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NEW YORK FOLKLORE  
129 Jay Street  
Schenectady, NY 12305  
518/346-7008  
Fax 518/346-6617  
Email: [info@nyfolklore.org](mailto:info@nyfolklore.org)  
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# Transcendence: Making Meaning with American Public Folklore Diplomacy Programming in Nanjing, China

*Dedicated to Dr. Edward Guiliano, NYIT President and CEO*

BY BEVERLY BUTCHER, PhD, WITH LI JINKE AND XU JIAYI

“Folksongs as Regulators of Politics,” by Betty Wang (1965) in *The Study of Folklore*, edited by my mentor Alan Dundes, served as my introduction to Chinese folklore when a graduate student in the folklore program at the University of California at Berkeley from 1979–82. From that article, I learned, for example, that during different periods of history, the Emperor of China had sent officials out into different regions of the country to collect folk songs in order to understand how well he was governing from the point of view of the people, as expressed in these narratives (Wang, 308–14).

Approximately 35 years later, at the New York Institute of Technology (NYIT) and

the Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications (NUPT) Overseas Education Program, my undergraduate students, other students, professors, administrators, and a few members of the public had the opportunity to learn about the thoughts and feelings—or worldviews—of regional groups of Americans, as expressed in their folklore not only through assigned course readings—for my students—but also through the Public Folklore Diplomacy Programming that occurred in one of the original 12 American Culture Centers in China, funded by the US Department of State, on our campus. In the NYIT Center for Humanities and Culture at NUPT

(CHC), Teaching Building One, Room 207, we as Americans were granted permission by the Chinese government, through our partner institution, to explore the folklore of specific regions of the United States by bringing folk artists, folklorists, and other scholars of folklore to this space.

As a result, *Cultures of the American Gulf Coast: Work and Play through Story and Song from Louisiana to Florida* brought Dr. Nick Spitzer, folklorist and NPR “American Routes” founder and host, as well as Tulane University professor and co-editor of *Public Folklore* with Robert Baron (2007), along with folklorist Josh Kohn, to Nanjing during the 2013–14 academic year. Their entourage included the Louisiana-based Cajun musicians Jesse Lége, Joel Savoy, and the Cajun Country Revival; Cajun filmmaker and University of Louisiana folklorist Connie Castille; and sacred steel guitar musicians, The Campbell Brothers. Independent scholar Sandra Parks also joined them and spoke on the work of Florida folklorist, social activist, and author of *The Klan Unmasked* (2011), Stetson Kennedy. Finally, a “Woody Sez: The Life & Music of Woody Guthrie” performance was offered.

In 2014–15 *Folk Arts of New York State* were highlighted in this American Culture Center. Harvard-trained sociologist and NYIT Campus Dean Dr. Monique Taylor spoke on “Changing Foodways in Gentry-

**ALEX TORRES  
AND HIS LATIN ORCHESTRA**

“...I have never seen an act that so accurately reflects a culture’s music and yet targets a mainstream audience, combining education with exciting environment.”  
—Larl S. Brunig, *The Chronicle*, Pennsylvania

**March 16** Perform the following musical traditions:  
Dominican Republic “Merengue,”  
Puerto Rican “Plena,”  
Cuban “Son” and more.

Speak with the students and other members of the audience. Describe how these forms of music impacted the Latino and other ethnic groups in New York City.

**March 17**

Alex Torres and His Latin Orchestra poster. All New York posters by former CHC assistant Zhu Ruida, presently a student in Northwestern University’s MS in Leadership for Creative Enterprises Program.



Frank London and Lisa Gukin of The Klezmatics informally discuss similarities between klezmer music and that of Chinese folk music with Chinese student musicians, CHC, April 10, 2015. All photos by Beverly Butcher unless otherwise noted.

fyng Harlem,” and MIT Professor Christopher Dewart lectured on “From Shaker to IKEA,” A Folk Arts of New York State Lecture on Furniture Making.” New York Folklore Society Director Dr. Ellen McHale offered a presentation on her book *Stable Views: Voices and Stories of the Thoroughbred Racetrack* (2015). In addition, Goucher College Cultural Sustainability faculty member Dr. Robert Baron presented on “Folklore and Cultural Tourism.” The world class Klezmer band, The Klezmatics—whose performance included songs from their 2006 CD, *Wonder Wheel*, with music put to Woody Guthrie lyrics—and the award-winning Amsterdam, New York-based Alex Torres and his Latin Orchestra were also brought to China through one of the two US Embassy Beijing \$50,000 Supplemental Grants awarded to NYIT for this folklore programming.

