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### Introduction: History and Trends of Chinese Folklore Studies

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## INTRODUCTION

### *History and Trends of Chinese Folklore Studies*

Lijun Zhang and Ziyang You

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS ON FOLKLORE DISCOURSE AND practice in contemporary China emerged from our response to the call for advancing and deepening scholarly communication and exchange between American folklorists and Chinese folklorists by introducing Chinese folklore studies to an American audience, especially those who are not yet familiar with Chinese folklore studies through the form of publications.<sup>1</sup> Thus, one of the major purposes of this scholarly work is to illustrate what scholars are working on and what is going on currently in Chinese folklore studies. Contemporary Chinese folklore studies have been opening up to and learning about folklore studies in other parts of the world. The word *folklore* was introduced to China from Japan at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many Chinese folklorists at that time studied in Japan and/or were greatly influenced by Japanese folklore studies. And the interaction of Japanese and Chinese scholarship continues today. Chinese folklorists are also very familiar with various influential American and European theories and methods, such as the older historical-geographic method from Finland and the more recent performance theory from the United States. These methods and theories have greatly influenced Chinese folklore studies. The communication effectively contributes to Chinese folklorists' engagement in the international scholarly discourse and to the self-reflective perspective towards their own disciplinary practices in China. Chinese folklorists' engagement with international folklore academia is even perceived as "the major transformative forces on the discipline" (Li 2015). In the specific case of the interaction between American and Chinese folklore academia, for the last decade, the China Folklore Society and the American Folklore Society have worked together to create a network of institutions as well as professionals and scholars, in both countries, to share both scholarly and professional interests (Kang, Baron, and Wang 2014; Zhang and Song 2017;

Song, Ivy, and Huang 2017). Chinese scholars have been widely exposed to American folklore theories and practices and are becoming familiar with important American folklorists' work. Meanwhile, American folklorists are more frequently interacting and communicating with their Chinese colleagues and making great efforts to bridge folklore studies in the two countries. In this context, the coeditors of this book hope to join these cultural and disciplinary bridging efforts and the international academic dialogue by recruiting a small group of scholars (mostly junior scholars) to write essays on their study areas in Chinese folklore studies.

With this intention this book is a collection that aims at helping American and other international audiences who are interested in folklore, Chinese studies, Asian studies, or any specific topics the authors examine in the book to encounter the related work being conducted in China. The book also attempts to help the readers' general understanding of the trends of recent folklore studies in China. The coeditors and contributors have worked to make that knowledge accessible to non-Chinese-speaking audiences. We are honored to join the first attempts to advance scholarly exchange between China and the world, and it is our hope the publication will foster interests in deeper and wider introduction to and investigations of Chinese folklore studies to an international audience.

To illustrate the theoretical discourses and disciplinary practices of contemporary Chinese folklore studies, especially the research interests and scholarly perceptions of junior scholars, we present five young scholars' case studies based on their own research interests on specific topics in the rapidly changing contemporary Chinese society, where tradition and modernity interactively coexist. The chapters, with their ethnographic case studies, show the dynamics of current folklore studies in China. The volume includes analysis on topics that had long been the dominant subjects of folklore studies in China but have gained new features and new implications in the contemporary political-social context, such as folk songs and myths. There is discussion of topics of great significance in the public sector of Chinese folklore studies that have aroused scholarly interests and disputed discussions across the nation, such as heritage. And contributors have also focused on topics perceived as new fields in Chinese folkloristics but of great disciplinary significance in the current development of Chinese folklore studies, such as urban folklore and women's folklore.

We believe the five selected cases are representative and range across the significant subfields in Chinese folklore studies. The book covers important topics such as urban childbirth, women's gift exchange, folksong



Map 0.1. Map of China. © Daniel Dalet, [https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=11572&lang=en](https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=11572&lang=en).

and its star performer, myth-making, and heritage-making. At the same time, the ethnographic researches have been conducted in various regions in mainland China, including the capital city, Beijing, and rural areas and townships in Shandong, Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Fujian Provinces (see Map 0.1). All the contributors present their ethnographic case studies in their chapters alongside a literature review of Chinese folklore studies relating to their specific case topic.

