

Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Singing songs of rebels, rice and romance in China's lower Yangtze Delta

Description: The Yangtze, Asia's longest river, flows through China's wealthiest region, the lower delta, which includes the metropolis of Shanghai. Sadly, the unique traditional cultures and epic folk songs of this region have all but succumbed to the relentless march of modernization and cultural homogenisation. What are the stories behind the region's longform folk songs, and how are they passed down? How do today's people in the region regard this cultural legacy, and what's being done to save the songs of Shanghai's hinterland? Sinologist Prof. Anne McLaren, who has researched the region over decades, joins presenter Ali Moore to explore the lower Yangtze's unique cultural heritage. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

Voiceover:

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Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore, this is Ear to Asia.

Anne McLaren:

So songs played all of these roles, they helped organise labour, they reflected the folk beliefs – the prayer to the rice mother in line with other Asian monsoonal systems. And it is in this context that the long songs evolved. And of course being farmers and mostly male, what they love to talk about was sex, so the sort of most popular stories were all about love affairs.

Ali Moore:

In this episode, singing songs of rice, romance, and rebels in China's lower Yangtze Delta.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

The Yangtze is the longest river in Asia. It begins in the Tibetan plateau, flows to the east across China, passes through the metropolis of Shanghai, and finally empties into the East China Sea. The Yangtze's lower delta region, which takes in Shanghai, a host of other industrialised cities, and a highly productive agricultural hinterland, has been the great generator of wealth for most of China's recent history. But before the advent of high speed trains and motorways, the product of four decades of economic reforms, Shanghai's hinterland was a tapestry of rice paddies punctuated with numerous rivers, streams, and lakes. And although ethnically Han, the denizens of the Yangtze lower delta had their own languages, folklore, and moral codes, including long detailed mountain songs.

Today, in the wake of China's relentless march to modernization and cultural homogenization, the region's unique culture has all but disappeared. So how did singers learn these epic songs, which are often several thousand lines long? How does today's population of the lower Yangtze delta regard these cultural heirlooms, and what's being done to save the songs of the region? Asia Institute Chinese literature expert Professor Anne McLaren, has been documenting the folk songs of the Yangtze delta over many years. Her latest book on the subject, *Memory Making in Folk Epics of China: The Intimate and the Local in Chinese Regional Culture*, is published by Cambria. Anne joins me over Zoom to discuss the stories behind these long form delta folk songs, and to look at the unique culture of the region. Anne, welcome back to Ear to Asia.

Anne McLaren:

Thank you.

Ali Moore:

This is an in-depth Western language monograph of these long narrative mountain songs. What took you to this part of the world, to the lower delta of the Yangtze, and to this culture and this language?

Anne McLaren:

I first visited this region in 1978 when I was studying Chinese in Shanghai, so this region has long held a fascination for me, it's a vibrant and very interesting place. I've got about 40 years of engagement with the region, and for that reason I've been able to make friendships amongst scholarly circles, and those friendships have in turn led me to go on trips with the scholars, and they've opened up for me areas that very few people have seen. So quite a bit of my work is in areas of the lower Yangtze delta, culture of the ordinary people that a lot of Western scholars really haven't looked at in the past, in other words, overlooked, unnoticed, and I personally find it very, very interesting.

Ali Moore:

And when did you first come across these long narrative songs? These real, I mean they're true epics, aren't they?

Anne McLaren:

They are, they are. Well, it all happened when a friend of mine from one of the universities invited me to go on a field trip with him to a city called Wuxi, and this city is located on the northern reaches of Lake Tai, or Taihu. Taihu is one of China's largest lakes, I think it's the third largest freshwater lake, located approximately a 100k really from Shanghai. It took a while to get there in 2004, and we went immediately to an interesting lake, which was called Duck Village Lake, which I learned had lots of interesting folk stories dating back about 2,500 years associated with it. The Chinese have culture bureaus, which are run by the culture cadres in charge of the local cultural activities in the region.

So my friend introduced me to people who were singing, and I just remember the impact of these, the loud voices and the long booming songs echoing across the lake. And then he said to me, "These belong to a culture where they sing very long narrative songs, and this is the only region we've found, so far anyway, where Han people have these long narrative songs." I call them folk epics in my book, this is just to avoid having to say long narrative songs all the time, but they are really folk epics in style, and that's where I first came across them.

