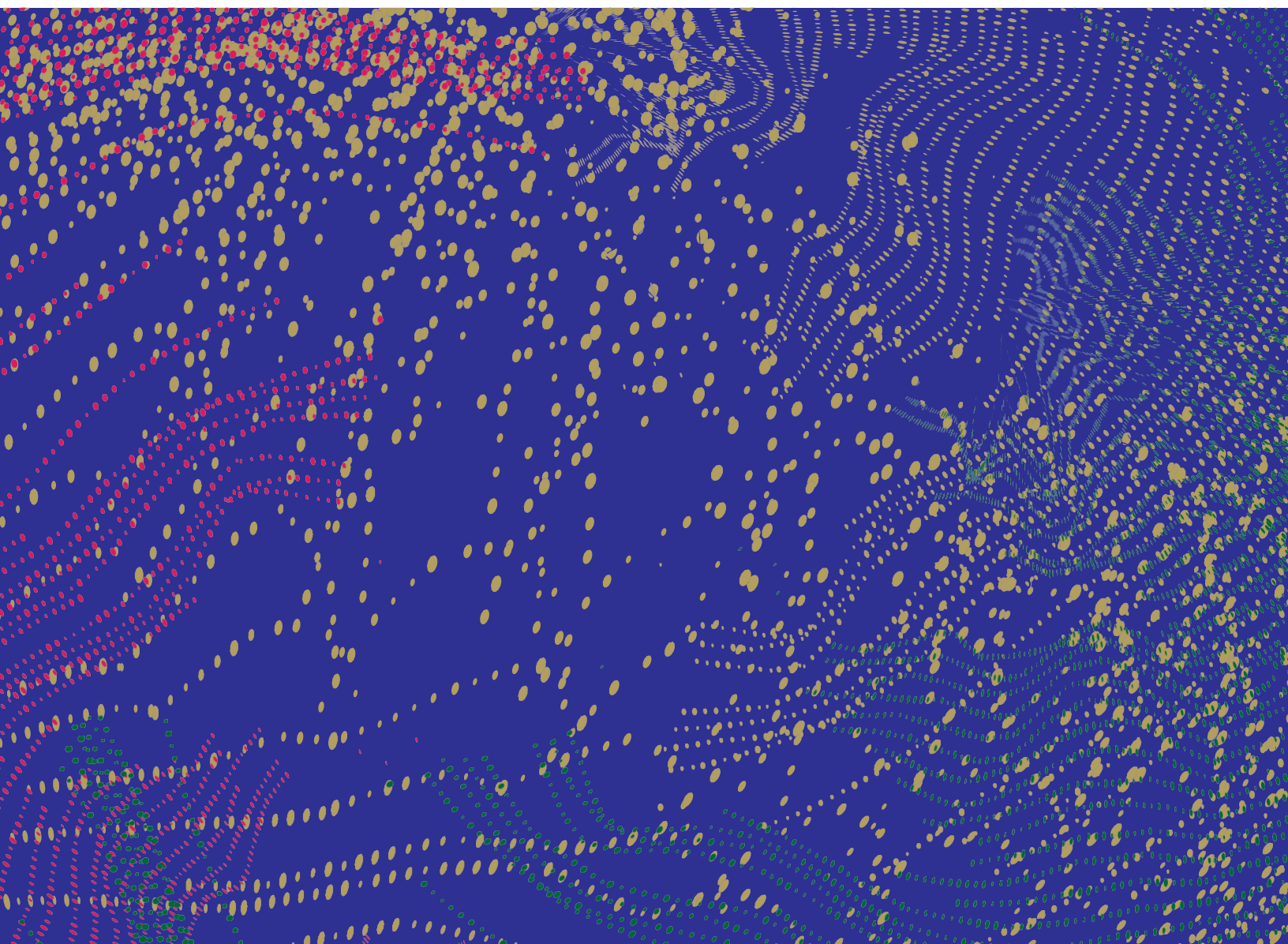


The World Humanities Report

Ethnic Minority Literature in China

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Ethnic Minority Literature in China

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China is a multiethnic country, and the Chinese literature is the literature of a multiethnic country.¹ Although the concept of ethnic minority literature didn't come into use until the early 1950s in China, historically, differing ethnic groups within populations have gone through complex divisions, assimilations, and migrations, coming together to form a historical phase of multiethnic symbiosis. Some of these ethnic groups, once vigorous on the historical stage, have disappeared within the long flow of history, such as the Ruoran and Xianbei. Others have evolved through division and assimilation developing into today's ethnic groups. Therefore, within ethnic minority literature studies, there is a consensus that "Chinese ethnic minority literature refers to the literary phenomena of the 55 ethnic minorities living within the borders of China today. It includes the literary phenomena of some minority nationalities that historically existed within the borders of China. It includes these ethnic minorities' oral folk literature as well as written literary creations of literati. It includes literary criticism and achievements in literary theory. The scope of the study of Chinese ethnic minority literature encompasses the study of writers and texts from the above-mentioned ethnic groups, the study of the history of literary development, and the study of literary theories."²

The historical shape and fundamental characteristics of an ethnic minority's literature are decisively shaped by the track of that ethnic minority's formation

¹ Section "Ethnic Minority Written Literature" of this essay was written by Liu Daxian, and section "Ethnic Minority Folk Literature" was written by Chao Gejin. For a more complete review of the literary activities of ethnic minority literature, see Liu Daxian, "70 Years of Research on Written Literature of Chinese Ethnic Minorities" [in Chinese], in *70 Years of New China Literature Studies*, ed. Chao Gejin, Liu Yuejin, and Chen Zhongyi (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2020), 284–326.