This book reflects important aspects of current studies on Chinese folklore from the eyes of young folklorists. Among the five contributors, two folklorists received their main academic training in China and the other three received their PhDs in the United States. In particular, Yongyi Yue earned his MA in folk literature at Beijing Normal University (BNU) in 2001 and his PhD in folklore at BNU in 2004. Junxia Wang received her MA and PhD degrees from the Institute of Folklore and Cultural Anthropology at BNU in 2008 and 2011 respectively. Although both scholars received their academic training in China, they spent considerable time in Western countries for academic exchange. Levi S. Gibbs received his PhD in Chinese Literature with a Graduate Interdisciplinary Specialization in Folklore Studies from The Ohio State University, and he has deep connections with Chinese academia and local communities in China. The coeditors Lijun Zhang and Ziyang You received academic training in both China and the United States. Zhang earned her MA in Folklore at BNU in 2009 and her PhD in Folklore at Indiana University–Bloomington in 2014. You earned her MA in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature with a concentration on Folk Literature at Beijing University in China in 2005 and earned her MA in Interdisciplinary Studies: Folklore at the University of Oregon in 2009. She received her PhD in Chinese Literature with a concentration on Chinese Folklore Studies at The Ohio State University in 2015. With contributors who have research and/or study experience in both China and abroad, this book represents some of the primary characteristics of current studies on Chinese folklore, such as the significance of ethnographic field research, the perception of cultural products as social construction, the emphasis on cultural politics and individual agency, and the great attention paid to the social movement of cultural heritage safeguarding.<sup>2</sup>

This book is not intended to be a comprehensive collection of Chinese folklore studies. Instead, it aims to be a snapshot of the various works conducted by young folklorists in China today. In recent years, many excellent special issues and articles on or related to Chinese folklore studies have been

published in English<sup>3</sup> (Chao 2000; An and Yang 2015; Li 2015; Zhang 2015; Baomo, Chao, and Niles 2016; Niles 2016; Zhang and Zhou 2017; Gibbs 2018). These special issues and articles mainly contain contributions by senior scholars in the field, and their works are representative in many areas, such as the intellectual history of Chinese folklore studies, village-based production/trade practices, community-based folk religious practices, mythology, diaspora folklore, oral tradition and living epics, the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, and the faces of tradition in performing arts. In March 2016, *Annual Review of China Folkloristics 2015* (*Zhongguo minsu xue nianjian 2015* 中国民俗学年鉴 2015) (Chao Gejin et al. 2016), the first comprehensive volume to review Chinese folklore studies today, was published in China. This book is the first yearbook in Chinese folklore studies, and a variety of domestic and international folklorists contributed their work to it. It covers all the important genres and subfields in Chinese folklore studies and includes related official documents, literature reviews, commentaries on books, representative papers, excerpts and abstracts of important articles, influential essays, summaries of academic activities, and so on. Those who wish to obtain a comprehensive understanding of Chinese folklore studies today may draw on this edited volume combined with the other recent publications.

Before we present the current trends of Chinese folklore studies and introduce the five chapters, we will first provide a brief history of Chinese folklore scholarship from the early twentieth century to the present so our audience has a better understanding of the trajectory of folklore studies in China as well as particular political, social, and cultural contexts within which the discipline has been shaped and developed.

## A Brief History of Chinese Folklore Studies

China has a long tradition of collecting folk songs, documenting myths (see chapters by Levi Gibbs and Ziyang You), and recording other aspects of folk culture (Zhang 2018). There were edited volumes of collected folk songs, proverbs, jokes, and local customs. However, during the long history before the twentieth century, most of the folk data were scattered in literary, historical, geographical, philosophical, agricultural, and other works. Nevertheless, they are important historical records that provide knowledge about folkloristic practices and beliefs in the past.

