

Revitalisation of the folk epics of the Lower Yangzi Delta: an example of China's intangible cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

The folk epics of the Han people of the lower Yangzi delta in China have been entered into the national register of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). These lengthy verse narratives were sung by labouring people toiling in paddy fields or working the waterways of the delta before the establishment of socialist China in 1949. Repressed during the Maoist period, the process of their re-discovery, identification and revitalisation as valued examples of China's heritage has been a difficult one, and their transmission to future generations as a living and valued folk art is by no means assured. As argued here, the case of the folk epics illustrates the cultural and political complexities of the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in economically advanced areas of China.

Introduction

The rich epic traditions of the Mongolians, Tibetans and other minority groups residing on Chinese soil have been relatively well investigated by anthropologists and folklorists. It was long believed that the largest ethnic group in China, the Han Chinese, comprising ninety-one percent of the population, had no tradition of epic-length verse narrative performance. The 'discovery' after 1978 of song practitioners amongst rural communities in the Yangzi delta who could perform lengthy narrative songs greatly surprised Chinese folklore and oral literature specialists. In Chinese these narratives are known as 'long narrative songs' (*changpian xushi ge*). Here I term them 'folk epics' in line with the term adopted by Stuart H. Blackburn to identify lengthy sung narratives

performed by illiterate rural populations in India on a range of themes from the mythological to the secular and romantic. The term 'epic' here refers to the length of the narrative rather than to military heroism in the Greek tradition, although all the narrative songs focus on heroic individuals who overcome great hardship to achieve their goals¹.

The delta folk epics, performed in the native dialects of the region, are virtually unknown in the West. As I discuss here, they are of considerable poetic and aesthetic interest and reflect the beliefs, customs, folk knowledge and ecological understandings of the rice paddy cultivators of the Lake Tai region. In 2005 they were placed on the national register as examples of

China's valued intangible cultural heritage but nonetheless they face a somewhat uncertain future because of the transformation of this former 'land of rice and fish' to a land of industrial enterprises and ever-expanding urban conurbations. In this study I will first discuss the complexities of the introduction of notions of ICH in China, difficulties experienced in the implementation of the policy, and I will then proceed to an analysis of the application of ICH policies in the lower Yangzi delta, with a focus on the Han folk epics and related cultural sites. It is argued here that any assessment of ICH policy and its implementation in the China of the twenty-first century needs to take into account the particular trajectory of China's history over the past one hundred years. With regard to the preservation of its cultural heritage, contemporary China is seeking a balance between the Marxist ideology of the recent past and its new identity as custodian of China's traditional civilisation. This balance is often an uneasy one, where the state seeks to both transmit and recreate 'traditions' in line with new economic and national imperatives.

Tradition and the push for modernity in twentieth century China

China's revolutionary history in the twentieth century ensured that the state's relationship to tradition was significantly different from that of other leading East Asian countries. In Japan, for example, preservation of traditional culture began with the Meiji government of 1868-1912². In the post-war period, the Japanese and Korean governments vigorously promoted the preservation of selected aspects of their traditional culture as part of the war reconstruction effort. In 1950 the Japanese government enacted the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties and in 1955 designated Important Cultural Properties and their holders (Alivizatou 2008:45-46; Cang 2007:47). Korea, too, became attentive to heritage issues after the traumatic Korean War of 1950-53. During the tenure of Park Chung Hee (president from 1961-1979), Korean heritage was an integral part of cultural policy. In 1962 the Cultural Properties Protection Law was promulgated (Maliangkay 2002: pp.224-5).

An important stimulus to the conservation of traditional sites and cultural forms in the case of Japan and Korea was the prevalence of indigenous movements

that promoted notions of an idealised traditional agrarian life as essential to national identity. In Korea, the Minjung movement advocated a return to *pre-industrial and agricultural village values* (Maliangkay 2002: p.240 note 2). In Japan, ethnologists such as Yanagata Kunio (1875-1962) and his disciples sought to capture a 'fixed identity' for the Japanese 'folk' at a time when the twin forces of capitalism and urbanisation were undermining Japanese identity (Harootunian 1998). In some cases, the enthusiasm for preserving perceived traditions from the past led to the invention of new ones for touristic or commercial purposes. As Hashimoto and Ambaras have noted, the Japanese Festival Law, which aimed to revitalise some dubious 'traditions' for economic and touristic purposes was decried as 'inauthentic' in some quarters (1998: p.36)³.

