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Memory Making in Folk Epics of China: The Intimate and Local in Chinese Regional Literature

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Since the New Culture Movement in the early twentieth century, the question of whether the Han Chinese have an epic tradition has been a subject of scholarly inquiry and debate. The question of whether there were epic traditions circulating within the borders of China is a somewhat different question, one that began being answered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the discovery of epics (*shishi*) among Mongol, Tibetan, and Kirghiz ethnic groups in the north and western areas and among certain minority groups in the southwest. By the end of the 1950s, many epic traditions had been cataloged from these and other groups in a process that has resulted in extensive documentation by think tanks such as the Institute of Ethnic Literature in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. By most definitions, these epics of the ethnic minority groups, divided by Chinese scholars into the northern/western heroic epics (*yingxiong shishi*) and the origin or creation epics (*chuangshi shishi*) of the

south/southwest, conform to long-standing conceptions of "epics," a term derived from the Greeks with associations of the heroic character-types of the Homeric epics. The ancient cosmogonic epics of the Middle East (such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which were not called "epics" in their respective languages), provide instructive parallels to the origin/creation epics of south China. This leaves the question of "Han" epic traditions on the table. Scholars of the New Culture Movement, such as Wang Guowei, early on raised questions of the existence of a Chinese epic tradition, and later Zheng Zhenduo suggested that the local prosimetric forms of *baojuan*, *tanci*, and *pinghua* in both orally delivered and written-to-be-read formats could qualify as epics due to prosody and length, though there has been resistance to including them under what has become an ever-expanding global recognition of long narrative poems or prosimetric works under the culturally powerful title of "epic." In the Chinese case, nativist terms for these long poems and prosimetric works include *jiangchang wenxue* and *shuochang wenxue*, and many or most are considered part of the giant family of *quyi* (art of melodies) forms, which in some instances has included the long narrative poem styles of some minorities that are widely termed as epics (including Tibetan, Hezhen, and Bai) (Zhongguo Dabaikequanshu 1983, 13–14). Since the refocusing on folk literature after the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), certain candidates for the title of an epic originating among the Han people have occasionally arisen, especially since the 1980s. One of these is the prosimetric cosmogonic long narrative called *Hei yin zhuan* (Legend of Darkness), which in many ways parallels content in creation/origin epics from the southwest minority groups (Liu 2002, 5–6). Another candidate is the 1,350-line version of an oral poem called *Guo Dingxiang* concerning a love triangle tied to the origin of the stove god, which has been called the "number one epic of the Central Plains" (Bai 2007, 1–2).

In *Memory Making in Folk Epics of China*, the author's most recent study of Lower Yangzi Delta folk culture, Anne McLaren employs the term "folk epics" to describe the "long narrative songs" (*changpian xushi ge*, as noted in the introduction, xvi)—a current term among Chinese academics that is influenced by terminology in *Oral Epics of India* (Blackburn et al. 1989). This utilization of "epic" to describe a Lower Yangzi oral art tradition is very much in the trend to move away from the narrow confines of the Greek heroic model (and Chinese associations of "*shishi*" with Mongol, Tibetan, Kirghiz, and other groups' heroic epics) by contemporary scholars worldwide. McLaren stresses length, prosody, narrative, and the formative effect on community identity. In this context, the term "folk" suggests an association with orally delivered texts within (assumed) rural communities that are less literary than written-to-be read epics (whether oral-connected or otherwise), although the calculus changes once the orally performed epics enter into the process of transcription, translation, editing, and publication, and orally transmitted texts become artifacts in writing (Honko 2000, 15–18).

McLaren offers readers deep insights into the folklore of the Lower Yangzi that will inform other studies of the folk literature of this region. Of particular interest is the "feminized rice spirit" that invokes a "ritual technology" of ritual and agrarian practice and concepts of sexuality that McLaren details at some length (xviii). Another key term in this work is the "epichonic," meaning the ecology of expressive forms that circulate within the linguistic and sociocultural boundaries within a local environment that it supposes molds key aspects of the local culture—as does wet rice agriculture. The theme of environmental context in relation to local folklore and folk literature is explored throughout the text, aptly beginning with the theme of water in chapter 1. A key theme of

the book, discussed in the coda, is "memory making." McLaren states that "remembering" refers to both the "singer's concentrated toil in 'remembering' (composing) the song or folk epic and to the memories of the past that the song transmits," and the idea that singers "draw on a range of memory frameworks that implicitly involved notions of time passing and space crossing" (215). The notion of frameworks—and their content—aids in drawing attention to the manipulation of many sorts of details and identifying processes that unfold within versions of the narratives in the transmission process.

