

# ***From the Village to the City: The Rise of Urban Folklore Studies in China***

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**Abstract:** The rise of Chinese folklore study was an academic response to the Modern Chinese Enlightenment Movement. The shift in perspective of Chinese folklore studies from the rural field to urban society is the symbol self-reflective turns and innovations. The shift from rural to urban folklore requires an adjustment of research perspectives and methods, not only to adapt to the urbanized social environment, but also to cope with the more complex modern society. Cities are fast-paced, mobile societies, where people's general and instinctive rejection of strangers and the highly compressed and fragmented nature of their leisure time make fieldwork more difficult. Human behavior is not homogeneous, but diverse, the study of urban folklore can draw on personal life history methods to take a "microscopic" look at urban society. The rise of Chinese urban folklore is a new area of Chinese folklore studies, and its research theory, methodology and subjects still need to be further explored and supplemented by scholars.

**Keywords:** Urban Folklore, China, Fieldwork.

## **1. Introduction**

The rise of Chinese folklore study was an academic response to the Modern Chinese Enlightenment Movement. Born in Western influence and impulse by nationalism consciousness and academic mission, Chinese folklore study walked with great difficulty. The situation even deteriorated after 1949, when political power began to intervene scholarship. In such a historical background, Zhong Jingwen and other pioneers in this field carefully maintained the development of Chinese folklore study. However, on contrary to their will, it has not grown to a strong discipline in China but fell into crisis again and again. The crisis in the discipline will make scholars think more deeply, and it is through continuous reflection and self-criticism that the development of the disciplinary system will be refined and matured. The shift in perspective of Chinese folklore studies from the rural field to urban society is also one of those self-reflective turns and innovations.

## **2. From Village to City: Expanding the Scope of Folklore Studies**

Contemporary China is in the midst of a transformation from science and technology in cities and villages, people's work and lives are undergoing continuous revolution.[1] Chinese folklore reflects a strong vernacular orientation, but with the spread of economic globalization, information interchange, and urbanization, folklore studies need to be concerned with contemporary urbanized

societies and require a new expansion of urban folklore. In the past years, folklore studies have been more concerned and discussed the rural area as the focus around the world. Zhong Jingwen spoke of three main streams of traditional Chinese culture. Firstly, the culture of the upper class, that is, the culture enjoyed by the ruling class. Secondly, the culture of the middle class, that is, the culture of the urban people. Thirdly, the culture of the lower class, that is, the culture rooted in the countryside and created and passed on by the masses of peasants. These three tributaries coexist in the same social community, with no absolute barriers or boundaries, intertwining and influencing each other. [2]

The disciplinary construction and research methods of Chinese folklore have been influenced by Western folklore. From the 1950s onwards, urban folklore emerged in British and American folklore studies, and since the 1970s works have been abundant and gradual maturation of theory. Martin Laba published *Urban Folklore: A Behavioral Approach* in 1979, which explored the application of folklore to urban life. He argued that the city in the context of folklore is a combination of experience and strategy, with strategy revealed in the design of texts and acts of folklore performance, and experience in the assessment and control of residents' experiences in everyday life.[3] Folklore as a tool for living. Folklore study in Germany has a long history, the research method and orientation had a turn after the 1960s with the rise of popular culture. [4] Kashuba, in referring to the phenomenon of cultural transfer in the city, points to the mobility and metamorphoses of foreign cultures, in addition to their inheritance. [5]

In Japanese folklore studies, urban folklore emerged in the 1980s with the city as the object of investigation and research.[6] As centers of political and economic activity and information dissemination, the city encourages consumer behavior and emphasizes technological innovation and economic efficiency. The urban character is also reinforced in the composite, multi-layered city. The dynamism and cultural creativity of urban societies is of interest to folklorists.

Chinese folklore studies are unbalanced in their attention to rural and urban culture. It was only after 2000 that the study of urban culture in Chinese folklore began to take on more dynamic, breaking out of its stagnant development. Its research was initially driven by the pursuit of economic development in cities, linking cultural resources to tourism promotion and using folklore to attract foreign tourists. Theoretical research on urban folklore has remained relatively scarce in the field of Chinese folklore studies until today. Urbanization is the path of modernization in contemporary Chinese society. Some Chinese scholars to identify patterns of urbanization as a key to larger processes of social change in modern Chinese history.[7] Urban folklore is shaped by modernity. Modernity is not a division, it's a process, to show the changes of the times, to reflect the rapid and multi-directional development that accompanies science and technology. Under the influence of consumer society and modern media, it has become a trend for rural folklore activities to be caught up in the wave of digital revolution.[8] The rise of urban folklore studies in China is inevitable given the changing times.

