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Chinese Folklore Since the Late 1970s Achievements, Difficulties, and Challenges

The past thirty-five years have been the most exciting time for Chinese folklore studies since the inception of the discipline a century ago. Chinese folklore studies has gradually broken away from the grip of the extreme leftist political ideology of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and recovered disciplinary traditions established before the 1949 founding of the People’s Republic of China. The field of Chinese folklore studies has theoretically and methodologically enriched not only itself but also other disciplines in humanities and social sciences, as well as arenas of public life. It has participated in and promoted the nationwide project titled “Three Collections of Chinese Folk Literature” and the movement to protect intangible cultural heritage. However, many questions have also surfaced in terms of its theoretical discussions, disciplinary practices, and disciplinary orientation.

KEYWORDS: Chinese folklore studies—disciplinary history

CHINESE modern folklore has traveled a turbulent path in the hundred years since its inception in the second decade of the twentieth century. During this historical course, the vicissitudes of Chinese folklore studies were shaped by the constant transformation of political, social, and cultural circumstances. Folklore's changing destiny reflects not only the close interrelation between humanities and social sciences and the state system, political ideology, and social economy, but also the distinctive nature and issues of the discipline itself.

The past four decades have been the most exciting period for Chinese folklore studies since the inception of the discipline a century ago. Since the late 1970s, Chinese folklore studies have gradually broken away from the grip of the extreme leftist political ideology of the Maoist period (1966–1976). It has made great progress in training scholars, establishing its disciplinary structure, increasing the number of academic publications, broadening and innovating theory and methodology, and building an institutional foundation. It has also made unprecedented contributions to other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and other arenas of public life. At the same time, however, Chinese folklore studies have expounded upon new problems within the discipline.

REVIVAL AND REESTABLISHMENT

Chinese folklore studies as a modern academic discipline developed out of the Folksong Studies Movement (Geyaoxue yundong 歌谣学运动) initiated by a group of professors and students at Peking University in 1918 (ZHONG 1984; ZHANG 1985, 306). Over the eight years they spent collecting, recording, and studying folk songs, scholars in the fields of history, literature, and philosophy highly praised a folk culture that was traditionally despised by the upper class. These scholars created a field of study that centered on folk literature at the same time as they endeavored to use folk culture to reestablish China's national spirit. From then on, urban intellectuals increasingly began to devote themselves to the investigation and collection of folk literature and mass culture, and produced rich

research on a wide variety of folk songs, myths, folktales, folk beliefs, rites of passage, and social organizations. Although folklore research was often interrupted by war and social instability, it continued to develop its own theoretical and methodological maturity (ZHANG 1985, 305–47; WANG 1987, 17–123).

After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, Zhong Jingwen 钟敬文, who had been investigating and researching folklore since the Folksong Movement, was the first to offer folk literature courses at Beijing Normal University. He established the teaching and research office of the oral literature of the laboring people (Laodong renmin koutou wenxue 劳动人民口头文学) as well as a postgraduate program in folk literature. This was the first entry of folklore into the academic system of Chinese universities. Meanwhile, the renowned writers Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Lao She 老舍, and Zhong Jingwen, with the support of the Ministry of Culture, founded and led a national folklore research society, named the Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Research Society (Zhongguo minjian wenyi yanjiuhui 中国民间文艺研究会). However, under the influence of the academic system of the former Soviet Union and the literature and arts tradition developed by the Communist Party in Yan'an 延安, only folk literature research was supported and allowed to flourish as an independent discipline. Studies of other aspects of folk culture were grouped together as "folklore," which was limited, criticized, and even forbidden by state ideology. From the outset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 to the death of Mao Zedong 毛泽东 a decade later, the teaching and research institutions of folk literature were disbanded, and academic research on this subject came to a standstill (ZHONG ed. 1980, preface).

As China emerged from the Maoist period in the late 1970s, the state gradually adopted a more tolerant and flexible attitude toward academic research on China's cultural traditions. Practices and traditions that had once been forbidden were slowly revived across the country. Correspondingly, Chinese folklore studies also experienced a process of revival and reconstruction, in which the older generation of folklorists such as Zhong Jingwen played an important role (LIU Xicheng 2006, 686–90, 742–47; AN 2003, 131–36).

