

High Culture or Low Culture: The Propagation and Popularization of the Classic of Poetry in Modern China

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Abstract : A major Confucian masterpiece and the earliest-known poetry anthology (composed approximately 1046-771 BCE), The Classic of Poetry, reflects different cultures in ancient China. It is regarded as a Chinese classic and one of the world's most significant written works, an essential part of our global cultural heritage. This paper explores how the ancient Chinese classic became transformed into part of popular culture, found in folk songs circulated in Fangxian county, a mountainous location in Hubei province in central mainland China. It is the hometown of one of the most well-known authors of The Classic of Poetry, whose name is Yin Jifu. Local villagers process, refine, and recreate these poems into popular folk songs, which have been handed down from generation to generation. The folk songs based on The Classic of Poetry vividly reflect local customs, life styles, and various cultural activities. After thousands of years of singing these traditional songs, the region has become an important area to maintain part of Chinese cultural heritages; here, the original high culture is converted into a popular culture that is absorbed into people's daily life. Based on a year's field research and many interviews with local singers, this paper explores the ways in which locals have transformed the contents of The Classic of Poetry. It examines how today these popular folk songs become part of much-treasured culture heritage, illustrating the transformation of traditional high culture into popular culture. The paper argues that the modern adaptations of the traditional poems of The Classic of Poetry combine both oral and written cultural heritage and reflects the interaction between ancient Chinese official literature and folk literature. The paper also explores the reasons why the folk songs of The Classic of Poetry are so popular in the area, including the influences of its author Yin Jifu, the impact of ancient diasporic culture from the political centre to remote rural areas, and the interactions of local cultures (famous as Chu culture) and Chinese mainstream cultural policies.

Keywords : high/low culture, The Classic of Poetry, the functions of media, cultural policy

Conference Title : ICMFCS 2020 : International Conference on Media, Film and Cultural Studies

Conference Location : Amsterdam, Netherlands

Conference Dates : May 14-15, 2020