Now it wasn't possible for me to do research into that topic at that time, and in fact the linguistic aspects were very challenging and very demanding. There were a number of transcripts, a number of volumes published, but the sheer amount of Wuyu, which is Wu language material – expressions in these long folk epics, made it very difficult for me to read them and gain an entry into that culture. So it took quite a while, it took quite a lot of effort and collaboration with Chinese scholars in order to allow me to actually read the singer transcripts, make translations, and then try to figure out what they might have meant in the culture of the time, to the people in the rice paddy fields. What they were trying to do, what were their faith systems? Why was there this rice mother, which I found very interesting, why was it always about rice? Why was rice portrayed as feminine? Things like that started to catch my eye.

Ali Moore:

And the language, the Wu language that was used for these folk epics, is that still spoken today?

Anne McLaren:

Yes. So there's not one Wu language, I hasten to add. Like everything in China everything's complicated. So the Wu language, in general, is said to have about 85 million speakers, but inside that there are types of Wu language which are mutually incomprehensible. So the one that is spoken around the region of Lake Tai is called Northern Wu, and it's not necessarily comprehensible to other speakers of Wu south of that area, so that's another of those complicating factors.

Ali Moore:

And when you first went to this part of the world, it was extraordinarily fertile, wasn't it? And had been for many centuries.

Anne McLaren:

Yes. In fact, it's very interesting. Studies show that far from being unsustainable, the rice cultivators, over a thousand years, had managed to create a culture that was sustainable, so they could grow rice in the rice paddy every year. They had an amazing system of fertiliser based around human fertiliser, and other things made from soybean cakes, from bracken, and all sorts of things, so they're very good with the fertiliser. I've been visiting the region really from the 1970s, and even in the 1990s I must say that the toilets were not modern, if you know what I mean. You go out to a hayloft and you make your contribution to the local fertiliser. That was true of the 1990s. All of this did of course gradually change in China of the 21st century.

But yes, it was an amazing self-sustainable system which was very productive. Rice is a very rich food, it gives you a lot of calories, people pay tax in rice, and an awful lot of the rice that the population grew actually was sent up the grand canal, up to Beijing, up to the court in the form of tax. And that's another topic, because it's also part of one of the folk epics that I read and explored.

Ali Moore:

Which we'll have a look at in a minute, but as you say, you were fascinated by the rice mother, the various themes of these songs. So what was the connection between farming, between rice growing, and the singing these epics? Particularly given many farmers, they're so busy making a living, as opposed to being able to sit there and think about thousands of lines for an epic song.

Anne McLaren:

Yes. So how did it evolve? Well, the very earliest record we have of the very loud songs booming across the rice fields comes from the 12th century, and it's a set of paintings about how rice was grown that was given to the emperor of the Southern Sung in the mid 12th century. The emperor of the Southern Sung had come from North China, he'd fled because the north had been taken over by a foreign northern tribal people, and here he was in the modern day city, which we call Hangzhou, and he didn't know much about rice growing. So the local people did some beautiful paintings, and each of the paintings has a poem attached, and from the poetry that's attached to the paintings we know that during rice transplantation the farmers would work in teams, and it's a very choreographed form of activity.

So transplanting rice, you're taking the green shoots that have been grown for a few weeks from the nursery bed and you're putting them in a field in a line along with a number of other rice growers. You need to keep to your line, you need to keep a certain rhythm if you're going to get through the whole paddy field, planting it one by one by one, you need a certain choreography to make it efficient, and to make it interesting and rewarding. So even in the 12th century, this poem tells us that loud songs boomed across the rice paddy. So that is an example of how very longstanding this custom is.

And then a few centuries later, there are records of the people who are the landholders saying, "Oh yes, look, these songs are very helpful, they make the work very efficient, the farmers are entertained, and this is a good thing, and they get through the work cheerfully and happily, this is great." But then they said, "But we don't like these songs because they're obscene, they're all about men and women and love making, this is dreadful." And one of them actually said, "I'm going to write some nice songs that they will like all about virtue and learning." I don't know how well that went.

So the songs played all of these roles, they helped organise labour, they reflected the folk beliefs, which is the prayer to the rice mother, veneration of the rice mother, in line with other Asian monsoonal systems. They accompanied rituals to the rice mother that were carried out on the banks of the rice paddy from time to time, particularly when the bridal rice shoot was transplanted into the rice paddy, she needed to be given sacrifices, so they would give her the kind of foods that they thought a pregnant woman would need, meat and vegetables, and so on, and rice, and it's in this context that the long songs evolved. And of course being farmers, and mostly male, what they loved to talk about was sex. So the most popular stories were all about love affairs. We've identified about 39 long narrative songs, or folk epic, from this region, of Lake Tai, and of that number about 28 of the 39 are different types of stories about love affairs.