During the same period, China's immense cultural heritage was under severe attack by its leading intellectuals. The transmission of tradition followed a very different path in China due to the dire impact of Western penetration and colonisation. After a lengthy period of dominance by Western powers, Chinese revolutionaries finally threw off two thousand years of imperial rule and set up a republic in 1911. In the early years of the new republic intellectuals rallied around the banner of the May Fourth Movement (from 1919) which sought to bring about comprehensive modernisation of the entire economic and social system. For many leading Chinese intellectuals modernisation was equated with Westernisation. It was regarded as incompatible with the continuation of the old imperial system of government, education in the Confucian classics and the deeply ingrained systems of kinship and culture that had sustained Chinese populations for thousands of years⁴.

The Chinese Communist Party, which set up the People's Republic in 1949, perceived China's inherited culture through the lens of the Marxist view of history. Traditional culture was now labelled 'feudal' and traditional rituals, practices and beliefs were subsumed into the notion that religious or 'superstitious' belief was the opium of the masses. After the formation of the People's Republic the state sought to rigorously remove past practices and beliefs. During the period of the mis-named Cultural Revolution (1966-76), traditional culture was uprooted with particular zeal. After the death of party leader Mao Zedong in 1976, the new leadership, led by Deng Xiaoping, began to open up the economy and

controls were gradually relaxed in the social and private domains.

The consequences were remarkable. At local level traditional patterns of ritual interaction and folk religious practice re-emerged after a long hiatus⁵. Temples were restored, ancient residences repaired and traditional cultural and religious sites became allied with burgeoning commercial enterprises including tourism. The reformist state overturned decades of socialist policy that had condemned the 'feudal' customs of 'old China'. Fearing an ideological vacuum with the discrediting of Maoist policies, the state sought to regain the initiative by promoting a revival of selected attributes of the Chinese tradition in order to serve the cause of Chinese patriotism. The general slogan adopted by the state in the 1980s and 1990s was that of *inheriting and promoting the highlights of Chinese culture* in order to enrich *Chinese spiritual civilisation* and to strengthen *socialism with Chinese characteristics* (McLaren 1997:69-70).

In the early 1990s, Party Secretary Jiang Zemin proclaimed that Chinese traditional culture was one of the main bulwarks against negative elements flooding in from the West and that the goal was to resist all-out Westernisation (McLaren 1997: p.70). The goal now was to decide which aspects of the past should be allowed to fade away and which should be revived in favour of a reinigorated Chinese cultural nationalism. State culture cadres often felt considerable ambivalence about conserving aspects of traditional popular culture such as oral and ritual performance, shamanism and folk religion, all previously condemned as 'feudal superstition'.

Nonetheless, Chinese folk art practitioners and ritual specialists were wary of exposing themselves to persecution, as in the recent past. The task of cultural revivalism was particularly delicate when dealing with China's 'low' culture, the former daily practices of the vast majority of people, as opposed to 'high' culture, the preserve of the educated elite. As I observed in an earlier study of Chinese heritage policy, [China's] *popular culture, unlike Chinese high culture, is still insufficiently dead to be regarded with complete equanimity* (McLaren 1994: p.80). For example, even in the early 1990s Chinese ethnologists would still make a claim of this kind: *my basic aim in investigating folk beliefs is to eliminate their influence*⁶. This suspicion of traditional popular culture remains to the present day. One example is the recent

declaration that a key problem besetting the conservation of tradition is that people use the label of 'folk culture' to carry out 'superstitious' activities, including performing ghost plays or singing erotic songs (Sheng Zhiwei et al. 2003: pp.41-42).

In the early years of the reform period (post 1978), the Chinese state allocated significant funding to provide for the collection and publication of enormous compilations of folk performances, songs, plays, stories, sayings and scholarly studies of Chinese folk customs and beliefs. Many local ethnographers, culture cadres and established scholars threw themselves enthusiastically into these projects, often on a voluntary basis⁷. Many scholars understood their goal as the collection, analysis and archival preservation of folkloric practices believed to be on the brink of extinction. For example, Guo Songzhen (1991), in his study of temple fairs, saw his task to find *living fossils* (*huo huashi*) and preserve a record of their attributes for future generations. Other scholars had broader aims. Zhang Mingyuan sought to use Chinese traditional popular culture to reshape a Chinese form of modernity distinct from that of the West. In his book, *Yellow Civilisation*, he argued that:

modernisation does not mean a separation from the past. The really deep-rooted aspects of Chinese culture will not be easy to overturn and traditional culture still possesses substantial vitality.
(cited in Zhang Yi 1991: pp.66-67)

