

# *A Spatial Turn of Folklore in the Context of Urbanization: From Folk Culture to Mass Culture*

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**Abstract:** Urbanization is the most prominent change nowadays. The most prominent thing brought by urbanization is change in traditional folklore. In contemporary China, urbanization is accompanied by modernization. Under the influence of consumer culture and the modern media, traditional rural folklore is gradually evolving into urban mass culture. Additionally, it is being spread by a big wave of informatization, characteristic of the digital revolution. Traditional rural customs are always important contents of folklore study, but nowadays and in the future, the research focus of Chinese folklore studies needs to be adjusted. At the same time, individual folklore study needs to be turned into holistic culture study under that specific context.

**Keywords:** urbanization; folk culture; mass culture; change; spatial turn

China is undergoing a fast transition from an agricultural civilization to an urban civilization. With the whole society changing rapidly and continuously in this era, it is no exception for the cultural domain. Therefore, folklore studies should correspond to this feature as well. China's folklore studies have long laid emphasis on rural folk customs. Zhong Jingwen (2010) pointed out, "The focus of folklore is certainly on the countryside. It is the same case in many countries as more traditional cultures and customs are preserved in villages. Most of the materials for China's folklore studies are available in rural areas. Our folklore studies attach importance to traditional and ethnically inherent cultures so that focus is placed on rural areas (including small old towns)." In the meantime, he also

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expressed that collection and research on modern metropolitan materials should not be excluded and urban culture should be studied as well (pp.69-70). An increasingly urbanized Chinese society signifies that folklore studies with the emphasis on rural areas should from then on shift from studying traditional rural society to researching urban society and focus on cultural changes brought about by urbanization. On the other hand, domestic and overseas folklorists are conscious of the importance of studying folklore changes. Zhong Jingwen pointed out at the Founding Conference of Chinese Folklore, "To study what's new in the society over the past decades, what changes have taken place in cultures and customs, and what's the difference from the old cultures and customs... I think these are important questions" (p.70). Japanese folklorist Morifumi Takakuwa (2005) said, "So far, the focus of folklore has been studies on the continuity of folk customs under change. With sharp changes in folk customs nowadays, methodology and system for the discipline are not yet adequate. To get adapted to modern changes in folk customs, folklore studies need to again address fundamental questions of the discipline, including purpose, methods and concepts, and explore in particular the changes in folk customs" (p.118). But the folklore academia has paid less attention to changes in folk customs in the context of urbanization as Hermann Bausinger pointed out in 1961, "Folklore studies paid little attention to the transition from pre-industrial rural culture to folk culture in the age of technology." Therefore, his studies on folklore in a world of technology caused a sensation in the international folklore academia. The degree of urbanization and the influence of technology and media nowadays have far exceeded any previous times and the consequent changes in folk customs are obvious. This is not only the case in foreign countries that have accomplished industrialization and

urbanization, but also the case in China. Under such circumstances, it is necessary to research this issue.

## 1. Changes in folk customs in the context of urbanization

### 1.1 About urbanization

The definition of urbanization varies from different perspectives. Apart from urbanization, there are concepts like metropolitanization or townization. This article does not intend to strictly distinguish these concepts but to use the concept of urbanization in a broader sense. It is because cities in China were, as a matter of fact, extensions of villages before China's urbanization on a large scale. The Chinese culture takes root in its agricultural civilization, which has a cultural type like that of villages. Cities in China are different from those in western countries. Capitals of states in ancient China were places where monarchs and their top officials lived and acted as a political center, instead of an economic and commercial center as in western countries. It was after modern times that urban civilization in its true sense came into being with the progress of modernization and scientific and technological development.

Metropolitanization has many connotations. It includes rural lifestyle and changes in people's life due to migration to cities along with population transfers. Another big part that it covers is rural people leave villages periodically for work in cities and return to the villages at certain periods and then leave again to continue their work. They become temporary residents in cities or towns every time they go there to work. Metropolitanization not only means following an urban lifestyle while living in the countryside, but also refers to changes in their adaptation to urban management, norms and pace of life due to their residing in cities.

Urbanization not only means to integrate agricultural populations into urban populations, to

expand urban land to the suburbs and the increase in the number of cities, but also signifies urbanization, modernization and technicalization in lifestyle. In other words, urbanization of villages takes place along with the latest development in modern science and technology as well as social change. It is the concomitant of modernization. The establishment of a city is a process of dynamic development and construction. For instance, in the past, water supply facilities were wells instead of tap water pipe networks; people lived in bungalows instead of apartment buildings; the boundary of a city was limited and its population was not that huge and densely concentrated. With the implementation of “village-to-village connection” projects nowadays, villages are equipped with tap water facilities, buildings, landline telephones, TV sets, household appliances and convenient transportation. Therefore, urbanization is often a synonym of modernization.

Some researchers summarize the features of urbanization into five aspects: (1) Polarization of population structure, as shown in the increase of the number of people engaged in non-agricultural activities; (2) Diversification of economic structures, as shown in the change of agricultural operations from being traditional to export-oriented, commercialized and modernized; (3) Metropolitanization of lifestyle, as shown in the changes to an urban way for people’s basic necessities of life and leisure time; (4) Popularization of mass communications, which promotes changes in the rural society; and (5) Modernized ideology (Zhou&Guo,1996). The five aspects will definitely exert huge and profound influence on original folk customs and traditions in villages.