What is the effectiveness of such folklore programming in an Overseas Education Program in China? What purpose has it served? Who has gained what from these outstanding performances and lectures? Of

what lasting value will the experience of these two programs have? As Stephen D. Winick asked in the conclusion of his piece on “Folklore and/in Music”: “What does this mean?” (Winick 2014, 480).

In an effort to answer this question as a folklorist, professor, and the director of the former NYIT Center for Humanities and Culture at NUPT, now known as the NYIT–NUPU Campus Commons, the two former Student Associate Directors Li Jinke and Xu Jiayi and I created two surveys to be completed by 22 other former student assistants who worked in the Center during the years under consideration. We sent the surveys via email to the students, many of whom are now in top graduate school in the US, China, or Europe or working full-time in any of these locations. We also sent a request for NYIT and NUPU administrators and professors who attended any of the folklore programming to review my annual grant reports, as well as *Cultures of the American Gulf Coast* and *Folk Arts of New York State Literature and Folklore* course syllabi (which had also been sent to the assistants),

in addition to the two surveys before providing any feedback they wanted to share with us. Additionally, we made this request of all of our programming participants. Finally, we asked for feedback from Dr. Jennifer Tarlin, then director of the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology (USST)—University of North Dakota (UND) American Culture Center with regard to our shared folklore programming during these years. We received 21 responses to our inquiries.

Prior to sharing our findings, I would like to provide a bit more of the context in which the *Cultures of the American Gulf Coast* and *Folk Arts of New York State* programming occurred and some of my relevant history which brought me to be director of this programming in China. In one of those institutions of higher learning—that is, Institutes of Technology—described by cultural critic University of Pennsylvania English Professor Wendy Steiner as being likely to “become increasingly central to cultural education in the future” due to the fact that interactivity through the internet and



The Campbell Brothers perform during informal session with audience, CHC, May 15, 2015. Student Associate Director Huang Wei (2015–16), “American Routes” host Nick Spitzer, and accompanying musician Cao Jiawang (Guangzhou Xinghai Conservatory of Music) on left.

mass media are “the central thrust of contemporary culture” (Wendy Steiner, pers. comm.)—the New York Institute of Technology (NYIT)—and a highly esteemed second tier university in China, the Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications (NUPT)—formed the extremely successful joint Overseas Education Program in 2007. Three hundred Chinese students a year, primarily from China’s educational capital Jiangsu Province, where Nanjing is located, enter our program and four years later receive undergraduate degrees from each university, after having spent their fourth year in New York (a three-plus-one program).

In regard to my part of the story, my first experience with an “intimate, authentic encounter with the other,” a Robert Cantwell phrase (1993, 274), through the “gift” (Cantwell 2007, 303) of the sharing of Chinese folklore by my students—as opposed to reading about the academic discipline of Chinese folklore studies for my professor—occurred during the years 1982–84 in Hsin Chu, Taiwan, where I had gone to teach English as a Second Language after having earned my master’s degree in folklore. The re-contextualization of the folklore narration shared with me in the classroom or on the back of a motorcycle driving up a

small mountain to a temple in Taiwan during those years, as well as during 1997–98 in Chungli, Taiwan, changed my future. I wrote my University of Pennsylvania dissertation, later published as a book, on Chinese and Chinese American ancestor veneration

in the Catholic Church (Butcher 1994; 2010), as a result of these Taiwan years. My year of teaching American folklore and literature at USST—coincidentally—from 1986–87, when I had the opportunity to personally learn how revered Alan Dundes (1934–2005) was among Shanghai folklorists and his Chinese folklore studies counterpart, the honorable Beijing-based Zhong Jingwen (1903–2002), did as well (Butcher 1990, 54; Liu 2014, 192; Kang, Baron, and Wang 2014, 267).