By the late 1990s, state interest in funding and the good will of the voluntary participants and scholars were beginning to falter. The times were changing. A vast influx of foreign investment, privatisation of the economy and subsequent social transformation, led to the extension of vast urban conurbations into formerly rural areas⁸. Young people seeking economic opportunity abandoned the less-developed hinterland regions to form a vast army of migrant labourers who thronged city streets and toiled on temporary construction sites or in new factory and industrial zones⁹. By the late twentieth century, hundreds of millions of once-rural people were no longer 'rural' with regard to either residence or occupation. They lived as sojourners in the urbanised countryside, no longer rooted within the community of their birth. Meanwhile, the younger educated generation born in major urban centres embraced a globalised cultural economy in which traditional beliefs and life-

styles had little place.

In the age of affluence and globalisation, it appeared that Chinese 'tradition', although no longer regarded as feudal, had once again become outmoded or irrelevant. Scholars of Chinese folk performance and traditions once again wondered about the fate of their discipline and its ongoing relevance to a society that appeared to be increasingly leaving its past behind¹⁰. It is in this context that the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* has had an enlivening effect on China's appreciation of its past, on the promotion of scholarship relating to China's indigenous cultures, and to greater recognition of China's non-elite cultural heritage. ICH and its preservation has been put to service by the state to further the cause of Chinese patriotism and to bolster Chinese cultural nationalism and 'soft power'. However, given the tortuous trajectory of China's relationship with its past civilisation, this new project has not been without its dilemmas and uncertainties. A critical problem is the relative lateness of China's effort to preserve ICH, which in the Maoist decades was regarded as 'feudal rubbish'. Also, the attempt in the early twenty-first century to reinvigorate folk traditions is taking place at a time when many cultural expressions, performance traditions and ritual customs are on the verge of extinction.¹¹ In addition, in the most economically advanced regions, such as the affluent lower Yangzi delta, the traditional patterns of labour on the land and the traditional life-style of rural communities have been irretrievably lost. In this study I will seek to illustrate the problems of the implementation of ICH policy in China's affluent coastal sector.

Intangible cultural heritage in China

In 2001 UNESCO set up a list of nineteen items of oral traditions and intangible cultural heritage for preservation, including one item from China, a southern Chinese operatic form known as *kunqu*. All items were judged by an international jury against the stated criteria:

a strong concentration of the intangible cultural heritage of outstanding value or a popular and traditional cultural expression of outstanding value from a historical, artistic, ethnological, sociological, anthropological, linguistic, or literary point of view (Nas 2002: pp.139).

As Peter Nas explains, the goal was to identify key intangible cultural forms that are at risk of extinction from the combined forces of *urbanisation, modernization and globalization* (2002: p.142). The strategic inclusion of a single Chinese item sparked a great deal of interest in China. The Folk Performing Arts Association Chairman, Feng Jicai, called for policy to safeguard China's ICH against the tide of urbanisation that is transforming rural China into urban conurbations.

China joined the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* in August 2004. This was a turning point in China's attitude to its heritage of oral and performing arts. Subsequently, the Chinese musical instrument known as the *qin* was added to the world list of valued ICH. This double success greatly added to China's new-found enthusiasm for ICH preservation (Chen, H. 2009: p.77). In 2005 the State Council issued a series of directives concerning policy and implementation of selected items of ICH and set up specific application guidelines. The goal appears to be somewhat different from the earlier cultural revival in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic years of the Cultural Revolution. At that time the focus was more on choosing 'highlights' of traditional culture while eliminating elements considered undesirable. In the twenty-first century, after three decades of accelerated growth, the destruction of traditional intangible culture in affluent regions of China has been much more comprehensive than at any other time in China's history. Only in economically backward regions, including those where many ethnic minorities reside, can one find vigorous traditional arts and practices. In these changed circumstances the state's goal is not just to 'preserve' ICH in the archival or scholarly sense but also to 'revitalise' (*zhenxing*) it, because *preservation without revitalisation will not lead to longevity* (Xu, H 2008:90)¹².

