
On Historical View of Multiethnic Literature

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ABSTRACT: With the broadening of “rewriting the history of Chinese literature”, the historiographical approach of Chinese literature attracts more and more academic interest. At the same time, the inter-relationship between ethnic literature and the Chinese literature as a whole is turning into a key point. The paper seeks to explore the multi-ethnic literature history under the context of Yi-xia (sinocentric) China, as well as the multi-ethnic nature of Chinese literature.

KEY WORDS: Chinese literature, multi-ethnic group, view of history

Introduction

Since the winter of 2004, scholars from three “Chinese multi-ethnic literature forums” held in Chengdu, Nanning and Xining stressed the necessity of reviewing Chinese literature from the perspective of multi ethnicity. Without the view sight of this kind, they argued, the basic configuration of Chinese literature cannot be fully understood. This spurred a series of discussion and debates. In my opinion, the simple words like “Chinese”, “literature”, “multi ethnic” and “historical view” have much deeper and underlying meanings which deserve further exploration.

The origin and influence of “national literature history”

Seen from anthropological point of view, writing history for a certain group equals to “field-working” the subject and finishing the ethnography diachronically. On the surface, the writing includes three steps, which are observation, description and explanation. However, the whole process has a lot to do with the relationship between the writer and the written, revealing the self-context of the writer as well as his/her intention of and control over the field. On the one hand, writing the history is closely linked with writing as a creative procedure, on the other, it is fused with the motivation and the literature and the historical view that supported it.

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For the recent years, there is an abundance of work named as “History of Chinese Literature”, most of which are the ethnographical experiments using nation-state and dynasty as their primary component. This prevailing tendency, if traced back to Dou Jingfan’s *History of Literature* (1906) and Lin Chunjia’s *History of Chinese Literature* (1910), lasts for almost a century, and the fruit can be seen as the archetype of national literature. Despite the varieties, the national literature writing throughout Chinese dynasties held many a similarity, such as nationalization of literature, the Chinese-centered history and the Han-centered discourse, etc.

Placing the writing under the historical context, it is clear that its formation was largely influenced by the collapse of imperial dynasty and the burgeoning of nation-state. On academic specifically, it sprang out or the diversion of the local tradition and the reaction of western paradigms. For instance, Liang Qichao (梁啟超), the opponent of Novel Revolution and History Revolution, has re-written the Chinese history and Chinese culture in a new way, encompassing literature as a consisting part of it. In other words, Liang viewed the Chinese literature as an episode of national history, with the reference of western imperial world built upon the basis of nation-state. His real intention is “marry western beauty to empower the Chinese clan.”¹

Therefore, one may wonder, for what reason literature played an important role in the history writing of a nation? What made literature an identifying mark in the frame of national history? As Liang brilliantly pointed out:

A country cannot be fully independent without a spirit of independence, by which countrymen live both morally and politically. The distinctive feature, up from national law and down to the customs or arts, is inherited from one generation to another, and it is precisely the spirit that lay the foundation of the country.

Liang emphasized the distinctive feature of countrymen, and even viewed it as the source of nationalism.² According to the later scholars, Liang’s fundamental theory in his Chinese literature studies is the Sino-centered global culture, and his analysis in east-west comparison has a lot to do with a principle:

*Chinese literature is bound to glitter every time after the acculturation taken place.*³

The aforementioned Hua-xia (華夏) and the closely-related nationalism are crucial in understanding the works Chinese Literature as national literature. Looking back, it featured in state-nationalism, uplifting literature to the study of a country. Throughout the integration, country is made, groups are united, and the Hua-xia tradition is hopefully gaining its momentum in the surrounding of west countries.

Seen from this perspective, the Chinese literature works of this kind is better viewed as part of the enterprise of remaking China, rather than the simple compilation of the past. It created a new genre, showing the tendency of re-envisioning China. It may well be named as “new history” of the modern national discourse from the viewpoint of literary-history. In terms of the “new” nature of the literature, Liang Qichao held that it is able to stimulate the love towards country, to unite the groups and communities, and thus to lay the foundation for China among the

¹ Liang Qichao, *On the Trend of Chinese Academic Thought*, chapter 1. in *Xinmin Congbao*, no.3, 1902, March

² Liang Qichao, *On New People*, in *Xinmin Congbao*, no.1, 1902, Feb.

³ Xia Xiaohong, *Liang Qichao’s Literary History Studies*, in Wang Yao (ed), *Modernization of Chinese Literature Studies*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1996, pp. 1-57.

international competition.⁴ After near half a century, Gu Jiegang (顧頡剛) concluded that the reason why we define it as “new” rests on its relationship with the founding of the Republic and the coming of western influence, of which science and revolutionary historical view marked⁵ In this sense, Chinese “new history”, including Chinese literature is the copy of the nation-state model of the west.

