

Introduction: China, Translation, Folkloristics

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At the 2015 meeting of the American Folklore Society in Long Beach, California, then-president of the China Folklore Society, Chao Gejin (朝戈金), observed that Chinese scholars know much about American folklore studies, but that American folklorists generally know very little about Chinese folklore and Chinese folkloristics (see Zhang and You 2019). In fact, American folklorists generally know little of folkloristic research written in any language other than English. In writing about scholarship from Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union, Rouhier-Willoughby (2021, 50), for example, notes that “scholarly materials produced by international scholars, no matter how innovative or traditional the approach, do not appear in English.”

The problem is in part one of interest in, and competence for, translation. Many of China’s folklorists are bilingual to at least some degree and have been active in introducing folkloristic theories, like the ethnography of performance and oral-formulaic theory, through their own scholarship, translations of prominent scholarship into Chinese,¹ inviting scholars to China for lectures and conferences, and sponsoring Chinese scholars going abroad to engage in short-term research and conversation. The same cannot be said of many North American folklorists. Though many North American folklorists are multilingual, there seems to be relatively little interest or incentive to engage substantively with, or translate, Chinese-language folklore scholarship. When Chinese folklorists have presented at the AFS annual meeting, their sessions are usually poorly attended (as are many panels focused on communities outside the Euro-American West) by people without a vested interest in Chinese folklore, and their scholarship has thus far had little influence on the field as practiced in North America. When Chinese scholars have visited campuses in North America in recent years, it has frequently been with funding from the Chinese Scholarship Council, or some other Chinese funding body (rather than with local support).

This issue, though, is not limited to just scholarship from China. Significant structural impediments further exacerbate this situation. Even prior to the recent cooling in Sino-American relations, particularly since the latter years of the Obama presidency, a lack of public funding for major international initiatives has also inhibited collaborative opportunities. At the institutional level, meanwhile, English’s global hegemony largely undervalues other languages in education, and translation is frequently over-

1 Readers of Chinese can find summaries of some major translations can be found on the China Folklore Society’s website: <https://www.chinese-folklore.org.cn>.

looked as a form of publication within the US tenure track or for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK. However, we might also argue that the problem lies earlier in the folkloristic training pipeline. Where budding academics in North America *do* learn extra languages as part of their degrees, such training is frequently ancillary to concerns of theory and method. It is a choice that accompanies someone's decision to do fieldwork in a place where English is not the primary language (as opposed to a requirement of folklore programs). Students are often assumed to have already developed the language abilities necessary to complete fieldwork, or they hire research assistants. With a few exceptions (like Briggs 1988), publication also often elides and erases the intellectual labor of translation as part of the research process. Moreover, while people are often meticulous about getting things right, translation in the final product (which should not be considered coterminous with language training) is often secondary to the other skills required in scholarly development.

In writing on the translation of indigenous traditions in the United States, O'Neill (2013, 245) argues that "translation is a profoundly undertheorized aspect of the human condition," let alone within the discipline of folklore studies. And yet, translation has been central to the work of many of the discipline's foundational figures. Franz Boas's tremendous body of work, for example, hinged significantly on the painstaking (and perhaps problematic) translation of Native American oral traditions. With the turn to the ethnography of communication and viewing "verbal art as performance" (see, for example, Bauman 1977) and "ethnopoetics" (see Hymes 1981; Tedlock 1983) over the last fifty years has made us keenly aware that we live in a world of others' words (to use Bauman's 2004 paraphrase of Bakhtin) and, translation particularly, is an important part of this. Even so, our disciplines have increasingly turned away from engagement with communities and scholarship from speakers of non-Romance languages, and much of the material taught in folklore classes is based on work done with English-speaking communities.

This focus on Anglophone and European traditions is, perhaps, understandable. Translation in folkloristics has not always been innocuous, given the discipline's historical (and ongoing) links to colonial and nationalist projects (Roth 1998, 248). Indeed, transcription (and other forms of translation) render a place, its people, and traditions legible to power and bring them into conversation with new interpretive frameworks (Gibbs 2018, 212). This act of rendering peripheral peoples legible to power can often be in the service of the hegemonic center, but also, as Haring (2012) notes, an important tool for awakening the hegemonic consciousness. Going further, Bacchilega (2015, 35) argues for "thinking of translation as both imperialist and counterhegemonic practice within and across narrative cultures." It is time to treat the practice, theorization, and method of translation as a central part of the folkloristic endeavor, because the institutional, theoretical, and methodological tendency to overlook and minimize translation labor as academic labor impedes attempts to foster meaningful collaborations and also impoverishes resulting scholarship. The contributions to this special issue all seek to address this concern with the importance of critically understanding translation through examples of Chinese folklore, and by reflecting upon translation in Chinese folkloristics.