In the summer of 1978, the Ministry of Education reintroduced folk literature to the curricula of Chinese language and literature departments at universities and pedagogical universities. Then, authorized by the Academic Degree Commission of the State Council (Guowuyuan xuewei weiyuanhui 国务院学位委员会), postgraduate folk literature programs were established at Beijing Normal University, Peking University, Liaoning University, the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, Henan University, and so on. Beijing Normal University established a doctoral program in folklore studies that for ten years would remain the only one of its kind in China. In 1979, the Chinese Federation of Literature and Arts (Zhongguo wenlian 中国文联) officially resumed the Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Research Society, which had been disbanded during the Cultural Revolution. This society was renamed the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Association (Zhongguo minjian wenyijia xiehui 中国民间文艺家协会) in 1987.

At the same time, influential scholars actively promoted the revival of folklore research. In the autumn of 1978, Zhong Jingwen drafted the Proposal to Establish Folklore Programs and Folklore Research Institutes (Jianli minsuxue ji youguan yanjiu jigou de changyishu 建立民俗学及有关研究机构的倡议书) and invited six famous scholars, Gu Jiegang 顾颉刚, Bai Shouyi 白寿彝, Rong Zhaozu 容肇祖, Yang Kun 杨堃, Yang Chengzhi 杨成志, and Luo Zhiping 罗致平 to sign it. The proposal was submitted to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and later published.¹ It discussed the guiding ideas of folklore research as well as the academic and pragmatic value of the discipline and advocated the establishment of folklore studies research organizations in contemporary China (ZHONG 1987, 439–43). Having laid this foundation, the Chinese Folklore Society (Zhongguo minsuxue hui 中国民俗学会) was officially founded in 1983. Unlike the semi-official Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Association, the Chinese Folklore Society is an unofficial organization. It currently has over sixteen hundred members, including folklore scholars at universities and research institutions as well as workers at grassroots-level cultural centers and museums.² Of the two groups, it is academics who generally play the more decisive role in the theoretical construction of the discipline. However, since both academics and local-level cultural workers share a common passion for folklore and folklore research, both contributed to the development of the discipline from different aspects. The membership structure of the Chinese Folklore Society is thus similar to the societies of the May Fourth era, as well as those of foreign bodies such as the American Folklore Society.³ It reflects the distinctive disciplinary attribute of folklore: as a field of everyday culture, it is not only a stage for academic researchers in which to explore theories but also a channel for culture workers (a category that includes both performers and officials related to culture and propaganda) or amateurs at the grassroots level to discover, display, and express their own cultures.

As an active promoter and leader of folklore revival, Zhong Jingwen collaborated with the administrative bureaus in charge of culture and education to coordinate the reconstruction work of the discipline. Zhong (ZHONG et al. 1980; ZHONG 1981; 1987, 371–93) also published a series of papers in which he discussed the nature, task, history, and methodology of folk literature research (what was meant by *minjian wenyixue* 民间文艺学 or folk literature and arts studies) and folklore studies from various angles, shedding light on this newly-revived field. Under his promotion, folk literature research gradually came to be regarded as “a citizen of the academic ‘state’” (ZHONG 1981, 14). Folk literature researchers, and also folklorists, not only paid attention to oral culture but also extensively explored other aspects of everyday culture, including rituals, beliefs, and social organization. Folklore gradually came to occupy a dominant position in this field.

However, in the disciplinary catalogue designated by the Academic Degree Commission of the State Council,⁴ folk literature (*minjian wenxue* 民间文学), which is identified as a discipline mainly centering on verbal arts or oral literature (*koutou wenxue* 口头文学), was for a long time listed as a second-level sub-discipline of the first-tier discipline of Chinese literature (*Zhongguo wenxue* 中国

文学). Folklore (*minsuxue* 民俗学), a field encompassing a wider variety of folk culture than folk literature, was included as a research direction within the discipline of folk literature. This taking-the-root-for-branches designation nevertheless offered more legitimate space for teachers and postgraduate students of folk literature to also study folklore. In 1997, the Academic Degree Commission of the State Council and the Ministry of Education amended the degree designation catalogue to include folklore as a second-level discipline under the first-level discipline of sociology. This new designation gave folklore an independent position within the state academic disciplinary structure. Some universities and research institutions renamed their folk literature programs as “folklore” and applied to establish masters and doctoral degree programs in folklore. Currently, more than ten universities and research institutions nationwide have established folklore doctoral programs, and nearly fifty offer master’s programs. This reflects a great leap in the development of this discipline from the days that the only folk literature doctoral program was that at Beijing Normal University.