In chapter 1, McLaren examines a "culture of locality" (xiii) in the Lower Yangzi Delta, stressing the importance of working intimately in local languages, communicative styles, and idioms in the context of local culture as it exists in the larger framework of China. The author's effective fieldwork strategies have yielded a study of great insight into the social meaning of the body of folk songs that help understand the regional cultures of the lower Yangzi in the not-so-distant past and into the present. Chapter 2 focuses on reconstructing a historical context for the folk epics of the Lake Tai region, investigating the impact of factors including song competitions, amateur song troupes, and the market for books that contributed to the formation of the long-sung narratives. Focus is first on the early phases of the Wu kingdom in antiquity, then the late imperial period, with Feng Menglong's song anthology of the early nineteenth century, folk opera, printed song booklets, and song competitions held in rural marketplaces or special timber pavilions down into modern times. Song troupes composed of skilled amateur singers were sometimes hired seasonally to relieve the monotony of rice planting and were in greater demand in the flatlands than in the mountains, which saw less agricultural production. McLaren notes other geographical factors such as travel by boat that contributed to the transmission and formation of the long-style folk songs in local flatland contexts.

Chapter 3 examines how the convergence of versions of the folk epic *Shen Seventh Brother* and local geography dialogue with the "canonical myth" of Wu Taibo, who is said to have brought civilization from the cosmopolitan northern Chinese regions to the "barbarian" Yangzi delta region millennia ago and is remembered in two local historical monuments (8). In a process of cultural mitigation, the story of *Shen Seventh Brother* practically displaces the civilization-builder Wu in folk epics that relate how he and an immortal maiden introduce sedentary rice cultivation (something Wu Taibo of the millet-raising north would not have done) and folk singing to the locals, who in the words of the epic, "wore skins for clothes, dwelt in shacks, and plucked berries from the wild" (79–80).

Chapter 4 delves into the song of "Fifth Daughter," the best documented and best known of the regional folk epics. The appendix supplies a rather literal translation of key passages of the version sung by Lu Amei (*c.* 1981). A version based on her singing was published soon after and helped bring the tradition to the attention of scholars. As McLaren notes, "Fifth Daughter" concerns illicit love, a theme common in the so-called "mountain songs" (*shange*) and folk epics of the region (and with parallels in antiphonal song traditions in other regional cultures in China, such as the Guangxi love songs (*qingge*) tradition and northwestern flower songs (*hua'er*). The sample passages in the appendix illustrate how the folk epic tradition is a merger of mountain songs that feature many common motifs and formulaic lines entwined within narration and conventions for revealing thoughts of characters and brief passages of spoken dialogue. McLaren supplies a fascinating discussion of the themes of the "secret passion type" (116) of the epic narratives, which feature tragic outcomes of illicit affairs. They are

framed in the tradition as actions of real people living a few generations before, and structured "entirely around kinship relations" (ibid.), which form a contextual web in which a young woman of the family (always referenced by a kinship number, such as third, fourth, or fifth daughter) and an outside lover (often with some sort of associations with urban places across the delta) become ensnared. The folk epics serve on one level as cautionary tales, but the effect is compounded in the embodied "lamentation" (112) mode of the singers, especially when evoking the lingering ghostly presence of the victims of what is often familial violence in the local area. In the discussion of "Fifth Daughter," McLaren describes the rhetorical features of performance in the "Twelfth Month Flower Song" ballad form, which is utilized by contemporary singers. It is a more concise mode of delivery than the long narrative versions (of which Lu Amei was the sole remaining singer) and is organized on the annual cycle of blooming flowers (119). Aside from changes in voice tenor in the lamentation mode, a singer may employ shifts in bodily movements and melody, along with paralinguistic conventions such as the "*diluo sheng*" (121), which mimics the sounds of sudden bursts of rain, so common in regional weather patterns and related to local rice paddy weeding tunes. Lu Amei's long-version performances, which feature some aspects of the twelve-month style, provide much more elaboration of scenes and detail of local folk customs. One example illustrates the "complex visual code of romance" by describing embroidered patterns of peonies, lotus buds, persimmons, and dragonflies on four handkerchiefs presented to the fifth daughter by her itinerant peddler lover, the young Atian (127). Certain passages, sung depending on the nature of the audience, are sexually suggestive and at times explicit. In some versions, subplots involving the fate of a fourth sister are also related. Thus, the folk epic tradition in the long form featured a flexible frame of performance manipulated at will by the singer's needs.