While there is a long history of folklore collection in China, folkloristics in the modern scientific disciplinary sense didn't start until the introduction

of the term *minsuxue* (民俗学 folkloristics) from Japan and the national survey of ballads/folksongs called for by the *Peking University Daily* in the early twentieth century. Starting from the early twentieth century, Chinese folklore studies followed an uneven path. During its one-century journey, Chinese folklore studies has been intertwined with political ideologies and social transformations. In the first half of the twentieth century, China went through the First World War, the Second World War, the anti-Japanese war, and the civil war. This turbulent social path brought about radical intellectual movements. Along with these movements, scholars were eager to seek solutions for social problems through disciplinary practices. In the second half of the twentieth century, China went through social transformations under the regime of the Chinese Communist Party. During this time, Chinese society experienced the establishment of the new nation-state, the devastating Cultural Revolution, the Reform and Opening Up, and rapid economic development. Entering the twenty-first century, China has become an important international power and plays a more significant role on the global stage, which also has an impact on the development and transformation of Chinese folklore studies. From efforts to fight against foreign imperialism and seek independent cultural identity in the early twentieth century to the enthusiasm of entering the global system with the international recognition of Chinese uniqueness in the twenty-first century, the scholarship of folklore studies in China, like many other places in the world, has been practiced within these historical and ideological contexts. A fuller understanding of the development of Chinese folklore studies will only be made possible when we examine the paradigms and trends combined with the specific social historical situation at each stage of Chinese society. With our goal as an illustrative volume of Chinese folklore studies, especially for those who are not yet familiar with Chinese folkloristics, the following part will introduce the path of Chinese folklore studies in chronological order. On one hand, we situate the volume chapters in the flow of the whole disciplinary development. On the other hand, the introductory chapter can help the audience understand the related historical terms, concepts, movements, and events they will encounter in the chapters.

*Chinese Folklore Studies before the Founding of the  
People's Republic of China*

Although China has a long history of studying the culture and customs of the common people (Wang 2003), the academic study of folklore in the

modern disciplinary sense is seen as having started at the beginning of the twentieth century. The growing interest in folklore in China in the late 1910s and early 1920s was closely related to the idea of romantic nationalism in the context of political chaos within the nation and the pressure exerted by foreign powers. China in the beginning of the twentieth century experienced radical social and cultural changes brought about by various movements. At this time, the old dynasty was overthrown, and new ideas of democracy and science along with modern sciences and disciplines were introduced to China. Intellectuals began to reevaluate and criticize the cultural traditions that tended to value the elites' culture and ignore the major portion of the population—in this case, the peasants. Some scholars started to turn their attention to the lower class for fresh ideas and energy for cultural change.

In such circumstances, the idea of “going to the people” (*dao minjian qu* 到民间去) became popular among Chinese nationalists (Hung 1985, 10; Zhao 1999). Part of the movement was influenced by the Russian Bolshevik Revolution and Russian populist theories. Li Dazhao, a professor at Peking University and a Marxist who later cofounded the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (*Zhongguo Gongchandang* 中国共产党), played an important role in introducing Russian ideas of the common people to China. He stated that China could not be liberated until peasants were liberated as the majority of the Chinese population was peasants. Like the early romantic nationalists in Europe, Li held a romantic view of village life and peasants. He romanticized the happiness of village life and called for Chinese educated youth to go to the people—in this case the village peasants as the laboring masses—to educate them and at the same time be educated by them. Thus the intellectuals and the laboring masses would bridge the social gap between them and become united (Li 1919). Responding to Li's ideas, a group of students at Peking University founded the Mass Education Lecturing Corps (*pingmin jiaoyu jiangyuantuan* 平民教育讲演团) in 1919 to educate the common people and advance knowledge of the laboring masses. One important member in the corps was Chang Hui, a future editor of *Folk Songs and Ballads Weekly* (*geyao zhoukan* 歌谣周刊) and an influential participant in the early history of the Chinese folk literature movement.