If it is true to say that “all the literature is history”, as Liang Qichao boldly announced, we might have used it in a reversed way: all the history is literature, of which the fruits can be seen as a writing creation. Apart from what is presented, how to write and why to write deserve academic attention. In anthropological view, to better understand the literary writing in ethnographical genre, three key questions are needed: 1. Where is the “field” of the writer, and what are the motives and ultimate goals? 2. What are the problems they gave out? 3. What is the methodology they use to solve the problems?

Retrospective and rethinking of the nationalization of literature

The answer to the first question is: the field of the writing is nation.

The so-called national literature is nothing but the representation of the nationalizing literature, which illustrates itself as geographical border and territory, national system in politics and the nationalism as well. In short, it aims at placing the literary writing of a relatively small group under the broader context of nation. The selected materials, such as authors and literary cases are likened as components of a large building named as “literature made in China”.

It is worth noting that for the Chinese Literary History in the early Republic, the construction aforementioned carried double weight: on the one hand, illuminating Chinese literature, and on the other, building and constructing China within and outside China.

What does “China” mean? As the foundation of national literature, China implies both a structure and a process. Therefore, it is proven to be a challenge joining them in one in the historical representation.

In 1921, Hu Shi (胡適) was assigned to lecture History of Chinese Literature. Several years later, he altered his handout into *History of Vernacular Literature* and had it published. In this book, he firstly made it clear that the history of vernacular literature was actually history of Chinese literature. Comparing with the cases of Italy, Spain, England, France and Germany, he illustrated the significance of “national literature” in the nation-building enterprise. That is to say, despite of the varieties, literary history of this kind, both in motivation and effect, has turned into a consisting part of “constructing China” in the level of social practice. For Hu Shi, in spite of the difference between elite literature and grass-root literature, he undoubtedly put them all into the container of Chinese civilization:

“During the two-thousand-years conquering of Huns, Xianbei, Tuoba, Qiang, Cathay, Jurchen, Mongol, and Manchuria northward, and numerous tribes southward, China used nothing but the ancient civilisation to sinicize these ethnic groups.”⁶

⁴ Liang Qichao, *New History*, 1902, in Collection of *Yinbing Shi*. (Vol.9) Zhonghua Shuju, 1989.

⁵ Gu Jiegang, *Contemporary Chinese History*, Shengli Press, 1945.

⁶ Hu Shih, *History of Vernacular Literature*, Xinyue Press, 1928.

Apparently, what Hu Shi named as “Chinese ethnic groups” refers to Hua-xia, apart from which are the “ethnic minority groups” tied up closely with the words like civilization, conquer, and acculturation. Hu’s discourse implies a dilemma. On the one hand, the “national language” he mentioned referred to the language of the Han, thus the Chinese civilization equals to Han civilization, on which the China as a nation-state has been built. On the other, he viewed the history of two thousand years vertically, mentioning the relationship between Hua-xia and the other minority groups as the civilizer and the civilized, implying (although only slightly) the dynasty based upon the multi-ethnic foundation.

The dilemma of Hu Shi as-a-matter-of-factly is the dilemma of the Republic, which has a lot to do with the definitions of China, of nationalities and of the national history writing. In its early years, the revolutionists advocated for *repelling Manchu and restoring Han* (*pai man xing han* 排滿興漢), aiming at rebuilding a Han-dominated country on the Ming basis. According to this plan, Chinese history is going to be Han history. However, the emphasis turned into *five ethnic groups union* (*wuzu gonghe*, 五族共和) in the later period, with the inheritance of the preceding dynasty’s political paradigm. This naturally brought about the dilemma in defining nation-state and writing the history: how to balance between Chineseness and five ethnic groups? And how to build the Republic as a modern nation-state, while at the same time keep the tradition of the universe (*tianxia* 天下)?

In face of the dilemma, there exist two ways of approaching and solving. The first one accentuates the political adjustment in the nation-building policy. As Sun Yat-sen (孫中山) put it:

*The national union means to melt Han, Manchu, Mongolians, Urghurs and Tibetans into one person and one country.*⁷

Sun advocated the nation union on the condition of Han centred foundation. Another way, presented by Hu Shi, function as the supplementary of the first one given out by Sun. In the wave of vernacular literature, the great assimilating power of Chinese civilisation was chosen as the hallmark of Chinese tradition, succeeded in uplifting Chinese language into national language. Nevertheless, the significance of “nation” dwarfed “union”, and in the case of History of Chinese Literature, the literary fruits of the ethnic minorities got weakened if merely measured by Han language and Han-standard of literature.

