

The Cultural Significance and Historical Value of “Tofu Banquet” in the Zhejiang Funeral Banquet

Haojie Sun

School of International Studies, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China

Abstract

Eating tofu meals is a traditional funeral custom which is spread in Zhejiang Province. It is another expression of participating in funeral activities. Consuming tofu is an integral part of Zhejiang’s funeral tradition. As a custom, it must be rooted in certain cultural circumstances. The relationship between funerals and tofu must also have a cultural foundation. As a kind of traditional food, tofu actually carries rich cultural significance. With the progression of time and culture, the new spiritual value of tofu has been gradually identified and acknowledged. By examining the social behavior of attending “Tofu Banquet”, a funeral custom in Zhejiang Province, we may determine that “tofu” not only represents people’s mourning to the deceased, but also demonstrates a specific spiritual and social value.

Keywords

Tofu; Spirit; Culture.

1. The Origin of the Phrase “Tofu Banquet”

“Tofu Banquet” refers to the funeral banquet hosted by family in mourning to thank relatives and friends who have come to offer assistance and condolences. This feast is predominantly vegetarian, and bean products play a significant part, hence it is also known as a “bean banquet.” However, many folk beliefs exist regarding the origin of “Tofu Banquet”. However, there are three primary arguments. The first is about Le Yi, a filial son of the Period of Warring States. Le Yi is diligent and serves his parents out of filial respect. He discovered that his parents had bad teeth and enjoyed eating soft and putrid cuisine. Therefore, Le Yi employed inventiveness to transform beans into soft tofu [1]. Tofu is nutritional, and his parents had been consuming it for a long time, so they both lived long lives. Le Yi, the filial son, prepared tofu into a variety of dishes for relatives and friends who came to help and attend the funeral, with the hope that everyone might live as long as his parents. Since then, this tradition has gained widespread among the public, and it is now customary for every household to serve tofu at funerals. The second story is about Liu An, the monarch of Huainan, invented tofu. [2] It is stated that Liu An, the ruler of Huainan, was interested in alchemy and the art of immortality because he pursued the art of immortality. Once, while making pills of immortality, he found by accident that soybean milk would solidify into tofu when exposed to gypsum and salt. After his father died of illness, the kitchen was etiquette-forbidden from being used. Therefore, Liu An was forced to eat tofu for three days. The public was perplexed because they believed he takes delicacies; hence, they accused him of being unfilial. People didn’t come to realize the truth until they tried the tofu during the funeral repast. Filial sons had a tradition of eating tofu while they were in mourning, and tofu became essential to their mourning diet. The last one is about a housewife who lived in Yangzi Huaihe River Basin. There once lived an elderly man with his three daughters-in-law. One day, the old man gave one liter of beans to each of his three daughters-in-law. The eldest and second daughters-in-law prepared and consumed the beans when they returned home. Only the youngest one comprehended his meaning. She sowed beans in the fields, diligently tended to them, gathered them in the fall, and accumulated a large quantity of

beans in a few years. In addition, the housewife is exceptionally brilliant. She made tofu to serve her father-in-law because of his bad teeth. Not only was the old guy pleased, but he also told his daughters-in-law that he hoped his family would serve tofu as the ritual food after he passed by. When the funeral banquet was held, the main dish was inseparable from “tofu” because it had long history and boasted a deep culture.