### **1.2 Urbanization-induced changes in folk customs**

The most prominent part in cultural change brought about by urbanization is in lifestyle. There are different definitions of culture. Raymond Williams (1991) defines culture as a particular way of life.<sup>①</sup> Folklore studies aim to research the daily life and a wide range of discussions about cultural change related to folk customs. From another perspective, cultural change certainly leads to variation in folk customs. It not only poses an impact on urbanized villages, but also has a significant influence on modern cities and migrant workers who travel to and fro between urban and rural areas for years.

#### **1.2.1 Depopulation in rural areas brings about a rupture in cultural inheritance**

Japan once underwent the decline of rural folk customs due to urbanization, which made many rural residents leave for cities to earn a living, and in particular, lead to the outgoing of the major labor force of a household. Some villages in mountainous areas were inundated due to the construction of dams and some had to resettle in plain areas as their lands were occupied owing to the construction of roads. Consequently, the original village sites were deserted and folk customs experienced sharp changes. “Particularly, it was increasingly difficult to maintain joint activities or undertakings for the village as a whole. Owing to a shortage of hands, rites which were once an indispensable annual ceremony cannot be performed as usual” (Takakuwa Morifumi, 2005, p.113). It is the same case in China. Before 1980, agriculture was the foundation of the national economy and the agricultural population accounted for 80% of the total population of China. Because of the household registration system and institutional management, peasants seldom moved to other places and hardly ever into cities so that villages maintained a stable and unchanged state. With gradual urbanization,

<sup>①</sup> He pointed out, “Culture” means “a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual.”

the numbers of the agricultural population are lower than that of the non-agricultural population. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics shows that China's urbanization rate in 2013 reached 53.7%. The percentage would be much higher if the calculation was made by actual floor area. The situation that many villages have become empty shells is quite serious now and folklore inheritance is facing a crisis.

Owing to the absence of males, females must assume some of the roles that were played by males in the past for folklore inheritance. For instance, lusheng (a Miao musical instrument with multiple bamboo pipes) is regarded as a typical cultural symbol of the Miao ethnic group in southwestern China and must be present in many occasions for the Miao people. But in recent years, the lusheng culture has seldom

been passed down in many places. Although it is a common practice that only men should play the lusheng, the villages where young men have left for cities must train women on how to play it. For the Dong people, there has been a custom of "yueye" prevailing among villages. It is a communicative activity that enables young men and women between different villages to make friends, date and get into matrimony. But nowadays, as young people in the villages all go to work in cities, the "left-behind" old women have to carry out such an activity by disguising themselves as men or young daughters. The purpose of such an event changes from matchmaking to self-entertainment (Yin, 2011). Such a situation occurs not only to cultural activities, but also happens to rituals such as the ancestor worship ceremony on the day of



*Dong Minority Village*

the Zhongyuan Festival (Ghost Festival) and village collective rites, which were generally attended by men but now have to be held by women. This leads to the decrease of folk activities in villages and has even forced their evolution. In addition, many folk activities cannot be carried out any more owing to being short of hands in the villages, resulting in involuntary suspension of folklore inheritance.

Another consequence of urbanization for peasants is that some peasants rent their land to others and are engaged in industries other than agriculture though they choose to stay in villages. On the other hand, with the improvement in infrastructure under the “New Village Construction” program and the construction of expressways and high-speed railways in recent years, it is more and more convenient for remote villages to get into contact with the outside. This not only changes the villagers’ scope for market exchange on daily necessities, but also provides opportunities for urban and rural exchanges on human resources and materials, further promoting the integration of urban and rural life or urbanization of the rural way of life and triggering a trend for the villagers to build their houses in a centralized way in easily accessible areas. In agriculture-based traditional villages, the overall layout is generally scattered instead of concentrated as people like to live in proximity to their farmland. But nowadays, an increasing numbers of villagers choose to build their houses near a highway and the houses are more modern with the increasing use of masonry structures, aluminum alloy windows and burglarproof doors. More and more villagers get their daily necessities such as food and clothing by purchasing proceed or semi-proceed products from the outside and seldom make by themselves. Great changes have taken place in the self-sufficient and frugal ways of life in traditional villages.

1.2.2 Frequent migration of urban populations and the fusion of different cultures

A scholar pointed out, “The reason and

consequence of mobility are gradually believed to be the most determinant factors of the nature of urban life” (Lash, Scott & John Urry, 2006, pp.344-345). With the development of globalization, frequent flow of people among different regions and exchange among countries as well as the philosophy of mutual respect, cultures have been appealing to and learning from each other and travel has become an integral part of modern life. In this way, there is an increasing trend toward fusion of different cultures. Many traditional folk customs are spread from ordinary people to the upper class, from foreign countries to domestic areas, from villages to metropolis, from convention to fashion, from self-enjoyment to consumption by others.