'Revitalisation' involves integrating the ICH item into the regional economy, or providing an economic incentive to practitioners to continue the practice or performance. Valued examples of ICH can become features of the local tourist industry and be celebrated in local schools. The underlying goal of the new focus on heritage is to preserve the distinctiveness of each ethnic group in China, under the aegis of the Chinese state, now reified as the only proper custodian of all regional cultures

residing in Chinese national space. As a directive from the Ministry of Culture dated May 25 2006 points out, China is a *unified multi-ethnic country with time-honoured history*. Chinese heritage is thus *the bond of affections between all ethnic groups and the foundation of national unity* (Ministry of Culture 2006).

'With the opening of applications for state-designated ICH, there has been enormous regional interest in submitting not only traditional folk forms but also the cultural or ecological sites in which the relevant item of intangible cultural heritage originated or is embedded. The latter are known as 'original ecological protected sites' (yuan shengtaixing baohu).

In some cases entire villages with traditional architecture and ecological features were chosen for preservation (known as *cunluoxing baohu*). In May 2006 the State Council announced the register of national-level examples of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Chong, X. 2008). To cater to the growing demand for recognition of regional treasures the state set up a graded system of applications for ICH status extending from county and city up to provincial and national level (Chen, H. 2009: pp.78-79). Each level was rapidly overwhelmed with applications. In the first call of applications 1300 items were submitted at national level in sixteen categories from forty ethnic groups. From this, 518 items, divided into ten categories, were chosen for inclusion¹³. In 2007 3,000 items were submitted and 510 accepted (Chen, H. 2009: p.80). The Yangzi delta province of Zhejiang was particularly proactive. This was due to the efforts of leading CCP official, Xi Jinping, who, when Party Secretary of Zhejiang province made five pronouncements applauding the preservation of ICH (Chen, H. 2009: p.82).

The application system was not without its problems, as Chen Huawen, professor at Zhejiang Shifan University, pointed out. Due to the haste with which the programme was set up, many applications did not go through a rigorous process of appraisal. Regional governments were sometimes unduly influenced by powerful lobbyists and local interests. The role of scholarly expertise was sometimes neglected, leaving government experts with little precise knowledge to make judgements about complex cultural phenomena. The sheer number of

items accepted made it difficult to ensure that all the items were of sufficient quality. Experts were paid for their work and were not always sufficiently impartial (Chen, H. 2009: p.90).

Chinese critics have raised numerous problems with regard to the preservation of ICH that are familiar to heritage specialists worldwide. As Voltaire Garces Cang has observed in the case of the Japanese tradition known as *Gujo Odori*, many officially-designated examples of cultural heritage in Japan *have been transformed or revised to suit contemporary purposes* (2007: p.53). In the case of China, possibly the most well-known controversy concerns the nomination of Naxi ancient music for ICH status. The Naxi people live in the mountainous regions of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces and have transmitted distinct religious practices, music traditions and their own script. In recent times, practitioners of Naxi music have blended traditional musical modes with styles from other regions borrowed from the Han Chinese and other peoples. A Chinese musicologist, Wu Xueyuan, attempted to expose the term 'Naxi Ancient Music' as a fraud and to deny its nomination to the list of UNESCO intangible cultural heritage. One of the chief practitioners successfully defended himself in a local Chinese court, but this did little to stop the continuing controversy over this issue (Dawe 2005).

The urge to attract a new audience lay behind the blending of original Naxi 'ancient' music with that from elsewhere. Liu Kuili (2008), Chairman of the Chinese Folklore Studies Association, and Deputy Chair of the national ICH Specialist Committee, for example, discusses the problems that arise from the commercialisation of cultural inheritance, which inevitably changes the nature of the original practice or performance. As Liu terms it, *culture provides the stage but economics perform the play*. He argues further that as solemn ceremonies and rites turn into daily performances for tourists, the folk sentiment originally imbued in these practices will weaken and become distorted over time.

Love songs between men and women become pale performances, ceremonial dances become mere displays of skill, solemn rituals become theatrical

performances (Liu 2008: p.10)

On the other hand, as Chen Wenhua points out, if state or business enterprises are to invest in the preservation of cultural heritage then there has to be an economic outcome. He points out that in most cases *investment in preservation is generally to develop regional economies and stimulate regional commercial culture* (2008: p.25).