In my case, I came to the folk, and the folk shared with me, for the most part, in a non-traditional setting. In the case of my students and of others at NYIT–NUPT Nanjing, Room 207, for the most part, served as the non-traditional setting where the various folk under consideration came to them, and where the attempted application of Public Folklore Diplomacy “to an ‘audience’ in a new setting in an honest way that accurately conveys its meaning” occurred, to use Richard Kurin’s words pertaining to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (Kurin 1997, 23).



**NYIT**  
 NYIT Center for Humanities  
 and Culture at NUPT

**“Changing Foodways  
 in  
 Gentrifying Harlem”**

Presented by Monique Taylor, Ph.D.  
 Executive Director for NYIT China Programs  
 Campus Dean, Nanjing

Thursday, November 13th, 12:20-13:30 p.m.  
 Teaching Building 1, 207

**All are welcome!**

NYIT Campus Dean, Dr. Monique Taylor lectures on “Changing Foodways in Gentrifying Harlem,” based on her fieldwork, November 13, 2014. Photo taken by a CHC assistant Zhu Ruida, courtesy of the author. “Changing Foodways in Gentrifying Harlem” poster.

Former CHC Assistant Yin Xin indicates in her narrative response to the survey questions evaluating the effectiveness of *Cultures of the American Gulf Coast* programming that prior to her experience of these events, she felt that “American culture was a blur picture” while Zhu Ruida maintains that she learned, “American culture is not just all about modern civilization and technology. There are more mysterious parts about... nature and traditions” (Yin Xin, pers. comm.; Zhu Ruida, pers. comm.). My observation over the years has been that Chinese students are typically educated about major historical events in American history, but not geography. Robert Baron concurs in his narrative response to our request for *Folk Arts of New York State* programming feedback, in which he states that although Chinese students are well informed about American popular culture and “enjoy our fast food, they have a limited understanding of regional variations and traditional cultures in the United States” (Robert Baron, pers. comm.). Both the *Cultures of the American Gulf Coast* and *Folk Arts of New York* programming served to rectify this situation for our students and others. Yin Xin states,

Our [C]enter brings concerts, film events, scholar speeches to people in Nanjing, and let[s] them feel, hear and think about American culture. Besides, discussions after those events among people from different background[s] (Chinese and American students and international professors) deepened their understanding...It was a pleasure for us to enjoy the time. We were relaxed in the music and the stories...it was meaningful in the way that it makes us to think about things behind the events, such as cultural differences...it served as a platform for us to make more friends. (Yin Xin, pers. comm.)

Indeed the formation of friendships in the Center during our presentation of the folklore programming is a repeated mantra throughout the narrative responses. In the process of developing friendships, preconceived notions about the other were either changed or affirmed while positive experiences were shared. Yang Zheyu states, “I

thought America was a perfect place and people there might feel superior to others before, but when I got a close look, I found that most Americans are very nice just like everywhere else, and there are also many problems in this country and it is still not perfect” (Yang Zheyu, pers. comm.). Jing Yifei shares, “I love the Ellen McHale [presentation]...in regard to her experience with

only remaining dread that the black[s] are danger[ous] or offensive[, a] kind of stereotype in most Chinese mind[s]. Actually, they are awesome and talented, creative” (Anonymous, pers. comm.). Another assistant who evaluated the New York State programming described the ACC in general. Jin Yifei writes, “So when compared to other student associations on the campus,



Jese Lége, Joel Savoy, and the Cajun Country Revival bass player Nadine Landry teaches CHC assistant Meng Xiang-lei the two-step while “American Routes” Nick Spitzer and Cajun filmmaker Connie Castille teach other students and faculty, Administrative Building Auditorium, NUPT, April 10, 2015.