The vernacular movement (*baihua yundong* 白话运动) co-occurred with the “going to the people” movement. It is an anti-traditionalism and anti-elitism movement. The movement attempted to find a new national written language that would revolutionize the traditional elite culture written in classical Chinese. Folk literature in the form of vernacular language was chosen to represent the Chinese spirit and reconstruct a new sense of



national identity. The concept of folk and folk culture was gradually linked with the concept of nationalism (Hung 1985, 17).

The “going to the people” movement and the vernacular movement together were called the New Culture Movement, which is regarded as the precursor of the May Fourth Movement (*wusi yundong* 五四运动). The May Fourth Movement consisted of student demonstrations in Beijing on May 4, 1919, directly caused by the Chinese government’s weak response to the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War. More broadly, it was an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement that marked the upsurge of Chinese nationalism and populism.

Along with the movements discussed here is the folk literature movement, which started with the activity of ballad/folk song collecting. In 1918 some scholars published a letter on the *Peking University Daily* (*Beijing daxue rikan* 北京大学日刊) to call for students to collect ballads and folk songs in their hometowns. In 1920, the Ballads/Folk Songs Research Association (*geyao yanjiuhui* 歌谣研究会) was established at Peking University. Two years later, *Folk Songs and Ballads Weekly*, the first journal of folk literature in China, was created by a group of scholars at Peking University to publish folk songs, ballads, and research papers on folk literature. The scholars came from academic fields such as literature, history, religion, and sociology. Influenced by the various movements mentioned prior, these scholars, regardless of the differences of their disciplinary backgrounds, assigned folklore an ideologically positive value.

In the 1920s, folklore theories and methods were introduced from Western and Japanese scholarship, which had major influences on the development of Chinese folklore studies. At this time Chinese scholars “came into contact with and accepted the view of the (early British) anthropological school of folklore” (Chen 1988, 4). The theory of cultural survivals was applied by Chinese folklorists, and it served well the nationalist’s ideology. Chinese scholars also began to conduct field research to understand folk culture “through folk eyes” (Hung 1985, 168). In 1925, Gu Jiegang and his four colleagues at Peking University organized a survey trip to a temple in the suburb of Beijing to study popular pilgrimage. The three-day survey is regarded by contemporary folklorists as the beginning of field research in Chinese folklore studies (Liu 2008), and it had long-lasting effects on Chinese folklorists’ fieldwork conduct.

From the mid-1920s and 1930s, Chinese folklore studies experienced fast development. Folklore societies were established. Folklorists and other

scholars interested in folklore published books and articles on riddles, folk songs, ballads, mythology, folktales, folk religion, social organization of folk society, and the introduction of theories and methodologies in folklore studies. After the death of Chinese nationalist leader Sun Yatsen in March 1925, China was divided into two parts; the Nationalist Party ruled the south of China while various military warlords obtained power in the north. Internal political pressures and struggles forced many scholars to leave Peking for the south of China. This move led to disbanding the Folk-song Research Society and discontinuing the *Folk Songs and Ballads Weekly* at National Peking University in 1925. However, scholars continued the folk literature movement in the south and expanded it to Chinese folklore movement, with a focus on folk literature as well as folk customs, festivals, beliefs, and so on. The center of folklore studies was shifted from the north to Sun Yat-sen University in the south from 1927 to 1934. The political and social uses of folklore were strengthened during this period. Folklore was not only regarded as the subject of investigation, but as a means to glorify the national spirit and propel social changes. Peking University restored its eminence in folklore studies in 1935, but its reign was soon suspended because of the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War.

The eight-year second Sino-Japanese war, officially regarded as starting from 1937, and the civil war, which lasted from 1945 to 1949, forced most of the academic institutes to move to the border regions in southwest and northwest China. In these regions scholars had opportunities to be exposed to the culture of the minority ethnic groups dwelling in these areas. Scholars of folklore studies, anthropology, sociology, and other related fields developed particular interests in the study of the history, customs, languages, and folk ways of the local people. Folklore study during the war time geographically distinguished between activities in the northwest and those in the southwest mainly due to the ideological differences between the major political forces that occupied the two regions.

