

ORAL EPIC TRADITIONS IN CHINA

There have been rich oral epic traditions in China from the remote past, disseminated among ethnic minority peoples, with three dominant types, namely, heroic epics, creation epics, and origin epics. Scholarly works in epic studies can be traced back to a few centuries ago, with both foreign and domestic scholars' involvement. Over the past two decades, a new paradigm in epic studies has been shifting from mainly literary concerns towards folkloristic researches in many directions, labelled by some scholars as a "paradigm shift of epic studies".

Keywords: oral epic, epic studies, epic types, traditions, scholarship, folkloristic researches, foreign scholars, domestic scholars, paradigm shift, China.

Epic Scholarship in China in a Nutshell

By now it has been acknowledged that there are thousands of epics, spreading across the minority areas in the north and south of China among the numerous ethnic peoples¹. According to life style and production mode, we may roughly classify these epics into the following groups: epics attached to fishing and hunting culture in forests (exemplified by the Tungus epics such as the Hezhen *Yimakan* and the Manchu *Shuobu*), to prairie nomadic culture on the grasslands (exemplified by the Mongol and the Kazakh epics), and to highland agricultural life style (like the Yi epics and Miao ancient songs).

Roughly speaking, the dominant epic type among the Altaic language families covering Manchu-Tungus peoples, Mongolian peoples and Turkic peoples, is heroic epic poetry, while among the Sino-Tibetan language families the dominant epic types are either creation epic or origin epics, or a combination of both, with the ingredients of some heroic elements.

However, recalling the progress of epic studies in China, we find that the predecessors who carried out scholarly work on epics have mostly been foreign scholars, and the studies can be traced back to the 18th century. The earliest introduction of *Gesar* to the outer world was made by the Russian traveler P. S. Pallas in his *Journey through various provinces of the Russian Empire* in 1776 [1]. During the 19th and the 20th centuries, epics from ethnic peoples in China gained the attention of many foreign scholars; to name only some by country: David Neel and R. A. Stein of France; I. J. Schmidt, F. W. Radloff (of German descent and permanent residence in Russia), W. Heissig, and K. Reichl of Germany; G. N. Potanin, S. A. Kozin, A. Rudnev, Zhamcarano, N. Poppe (who later moved to the United States), B. Ya. Vladimirtsov, V. Zhirmunsky, and S. J. Nekljudov et al. of Russia and the former Soviet Union; G. J. Ramstedt of Finland; C. R. Bawden, and Nora K. Chadwick et al. of Britain. In brief, we can roughly summarize this stage as the stage of "others" in epic studies.

Indeed the "trajectory" of epic studies in China can be traced back to hundreds of years ago. In 1779, Sum-pa mkhan-po Ye-shes dpal-'byor (1704-1788)², the eminent monk in Qinghai, discussed the

¹ There is no statistics on the number of epic traditions in China. However, considering the saying that there are hundreds of epics in various Turkic nationalities, and at least 500 works of epic poetry among the Mongols, and taking into consideration the fact that by now voluminous epic texts have been accumulated among the southern ethnic peoples, it makes quite a conservative estimate that there are more than one thousand epics found in China.

² Later Sum-pa 松巴 (whose full name is Sum-pa mkhan-po Ye -shes dpal-'byor) compiled a collection of the related topics, which is entitled *Guanyu Gesaer de Wenda* 《关于格萨尔问答》 (*Questions and Answers about Gesar*), collected in *Wenda* 《问答》 (*Questions and Answers*) in *Songbaquanji* 《松巴全集》 (*The Collections of Sum-pa's Works*) stored in Labrang Monastery, Gansu, p. 11-16. See 1990. *Gesaerxuejicheng* 《格萨尔学集成》 (*Collection of Gesar Studies*) Vol. I, p.286-290. Lanzhou: Gansu Ethnic Publishing House.

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related issues about *Geser* in the letters to the sixth Panchen Lama Losang Palden Yeshe (1737-1780) [2]. It is an interesting phenomenon that there are two different viewpoints regarding the ethnicity of Sum-pa, and it is difficult to decide whether he belonged to the Mongolian or the Tibetan people, just like the uncertain identity of the epic of *Geser/Gesar*. It is now generally acknowledged that the epic has in both traditions the same origin and has developed in different flows, reaching great status among the Tibetan and Mongolian people respectively.