² Chao Gejin, "The Concept, Object, and Scope of the Discipline of Chinese Ethnic Minority Literature" [in Chinese], *Studies of Ethnic Literature*, no. 2 (1998): 3.

and development, its natural and social conditions, and its language and cultural traditions. The features of their productive life, such as hunting and gathering, fishing and forestry, nomadic herding and agriculture, all create the rich and varied literary scope of the ethnic minority in perfect accord with their particular natural environment and cultural style.

From the aspect of literary production, the literature of each of China's ethnic minorities can roughly be divided into an oral tradition of folk literature and written literature produced by authors. Currently, there are more than 130 languages spoken by the various ethnic minorities within the borders of China. Of those, only 10 percent has a currently written ethnic script. The general situation is one of many languages but few scripts. Accordingly, we observe that orally created and transmitted literature occupies the lion's share of ethnic minority literature throughout the nation. This article will be in two parts, sketching out, in a very rough manner, the status of research and general trends of ethnic minority authored literature and folk literature.

Ethnic Minority Written Literature

The study of ethnic minority literature is intimately related to the Chinese masses and the Chinese Communist Party's process of putting into practice the revolution of moving from old democracy to new democracy. It was established in the historical process of achieving national liberation and national independence and moving toward socialist reform and construction. It is an integral part of the project of organizing the multiethnic domestic cultural heritage and planning for future literature of the newly arising People's Republic of China. Its birth and development possess a clearly political nature, showing the attempt of the socialist state to integrate "traditional culture," containing its varied sources, into the "modernity program," that had been visualized since the Enlightenment, particularly by socialism, and in so doing, forging the intent of a new cultural politics. This intent and its practice are implemented in a series of literary knowledge productions, the establishment of literary institutions, and literature organization movements. These movements will link historical experience with actual transformation, social revolution with literary revolution, and they will bake the principle of socialism into the literary thought and knowledge production of ethnic minorities.

In the seventy years since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the understanding and production of knowledge and ideas of ethnic minority literature have occasionally fluctuated unevenly, but they have always

been delicately connected to the trends of the era. As a product of socialist political equality and cultural justice, ethnic minority literature seeks “positive diversity” both within and beyond the multiethnic, united nation, taking into account the dialectic between principle and propensity at different historical stages.³ This provides inspiration for the pluralistic universality supplied by Chinese literature in a global context to world culture.

Between 1950 and 1952, the State Council of the Central People’s Government took the lead in implementing a series of ethnic minority–related efforts, including establishing eight ethnic minority colleges and universities, launching large-scale ethnic histories, social surveys, and ethnic minority identification work. Critically, from 1956 to 1959, through a series of social projects and scientific research, the government-organized historical, social, and linguistic surveys of ethnic minorities cultivated a cadre of researchers in ethnic minority languages and literatures. From the form of work to specific methods, from the construction of personnel reserves to the experience of collecting and organizing, this socialist cultural practice, which has the characteristics of cultural investigation, collective collaboration, and comprehensive thought, comprises the prototype and foundation of the study of ethnic minority literature.

From the 1950s to the 1990s, the study of ethnic minority literature underwent two major paradigm shifts. First was the systemization and organization of ethnic minority literature. Following the convening of the First Congress of Literary and Art Workers, “fraternal ethnic literature” was put on the agenda, and then the Institute of Literature of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and other related research institutions began to be set up, and the work of collecting and organizing the heritage of ethnic minority literature began. The main work of these research institutions has been focused on writing both a general history of ethnic minority literatures and surveys of the literature of each ethnic group. The guiding concepts of these texts was to follow the standard of equality, unity, and coexistence of people’s literature and art, as well as the stages of revolutionary history. These texts have the traits of combining social history and literary history. At the same time, the traits of minority “pan-literature” (compared to elitist “pure literature”) are shown in the production and criticism of ethnic minority film and video.

³ The confluence of principle and propensity is an idea from the late Ming scholar Wang Fuzhi. Principle [*li*] refers to rules and even natural processes of a thing, while propensity [*shi*] is the inevitable trend of a thing that cannot be altered. Only when those things come together can political (and other) action be successful.—Trans.

The second major paradigm shift has been the transformation of late revolutionary discourse toward the discourse of modernity at the end of the 1970s. With the advent of the era of reform and opening up in the late 1970s–early 1980s, the study of ethnic minority literature, which had been interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, was revived, and the writing of ethnic minority literary histories and literature surveys were renewed, but they shifted from histories of the literature of a single ethnic minority to overall comprehensive studies. The dominant discourse of unification in the nation has shown a firm continuity, and the uninterrupted image of a multiethnic China as a national image has been the intention of the Institute of Ethnic Literature from its founding in 1980. With the construction of universities and research institutes, the terminology of ethnic minority literature has gradually shifted from “folk literature” to “ethnic literature,” freeing itself from the discipline of folk literature and art to seek its own disciplinary principles. In the meantime, the creative scene of ethnic minority literature has shown a massive surge. The works of emerging minority writers have led to the rise of attention, thus triggering thoughts on the subjectivity of ethnic minority literature and stimulating the reexamination of some modern writers of ethnic minority origin (such as Lao She and Shen Congwen) from the perspective of ethnic culture and ethnic psychology.