Ali Moore:

Clearly there was an element of entertainment as well. But let's look at some very specific examples, and maybe start with a song that does focus on rice. Just to give listeners a sense of the subject here and what a folk epic is, here's a little bit of a song called Planting Rice Shoots.

Speaker 3:

(Singing).

Ali Moore:

And you can hear the rhythm in that song, Anne. Tell us a bit about it, and maybe read us a little of the translation.

Anne McLaren:

Sure. You'll hear that it's very loud and reverberating, this is important. One aspect of the folk culture that I uncovered is that they believe that a loud song sung outdoors would help the rice grow, it would literally act as a kind of fertiliser, symbolic fertiliser, and nourishment to help that rice to grow. So that's one reason that they gave for why we sing loud songs.

But to give you an example, this one comes from the folk epic of Shen Seventh Brother, which is a folk epic about how human beings learned how to grow rice. It's not a translation of the song we've just heard, but it's another more elaborate version of a similar song. So it goes as follows, "The precious grain has fallen into the ground and has grown into rice shoots. The brother and sister lead the mother and neighbours as they sing out the longing for the rice shoot song. Tiny rice shoots, you understand the feelings of mankind. When you greet the wind, you shake your heads, your faces wreathed in smiles. Precious shoots, we urge you to grow three inches in a single night. We await the happy time when we can marry you off to another field.

"The sister tossed the sacred rice seedlings as evenly as the heavenly maiden scattering nectar from flowers, and the brother worked the bunches with his fingers, arousing the lotus flowers to open up their buds. Their hearts at ease, their hands move quickly as round after round of songs rang out. The rice transplanting song was sung again and again. The rice shoots grew mature and conceived ears of grain. The brother and sister wept warm tears like broken lines of pearls cascading down. Leading the mother and villagers, they walked from the eastern edge to the western bank, from the

north to the southern corners, carefully inspecting the rice crop. The song of longing for son seeds rang out like triumphal drums in the palace of content."

Ali Moore:

So Anne, it's very much, I mean, there's a direct correlation there, isn't there, between the growing of the rice and the human reproduction cycle?

Anne McLaren:

Well, there is indeed, and I think that's the link between the sacred, I actually have a chapter on the sacred and the secular and how you can't separate them very easily. It's about procreation, it's about survival, it's about making sure that humans have rice to eat, and that human beings reproduce like the rice and have children, especially sons, I must add. In fact, the word for seeds sounds the same as the word for sons, that's why I call them son seeds, just to capture that idea there. But yes, it's about procreation, it's about the survival of the whole community, and it's about working together to achieve a common goal.

Ali Moore:

And about showing respect for the sacred rice?

Anne McLaren:

It's absolutely about veneration of the rice and the feminine principle. And one characteristic that I do find interesting about the folk epics in general is that although in some ways the stories draw from broader Chinese culture, they almost invariably have strong female characters, and I do find that very interesting, including some very positive female warriors.

Ali Moore:

And we're calling them folk epics, we're talking about how they're a long narrative. That little bit that you read us of that particular song, what would that have been? A quarter of the song, a 10th? How long are we talking?

Anne McLaren:

Well in this particular case, the one I read out is part of a long narrative song, it comes from a man called Qian Afu, and the transcript that we have is 800 lines, which is not long. There is a longer version available which is about 2,500 lines, but this is a mixed arrangement of the song sung by three different singers. But people who met Qian Afu, who sadly passed away some years ago so I didn't get to meet him, but folklorists who did asked him, "How long could the song go on for?" And he would say something like two to three days, which means that he would've included all of the known rice growing songs in this folk epic, which is about rice growing. So in other words, he could make it endlessly long. So as long as they could recall the stock material, recall the songs of the past, the most adept and talented of the amateur folk singers could just keep on going endlessly, virtually, kind of spinning out the story.

Ali Moore:

As long as their voice held out.

Anne McLaren:

As long as their voice held out. Obviously they would stop, when they say several days they don't mean 24/7, they mean that there would be sessions, and they'd have lunch, and there could be a nap, then they'd come back and do it again, that sort of thing, through the day.

