Living with Ghosts in Contemporary Society: A Sociological Study of Modern Folktales in China

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Modern folktales have not been considered a subject of study in conventional folklore studies or folk literature studies. The reasons for this include the fact that modern folktales are thought to have moved away from traditional folk literature forms as well as the fact that because they are short-lived and their storylines and structures are not stable, modern folktales can be difficult to handle. Nevertheless, I have used modern folktales in my research and over the years have gathered a sufficient number of examples for analysis.

Modern folktales may come under the category of urban folklore. However, stories that are told in urban areas can be found in rural areas as well, so it is not necessarily the case that modern folktales are an inevitable product of urban life. Modern folktales are an emerging reaction to modern society and at the same time a phenomenon characteristic of modern society. Some believe that the progress of modernization will soon eliminate the "superstition" evident in scary stories, but in reality, modern folktales can instead be said to be characteristic of modern society in the following two ways. First, based on an analysis of subject matter and motifs, modern folktales can be seen as interpretations and explanations of the modern social order. Second, modern folktales are distributed not only through conventional oral tradition but also through extremely contemporary electronic media, such as the Internet. Modernization and superstition are not necessarily in contradiction with one another; the progress of modernization does not deny the existence of superstition. On the contrary, scary stories are one of the necessary consequences of modern society.

What is clear as a result of my analysis of several examples is that scary stories are a manifestation of the worries and fears unconsciously held by people living in today's risk-driven society. While we avoid risk by relying on and living in a highly structured system, we remain fearful in such a risk-driven society. Modern folktales do not emphasize frightening figures such as ghosts in the way that ghosts are prominent in traditional folk literature, but instead feature figures representing less tangible fears, which suggests the quality of personal relations in this risk-driven society. Modern folktales that are frightening are also a depiction of modern society.