While changes to the official degree designations created new opportunities for folklore, they came at the expense of the existing discipline of folk literature research, which had previously enjoyed a relative degree of independence and was engaged in at a considerable scale. In the past, folk literature programs had been set in the departments of Chinese language and literature, coexisting as second-level disciplines alongside premodern and modern literature. In this new designation, folk literature was demoted to a “research direction” below the three second-level disciplines of premodern, modern, and contemporary literature. This adjustment not only cost folk literature its disciplinary independence, it also overlooked the theoretical and methodological differences in the study of verbal arts and orally transmitted and performed folk narratives. As a result of the redesignation, many folk literature faculty members had to cope with the pressure of changing their research direction jobs, and were even faced with unemployment (LIU Xicheng 2001; LIU Shouhua 2002).

In addition to the rigid and rather arbitrary decision made by the administration, the reality of the dislocation of folk literature could also be attributed to the ambiguous self-definition of folklore within the discipline itself. Folklorists were often less than clear about whether folk literature was independent of their own discipline or a research direction within the discipline. It is perhaps unsurprising that people external to these debates could not accurately define the specific relations among the disciplines.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL EXPANSION

Over the course of its forty-year revival, folklore gradually broke away from the powerful impact of political ideology and revived its academic independence. Folklorists were no longer limited to a single-dimensional focus on the analysis of class struggle, the sort seen in the folktales, legends, or ballads about revolutionary conflict. On the one hand, new developmental opportunities in this

phase also encouraged the disciplinary self-awareness of folklore. The Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Association, the Chinese Folklore Society, as well as universities and research institutions successively launched large and small folklore fieldwork projects. They also organized workshops and conferences to explore and discuss disciplinary theories and methodologies (LIU Xicheng 2006, 742–63). These events popularized the general understanding of folklore, expanded the field, promoted the development of theory and methodology, and thereby inspired the emergence of fresh, insightful perspectives. At the same time, the rising tide of academic communication between China and the world offered an effective source of reference and external stimulation for disciplinary reflection among the Chinese folklorists.

In this context, the theoretical and methodological shifts that occurred within Chinese folklore studies over the past forty years can be understood largely in terms of three major transitions: the transition of the subject of the study from the laboring classes (*laodong renmin* 劳动人民) to people of all social groups (*quantu renmin* 全体人民); the methodological shift from cultural history to ethnographic field research; and the change in theoretical orientation from text (*wenben* 文本) to context (*yujing* 语境) and text *in* context (*yujing zhong de wenben* 语境中的文本).

At the outset of this disciplinary revival, folk literature was still commonly recognized and defined as “the oral creation of the laboring masses.” Published in 1980 and a guiding work in the construction of the discipline, *Minjian wenxue gailun* 民间文学概论 (An introduction to folk literature) clearly stated that, in a society with class stratification, the “laboring masses” referred mainly to peasants, craftsmen, modern industrial workers, and folk artists who came from the lower social classes and lived in rural and urban areas (ZHONG, ed., 1980, 4). This definition was shared in other important publications (see ZHANG 1979; WU 1980; DUAN 1981). This class-based understanding of folk literature was related both to the overriding importance of class analysis since the 1950s and to the disciplinary tradition of taking the research on the lower classes’ history and culture as its own social responsibility since the folk song-collection movement of the May Fourth era (TONGREN 1928). But this orientation gradually changed in the following years, as clearly shown in a series of ZHONG Jingwen’s post-1980 publications (for example, 1987, 371–98, 399–402, 403–22, 444–46). The class-based understanding of “folk” was largely de-politicized by referring to the majority or even all the members of a state or ethnic nationality. By the 1990s, when research publications discussed the nature of folk literature, the “folk” was further defined as the general populace or the entire nation (LI 1999, 13–15).

During the course of this change, Zhong Jingwen’s perspective on folklore as the everyday lived culture of the common people of a nationality greatly broadened the views of Chinese folklorists. While ZHANG Zichen (1985, 4–6) and WU (1985, 4–8) echoed this perspective in their research, GAO (1994) expounded it more systematically and in greater depth, which greatly influenced the transition of the Chinese folklorists’ theoretical orientation. From that point on, folklore research has been increasingly anchored in an inclusive understanding of everyday culture rather than that of class.