Ali Moore:

And were they sung by both men and women?

Anne McLaren:

They were, and one of the most powerful is sung by a woman called Lu Amei. This is another, I think, valuable aspect of all folk culture generally, it's nowhere near as patriarchal as Chinese written culture, so you really get women taking part. When you don't have to read and write, learn all those thousands of characters, which women don't get the chance to do, women take part in other genre.

So women not only figure as highly positive characters in folk epics, they also sang. Lu Amei, she's the best known singer of a long song cycle called Fifth Daughter, which is about an abortive romance between a woman from a property owner family and the hired hand who did the work in the family, and it was frowned upon, of course, by the family seniors, who did everything that they possibly could to thwart her in her love affair. But she obviously strongly identified with that and she did a really good folk epic version, which I've translated part of in my book.

Ali Moore:

You talk about how of the 39 songs that you've identified, 28 of them deal with love or sex or romance. What was the appeal of those topics to communities? Were they merely entertainment or were they morality tales?

Anne McLaren:

Actually it was a man called Zheng Tuyou, he's from the same universities that I generally work with, who identified 39 folk epics. But of the remainder, some were about heroes, one was about a rebel hero, for example, from the Ming Dynasty. Another was about a man who actually was a tiler, who worked on clay tiles, and who offended the leading magnate in the area. And there were others that told mythological stories about the white snake, which is a famous story in China, so there's quite a broad range. Morality tales, there's a very tiny number.

Ali Moore:

So what was the appeal of the romance, the sex, the forbidden love stories that dominated? Was it just entertainment?

Anne McLaren:

It was mostly entertainment, but I also think it related to the code of morality built around rice cultivation. So I've mentioned that the rice shoot was transferred from the nursery bed, which was seen as like the young girls' natal home, she was taken out. Remember that young girls didn't choose their partners in marriage, they were not allowed to choose their partners in marriage. So the young girl was meant to follow the same process of the rice cultivation, she was meant to be chosen, put in a basket, taken to another field, that is taken to another village, and married off where she should have sons.

Now what happened if a woman in the community chose to violate this general principle, which is that her parents marry her off to another field? Once she chose to violate that, what if a young woman, from a good family falls in love with a hired hand and she has an affair, what happens then? Unfortunately what happens, and what I found, is that they almost always have tragic ends. The

woman is very often forced to commit suicide, she'll either hang herself or she'll take her own life with a knife. The man, if he's a hired hand, or a lower class individual, will be punished. But in some of the stories, like, for example, the one about where a brother-in-law goes to fetch his little sister, in that particular folk epic, very interesting folk epic, the man basically takes his wife's younger sister, through deceptions, through capture, he rapes her on a boat, and he gets away with it. And that type of folk epic is a very challenging one for us.

Ali Moore:

Yes, that's called Going to Fetch the Wife's Younger Sister, can you maybe read a little of that one?

Anne McLaren:

Yes. So Going to Fetch the Wife's Younger Sister, a man has a wife already, and he gets to learn about the beautiful younger sister of his wife and he decides that he will go and bring her into his home, he doesn't really want his wife that he has, he wants this younger and beautiful sister, so his appetite is whetted. He hits on a scheme to go to the home of the in-laws and to say, "Oh look, my wife is sick, she needs someone to look after her. Please let me take the younger sister so she can look after her older sister." The in-laws fall for this, because after all he's an older man, he's a kinsman and they trust him, and the girl goes on the boat. The singer spends a lot of time dwelling on the stages of the boat trip, and it's from that section that I'm going to read now.

She also sometimes, the singer could be male or female, the singer also does spend some time in some cases outlining what happens next, the actual sexual act itself, and I think this would've been the highlight in days gone by. Modern day singers tend to, how can I put it, elide that particular section, but they do spend a lot of time on the boat trip, where the man attempts to seduce the girl.

Okay, so I'm going to read from a passage about the boat trip, where the singer is very carefully building up tension. Everyone knows what's going to happen, there's no surprise here, but the tension involved in what will the girl do when she realises what's going to happen? I should add that she's in a low-lying poling boat, so there's only two people on the boat, there's the brother-in-law, he's standing upright, poling the boat along, and she's sitting on the boat, it's a very small boat. There's no cover.

