

Applying Big Data to Study Popular Folk Culture in Literary Canons

Mei Dong

English Department
Sichuan Agricultural University
Ya'an, China 625014

Abstract—Learning about culture is an important thing in this fast developing world with more and more communications between members inside. For the official part of culture, it is not difficult to get the needed information; but for the folk part, which is even more important for it agrees more with real life, it's quite difficult as there's usual neglect and no systematic recording. Literary works are the best transmission medium of culture. As collection of history and time-tested literary works, literary canons offer an efficient way for tracing information and learning about folk culture. Even though the study of culture is narrowed down to the folk culture in literary canons, it still covers a large scope and contains quite a lot of information. At this critical moment, applying big data into the analysis and studying of folk culture in literary canons would be quite a wise choice.

Keywords—folk culture; Canons; big data; literature

I. INTRODUCTION

In this fast-developing information age, digital technologies go deep into human life and lead to changes everywhere. As a well-known carrier of human civilization, culture always catches the eyes of all. Whether culture develops well or not and whether people can understand it well or not will surely influence others around. With both of their fast development, it's no doubt that there would be some unavoidable connection between them.

Culture is generally about a set of rules, ideas and conceptions drawn from a long term self-experience of a certain group, which is concerned with all aspects of human life and which is never an individual property. According to who the specific culture is concerned with, culture is usually divided into those serious ones closely related with the official and the relatively informal ones concerned with the crowd, generally called as the "high/official culture" and the "popular culture" respectively. In fact, there's not a clear separation between them, for too many subjective factors are concerned. It's a commonsense that the more subjectivity is concerned with, the less precise a thing would be. With change of time, the official culture and the popular culture are exchangeable. While in a certain period of time, the official one is usually connected with a small group. For those who are new to a culture, learning about the official part is more effective. While for those who want to understand it more specifically and accurately, the popular

part counts for much more. Popular culture "is simply culture that widely favored or well-liked by many people".[1](P5) What is more true to life would be the ones belonging to the crowd instead of the few in controlling, knowing popular culture is a better way to understand a new group.

There's not a strict division between the official culture and the popular one. With time progressing, certain popular culture could be singled out and set up as representation and even model for the whole culture. However, generally speaking, being popular contains more the sense of being casual and it is more agreeable with ordinary life. A typical example of popular culture is the part named folk culture. Just as what the name indicates, "folk culture" belongs to a certain group, folk, usually a group of ordinary civilians with its exclusive characteristics. Part of folk culture would also be set up as official culture, but for its core part, folk culture is generalized as an important part of popular culture. "Being popular" emphasizes that the concerned culture should be connected with a large group instead of a small one, even though it could be the elite group. While "being folk" means that the concerned culture is usually connected with a specific group, "folk", though it also indicates that no matter how the culture is divided, it never belongs to any single individual but a collective group. Thus folk culture shows a much stronger civilian touch for it is connected with specific groups accumulated together for some similarities, no matter it is about ethnicity, religion, hierarchy or something else. Then, to learn about a new culture, folk culture accesses the reality more and it is a better reflection of the whole culture.

However, even though the culture is narrowed down to the folk part, it also covers a lot. Especially when such big countries as China, America or others are concerned, there would surely be lots of different groups who hold their own likes and dislikes, thus forming different cultures of their own. It could never be possible for any single group, not to speak of any single individual, to get all information related with a specific folk culture. Then, canons come out at this urgent moment as a rescuer. There are artistic factors that are main components of the canons, but what canons really do is to reflect the real life and actual historic events, thus tracing folk culture in canons could be a relatively more precise shortcut for learning a new culture. With the development of the society, if big data could be applied here for it goes to any corner of the world, it's sure that a more detailed,

reliable and meaningful record of folk culture could be established and then benefit both those who are interested in it and who want to inherit and even pass it on.

II. FOLK CULTURE IN THE CANONS

While talking about carnival, Bakhtin says that “Actually, the official feast looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present...it asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial...”[2](P9) Carnival is a popular festival to overthrow the controlling of the official for the moment. Though it would just last for a short time, it shows the contrast between the official and the popular quite clearly. The official cares more about the “stable, unchanging”, but which just occupies a quite small part in real life. “Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it... During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom...”[2](P7) Carnival offers the chance to let the light of “second life” out, showing people the charm of the civil life, that is where the folk plays the important role and where popular culture, especially folk culture originates.

Kevin V. Mulcaby says that “an official culture is a body of artistic correctness by the state or the ruling party.”[3](P70) Compared with the official one, folk culture reflects the true life more concretely and accurately. Knowledge about folk culture will surely lead to a better understanding of a new culture. Only when a culture is well understood, can it be accepted and last for a longer time. Antonio Gramsci says that “Every social group, coining into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, originally, one or more strata of intellectuals...”[4](P70) Different people will form different cultures according to their different experiences, values and thoughts, and so, there are different cultures.