The UNESCO understanding of the ongoing value of ICH accommodates the adaptation of the cultural form to the needs of contemporary communities, including the encouragement of commercial investment and adaptation to new communications media. Nas argues that items identified as of high cultural value may well be modified in such a way as to imbue ancient cultural forms with new meaning within *the framework of national identity formation*. He argues that without this adaptive capability, a cultural form will at best be fossilised, a pale reflection of the original, or at worst, be abandoned as of no value to the contemporary world (Nas 2002: p.142). Laurie J.Sears argues eloquently for the revitalisation of traditional forms as the key to their ongoing transmission into the future. He cites the case of Javanese performers of 'classical' shadow theatre who resorted to using new musical instruments, inserting comical interludes and arranging formats suitable for

television in order to capture a contemporary audience (2002: p.147).

The Chinese state has been actively involved in revitalising monuments from the past ever since the end of the years of neglect of the early socialist period (from 1949) and the decade of turmoil and destruction during the Cultural Revolution. However, it has generally been the artefacts and art forms of China's traditional high culture that have been the chief focus of state efforts at cultural preservation, for example, *kunqu* opera and the *qin* zither. The true significance of the UNESCO-promoted movement to identify items of intangible cultural heritage lies in that it seeks to identify and validate the rituals, festivals and performance practices of the everyday, elevating the oral culture of the unlettered rather than the usual scriptural economy, celebrating 'low' culture as opposed to 'high culture', indeed almost converting 'low' culture into aspects of 'high' culture. This too has been recognised by Chinese ICH scholars. According to Chong Xiuquan, from the national ICH list

one can see that most of the items come from the ordinary people. Therefore it follows that the work of conservation and development must take place at the level of the ordinary people (2008: p.104)

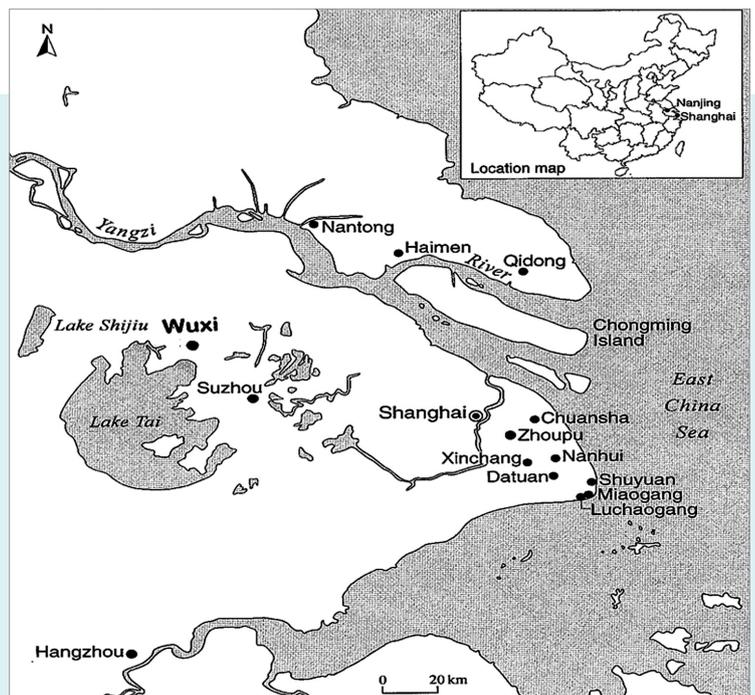


Figure 1
Map of the Taihu area.

Folk rituals, performances and practices that in imperial times were considered plebeian, marginal or transgressive are now essentialised as traces of a reified past, virtual constructs of a 'Chinese' culture once thought to be ingrained in everyday communal practice but which urban populations can only experience vicariously in the new globalised China. The folk epics of the Yangzi delta reflect this paradox: the scorned, prohibited art forms of the past are gradually being converted into the cultural treasures of the present.

The Yangzi Delta folk epics: from 'unhealthy' songs to national treasures

On the eve of Western penetration in the 1840s, the lower Yangzi delta region was the most affluent and the most commercialised region in China. Renowned for the production of textiles, its silk and cotton clothed the empire for a millennium. Most of the population relied on subsistence farming down to the late imperial era and throughout the twentieth century until the 1980s (Huang 1990: p.5). Rice paddy and sericulture dominated the well-watered lowland region around Lake Tai in the Shanghai hinterland. Cotton was cultivated on drier reclaimed soil near to the coast.