"He rocks the boat and pulls on the rope. The prow cleaves the water with a thwacking sound. He rocks the boat and pulls on the rope, both banks rise high with tangled grass. He rocks the boat and pulls on the rope, he stops the swaying boat with a very loud thwack." So clearly the brother-in-law has found a relatively protected and secluded place with tangled grass where he can stop the boat and carry out the act.

In another similar version of the same folk epic we're told that the girl comes out into the boat looking as beautiful and innocent, she's a virginal young girl, probably a teenager, she comes out looking like the goddess of mercy. The brother-in-law offers her drops of muddy water from the tip of his boat pole, so this is a custom in some areas, and this is the idea, that if you sip muddy water from the pole tip, your stomach can cope with the rocking of the boat. In other words, the muddy drops will protect and shield her from sickness and misfortune.

But the irony of this seeming protection from evil soon becomes very apparent, so I'll just read from this singer now. "The little girl got all dressed up to go on the boat. The brother-in-law led her by the hand as she stepped on board. She sipped three drops of muddy water from the tip of the pole. She drank as if this was indeed the elixir of life. With his pole he moved the prow and turned the boat around, the little sister felt sick in her stomach with fear. The brother turned his head and said to her, 'Darker floating duckweed blocks the way ahead.'"

That is actually the end of the singer transcript, the singer didn't go on, she didn't really need to because she'd brilliantly created, and this was a woman singer, Lu Amei, she'd just brilliantly created

the kind of terror that any young girl would feel when she realises he's going to stop the boat, something's going to happen to her.

In versions of this story that I've read and translated after the rape, or it's written as an act of seduction, they arrive at the home of the brother-in-law, his wife, she looks at the crumpled dress of the sister, she notes her hair's in disarray and she says, "What have you been doing? Have you been sleeping with my husband?" And the sister tries to explain that she was captured and deceived, but the sister is completely unrelenting and she blames it all on the little sister, not on the husband. The sister then says, "Well, I've lost face in the family," she goes and hangs herself from the rafters.

And then there are some versions of the story where the singer adds on a bit where the older sister comes back as a bird and she condemns and derides the younger sister, or she even blinds her and scalds her with water. Yeah, so this is a story which is really quite challenging for us, I think.

Ali Moore:

Absolutely, I mean all of that, what does it say about the social mores of the day?

Anne McLaren:

Well, it clearly shows male control, because in this case all the variants of the story I've read, the man always gets away with it, and they don't really have a concept of a woman is coerced and therefore she feels she hasn't got any choice. If you look at the legal situation, if a woman wants to accuse a man of rape, she has to prove, she has to demonstrate that she fought him to the point of death. So what this means is that the poor girl on the boat, she either submits or she throws herself in the river and drowns. If she doesn't do that then she's not demonstrating virginal purity and she's to blame. So that's what it tells us about the sexual mores of that age.

The other thing it tells us is that, when the folklorists learned of this story and they made inquiries, people said, "Well look, this is an actual marriage practise," that sometimes men do marry the younger sister, because usually they can do this and not pay a bridal price, so it's an easy thing to do. They would often do it if the older sister had died. So if she sickened and died then they'd essentially marry the younger sister, and they wouldn't need to pay a bridal price. So it reflects the natural practise that took place in the lower Yangtze delta region, and it reflects patriarchal cultural mores, which is certainly frowned upon in the present day.

Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, and just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its society's politics and cultures, it's called the Melbourne Asia Review, it's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests, and by many others, plus you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Professor Anne McLaren from Asia Institute, we're discussing folk songs of the Wu people from China's lower Yangzi delta. Let's look at another song, moving away from sex and relationships, and in that particular case rape, and you talked about some of them having heroes, that there's a very long song, isn't there, I think it's got 20,000 lines, which is pretty extraordinary, about the Hua Mountain Lifter. Can you tell us a bit about that one?

Anne McLaren:

Yes, this is actually the longest of the identified long narrative songs, or folk epics of the delta. So Hua Mountain Lifter is said to be a rebel from the Ming era who lived in the region of Wuxi, which is this region to the north of Lake Tai that I've mentioned previously. In this region, and elsewhere in the

delta, there were waves of very strong anti-rent movements from the farming populations, who were mostly tenant farmers, so they didn't own the land. They worked the land all year and they gave most of the harvest to the landlord, and a lot of it to the emperor through payment of tax. So it was an anti-rent movement that was an anti-tax movement, and it went through China in waves, and one of the main waves was in the mid 17th century, which coincided with the time of the breakup of the ruling Ming Dynasty, and the conquest of the country by the Manchus, who came over the wall.