Chapter 5, "Replacing the Bride," concerns what the folk consider "real" (164) stories on the theme of the replacement of a wife or betrothed, and includes plots with ghost marriages that deal with the "vexed issue" of how to ensure the dead (which could be a wife spurned in favor of a younger sister, or a male that dies of lovesickness after his plans of replacement are thwarted by family objections) are appropriately commemorated. Such themes are clearly productive for embellishing into longer narrative content. McLaren offers several versions from oral and written sources of such "unconventional liaisons" and suggests that the songs containing descriptions of courtship and lovemaking are in essence mourning songs for those who ruined their lives through moral transgressions, linking this sentiment to the folk idea of good harvests resulting from the proper nurturing of rice (139).

Chapter 6 concerns the "The Song of 'Hua Mountain Lifter'"; with a transcribed version at twenty thousand lines, it is the longest of the Yangzi delta epics. The epic deals with masculine heroism and violence, narrating the exploits of a band of renegade farmers who resist imperial and local militia forces in their mountain fortress. McLaren expounds on the theme of violence that runs through many of the other epics and notes how the "Lifter" epic differs from the well-known Chinese classic *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*), set in northern China, which has appeared in written and oral forms for a millennium, differing especially in the more positive portrayal of women. The song is unique because it is the product of one family; due to its subversive content, it was transmitted (until recently) only by men and in relative secrecy. As with the other chapters, McLaren summarizes the themes and content of versions of the epic (which

are related to collective memories of rebellions, rent resistance movements, etc.) and presents background on singers, which sometimes includes snippets of interviews and passages of songs.

In the coda, McLaren reflects on the process of creation in epics performed since the late 1990s, when the inroads of modernization were rapidly supplanting the material culture of farming and other aspects of the traditional agricultural cycle that had survived largely intact into the early decades of the PRC and was available as context to singers and audiences alike—a tradition that for now seems to have gone silent. With the emergence of newer lifeways and cultural actors, the question of how memories are made and transmitted in the process of performance (or other means of transmission) is discussed, interwoven with the theme of how cultural memories were transmitted over generations in the previously oral realm of song and story. McLaren notes the role of stock imagery that resonates to maintain memories, including that of the environment and agricultural cycle, items of material culture (such as the embroidered love tokens), scenes of disputes between protagonists, the "agonistic dialogues" that in resolution propel the narrative forward, and the stock language of intimacy and emotion (sometimes erotic) that in turn invites heightened focus on the performative actions of characters, with undertones of a moral order based on the goals of successful rice harvests that is more "agrarian" than Confucian (219–20). Many of McLaren's observations could be profitably applied to other long narrative poetic/prosimetric traditions in China, including other recently identified Han local epics previously mentioned and the more urbane Lower Delta professional storytelling traditions.

McLaren's comprehensive and insightful treatment of a distinct oral narrative form in the Lower Yangzi Delta will serve as model and inspiration for further studies of Chinese oral narratives that now may exist in a variety of mediums, including online formats. The term "epic" engenders powerful cultural "soft power" for governmental and business entities that seek to place their heritage items on global display. The term may also open up access to scholars and others working outside the nativist academic circles that would utilize Chinese categories created since the early twentieth century. Whether these Delta narratives are best considered "epic" or as I have recently suggested "epic-adjacent" (a term allowing recognition of native categories), this study will become essential reading for folklorists and scholars of cultural heritage (Bender forthcoming).

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