

Oral Narrative Studies in China

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Oral narratives fall into two broad classifications in China. The first is “folk literature,” and the second is urban-based narratives performed by professional or avocational performers.

The field of study focusing on oral literature (*koutou wenxue*) is concerned with traditional genres that tend to be lumped under rather general though not necessarily descriptive headings such as folktale, myth, legend, children’s stories, animal tales, narrative poems, epics, and so forth. These categories, introduced into China from the West (to some extent via Japan) by the early twentieth century and modified to suit Chinese needs by scholars such as the late Zhong Jingwen, are still the basis of the text-based approach to oral literature followed by most scholars and cultural workers in China today. It is assumed that most of these forms of narrative (as well as folksongs) exist and are collected among rural people. In recent decades, massive folklore collecting projects have resulted in the anthologizing of a huge number of texts (rather highly censored in the early decades after 1949) in a wide variety of venues, including newspapers, magazines, journals, books, and book series. At times some were used to promote political agendas and many texts have found their way into a variety of popular media. Moreover, a large number of works have been published as “inner-circulating” documents for scholars only since 1949. In recent years, as strictures have relaxed, most scholars prefer the public forums.

Though the bulk of published materials are “text-based” (sometimes with little or no description of the performance process and context), in recent years a small number of younger, well-positioned Chinese scholars have turned a critical eye to developments in folklore studies in Europe and the United States and have begun experimenting with a bundle of approaches that, if considered from a distance, might be called the “oral pragmatics” school of Western folklore/folk narrative studies. The body of theory constituting this syncretizing approach (which seems pragmatic both in the sense of descriptive methodology and ethnopoetic politics) wields a theoretical tool-kit that includes Parry-Lord oral-formulaic theory, a

performance/contextual/ethnography of communication approach, Lauri Honko's ideas on the "folklore process" and the "process of textualization," reception aesthetics, John Miles Foley's ideas on "traditional referentiality" (and his syncretic approach), and research on the psychophysical implications of performance.

Among the most active of the younger Chinese scholars and editors is Chao Gejin, a scholar of the Mongol ethnic nationality in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. His groundbreaking work on the oral poetics of Mongol epic singing (2000) is the first full-length study of an ethnic minority tradition in China to fully utilize aspects of many of the approaches just listed, introducing translations and explanations of key terms in the text. Major folklore journals in China have in recent years also included translations of what they perceive as key works of Western folklore studies, including a number of key chapters on basic approaches translated from Foley's *Teaching Oral Traditions* (1998). Other innovative voices include those in the productive Bamo Sisters' Studio, a small group of Yi nationality sisters (including Bamo Ayi and Bamo Qubumo) who have helped bring an international profile to the large Yi nationality in southwest China through their studies on oral and written poetic narrative, ritual specialist texts, a recent museum exhibit on material culture at the University of Washington, and a Harvard conference in 2001. The situation of Yi folk narrative studies is exceptional, however, as many groups have a low profile within as well as outside of China and funding for local research organs is inconsistent nationwide. It will be interesting to see where this oral pragmatics approach goes in China, given the large number of local oral traditions still available for study, despite the increasing waves of modernization.

Another large body of oral or oral-connected narrative also exists in China, though its items tend to be classified as "performing narrative arts" (*quyi*) or, when written, as forms of "vernacular literature" (*suwenxue*). These narrative arts, many of which were prosimetric in form and had a musical dimension, numbered over 300 at the end of the nineteenth century. They were (or are) performed in urban and small-town venues (markets, teahouses, or in some places actual "story houses") and in some instances today on radio and television. Some of these traditions have strong dramatic elements, and while most are secular, a few are performed in ritual contexts. Themes (martial or love-related) and stories are often those shared with traditional Chinese opera. These arts have been understudied by Chinese scholars (who until recently often regarded them as low-brow entertainment), with notable works often produced by researchers in local government culture bureaus such as Wu Zongxi (Zuo Xian) in Shanghai and Zhou Liang in Suzhou, who research Suzhou *pingtan* storytelling (Bender

2003). Interest by foreign scholars such as Vibeke Børdahl, who has published extensively on Yangzhou professional storytelling, has helped to stimulate interest in these arts, many of which are in decline due to lack of young performers and audiences.

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