By the 1990s the construction of ethnic literature disciplines and personnel training in ethnic colleges and universities had advanced step by step, and the discipline gradually prospered. Central ethnic minority universities and regional ethnic minority universities include Northwest Minzu University, Southwest Minzu University, South Central University for Nationalities, Dalian Minzu University, and North Minzu University. Regional colleges and universities include Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities, Guangxi University for Nationalities, Qinghai Nationalities University, Xizang Minzu University, Guizhou Minzu University, Yunnan Minzu University, Hubei Minzu University, and Sichuan Minzu College, among others. They have taken advantage of their respective geographical and linguistic conveniences to offer relevant courses in ethnic minority literature and train specialists in ethnic minority literature research. Through this, some previously unappreciated studies such as aboriginal literature and comparative study of ethnic minority literature have gradually emerged. This discipline also radiates to other regional institutions such as Guangxi Normal University, Inner Mongolia University, Inner Mongolia Normal University, Yanbian University, Xinjiang University,

PXinjiang Normal University, Yili Normal College, and Ningxia University, and even in some comprehensive institutions that originally did not have ethnic minority literature disciplines such as Sichuan University, Soochow University, and Nankai University relevant majors and researchers have also been found.

In 1988 Fei Xiaotong proposed the theory of pluralism of the Chinese nation. This expression and the general force of cultural consciousness have become the basic cognitive framework for the study of Chinese ethnic minority literature. It has balanced the tension between national political discourse and individual aesthetic discourse, allowing the concept of the Enlightenment and that of pluralism to go hand in hand. From the “beauty of each” in the history of ethnic minority literature to the “beauty of the common” in a comprehensive and comparative perspective, the study has been effectively expanded at both the historical and practical levels. The direct impact of this thinking is seen in the Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ project “On the Contributions of Chinese Nationalities and Their Interrelationships,” which was a major topic of the National Philosophy and Social Science Plan during the Ninth Five-Year Plan period (1996–2000). It later became the most important paradigm for interethnic relations after the revolutionary paradigm of people’s literature and art. This is also the outcome of an integration of the “great unification” tradition of politics and religion, the historical legacy of the dictum “Alter their education, but maintain their customs. Smooth out their political systems, but keep what is suited to their situation”⁴ as a governing policy. This is similar to the modern political principle of a “people’s republic” and the modernized concept of “alter their customs.” This has led to the interrelated study of ethnic minority literature in ancient times, including such concepts as “Hua [Chinese] and Yi [foreigner] as One Whole”; ethnic minority clan literature; ethnic integration in the Wei, Jin, and Northern-Southern Dynasties, Liao, Song, Jin, and Yuan dynasties; and the literature of the Qing dynasty bannermen.

It is worth mentioning that after the mid-1980s, with the introduction of various modern Western academic trends, the grand narratives of liberation and revolution gradually faded and moved through changes toward the scientific and the linguistic. There was also the introduction of various “post” academic

⁴ The standard English translation is: “Their training was varied, without changing their customs; and the governmental arrangements were uniform, without changing the suitability (in each case).” See Confucius, *The Book of Rites*, ed. Dai Sheng, trans. James Legge (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 56.

concepts that came after structuralism, such as postmodernism, deconstructionism, postcolonialism, new historicism, feminism, and so on. The introduction of these theories has greatly changed the perception of Chinese academics on politics, history, society, and literature. While there is a direct connection between the study of ethnic minority literature and mainstream ideology, it cannot help but be influenced by the overall mood, and while the transformation of concepts is slow and diffuse, it seems to be inevitable. Thus, within the general framework of “diversity within unity” in the study of ethnic minority literature after the 1990s, we can see a kind of symbiotic diversity that implies a slight wavering of the unity. If diversity within unity is a manifestation of socialist cultural diversity based on mainstream core values, then along with the rise of the market, neoliberalism, and consumerism, a cultural pluralism based on liberal concepts also emerged in the 1990s. At the turn of the century, a clamor of voices emerged with different discourses and values, and with them came a postmillennial pluralist paradigm of ethnic minority literary studies and its involution. On the one hand, it expanded freedom and increased tolerance. On the other hand, ethnic literary studies also contributed to the enthusiasm for difference and brought about an orientation toward culturalism.