Contemporarily, people mainly live in cities and have many chances to communicate and meet with one another. Folk customs often appear to be some trendy behaviors in cities and therefore lose their role in identifying the group of people who are from the same area and follow the same convention. The fusion of folk customs in a society featuring the flow of people is reflected in the fact that various dialects are used in a metropolis while language is gradually unified. Through communications based on tourism and by media, the value of folk customs is discovered and endowed with new meanings which are integrated into urban life so that traditional folk customs can become popular again. The highly representative example is that local traditional food has now been favored by people living in cities across the country with the documentary hit — *A Bite of China*. With the flow of migrant workers, they bring their preference for diet, such as a liking for spicy food, along with them to the north, the east and the south of China so that metropolis like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou are under their influence. In Shanghai, a mega-city which accommodates new and old migrants, many restaurant owners put on their signboards specialties of different regions, such as Shanghai, Canton and

Fujian, or Hunan, Hubei and Jiangxi to attract diners coming from those areas. In the meantime, the city also sees many restaurants offering authentic western or Southeast Asian cuisines. Diversified cultures get mingled here and the traces of indigenous tradition and folk customs are diminishing.

For contemporary cities, cultural change has become a normal state. “Time-space compression” is now an important phenomenon in contemporary society, leading to the convergence of cultures which originally existed in different times and spaces (Harvey, 2003). According to Anthony Giddens (1998), a key feature of modernity is that, social relations are lifted out from localized contexts. It means that social relations are reorganized across large time-space distances. For example, many festivals, ceremonies and conventions are not held or not that grandly held in China, but in Chinese settlements in Southeast Asian countries, they are kept similar to, or are the same as they used to be. On the other hand, there are many western cultural elements in China as well. Not only local festivals but also foreign holidays are celebrated by people and elements of festivals are mingled to some extent. Chinese festivals have been spread abroad and have become public holidays in many countries while western festivals like Christmas, Valentine’s Day, Thanksgiving Day and Halloween have been spread to China and are quite popular among young people.

1.2.3 New means of livelihood give rise to new folk customs

Villages often have features contrary to those of cities. Traditional agricultural society mostly relies on farming and animal husbandry for livelihood and selling their products for exchange of other products. Peasants are highly dependent on land which is the source of their main income. Their daily life and festivals are all related to agricultural production. Their pace of life is determined by farm work so that the production time is aligned with the natural

time. Production and living are scheduled according to growth cycles of crops and traditional festivals and sacrificial rites are emphasized. City dwellers, however, make a living by working in industry, commerce or other sectors. They follow strict working hours and the official national holiday schedule and are accustomed to a pace of life with two days off each week. They pursue modernity and fashion as well as western sci-tech civilization. Rural culture attaches importance to kinship based on family and lineage as well as geographical relationship based on neighborhood while urban culture lays emphasis on professional relations with people’s needs satisfied by different industries of the society. Therefore, urbanization means a new way of life. When peasants enter a city, they not only change their identity, but also their profession. Their experience and practice accumulated from agricultural production are invalid and thus abandoned. Joseph Klapper mentioned in *Folk Nation of the Metropolis* that, “Blood and geographical relationships are decisive to preserve folk customs. When people move to the cities, their folk customs get lost” (Hermann, 2014, p.29). A village is an enclosed society based on blood and geographical relationships. Folk cultures arising there from would lose their charm and habitat when people move to the cities.

1.2.3.1 Changes in the necessities of life

Folk customs refer to daily life and culture related to food, clothing, accommodation, means of travel, wedding, funeral, festival, temple fair, sacrificial rite and oral narration. The first changes brought about by urbanization are reflected in the variation of the daily way of life covering food, clothing, accommodation, and means of travel, i.e., urbanization of the way of life or consumer culture. Consumer culture varies with economic forms. For a traditional agriculture economy, production and living are carried out on the basis of a family while in cities, production and consumption are regulated by the market, not relying

any more on farming and cultivation, but on factory production or service industry, which is not in a traditional mode of production. Folk customs about agricultural production, i.e., knowledge learned from the elder generation for livelihood has to be abandoned. With the entry of a commodity economy into villages, awareness of commodities and industrial products in contemporary city life have wide influences on people's daily activities. The traditional household lifestyle is dissolving and customs inherited within families are waning or changing.

Urbanization of the daily way of life is reflected in the following aspects: (1) Accommodation. People do not live in standalone houses as those in villages any more but in apartments in cities. (2) Clothing. In urban life, people dress for fashion and tailors are largely replaced by numerous apparel production with new styles constantly. In the ethnic minority villages where I did my field studies in southwestern China, folk costumes that villagers wear everyday were one of the important symbols for ethnic identity. If some villagers did not wear their folk costumes when they returned to the village, they would be looked down upon and excluded. Nowadays, however, when villagers working outside get back home for the New Year or major events, they seldom wear folk costumes. There are fewer and fewer people engaged in making costumes, which are merely for sale as tourist handicrafts most of the time, rather than for daily use. (3) Diet. This undergoes great changes, for instance, dietary structure. In the past, people's dietary structure was simple while fresh vegetables and fruits are now available all the year round and new types of food are transported to markets from various regions. People's dietary structure is changing. On the other hand, dietary mode is getting complicated and diversified. With the fast pace of city life, people spend less time in cooking. Industrialization and social division of labor lead to the emergence of convenience food in the market. An increasing number of people buy

cooked or ready-made food such as instant noodles, ham sausages, bread, cakes and mineral water and choose to dine out more frequently (Jiang, 2005). Only in terms of food consumption, manufactured food and fresh vegetables from other places have improved people's life dramatically, changing significantly their dietary structure and choice of food which were subject to traditional farm life in the past. (4) Transportation. While cities have convenient transportation, urbanization of villages is achieved by constructing village to village highways. Many people purchase motorcycles or cars as means of travel and some are engaged in business or transportation services. The flow of people and goods is accelerated accordingly.