This problem kept haunting Chinese literati for a century. Hu Shi can be well regarded as an interim figure in the transformation from the Republic to the New Regime after 1949. Before Hu Shi, the advocacy of Literary and History Revolution was featured by the traditional mode of “everyone be responsible for the prosperity and decline of the country”. With Hu’s “national

⁷ Refer to *Inauguration Statement of Sun Yat-sen*, in *Oriental Magazine*, Vol 8, no. 10, 1912. Related document is *The Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China*: “the territory of the Republic is consists of 22 provinces, including inner and outer Mongolia, Tibet and Qinghai.” According to the *Constitution of the Republic of China* by 1914, the same was presented as “the territory of the Republic follows the late imperial one.”, in Chen Hefu: *Collections on Chinese Constitutions*, vol.2 China Social Sciences Press, 1980, p. 381. In addition, as the *Order of the Republic President* stressed: “since the five minorities unite into one, the land of Mongolia, Tibetan, and Dzungur are the land of the Republic; the people the citizens of the Republic. Therefore, the name of suzerain should be banned from now on.” in *Oriental Magazine*, Vol 8, no. 10, 1912.

literature" however, official authority is unprecedently stressed, paralleling the found of the Republic and scholars' involvement into national polity. In the later years, nation intervened into the writing of literature and history, thus pushed the nationalisation of literature from up to bottom.

During the transformation of this kind, the history of Chinese literature saw again a rotation of writing from official to private and finally back to official. Not unlike the previous dynasty, history of Chinese literature in the new regime served the nation building enterprise, only altering itself a bit by supplanting *Record of History* that used to revere the royal dynasty with the ideological doctrines. This made the writing of literature a necessary pillar supporting the mansion newly-constructed nation state together with philosophy and history. In this mansion, multi ethnic problem deserves further attention and scholar scrutiny.

The extension and breakthrough of ethnic literature

1949's new regime marked the expansion of Yi-Xia (夷夏) paradigm within the multi-ethnic China. Afterwards, Han Chinese was juxtaposed with ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu* 少數民族), exerting great influence on the representation of Chinese nationalities, history and literature. However, it is precisely the juxtaposition of the Han and non-Han that triggered the centralisation of Han as well as the marginalisation of non-Han in the writing of national literature. Two principle lines, largely separated with each other, emerged as the basic type of Chinese literature: one is the Han literature with the Hua-xia focus, and another centered on literary history of the ethnic minorities.

The literary writing of the ethnic minorities, seen from the perspective of cultural diversity, played a vital role in the emotion-expression, mutual communication and the deliverance of memory for certain groups, and thus cannot be easily replaced by any one kind model or even by a so-called homogenised history of literature. Each ethnic literature has its particular and traditional characteristic. In Chinese multicultural tradition, one can find a mixed heritage of literary theory which is related not only to Confucianism, such as "keeping the truth through literature" (wen yi zai dao 文以載道), and Daoist "thinking naturally without human's interfere", but also to Dong people's "lei bao ga, ga bao liu" (speech cannot express meaning, singing can spreading feeling).⁸

It is undisputable that the emergence of ethnic literature since 1950s compensated the absence of "ethnic" color in the previous literary writing. However, there is a series of inadequacies due to the juxtaposition of Han and non-Han. First and foremost, in lack of the above-all-viewpoint from cultural subjectivity; secondly, in lack of the view of seeing from within, and thus thirdly, measuring ethnic literary writing merely by Han standard; last but not least, the multi-lingual literary writing within China was simplified as the generalization of Han literature, so that the non-Han writings, as well as the oral version of literature were put aside.

⁸ It is the transliteration from Dong ethnic language to Chinese, meaning "words are inadequate in expressing; only through singing can one speak thoroughly." See *Dong Ethnic Folksongs*, Guizhou renmin press, 1958 and Xue Liang, "Brief Introduction of the Dong Ethnic Folksongs", in *People's Music*, 1953, Dec. In summary both of their explanation, I therefore define the sentence as "songs speak louder than words". It goes the same with "oux sangx soh, al sangx sais", which means "food breed the flesh, songs the mind". See Xu Xinjian "Five Decades of Dong Song Studies: from Literature, Music to Folklore", in *Ethnic Arts*, 2001, vol.2-3.