The first few years of the twenty-first century witnessed a dramatic turnaround in the study of ethnic minority literature in the Chinese academy. The impact of the planned economic reform on the humanities and social sciences as a whole has caused a decline in the creation and research of minority literature lacking market benefits, and apart from a handful of studies run under the auspices of central research institutions, few significant research results emerged from local ethnic minority colleges, research institutions, and literary associations. The concept of cultural diversity and the discourse of intangible cultural heritage have become important internal factors for the legitimacy and vigorous development of ethnic minority literature research in the new century. After 2009 ethnic minority literature has received increasing attention, both domestically and internationally, in academia and at the level of popular culture. There are many aspects to this. In terms of policy, it has benefited from the government’s increased attention and funding to border and ethnic issues due to the real-world symptoms that have emerged. From the point of view of the concept itself, the increased attention stems from the formation of a consensus on cultural diversity in the context of globalization. In terms of the development of the academic lineage itself, the study of ethnic minority literature has increasingly gained disciplinary consciousness and pursued its own subjectivity,

and a large number of people in the field are increasingly ethnic minority scholars. It is no longer predominantly Han Chinese. And from the point of view of the market, ethnic minority literature also has the potential to become a kind of consumer culture with symbolic value, which, from the perspective of dissemination and the market, also stimulates research. Through the cooperation of many, the top-down planning and assistance meshes with the bottom-up self-analysis. In this way everything comes together at the right time to transform the academic tradition, with even those who gaze on from abroad also pitching in. The study of ethnic minority literature has rapidly moved into a flourishing era of swift development and divergent discourse in the new century.

On the track of research and literary creation, the journals *Studies of Ethnic Literature* and *Minzu Literature* are both uniting their efforts to develop ethnic minority literature into multiethnic literature. The idea behind replacing ethnic minority literature with multiethnic literature is not simply a semantic game. The aim is to promote interdisciplinary dialogue within the study of ethnic minority literature and to distill a theoretically radical proposition from the perspective of minority literature and to interpret the classical concept of seeking harmony, not sameness as not sameness and harmony of the twenty-first century. This includes the dialectic between sameness and difference. The view of a Chinese multiethnic literary history has been refined from the practice of writing minority literary history and literary surveys for half a century. It can be summarized as a pluralistic symbiosis in terms of being multiethnic (in language, place, culture, psychology, beliefs, and traditions), multi-literature (in form, genre, and aesthetics), and multi-narrative (in different ways of writing history). It is thus not only an ethnic viewpoint, but also a Chinese national viewpoint. This has greatly enriched and even rewritten the established thinking about Chinese literature, Chinese literary history, and even Chinese cultural history.

At the same time, regional ethnic minority literature studies, which integrate locality and ethnicity; minority women's literature studies, which introduce gender theory; minority native language literature studies; Taiwanese ethnic minority literature studies; ethnic minority literature translation, dissemination, and media studies; and the emerging online ethnic minority literature studies among others have also emerged in profusions from different paths. The literature of less populous ethnic minority groups has also emerged as an academic proposition in the new century. One can observe that with the strengthening of China's overall national power, the study of ethnic minority literature,

just like other disciplines in the humanities, has shared in the dividends from reform and opening up and economic development, has received relatively ample funding and support, and so has developed significantly. This is particularly evident in the publication of the Studies on Chinese Ethnic Minority Languages and Cultures series, the Studies on Literary Theory and Ethnic Literature series, the Studies on Minority Literature series, and the Studies on Chinese Multiethnic Literature from the Perspective of Diversity within Unity series, among others, as well as the appearance of a new generation of scholars.

However, among the vigorous research results, a large part of the methodologies and paradigms (such as women's literature, identity, and media studies) are transplanted from mainstream literary disciplines, and there is also the problem of the "involutionization" of research discourse: due to a lack of theoretical innovation and breakthroughs in paradigms, research is increasingly limited by established thinking and inherited academic routines. Much of the research results remain within layering of data, accumulation in quantity, closed-off intensive work, and isolated inward development, without any horizontal development or qualitative leaps. There is no ability to influence or dialogue with contemporary literary research beyond the discipline of ethnic minority literature discipline, and so the function and significance of cultural production is lost. Facing this situation, the propositions of ethnic minority literary studies as Chinese studies, a literary republic, and a holistic view of oral poetics have challenged and renewed the concept of literary studies as a whole. It has moved away from the singular form, function, and meaning of oral or written literature and toward an investigation of a comprehensive vision of literary life. Without doubt, this is a return to the "pan-literature" concept that arose at the intersection of the real situation of the literature of each ethnic group and the rise of ethnic minority literature. In an era of mixed media and in the face of the ever-changing literary reality, such a transformation is inevitable and will promote a new round of integration of disciplines, methods, and theories.

The trends of general development in ethnic minority literature research in the last four decades have run from the earliest top-level plans with their interest in integration to the pluralistic symbiosis since the 1980s and then to the combination after the division and reorganization following the first decade of the new century. From the writing of ethnic literary histories and literary surveys to the literary criticism of writers' texts, from the introduction of various ideas and methods to the foundation of the theory of diversity within unity and the emergence of a multiethnic view of literary history, the study of minority

literature has increasingly broken out of unidirectional research paradigms, broken through disciplinary frameworks and conceptual constraints, and shown regional alliances, horizontal disciplinary complementary relationships, and multimedia and cross-cultural communication.