Facing new culture, people seldom have trouble getting the general idea for there's always official information. But for the part directly related with civilian's ordinary life, that is, folk culture, the problems arise now and then. Compared with experiencing and drawing conclusions by oneself on all culture, just learning folk culture is an easier task for people before all the preparation has been done officially. However, folk culture comes out from human beings' ordinary life and usually it is neglected, if not completely, at least partly. At the same time, folk culture covers every aspect of their ordinary life, from the colors a group likes to the values it holds. People who come to folk culture for different purposes need information focusing on different perspectives. Since the information concerned with most folk culture is not systematically gathered and it's impossible for people to go through all information available, even though they would experience the life and draw conclusions themselves. Then when it's really in need, there would not be a high possibility to get help from the outside, but it doesn't mean there's no possibility at all. In this critical moment, the significance of literary canons shows up.

Culture is a transmitter of civilization and literature is a transmitter of culture. Any culture would be set up after a long time and then it would be passed on for years. Even for those who draw the conclusions from their own experiences, what they show later would be different from what they really feel at that right moment, not to say for those who will succeed and inherit others' experience and conclusions — there are full of changes for time, conditions and nothing would be the same as before. Though it is said that for thousands of different readers, there would be thousands of different Hamlets, compared with other forms of inheritance, pictures and written words would be more reliable and agree more with the reality. Literature is a kind of record in written forms, which offers a good way for culture learners who want to know more about the past.

There's difference between reality and literature, even documentary and historic works would agree more with reality, but written works accepted by people and lasting long are mostly kept as literary works. The part of culture accumulated as official culture is usually selected out and organized together, but the folk part just scatters about. Even just gathering the information would be complicated, judging which part of the information is strictly agreeable with reality and which part is more for a literary purpose would be much more difficult. Even so, tracing folk culture in literature is a more suitable choice because information in oral or other invisible forms can't keep their initiative images, meanings or even forms so well as the written works for the special endurance of visible words and pictures. Then when it comes closer and closer to the conclusion that literary works are quite beneficial to the pursuit of a new culture, another problem arises; that is to say, literature is also connected with such a large scope, whether it is contradictory to the original purpose of going to literature for tracing folk culture because it covers so much? In fact, if all literary works were to be considered, it would mean no solving of the problem to a great degree, but when it is limited to the classical works, the canons, the problem is actually solved.

As is known to all, literature is reflection of the outside world through the texts by the author and it refers to the readers. The most important point here is that it contains factors concerned with humanity. If they are just stories without any decoration or frank description of the physical surroundings, they could not be called literature. Literature goes beyond real life for its unique features caused by literary effects, perhaps for special adoption of words, style of narration and unusual imagination etc., but basically, literature is also closely related with life itself. No one can write a work totally not connected with his own life experience. Everyone can write something and all work reflect more or less the culture of the concerned ones, but not every work can be accepted by large numbers of readers and even be passed on. However, literary canons can.

Literary canons refer to great classical literary works that have lasted for a long time but still been attractive and acceptable. Just as what Harold Bloom says, “Canons...which are instruments of survival built to be time-proof, not reason-proof, are of course deconstructible.”[5](P3)

Establishing canons is a repeated evaluation and choice. Nothing tedious or meaningless would be accepted by human. While people make choices among so many works, what attract them would be their originality and intimacy, which keeps the works on the shelf of canons forever. Being original means that elements mentioned are not so much mentioned by others, which would be precious for latter generations' study. Being intimate means that what is in the works has gone through the test of the time and the readers and it has been proved meaningful, thus causing the readers' resonance. Then though it would be difficult to gather information about folk culture together, as long as the work is done, the gathered information would be quite fresh, reliable and enduring. Go to canons to trace the information of folk culture, gather them together, then even what disappears nowadays may be rediscovered for written words are really more enduring than all other forms, spoken language included. There's one higher security for the meaningfulness of the materials from the canons for nothing can be contained in the canons without agreement from the majority of people.

III. BIG DATA AND FOLK CULTURE IN THE CANONS

What develops fastest in the society is nothing else but digital technologies. No more examples than PC can be illustrated as a proof for the popularity and influence of digital technologies. It's no doubt that the basis for all the applications of digital technologies is the internet itself. And the operation of internet is totally based on data transcribed before. Data the conception appears together with the emergence of computer. Only with the transmission of data through internet by all users of computer, can all information run quickly around the world. Data before would be concerned with a relatively smaller number. But now, groups of data make up a new situation for the wide spreading application of digital techniques. It has already entered an age of big data. Big data could be simply understood as a collection of various databases while database is an accumulating space for various data. Without special skills and strategies, it's really difficult to take a good control of it. However, since so many people are willing to devote all to advancing it, big data has always been on the way of bringing benefits. It is commonly agreed that big data becomes popular with effort of John Mashy in the 1990s and develops on the basis of the existing database. Gartner says that "Big Data is high-volume, high-velocity and/or high-variety information assets that demand cost-effective, innovative forms of information processing that enable enhanced insight, decision making, and process automation." [6] Big data is so innovative that even if it is put into studying folk culture in literary canons, it would surely break a new ground for researches on culture.