In addition, traditional means of livelihood are changing perse. Folk handicraft has become a rare resource so that traditional folk artisans can become masters in their fields. Folk arts or crafts are inherited by sons from their fathers but they may also be handed down by school training or internal business development. Originally, they were presented for appreciation and enjoyment by the public. Being more professionalized and artistic, they have now become the sole means of livelihood for artisans instead of a sideline or part-time job. Peasants who are engaged in some crafts become masters in their fields.

#### 1.2.3.2 Changes in social conventions and ideology

One aspect of urbanization or modernization is the quick accessibility to information. With the spread of information from the outside world to villages, part of the stability of the traditional agricultural society is dissolving. Villages are impacted from material life to ideology. In the areas where I did my field studies, changes in marital customs brought about by urbanization are mainly expansion of intermarriage scope. Especially in ethnic minority areas, intermarriage used to be limited to the ethnic groups in the region. With young people going out for working in other places, they get to know other people

from different ethnic groups, areas or even regions far away. Some get acquainted with their true love through chatting online and the form of marriage is also getting diversified.

Changes in life and space further spark changes in people's consciousness and values. For instance, daily use of mobile phones brings more sound to people. The use of TV sets in every household make people feel that they live in a global village synchronically. Villagers often imagine urban life through watching TV and follow urban way of dressing and dress themselves in the latest urban styles. At the same time, folk customs of different places tend to be uniform in terms of architecture, clothing, and dietary mode. The most typical example is folk tourism scenic spots across the country. They are not only of the same pattern, but also sell similar tourism products. Villagers want to pursue a life that is as decent as shown in soap operas and are not satisfied with the rural environment and poor rural life. Someone who is eager for great fortune overnight may take extreme actions to change their destiny.

Space-time concepts are changing. Long distances within a city can be traveled in a short time. Public facilities like subways and elevators provide people with convenient and fast services, not to mention high-speed railways and aircraft connecting the city with other parts of the country and the world. Many farmers work for years outside and rarely go back home. They do not have much feeling about land and their notion of hometown is indifferent. Consumption concepts, those related to wedding or celebration for admission to university, tend to be urbanized as well. Relatives and friends are invited to attend the ceremony in a grand hotel or restaurant in the county or township, and even cameramen are hired to record the event. During big days such as the Chinese New Year, more and more people buy gifts or feast food in the market rather than preparing them themselves. Such changes in life are so obvious and prevalent, shaping farmers into citizens.

As Tao Siyan (2002) said, "The rapid development of modernization in the new era breaks the original folk heritage context and natural evolution while it constantly transforms the subjects of the heritage and makes them representatives of new cultures by introducing new ideas, knowledge, information and horizons to them."

In the meantime, with the earlier entry of external capital and culture into cities, the collective consciousness that was formed on the basis of a common region is weakening. As pointed out by a Japanese scholar, "The common concepts of gains and losses that were formed by simply growing rice have been replaced by differences in gains and losses of each family. It is also hard to keep the joint labor practice. The religious belief of a village reflected in rites, seasonal customs and rituals of life is deeply rooted in the hearts of the villagers as it has been incorporated in the natural environment and heavy working conditions of the village. But their dependence on deities is declining."

The impact of changes in urban and rural spaces has altered ethical relations within families and people's concepts of and attitudes towards life. Once farmers live in cities, they are no longer farmers and are gradually transformed by urban spaces. Changes take place not only in their identity, but also in their habits, behaviors, views and values.

In general, social environments such as urbanization have caused unprecedented changes in folk culture. Many folk customs and traditions that had been inherited for thousands of years suddenly disappeared. As material and cultural changes are faster than changes in spiritual culture, changes in folk culture related to necessities of life are more prominent. Although spiritual folklore changes with material progress and many modern conveniences superficially, its core content is moving forward like a hidden undercurrent and people's folk psychology still persists. This will preserve and create new types of

folk customs, in the form of popular mass culture.

## 2. A spatial turn of folklore, from folk culture to mass culture

For decades, folklore studies have taken the group as the object of research, mainly to study life culture created and enjoyed by ordinary people that are neither the official nor the upper elite class. In the academic circle of folklore, “folk customs” and “folk culture” are often recognized as equivalent. “People” contained in the meaning of folk refers to peasants mainly living in rural areas, but urbanization has made many of them live in cities. The subject of culture now mostly refers to people living in urban spaces. “All these modern phenomena, such as mass culture, transportation, technology, media and leisure time, are now part of the way of urban survival” (Kaschuba Wolfgang, 2011), and should be the focus of folklore studies.

