

Introduction to Folklore II:  
Folk Genres and Analysis

**FOLK AND FINA 113**

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# ON THE CONCEPTS OF FOLKLORE

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- ✘ What is folklore?
- ✘ Obviously a compound of “folk” and “lore”, which begs the questions:
  - + What do we mean by “folk” (and its use as a prefix)?
  - + What do we mean by “lore” (and its use as a suffix)?

# FOLK

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- ✘ 19<sup>th</sup> Century term
- ✘ Literally, “the people” (as in the German *volk*)
- ✘ Connotation of “the common people”
  - + Rural, unlettered, non-cosmopolitan
  - + Explicitly “not us” (the educated, urban, male, middle and classes)
- ✘ Tends to retain that connotation
  - + Sometimes as a pejorative
  - + Sometimes as a measure of authenticity

# FUN FACT! (DON'T WRITE THIS DOWN)

- ✘ In Chinese, the term which is used for folklore (the discipline) is 民俗學: 民 (mín) people, public, civilian, private; 俗 (sú) practices of valley people; 學 (xué) academic study. Of particular interest is 'mín': note how it used in the following contexts:
  - + míngē (folksong); míngúo (republic); mínjian (of the people, non-governmental, private); mínjìndǎng (Democratic Progressive Party); mínquán (civil rights); mínshēng (people's livelihood); mínsú (folk customs); mínxīn (popular sentiment); mínxuǎn (popularly elected); mínyì (public opinion); mínyíng (privately operated); mínyùn (democracy movement); mínzhòng (the people); mínzhǔ (democracy); mínzú (ethnic group, people, nationality)



# FOLK (TODAY)

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- + Over time, there was a recognition that the thing we call folklore was not limited to a rural peasant class but existed among all people at all time (which we get to in a minute)
- + “Folk” (or, rather, “folkgroup”) became “two or more people who share at least one common factor”
  - × Also, they are in communication with each other
  - × And they find that factor significant
- + So, if folk is anybody, we have to turn to “lore”

# LORE

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- ✘ Not very helpful approach either
- ✘ Stuff? Understanding of stuff? Stories about stuff?
- ✘ See Dundes' list (page 2): good examples, but what links them?
- ✘ So, let's stop looking at the terms separately, and keep them together

# FOLKLORE

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- ✘ Return to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and start to question why these things got started
- ✘ “Romantic nationalism”
  - + A nation was in part a product of its environment
  - + Modernity (industrialisation, education, etc.) had removed the middle and ruling classes from the environment
  - + “Outsiders” were being espoused as “higher cultures”



# ROMANTIC NATIONALISM

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- ✘ A nation can only be unified if it shares a distinct culture, which it holds to be the equivalent (or, often, *better*) than the cultures of others
- ✘ **But**, where to find it?
- ✘ **ANSWER:** Among “the folk,” the simple people still connected to the environment, landscape, etc., who have not been “corrupted” by external influence



# THUS

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- ✘ “Folklore” (“a fine Saxon compound” - Thoms) became the cultural remnants of an ancient past that reside among the rural peasantry
- ✘ Soon, with the advent of evolutionary theory and its offshoot, cultural evolution, this “ancient past” was reframed as an earlier stage of progress
  - + Savagery → Barbarism → Civilization
- ✘ Folklore was survivals from those stages

# MORE CHANGES

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- ✘ Both romantic nationalism and cultural evolutionary models claimed a continuity with a distant past
- ✘ Therefore, neither could account for new things
- ✘ North America changes that
  - + In Europe: middle and ruling classes arose from indigenous people
  - + In North America, middle and ruling classes arose from immigrant cultures

# FOLKLORE STUDY IN NORTH AMERICA

- ✘ At first, only interested in First Nations, French Canada, Mexico, African-Americans, and whatever lore was brought by European peoples
- ✘ Soon, however, new lore was noted
  - + It existed among European-Americans
  - + **But** had no precedent in Europe
  - + **But** bore all the hallmarks of “folklore”



# SO

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- ✘ Rather than “ancient,” folklore conceived as “traditional”
- ✘ More importantly, emphasis turned to the process of how it is passed along
  - + “Oral,” “Face-to-face” → eventually, “informal”
- ✘ Thus, attention begins to be paid to *who* passes it along and to whom
- ✘ Becomes understood as a “performance”

# MEANWHILE

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- ✘ Redfield suggests the “folk society model”
  - + Isolated: little communication with outsiders, intense communication within itself
  - + Members are physically, behaviourally, and ideologically similar
  - + Simple division of labour; economically independent/self-sufficient; an exchange economy
  - + Non-literate

# A MODEL

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- ✘ This is a **model**: no culture exhibits all these traits, but many may more or less resemble them
- ✘ Thus “Folk” becomes defined not by its specific context – “peasantry” – but by its relative context – small and independent
- ✘ And thus, new folklore emerges when new groups operating in a folk society model emerge



# SO...

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- ✘ Folklore is not restricted to a type of community or strata of society
- ✘ Folklore is not restricted to a fixed canon of forms and items
- ✘ Folklore emerges in groups with a sense of “groupness”
- ✘ It is artistic communication
  - + Of the group; to the group; from the group

# MEDIATING ROLE OF FOLKLORE

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- ✘ To be in the group is to know the lore
- ✘ To know the lore is to be in the group
  - + Tautology, or chicken and egg thing?
- ✘ Two approaches to folklore study:
  - + Find the group, look at the lore they perform
    - ✘ or
  - + Find the lore, look for the group who performs it
- ✘ Kind of the same thing, but subtly different

# SO...

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- ✘ Is everything folklore?
- ✘ Not quite: it still tends to denote something distinct from both popular culture and high/elite culture, no matter how nebulous those boundaries may be
- ✘ Because it connotes a necessary relationship between the people who perform it and the group within which it is performed
- ✘ Interpersonal and human, not formal and institutional



# GO AWAY FROM THIS PLACE

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- ✘ Read “The Portal Case” by Evans-Pritchard, from the *Reader*