Translation and Chinese Folklore

In contrast to North American folklorists' inattention, translation has played a crucial role in the founding and development of the Chinese folkloristic discipline and its current trajectory. Translation and multilingualism have long been the rule rather than the exception in China's rich linguistic mosaic, where Tibetan, Mongolian, Uyghur, and other ethnic languages sit alongside dozens of mutually unintelligible "regional dialects" (*fangyan* 方言).² In many cases, rather than translation, individuals and communities develop complicated translingual repertoires using one language for religious activities, another one (or possibly two) at home, another for business, and possibly still another for specific genres of folksong (see Roche 2017).

However, while translingualism provided a valuable local tactic for dealing with cultural complexity, writing and translation were essential technologies of governance for the different kings and emperors who historically ruled in China. The collection and publication of oral traditions as an essential component of good statecraft is nearly as old as Chinese society itself. China boasts a long history of folklore collection, dating back thousands of years. In the earliest periods, folksongs were collected as a way to know the people. From the Zhou Dynasty (ca. 600 BCE) *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 诗经) to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) *Music Bureau* (*yuefu* 乐府), such collections—perhaps not limited to folksong—served a bureaucratic function, helping to identify trends among the populace. More recently, it has been argued that particular deity cults and festival practices were introduced on China's borderlands during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) as part of a Confucian "civilizing project" (as with the Monguor Nadun, see Roche 2011).³

In addition to their political use, oral and vernacular traditions have also played a significant role in intellectual projects. For example, Feng Menglong's Ming dynasty collection *Mountain Songs* (*Shan Ge* 山歌) stands out as an exemplar of an increasing interest in folk traditions among Chinese intellectuals (see, for example, McLaren 2022). The existence of a vibrant oral tradition of story cycles like the *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihu Zhuan* 水浒传) (see Børdahl 1997, 2003, and 2007; Shepherd 2011) alongside a printed one (see Ge 2001), meanwhile, provides valuable clues to the growth of print and literacy cultures in China's late Imperial period. These examples provide only a small sample of the tremendous interest and concern shown to questions of folklore and oral tradition throughout Chinese history.⁴ While these efforts have played an important role in Chinese history and governance, they all predate the development of the modern folkloristic discipline in China, reflecting instead what we might consider

2 Although dialect is the commonly used term, Mair (1991) prefers the term "topolects" to emphasize the regional nature of these languages.

3 See Harrell (1995) for more on the concept of the "civilizing project."

4 There is, of course, a large amount of research on Chinese folkloristics produced within China. For the sake of brevity, this introduction only summarizes some of the main moments and trends. Zhang (2018) provides a more thorough discussion of the history of the Chinese folklore discipline with further reference to the Chinese language scholarship.

an imperial approach to the vernacular.⁵

The folklore studies discipline in China today—which might be termed a nation-state approach to vernacular traditions—is a product of China’s experience in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is itself the product of translation. The term “folklore” (*minsu* 民俗) came to China from Japan (see Liu 2012 and Zhang 2022) in the early years of the twentieth century. In the wake of the second Sino-Japanese war (1895) and the degrading signing of the Treaty of Shimoneseiki, Chinese scholars began looking to Western learning, much of which found its way to China through Japan. Incorporating Western science and entering the Eurocentric global stage change required a reorientation of Chinese society: from empire to nation-state, from subject to citizens, from Confucianism to Western epistemologies. Scholars also required the discursive tools to describe this new way of understanding and approaching the world. Alongside “folklore,” new terms were imported for other disciplines and methodologies. Terms like “culture” (*wenhua* 文化), “tradition” (*chuantong* 传统), “nationality” (*minzu* 民族) “nationality,” and many, many more. These terms built on concepts already circulating in the Chinese-influenced word, but the two-character word compound terms were new.

Not satisfied with importing these new terms from Japan, Chinese scholars began ambitious translation projects of their own. Young scholars travelled to study in Europe and the United States, sometimes returning with translations of scientific and literary work, as with Yan Fu’s translation of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. The draw of Herderian romantic nationalism also inspired a group of young professors and students at Peking University to pursue a “folksong movement” (Zhong 1984). Though these accounts are simplified, they highlight how translation—primarily from encounters with Japanese and European modernity—influenced the development of the folkloristic discipline and the introduction of new epistemologies and ideologies that continue to influence the Chinese world today.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the government initially sponsored teams of scholars to collect folktales, folksongs (Gibbs 2018), and other forms of oral traditions from across the new nation (see Hung 1985). In some cases, these projects served as a means of “ethnic identification” (*minzu shibie* 民族识别), categorizing the people in the country into 55 minority nationalities and one majority “Han” nationality, unified under a single “national Chinese race” (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族).⁶ Beyond collection, these projects included the transcription and translation of a massive corpus of oral traditions from around the nation. During this period, folkloristic work was often based on assumptions of the contemporary political and ideological context (Tuohy 1991, 196): for example, that China has a long, unbroken history and is a diverse yet unified nation. Like many other activities, these official