### 2.1 The rise of contemporary mass culture

The foregoing shows that urbanization has brought about changes in traditional rural folk culture, leading to the devastation of the original cultural foundations. Then does folk culture still exist in an increasingly urbanized society? In which way will people present their thoughts and emotions? What is the carrier for inheriting traditional concepts of folk heritage? These are questions that contemporary folklore studies need to ponder.

#### 2.1.1 Difference and correlation among rural culture, urban culture, folk culture and mass culture

What are the differences between rural culture and urban culture? The paradigm and framework established by Fei Xiaotong, a famous sociologist, covers rural and urban societies, country folks and city dweller, societies of acquaintances or strangers, societies ruled by moral standards or laws, habits and contracts. The above factors are often used to distinguish between urban and rural societies and seem to be also applicable to differentiating between

urban and rural cultures.

By further analysis, we can also find that cities mainly have more contemporary pop culture while villages retain more traditional folk customs. The cities undergo rapid change due to the fast pace of urban life, focusing on innovation and being more open, inclusive and diverse while the villages have a conservative nature or strong features of stability, inheritance and homogeneity. Cities emerge with the rise of commercial trade activities. City culture is consumer culture while villages feature a self-sufficient culture that is related to or focuses on production. In cities, people emphasize exchange of information and knowledge. They communicate with one another in words or through modern media and solve various problems with new approaches of modern science and technology. In villages, people focus on transmission of experience. They express and exchange their emotions in oral language and depend on supernatural beliefs to address anxiety. Urban life is stressful and even ruthless and rational while village life is soothing, irrational and humanistic.

Folk culture is a different from, yet related to farm culture, rural culture, traditional culture, popular culture, civil culture and pop culture. It is regarded as the root of ethnic culture and has more linkage to farmers, villages and tradition. In contemporary urbanized society, mass culture, which incorporates or covers popular culture, civil culture, pop culture and folk culture, has become the mainstream of social culture.

Over the decades, folklore studies have emphasized that folk culture is different from mass culture in the following aspects: (1) Folk culture is created, enjoyed and inherited by the common people themselves. Its creators and users are difficult to distinguish and often refer to the same group of people. They are also highly homogeneous groups. Mass culture is produced by professionals for others' consumption, and its creators and users or recipients

are detached (Zhu, 2005). (2) The forms of creation and circulation are different. Folk culture is generated in rural society and is inherited by oral language and behaviors in a natural state of life; mass culture is mainly popular in urban society and is spread by written texts and audio/video media. (3) Mindset of contents is different. Folk culture is spontaneous creation made by people in production and life to serve their own needs and to express the group's feelings and aspirations. It is "the art of producers." Mass culture is often market-oriented creation and is "the art of consumers." (4) Traditional folk culture reflects more the differences between regions and groups while modern mass culture has a tendency of convergence in popular things. (5) As said by Bausinger, folk culture does not seem to be affected by modern development while mass culture uses modern technology and media to achieve innovation and frequent changes (Hermann, 2014).

China's contemporary mass culture is generated, like western mass culture, in the historical process of human society developing toward commercialization, urbanization and technological progress and becomes full-fledged amid promotions by the media and consumer culture oriented ideology and has characteristics that are different from folk culture. What is mass culture? As early as the time when mass culture emerged, Hang Zhi (1991) defined it as, "A special product of urban industrial society or mass consumption society. It is a cultural product that is carried and transmitted in a mass consumption society through print, electronic media and other mass communication tool. It is a synthetic and processed cultural product, with an obvious feature of being mainly produced for mass consumption" (p.141). Tao Dongfeng (1993) held that mass culture features "mass production, standardization and replication" in terms of texts. Gao Bingzhong (1996) pointed out, "Mass culture take shape with the establishment of commercial hegemony and the emergence of an urban-

centered consumer society as well as the flourishing of mass media. Its feature can be summarized as, popular, transient, consumable, young, witty, secretive, cunning, sexy, thrilling and adventurous." Mass culture emerged with the development of mass media technology, information technology and a cultural industry in the modern consumer era and has a prominent nature of commodity and consumption, the characteristics of being modeled and identical, and features of being secular, hybrid, variable and prevalent.

By groups of people, urban culture is certainly civil culture. It may be folk culture, i.e., culture created by the public, but in the contemporary era, it is more immersed in mass culture. Someone pointed out, "Mass culture is civil culture. China had civil culture from the middle period of the Ming Dynasty but the situation was reversed after the rule of the Qing Dynasty. The current mass culture is still civil culture which mainly exists in middle and large cities where a commodity economy prospers" (Li, 1998, p.296). This view points out the civil and commodity nature of mass culture. If the Chinese culture of the traditional society is divided into upper culture of the ruling class, middle culture of citizens, and folk culture created and inherited by peasants at the bottom of society (Zhong, 1990), then mass culture rising from the 1990s is middle culture of citizens with modernity features. Of course, urban culture has a wider scope than mass culture. More precisely, the object of folklore studies is not the entire urban culture or mass culture, but a certain traditional or shared part in the life of ordinary people.

