

MODERNITY AND FOLKLORE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION

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The papers collected in this special issue are the result of a three-day seminar “Modernity, Folklore and Transnational Possibilities” at the annual conference of ACLA (American Comparative Literature Association) held in Puebla, Mexico in April, 2007. Thanks to all the scholars who participated in the seminar and the editors of *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* who provided great support for this present issue, we started and continued open and thought-provoking discussions on modernity and folklore from the perspective of Comparative Literature.

In the field of folklore studies, there have been long debates and discussions on modernity and folklore, with great concerns and anxieties about the modern roles folklore plays in the world today. While some scholars question the rationale for the modern existence of folklore, and even “worry[ing] about the impending death of folklore,” the various definitions and descriptions of folklore leave vast space for research on folklore and its relationship to modernity, especially when modernity also demonstrates multiple facets which complicate the research (Dundes and Pagter, 222). As a pioneering scholar in folkloric study for many decades, Alan Dundes greatly expanded the horizon of folklore by defining “folk” as “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language, or religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own” (“What is Folklore?” 2). In other words, any group of people who have

a common factor which connects them to each other can be called “folk,” no matter where they come from and during which time period they live.

If we say that the above description of “folk” liberates folklore from the misconception that folklore is “being rooted out by modernity,” then Walter Benjamin’s claiming modernity “as the new in connection with that which has always already been there” places the relationship between modernity and tradition on solid ground.¹ Folklore, “the traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice that is disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioral example,”² obviously has its own non-substitutable position in the research on modernity, particularly with regard to the conception of alternative modernities.

Setting folklore in the context of modernity evokes the questions of the multiple existence and variation of folklore in modern societies, as suggested by Dundes and Pagter in the introduction to their book *Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire* (xix). To have a deeper insight into the dynamic changes of folklore and “to make sense of the new formations” when adapting to modernity, scholars studying modernity and folklore attempt to penetrate the information provided by people’s everyday life, as well as the historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which folkloric elements function, interpret and manifest themselves (Tokofsy 331). For instance, in his book *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity*, Diarmuid Ó Giolláin impressively and successfully investigates folklore, modernity, and the formation of national identity.

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The Chinese readers may have noticed that Yu Hua’s 余华 *To Live* (Huozhe 活着) begins with a young man’s journey to collect folk songs and his encounter with the old man Fugui who narrates the stories in the text. This introduction of the narrator and the storyteller in the novel not only suggests the novel is fundamentally oral in origin, but also illuminates the transformation of Fugui’s storytelling into writing by the narrator-author (the avant-garde writer Yu Hua) in the book. One may ask, in *To Live* and his other writings, how does Yu Hua combine the folkloric elements with new thoughts, perspectives and narrative devices? Is the reinterpretation, transformation or modernization of folklore and folktales a way for modern Chinese writers to articulate a discourse which is different from that of the Western modernity, and which is more indigenous and able to penetrate into something very traditional and local, while also trying to trigger something very new and unexpected? A comparative study of folklore, modernity and literature can provide better answers for these questions.

Furthermore, in the global context, similar features of folklore in modern literature are observable in other literary and artistic traditions. When folklore travels across different geographical, historical, political, social and cultural boundaries, it demonstrates its variations and complexities throughout its transnational journeys. Studying modernity and folklore needs interdisciplinary and transcultural perspectives and approaches to broaden and build the theory and to deepen the inquiries into specific issues and phenomena in folklore’s adapting to the discourses of moder-

nity and globalization. As Hermann Bausinger points out, “the dissolution of the horizon does not equal the end of folk culture but carries with it transformations which are different for each individual cultural good and which must be examined precisely”(47). It is true that scholars in folkloristic studies have been having “a vast interdisciplinary and international range of academic interests,” as Alan Dundes has shown in his works (Gürel).

For researchers in comparative literature, the interdisciplinary and international approaches are undoubtedly the fundamental methodologies of this discipline. To combine folklore and comparative literature not only continues the explorations of the relationship between oral traditions and literary texts, the local and the transnational, and the past, the present, and the future, but also can motivate more breakthrough innovations and development in each discipline, especially where circumstances in folkloristic studies have long ago embraced the research methods of comparative literature. As Haun Saussy posits, “Comparative literature supplies the
 10 instructions, the labor, and the glue. Our many ‘modes of reading’ fix on texts from elsewhere, transform them, and then send them out again. If part of our ‘selflessness’ derives from not having a national ‘home,’ another part derives from our identification with the processes of interchange, our investment in methods rather than in subject matter” (11). This present journal issue, based on the ACLA 2007 seminar “Modernity, Folklore and Transnational Possibilities” is an attempt to gather scholars who are doing research on folklore and comparative literature, and whose papers address modernity, folklore, and accordingly, any transcultural possibilities stimulated by the combination of these two.

The current issue begins with an essay discussing questions of transformation in society, culture and national identity of China during its process of modernization. In “The Mosaic of Chinese Literary Modernity,” observing certain strong ambivalence about social progress and as strong nostalgic sentiment toward pre-modern cultures in recent Chinese literary texts and films in the past few decades, Rujie Wang discerns people’s changing views on Mao’s revolutionary discourse on communism as a result of Deng’s ideology for a liberal market economy. With a focus on interpreting the adaptations of the primitive, the religious and the supernatural from traditional Chinese culture in the Nobel Prize winner Gao Xingjian’s 高行健 *Soul Mountain*, and popular films such as Zhang Yimou’s 张艺谋 *Not One Less* (Yige dou buneng shao 一个都不能少 1999), *Happy Times* (Xingfu shiguang 幸福时光 2002) and *The Stories of Qiu Ju* (Qiuju daguansi 秋菊打官司 1992), and Feng Xiaogang’s 冯小刚 *A World without Thieves* (Tianxia wuzei 天下无贼 2004), Wang argues that as literary aesthetics and countervailing ethical values, these adaptations provide no real alternatives but compensatory adjustments to China’s social and cultural transformation.