5 It is worth noting that this collection and publication work continues into the present with projects like the *San da jicheng* (三大集成) 1980s–2009 and the ongoing “The Great Series of Folk Literature” (*Minjian wenxue da xi* 民间文学大系). For some discussion of these projects, see Zhang 2022.

6 See, for example, Mullaney 2004 and 2011.

efforts generally came to a standstill during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), as official policy condemned traditional knowledge and practices as part of the “Four Olds” (*Si Jiu* 四旧) of “old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits.” However, the post-Mao era, and particularly the period of “reform and Opening up” ushered in by Deng Xiaoping after 1980, saw a more liberal atmosphere for cultural practice, and higher education saw traditional practices and folkloristic research roar back to life. Folklore collection, translation, and publication quickly followed (Ting 1987).

As higher education flourished, folklore was officially classified first as a branch of Chinese literature, and then as a branch of sociology. These classifications have significantly influenced the development of the discipline in China (An and Yang 2015), including the broadening of the folkloristic discipline’s purview to encompass topics such as urban folklore and women’s folklore (see Zhang and You 2019, 2). The post-Mao period has also seen increased engagement with international folklorists and academic theory, the emergence of a veritable cottage industry of state-supported publications of vernacular literature from across the country, and contributions to the international heritage regime (see You 2020 and Maags and Svensson 2018).

Translation in these various projects has been essential to folkloristic work in China. For example, the work of collecting, transcribing, and publishing oral traditions from around the country—in both grassroots and State-sponsored efforts—requires a variety of translations, including inter-medial from oral to written and inter-lingual translation from minority languages and “regional dialects” (*fangyan* 方言) into “simplified” (*jianti* 简体) Chinese characters.⁷ In many cases, this includes considerable intervention as scholars, publishers, and other stakeholders work through multiple versions to create a single, ideal text that may be seen as authoritative or complete (Bender 2012).

Increased engagement and collaboration between international colleagues, meanwhile, have led to a more bi-directional trend in the discipline. The China Folklore Society and its members, for example, have spent several years developing connections with Western scholars, attending conferences, and sitting as visiting scholars (Bamo et al. 2016, 275). In their work, they have sought to translate Western folkloristic research into Chinese, and also to bring the contributions of Chinese folklorists to Anglophone audiences through their English language publications (and through others in, for example, the *Oral Tradition* journal).⁸

These vastly oversimplified histories of exchange across cultural and linguistic difference—within the present boundaries of the PRC and from Japanese and Euro-American interlocutors—play a key role in the ongoing recognition of and appreciation for translation and its role in the study of folklore in contemporary China. They also point to the role of both translation and folklore in maintaining and wielding imperial and state power. These interweaving projects of folklore collection, translation, and publication make China a particularly valuable point from which to study these issues.

7 Mair (1991) calls these “topolects” to emphasize the regional nature of these languages.

8 For example, volume 16 issue 2 of *Oral Traditions* published in 2001 as well as other individual articles published in the journal.

Considering Translation

To begin with, it may be helpful to discuss what we mean by the term “translation,” and what it means in the various cultural contexts being discussed in this special issue. The English verb “to translate” derives from the past participle of the Latin *transfere*, also the root of the English word “transfer,” and literally meaning “to carry across.” Although often used narrowly to refer to interlingual translation, which is at the heart of this special issue, the term can also be deployed in a broad range of activities in which things are “carried across.” Folklorists, for example, have examined inter-semiotic translation, as seen in the work of Tedlock (1971), Fine (1984) and Foley (1991) who have drawn attention to the types of signals that are lost when moving from performance to the printed page. Bauman (2010, 23) further reminds us that remediation and inter-medial translation—from oral to written, and to other media—has long been part of the folkloristic endeavor. Translation is also used in the sciences to describe the processes of mRNA replication in gene expression. The late Bruno Latour used the word ‘translation’ to refer to a range of activities, including “displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that did not exist before, and that to some degree modifies two elements or agents” (Latour 1994, 32). This broad definition of translation creates space for a wide range of activities to be included under its umbrella.