The “lack” and inadequacies can be divided into two types of the “represent” and the “represented”. The former is marked by Han literature, ranging from Si Maqian to Liang Qichao, Hu Shi, Zheng Zhenduo, to the contemporary authors of *History of Chinese Literature*. Sino-centered and Han-language-focused, they spoke for the ethnic minority only occasionally, representing the difference between Yi and Xia within the nationalized literature. In contrast, the non-Han writers can be viewed as the “represented” type, whose work offered not only the critic for the Chinese literature as a whole, but also the testing cases for further comparison with the Han-centered literary work at large. Ultimately, they advocated in viewing the literature of the multiethnic country from a broader perspective.

Back to 1950s when the national identity project was about to finish, China showed itself as a multiethnic country. Lao She (老舍), the Manchu writer, spoke under the title of “Storms of the Ethnic Poetry” in the 2nd Meeting of National Peoples Congress of PRC. As he put it, it is far from proper to have Han literature as the representative of Chinese literature, since China is a multiethnic country, and the ethnic groups, as the brothers of Han, have their own tradition of literature. Therefore, he argued that the later literary history should encompass the ethnic literature as well.⁹ As a Manchu himself, Lao She had the experience of the multiethnic society of western world while he travelled and studied abroad. After 1949, he has been appointed as the vice-chairman of Chinese Writers Association, in charge of literary production. In this sense, his idea about history of Chinese literature was labelled as the idea of the “represented” camp. The discourse of his speech was filled with the words like “brotherly ethnic groups”, “multiethnic”, conveying the identification of ethnic literature, and revealing the confidence Lao She felt when comparing the current situation with the past. As he pointed out:

*Ethnic literature is nothing under the oppression of the feudal ruling class. After the establishment of new regime, things have dramatically changed. Ethnic literature was emphasized and developed by leaps and bounds.*¹⁰

Looking back, the ethnic literature in the early years of 20th century has forged a prevailing trend of native language writing apart from the Han scholars’ “frontier studies” and “frontier reports”, presenting the native tradition and expecting the respect and acceptance from the mainstream.¹¹ More than half a century later, the way has expanded thanks to the generation of Lao She. History of multiethnic literature has got further attention, and produced a great deal of path-breaking works. After the publish of *History of Chinese Multiethnic Literature*, authored by Deng Minwen (鄧敏文), and a series of “multiethnic literature” forum, “historical view of multiethnic literature”, the new project is coming for better understanding Chinese Literature and its transformation as a whole.

The significance of “historical view of multiethnic literature”

⁹ Guan Jixin, Manchu Writer Lao She, in CCTV-4, 21st Jun, 2004, <http://www.cctv.com/program/bjjt/20040611/100573.shtml>.

¹⁰ Lao She, *Reports of Ethnic Literature*, 1960. Lao She expressed his pleasure in saying: “The long-buried literary legacies are brought under the sunshine, turning into the spiritual treasure of the globe, and additionally breeds new literature. What a pride for the people of the new regime!” Quotation taken from Guan Jixin (ed), *Classics of the Ethnic Literature in Five Decades, Theory and Critic*, Yunnan Renmin Press, 1999.

¹¹ Yang Hanxian (1913—1998), born in Weining, Guizhou Prov. He was a distinguished scholar in ethnic studies of the Republic, and was appointed vice principal of University of Guizhou and College of Nationalities. His accounts on Miao literature and history are: *Brief History of Miao* (1937), *Folk Songs of Flower Miao in Weining*, *Category of the Flower Miao Song* (1940), refer to *Papers on Miao of the Republic*, reprinted in 1983

The significance of his work, as Deng Minwen put it himself, rests on his analysis of ethnic literary history, situation, practical experience and theoretical moot points from the perspective of ethnic-literature-construction for the first time.¹² Liu Quili (劉魁立) in the preface points out that Deng's work marks the coming of multiethnic literary time, which goes beyond the bipartite division of ethnic history and history of relations. Moreover, Deng's work corresponds to the official discourse declared by The Constitute: "Chinese culture is co-created by multiethnic groups".¹³

In my view, the praise of Deng's work is proper in the sense that it reflects the truth of "co-created". However, it is far from adequate in valuing his work by accentuating its national significance.

Without the combination of historical facts and epistemological approach, the multi-layered significance of historical view of multiethnic literature will be largely one-sided.

First of all, what is multiethnic group? Within the scope of this paper, it means the openness of the object, breaking the accepted paradigm of Sino-centric and the bipartite opposition between Han and non-Han. Secondly, it implies diverse and multiple centres, broadening the space for mutual dialogue. Moreover, multi-ethnic groups consists an entity as a whole, offering a vintage point for the further discussion upon the relationship between Hua-xia and barbarians.