During the second Sino-Japanese war, many universities and other research institutes moved to the southwest region where various ethnic minorities lived, which was occupied by the Nationalist Party. The culture and society of the ethnic minorities on the borders were barely touched by Chinese social sciences before the war period. Scholars began to study myths, legends, folktales, folk songs, proverbs, and language among the ethnic groups. They conducted survey-based research, reporting and describing the population, economy, family organization, religion, rituals,

customs, and other aspects of the minority ethnic groups. Analytical work was also conducted based on the newfound and collected myths, folktales, folk songs, and other folk materials.

In the northwest and later in the northeast regions that were under the control of the Communist Party, cultural workers recorded and studied folk literature among peasants and workers. Many of the texts of folk literature they collected were used to serve the communist ideology oriented toward class struggle and the resistance of the ruling class. Writers and scholars recreated folk literature to fit communist propaganda and to educate the laboring masses. The folk artists gained privileged status for being the outstanding representatives of the laboring masses (Liu 2008).

At the crucial 1942 Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature, Mao Zedong, the leader of the CCP, presented his important lecture about Chinese art and literature, including folk literature, and the political and ideological aspects of art and literature were overstated in an unprecedented way. In Mao's opinion, art and literature were primarily ideological expressions, and artists and writers should create their works based on the social life of the folk, including workers, peasants, and soldiers, with the guidance of Marxism. These new and revolutionary contents and forms were the core of art and literature in new eras. Mao continued the focus on the folk and their culture and the anti-Confucian spirits in the Chinese folk literature movement. However, the political and social uses of folklore were executed to extremes, especially after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

In Chinese folklore studies, the relationship between ideology and folk literature or performing arts has been tracked widely in different periods from the Republic of China up to the People's Republic of China (Tianying 1959; Eminov 1975; McDougall 1984; Hung 1985; Holm 1991; Tuohy 1991; Lee 2005; Gao 2010). Of particular relevance is David Holm's work (1991), in which he drew on the New Yangge Movement (*xin yangge yundong* 新秧歌运动) to explore the interplay of ideology and artistic creation in the Shanggan-ning Border Region (*Shanganning bianqu* 陕甘宁边区) in northwest China from 1937 to 1947. He demonstrated how the peasant dance-drama in this region, *yangge*, underwent dramatic political transformations in the hands of the communist propagandists in their attempt to realize the Maoist goal of "facing the masses." His careful study throws considerable light on larger issues concerning both the Maoist line on art and literature and the whole subject of the "Signification of Marxism." He sets this firmly in

the political exigencies of wartime China and in the tensions within the party between the post–May Fourth New Culture Movement intellectuals’ cultural iconoclasm and the conservatism of their rural constituents in the “liberated areas.”

### *Chinese Folklore Studies after the Founding of the People’s Republic of China*

At the beginning of the PRC regime, the nationwide nationality identification (*minzu shibie* 民族识别) was urgently required to serve the legitimacy of the PRC. The act had great political and cultural significance in history and long-lasting effects in contemporary China. Starting in the 1950s, the central and local governments collaborated with scholars to identify the official nationalities, with a list of more than four hundred groups across the country. Deeply influenced by Russian standards to differentiate ethnic groups, the traits applied in the identification were common language and customs, religion, historical roots and continuity, territory, stable community, and self-identification. The work of nationality identification turned China into a multinational state with the majority Han nationality (*Han minzu* 汉族) and the identified fifty-five minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族). The Han is defined in relation to the minorities, and the official identification masks the diversity of people under the categorizations. The Han and the minority groups as “the fifty-six brother nationalities” form the one unified “Chinese nationality” (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族). The collecting work conducted by scholars such as folklorists, anthropologists, and sociologists served the work of nationality identification. For a long time, the official identification of nationalities was the framework under which Chinese folklorists celebrated and studied the diversity and richness of Chinese culture within the scope of a unified multinational country. And cultural tradition became a notion used to help explain “the overall unity of the apparent diversity” (Tuohy 1991, 199). The notion of multinationality within a unified nation has been one of the general assumptions many Chinese folklorists share with the Chinese government ethnic policy and ideology, although now more scholars are beginning to reflect and redefine the notion of nationality (*minzu* 民族).