While the English word “translation” gives a sense of carrying something (in interlingual translation, we may say “meaning”), the Chinese term *fanyi* 翻译, by contrast, refers more to making a change. Like many words in Mandarin, the term *fanyi* finds its origins in the spread (and translation) of Buddhism. The second character, *yi*, is written with a “language” radical on the left, the semantic component, suggesting that the term is most appropriately used for situations involving language. This character alone had already been used in Chinese language historical records to describe translation between languages. With the spread of Buddhism, translators introducing Indic religious concepts to Chinese audiences appended the term *fan*, which, on its own, can now mean “to turn over,” “to translate,” or “to cross.”

In recent years, the term *fanyi* has come to attain a similar range of meanings as the English definition, being used for symbolic, graphic, and inter-lingual translation. Other words using the character *yi* include *kouyi* 口译 (“oral interpretation”), with the first character *kou* meaning “mouth.” Nevertheless, in recent years, *yi* has been used in genetics to translate the new scientific concepts emerging from Western scholarship. The English term “gene translation” is sometimes translated as *fanyi* or as *zhuan yi* 转译 with the first character meaning “to change.”

While the different Chinese terms *fan*, *yi*, *fanyi*, and *zhuan yi* suggest the importance of careful attention to the terms we use in translation, the linguistic diversity in the People’s Republic of China further complicates things. For example, Tibetan-speaking communities in the PRC have two words commonly used for translation. *Lo tswa* is often used for the work of Buddhist translation, and famous translators (called *lo tswa ba*) are important cultural figures (for more, see Thurston this issue). The second term, *sgyur*, used for the act of translation in contemporary publications, for example,

means “to change.” Tibetan grammar considers this a *tha dad pa* form, imperfectly translated as “transitive.” In explicitly marking the subject, *sgyur* suggests that there is an agent—marked in the sentence with a special particle—who actively transforms the text from one language to another. This hints at the active work of the translator in not only changing codes but also changing the text in the process. It can also apply to a range of activities beyond just inter-lingual translation. At the same time, it has not achieved some of the broad academic meanings that have thus far been used for “translation” in English. Within the folkloristic endeavor, these differences necessitate critical attention, not just to translation in China more generally, but to the roles of translation in communities across the PRC, including (especially) China’s ethnic minority communities.

Translation as Theory, Method, Practice

This brief introduction should hopefully provide some general sense of the role translation has played in Chinese folkloristics. This special issue of *Cultural Analysis* will use the example of folkloristic research in and about China—where translation of English-language theoretical writing, and minority traditions play a key role in the history, current status, and future trajectories of the folkloristic discipline—to re-center perspectives on translation in folkloristic theory and stimulate interest in translation work within the discipline. Each article brings a different theoretical and topical concern to the panel, but all fundamentally seek to understand translation in studies of expressive cultures from the People’s Republic of China. Though we do not intentionally exclude Taiwan, Singapore, or other parts of the “Sinophone world,” the contributions to this volume come from research with communities in the People’s Republic of China by virtue of our own positioning and research interests rather than by design. However, it may also reflect the relative importance of translation and the folkloristic project in these different locations.

In this issue, for example, I study the difficulties of translating emerging theories of cultural sustainability in working with Tibetan stakeholders to develop new futures for Tibetan expressive practices. In doing so, he illustrates some of the concerns that translators and other culture brokers must consider when engaging in a public folklore project. The question of translation in public folklore collaborations is also at the center of Wenhong Luo’s essay. Writing in the context of the collaboration between the American Folklore Society and the Chinese Folklore Society, Luo focuses on two exhibitions of quilts—one in China and one in the United States—asking how ethnographers and curators can “thicken” translations through clarification, demonstration, and interpretation. Bender also invokes Appiah’s idea of “thick translation” (Appiah 1993) in describing how his experience of collaboratively translating oral traditions and poetry with Nuosu (Yi) scholar-poet Aku Wuwu and others has required “entering the storyworld.” In the works of modern traditionally inspired poetry, this has required navigating traditional knowledge, modern creative interventions and ideologies, and transnational information flows. The collaborative and practice-led approach he espouses, continues to play an important role in his ground-breaking work

introducing new oral traditions to Anglophone readers, brings benefits and honors to the people with whom he works. Juwen Zhang discusses the issue of rights and power in academic discourse as seen in the publication of translations, and how Chinese folkloristics has been affected by translations in the unbalanced discourse between the West and China. Importantly, together these contributing authors examine the question of translation in folklore studies from the perspective of theory (Zhang), method (Thurston and Luo), and practice (Bender).

These contributions do not address the entirety of the question of translation in folklore studies. They do, however, aim to bring the question of translation in folklore studies into further attention through a critical re-examination of its role in our ongoing studies of Chinese folkloristics, with the hope that it can encourage greater attention to translation and its importance in folklore studies more generally.

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