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Vitality and Modernity: Defining the “Folk” in Early Twentieth Century China

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As usual, the 2005 Chinese Rooster New Year Celebrations in Beijing highlighted the annual Earth Temple Fair (*Ditan Miaohui*) as an indispensable attraction. In recent years, this entertaining space featuring red lanterns, lion dances, and revived folk performances has been widely and officially advocated as an occasion and place to appreciate “national culture (*minzu wenhua*)” and to experience “folk culture (*minsu wenhua*).” In the commodified and globalized metropolitan capital of the nation, the Fair forms a symbolic space where traditionality is celebrated to label national identity.

Yet the interpretations of “the folk” and “the national,” especially when related to the discourses of traditionality and modernity, are not constant in China’s turbulent modern history. Back to the turn of the last century when this capital city witnessed radical nationalistic struggles for a modern China, the highlighted “folk” and “national” in today’s Fair were employed and constructed to convey anything “new,” “vital,” and “modern” instead of “traditionality.” The divergent meanings here pose a question on how the concept of “the folk” has been defined to create distinctive discourses of nationalism and modernity in different non-Western historical contexts. This article, by situating this issue in the historical trend of the search for a modern China at the turn of the last century, intends to explore what forms of nationalism and modernity were advocated through selectively imagining “the folk” in indigenous modernist projects; what forces and agents, in what means, participated in these processes; and how the localized discourses of modernity reflected social-cultural distinctions and key tensions of early modern China.

Literary and Cultural Modernity in Early Modern China: “Vital” vs. “Sick”

For much of the twentieth century, the May Fourth era (1910s to 1920s) has remained in the dominant view of Chinese historiography as a golden legacy—“constituting the crucial period of the formation of a Chinese discourse of modernity” (Dolezelova and Wang 2001:1). This mainly refers to the concept of modernity constructed by the Chinese intelligentsia in that period, who initiated the iconoclastic questioning of China’s

imperial past and dedicated themselves to creating a new twentieth-century civilization through importing Western culture and institutions and reforming language and literature.

The May Fourth intellectual project shared an underlying rationale with the cultural awakening efforts of the elites in the late Qing dynasty (1644-1912), when China suffered from foreign invasion (after a series of military defeats, especially the Sino-Japanese War in 1895) and internal political chaos. Liang Qichao (1873-1929), one of the first introducing the idea of enlightenment and the new national character to the Chinese intelligentsia, diagnosed China’s “sickness” as the self-submissive and “slavish character” of the Chinese people (Liang, 1900, in Schneider 1971: 193-194). China’s predicament stemmed not so much from the deteriorating political system, poor economics, underdeveloped technology, or outside aggressors as from entrenched cultural problems, such as the hierarchical human relationship stipulated by Confucianism. Much attracted by the Japanese enlightenment, Liang believed that changes in literary practice (particularly in the novel) would constitute the most direct challenge to the ethic of submission and would remold morality, manners, hearts, minds, and character (Liang 1902, in Hsia 1978: 222-223).¹

Liang’s enlightenment thoughts were echoed by the May Fourth intellectual generation in their launching of the New Culture Movement. The leaders spelled out that language and literary reforms were the first step leading to the modernization of cultural communication and societal changes. *Wenyan*, classical written Chinese, and the classical literary style that had been the mainstay of China’s intellectuals for centuries were critiqued for being “imitative, immobile, and lifeless” (Hu 1928: 16) and the main supporting instruments of imperial governance. The May Fourth elites advocated destroying the “painted,” “stereotyped,” “pedantic,” and “obsequious” literature of classicism and adopting colloquial expressions and words to create a “plain,” “expressive,” “fresh and sincere” literature “of realism,” “of the people,” and “of a living society” (Chen 1917). By reducing the differences between classical and vernacular into an ideologically charged dichotomy of “elitism” vs. “populism” or “vital” vs. “sick” (Owen, 2001), Hu Shi concluded that the “spontaneous, vivacious, and full-of-life literature in the vernacular language” (Hu 1928: 16), *Baihua* (colloquial or spoken Chinese), was “the mainstream of Chinese literature and would be a useful tool for developing future literature” (Hu 1917: 17). Here,

language and literature were not just academic disciplines but the foundation of a modernized discourse and cultural communication that would serve as alternative sources of vitality to build a new national character and literature after demolishing the old models.