The delta region was sinicised relatively late in the history of imperial China. Due to its topography of lakes, rivers, tributaries and water channels, each micro-region of the delta tended to develop in isolation from the

others. Village communities have long been noted for their variant forms of *Wu* dialect and plurality of folk customs, marriage ceremonies, rituals and folk performances. This picture was largely true until the 1980s. However, the reform period has seen a huge influx of labour from the poorer hinterland and the conversion of much fertile farmland into townships, factories and business enterprises.

In these changed circumstances, the traditional ethno-culture is breaking down rapidly. By the mid to late twentieth century, for example, the dry coastal areas around Shanghai were the only ones to preserve vestigial forms of bridal and funeral laments (McLaren 2008). These were learnt by women from an early age while engaged in cotton weeding, spinning and weaving. The hinterland areas surrounding Lake Tai preserved a tradition known as *Wu* songs (*Wu ge*) or more simply, 'mountain songs' (*shan ge*) to the present day. These were commonly sung while labouring in the rice paddy fields and reflected the folk ecology of the well-watered Lake Tai region in the district of Wuxi.

Wu songs were only rarely recorded during the imperial era and most of our knowledge about how they were performed comes from the work of ethno-musicologists and folklore scholars of the present day (Schimmelpenninck 1997; Zheng T. 2004). The very term 'mountain song' was pejorative. In this region it referred to songs sung outdoors, often during toil in the fields, at festival occasions or while boating on the waterways which were the main form of transport in the delta.



Figure 2
A boat singer in the 'water town' of Zhou Zhuang, now a popular tourist destination for Shanghai residents. Author's photo, November 2004.



Figure 3
A newly refurbished tea-house in the delta town of Xinchang. Tea-houses were popular sites for the performance of storytelling and songs in the imperial era. Author's photo, April 2008.

Figure 4
‘Duck Village’ (*Yacheng*), Dongting, believed to be the original site for Wu songs in antiquity. Author’s photo, taken on the outskirts of Wuxi city, November, 2004.



Figure 5
Zhu Hairong, taken at the Wuxi Culture Bureau. Author’s photo, November, 2004.



Mountain songs were ‘wild’ as opposed to regulated, they were sung by illiterate populations with little or no reliance on scripts or written sources. Top singers were known for the loudness and deep resonance of their voices which could carry over long distances. Young men and women wooed each other with dialogic courting songs. Young men proved their intelligence and skill in song contests performed during the Dragon Boat Festival on the lakes and rivers. Members of all generations whiled away the hot summer days singing mountain songs.

Before 1949 folk epics would commonly be sung by a team of singers employed by the landlord to encourage the villagers as they went about their work in the rice paddy fields¹⁴. In the first half of the twentieth century virtually everyone in a village would have learnt to sing mountain songs. It was the shared preserve of entire linguistic communities and always reflected the specific rhetoric and idiom of the originating villages. Many were love songs or romantic tales and (reportedly) included raunchy sexual imagery. All of this was to change during the socialist period. With the advent of electricity, it was now propaganda songs and speeches not mountain songs that blared out over the paddy fields¹⁵. During the Cultural Revolutionary era (1966-76), noted folklore practitioners and singers of *Wu* songs were subject to harassment and interrogation with dire consequences for the transmission of *Wu* songs to the next generation¹⁶.

With the inauguration of Deng Xiaoping’s reformist policy after 1978, it became possible once more to investigate the popular cultural heritage of the delta region. The first ‘discovery’ was made in 1981, with the

performance of the story of Shen Qige by Zhu Hairong of Wuxi¹⁷. With the encouragement of local enthusiasts and culture cadres, a number of other song narratives were elicited from - mostly elderly - members of the farming communities in the area. Subsequently, cadres and ethnographers toured the villages and collected a series of long song narratives as well as bridal and funeral laments. Some of the narratives relate mythical or legendary stories circulating in the delta region. The story of Shen Qige, for example, relates a mythical tale about how a local hero, with the help of his supernatural partner, teaches the hunter-gatherers of Lake Tai how to cultivate rice, raise livestock and sing ‘mountain songs’. As I have argued in another study, this folk epic reflects local interpretations of the process of signification of the area (McLaren forthcoming). Another distinctive folk epic is the tale of Hua Baoshan, a legendary folk hero who resisted the Manchu invasion in the seventeenth century. This is the longest collected folk epic, with a reported 16,000 lines. Most of the folk epics relate what purport to be ‘true’ events from the late imperial period and are presented as love stories or romances (see McLaren 2010).