2. Features of Zhejiang Tofu Rice

Vegetarian banquets are typically followed by meat feasts at funeral banquets in Zhejiang. The funeral’s first meal will be a vegetarian feast. Then, several meals are offered. However, the dishes served at a vegan dinner will differ by region. But regardless of how the meals evolve, tofu remains a vital ingredient. Zhejiang is culturally a Wuyu-speaking region, and the local term for attending a funeral meal is “tofu banquet.” It goes without saying that tofu must have had a crucial role in its creation. At the first vegetarian dinner, vegetarian birds, geese, and beef are typically served. These dishes are actually made of tofu, but due to the talent of the chef, their flavor is quite close to that of true meat dishes; so, they are titled accordingly. In Zhejiang, the funeral ritual is known as “white affairs,” and those who host funerals are known as “white affairs family”. As indicated above, attending a funeral is also known as “attend tofu banquet”. It is termed “tofu banquet” since tofu is the primary ingredient. But why is tofu the preferred option? First, this concerns the selection of color. White tofu matches the white affairs. Second, the majority of people in rural Zhejiang adhere to Buddhism and Taoism [3]. When a funeral is held at home, monks and Taoist priests are typically called to recite religious scriptures in order to expiate the sins of the deceased. Monks and Taoist priests practice abstinence from meat as a religious exercise, therefore the host family typically serves them vegetables and tofu. Moreover, this dish also has a symbolic significance, representing the innocent life of the deceased [4]. Therefore, eating “tofu meal” is becoming synonymous with attending funeral banquets. In many areas of Zhejiang province, the form and name of “tofu banquet” have preserved their distinct peculiarities. In Jinhua, for instance, the grieving will host a banquet for their family and friends upon their return. This method is known as “Xie Ke,” and a dinner of this nature is known as “Bai Xi Jiu.” In general, the dishes consist of green veggies, pickles, and greasy tofu. If the deceased was an elderly man over the age of 70, the mourning family is required to share meals with neighbors. This practice is known as “sharing longevity meals.” The host family will also provide “market- benefiting beans” or “market- benefiting dinners” after “Xie Ke”. Although tofu has been retained in the “Xie Ke” dinner, meat dishes have been included in many places to funeral banquets as a result of changing times. These meat dishes are nearly identical to those served at standard banquets. Some locations also refer to “tofu banquet” as “Geng Fan”, which in local people’s eye could get rid of bad luck.[5] After the decedent’s passing, the mourning family prepared a daily soup supper for visitors who came to pay their respects. The addition and preservation of tofu banquet in Zhejiang indicates the evolution of local rituals and funeral beliefs among local citizens.

3. Traditional Filial Piety Culture Contained in Zhejiang “Tofu Banquet”

What does “tofu” have to do with filial piety? Combining the three mentioned stories, we may conclude that these three tales about the birth of tofu are all about the concept of filial piety. Le Yi made tofu since his elderly parents had bad teeth. Old people are frail and have poor teeth, which makes it difficult for them to chew meat and inevitably makes them weaker with time. Tofu is soft, healthy, and delicious, as well as easy to chew and digest, making it an appropriate food for the elderly. In addition, tofu is nutrient-dense, which can lengthen life if consumed regularly. In addition, due to the absence of production technology and skill in ancient times, a significant section of the population was from poor families. The majority of the children of

these impoverished families serve their parents tofu with the hopes that their parents will live a long and healthy life. In addition to the aforementioned factors, the practice of consuming tofu is an ancient custom, the civilized evolution of eating “dead body”. In ancient times, it was a significant component of the funeral ceremonial to consume the bodies of deceased elders. This was done because people at that time believed that animals and birds would consume the corpses of the deceased, which was incredibly disrespectful to the departed. In addition, allowing the deceased to live in the world in a different way by eating dead human flesh actually signifies the immortality and immortality of the deceased, which reflects the deep love and reluctance of ancient people to leave their ancestors and shows the filial piety of their descendants [6]. Then, as a result of the phenomena of changing customs, tofu became an additional spiritual substitute for the deceased’s body. Tofu consumption has become an integral part of the funeral ritual for those who attend. In today’s social spiritual civilization construction and aging society, the filial piety culture inherent in tofu is of utmost importance. First, promoting and disseminating the filial piety culture in tofu is a crucial aspect of socialist spiritual civilization building. China has traditionally placed a premium on filial piety and prioritized it above all other qualities. Respecting filial piety not only exerts a subtle influence on family peace, social stability, and national cohesion, but it is also the appropriate meaning of current socialist spiritual civilization creation and the emotional and moral foundation of Chinese patriotism. Filial piety is not simply a familial obligation, but also a social one that the entire society must undertake. Carrying on and studying the exemplary tradition of filial piety is beneficial for enhancing the moral quality of the entire community, bolstering national solidarity, and advancing the development of a spiritual civilization.