Folk culture and mass culture are historically linked and converge in reality. Wang Di (1999) said, "In a traditional society, the characteristics of regional culture are quite strong because there is no modern mass media of communication to bring time and space closer together, so 'popular culture' is often associated with 'folk culture'." Although Wang Di's comment

mainly refers to pop culture, which is the predecessor to, or a part of mass culture. His statement shows that the two are mixed. In contemporary society, folk culture has become or is developing towards mass culture. Antonio Gramsci, a figure with great influence in western cultural studies classified “pop songs” into three types: (1) Songs written by the public and for the public, representing “folk culture”; (2) songs written for the public yet not by the public; (3) songs written neither by the public nor for the public, but accepted by the public because of the expression of their thoughts and feelings. In this way, the first, the second or even the third type can be mass culture in today’s urbanized society. This means mass culture is not limited only to the first type. As Bausinger (2014) said in the preface of the latest version of his monograph — *Folk Culture in a World of Technology*, “The dividing line of folk culture and mass culture has never been clear-cut. In the process of technological penetration, it is increasingly blurred.” Other scholars pointed out explicitly that folk culture and mass culture are increasingly integrated into each other due to influences of modern social mass media and that the two terms are almost synonymous (Wilson, 1992). Folk culture has been conceived as the “origin,” the “authentic” and “true” source of traditional culture, but in a world of technology, the two terms gradually merge into or replace each other. On the other hand, it is possible for modern mass culture to melt into people’s daily life after prevailing for a certain period and become new folk customs after years of development.

In a word, with the development of the times, there will be less and less pure folk culture, and mass culture is increasingly penetrating our daily life. In the consumer era, with the development of the cultural industry, information technology and a variety of electronic media, folk culture has begun to shift to mass culture. It is very common for contemporary folklore studies to research SMS, rumors on the

Internet, popular fashion and intangible cultural heritage. This indicates that the boundary between folk culture and mass culture is not that clear-cut.

### 2.1.2 The rise of mass culture in contemporary urban society

In contemporary society, folk culture is getting closer and closer to mass culture. In this era when technology and consumption are advocated and popular fashion prevails, oral inheritance is mostly replaced by text reading, audio-visual communication and collective creation substituting for individual creation. The original culture for self-creation and enjoyment gradually changes to be something created by professionals for consumption by others. The traditional and local civil society has undergone urban and rural integration featuring popularity, standardization and universality. People are keen on innovation and stress new things and changes while heritage is neglected. New technologies and ideas promptly guide the mainstream of society. Especially with the influence of information technology, young people’s lifestyles, such as online dating, chat and shopping, are increasingly dependent on the network. People get familiar with strangers in cyberspace and people form groups that are divided by the same industry, interest, major or school instead of traditional blood and geographical relationships. The impact of technologies, such as television, mobile phones and



The “vying for red envelopes” event participated in by numerous people during the Chinese New Year of 2015 is a typical example.

the Internet, requires folk customs to be reassembled by new techniques or adopt new technology for inheritance or transmission. The “vying for red envelopes” event participated in by numerous people during the Chinese New Year of 2015 is a typical example.

Folk customs are usually generated in a specific geographical environment and have a distinctive regional culture. They disappear with the diminishing of local features. When the survival wisdom accumulated on the basis of geographical and climatic factors loses its advantages, diversity of local cultures no longer exists. Mass media brings time and space closer. Network facilities can make instantaneous transmissions, with a speed and a scope of communication faster and broader than any previous eras. The rapid development of transportation makes people feel that they live in a “global village.” Space becomes a virtual symbol or just means a difference in numbers. Some of the traditional folk customs are used by businesses or governments in the contemporary era, only with similar forms which soon become wholesale “industrial products.” As someone pointed out, “In the era of urban consumption, art folklore is consumed as commodities and appreciated as art objects. Recipients and creators of art tend to be professionalized” (Geng, 2009), becoming participants of mass culture.

Contemporary folk culture is often inherited or spread by external efforts instead of by the creators themselves. This will inevitably bring in a variety of non-folk factors, and those who participate in the creation and enjoyment of folk culture cover all levels of the public, apart from involving mainly the lower class only in the past. When folk culture is inherited, or spread by means of media, science and technology, and urban space, it is often subject to transformation by professionals and review by national regulatory authorities. It may lose its independent folk nature and uniqueness, but may be endowed with the aesthetic characteristics and vitality of the times. At the same

time, traditional folk customs have been undergoing great changes, some of which, because of the rapid speed, the broad scope and the deep impact, result in rupture and difficulties in recovery. Certainly, there are some customs that are still inherited, but the focus of culture has been transferred to cities where mass culture has been the mainstream of national culture. With the development of high technology, especially the widespread use of new information media, mass culture exerts a deep impact on every aspect of people’s daily life.