the study of racetrack folklore...fascinating stories behind the scenes attracted us much. This lecture provided us with a chance to take a glimpse of American hardships [in] a certain walk of life, which is exactly what we crave since we’d better know the states [more] roundly” (Jing Yifei, pers. comm.). And Wang Shuai responds, “Since I [have] worked for the ACC [American Culture Center], it... [no longer means just a] wonderful indoor condition, nice western food, dessert and fluent English anymore ... [rather, this place gives] ... me a sense of belonging[.] our members...[are] a team...” (Wang Shuai, pers. comm.). An anonymous assistant has learned, “...Each person should be respected. The brilliant concert performed by The Campbell Brothers impressed me the most which eliminate[d] the

the ACC is undoubtedly more efficient and attractive and meaningful. Being efficient may be an important element in American culture because it sounds so ‘American,’ which I barely experienced before” (Jing Yifei, pers. comm.). Yin Xin shares that she was surprised to learn that listening to the “church music” of The Campbell Brothers could have meaning to her life as an atheist. She states, “I was a little doubtful...before I went to [a] religious concert. But when I was there, I enjoyed it and found resonance” (Yin Xin, pers. comm.).

Both Yang Shuyuan and Jing Yifei comment on the meaningfulness of spending time with the Klezmatiks, especially on their tour of Xuan Wu Lake, the Nanjing Wall, and Jiming Temple. Shuyuan remembers the band “intently listening and observing

the Buddhis[t] chanting in Jiming Temple.” He adds, “Since I guided several groups of people...around the archaic part of the city, I [found] these pros, unexceptionally, marveled at how...Nanjing and China differ from their original understandings” (Yang Shuyuan, pers. comm.). These words echo those of Ellen McHale who also finds she had misconceptions of China prior her visit (Ellen McHale, pers. comm.). Yifei comments on how he heard the Klezmatics sing during the tour: “They are kind and easy going, and they love much from their deep heart.” He continues, “It was magical to witness their daily life and talks before they gave a show and shone. Also, they are professional in that they composed and practiced their songs again and again when walking and chatting” (Jing Yifei, pers. comm.).

their meanings and they ours” (Spitzer 2007, 99).

The students and other audience members were the most joyful—exuberant, really—during events in which they had opportunities to participate in folk music traditions as they were being introduced, such as the playing of their *erhu*, *pipa*, *bulusi*, and *guzheng* with the Cajuns, or their violins with the Klezmatics, or dancing with or before the performers—the two-step in the case of the Cajuns and traditional wedding dances with the Klezmatics. In addition, perceiving parallels between the American and Chinese traditions for the first time were found to be illuminative experiences: an NYIT professor (Butcher 1989, 1) sharing that she had collected the Chinese folksong “Liang Lao-hu” or “Two Little Tigers” in Philadelphia

chant the group heard at the Jiming Temple is analogous to the repetition of sounds found in klezmer music (Butcher and Mitchell 2015, 9). NYIT Professor Sumiao Li, who earned her PhD in the US, but grew up in China, shares her experience along these lines: “...I remember asking the musicians if those often repeated sounds had special meanings, and after being told they were just vocals, I remember feeling amazed how people from very different corners of the world would use similar sounds to voice feelings, feelings that could never be fully captured by words maybe, feelings that were probably more similar than different, if we did not try to use complicated ideologies to differentiate and thus hierarchize you and me, us and them, citizens and foreigners...” (Sumiao Li, pers. comm.).

In response to Stephen D. Winick’s (2014, 480) question, “What does this mean?” I offer the following conclusions: transcending difference to the extent to which all in the room become one through the sheer joy of the experience of the traditional or tradition-based music is perhaps the highest, most meaningful point of magic realized though the folklore programming during these years 2013–15. The uplifting transformative “dialogic” and “emergent” experiences of all present—which made those moments possible with the Power-Point presentations followed by Q&A, exchanges with and without dancing, where who is the guest and who is the audience becomes “a blur picture”—only in a good sense—could only help prepare our students for their fourth year at NYIT New York and for graduate schools they now attend in the US—the University of Pennsylvania, University of Southern California, Dartmouth, Massachusetts College for Art & Design—as well as in Europe and elsewhere (Bowman 2006, 67; Baron, 2016a, 4; Baron 2016b, 14; Yin Xin, pers. comm.); and for their first full-time jobs, as well as provide preparation for “better and deeper thinking in [a] global cultural system” (Sun Rui, pers. comm.).