The study of ethnic minority literature has never been a discipline of “pure literature,” established on the basis of aesthetic autonomy. It has been closely related to political identity, social transformation, and the changes of the times. From its beginning, it has had the characteristics of a national cultural survey and dissemination, a literary organization and construction, a literary education and enlightenment. The understanding of “literature” also carries with it the concept of “pan-literature,” or one might say, a “grand view of literature.” After a period of simplification by modern Western literary concepts in the 1980s, the current renewal within a blended media context allows the textual meanings of images, sounds, performances, and rituals beyond the written text appears, turning ethnic minority literature into a kind of “miscellaneous literature.” This is more in line with the actual shape of Chinese literary existence, and it in turn will gradually affect the iterative renewal of research paradigms and even of cultural concepts. No literary study is decided by some kind of pure individual interest that transcends historical practice. The foundations of the legitimacy and rationality of ethnic minority literature are based on the local cultural practice in place since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. This practice is dedicated to the carrying on and promotion of multi-ethnic traditional culture on the one hand and the creation and development of new cultures on the other. In terms of disciplinary productivity and possibilities, the study of ethnic minority literature attempts to construct a system of theoretical discourse with Chinese dignity and Chinese style, which provides multiple perspectives and dimensions for reviewing history and looking toward the future. It will have profound meaning and serve as a vivid inspiration for the entirety of the humanities and social sciences research methods and renewal of concepts, for understanding the history and practice of each of the cultural exchanges and integration among each of China’s ethnicities, and for imagining and planning the long-term cultural renewal.

Ethnic Minority Folk Literature

Ethnic minority folk literature has developed in parallel with the study of written literature of ethnic minority writers. After the 1950s many ethnic minorities had their first generation of writers publishing in their native languages. Two

such examples are Dong Xiuying of the Va people and the phenomenon of the first generation of writers of the Gelao, which has only a short history. In the literary history of these ethnic groups, we can see that the overwhelming majority is oral literature, and even when there is written literary activity in these ethnic groups, one finds many connections to oral literature.

Among those peoples who have been using writing for hundreds or even thousands of years, such as the Tibetans and Mongols, the use of writing has also been the privilege of a small group of people, such as nobles and monks, with over 90 percent of the population being illiterate. The vast majority of people involved in the literary activities of these peoples is the illiterate population, and the main body of literature is the folk literature transmitted orally. Therefore, although these peoples can be regarded as a writing people, in terms of language and writing, the common situation is still that the oral overwhelms the written.

In contrast to the Han literary tradition, a holistic examination of Chinese ethnic minority literature as a field reveals that ethnic minority literature is characterized by the following characteristics.

First, the languages spoken are diverse. There are a total of more than 130 languages used by ethnic minorities, belonging to Sino-Tibetan, Altaic, Indo-European, South Island, and South Asian language families. In line with the richness and diversity of languages, various local literatures are extremely developed, such as holboo (Mongolian folk art), aken aytes (Kazakh playing and singing), and kezhi (Yi oral debates), among others. Therefore, the literature of ethnic groups in one country shows a rich diversity of language use situations. The language barriers between the various ethnic groups bring great difficulties to the literary exchange. At the same time, there are also many examples that show that folk literature can be spread across ethnic boundaries to other ethnic groups over long distances, such as *The Epic of King Geser* being quite popular among Tibetan, Mongolian, and Turkish ethnic groups. Geographically, the story of Geser spread from the Tibetan Plateau all the way east to Lake Baikal, west to India, Nepal, Pakistan, and other countries.

Secondly, the situation of China's ethnic minorities in terms of religious beliefs and folk customs is fairly complicated. The people of some ethnic groups generally belong to the same religion, such as the Dai, the Blang, the Tibetan, the Hui, and the Uyghur. In the literary activities of these ethnic groups, the profound influence of religious culture can be clearly seen. In some cases, the influence from religion is even dominant. A necessary prerequisite for the study

of the literature of these ethnic groups is a deeper understanding of their religious situation, otherwise it is difficult to interpret their literature in depth. *King Yalu* of the Miao people of Mashan in Guizhou Province is studied as an epic poem, but as a recited text at a funeral, its main function is to lead the spirits of the dead back to the homeland of their ancestors, so its literary nature serves the faith.

Thirdly, it is folk literature that dominates the literary mainstream. There are relatively large differences among ethnic groups in terms of humanistic written creation. Although oral and written have worked in parallel in some ethnic groups, the general rule is that orality overwhelms the literacy. For example, in terms of numbers, poetry from Mongolian monks, biographies of monks, and historical literature can't be mentioned in the same breath as heroic epics, narrative folk songs, and the like. What the broad masses are familiar with on a daily basis is basically folk literature. From another point of view, not a small number of types of folk literature have local ethnic characteristics, such as the Kazakh aken aytes, Mongolian holboo, and so on. On the other hand, the creation of written literature is sometimes borrowed from other ethnicities; for example, there are many examples of literary groups in the southwest learning from the peoples of the Central Plains in the creation of their literature. The Mongolian novels of (Vanchinbalyn) Injinash *One-Story Pavilion* and *The Chamber of Red Tears* were directly influenced by the Qing dynasty writer Cao Xueqin's *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Fourthly, because the division of labor between social differentiation and literary forms is not yet sufficient, it is common for both literature and history to be indistinguishable from each other and also for literature and art to be indistinguishable from each other. Literary activities in the life of the people are often not primarily entertainment activities or aesthetic activities, but social life events, weddings, funerals, or events inlaid within a ritual activity or as a component part of a rite. For instance, the Mongolian people hiring singers to chant *The Epic of King Geser* in order to drive away evil spirits and ward off disasters is a vivid example of the close integration of literature and life.