Danielle Smith calls into question what is local and what is transcultural when she studies the regionalist literary tradition in Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean. “*La novela de la caña*: Insular or International Phenomenon?” is an essay with a dialectical approach to literature, geography and cultural studies, in which

Raphaël Confiant's trilogy, "Commandeur du sucre" (1994), "Régisseur du rhum" (1999), and "La Dissidence" (2002), and other regionalist works about sugar cane from Puerto Rico to the Dominican Republic to Cuba and the northeast of Brazil are examined both within and across the "extended Caribbean." Discerning similar aesthetic and ideological features in these "sugarcane novels," Smith argues that "la novela de la caña" is both insular and international. They provide a larger landscape for understanding the literary history of the Caribbean and Latin America.

Taking Jorge Luis Borges as a specific example, Lucy McNeece's essay "Borgès' as Mégistus: Hermetic Shadows in the Enlightened Mirror" concerns other forms of knowledge and belief grounded in archaic and pre-modern traditions, and helps us understand the extremism and violence of contemporary culture. Tracing the resonance in Borges' writings in other writers from diverse cultural traditions such as those of Mesopotamia, India and the *Tao* in China, especially with regard to their notions of knowledge and reality, McNeece highlights Borges' sensitivity to other "ways of being in the world" than that have been conditioned by rational metaphysics in the West after the Renaissance. While criticizing that modernity has ignored these esoteric traditions which carry alternative implications of epistemology and ethics, McNeece views many of Borges' tales as representations of his esoteric beliefs and reminders of our relation to universal mysteries.

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Studying transnationalism and hybridity in Latin American and Asian art and literature, Gabriela Jauregui reflects upon Said's definitions of "the Orient" and "the Occident" and his discussions of their relationships in *Orientalism* by bringing into question the place of Latin America in this binary opposition. "Apuntes on Orientalism in/and Latin American Literature" elucidates the hybridity found in the selected twentieth century Latin American texts, and thereby evokes further thinking about Said's explanation as "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony." Jauregui suggests the Orient, for these Latin America writers, is an added element in a binary relationship of the Orient and the Occident defined by Said. The simultaneity of each voice disrupts and disturbs the comfortable dualism and challenges the explanation of the relation of power in traditional Orientalism.

The next two essays are on storytelling in literary texts. In the labyrinth of his narration, Yu Hua's fiction often has a deeper and more complicated connection to the old and the local culture. In "Folkloric Elements and Avant-garde Fiction: Yu Hua's 'One Kind of Reality' and 'World like Mist,'" Liyan Shen examines how folkloric elements play important roles in Yu Hua's early writings. She argues that Yu Hua's endless preoccupation with narration is motivated by his efforts to exhaust the numerous possibilities of storytelling in traditional Chinese culture. More importantly, Yu Hua successfully constructs a literary modernity in his stories which distinguishes new incidents from local folk tales. His writing thus indicates a huge tension between the old and the new, approaches the actual states of individual existence in contemporary China, and arouses a strong sense of defamiliarization in the reader. The narrative

techniques he has adapted from modernist writers in other countries further assists his reconstitution of old or local tale on the technical level as an avant-garde art form.

Through rereading *El hablador* by Mario Vargas Llosa and comparing it with other English and Spanish novels, Mileta Roe discusses the author's particular interest in storytelling, his attempts to combine native or mythic elements with new narrative strategies and the text's structural debt to oral tale-telling. In "The Search for Extra-textual Life: Transcultural Narration in *El hablador*," Roe analyzes the complicated and elusive identities of the storyteller and the narrator who both appear in a split narrative. She considers Vargas Llosa's employment of the mythic sections as a structural device to be his response to the formal concerns of modernity. Departing from a literate imagination and trying to connect it with the oral, *El hablador* fails to continue both an oral and written imagination. However, *El hablador* and other works discussed in this essay evoke a reflection upon relationship between fiction and reality, orality and literacy, and modernity and traditionality.

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Ronita Bhattacharya's "Ramcharitmanas to Dhnoraicharitmanas: An Overview on the Construction of Identity of an Indian and India" interprets *Dhnoraicharitmanas*, Satinath Bhaduri's influential novel about the Indian nationalism, in its connection with the living epic *Ramayana*. By exploring how a modern man Dhnorai, the protagonist of Bhaduri's novel, aligns his own journey with that of an epic hero through exile, loss and separation, and explaining why *Dhnoraicharitmanas* is a case study for understanding Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined community," Bhattacharya further suggests that Dhnorai shares similar sentiments with his fellow modern men in an isolated, alienated and problematic state of being both inside and outside of their "imagined community."

In "Transnational Art as Revolutionary Discourse: Women Dialoging with the 1930s Americas," Tabitha Morgan explores the transnational possibilities caused by the Latin American women's folk art traveling across the borders between South and North/North and South America in the 1930s. Morgan points out that folk art often transcends the restrictions resulting from geographical differences and national boundaries. Along with a growing transnational market consciousness allowing a personal negotiation of nation-state identification, the three women whom Morgan selects for her research successfully create a new language in their artworks establishing their own transnational aesthetics as gendered, classed and ethnicized. Through such a revolution in the field of visual arts, the working class and immigrant women artists cast into the public sphere their new aesthetics that are different from those historically characterized ones.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 See Walter Benjamin's *Das Passagen-Werk*. I cited from Peter Tokofsy, "Folklore, Modernity, and the Postmodern: A Review Essay," 329.
- 2 "What is Folklore?" The American Folklore Society. <<http://www.afsnet.org/aboutfolklore/aboutFL.cfm>>