In 2005 the city of Suzhou applied for *Wu* songs to be added to the Chinese national register of ICH and this was approved. The case was made that *Wu* songs had been in transmission for a significant period of time (3000 years, according to legend), that the original sites and lines of transmission could be identified, that there were still practitioners of *Wu* songs and further, that the songs were of high aesthetic quality and intimately reflected the land use, labour and cultural specificity of the delta region (Shen 2007: p.129). However, it was also noted that the active transmission of *Wu* songs as an

ongoing art form is gravely imperilled. With the exception of a tiny number of practitioners there are very few singers of traditional *Wu* songs left in the delta. I was privileged to meet a number of these in a visit to the Wuxi Culture Bureau in November 2004. Two important figures in the transmission of *Wu* songs in the contemporary period are Zhu Hairong, a male song practitioner and local ethnographer who has actively sought out and transcribed a number of *Wu* songs, and a rare younger generation female singer, Tang Jianqin, who learnt how to sing *Wu* songs as a child in her home village. Tang Jianqin is now training a number of younger singers to ensure the ongoing transmission of this art form into the future.

A number of the most popular of the *Wu* folk epics have been transcribed in Chinese characters and are now available in print. The most widely known and accessible is the compilation of ten folk epics by Jiang Bin and his collaborators (1989). These printed songs, with their abundance of *Wu* dialect expressions, are mainly targeted at the present day population of the delta region. According to one of my experienced local informants, printed versions of *Wu* songs tend to sell out as soon as they are offered for sale.

I have written in detail about two of the *Wu* folk epics and the process of their textualisation in the contemporary period (see McLaren 2010 and forthcoming). Here I will introduce one of the most famous of *Wu* song practitioners, a man called Qian Afu, to illustrate the process of discovery and preservation of

Wu folk epics. Qian Afu was born c.1907 and died in 1993. He spent his life in the Dongting region of Wuxi. His parents were noted singers of mountain songs and Qian learnt to sing virtually as soon as he could talk. In fact, according to local legend, he was already beginning to sing in his mother's womb (Zhu, H. 1997: p.16). His family was poor and he had little schooling and often went hungry. His parents were his early teachers but in his youth he also sought out noted singers and mastered a huge repertoire.

After the communist revolution, Qian continued to sing mountain songs but they were adapted to suit the new ideology. According to Zhu Hairong, who has written an affectionate biography of Qian Afu, some of these songs subtly poked fun at communist campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution¹⁸. However, he was actively discouraged from singing traditional *Wu* songs and folk epics during most of the socialist period (that is, from 1949 to the late 1970s) and was initially very reluctant to display his skill. When eventually he was induced to sing his repertoire he sang for three days and three nights, claiming, *I have felt pent-up frustration for over twenty years, now my frustration can reverberate to the skies* (Zhu 1997: p.1). He is also reported to have said, *There are millions of good songs in my belly. I can sing more than one thousand over eighty days in the rice paddy fields* (Zhu 1997: p.1). This prodigious ability refers to a two-fold process of mastery. The accomplished *Wu* singer would master the repertoire of his or her teacher and then learn to adapt the formulae, imagery and plot material to an infinite



Figure 6
Tang Jianqin, taken at the Wuxi Culture Bureau. Author's photo, November, 2004.

number of song performance contexts, including songs sung during toil in the paddy fields, songs sung in competitions, songs on contemporary situations, love songs and romances, songs about the scenery of Lake Tai and folk knowledge and the traditional lengthy epic narratives.

Conclusion

Marilyn Ivy, in discussing reconstructed 'tradition' in modern Japan, talks of the 'vanishing' of traditional forms, as in *the movement of something passing away, gone but not quite, suspended between presence and absence* (Ivy 1995: p.20). Similarly, in the Yangzi River delta, the past is under grave threat but traces of it still remain today. The registration of selected aspects of traditional folk performance culture as examples of Intangible Cultural Heritage is of considerable significance to notions of Chinese identity and cultural nationalism in the twenty-first century. The formulation of international definitions and policies governing ICH, and the endorsement of these definitions and policies by the Chinese government, has had the effect of elevating the status of the traditional beliefs and practices of China's lower classes.