Fifthly, the producers and consumers of folklore are the general public themselves. It is rare to see professional storytellers who make a living from folklore performance. Because of this, these literary production activities have an expression more in the style of the group. Of course, outstanding oral poets or storytellers also develop their own personal style of expression in their literary activities over the years. Literary producers are not only outstanding language

artists; they often have multiple social identities at the same time. For example, they might also be songwriters, priests, shamans, ritual directors, and more. Moreover, their roles in literary activities often change, with singers leaving the performance field and becoming audiences. Some audience members enter the center of the performance field and become narrators in their turn.

Sixthly, the study of ethnic minority folk literature, the discovery of new materials, and the interpretation of theories often happen at the same time. That is to say, the data collection and theoretical discussion often progress in sync or are intertwined. The prevalence of this kind of research, which is close to ethnography, is related to the paucity of already discovered literary materials and also directly related to the discovery of a large number of new materials. The lack of accumulation of materials in the past is due to at least the following reasons: the neglect and disdain for the culture of the lower classes and the borderlands caused by the sense of social or cultural superiority, the difficulties in recording due to the limitations of technical means and language barriers, and the disdain and neglect for the language and art of the lower classes caused by the long-standing tendency to emphasize the written word over oral transmission in the education system.

The following is a brief outline of the development of ethnic minority folklore research in the past thirty years, in terms of the establishment of material studies, institutional settings and institutional arrangements, multidisciplinary interrelationships, major topics, international dialogue and exchange, and a few issues of intangible cultural heritage.

The large-scale unearthing and arrangement of folk literary materials is related to the communist ideology's recognition of the social status and role of the masses. The literature on the earlier times that sang the praises of emperors and kings, generals and ministers, and scholars and beauties was considered unsuitable for the requirements of literature and art of the new China, so folk literature that glorified the labor, life, and feelings of the working people was advocated and promoted. From the Yan'an literary and art movement to the new folk song movement during the Great Leap Forward Era, to the large-scale collection and collation of folk literature and art materials starting in the 1980s, all of these efforts were developed with this in mind. In the field of ethnic minority literature, along with the investigation of the social and historical activities of ethnic minority groups, a large number of fine works of ethnic minority literature and art were adapted, processed, and promoted to produce a national impact, such as folktales "Ashima," "Liu Sanjie," and "Gada Melin."

Since the 1980s, the nationwide publishing project for *A Chinese Folk Stories Collection*, *A Chinese Folk Song Collection*, and *A Chinese Proverb Collection* (later called “three collections” in academic circles) has been in full swing, and its results have become a large-scale collection of materials rarely equaled in human history. All told, two million people have participated in the project nationally, and the collection has yielded more than four billion characters worth of material. In addition to the nationwide planning and publication, a staggering number of various folklore anthologies have been published in different regions. Among them, the literary materials of each ethnic minority group in the areas they inhabit have also been mapped, researched, and collected more fully. With the “three collections” before us as a model, later work of organizing and publishing materials in the ethnic areas has reached an unprecedented level in terms of scale and ambition. Due to limited space here, I will provide only a few examples to suggest the rest: *The Collected Naxi Dongba Ancient Texts: An Annotated Translation* of the Naxi people is massive at a hundred volumes. *The Classic of the Bimo of the Yi People: An Annotated Translation* has 106 volumes. The Tibetan *Epic of King Gesar* has been published in dozens of multivolume series, such as *The Gesar Artist Samdrup’s Narrative Song* (in Tibetan), which has been published in forty-five parts. In 2019 the huge three-part, 30-book *Gesar Library*, edited by the Northwest University for Nationalities, was published in multiple languages. Ethnic minority regions such as Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Inner Mongolia have published large collections of materials, making it a magnificent landscape for the collection and publication of minority literary materials. Recently, the Chinese Folk Literature Series led by the China Federation of Literary Circles has been launched, and by the time it is completed, we will see the appearance of another large volume of publications.

In the 1950s and 1970s ethnic minority folk literature was a kind of “work on the front lines of literature” in terms of promotion mechanisms and focus, but from the late 1970s, the systemization of the discipline of ethnic minority literature was on the agenda. The following year, the Institute of Ethnic Minority Literature (later renamed the Institute of Ethnic Literature) of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was established. It is no coincidence that academic groups and national academic institutions were established in quick succession, indicating that the academic community had realized that ethnic minority literature, as a discipline with fairly clear boundaries, limited to specific ethnic groups, and with linguistic specificity, should make its official debut. It was also during this period that graduate students in the field of ethnic

minority languages and literatures began to be enrolled, training as professionals in this discipline. The year 1983 saw the launch of the journal *Studies of Ethnic Literature*, which can be seen as a sign that the institutional setup and platform of the discipline had begun to take shape. The Department of Ethnic Minority Literature, which was subordinate to the Institute of Ethnic Minority Literature, began to enroll master's degree students after a short preparation period, and a few years later it earned the qualifications for and began to enroll doctoral students. Among the series of disciplines established by the Ministry of Education, ethnic minority literature has gained steady development as a secondary discipline under the primary discipline of Chinese language and literature. The compilation and publication of the *Encyclopedia of China—Chinese Literature—Minority Literature Sub-volume* (first edition of which was published in 1984) can also be regarded as the evidence that the subject of ethnic minority literature has taken its place in the national academic landscape.