4. The Spirit and Value of Tofu in Zhejiang Tofu Banquet

4.1. Innovation Spirit and Significance of the Times

Tofu is not a natural thing. Ancient Chinese innovation was responsible for the creation of this delectable dish. This immediately demonstrates the ancient Chinese’s inventive mentality. If not for Le Yi and Liu An, the discovery that gypsum or thick salt could solidify soybean milk to produce tofu would have had to be postponed for a very long period, or tofu would have vanished from existence. The advent of tofu represents a milestone in the evolution of human eating and the crystallization of ancient knowledge. Since then, the bright and hardworking Chinese have consistently improved tofu’s cooking ways and production techniques. Water tofu, semi-dehydrated tofu, fried tofu, marinated tofu, smoked tofu, frozen tofu, dried tofu, and fermented tofu are the eight series of Chinese tofu based solely on production technology and products. It can be said that generations of artisans have innovated the tofu-making process.

4.2. The Tolerance Attitude and the Value of the Times

In daily life, tofu can be prepared as a main dish or as a side dish with other components. However, whether served as a main course or a side dish, tofu retains its distinctive flavor and remains tofu. Tofu, as a superb supporting actor, may enhance the flavor of the main dish without sacrificing its own flavor. Therefore, everyone enjoys tofu for its inclusive quality, which is the capacity to live in harmony with others without losing one’s own identity. [7] For instance, steamed frozen tofu in Hangzhou, smelly tofu in Shaoxing, stewed tofu in Shengzhou, and tofu skin jiaozi in Shengzhou. Tofu has been incorporated into a variety of delicacies with regional peculiarities throughout Zhejiang, yet regardless of the tofu delicacies offered, the tofu retains its unique flavor. The spirit of tofu is brilliantly reflected.

4.3. The Value of Hard Labor and the Spirit of the Times

Since ancient times, there have been three types of drudgery: punting, striking iron, and making tofu. To produce tofu, the ingredient must be ground, filtered, boiled, marinated, poured with

brains, and pressed [8]. Therefore, those who produce tofu must be diligent and hardworking to make a living. Generally, you must wake up in the middle of the night to begin a task, and you must be mindful of time and discretion in every procedure. There is a possibility that tofu cannot be manufactured. In addition, insurance technology in ancient China was quite restricted, so tofu was typically sold on the same day; otherwise, it would go bad after a lengthy period of time. Therefore, the artisans who produce tofu do not typically take a break during the year, as they produce tofu nearly year-round. Therefore, creating tofu is a chore, and a tiny amount of tofu is available since those who make tofu have devoted their time and energy to it. Tofu contains the spirit of labor as well. In Chinese history, tales of laboriousness are well-known. Chinese generations have continued their national civilization via labor and perspiration. Only China's civilization is faultless among the four ancient civilizations, which is partly due to the hardworking nature of the Chinese people. Looking abroad, groups of overseas Chinese have rooted and sprouted on the land of other nations through their own hard work and sweat, producing as much spiritual and material wealth as their compatriots at home. Similarly, in pursuit of a better future, the Chinese are actively involved in social production and growth in the spirit of toil. No matter how harsh the conditions are, the Chinese people will continue to rely on the spirit of hard work and adversity to repeatedly soar against the wind and pursue their aspirations. The ongoing advancement of China's society, the continuous enhancement of the country's comprehensive strength, and the reemergence of the Chinese nation are all attributable to the nation's work ethic. The attitude of hard effort embodied by tofu is closely tied to the competition and survival of large nations and the development and advancement of little individuals. The advancement of science and technology, the growth and development of society, and the enhancement of people's standard of living are all the result of the Chinese people's efforts. The influence of tofu's hardworking spirit is broad and extensive.