### 3. Features of Urban Field

Customs change with the way they are lived in.[9] Cities are fast-paced, mobile societies, where people's general and instinctive rejection of strangers and the highly compressed and fragmented nature of their leisure time make fieldwork more difficult. More importantly, as people of different origins come together in cities, the degree of knowledge and understanding of the same city varies greatly between people of different cultural backgrounds, and the knowledge of place gained can be one-sided, contradictory, and mixed. So, the experience of the rural field is not applicable to the city perfectly, and the previously used methods of group surveys and symposia may not be effective in moving from a focus on homogeneous peasant collectives to the study of diverse individuals in the city with an emphasis on individuality. In this regard, Keesing points out that the anthropological approach, which is usually carried out in a tribal social village and works quite well in a vernacular

village, is not necessarily applicable to the scale, fragmentation, and divergence of urban social life. [10] Folklore studies have long been accustomed to doing fieldwork in the countryside and have largely been bewildered by doing fieldwork in the city.

The difficulties of doing fieldwork in the city as follows. Firstly, the geographical scale of the city is much larger than that of the village, making it difficult to find access to it. Secondly, it requires skills to enter the field with strangers, and it often takes several visits to find the right interviewees and establish a relationship of trust. Thirdly, urbanism must be considered as a mode of life which is served by various folkloric “resources.” [3] So people in the city are more guarded and generally reluctant to reveal themselves and tell their stories in depth, so it takes more effort to get there. Fourthly, because of the fast-pace and busy urban life, time is considered a very valuable resource and the researcher needs to persuade the person to take the time to be interviewed or find ways to take up as few times as possible. The interviewees do not have a lot of time to talk in depth, which makes it difficult to develop a case further, and the field data is prone to fragmentation. In general, the mobility of people in the city, the change of field sites and the compressed interview time make it more difficult to obtain in-depth interview materials in the city for the researcher. However, these problems are not insurmountable, and many even come from the researcher’s own imagination.

The point of folklore is about people. Fieldwork in the village and in the city have same methodologies, they are both about communication and observation. People are deeply influenced by their environment, and the environment in which they grow up affects the way of life and emotional attachment of the investigator.[11] As people who grew up in the rural area, when doing fieldwork in the countryside, they will have an affinity with the neighbors and be more comfortable interviewing them about village weddings and funerals, markets and fairs, and beliefs and legends. Students who have grown up living in the city, they will have a closer relationship with the interviewees when doing fieldwork in the city. As fieldwork has become multisite and mobile in nature, subjects are more “counterpart” than “other”. [12] People who identified as citizens of the city and face the same situation. There are various feelings, experiences and dilemmas in common between the interviewees and the researchers.

In response, I interviewed a few folklore students who both do the fieldwork in the urban city and village to share their feelings. “It is not as difficult to do fieldwork in the city as one might think. In fact, the respondents were not high-strung, rather most of them were very confident and self-expressive. The usual miscommunication problems such as language barriers, age gaps, and wariness common in interviews were largely absent, and the vast majority understood the researcher's research topic and were willing to assist.”<sup>①</sup> “The interviewees had high levels of education, a wide range of knowledge, and good conversation. They also preferred to compete for the right to speak and drive the pace of the interview. There was often sufficient self-expression in response to the interview questions, and it was rare that a question was asked in a rural field that the interviewee could not answer.”<sup>②</sup> “Communication with the interviewees is also easier and more direct than in the rural field. They are not distant others, we live in the same city, share similar environment, do not need to re-establish new cognitive systems, or learn unfamiliar intellectual terms, and there are fewer barriers to understanding.”<sup>③</sup> “In contrast to rural areas, there is almost no language barrier in urban areas, and people are more similar in terms of habits, rules of interaction, and topics of conversation. For urban students, the city is close by and longer, more in-depth research can be done in the city.” The urban field researcher has little need to supplement the tedium and lengthiness that fieldwork in primitive societies imposes on him or her with the lifestyle of civilized people, researchers simply retreat from

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① Tian Jiali, interview by author, Chengdu, May 2, 2023.

② Deng Jie, interview by author, Chengdu, April 30, 2023.