The development of mass culture in the twentieth century was a process of tributary to confluent and then to mainstream (Gao, 1996). Since 1990, China has gradually entered commercialization and marketization and culture in a consumer society has changed accordingly. With the second revolution in the cultural paradigm, the cultural form with texts as the main media has gradually turned to visual means. As a result, commercialized, entertaining and secular modern mass culture rises rapidly, occupying the main position of culture. Mass culture has a strong adsorption function and can integrate a myriad of cultures. Modern mass media has an increasingly profound effect on people’s consciousness, perception, identity and even lifestyle as groups and dissolves their self-consciousness and perception as individuals (Wen & Wu, 2014). The aestheticization of daily life in a consumer society has transformed part of folk culture into mass culture. The development of mass media results in the large-scale spread of visual images and the “anesthetization of daily life” (Featherstone, 2000). The development trend of urban and rural integration in contemporary society decreases the differences between cultural classes and localities. Differences in folk customs due to locality or community disappear and the significance of folk customs as the symbol or identity for defining a region or a group of people fades away. This is also the reason why folk culture changes into mass popular culture based

on consumption. Likewise, folk customs become fashionable instead of practical in the aesthetic trend and context. For example, embroidered belts or hats in tourist sites are basically not for use, but for decoration or collection. “Elements of those folk customs have nowadays become cultural relics that are as precious as Alaskan folklore or tropical rainforests” (Kono Shin, 2003). This shows that folk customs have become a kind of exotic and romantic consumer goods that can ornament fashion. The folk customs we see nowadays are more heterogeneous and have become part of mass culture.

If folklore studies take daily life as the object of study from now on, then mass culture will inevitably be a focus of folklore scholars since it is an important part of daily life. The impact of contemporary society and technology on folk culture cannot be ignored. I wrote a paper stating that the application of modern technology and media results in quite a different trend of folk customs dissemination and that, “With the development of science and technology, the contemporary world has entered an era favoring graphics with video images taking the place of texts and becoming a major cultural carrier in people’s daily life. The emergence of modern media endows folk customs with the ability to transcend time and space for transmission and inheritance.” “The upper and the lower classes, the authorities and the people, the intellect and the public, may all play a role in the inheritance of contemporary folk customs. Folk customs are no longer something that are created and enjoyed by people of the middle and the lower classes and passed down from generation to generation, but may be something inherited by the government, the elites, the middle class or the business people. With the flow of people and frequent exchanges arising from urbanization and globalization, foreign ideas and local notions influence each other, leading to cultural infiltration, borrowing, integration, assimilation and differentiation.” I thereby take the liberty to propose

that, “The definition of folk customs and research orientation of folklore studies may also need to turn to mass culture” (Xu, 2015).

## 2.2 The spatial turn of folklore

It can be inferred, therefore, that in the context of urbanization, traditional folk customs in villages have faded away and cities have become the main clusters for people. Social culture presents the trend of urban mass culture. Folklore used to focus on the rural world. As Zhong Jingwen (1987) pointed out, “Folk culture contains the middle culture and the lower culture, it is the culture of the majority of peasants” (p.385). He stated that although it also included all the culture of urban citizens, its major concern was the vast rural society and the rural world. In the meantime, he also suggested that folklore studies should pay attention to the current social life, “Considering the general nature of folklore studies, it should belong to modern studies as its methodology is to investigate and collect existing folklore materials which are mostly available now and its purpose is for the good of the modern times. This point needs to be affirmed.”

Urbanization is the biggest trend of change in contemporary society. Cultural changes brought about by urbanization are also the most important driving force. If both contemporary society and culture have undergone transitions, cultural studies also need to follow such transitions. In addition to the challenges brought about by urbanization to the inheritance of rural or traditional folk customs, there are fewer and fewer elderly people in villages who still have memories of traditional folk customs. Unlike the collection of folk songs in the 1950s and 1960s, it would be very hard to have a fruitful field study on folklore in villages. Therefore, from the perspective of the reality of urbanization in China, the call for urban folklore studies is getting stronger and stronger. But whether in China, or in Japan or Germany, “practical studies of urban folklore are quite rare” and “the theoretical basis of urban folklore studies is still very

weak” (Hermann, 2014). In this sense, Michiya Iwamoto (2012), a Japanese folklorist suggested whether urban studies should be urban folklore or modern folklore studies. Therefore, the contemporary turn of folklore studies does not specifically refer to the change of research object from rural traditional to urban traditional folk customs. From the perspective of time and space, mass culture not only relies on cities, but also reflects current social life and has the characteristics of the times. That is different from folk culture in cities in a conventional sense.

Foucault (2003) stated that the nineteenth century was an age of time and the twentieth century may be an age of space. He wrote that, “We are in the age of synchronism and coordination, coexistence and disseminating revealing the characteristics of a contemporary society that denies time and extends in space. Some Chinese scholars also proposed the spatial turn of cultural studies and the cross-disciplinary turn of sociological studies (Feng, 2008; He, 2007; You, 2010). Folklore studies have been in search of authenticity in tracing the origins of folk customs (Regina, 2006). Inheritance within a timeline is a key concept in the studies while dissemination across space is seldom emphasized. A spatial turn can thus break through or away from the long-term reliance on texts and make the studies transform “from theoretical research on ancient cultures to practical research on daily life in the contemporary era” (Hermann, 2014), and into people’s daily life with a dynamic perspective. The spatial significance here also refers to folklore studies in context and a holistic view of academic research (Liu, 2009). Anthropology has always emphasized a holistic view, but folklore studies seem to focus more on trivial folk customs over the years. A spatial turn means to regard folklore as a whole and to explore its internal logic. Since culture is like those webs of significance spun by

human beings themselves (Geertz, 1999), then every node on the webs are associated with one another, and therein lies the significance of “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” For example, our studies on cultural heritage should combine tangible and intangible aspects. Studies on traditional settlements should not only attach importance to architectural heritage sites, but also pay attention to intangible cultural heritage, and should focus on folk culture as well as traditions of the literati. Cultural studies should also take into account interactions between the elites and the people, between the upper and lower classes, as well as cultural mobility (Xu & Huang, 2013). As predecessors questioned some folklore studies that are confined to individual fields of folklore and argued that it is pointless to be indulged in studying certain insignificant individual objects of folklore and they must be interrelated and concerning the whole picture, or the overall interpretation of culture in a particular space, and reveal the inherent logic of culture in a culturally interrelated and interactive process (Hermann, 2014).