As argued here, this elevation is not without its ambiguities and concerns as Chinese cadres and ethnologists search for what they call 'master works' (*jingpin*) or fine aesthetic examples of the genre in question. Sometimes, it appears that master works need the assistance of literate 'experts' to fully emerge from generations of oral transmission by illiterate communities. This leads to a process of editing, blending and refinement. Once identified, master works require an appropriate context in order to be celebrated as treasures of the regional culture in question. What does the future hold for these folk epics of the labouring people of the Yangzi delta, now recorded, many for the first time, in lengthy textual form? Ernest Gellner has argued that in the face of modernity, 'low' culture is doomed to irrelevance, to be replaced by 'high' culture (1983: p.57). Anthony Smith, in his critique of Gellner, views this as over simplistic. He observes that some 'low' cultures are elevated to become the 'high' culture of the modern age (2004: pp.71-2) ¹⁹. At the time of writing it is hard to predict the future of the Yangzi folk epics. Nonetheless, at the very least, the preservation and celebration of the delta's intangible cultural heritage will

allow newly urbanised classes to experience, albeit in an aestheticised form, the everyday life of their recent forebears and renew once more their sense of what it means to be 'Chinese'. 🇨🇳

NOTES

1. In Chinese language scholarship the term 'epic' is translated as 'historical narrative in verse' (*shishi*). It is applied to the mythological sung narratives of the Mongols and Tibetans, but not to the usually more secular narratives of the Han people of the Yangzi delta.
2. Voltaire Garces Cang notes that the imperial decree for the Preservation of Ancient Objects was issued in 1871 (2007: p.47).
3. The classic study of the invention of tradition in the case of Japan is Vlastos (1998).
4. Myron Cohen notes that elite rejection of Chinese tradition in the twentieth century was not shared by the majority of the population leading to a *pronounced cultural antagonism separating the new elite from the masses* (1994: pp.88-89).
5. This was striking in rural areas. For some key studies on the resurgence of traditional beliefs and practices in post-Mao China see Dean (1993); Jing (1996); Mueggler (2001); DuBois (2005); Chau (2006); Tan (2006).
6. Jiang Bin, veteran folk performance scholar of the Yangzi delta, writing in 1992. Cited in McLaren 1994: p.81
7. For a study of the impact of this on the lower Yangzi delta see McLaren (1994).
8. According to Robert Ash, *between 1978 and 2004, the urban share of total population rose from 17.9 to 41.8 per cent* (2006: p.147).
9. An estimated 150-200 million rural workers had been relocated to urban areas by 2005 and this process of urbanisation is set to continue for decades, see Lampton (2008: pp.233-4).
10. For a sober assessment of the destruction wrought by the Cultural Revolution followed by the marginalisation of traditional folk practices in the reform years, see Xu H (2008: pp.87-88).
11. This is widely recognised by Chinese scholars. See for example the views of Xu Huaying: [in the early twenty-first century] *people started to pay attention to ICH but because of one hundred years or so of social turbulence, traditional folk arts and accompanying culture has gradually disappeared from Chinese soil and has been neglected and forgotten. Many examples of traditional popular culture have already vanished or exist now only in fragmentary form*" (2008: p.87).
12. One can perhaps find parallels between the Chinese notion of 'revitalisation' and contemporary Western theories such as that of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett who claims that *heritage produces something new in the present that has recourse to the past* (1995: pp.369-370). Her work has not yet been translated into Chinese and has had little influence to date in China.
13. The categories were: Folk Arts 265 items, 51% of this total; folk literature 72 items, folk music 31 items, folk dances 41 items, arts and crafts 51 items and folk practices 70 items (Chong, X. 2008: p.104).
14. Zheng Tuyou has given the best account of the performance context of *Wu* folk epics (2004).
15. In 1979, as a foreign student at Fudan University, I stayed at a village in Jiading County outside Shanghai and observed the ubiquitous presence of state radio broadcasts during daily labour.
16. For the impact of the Cultural Revolution on *Wu* singers see Kouwenhoven and Schimmelpenninck's study of Zhao Yongming (2007).
17. On the discovery of the folk epics see Qian (1997: pp.1-13) and Schimmelpenninck (1997: pp.39-40).
18. Some examples are included in Zhu's collection, see pp.159-183.
19. He cites as examples, the rural cultures of the Finnish and Estonian people as reflected in the Kalevala epic cycle.

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