Mr. Ren Naiqiang was the first contemporary scholar to write about the epic *Gesar*. In 1930 he published two articles in the *Sichuan Daily*, in which he conveyed some basic information about the gigantic epic tradition in Sichuan province [3].

A modest work of collecting epic singing in China started in the 1950s, followed by some introductory articles on epics discovered here and there. The collection of epic material and research on epics were interrupted by the Cultural Revolution Movement (1966-1976) for more than a decade, and resumed around the early 1980s, accompanied by larger scale compilation, translation, and publication of the epic texts. Some interesting field notes and interpretive works on epics came out one after another, forming a new landscape in field of folk literature. Among them are the series of *Epic Studies in China* [4-10] edited by the scholars of the Institute of China Ethnic Minority Literature (now the Institute of Ethnic Literature), Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which intensively reflects the outlook of that period. The following monographs are worth mentioning: *On Janggar* by Prof. Rinchindorji, and *The Study on Manas* by Prof. Lang Ying, among others. In a word, during this period, some influential epic texts have been analyzed, some prominent singers have been archived and discussed, and the socio-cultural settings of some epics have been outlined, depicted and explained. Obviously, a transformation from “others” study on epic to “self” studies occurred in some sense.

Multiple Academic Practices of Oral Tradition Studies in China

Some epic-related arrangements have been set up to promote epic studies.

- The “Oral Traditions Research Center” was established in 2003 in the Institute of Ethnic Literature, CASS.

- A number of Western works connected to epic studies have been translated into Chinese, covering many schools and methodologies. On top of this list, we may mention the works by Albert Lord, Walter Ong, Lauri Honko, John Foley, Gregory Nagy, Karl Reichl, Richard Bauman, and others.

- Some Russian-Soviet scholars’ works had an influence on Chinese epic scholars also; the most prominent ones are: Aleksandar Veselovski’s *Istoricheskaya poetika*, P. A. Meletinskii’s work on the origin of epic poetry; E. M. Neklyudov’s book on Mongolian heroic poetry, and so on.

- Joint programs and cooperative agreements were signed with institutions from Europe, North America, and Asia, aiming at promoting epic studies in an international framework.

- A “Minority Literature Research Database” (2000-2009) was established under the Institute of Ethnic Literature. New technologies have been used for the database, so as to make the collection of epic singing accessible.

- A number of treaties for establishing “Oral Tradition Field Study Bases” in selected places have been signed between the Institute of Ethnic Literature and respective local authorities since 2003, and so far we have 10 such bases scattered in minority areas, such as the base of üliger in Jarud, Inner Mongolia, Tibetan Epic and Oral Tradition in Golok, Qinghai, Zhuang people’s Buluotuo Culture and Oral Narration in Tianyang, Guangxi, and *Manas* epic tradition in Akqi, Xinjiang, etc.

- The “IEL International Seminar Series on Epic Studies and Oral Tradition Research” was launched in 2009. As an annual event, its purpose is to create a professional, long-term interdisciplinary training platform.

These localized academic practices have deepened epic studies in China to a great extent, and laid a solid foundation for further research on an abundant epic narrative tradition in China.

The Paradigm Shift of Epic Studies in China

From the end of the 20th century to the early 21st century, many new changes have indeed occurred in the paradigm of epic study in China. To give a simple summarization, there have been these turns: from sole text-centered analysis to taking account of factors during the performance; from tradition-centered observation to taking account of the dynamics of transmission; from the observation of anonymous singer groups to taking account of talented individual performers; from the application of universal concepts to taking account of indigenous concepts and terminology.

The shift of paradigm in epic studies means a move forward from once dominant literary study to folkloric studies, which focus on epic performance as a folk event, with multiple functions, rather than a piece of literary work. Fairly speaking, during the past two decades, the landscape of folk literature studies in China has got a great impact from epic scholarship in many ways.

As Mark Bender points out, a group of Chinese young scholars developed a “pragmatic” methodology to work in folklore and epic studies. They make use of core notions of some western theories like “Oral Formulaic Theory”, and “Oral Poetics”, and adjust them, localize them in many ways, and bring new dimensions and new interpretations to them, making their own pragmatic school of folklore and epic studies [11].