4.4. Honesty Spirit and Value of the Times

Tofu is sold in "blocks", which is uncommon for commodities transactions. Actually, tofu is not expensive and can even be considered a relatively cheap food. To ensure tofu's purity, however, tofu dealers insist on selling it in "blocks" as the sales unit. To maintain an honest character and trustworthy behavior. A small piece of tofu holds the only way to do business, which is with integrity. The expansion and growth of Zhejiang's business economy is likewise built on trust. Honesty and trustworthiness will propel Zhejiang businessmen from obscurity in the early days to today's global prominence. At the beginning, Zhejiang had virtually no commercial or natural resources. Numerous Zhejiang businessmen who did not have rich backgrounds did not enter the market at that time. However, they relied on their own efforts, stick to the principle of good faith, began by exchanging chicken feathers for sugar, accumulate incrementally, and mature and grow gradually after encountering a variety of challenges and obstacles. From obscurity to global prominence, Zhejiang businessmen have made significant success based on their integrity. Without honesty, there would be no thriving businesses in Zhejiang in the present day. Since time immemorial, the Chinese have revered honesty as a virtue. When we open the scroll of history, we shall find tales of honesty. Confucius himself stated, "How do not know it too." China's 5,000-year-old culture is infused with a constant sense of honesty, which has become the cornerstone of the Chinese nation. The ancients stated, "A gentleman's word cannot be taken back," yet today, individuals must "be honest with others, and people will not harass me; Be honest, and anything is possible." This demonstrates that the significance of honesty is exceptional. As descendants of the Chinese people, it is the unavoidable duty and responsibility of us to inherit and perpetuate this traditional virtue, cultivate the soil that emphasizes honesty and trustworthiness, and make honesty and trustworthiness the standard by which everyone lives.

4.5. Innocence and the Value of the Times

Tofu is renowned for its purity. The proverb "green shallot mixed with tofu-clean and white" is what it says. Although combining tofu with other foods is highly inclusive, it does not alter its purity. No matter how it is prepared, tofu retains its distinct flavor and natural color. Ancient nobles, sages, and other noble and moral individuals love the noble nature and integrity of tofu's innocent inhabitants. To be as innocent as tofu, both in action and in conscience, is the lifelong goal of these individuals. For example, Tao Yuanming of the Eastern Jin Dynasty did not stoop over for five buckets of rice. He considered fame and wealth to be filth, and he did not wish to plunge into the shadowy officialdom at that time. He maintained his poet honesty and his innocence throughout his entire life. The spiritual quality of innocence reveals the values of the Chinese people towards loyalty and honesty, and records of innocence exist in history due to the Chinese nation's unrelenting pursuit of this spiritual quality. Innocence consists of virtue, sincerity, and self-discipline, all of which are necessary and have a subtle impact on contemporary society.

5. Conclusion

In Zhejiang, eating "tofu" is an act of remembrance for the deceased. This customary form was the result of a lengthy period of evolving conventions. There are three opinions about the origin of the funeral customs of "Tofu meals". On the basis of analysis of these three stories, the paper analyzes the cultural values behind the activity. Firstly, the folktales are all about filial piety. For one, tofu was invented for the old families because they were too old to chew hard food. And it embodies the spirit by preparing soft and delicious tofu for the old. For another, it is a legacy of ancient cannibalism and the custom of eating dead people in the modern world. How could it be a way of filial piety? Because in the ancient times, the dead body would be eaten by birds and beasts if not protected. And it is an act of disrespect for the dead. So, eating the body and let it be a part of the alive became a popular practice, which conveys the deep love towards those passed ancestors. And with the development of the society and culture, eating dead body is not acceptable for people, and more importantly, tofu and meat share similarities. So, tofu takes the place of the dead body and becomes a dish on the table. And eating tofu not only refers to eat dead relatives but also the completion of the whole funeral ceremony.

