REPORT FROM CONFERENCE ON “FOLK TRADITIONS IN MODERN SOCIETY”

Last chance to save Chinese folk culture

The next 10 years are crucial for folklorists if the rich material of Chinese folk traditions should not be forgotten and disappear. Academics from Europe and China met to discuss that and more as University of Turku (Finland) held conference about “Folk Traditions in Modern Society” at Nordic Centre, Fudan University, Shanghai.

By Toke Christensen, Freelance Journalist, Shanghai

He sits a bit uneasy in his chair, and by the intense look in his eyes you can tell that he is anxious about his work. Yin Hu-bin, senior research fellow from Institute of Ethnic Literature at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has no time to waste.

“In the Central part of China it is already too late. Folklore material has already disappeared. But in other parts, like the Xinjiang province, there are still living oral traditions, in form of epic singers for example. The next 10 years will be the last chance for Chinese scholars to collect this material of oral traditions. It can disappear very fast”, says Yin Hu-bin.

He refers to the fast Chinese modernisation and urbanization as the main reasons why the collection of folklore material in China needs to be intensified. However, China needs help in carrying out this task. The country does not have the same academic folklore tradition as Nordic countries where there is a long standing practice in the field.

“We need real professionals, not just common people with an interest in the field. We have examples of novels being rewritten by the collectors - first hand material being changed, so it becomes literate work instead of original documents. We have many examples of this. It is useless.”

Conference is the first step

It is not only folklorists who can benefit from the collection of Chinese tradition material. With Chinas growing global influence, it is necessary for other countries to know more about Chinese culture and traditions to create better contact with the Chinese people. Therefore this conference is only a springboard to further Sino-Nordic cooperation within this research area.

“I hope that this conference can help create some long lasting connections between universities in China and the Nordic countries. We are just getting started, and I see this conference as a first step to create some kind of network and a platform for arranging workshops like this one”, says Pekka Hakamies, professor of folkloristics, University of Turku and main organizer of the event at Nordic Centre, Fudan University.

Keynote speaker at the conference, Barbro Klein, agrees that more Sino-Nordic workshops are needed in the future.
“I think that if there is one thing lacking in the current exchanges between China and the Nordic countries, then it would be knowledge about cultural and linguistic issues. The current form of economic cooperation is fine, but it is also a very superficial exchange of ideas. You are constantly going to misunderstand each other, if you do not understand what each worlds regard as their important cultures. Not just what business leaders and political leaders regard as important cultures, but also how the common people regard these things”, says Barbro Klein, professor of ethnology, Swedish Collegium of Advanced Study, Uppsala.

Folklore studies crucial for human survival
The rapid development and modernisation in China may be overwhelming to some traditional cultures and its peoples who may feel their lives changing from day to day. Barbro Klein emphasizes that the outer world has a responsibility to protect these kinds of cultural heritage.

“Folk culture would not only be comforting to some people, but also give a sense of security in very fast moving changes. Old stories are not to be thought of as silly, in fact they are important. They can give you a sense of security and a sense of who you are - a sense of self”, she says.

As mentioned above, China has an obvious interest in learning about Nordic folklore methodologies and scientific studies, but at the same time, the Nordic countries and its people can also, according to Barbro Klein, benefit from increased knowledge about China’s folklore traditions:

“You can always benefit from studying any other world far away from your own. When it comes to China there are so many people, so many regions and so many languages. Just the insight and the realisation from Nordic people that a world so huge, and in a way incomprehensible, can be made comprehensible, is important. That kind of knowledge is crucial for human survival.”

Background Information
The conference ‘Folk traditions in Modern Society’ was held at the Nordic Centre, Fudan University, 25-26 September 2009. It was organized by the Kalevala Institute at Turku University.

As a prelude to the conference, an exhibition of the Finnish epic Kalevala was held at the Student Plaza at Fudan University.

The conference was funded by the Nordic Centre and the Kalevala Institute, Turku University.

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