It's at this desperate time that a man called Hua Mountain Lifter is said to have lived. We cannot confirm independently that such a man lived, but on the other hand there is a record of someone from the 1640s, his name was Wu Paoshan, which sounds rather like that in the local dialects, and he was regarded by the members of the gentry as a terrible murderous thug, as a so-called local bandit, or a tufei. But from the point of view of the ordinary people, he was fighting for them, he was part of a righteous army, as they saw it, fighting for equal rights, as it were, for the population, and a much fairer system. So it seems to reflect all of the anti-rent and anti-tax movements of the delta region from the mid-17th century right through to the early 20th century when you have similar kind of riots, even in the 1940s.

Ali Moore:

Can you read us a little?

Anne McLaren:

Yes. So the song segment that I'm going to read is about the day when Hua Mountain Lifter is born. So he's in his mother's womb, his father is a man called Dragon Root, and his mother has been pregnant with him for 12 months, so not 10 months, but 12, which means, of course, that he's going to be an extraordinary individual, because this is a sign of an extraordinary individual, they have very long gestation periods. It's New Year time, it's a festival time when people should be celebrating good fortune in the coming of the New Year, at New Year time it is very unlucky to do anything negative. So to come and demand tax or rent is a very dreadful thing to do at New Year because it probably means that the rest of the year will be unlucky and inauspicious. But it's exactly at this time, when the mother is in labour, writhing on the bed, that the landlord in the henchman come around demanding that Dragon Root pay his tax. So they burst into the home, and they try to grab hold of Dragon Root.

"Dragon Root's heart burned with fire. The flame in his stomach felt like a volcano erupting. He rushed to the front door and pounded heavily on the door. Just as an arrow leaps from a bow he struck down the demon men. 'Today's New Year's Day, no need to tell you this. This one wants rent, the other wants silver. My wife is in labour, twisting and turning on her bed. Tell me, which one should I obey?' The evil demons open their stinky maggot mouths, 'Hand over your rent and silver right now. Who cares if it's New Year's Day or a festival time? Who cares if your wife gives birth to a child and dies herself?'"

Ali Moore:

They're pretty blunt.

Anne McLaren:

Yes, yes.

Ali Moore:

And is that common? That's the common language? I mean, this was the language of the illiterate.

Anne McLaren:

It was indeed, yes, this language where you demonise other people, your enemy, was very much part of this folk epic, possibly in society too. It reminds us that at New Year Festival, at other festival times in the year, people would go to the temples and there would be sometimes people acting up as the king of hell, and they would have demons and lictors and instruments of torture, and so on. So all of this religious-like imaginary was very much part of the local culture, of the local temple ritual culture of the region, and very familiar to the farmers, and hence, understandably, it was totally incorporated into the folk epic. So the landlord class and the official class see that the farmers who rebel as demons, and the farming class in rebellion see the upper class as demons too.

Ali Moore:

And the songs that we've been talking about, and that you've just given us little examples of, were they unique to the lower Yangtze delta?

Anne McLaren:

That's a very good question, Ali. I have learned of other long narrative songs in other so-called Han communities in other parts of China, but they seem to be more about mythological themes or religious heroes, and I think I can say that, so far, we have not uncovered a comparable corpus of material in any other Han Chinese group.

Ali Moore:

Do you think it's possible that it's there though, that it just has been lost or has not... I mean, was there something unique about this part of the world that lent itself to this?

Anne McLaren:

I do think rice cultivation was very important. If you look at rice cultivation areas of monsoonal Asia, they do have a rice mother, they have veneration of rice, and they have sexual and bawdy theatrical type themes and stories associated with it. I think the two things go together. So the Tai people of South China have similar rice customs and some rice songs that could have links with those in the lower Yangtze delta. A similar people, the Tai-Hmong people found in northern Vietnam, a similar type of pattern. So it seems to relate best to rice cultivation zones.

One of the reasons for the emergence of the very long narrative songs in the Yangtze delta was the establishment of troops of singers, these were called mountain song troops, and they were ordinary farmers who were chosen by the local landlord for their strong voices, their strong memories, and ability to sing at length. And they formed groups with other farmers, and they were actually paid to sing on the sidelines of the paddy fields, to help accompany and choreograph the labour in the paddy fields. Because the landlord would say, look, they're entertaining, they help coordinate the labour, and the farmers do much more work if they have songs, so it actually made sense for them to pay people to sing along the banks of the paddy fields to enable the labourers to keep going under the hot sun.