③ Xiong Peiyu, interview by author, Chengdu, May 1, 2023.

one corner of the city to another corner of the same city. For the researcher who has lived in the city for a long time, the city is a familiar life and cultural space, and the people in the city are a group, sharing the similar upbringing, habits, and rules of interaction. From this perspective, studying urban groups is also a look at ourselves as researchers, like a mirror.

Peter Trummer regards the city as four patterns: the city as a circle, the city as a grid, the city as archipelago, and the city as a solid.[13] Urban field research pays attention to follow the people. In the past, fieldwork was mostly carried out in villages, where villagers were homogeneous and social networks were tightly knit, with relatively clear and identifiable boundaries; in contrast, urban areas were geographically large, with diverse and unstable individual connections and loose social networks. The mobility of urban cultural spaces and people make the city an open structure, making it difficult to delineate urban field sites and their boundaries. Most of the time, field sites are not chosen by directly delineating an area, but by first finding field research subjects according to their awareness of the problem, and then following their movements within the city to identify field sites. [14] To find suitable interviewees in the vast sea of people in big cities, the first thing is to grasp the life patterns and characteristics of the urban population. For instance, in order to conduct research on Chengdu people's favorite recreational style of drinking tea and playing mahjong, it was necessary to rely on online communication and to conduct surveys in different communities and locations.<sup>①</sup>

The urban field requires the researcher to have greater interpersonal skills, or to use one of their strengths or specialties to get closer to the other, as in the case of the urban middle class whose lives themselves are intended to create a certain kind of division, and to enter their circles the researcher needs to use their similarities to the research subject. One study points out that "the material and symbolic systems that middle-class groups possess also place new demands on the field researcher to approach and be accepted by this group, which first requires the researcher to have the social and material conditions to socialize with them and to interact with them on a relatively equal footing. .... The researcher even needs to have some professional status to be accepted by the middle-class group." [15] In previous studies on the subject, people have entered the field site either as counsellors, doctors, or teachers, thus gaining the trust of the researched.

Compared to the countryside, cities have the advantage of having a large amount of documentation and we can learn more about them with the help of written sources. Cities have a long history and may have left behind a diverse range of archives and documents from all periods. The same inscriptions, deeds, archives, genealogies, local records, legends, and oral histories that can be collected by visiting rural fields are also available in cities, as well as a wider range of graphic and audio-visual materials and research reports or media materials from other disciplines, such as news reports, government documents, as well as advertisements and videos with significant documentary value. By exploring local cultural dynamics, a variety of valuable information or clues can be found. In practice, this is not uncommon in real-life research. The famous sociological book, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, is a masterpiece of urban migration research using documentary materials, with some explanations and comments.[16]

In short, to exaggerate the difficulty of urban fieldwork and overly emphasize the differences between urban and rural fieldwork are not necessary, but rather grasp the characteristics of the city, give full play to its advantages, try to avoid the fragmentation and direction lessness of urban fieldwork and carry out fieldwork while feeling others and looking at oneself.

#### 4. The Shift of Research Perspective

The shift from rural to urban folklore requires an adjustment of research perspectives and methods, not only to adapt to the urbanized social environment, but also to cope with the more complex modern

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<sup>①</sup> Deng Jie, interview by author, Chengdu, April 30, 2023.

society. The field methods and disciplinary knowledge born in the pre-modern period may not be suitable for today's social development and disciplinary development, so how can scholars keep up with the times and use available resources to make folklore a modern discipline? This not only means that folklore studies need to turn its attention to the city, but also to transform folklore studies towards the current society, to break away from the discipline's long-standing obsession with traditional, trivial, and marginal research objects and fields of study.

The research perspective has a turn from the downward looking to a flat view of urban life. In the context of the current characteristics of Chinese society, there is a need to focus on the emerging urban classes, especially the large number of the new middle class as the "in group". In the past, folklore studies have focused too much on the rural areas and the peasantry and have failed to identify the changes in contemporary Chinese society, namely urbanization and the rise of the new urban class. By studying the new middle class from a cultural perspective, scholars can better engage in a dialogue with other disciplines and make full use of folklore's strengths to bring folklore into the lives of people today. The focus on the new middle class does not mean that folklore studies should ignore marginalized groups, but rather that it should treat the new middle class as ordinary folk and take a closer look at the more representative ways of life of today's citizens. The city is not just steel industry, studying the city civilization is in line with the disciplinary pursuit of caring for the lived experience of ordinary people.[17] The new middle-class people of contemporary China are skilled, educated and interested in a better life, but they also encounter various difficulties in their lives. As they have experienced the fierce competition of the college entrance examinations and have been able to establish themselves in the cities, they are mostly trustworthy employees and pillars of society, and they are more culturally conscious about the preservation and protection of folklore, often taking the initiative to adapt and recreate folklore traditions and participating in the transmission and development of traditional handicrafts as consumers and heritage subjects.