Localizing Modernity: A Class-Bound Redefining of Chinese-ness

The May Fourth intellectual search for literary and cultural modernity through the formula of “vitality” and “sickness” indicated that their modernist project was largely guided by the application of Western evolutionism to literature and social progress. In their renowned and canonized Chinese literary histories, the May Fourth elites (Hu 1928, Zheng 1938) presented a temporal and developmental scheme rather than a dynastic one. The birth of vernacular language and the development of literary tradition were conceived as a biological evolution of a living organism, the vital/living replacing the sick/dead, the superior substituting the outworn. Within this, the exuberance and vitality of vernacular language and genres held a dominant position representing the direction of progress and instilling much needed energy for a nation to become a bigger power. During the May Fourth period, the notions of “newness (*xin*, present)” and “motion (*dong*, move),” as Lee (2001), Owen (2001), and Wagner (2001) pointed out, were defined in a context of unilinear time and sense of history with the emphasis on the present time and change. The intelligentsia regarded their efforts of bringing a democratic literature and living language as marking a pivotal point breaking away from China’s imperial past, freeing China “from its anomaly of immobility and stagnation” (Luo, 1920: 846), and going forward toward a glorious new civilization.

Thus, the May Fourth intellectual project and its articulated discourse of modernity reflected the Chinese reception of the Western terms in the face of national insecurity. The shattering of China’s cultural supremacy, economic affluence, and self-complacency at the turn of the last century propelled the intellectual elites to evaluate China’s position in the modern world and to study zealously the modernization experiences of powerful rivals. Yet, to a great extent, their application of evolutionism and cultural practices reflected more the elites’ reassessment of the relationship of China’s past and present than their engagement in the full semantic context of Western modernity. For these doctors of souls, social stratification between high and low, respectable and vulgar in imperial China tended to be measured by the distinctions between language and literary products of different social groups. The monopoly over classical language and literature separated the literati and conferred an inferior social status on the common folk who used “*Baihua*,” which was considered to be the reason for the lack of a literate citizenry and the failure to disseminate a national consciousness. To get rid of the negative influence of the old social and political supremacy and to awaken the common people, the May

Fourth intelligentsia purposefully privileged the “folk” and “vernacular” as new, vital source of strength to accomplish modernist and nationalistic tasks. In this view, their articulated sense of modernity and practices were more or less a class-bound, ideological redefining of Chinese-ness under the universal evolutionary continuum, whose agenda was centered on establishing a collective and modern national character for twentieth-century China.

Defining “the Folk”: Compromised Vitality and Modernity

The belief in the inseparability of two causes—cultural movement and mental change—in the May Fourth intellectual project, with its nationalistic and enlightenment orientation, also conveyed the elites’ complicated notion of “the folk.” As in the romanticism of Johann Herder’s *Volksgeist*, “the folk” as the bearers of the untarnished, non-aristocratic symbol captured the imagination of the new elites in the process of searching for a collective, vital, and powerful national character and literature. Not only the words but also the concerns of commoners attracted their attention. They actively collected and preserved folksongs as a way to understand the true life of the folk and listened to social messages embodied in vernacular expressive forms (Liu 1919, Liu 1927, Gu 1928, Chao 1942, Eberhard 1970, Wang 1995). Their efforts “shed a clear light on the ambiguities of the words *Volk* and people,” as Schwartz suggested about the nationalism emerging from the French Revolution. “The people as the collectivity of the oppressed in confrontation with the oppressing ruling classes speedily becomes the people as a collective subject or collective organism regarded as the bearer of such clearly national attributes as common national language and national culture” (Schwartz 1993).

While the approach of “going to the people” (Hung 1985) tended to dismantle the solid barrier between intellectuals and “the folk” (Fitzgerald 1996: 98), the elites simultaneously acted as “educators” to disseminate knowledge and their enlightenment thoughts to commoners through practice.² The “folk” were nevertheless a group of hopeless commoners with “a naïve, crude, and rigid mentality” (Qian 1919, also in Li 1979: 120-124), who needed to be awakened and guided. The same intellectuals who glorified the vernacular shouldered the responsibility of “sanitizing” unhealthy and superstitious components to construct a genuinely vital character for “the folk.”³ Their selective definition of “the folk” located themselves in the superior position of leaders determining how to build a new national identity and how to teach it to the folk. On the one hand, this stance, together with the cultural awakening efforts of the elites, echoed the entrenched hierarchical relationship between “the men of words (*wenren*)” and “mean commoners (*pinmin*)” and the Confucian credo that had claimed literature as the vehicle of moral enlightenment in imperial China. Ironically, the May Fourth intellectual project was shot through with the

same traditional thinking they had renounced as the elites were engaged in importing and searching for what was modern. Their iconoclastic new culture movement became an interplay or compromise between nationalistic fervor and the traditional assumptions of intellectuals.