Some interesting experiments have been conducted by them. To mention just a few facets of their theoretical concerns: they have developed a model of epic diction analysis, a model of re-examination of an epic text in the field [12], the “Five Basic Factors in Co-presence for Field Study”, reflections on the “formatting” problem and other disadvantages during the making of folk literature texts¹; there is also a development of new interpretations by re-examining the ancient classics with the help of the theories of oral tradition, and so on.

Future-Oriented Epic Studies in China

With the acceleration of China’s modernization process, oral epics are facing an enormous impact, and the number of epic singers is also declining sharply. “The songs disappear with the perishing of singers” is a saying we often cite to depict the endangered situation of epic transmission.

Prof. Zhong Jingwen said in an article that: “So far, we have indeed had considerable accumulation in the collection of data and the discussions on many subjects, but we have not been systematic and profound in the overall inquiry of theories, which is exactly the aspect where we can make more achievements. For the last two to three decades, we have focused on the basic work of collecting, recording, sorting and publishing, and the studies have also been concentrated upon the level of specific epics, so we see a lack of horizontal connections and a thorough consideration now, which restricts the vision of the theoretical concerns, and causes the defect of ‘*seeing only a tree other than the forest*’ in the perception of Chinese epics. The discipline construction pace of epic studies in China will be delayed if such a condition is not changed” [12].

It should be admitted that academic studies of epics have not developed satisfactorily in recent years, and we still have a lot of questions awaiting a convincing answer. In summary, the problems mainly concern: as to epic performers and tradition-bearers, a thorough and profound survey and archiving activity still has a long way to go; the more systematic and profound description and analysis of types, pedigrees, and distribution have not been undertaken thick description” and thorough field study of representative epic singers and tradition-bearers and the construction of their archives have not met the requirements of the discipline. As for the texts, there is big room for improvement in the existing aspects of collation, translation, preservation, publication, and interpretation; the collection, transcription, and transliteration of oral texts need more conscious reflection and growth of experience from the text production concepts of the field study and from the working model. As to theory construction, the regular discussions and theoretical exposition that we have already made have not been commensurate with the diversity of the epic traditions in China; the cross-cultural spectral pattern, the description and interpretation of polymorphic resources have not been in place; there has not been the scientific theoretical definition and type interpretation of the three major types and the sub-types (such as the Flood Epic in the Creation Epic) of epic traditions in China; the systematic degree of sorting and promotion of conceptual tools, terminological system, theory methodology, and research paradigm has not been developed properly. As for the system construction of the discipline, there is still much to do

¹ The “Five Basic Factors in Co-presence” is the study model and the theoretical reflection of having the demonstration significance abstracted from the specific cases of field studies, including the presence of epic traditions, the presence of performing events, the presence of performers, the presence of audiences, and the presence of researchers; and meanwhile, the “co-presence” of these five basic factors is required, in order to establish the interactive research vision of “Narrative Context - Performative Field” of achieving the field intersubjectivity, and to create an operable working model between the objects of study and the researchers. See details: Bamo, Q. 巴莫曲布媻 and Liao, M. 廖明君 2004. “Tianye Yanjiu de Wuge Zaichang (Five Basic Factors in Co-presence for Field Study: An Interview).” *Minzu Yishu* 《民族艺术》 (*Ethnic Arts*) 2004(3).

with regard to the field bases, digital archives, information sharing, resource integration, coordination mechanisms, degree education, and international communication, and so on. The formation of an epic academic community still needs to break through the discipline barriers, and only when the dialogue and communication between folklore, folk literature and art, ethnic literature and classics, linguistics, and anthropology is further strengthened can the vision be broadened, differences be integrated, and the turn of the academic paradigm be truly achieved.

Indeed, the construction of epic studies in China is a long-term systematic project that will face many challenges. In the international context of epics, how to send more “voices” of Chinese scholars, how to let more tradition-bearers of ethnic minorities maintain and persist in the cultural ecosystem of epic traditions, how to let the diversified polyphony of epics in China “never age and never perish”, all of these need to be further “questioned”, and the questions need to be actively “answered”.

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