But it's also been found that the longer narrative songs are associated with the broad flood plains of the lower Yangtze delta, when you had very large acreages full of rice, rice growers, full of singers. This is the specific site which really has nurtured, it's really brought out the emergence of the very long narrative songs, which we now call folk epics.

Ali Moore:

And especially against the notion of China today as a Han Chinese country, and the focus of the Communist Party on a homogenous society, how important are these songs to telling us about the cultural heritage of this region?

Anne McLaren:

I think they're very important because it points to the great diversity of China. In fact, DNA tests carried out about 20 to 30 years ago did establish that Northerners have different DNA to the Southerners. So Northerners, China's written culture basically comes from the Yellow River, the North, this is dryland farming, they did wheat, barley, and millet, and they had a really different culture and language as a result. Monsoonal Asia, the rice growers of the lower Yangtze delta, established rice growing very, very early, even 10,000 BC you can still see signs of rice growing. As for polders, they seem to have been established at least 2000 years ago. And the southern area, south of the Yangtze, is much closer to the original culture of the Austronesian peoples, who are non-Chinese people who used to live, their culture reflects, to an extent, this very ancient substrate, which is not Chinese, it's actually Southeast Asian, monsoonal Asian in origin.

So not to understand this represents a loss, it means that China is somehow homogenous or uniform, when actually historically it's never been like that. I mean, when we think of China, it's got 9.6 million square kilometres of space in the present day, Europe has about 10 million, it's only slightly larger. Europe has about 50 sovereign states, and China has one sovereign state in that same land mass. To think that it's all uniform and exactly the same would be rather saying that Norwegians and Maltese are similar and the same, when we know that they're not. They've been shaped very much by their geographic range and diversity, by their different languages. They would say, yes, they're European, but they're not uniform. I think in the past what made Chinese civilization great is that like Europe it accommodated many different peoples, languages, and religions, and the attempt at uniformity, coercive uniformity, I would call it, in the present day to me represents a loss to the great richness of Chinese civilization.

Ali Moore:

And if we look at China since communist China, how have these songs fared specifically under the CCP. In the 50s, for example, they were infused with a revolutionary theme, weren't they, and used for propaganda purposes.

Anne McLaren:

Yes, so the communist Party has long had a rather ambiguous relationship with China's regional culture. It was thought to be intractable. I mean, if you want to raise revolutionary consciousness amongst this vast population speaking so many different languages, you needed to relate to them and talk to them in their own folk genres of storytelling and singing, and so on. But the content of the folk genre they saw as vulgar, too much about entertainment, too much about the gods and the deities and superstitious rubbish, as they saw it, and too much sex. So like the gentry of old, just the same as the late Imperial era, they didn't like them, and they stigmatised folk genre.

So after 1949, when Chinese folklorists, now armed with Marxist theory, came down to villages in the lower Yangtze delta, what they tried to do is collect the transcripts of the singers, and then they'd look at them and say, "Okay, now how can we rewrite these and teach them again to the population and infuse them with revolutionary consciousness?" So that happened in the 1950s.

During the Culture Revolution all of the old folk song genres, and everything, in fact, to do with past Chinese culture, was regarded as part of the so-called Four Olds which had to be done away with, so there was burning of the books, and torture by Red Guards of people who were folk singers, even some of the folk singers I've been looking at who sang wonderful songs, even they were tortured during the Culture Revolution, which took place from 1966 to approximately 1976, which is the year of the death of Mao Zedong.

And then in the 1980s we had the Deng Xiaoping reform era, and there was a deep sense of cultural loss. People went to temples and they saw that heads had been lobbed off the statues of the deities. I was there in 1979 and we went to Hangzhou and we visited famous temple called Lingyin, one of

the most beautiful temples in the whole of China, it's a Buddhist temple near Xihu, which is West Lake. And the people there, after years of the Culture Revolution they were rebuilding the temples, and putting the heads back on the statues, and painting them, and it was just marvellous seeing it all come back to life again.

And they did something similar too with cultural forms. So with regard to the Wu songs, they're called Wuge in Chinese, and they've now been enshrined as national level intangible cultural heritage. With the coming of the current government, Xi Jinping from approximately 2012 onwards, he did show an interest in intangible heritage culture when he was governor of Zhejiang Province, and people hoped for the best. But unfortunately the seeds of liberalism have been pretty well crimped and constrained by a new imperative to have one national voice, one national culture, everyone thinking the same thoughts and speaking in the same dialogue, as it were.