Meanwhile, folklore studies at the beginning of the PRC had a strong orientation toward the official ideology within the discourse of constructing a new Chinese culture and a new nation-state. One year after the PRC

was founded in 1949, the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Research Society (*Zhongguo minjian wenyi yanjiuhui* 中国民间文艺研究会) was founded with governmental support. Guo Moruo, a famous scholar and revolutionist in China, served as the chair of the society. The vice chair of the society was Zhong Jingwen, a leading scholar who advocated folklore study in China. In his speech at the inaugural meeting of the society, Guo stated that folk literature and art needed to be preserved as heritage and could be used as truthful historical material for the study of social development and history (Liu 1998, 86). This statement perceives folk culture as national heritage that could serve to glorify the newly founded nation-state. Folk literature and art were reified as valuable entities that need to be documented and preserved. Guo believed the documented materials could be used to truthfully reconstruct national history. In 1951, Zhong Jingwen published *Oral Literature—A Important National Cultural Heritage* and expressed similar ideas (1951). He defined folklore as the culture of the laboring masses (primarily the peasants and workers who constituted the lower class in China), in contrast to the elite culture of the upper class. Therefore, he regarded folk literature as an important cultural form for the construction of a new Chinese culture. In 1953, Zhong began to teach folk literature and trained graduate students in the field of folklore studies at Beijing Normal University. At this time folklore studies mainly focused on folk literature and was often considered a subfield of Chinese literature study.

Some scholarship reflects the relationship between political hegemony, social ideology, and individual agency in social practice during this time. Webster-Cheng (2008) explores the dynamics of political control of the arts and individual agency in the musical storytelling art of Suzhou *tanci* between 1949 and 1964. In addition to examining the role of the state, she examines artists' agency in their responses to dominated political forces as expressed in their newly composed and revised *tanci* works. Furthermore, she reviews the artists' musical innovations both as responses to coercive political hegemony in a harsh environment and as significant expressions of artistic freedom within politicized hegemony. Ziyang You (2012) explores the integration of tradition, ideology, and individual agency in the New *Gushi* Movement (*xin gushi yundong* 新故事运动) in Maoist China from 1962 to 1966, showing how *gushi*, a traditional narrative genre, was appropriated and constructed for socialist education campaigns and how individual storytellers responded to such ideological ends. The New *Gushi* Movement was initiated in 1962 when Mao Zedong launched the Socialist Education

Movement, also known as “Four Cleanups” (*Si Qing* 四清), in the PRC. The main focus of the Socialist Education Movement was on educating the masses with socialist ideology, rebuilding revolutionary spirits into the CCP cadres and the masses, and strengthening the significance of class struggle (You 2012). At the end of 1966, the Socialist Education Movement was terminated and universally supplanted by the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

Folklore as well as anthropology, which were assigned with negative values and regarded as tools of capitalist imperialism by the cultural revolutionists, were abolished by the government during the ten-year period of Cultural Revolution (*wenhua dagemin* 文化大革命), a sociopolitical movement that caused mass chaos across the country. The initial goal of the movement was to impose Maoist orthodoxy and remove bourgeois elements and elements of traditional culture, which were regarded as threats to socialist society. The movement had a significant impact on political, economic, and cultural life in Chinese society. The Cultural Revolution not only paralyzed political and economic development but also brought the education system to a virtual halt. University entrance exams were cancelled, and the evaluation of admission qualification was based on the student’s class status. Many intellectuals were sent to rural labor camps for “reformation.” The movement, with its extreme ideological control, was described as a “disaster” for folklore studies (Zhong 1999, 51). Chinese folklore studies, which had straddled both the literary and sociological/anthropological fields, was placed in two different disciplinary fields still allowed to exist at that time. Scholars concentrating on folk literature were forced to enter the discipline of literature study. Ethnology as a field overlapping with folklore subsumed the rest of folklore studies (Chen 1988, 1). Some collecting work continued by individual scholars during this period, but the works weren’t published until the Cultural Revolution ended in 1977.