Another theoretical shift during the disciplinary revival was the reflection on the cultural history (*wenbua shi* 文化史) approach that was then dominant in Chinese folklore studies. This approach focused on analyzing the historical transformation and cultural meanings of folklore by combing through historical documents (LIU Tieliang 2008). Its predominance in folklore research can also be viewed as a disciplinary choice, which was shaped by the long-standing tradition of highly valuing historical documents in the fields of the humanities and social sciences due to their richness in China. This approach reflected the attempt of leading folklorists to raise their disciplinary status as an equal to other humanity and social science disciplines with their deep-rooted tradition of historical research. At the same time, this approach was also closely related to the phenomenon of culture fever (*wenbua re* 文化热) in China in the 1980s, wherein traditional culture experienced a full-fledged revival after the lifting of long-term political control. Being a thought-liberating movement, “culture fever” was a ten-year intellectual wave of debate and scholarship on culture and tradition, which further stimulated popular confidence in tradition and accelerated the process of cultural renaissance. In this trend, folklore research responded to the needs of the time and engaged in the analysis and interpretation of the historical origins and meanings of these revived traditions. This kind of research helped the populace to know, understand, and approach the functions of the ancient traditions that were reappearing in society (YANG 1994).

In contrast to the “cultural history” approach, some scholars, represented by Zhong Jingwen, emphasized in their work that folklore was “a discipline about the modern day” or “about both past and the present” (ZHONG 1987, 371–93). This view came to guide folklore research to shift its lens to the present, the real, and the everyday, which reflected an endeavor of advocating the perspective of ethnography at the very beginning of the disciplinary revival.

At the same time, fieldwork-based folk literature survey and documentation projects were launched in Yunnan 云南, Liaoning 辽宁, and other provinces. These projects laid important groundwork for folklorists to study the characteristics of folk literature in its living context (LIU Xicheng 2006, 691–709) rather than through historical documents. Such collection and documentation endeavors reached a peak with the launching of the “Three Collections of Chinese Folk Literature” (Minjian wenxue santao jicheng 民间文学三套集成) project, jointly initiated by the Ministry of Culture, The State Ethnic Affairs Commission (Guojia minzu shiwu weiyuanhui 国家民族事务委员会), and the Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Research Society in 1984.

In addition, collaboration with international folklorists also provided opportunities for Chinese scholars to engage in fieldwork-based projects. In 1986, the Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Research Society, the Guangxi Folk Literature Society (Guangxi minjian wenxue yanjiu hui 广西民间文学研究会), and the Finnish Literature Society (Fenlan wenxue xuehui 芬兰文学学会) together held a major conference on the collection and preservation of folk literature. They also jointly conducted field research on folk literature in Nanning 南宁 and Sanjiang 三江, and in Guangxi 广西 (LIU Xicheng 2006, 711–19). Chinese folklorists have

also worked together with Japanese scholars to conduct continuous research projects on Chinese folk culture since 1990 (ZHANG 1993; LIU Tieliang 2008). These efforts have greatly helped Chinese folklorists experience, understand, and grasp the meanings and methodologies of fieldwork-based ethnographic research.

As a result of the factors mentioned above, fieldwork started to attract greater attention in Chinese folklore research circles in the late 1980s. By the mid- and late-1990s, the cultural history approach was increasingly replaced by field studies conducted in specific communities. Fieldwork-based ethnographic research gradually became the dominant orientation in Chinese folklore studies (GAO 2008).

Consistent with the increasing attention to fieldwork, the final theoretical shift that occurred during the disciplinary revival of Chinese folklore was the reconsideration of “text” and “context.” This shift was greatly influenced by the introduction to performance theory that arose in American folklore research in the 1970s. But it also had its domestic lineage that can be traced back to the 1980s, when the cultural history approach was still conventionally practiced. At that time, Duan Baolin put forward the concept of three-dimensional description (*liti miaoxie* 立体描写) in order to document the fullness of folk literature (DUAN 1985). With the intention of correcting past practices that only collected folk literature texts, this concept emphasized the necessity of regarding folk literature as a component of everyday culture, which must be observed and understood in the specific contexts of transmission and performance. This approach advocated paying attention to the dimensional characteristics of folk literature in the documentation and research process (DUAN 1985; LIU Xicheng 2006, 758–62).