The social and lifestyle of contemporary urban citizens revolves around shared hobbies. Professor Xu Ganli found in her urban research in Shanghai that handicraft enthusiasts (such as patchwork, porcelain, pottery), Hanfu enthusiasts, book clubs, runaway companions, cat owners, and others have formed a small social group that transcends daily practical functions (utilitarian relationships). There is frequent internal communication within the group, including attention and mutual support based on shared interests on online social platforms, as well as emotional communication and mutual assistance in daily life. Within the Hobby Group, scholars see more creativity and human warmth beyond instrumental rationality. In a cat loving and pet raising community in Chengdu, members will share their observations, experiences, feelings, and insights about pet ownership with each other. They will also assist each other with cat food during special times and take care of pets when going out.<sup>①</sup> The members of this group have no blood or kinship, nor are they usually acquaintances based on industry or geography. Most of them are just strangers from the same city, but they develop connections due to their love of raising cats. They used their common hobbies to empathize with personal emotions, seeking recognition for behaviors that showcase their individuality through mutual communication, and even sprouted emotions like those in traditional rural areas.<sup>②</sup>

The study of urban folklore can draw on personal life history methods to take a "microscopic" look at urban society. Traditionally, village and folklore often appear in a typological form, but in a city, human behavior is not homogeneous, but diverse. Given that in the complex urban environment, communities are not as easily identifiable as the original village society, some folklore scholars argue that modern communities should not be seen as that used to be composed of geography and fixed social groups, but rather as Some folklorists argue that modern communities should not be seen as

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① Tian Jiali, interview by author, Chengdu, May 2, 2023.

② Leng Xiuhua, interview by author, Chengdu, April 30, 2023.

that used to be formed by geographic and fixed social groups, but rather mobile, creating by people's sense of self-reflexive belonging. Folklore responds to tradition[18], and folklore studies need to turn to the modern city, such as the special people in the city, and to trace the characteristics of urban citizens to present their likes and dislikes, interests, and life pursuits different from those of the rural people.

To be relevant to the study of urban people, it is necessary to draw on research methods such as oral life histories and personal histories from neighboring disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. These methods do not focus on regions or events, but rather on people, and through communication with interviewees, we understand each other's thoughts and emotions, which is in line with the characteristics of urban fields that flow with people. The research perspective shifts to the vivid life of each individual and his or her creativity, rather than pursuing the homogeneous folk of the pattern, which still exists but is expressed differently by everyone. Japanese scholars' research on urban individuals and their life experiences, such as the analysis of the phenomena of parent-child companionship, focuses on the lives of individuals or gender issues.[19] Such research findings undoubtedly provide a good model for urban folklore studies to focus on some urban experiences and inner activities through the method of personal life history. Urban folklore differs from rural folklore in that the findings vary greatly depending on the subjects selected for investigation. The traditional culture in rural areas is evenly distributed, and even if the subjects selected for investigation are different, the differences in research findings are not significant. However, the cultural backgrounds of urban individuals are different, and if the subjects are not categorized based on careful analysis of their life experiences and memories, as well as changes in their living spaces and means of livelihood, the research findings will be meaningless, so urban folklore research can be based on the study of the life histories.

## 5. Conclusion

This article starts from the turn of folklore studies and discusses the background of the rise of urban folklore, which is a new expansion of the discipline after self-critical reflection. Then, the methods and characteristics of urban folklore research are summarized. For most investigators growing up in urban life, the familiar urban space will reduce the gap between them and the interviewers in field research. The urban literature is also more convenient than the rural literature, but the investigators need to carefully consider the survey location and groups. The research perspective of urban folklore has undergone a shift, not only in the transfer of location, from rural to urban areas, but also in the connection between people, from geography, blood to interest. In addition, the study of urban folklore also reflects its interdisciplinary nature. The method of Case Study can learn from the practice of new cultural history and micro history. Finally, the rise of Chinese urban folklore is a new area of Chinese folklore studies, and its research theory, methodology and subjects still need to be further explored and supplemented by scholars. [20]

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