

Ceremonial objects in Modern Society: The Persistence and Transformation

1. Ceremony

I am fascinated by ritualistic behavior, a uniquely human trait absent in animals. Humans have been engaging in rituals since at least 2050 AD, and possibly even earlier. Initially, rituals may have served as a means for humans to seek answers or assistance from mysterious forces, beyond their own capabilities. However, as scientific knowledge advanced, humans realized that many phenomena could be explained through scientific principles rather than divine intervention. Consequently, the rational perspective would suggest that the scientifically explicable aspects of religion and superstition should have lost followers. Yet, rituals persist in modern society, albeit with a different approach. While some individuals may still practice rituals out of ignorance or superstition, others who possess scientific knowledge engage in ceremonies for various reasons, including partial belief.

2. Dubious

My hometown is not a religious country. Although Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism have historically been adopted as guiding ideologies by the ruling class, they primarily exist as philosophical schools of thought for most people. Folk beliefs and rituals in China have never been unified under a specific religion or accompanied by a comprehensive text like the Bible or the Qur'an. Consequently, interpretations of folk beliefs and rituals have always been fragmented and diverse. China is currently recognized as the least religious country globally, with a prevalent atheistic stance. However, this does not imply that Chinese people lack beliefs or refrain from performing rituals. Prayer serves as the most common and accessible form of ceremony, with individuals worshipping Buddha, gods in temples, or praying to various entities during times of difficulty. Chinese culture holds a belief in the "unity of heaven and man," where many gods are considered human creations. Powerful figures, such as ancestors, are worshipped as gods, with the easiest path to godhood being through procreation and subsequent worship by descendants. Many people find no disadvantage in worship, regardless of its efficacy. Beyond deity worship, various rituals persist. For example, during the New Year, firecrackers are set off, even though few believe in evil spirits or their repulsion through loud noises. The practical value of ceremonies does not necessarily influence their performance. This raises the question of whether certain aspects of human life inherently require ceremony. Despite religion's declining influence, the scale, devotion, societal development, and scientific progress, the ceremonial aspects of everyday life endure. Whether individuals are Catholics, anti-religious atheists, non-believing theists, superstitious non-theists, pantheists, polytheists, or committed atheists, human beings engage in rituals to connect with their origins, navigate their journey, and seek psychological clarity amidst confusion and fear.

3. Ceremonial Objects

Creating rituals from scratch proves challenging. Newly popularized ritual acts often stem from adaptations of past rituals or the fusion and absorption of existing ones. The transmission of ceremonies frequently occurs through objects.

Objects hold a distinctively human characteristic apart from ceremonies. Humans are the only species that utilize, create, mass-produce, trade, and continuously evolve tools. Tools have evolved alongside traditional crafts, industrialization, the information age, global trade, electronic goods, and social media, constantly interweaving with different aspects of human society. Ceremonial objects, apart from those essential for survival, undergo continuous evolution.

Efficiency-driven designs consistently replace outdated ones, streamlining furniture, tools, and appliances. However, ceremonial objects retain their original form because their usage function is secondary to their ceremonial significance.

For example, a spring couplet, a long strip of red paper adorned with an auspicious couplet, changes the atmosphere from festive to mournful when the red coloring is removed. Altering its shape renders it no longer a spring couplet. While size, material, or even a digital representation may deviate, the ceremonial nature of the object may not drastically change.