The attention to context has further developed with the increasing communication between Chinese folklorists and the international folklore community over the past decade. Influential theories in the fields of folklore, anthropology, and ethnography in the West were translated and brought into China. These included both re-translations of the classic works of Frazer, Malinowski, and Durkheim, all of which had exerted a profound impact on Chinese folklore studies at the beginning of the last century, as well as translations of more recent folklore theories from the West, especially the introduction and active application of the context-centered performance theory from the United States. The focus on the interrelationship between folklore and its sociocultural and performance context has become a commonly shared ground among many Chinese folklorists (LIU Kuili 1998, 79–91; ZHU 2002; BAMO 2003; YANG 2004; LIN 2007). The greater attention paid to the dynamic performance process of folklore and its individuality and creativity effectively rectified the former trend of overemphasizing the collectivity and traditional nature of folklore.

In the past ten years, through continuous reflection on the history of folklore research and fieldwork experiences, Chinese folklorists have developed various refreshing and creative perspectives. These approaches not only embody the growing impact of foreign theories and methodologies of folklore studies but also display the distinctive theoretical exploration and reflection of Chinese folklorists based on indigenous practices.

For instance, Liu Tieliang questions the conventional method of writing ethnography in Chinese folklore studies (LIU Tieliang 2005). He points out that folklorists tend to portray local folk culture homogeneously and to classify various folklore practices in the fixed genre framework that is defined by researchers. Liu argues for more attention to the representative (*biaozhixing* 标志性) folklore practices that characterize a community or its interactive relationship with its surrounding areas. In Liu's view, this approach to ethnographic writing will enable folklorists to better illustrate the distinctiveness of a regional culture and to reflect its particular history, collective memory and identification, and its regional character.

An Deming promoted a reflective trend on what he termed "folklore studies at home" or "hometown folklore studies," which has been a dominant approach throughout the historical development of Chinese folklore studies (see in particular AN 2011; and also 2004). Since the May Fourth era, folklorists have tended to easily objectify their hometown or native places as a self-evident arena of collecting data and doing research. By reviewing the scholarship of "hometown folklore studies," An pointed out that this approach enabled folklorists to establish their distinctive viewpoints and special relationship with the informants because of their identity of being a cultural insider. However, it also had its blind spots that might lead folklorists to overlook or misrepresent certain cultural aspects that were too familiar to them or too emotionally sensitive. Thus, in An's view, it was on the one hand important to show respect to local people who might otherwise be considered only as data-providing subjects in fieldwork research; on the other hand, the value of inter-subjectivity cannot replace the difference between observers and bearers of tradition, especially when conducting "hometown folklore studies." The recognition of this difference was the foundation to carry out hometown folklore research successfully.

During the process of translating and introducing international folklore theories, Chinese scholars also deepened, enriched, and reflected these theories through their own case studies. For example, in her research on ethnic epic performance in southwest China, BAMO (2003) put forward the principle of "five presences" (*wuge zaichang* 五个在场) in fieldwork research, which included the presence of narrative tradition, performance event, performer, audience, and researcher. This principle was apparently stimulated by contextual studies in American scholarship, but it offered an operative analysis module for context-based epic research in China. Another researcher of epics, CHAO (2000), applies the oral formula theory to his meticulous research on *Jangar*, the Mongolian epic performed by P. Arimpil. Chao points out that formula, which is rooted in the orality of epics, conditions the creation, transmission, and reception of the epic as a force at the core. Chao's research not only broadens the conventional horizon of epic research in China but also provides a meaningful conversation with the oral formula theory through exploring its theoretical effectiveness in a different context.

Another example of the localization of international folklore theories can be represented by Yang Lihui's myth research (YANG 2004; 2011; see also Yang in this issue). Yang Lihui was among one of the earliest scholars who actively introduced the context-centered performance theory that arose in the 1970s in American folklore

studies to China. But she also critically reflected on this approach rather than directly applying it. Based on her case studies of myth performances in contemporary China, Yang led our attention to the stability and self-sufficiency of text that has been largely overlooked by performance theory. She argued for a synthesized approach that integrates the internal and external research of the narrative texts of myth, or the research on the form, content, and meaning of text with that of context.

THREE COLLECTIONS OF FOLK LITERATURE AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION

In the past forty years, Chinese folklore circles have played an important role in many social and cultural projects. The two most important and influential have been the compilation of the “Three Collections of Folk Literature” and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH, *feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物质文化遗产) respectively. Each of these two projects was initiated and operated in collaboration with state bureaus of cultural management, with the government acting as an important organizer and coordinator. They raised widespread attention to folklore and also exerted significant influence on China’s sociocultural climate, policies, people’s everyday lives, as well as folklore studies as a discipline.