In terms of the basic theory of the discipline and the academic research paradigm, until the early 1980s, the basic theory of folklore literature and accompanying reference materials from the Soviet Union were dominant both theoretically and methodologically. V. Kraevskii's *Introduction to Soviet Oral Literature* and A. M. Astakhova's *Introduction to the Creation of the Soviet People* (both translated by Lian Shusheng and published by Dongfang Shudian in Shanghai in 1954) were regarded as models at that time. Later, *An Introduction to Folk Literature*, edited by Zhong Jingwen, and the accompanying *Selected Works on Folk Literature* (both published in 1980) were a localized synthesis of the type. In terms of political attitude, theoretical and methodological application, and the approach to the terminological system, this textbook inherited the academic ideas that had dominated the field of folk literature up to that time in a complete and systematic way. Zhu Yichu and Li Zixian's *Introduction to Ethnic Minority Folk Literature* (1983), on the other hand, is an effort to inherit and specialize Zhong Jingwen's *Introduction*, which has had a long-lasting influence in the field of ethnic minority folk literature studies.

In terms of the basic pattern and structure of the discipline, Zhong Jingwen has formed several judgments after a long period of reflection. Chinese folk literature and folklore are multiethnic within one country, constituted of Han and ethnic minorities, and in Chinese and ethnic minority languages. Chinese culture is divided into upper and lower cultures, and after the reform and opening up, a middle culture has emerged. Chinese literature is composed of written literature, folk literature, and popular literature. Therefore, in Zhong Jingwen's

literary map, folk literature and minority literature are essential parts. When Mao Xing was in charge of compiling *Chinese Minority Literature* (1983), he further introduced the concept of equality among all ethnic groups and emphasized the need to add the literary achievements of various fraternal ethnic groups so as to correct the biases and deficiencies of the past. This is all in order to build a complete history of Chinese literature that matches the name with reality. In 2003 Yang Yi advocated “the vitality of the periphery” and “redrawing the map of Chinese literature,” and the journal *Studies of Ethnic Literature* promoted a multiethnic literature forum, which can be regarded as more or less a continuation and development in this direction.

The study of ethnic minority folk literature has achieved its development in an open academic system from the very beginning. The scholars engaged in the study of ethnic minority literature come from different disciplines and have different academic orientations. Therefore, the results of their research in the early development of the discipline have been different from each other. Some of them started from materials collection, and their words have a great deal of weight in the interpretation of those materials. Some of them are literature teachers, and they are engaged in the study of folk literature using standard literature research methods, which can make it hard to avoid being incompatible and ineffective. There are also linguists, whose literary research is of the nature of an amateur understudy, although they have also had wonderful results from time to time. There are also scholars from regional cultural studies or cultural anthropology scholars, who combine literary studies with rituals, festivals, sacrifices, and other practices, so that the sociocultural meanings and social functions of literature can be fully analyzed.

From the beginning of the 1980s, the influence of the Soviet Union, and then Russia, has gradually declined, and more open efforts to absorb and adopt theories and methodologies from abroad gained momentum. Important works, mainly from Western countries, were translated and introduced in large numbers. Among the more influential one can cite James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890), Edward Burnett Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1891), Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928), and Albert Lord’s *The Singer of Tales* (1960), which triggered wave after wave of absorption and application. In general, however, research in the field of ethnic minority literature, in dialogue with Western scholarship, has unfolded in different spaces. Chinese scholars have extensively absorbed the theories of various schools popular internationally in the twentieth century in their criticism of contemporary

literature. In the study of classical literature, on the other hand, the traditional bibliographic approach reigns supreme. Although those who use other theories and methods to study classical literature, such as comparative literary methods, have their own achievements, it has been difficult for them to form a unifying direction. In the area of ethnic minority folk literature, the tide ebbs and flows, with each making its own appearance in turn. In the study of ethnic and regional literary traditions, the achievements of some Western Orientalists have become the main object of reference. One could look at German, French, and Russian scholars of Mongolian and Tibetan epics as being representative. The Austrian scholar Walther Heissig's summary of the series of Mongolian epic masters has long influenced the study of Mongolian epic in China. *On the Epic of Gesar and Narrative Singing Artists* by French scholar Rolf Stein has become an essential reference book for scholars of the Tibetan epic. For the basic theories of folk literature, Parry-Lord theory (or oral-formulaic theory) and the related study of oral tradition have been a dominant and influential force in the past two or three decades. Works such as Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, translated by Yin Hubin; John Miles Foley's *Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology*, translated by Chao Gejin; and Gregory Nagy's *Homeric Questions*, translated by Bamo Qubumo, once translated into Chinese, have become texts that those engaged in folk literature studies must often consult. Other Western works introduced to China according to their type are considerable in number and shine in their respective fields. The mythological theories of Ernst Cassirer, the story morphology of Propp, and the epic studies of Lauri Honko all have a large following in their respective topics of study.