The evidence provided by the responses to our surveys, and by my observations, il-



Dr. Ellen McHale, executive director of the New York Folklore Society, lectures on the occupational folklore of horseracing as described in her book *STABLE VIEWS: Voices and Stories from the Thoroughbred Racetrack* (2014), CHC, March 23, 2015. Photo taken by a CHC assistant, courtesy of the author.

Comparatively, “love” and “magic” are two words used by folklorist Robert Cantwell to describe the highest points of communication through folklore (Cantwell 2007, 303; 1994, 180), while another, Debora Kodish, maintains, “Folklore is best when it is practiced with a full and loving heart...” (Kodish 2014, 588). Our students naturally discern such qualities when provided with the opportunity to engage in “cultural conversation” where “we learn

prompted Yang Shuyuan to exclaim, “I recall how amazed Professor... [said she] was when she knew the nursery rhyme ‘Frère Jacques’ [had] a Chinese counterpart...” (Yang Shuyuan, pers. comm.).

Other enriching comparisons were made as well: Cajun musician Joel Savoy informed the audience that the “ancestor” of the fiddle/violin was originally from China (Butcher and Mitchell 2014, 12); the Klezmatics’ Frank Young mentioned that the Buddhist



“American Routes” Nick Spitzer records jam session of Jesse Lége, Joel Savoy, and the Cajun Country Revival with Chinese students playing the *erhu*, *pipa*, *hulusi* and *guzheng*, which inspired Dr. Spitzer to exclaim, “That’s the best jam we’ve had since we’ve been in China!” CHC, April 11, 2015.

illustrate that the CHC, in general during these years, and the folklore programming, in particular, provided a platform where students and others could gain insight into a variety of American worldviews by learning about Louisiana, Florida, and New York regional variations and traditional culture. This place and the programming here were also found to empower these individuals and others to form international friendships and strengthen those at home, perhaps by participating in newly introduced American folk music traditions and/or by perceiving parallels between American and Chinese vernacular culture for the first time. At least two students have chosen to include folklore as part of the focus of their future careers: Communication Arts graduate Chen Tianchen plans to “promote communication among different cultures” while Zhu Ruida, our devoted poster-maker, hopes to use “media to bring culture and folklore of each place to the world” (Chen Tianchen and Zhu Ruida, pers. comm.).

For what more can we as folklorists ask? Alan Dundes, though an armchair scholar himself and a self-proclaimed “missionary of folklore studies”—a phrase he shared with me about himself shortly before his passing—would likely be overjoyed to learn of the ability of an American Culture Center’s Public Folklore Diplomacy Programming in Nanjing, China, to ignite and inspire students and others to carry his torch, a torch which can only serve to enhance international understanding and world peace, as folklore converts making friends, creating an “authentic future,” writing their unfinished stories (Baron and Spitzer 2007, xiii).

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Beverly J. Butcher, PhD, is a multicultural interdisciplinary scholar (BA, English; MA, Folklore, UC Berkeley; PhD, University of Pennsylvania, Folklore and Folklife) and former NYSCA Schoharie County Arts Council folklorist (1999–2003). She is the author of *Chinese and Chinese American Ancestor Veneration in the Catholic Church, 635, A.D. to the Present* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), as well as of a number of folklore-related articles, mainly with a focus on the Chinese diaspora and Pacific Islander Americans. Beverly serves as Editorial Board Member for *CHINESE AMERICA: History & Perspectives*, *THE JOURNAL OF THE CHINESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA*. She is Associate Professor of English, English Department Chair, and Director of the NYIT-NUPT Campus Commons (the former NYIT Center for Humanities and Culture at NUPT), Nanjing.

# Folklore And Cultural Tourism

Presented by Robert Baron, Ph.D.,  
New York State Council on the Arts  
and Goucher College



May 14, 2015, 12:30–1:30 pm, Teaching Building One, 207

NYIT Center for Humanities and Culture at NUPT

9 Wenyuan Rd., Xianlin Nanjing, China 210046  
Contact Number: 1891522218

“Folklore and Cultural Tourism” poster.



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