Ali Moore:

So what has that meant for both language, but also for these folk epics?

Anne McLaren:

Well, when I visited the local region, I have seen many signs of hope. I mean, just to give you one example, I visited a water town, a water town is full of canals, and so on, a beautiful one called Luxu, which is in southern Jiangsu province on the shores of Lake Fen, and they have a song pavilion there, which is a beautiful building where they have curated exhibits associated with the rediscovery, as it were, of the folk songs of the region, and certainly including the folk epics that I've talked about here. And they have the local culture cadres relearning some of these songs from the elders, they're tape recording them, and they're actually bringing in school children and singing some of the songs.

This was true in 2014, 2015 when I last visited the region. I haven't been back to China since 2018, I don't quite know how it's faring now. But the general tenor is to put the nation first, and the regions somehow are very marginalised, so I'm wondering what's going on. But the major reason to fear extinction of this culture is the urbanisation of China, which has accelerated greatly over the past 30 years, particularly in this region of the lower Yangtze delta, one of the major regions of China. One thing that greatly disappoints me is that the beautiful region of the past is essentially gone, the air is polluted, the water's been poisoned.

Ali Moore:

So it's not the rice growing region it was.

Anne McLaren:

No. You go to Taozhuang, it used to be a famous rice growing region, it's full of metallurgy factories. The inside of homes are grimy, and the air is grey, and not much is growing in the fields, and it's a very different environment now. But people are very wealthy, I hasten to add.

Ali Moore:

And you talk there though about when recordings were being made from older people, I am curious as to how many people would still remember these songs? Does anyone still sing them today?

Anne McLaren:

Today, that is a question that I can't answer, but certainly in the 1980s and 1990s, there were people born in the early 1900s, or the 1920s, or 1930s, alive who could definitely sing these songs, and there were volumes and volumes of them that were sung and collected and transcribed in the 1980s and 90s and published in massive anthologies. In the 21st century, there are people who've learned them

from the anthologies. So that's what the anthologies are for. And sometimes people learn to sing from the transcripts, sometimes they are edited in such a form that they can engage with a broader readership, regional readership, or even national readership. So the future of Wu regional culture I think lies in that.

Ali Moore:

Because there is also just a fundamental demographic pressure as well, isn't there?

Anne McLaren:

Well, there is, because one of the impacts of urbanisation is that people move and flock to cities from all over the place. So you've got Uyghurs living in Guangzhou, for example, and we have people from Anhui, or the Northern provinces, north of the Yangtze river, moving into Shanghai and the hinterland regions, and the only language in common, of course, is Mandarin, it's the national language. So I remember in the 1970s, wherever I went in Shanghai I'd be hearing Shanghainese spoken. And I remember that sense of vivid shock at some stage, I'm not sure what year it was, in the 21st century when I stood in the middle of Shanghai and all around me was Mandarin, which I can understand, and that was very good. But yes, it's a very big change, and of course with the move away from village life, there's no particular need for younger people to remember village culture.

Ali Moore:

So as someone who's visited China since the 70s, and who's spent a lot of time and a lot of your professional career researching this area, do you mourn a culture lost?

Anne McLaren:

Well, I think I have much the same feeling as I do when I think of my Irish grandmother who was born in the west coast of Ireland, apparently she could not speak Irish Gaelic. And I said to my mother, "Why can't she speak Irish Gaelic when other people can?" And the reason was that the English repressed the culture of the region, she was born as a British subject in the late 19th century. And I feel a sense of loss that my family, my mother, never learned any Irish Gaelic songs or lullabies, and therefore I never heard any either. There is a sense of loss when your identity as a people is crushed by another culture, and that's what I now feel about the Wu region too.

Ali Moore:

Well it's terrific that there is a book now that tells us so much more about this particular cultural heritage of this particular part of China. Anne McLaren, thank you very much for talking to Ear to Asia.

Anne McLaren:

Thank you, Ali.

Ali Moore:

Our guest has been Anne McLaren, Professorial Fellow at Asia Institute. And Anne's new book is called *Memory Making in Folk Epics of China: The Intimate and the Local in Chinese Regional Culture*, and it's published by Cambria Press.

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