The “Three Collections of Folk Literature,” promoted by folklorists and launched by the Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Research Society, is a nationwide project for surveying, collecting, and documenting folk literature. In 1984, the Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Research Society received the support of the Ministry of Culture and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission. Three sides signed and published “The notice of intent to edit and publish *Collected Chinese Folktales*, *Collected Chinese Folk Songs*, and *Collected Chinese Proverbs*,” (Guanyu bianji chuban Zhongguo minjian gushi jicheng Zhongguo geyao jicheng Zhongguo yanyu jicheng de tongzhi 关于编辑出版<中国民间故事集成><中国歌谣集成><中国谚语集成>的通知) signifying the official start of this project. Zhou Yang 周扬, the chairman of the Chinese Federation of Literature and Arts, became the chief editor of the General Editorial Committee. Zhou Weizhi 周巍峙, who was the acting minister of the Ministry of Culture, and Zhong Jingwen were the executive vice chief-editors (LIU Xicheng 2006, 709–10). Two years later, authorized by the National Designing and Planning Committee of Art Disciplines (Quanguo yishu xueke guihua lingdao xiaozu 全国艺术学科规划领导小组), the three sets of folk literature collections were combined with seven other art collections, such as folk songs, regional opera music (*xiqu yinyue* 戏曲音乐), ethnic folk instrumental music (*minzu minjian qiye qu* 民族民间器乐曲), and so on, and became the so-called “Ten Sets of Chinese Ethnic Folk Literature and Arts Collections” (Shibu Zhongguo minzu minjian wenyi jicheng zhishu 十部中国民族民间文艺集成志书; abbreviated as “Ten collections” *shitao jicheng* 十套集成), by which they received even greater administrative and financial support (MA 1991).

The co-promotion by the central state and the academic circles of the “Ten Collections” was directly related to the fact that the revival and reconstruction

of Chinese traditional culture remained to be undertaken in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. With breadth of vision, these promoters endeavored to create a new oasis in the cultural desert and thus to uphold the healthy redevelopment of national culture. To scholars of folk literature, the work of the “Ten Collections” was particularly significant because of the rupture in the transmission of folk literature over the previous decades. Many folk literature genres and works were facing the possibility of disappearance due to the aging of tradition bearers. These projects could greatly contribute to the rescue and preservation of these traditions when their performers and practitioners were still alive.

The guiding idea that underlined the work of the “Three Collections of Folk Literature” (abbreviated as the “three collections,” *Santao jicheng* 三套集成) was to conduct a national survey, collection, and compilation of folktales, folk songs, and ballads, and proverbs based on a unified plan. The documented data was selected and edited under unified stylistic rules and then published at the county and provincial levels, as genre-specific anthologies (YANG and AN with TURNER 2005, 14–15). This huge task required both the guidance and participation of academic circles and the administrative and financial support of the state bureaus. The Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Research Society, a semi-official organization, played a significant role in the organizing, leading, and coordination of this process.

The “Three Collections” was an unprecedented folklore survey and collection project in China. It began in 1984 and lasted for over three years. The editing and compilation work continued until 2004. The number of participants, the duration of surveying, and the richness of collected folk literature were all without parallel. According to reported statistics, between 1984 and 1990 alone more than 2 million people took part in the surveying and collection of folk literature. In total, 1.84 million folktales, 3.02 million folk songs and ballads, and 7.48 million proverbs were collected from all over the country, which exceeded 4 billion characters (LIU Xicheng 2006, 711). Through the extensive mobilization and participation of artistic and educational circles across the country, this project also cultivated and trained a large number of folk literature scholars and workers at the grassroots level (XU 1999, preface). At the same time, it also enabled folk literature researchers to find many new research subjects, such as storytellers and storytelling villages, thus opening more research possibilities. The rich fieldwork experiences that were accumulated during this process laid the very ground for contemporary Chinese folklorists to be able to engage in research on the practitioners and bearers of folk literature and their performances, as well as to actively absorb related perspectives and methodology from Western folklore circles.

The campaign to protect ICH was launched worldwide by UNESCO in 2003. China positively supported and participated in this movement from the very beginning. UNESCO’s principle was to “enrich cultural diversity and creativity of mankind” by protecting ICH that was under threat or faced damage or the risk of disappearance (UNESCO 2003). This principle was resonant with China’s urgent desire to protect its own traditional culture, which had been struck by the wave of China’s increasingly rapid industrialization process and globalization. Therefore,

ICH preservation was enthusiastically embraced by different levels of Chinese government and academic circles, and led to a large-scale and unprecedented socio-cultural movement. The experience and training accumulated during the “Three Collections of Folk Literature” project created an ideal foundation for the smooth development of China’s ICH preservation movement.

