



Members of the women's group are performing dance for Double Ninth Festival celebration in Macha Village.

Finding Strength for

Rural Vitalization

from Traditional Festivals

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Note from the Editor: There are many ways to encourage rural community development. A direction worth exploring is how to rediscover the rural spirit during rapid changes, as well as quickly establishing rapport and generating enthusiasm within the villagers. Currently, there are social workers using festivals as an entry point to reshape waning cultural traditions and make it an important part of community building.

Finding Strength for Rural Vitalization from Traditional Festivals

The late autumn sun is shining brightly in Macha Village, and the villagers have just completed their fall harvest. It is the early morning, and the elderly are hurrying towards the village community center. Women in many households are bringing potatoes, pickles, and other ingredients in preparation to cook delicious meals. At the same time, villagers are preparing for a Qinqiang opera and dance performance on stage. The reason for the busyness is that everyone wished to organize a collective birthday celebration for the elderly in the village with the Double Ninth Festival.

Respecting and caring for the elderly on the Double Ninth Festival is a tradition in Macha Village, but these happy occasions are becoming few and far between...



Traditional festival customs are gradually fading away

In the past, moral concepts of respecting the elderly and taking care of the young, helping one's neighbours, village unity, giving thanks for nature, and ancestor worship were integrated into and expressed with traditional festival customs. These festivals included cultural elements such as food and art, and have been passed on from generation to generation, ensuring the stability and development of the village society.

Macha Village is located in Huining County, Gansu Province. Due to its re-

mote location and poor transportation, the area has retained its festival customs relatively intact for a long time. For example, villagers love to perform Chinese folk opera, *Shehuo*, and lion dances during the Spring Festival. During the Qingming Festival, ancestors are given thanks and worshipped. For the Dragon Boat Festival, sweet fermented grain¹ is brought on visits to friends and family. Evidently, festivals hold a place of great significance in the lives of villagers.

Unfortunately, festive customs are under the threat of decline due to urbanization. The cultural festivals in Macha Village have slowly evolved from being village-wide celebrations to individual family celebrations. Communal celebrations in the village are disappearing and rituals are becoming more and more simplified. The villagers cannot help but lament that cultural festivals are becoming dull and uninteresting, and good traditions seem to be missing...

Using festivals as a starting point to develop rural communities

However, the lively scene of everyone gathering to celebrate the festive season has become commonplace among the villagers once again.

In 2016, the Macha Village Center was jointly established by Chan Cheung Mun Chung Charitable Fund and Wu Zhi Qiao (Bridge to China) Charitable Foundation. In order to revitalize rural culture, social

workers use the community center as a platform to observe New Year's Day, Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Double Ninth Festival, and other festivals. Building on and respecting traditional customs, cooperation with the village committee, a Qinqiang opera troupe, a women's group and other community groups were formed. Many rich and varied community activities were held.



1. Sweet fermented grain is a special snack in northwest China, with a sweet and sour taste, which is a summer drink for the villagers during the busy farming season.

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1. A collective birthday celebration for the elderly in Macha Village.
2. A shadow puppet show was held in Macha Village on the Double Ninth Festival.

Dragon Boat Festival: passing on the community mutual aid culture

According to tradition, the villagers of Macha make sweet fermented grain and jelly using buckwheat during the Dragon Boat Festival, and bring them to visit relatives and friends, and exchange cooking tips with each other. This custom helps to improve neighborhood relations.

In order to recultivate traditions, since 2017, social workers have assisted villagers in organizing three consecutive Dragon Boat Festival activities at the community center. During the activities, members of the women's group will bring homemade delicacies and share cooking skills on making dumplings and

steamed cakes. Elderly people living alone in the village are also invited to participate and watch the square dance, Qinqiang opera, and other performances by the villagers.

After three years of hard work, Dragon Boat Festival celebrations in the village have gradually moved from being family-oriented to a community-orientated custom. Not only will this improve distant relationships between neighbours, it will deepen the mutual aid of the community while passing on traditions, making the atmosphere of the village warmer.



Double Ninth Festival: promoting the tradition of respecting the elderly

With the changes in society, Macha Village also faces the aging problem: the family and social status of elderly people have declined, and the elderly left behind in the village are facing many difficulties. In order to alleviate these problems, the village committee, Qinqiang opera troupe, and the women's group have held a Double Ninth Festival at the community center since 2017.

Elderly people aged 70 and over were invited to participate in the activity. Members of the women's group initiated gatherings to prepare longevity noodles, dumplings, and other tasty foods. They also prepared a collective birthday ceremony, longevity ceremony, and haircuts for the elderly. It is hoped that the elderly can feel the warmth and care from their community through these activities, as well as promoting the care of elderly people among the villagers.



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1. Women in Macha Village exchange cooking skills during the Dragon Boat Festival.
2. Group photo at the Double Ninth Festival in Macha Village.
3. The villagers gather to celebrate birthdays for the elderly.
4. The women in the village cut hair for the elderly during the Double Ninth Festival.

New Year's Day, Spring Festival, and Lantern Festival: strengthening community acceptance

Most of the participants in the Dragon Boat Festival and Double Ninth Festival are the elderly and women, while New Year's Day, Spring Festival, and the Lantern Festival are collective celebrations in the village. Macha Village is situated in a high-altitude zone, and its long and cold winter is the main leisure time for its farming villagers. Since 2017, social workers have helped to draw on the power of the entire village to successfully hold a New Year's Day party, a Qinqiang opera charity performance for Spring Festival, and a lion dance during the Lantern Festival;

recreating communal celebration practices that have not been seen for many years.

In order to prepare for the Spring Festival Qinqiang performance, the experienced troupe began to divide up the work in early winter. A group of more than 20 women who were interested in learning the opera, rehearsal procedures, and prop-making were recruited. Within the span of one month, the rehearsal of three to four operas were completed.

The Qinqiang opera troupe was only able to sing excerpts in the beginning. But after performing on stage many times, they are able to perform three to four operas. The gradual revival of the troupe brought great encouragement to other art enthusiasts in the village. Through the preparation of festival activities, various interest groups in the village slowly came together. From organizing party activities to participating in opera rehearsals, the villagers' sense of community increased little by little, making Macha Village a well-known cultural village.



The troupe of Macha Village performs in the theater in the evening.



The revival of traditional festivals may help to develop internal impetus in the community.

Revive traditional festivals and promote good rural governance

It is seen from the example of Macha Village that festivals can be used as an opportunity to encourage local villagers to raise funds and goods, initiate the organization of group activities, and continue to influence and improve the folk customs of the village, promoting good rural governance.

The revival of traditional festivals is not only about restoring the format and content of traditional festivals, but also to tap into the traditional values to deal with many challenges faced by community

development such as gender equality, elderly care, neighbourhood relations, and community unity. Besides responding to the specific needs of the community through festivals, it is more important to help the community rebuild moral principles and cultural attitudes, improve mechanisms of governance within the community, and use community rules and internal motivation to address local development issues for the long term.

However, in this process, development workers need to pay attention to their

role as collaborators. The difficulty of development work is in how to balance the participation of different stakeholders in the community, as well as for villagers with different characteristics to collaborate and cooperate. Therefore, we should help with developing the community in assuming a leadership role, and give developmental decisions to the community, so as to generate internal impetus in the community and push for positive changes.

Keywords: traditional festivals, rural vitalization, good rural governance, community's internal impetus, community development

Translated by Whitney Cheung from the original version 《从传统节日里找寻乡村振兴的力量》

Edited by Emily Li | Designed by Tracy Ying | All photos by the author



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