The following question would be: what is the significance of the multi-ethnic historical view? There are two crucial parts, one of which is "historical view", namely the idea towards history, the rest is the relationship between historical view and multiethnic. Not unlike the modern Chinese language, the word of history is remarkably ambiguous. It either refers to the things that had gone and the representation of the past. Roughly speaking, history equals to fiction and story: the past is the past in the sense that it will never reappear, however, by means of representation and narration, the past reemerges. Therefore, "telling the story" combines the double-layered meanings of history, which is regarded as the container of many an element: audience, narrator, materials, context, opinions and the explanation. For the things that had happened in the past, different versions breed different historical texts. Taking ethnic group for example, the multiethnic history refers to the two-way communication of the "single" and the "multi". The famous story of Emperor Huang (黃帝) and Chi You (蚩尤) had various versions ranging from Si Maqian's account, which represents the orthodox historical narration, to the ethnic's account of "the revival of Chi You". Again, the narrations around "the descendent of Dragong" and "the wolf totem", the wax and wane of Yuan, Ming and Qing (元、明、清), even the rotation of nomadic and agriculture show themselves as multi-centred and multi-layered.¹⁴ The tradition of multiethnic history thus gives rise to the multiethnic historical view, and goes far beyond the level of "story". If we see a certain type of historical view from an evolutionary

¹² Deng Minwen, *Historical View of Chinese Ethnic Literature*, (Preface), Chinese Social Science academic Press, 1995, pp. 1—4.

¹³ Liu Kuili, *Retrospect and Prospect*, in Deng Minwen, *Historical View of Chinese Ethnic Literature*, (Preface), Chinese Social Science academic Press, 1995, pp7—15.

¹⁴ In terms of the comparison between the descendent of dragon and the wolf totem, as well as the inter and outer Great Wall, see Xu Xinjian's current project multiethnic culture and tradition. Also refer to Xu Xinjian "Ethnic Identification of the Contemporary Chinese" (in *Ethnic Literature Studies*, 2006, no.4); "Literary Anthropological Interpretation of the Long-River Story" (in *Ethnic Literature Studies*, 2005. no. 3). Additionally, the comparison between Emperor Huang and Chi You is under further research.

aspect, the series of stories that had been told would demonstrated themselves as an transformation from lower to higher stages. However, if the spiral perspective is used when it comes to the history, fictions and stories would be one-version-centred, being constant yet stable. Besides, if the narrator is self-centred, his or her object falls into marginalised otherness, it is the case for both international and nation-state level.¹⁵ The problem that faces up everyone is, whether the context manages to provide the multiethnic perspective so that the transformation between etic and emic is possible? Would it be possible to focus on the represented and thus discover history in the field of otherness? Or should the scholars have nothing to do except for repeating the old story of Hua-xia and “the barbarians without history”?¹⁶ More specifically, does history appear merely by single means of language, documents and writing? Not the oral, ritual, art that also lead to the ultimate of history?¹⁷

This naturally leads one to wonder, what exactly is the multiethnic literature? If it is true to say that the historical view aforementioned implies the multistory, the multiethnic literature shows its significance in literary diversity on the basis of multiethnic. One ethnic group is far from enough to define literature as a whole. Back to the time of Confucius, *Book of Poetry* (詩經) consists of the folk song from more than fifteen countries, encompassing a variety of narration from different groups of people, and thus expanded the definition of poetry by both oral and textual level. However, as *Book of Poetry* gradually being uplifted to Classics, the diverse character of the original text such as the authors, locations and dialects diminished step by step; finally it is replaced by a rather simplified and generalized version.

History is not only the memory of the past, but rather, the foundation of the future. When it comes to story-telling, discourse of different types throughout Chinese history deserves re-envision and rethink in a much broader and deeper context where the interaction and mixture of the discourses are made possible.

To sum up, as Hobsbawm had mentioned in his *The Invention of Tradition*:

“Where the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived nor invented.¹⁸”

The same goes with the ethnic culture: where it is alive, history need be neither copied nor represented.

¹⁵ Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*. Columbia, 1986

¹⁶ Here the typical anthropological representation of non-west ethnic history is used, with the reference of Eric Wolf *Europe and the People without History*, University of California, 1982, and Eric Hobsbawm *On History*, New Press, 1998.

¹⁷ In the international discussion regarding the ethnic culture, some scholars doubted the monopoly of the written presentation, which has largely to do with the understanding of the “multi” and the equality among them. See John M. Roberts, History, International Social Science Journal.3 (1998). In his article Roberts also emphasized that there is not one way for people go back to history.

¹⁸ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger (ed) *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, P.8.

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