Like the “Three Collections of Folk Literature,” the main purpose of China’s ICH preservation was to save and protect folk culture that was rapidly disappearing. But the difference was that the former was mainly guided and operated by folklorists and culture workers at the grassroots level despite the important organizing and coordinating role the government played. In contrast, although folklorists once played a crucial role in expounding, advocating, and developing ICH preservation, the actual operation and practice went far beyond the scope of academic surveying and research. ICH preservation became a sociopolitical movement guided and operated by the state bureaus with participation from an array of social forces. Folklorists offered theoretical support and participated as ethnographers, researchers, or specialist committee members to review and vote for the applications for ICH preservation.

The government-guided model of ICH preservation has the advantage of popularizing relevant concepts and rapidly promoting preservation practices. Over the past ten years, this movement has exerted a positive influence over Chinese society. First of all, it has enhanced the status of folk culture generally, especially traditions such as folk belief that had been denounced as “superstition.” With their newly-achieved ICH status, these traditions have been recognized by mainstream ideology and society and thus gained more space for activity. Second, the enhanced confidence and awareness further encouraged society to take measures to preserve traditional culture (AN 2008). The two results mentioned above are related to the academic support and active advocacy of folklorists. At the same time, the progress of the ICH preservation movement also created more developmental opportunities for folklore and improved its social status.

However, Chinese folklore circles have not developed sufficient theoretical research on the problems derived from this movement. For example, a new hegemonic discourse has arisen from the application process. According to the application regulations, whether a cultural item or practice can be recognized as “cultural heritage” is determined by the criteria of UNESCO rather than by an assessment of its own intrinsic value. During the application and evaluation process, an evaluation committee that is composed of researchers and specialists becomes the agent of authority, whereas tradition and its bearers are objectified as the evaluated, waiting for their fates to be decided. This kind of hegemonic discourse has not always intervened in the development of folk culture in a positive way. It creates a man-made project that intentionally grades culture, which is vitally interconnected with people’s lives, into different ranks depending on whether, or to what extent, a cultural item or practice possesses the qualities of ICH. This ranking is bound to aggravate the inequality among different cultures or among different social groups within a cultural system. It may even weaken the confidence of those cultural bearers whose traditions are excluded from the category of ICH.

Further, the vitality of folklore lies in the mutual exchange among different social groups. The fact that a cultural item or practice can be claimed by various regions or groups leads to disagreement and competition for the related cultural rights. But it also promotes the reception, transmission, and reinforcement of the cultural item or practice in question on a larger scale. However, under the discourse and operation of ICH, each recognized ICH item is defined by a single so-called “representative work” (*daibiaozuo* 代表作), which is officially chosen from a myriad of coexisting variants in various regions. This regulated practice of compiling a standardized list of ICH representative work unavoidably institutionalizes the ownership of culture, restricting and even disrupting its transmission and continuity.

On the other hand, the question of what cultural items in a certain region or country can become so-called national or UNESCO “representative works” often involves complex issues of cultural or national identification, cultural ownership, intellectual property, and profit distribution within the culture industry. Competition to gain ownership of an ICH item that has been claimed by different countries or multiple regions or groups in the same country can lead to regional or even national conflicts. The ICH movement, which is closely related to the protection of intellectual property, intentionally or unintentionally contributes to the rising of regional protectionism or the strengthening of nationalistic sentiments instead.

These issues urge folklorists to further reflect on this movement and dwell upon what role they should play as this movement unfolds: will they observe and research or intervene in social transformation with their academic practices? If the latter, to what extent should they become involved? Conversations on these issues benefit not only the healthy development of China’s ICH movement itself but also the self-definition of Chinese folklore studies as a discipline.

DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

Over the past forty years, the revival of Chinese folklore studies, along with the “democratic” orientation that had been embedded in this discipline since the May Fourth era, gradually alerted humanities and social science circles and Chinese society to the necessity of the perspective of “seeing from the view of the folk.” With folklorists’ efforts, the concepts of “folk,” “folk culture,” and “folklore”—which before the 1980s were limited to certain disciplinary discourses—have gradually become well-known words in academia and public life. Folklorists have played an important role in enlightening and leading the whole society to objectively understand middle- or low-level culture as an important component of China’s national culture.