For all human beings, study and inheritance of culture is one of the most meaningful and essential businesses. It's easy to get data concerned with the official part, but there's a totally different situation for the folk part, but even the folk part also contains so much, then comes the help of literary canons. But still there's a quite broad scale. Literary canons go through the test of a long history, it is related with life and

experience of every individual. What's more, the factors related with folk culture usually scatter around there in the works without systematic association. Then, so many problems as "how to face a sea of data concerned in the canons, how to list them systematically, how to make a judgement on the value of these data" naturally arise, that is where the internet and big data will show their significant implications.

Big data is formed as a natural result of the development of all digital technologies. There is full of information about human beings' life, thoughts, actions, experiences and so on. Even though just a small part is recorded, it would be a big number. Before the popularity of internet and computer, people keep and inherit them in oral or written words, and then now with these new technologies, they are typed in texts and shown on the screen. When so much information is kept in data form and maintained in the "soft" areas, big data appears. Then, it's easy to understand what Gartner says about big data now, that is, big data is born with the features of being "high-volume, high-velocity and/or high-variety". [6] Just as culture, big data contains so much and it is not simple for any single individual, but there's also a great difference between them. That is, big data is more concrete for its being analyzed and summarized with exact forms while culture is totally abstract. Thus, the bridge between them is the work to sort out what abstract cultural connotations those concrete data contain. Quite a lot digital humanists have already done these works since the middle of last century, led by Father Roberto Busa and others' "focusing computing in the humanities". [6] (PXXIII)

Big data is shown to most people as information on PCs through the internet. As far as literary works are concerned, the fundamental way to get the needed data is reading. And then, during the process of reading, the greatest difference between getting information on screen and those on paper is that reading online can be a parallel simultaneous work while reading in paper can't. So many works are collected as canons. Traditional ways to read through all the works and collecting information can't work well for common researches are related with so many data but they are also carried out by limited hands. No one can finish reading all the books no matter how hard one tries. Up till now, most canons have been put into E-forms. Going through the internet, scanning all the data with the help of searching tools, the data needed can be got more quickly in large numbers.

Of course, it's easier and faster to get information online, but there's such a big number of data offered by computer users. While searching information by reading books, what they collect and gather are directly related with their own reading, feeling and thinking and all the information they get are first-hand ones. Therefore, the information one gets would be quite accurate and answer his/her needs well. By contrast, since there are too many data online, one can only get the information with the help of others, usually the searching tools. No matter how fast the technologies develop, the first step of setting up a system could only be done by human designers. What they design is necessarily influenced by his own interests, his experience and so on. The more agreeable between the one researching and the one designing,

the more accurate the obtained data would be. Let's say, even the quite simply-sounded process of choosing the key words for the searching tool is not such easy as expected, not to say those more complicated processes.

The best way to solve a problem is to find a way to promote the advantages and avoid the disadvantages. While people are deciding to make use of big data online, they should gather together and integrate their needs, opinions and suggestions, thus setting up a reliable plan to guide the further research as well as pave the way for checking again the obtained data. Leaving the traditional way to get information from big data goes together with the fashion and saves time and energy. The plan before and after the retrieving of data saves the trouble led by some unavoidable disagreement between the data transcriber and the data gainer. It also holds true for those ones who want to get information about folk culture in the canons with application of big data.

Applying big data to study folk culture in literary canons complies completely with the rules mentioned above. Literary canons are usually works quite long. Not to say finish reading all the works, even reading through one work would be a heavy task. Even just for a book, when one reaches the end, forgetting the details before is such a common thing. Then, how can one remember necessary information in detail. Going to the internet, making use of those data offered on it, would be a quite good solution. As long as the reader remembers the general idea and grasp well the "key words", retrieving the needed data with the help of searching tools in a relatively confined big data scope would be fruitful. The decision about what kind of information is needed and which key words should be chosen would be the first important step. Then when the information is obtained and organized, a long list of data would be formed. According to different criteria, these data can be divided into different groups and set up as several database, thus leading to a new big data system. Because big data is not only concerned with two or three limited information, the evaluation of the value and reliability of the data obtained is not simple. Learning more clearly about the object, analyzing the information concerned with the help of big data will surely lead to a better conclusion benefiting those who are studying such abstract thing covering so large a scale as folk culture.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this fast developing world, it's quite common for people to learn about a new culture, among which, the learning of the folk part would be quite meaningful and significant, but also quite profound and abstract. Folk culture agrees more to ordinary people's common life, but it is also the part of culture that is usually neglected without a systematic recording. Literature is a good carrier of culture, and the excellent literary works in human beings' history are usually collected in literary canons. Making use of canons to get information for folk culture is quite reliable and efficient. Even so, quite a large number of data will also be concerned, and make use of internet; especially the big data, both for gathering information and analyzing the data, will be the best

way to solve the problem of learning about folk culture up till now.

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