Recently, professor Michael Herzfeld advocated “engaged anthropology,” emphasizing that anthropologists should be engaged in local communities and conduct field work to identify real academic and realistic issues and to discover resources conducive to the local people from local cultural context and authority structures, and to combine academic research with realities.<sup>①</sup> This proposition implies that cultural studies should not merely be a personal interest but should be concerned about social reality. China’s contemporary folklore studies coincide with the protection of intangible cultural heritage and the trend of cultural development and prosperity and should be included in national cultural development programs to become a discipline engaged in this era. This also requires folklore studies to

① Blog of “Anthropology–SSDPP Fudan University”, retrieved from [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_6593f6530101afxi.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_6593f6530101afxi.html).

turn to contemporary society to make contributions to increasing people's emotional satisfaction and happiness index. Since the definitions of contemporary folk culture and mass culture are not so clear-cut and culture is by nature changing all the time, research fields of folklore studies need to be expanded appropriately to keep up with the times, focus on realities and make contribution benefiting the society and the era.

Moreover, today's academic circles are increasingly emphasizing cross-disciplinary comprehensive research (Department of Science and Technology, Ministry of Education, 2007). In the United States, there are endeavors to emphasize interdisciplinary research and talents instead of confining studies to a single discipline. This reminds us that if we adopt multidisciplinary research perspectives and methods to look at our research objects, we may be able to expand disciplinary fields and innovate our research approaches. Currently speaking, space, space production, cultural space, public space and other concepts or theories are expected to enable dialogues and exchanges between folklore studies and other disciplines so that the studies can contribute to the development of humanities and social sciences. The proposal of multi-sited ethnography is also what a "spatial turn" involves. In the current society which sees continuous innovation, urbanization and mobility, field work of folklore studies need broader horizon to give in-depth interpretation of cultural reproduction or recreation.

The spatial turn of folklore studies needs to shift research objects not only from the lower class to daily life, from peasant culture to mass culture(Xu, 2015), and from traditional carrier to contemporary carrier, but also from rural areas to cities, from convention to modernity, from folk culture to mass culture. In addition, it is necessary to deepen the relationship between the discipline and the times, focus on involvement in reality, abandon the previous research

obsession in tracing the origin of a single item of folk customs and pay more attention to the future, to the mainstream public life. In other words, we call for research on contemporary urban daily life and commonality of cities to highlight social culture and characteristics of the times with contemporary urban life as the mainstream.

This spatial turn will undoubtedly bring us new research perspectives as well as new challenges. Rural society features regional, enclosed and rustic culture that is walled, exclusive and conservative. This gives rise to the regional, unique, stable or conservative nature of rural folk customs (Zhang, 2004). In contrast, urban culture is changeable, open, diverse and inclusive. Therefore, a paradigm that is different from that of previous studies should be adopted. "Mobile ethnography" is not impossible, but the difficulty is conceivable as mobility is hard to hold.

It should be noted that current theories of mass culture for academic research is represented by those of the Frankfurt School. There are differences between mass culture as a practice and as a research object. Contemporary folk culture still survives by using space and ways of dissemination of mass culture so we should focus on those aspects. If the studies tend to criticize mass culture instead, it will be against the original intention and meaning of the studies. Mass culture is just the object of folklore studies and methodology may still come from the folklore studies. Just like the localization of western festivals, our studies on mass popular culture still need to emphasize the traditional factors. John Dock was strongly opposed to the way of modernism that cuts the links between mass culture prevailing in industrial and post-industrial eras and folk culture in pre-industrial era. He believed that carnivals held in medieval town streets and alleys as well as soap operas, farces, and animations broadcast in the contemporary era are of the same strain. For example, the character under the pen of Bakhtin of a funny, innocent, unsophisticated,

anti-stereotyped, grumbling, idle, hypocritical and troublemaking fool, now frequently appears in various television programs and becomes an important role in mass culture narratives (Docker, 2001). This also shows that contemporary mass culture and traditional folk culture have many similarities, which folklore studies should not neglect.

After folklore studies turn to research on mass culture, its subject name need not be changed to “mass culture studies” or the like, although appellations such

as “empirical cultural studies” and “ethnology” have been used in Germany. China’s folklore studies have their own specialty. Its theories and methodology also need to be continuously explored and constructed in practice. In the process, it is necessary to continue to learn from contiguous disciplines at home and abroad, to make bold innovation based on realities so that this discipline growing from our own cultural soil can flourish..

(Translator: Wu Lingwei; Editor: Xiong Xianwei)

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