But at the same time, folklore also faces increasing difficulties and challenges. Although folklore is often referenced by other disciplines, it remains on the periphery of the humanities and social sciences. To some extent, this situation is related to the prejudice that Chinese academia harbors towards folk culture. Yet, more importantly, it also lies in the unresolved problems that remain within the discipline itself.

First, in terms of the disciplinary orientation, there is no clear answer to the question of whether folk literature research should be viewed as a component of folklore studies in Chinese academia. As mentioned above, folk literature research was gradually classified as a subfield of folklore due to the shared features between the two. However, the unavoidable fact is that folk literature research is often conducted in a comparative reference framework with literature, whereas folklore research derives its theories and methodology from anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and other disciplines. From the outset, these two fields formed different research approaches and theoretical models. Therefore, although it seems logical to classify folk literature into a system of folklore studies on the surface, it is up to folklorists to explore and discuss any systematic theoretical and methodological integration of the two fields. Unfortunately, Chinese researchers have largely avoided this issue as a whole or have been unaware of it. In the few discussions that have occurred, the focus has been to analyze the similarity of the research subjects between the two fields rather than their theoretical or methodological distinctions, which only brings more uncertainty to the disciplinary orientation. The lack of discussion may also be an important factor that accounts for the inappropriate disciplinary designation of folklore and its continued marginalization within the humanities and social sciences.

Second, in the increasingly popular research models that highlight regional or case studies, the ethnographic research method dominantly shapes these case studies, resulting in a rather monotonous pattern. In this pattern, the survey and description of folklore in a specific community becomes a footnote to popular theories. Other researchers are concerned only about documentation and description and do not even attempt theoretical discussions. This causes the knowledge-production system of folklore to be fragmented, and folklore research is overly dependent on shared or prevailing paradigms without in-depth theoretical exploration.

Third, the overemphasis on the distinctiveness of folklore as the opposite of elite culture tends to separate the two, intentionally or unintentionally. Although Zhong Jingwen and other scholars repeatedly emphasized that the research subject of folklore was the everyday life culture of all the nationalities in China, many folklorists often have too high an opinion of their own field and continue to highlight the difference between their research subject and elite culture. The tendency to focus on the subaltern as the natural subject of folklore echoes concerns about “democracy” and “affinity with the people” that have become embedded in Chinese folklore studies since the May Fourth era. Yet, if this tendency is overemphasized, folklore studies will lose its opportunity to engage the entirety of national culture. It would also lose the ability to actively participate in the discussions of more significant issues along with other disciplines in humanities and social sciences.

Finally, as already mentioned, there has been a tendency to overcorrect the conventionally conducted text-centered research approach in the history of Chinese folklore studies. This in turn results in another undesirable approach in which context-based research attracts great attention, whereas textual analysis or the study of the innate attributes of folklore phenomena is ignored.

Chinese folklorists are still dwelling on these issues. How to solve them, some of which challenge not only the circle of Chinese folklore studies but also folklorists worldwide, will greatly contribute to the further sophistication of Chinese folklore studies as a discipline.

NOTES

1. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan 中国社会科学院), deriving from the Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Zhongguo kexue yuan zhexue shehui kexue bu 中国科学院哲学社会科学学部), became an independent research institution in 1977. Under the direct leadership of the CPC central committee and the state council, it played an influential or even decisive role in the national planning and designating of the disciplines of philosophy and social sciences.

2. This is according to the information posted on the Chinese Folklore Society website: <http://www.chinesefolklore.org.cn> (accessed 15 March 2012).

3. See the membership information on the American Folklore Society website: <http://www.afsnet.org> (accessed 15 March 2012).

4. The disciplinary catalogue is promulgated and implemented by the Academic Degree Commission of the State Council (sometimes with the Ministry of Education). As a policy document, it played a powerful role in guiding and regulating the disciplinary construction, personnel training (*rencai peiyang* 人才培养), and the conferment of academic degrees (*xuewei shouyu* 学位授予) of all the colleges and universities in China. This catalogue is divided into three categories: disciplinary catalogue, first-tier discipline, and secondary-tier discipline. The secondary-tier disciplines are the basis for colleges and universities to set their majors. Whether one field is classified as a secondary-tier discipline under the first-class discipline directly determines its possibility of becoming an independent disciplinary unit in an institution and its qualification for establishing master and doctoral degree programs. Since its implementation in 1983, this document has been modified and adjusted three times. Each adjustment has had a profound impact on the involved disciplines, both positive and negative.

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