During this period, traditional Chinese culture itself as the subject of folklore studies also underwent severe damage as it was alleged that traditional culture fell into the categories of the Four Olds (*sijiu* “四旧”) that should be abolished. The Four Olds were old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. There was not clear definition of the Four Olds. It included classical Chinese literature and Confucianism, which were attacked by the pioneers of the May Fourth Movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. It also included many traditional customs promoted by those pioneers. The Cultural Revolution is an extreme example of sociopolitical constraint upon academic activities.

After the policy of Reform and Opening Up came into force in 1978, folklore studies was revived as an academic field in China in the context of a comparatively more liberal political and cultural environment. In 1978, the older generation of scholars in folklore studies and related fields, including Gu Jiegang and Zhong Jingwen, proposed to the central government that the discipline of folklore studies should be reestablished in universities and research institutes. The government approved the proposal, confirming the value of folklore for the modernization of Chinese culture and patriotism. Folklore studies returned to universities, particularly within Chinese language and literature departments.

Chen Qinjian summarizes three significant changes in the work of folklore studies during this time: from the study of village people (*xiangmin* 乡民) to people in general (*renmin* 人民); from a historical science to a science of contemporary life; from an independent science to an interdisciplinary field of study (1988, 3–11). The content and subjects of folklore studies have greatly expanded. For instance, urban folklore became a new topic of folklore studies in China. In his inaugural talk for the establishment of the Chinese Folklore Society in 1983, Zhong Jingwen suggested that while it was important to study folk culture in rural area, folklorist should not reject the collection and study of urban folklore. He also pointed out that urban folklore had attracted the attention of folklorists in the United States and Japan (1999, 54). The notion of urban folklore extended not only the *folk* but also the *lore* in Chinese folklore studies. In this volume, Yongyi Yue presents a profound discussion on the topic of urban folklore in his ethnographic study of childbirth custom in the cosmopolitan city of Beijing.

The time after the Reform and Opening Up is described as the springtime of Chinese folklore studies (Zhong 1999, 52). As mentioned before, the Chinese Folklore Society was established in 1983, with members across the country. Associations of folklore have since been founded nationwide. Folklore programs were established in many top universities and nationality universities. Museums devoted to folklore were also established in many places. *Folklore Studies* (*minsu yanjiu* 民俗研究), *Folk Literature Forum* (*minjian wenxue luntan* 民间文学论坛), and *Folk Literature Quarterly* (*minjian wenxue jikan* 民间文学季刊) were the major journals focusing on publishing folklore studies in China. Various textbooks on folklore studies were published to aid the teaching and learning of folklore in colleges and graduate schools.

In 1984, the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Research Society together with the Chinese Ministry of Culture and State Ethnic Affairs



Commission (*guojia minzu shiwu weiyuanhui* 国家民族事务委员会) started the Three Collections Project of Folk Literature (*minjian wenxue santao ji-cheng* 民间文学三套集成). This nationwide coordinated project called for folklorists from every province to systematically collect folktales, folk songs, and proverbs, which were published in three collections. The purpose of the project was stated in the official documents as using folk literature to better serve the people and developing socialist material and spiritual civilization. Despite the ideological statement, these massive collections entered the folklore archives with their own value in the academic study of folklore (Liu 2006). In Lijun Zhang's chapter, the author describes the significance and impacts of the project in the context of promoting Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) nationwide in detail.

From the mid-1980s, Chinese scholars started to participate in international communication and collaboration more actively. For instance, Chinese folklorists participated in a joint Finnish-Chinese seminar on collection and recording of folklore in 1986. In the first half of the 1990s, Chinese folklorists collaborated with Japanese folklorists on field projects in Yunnan Province and the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. Entering the twenty-first century, the scholarly exchange and communication between Chinese folklorists and folklorists in other parts of the world become significantly more frequent, which is perceived as "one of the major transformative forces on the discipline" (Li 2015). A large number of scholarly works have been translated and published. Overseas scholars are invited to give talks on their research. And Chinese folklorists more frequently attend conferences abroad and visit foreign research institutes. The growing exposure to international academia greatly contributes to Chinese scholars' reflective perspective on the disciplinary practice and discourse in the nation.