In the past two or three decades, the research on ethnic minority folklore by Chinese scholars has also gradually attracted the attention of international colleagues. Take the Institute of Ethnic Literature as an example. Several papers have been published and been influential in the United States, Japan, Russia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Kyrgyzstan, and other countries and regions in recent years. The folklore research works in the US also includes an introduction to Chinese scholars and considers the academic path of the new generation as following in the tradition of Zhong Jingwen and Ma Xueliang, while absorbing the strengths of the Western ethnographic schools, thus forming an integrated approach that has created a stimulating model.⁵ From Japan's Takao Nishiwaki's *Chinese Ethnic Minority Literature* (2001), which featured Chinese

⁵ Mark Bender, review of *Oral Poetics: Formulaic Diction of Arimpil's Jangar Singing*, by Liu Daxian, *Asian Folklore* 60, no. 2 (2001): 360–62.

ethnic minority literature, to the American journal *Oral Tradition*, which in 2002 published an special collection of Chinese oral traditions, more than a dozen scholars from the Institute of Ethnic Literature have appeared in foreign publications. This can be seen as a two-way interaction between someone else's introduction and one's own initiative to go out. In the past few years, the *Journal of American Folklore* in North America and *Epic Poetry Studies* in Russia have published columns with articles on Chinese epic poetry studies. The journal *Cultural Studies Along the Silk Roads*, jointly founded by the Institute of Ethnography and the Institute of Ethnology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, is another platform for further internationalization of Chinese ethnic minority literature.

Since its establishment, the Institute of Ethnic Literature has systematically promoted topics of study in several important directions. The establishment of these topics can be seen as a weather vane for the study of ethnic minority literature: What research is crucial for a newly emerging discipline to gain a foothold in its development? Which topics have the role of laying the foundation of the discipline?

Since the mid-1980s, the Institute of Ethnic Literature has promoted the compilation of the History of Ethnic Minority Literature—Literary Survey series. Through the preparation of literary histories of dozens of ethnic groups, such as the multivolume *History of Mongolian Literature* and the *History of Tibetan Literature*, these histories have begun to address the issue of the representation of the history of the development of ethnic minority literature. This functions, for example, through the discussion of writers such as Sa Dula, Guan Yunshi, Li Zhi, and Cao Xueqin on the issue of ethnic identity, and through exploring the representation of ethnicity and the writing of literary history of non-Han literati in history.

Through the discussion of literary phenomena such as *The Biography of Oghuz Khan and the writer Abai*, they address the issue of common literary heritage of cross-border ethnic groups, and through the periodization of Zhuang literary history with phrasing such as “literature in the King Moyi era,” one investigates the problem of misalignment or correspondence between the periodization of the Chinese dynasties. Therefore, the work of writing literary history is first to sort out the literary heritage and then to solve the problem of how to arrange the relationship between the multiethnic literary histories of a country and how to determine the attribution of literary heritage.

Since its establishment, the Institute of Ethnic Literature has focused on the study of the three major epics of ethnic minorities. Through a long-term inclination and uninterrupted investment of human and other resources, a comprehensive advancement has been made in material collection, text transcription, collation and translation, publication and publicity, research and promotion. In 2009 the Gesar epic tradition and the Manas trilogy (a Kyrgyz epic) were inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, which has greatly enhanced the influence and visibility of the major epics of Chinese ethnic minorities. In the past three or four years, the three epics have been mentioned and recognized in the most important documents of the country and have been successfully ranked among the great classics of Chinese civilization.⁶

The study of literary relations among ethnic groups as a branch of comparative literature has received special emphasis at the Institute of Ethnic Literature, with the intention of remedying the lack of descriptions of literary relations between various ethnic minority groups and Han Chinese, and among various ethnic groups in previous literary histories. The two-volume *Study of the Literary Relations among the Ethnic Groups in China* is a pioneering attempt.

Recently, there are several new developments in the study of minority folk literature. First, the digital archiving of literary materials and the development of metadata standards are being promoted. Second, the deepening and expansion of the study of the oral tradition has added information technology as an important dimension to the previous folklore studies and has also expanded the scope and methodological support of folklore. Thirdly, through the construction of oral poetics, we can provide a summary of the forms of folk literature for the enrichment and development of poetic theory.

UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, and the Chinese government soon joined the Convention as a signatory, committing itself to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in the country. This Convention, together with the World Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) proclaimed earlier by UNESCO, gave a major boost to the folk culture preservation boom in China. In 2011 the Chinese government published the People's Republic of China Intangible Cultural Heritage Law, confirming, at the level of law, the importance of intangible cultural heritage work and the responsibility of all sectors of society. What were folk artists

⁶ Xi Jinping, "Speech at the First Session of the 13th National People's Congress," March 20, 2018.

and artisans may now be intangible cultural heritage (ICH) bearers and practitioners. Among ethnic minority people and cultural workers, the enthusiasm for ICH-related work is often much higher than expected. As an important government task, the operation of various aspects of ICH, such as identification, archiving, research, preservation, protection, dissemination, carrying forward, imparting, and energizing, provides a rare opportunity for the development of minority folklore. For a long period in the future, materials and theoretical work on Chinese minority folk literature will be profoundly influenced by the enthusiasm for ICH protection and related work arrangements.

Minority folklore activities, in real-life settings, are often group activities, events, and ritual practices, so theories and methods from literary disciplines are not always effective. A variety of approaches, such as those from folklore, cultural anthropology, communication and media studies, cultural heritage studies, and sociology, may join in and in some cases dominate the analysis and interpretation of folklore practices. It can be expected that in the future development of the discipline this will still be the general situation of ethnic minority folklore with multidisciplinary participation and multiple technical lines of research.

Translated from the Chinese by David Hull

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