Apart from filial piety, there are also other cultural values in tofu. Firstly, it reflects the spirit of innovation. As known to all, tofu is not found in nature. And it can be said that without innovation, there would be no tofu. The small invention is spread around the world because of the innovative spirit. Besides, tofu also embodies tolerance. Whether it be a main dish or a side one, tofu has not lost its own flavor. It tolerates other food and remains its own origin flavor. The spirit of tolerance in tofu still has a great influence on the development of China. In addition, honesty is also a lesson we can take from tofu. As the descendants of Yan and Huang, inheriting this traditional virtue is our obligation. Last but not least, innocence and hard work are also merits deserving giving priority to. Tofu is well known for innocence. Staying innocent is the traditional virtue of the Chinese nation and the basic criterion of entrepreneurship and governance. What's more, making tofu is a chore. Only when those who made tofu have devoted their efforts to it is tofu available. The small food contains the spirit of hard work.

Above all, in addition to filial piety, tofu also has the spirits of innovation, tolerance, hard work, integrity and innocence, which all have positive guiding and driving significance for the whole society. Tofu culture is the intangible fortune we inherit from our ancestors and also an important part of Chinese civilization. And Chinese people will definitely carry on these spirits and make their own contribution to the country by having a good understanding of tofu. There are three tales regarding the origin of tofu rice: one is about Le Yi, the filial son, made tofu to support his elderly parents, who would live longer if they consumed it. The departed parents

of Le Yi arranged a tofu banquet for family members, friends, and neighbors who came to pay their respects. According Chinese legend, Liu An, monarch of Huainan, accidentally invented tofu because he advocated magic and hoped for immortality. Later, as a result of this dish being served during his father's death, the custom of eating tofu was formed. The final argument is that a bright and devoted daughter-in-law invented tofu because her in-laws had bad teeth. The in-laws endorsed and admired this action, and hoped that daughter-in-law could make tofu as sacrifice after they passed away. Although these three tales range greatly in chronological sequence and character identity, they all represent the pursuit of the same social pursuit, namely the culture of filial piety. Tofu is served in Zhejiang funeral banquets because Zhejiang funerals are also known as white affairs. Since tofu is white, it should be the main dish. Additionally, when a funeral is held in Zhejiang, monks and Taoist priests are typically invited to recite scriptures for the deceased. As both monks and Taoist priests are monks, green veggies and tofu will also be offered. In fact, the green bean curd also serves a symbolic function, representing the deceased's innocent life. There are two reasons that tofu becomes the first choice by families holding funerals. Firstly, the color of tofu suits Chinese funeral ceremony. Because a funeral ceremony is called "Baishi" in Chinese. Secondly, Zhejiang Citizens used to send for some monks to help release souls of the dead from purgatory. They are all firm vegetarians, so green vegetables and tofu become the best meals prepared by the hosts for them. In Chinese, the meal also symbolizes the whole clean life the dead has led. Therefore, eating tofu rice is becoming linked with attending funeral banquets and not only with eating tofu. Additionally, tofu has the traditional culture of filial piety. Le Yi made tofu since his parents were old and had bad teeth. which will make them even frailer with time. Tofu is soft, tender, fresh, aromatic, easy to chew and digest, and nutrient-rich. If consumed for an extended period of time, it can promote health and lifespan. In addition, due to a lack of production equipment and skill with ancient times, children of poor families would frequently feed tofu to their parents in the hope that their parents would live a long and healthy life. In addition to the aforementioned explanations, the practice of consuming "tofu" is an ancient custom that evolved from the practice of consuming "dead human flesh". After the death of their elders, the ancients believed that animals and birds would consume the bodies of the deceased, which was a grave discourtesy to the departed. In addition, the behavior of eating the body of the deceased allows the deceased to remain in the world in a different way, which actually signifies the immortality and immortality of the deceased, reflects the profound love and reluctance of ancient people for their ancestors, and is a manifestation of the filial piety of future generations. Then, as a result of the phenomena of changing customs, tofu became an additional spiritual substitute for the deceased's body. Tofu consumption has become an integral part of the funeral ritual for those who attend. In addition to the ancient culture of filial piety, tofu embodies the spiritual qualities and values of creativity, tolerance, hard effort, honesty, and innocence, which have a good impact on the spiritual culture of the contemporary society. Chinese tofu culture has a long history, and the traditional culture and spirit of the periods it embodies are the spiritual wealth and treasures of all Chinese nations.

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