The highly selective imagining of the "folk" in creating the discourse of modernity, on the other hand, also presented a typical example of employing "the folk" to conduct ideological battles. As Yu argued, the May Fourth intellectual project was essentially multidirectional and multidimensional, with a variety of discourses, approaches, and practices among the intelligentsia (2001). In this era of destruction and construction, different perspectives selected, advocated, and contended for what was valued in rebuilding a nation.⁴ The rise of vernacular language and literature as a vital resource for a modern China at the turn of last century illustrated a discursive victory of "the folk" after this notion was romanticized, "sanitized," and canonized through the literary and cultural practices of its advocates. Thus, the May Fourth elites "did open a ground of pluralism that promised modernities. But at the same time they sowed the seeds of monologic hegemony that eventually dominated the literary, cultural, and political discourse of modern China" (Dolezelova and Wang, 2001: 23).

Conclusion and Discussion

The analysis of the selective definition of "the folk" in the context of pursuing a modern China shows the crucial role of "the folk" in creating the distinctive discourses of modernity and its elusive nature as a cultural artifact crafted by power dynamics. The once inferior vernacular production of "the folk" was highly valued as a vital, lively, and fresh source to construct a modern mode of cultural communication and a new national character when China faced a crisis of national survival. In this historical context, vitality and modernity were intertwined in the concept of "the folk" revealing the revision of China's heritage and the redefinition of social-cultural distinction by the May Fourth intellectuals. It also reflected the key tensions and negotiations between the native and the foreign, tradition and modernity when the intellectuals endeavored to apply the Western discourse of modernity to their indigenous modernist projects. Thus, theoretically, the case of the early modern China in this article reinforces the recent reflective trend of localizing or re-contextualizing modernity in distinctive social-cultural-political constellations (Duara 1993, Schwartz 1993). Far from being "a political McDonald's" whose prefabricated formula can be established in every new context (Nordholt 2000: 101), modernity in non-Western settings incorporates or appropriates Western impacts into its own program rather than simply adapting Western models (Hutchinson 1996, Greenfield 1998, Eisenstadt and Schluchter 2000, Spohn 2003).

We must pay attention to the indigenous rhetoric of nationalistic and modernist projects and the linkage between internal dynamics and external forces at the local level in order to read the concept of "the folk" within multiple discourses of modernity.

End notes

¹ "To renovate the people of a nation, the fictional literature of that nation must first be renovated...to renovate morality, we must renovate fiction, to renovate manners we must first renovate fiction...to renew the people's hearts and minds and remold their character, we must renovate fiction" (Liang 1902, in Hsia 1978: 222-223)

² For example, the activities of Beijing University Commoners' Education Lecture Society (in 1919) and the Custom Survey Society (in 1923).

³ For example, the campaign against popular religion in the late 1920s. An article named "Gods" in *Minsu* (Folklore 1929, Vol. 41/42) rationalized the governmental order on eradicating superstitions, "we still have stupid men and women with simplistic minds who hold on to their old beliefs and are not easy to change. With people like them, we can only wait until they expire together with god..." (Shang 1929:24). Wagner (2001: 101) pointed out that the people and the popular appearing in the collections were highly selective.

⁴ In this era, in addition to the opinions of conservative scholars such as Gu Hongming and Wu Mi, some intellectuals, who were agreeable with the New Cultural Movement also questioned the radical approach of the vernacularization of classical literature. For example, Yu Pinbo criticized that vernacular poetry was clumsy and coarse compared to succinct classical poetic language (Yu 1919: 163-171). Zhou Zuoren regarded the folksong collecting movement as a pure literary concern (Zhou 1923). He appreciated genuine feeling, sincerity, and creativity of folksongs, but seldom viewed folksong research as a tool to understand commoners or to foster social change.

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Some Important Chinese Folklore Journals:

XQN: *Xin Qing Nian (New Youth)*, published in 1917.
 GYZK: *Ge Yao Zhou Kan (Folksong Weekly)*, published in 1922-25; 1936-37.

MSZK: *Min Su Zhou Kan (Folklore Weekly)*, published in 1928.

MJWY: *Min Jian Wen Yi (Folk Literature & Arts)*, published in 1917.

MJWX: *Min Jian Wen Xue (Folk Literature)*, published since 1955.

CORRECTION

The author of "Media Translation in the Production of Legendary Hawaii" (*Indian Folklife*, 4.1.2005; 5-8) **Cristina Bacchilega's** introduction should have read as '**Professor in Department of English, University of Hawai'i-Manoa**' and not as "Professor of English literature and Hawaiian Culture Studies".

The mistake is solely of the Editor and completely unintended by the author. With due apologies to the author and others concerned, the Editor requests that the change may be noted. [Sadhana Naithani, Guest Editor, *Indian Folklife*, 4.1.2005]