Another feature of Chinese folklore studies in the twenty-first century is the dominance of heritage discourse in the discipline, which is discussed in detail in Zhang's chapter on the making of heritage in southeast China as well as in her larger project, from which this chapter draws (2014). Chinese folklorists have been preserving and studying folk culture as expressions of national heritage for a long time. However, in the twenty-first century, heritage studies have attracted folklorists' attention in an unprecedentedly large scale in Chinese folklore scholarship. Since 2002, the Project of Rescuing Ethnic and Folk Cultural Heritage initiated by the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Association and the work of "conservation of intangible cultural heritage" charged by the Chinese Ministry of Culture offer new opportunities for the



development of folklore study and the folklorists' participation in social activities relating to heritage inscription, folk festivals, folk culture village, museum exhibits, and heritage tourism. The acceleration of heritage-related activities has also led to the establishment of new folklore programs in colleges and universities, which has contributed to the expansion of the discipline as a field of academic inquiry.

The popularity of heritage discourse and practice in China, on one hand, is linked to nationalism and Chinese people's desire for modernity and globalization. Formal world heritage designations from an important international body such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are a way to secure international recognition and legitimacy and to arouse, within China, a sense of patrimonial and national pride. On the other hand, it is related to people's nostalgic longing for a traditional lifestyle in the context of rapid social development in contemporary China. Heritage activities, scholars' participation in heritage movements, and the discussion of such participation form the current heritage discourse in Chinese folklore scholarship. The discourse is related to and examined with the concepts of continuity, nationalism, ideology, modernity, and globalization (Gao 2007). The heritage practice and folklorists' active participation in the practice also leads to self-reflective criticism of what Li Jing calls "the scholarly-activist role of folklorists" (2015). The reflection and interpretation of folklorists' role in heritage-related activities have been a subject of debate in folklorists' consciousness and in the academic discussions of folklore studies (An 2008). Some scholars are concerned that the involvement of political and economic factors in heritage-related work would diminish the independence of the folklore discipline as an academic inquiry while other scholars claim it is both beneficial for the discipline and for the preservation of folk culture when folklorists participate in and use their expertise to guide and influence heritage activities (Wu 2008; Zhou 2012). Nevertheless, more and more folklorists are involved in the ongoing heritage practice and discourse, which has become a paradigm in Chinese folklore studies in the new century.

### **Chinese Folklore Studies Today: Some Trends and Themes**

This edited volume consists of studies on diverse topics, including child-birth customs in urban communities, female kinship practices in a rural

society, grassroots oral narratives relating to the meanings and implications of folk song and on-the-ground myth-making in local communities in rural northern China, and the institutional practice of producing heritage on the local level in southeast China. The chapters reflect some of the trends and themes featured in contemporary Chinese folklore practice and discourse, such as fieldwork-based research, cultural continuity, cultural transformation, and cultural critique and reflection.

Fieldwork and ethnographic writing have become the norm of Chinese folklore studies today. However, there has been tension between textual analysis and the fieldwork method since the establishment of the discipline of folklore studies in China (Liu 2012). As stated prior, Chinese folklore scholarship, similar to folklore studies in much of the rest of the world, straddled both the sociological/anthropological and literary fields in its development, and this feature is still apparent today. The institutional affiliation of folklore in different departments or schools is a reflection of the phenomenon. China is one of the oldest civilizations in the world, and it has continuously written documents of the past dynasties and regimes over a very long history. Textual research (*kaoju* 考据) was the main research method for literati and scholars in traditional China, and it is still widely used among many traditional disciplines in China studies. Chinese folklorists find it difficult to completely get away from this approach when shifting their research from folklore in texts to folklore “in contexts” (Liu 2009). The text and context controversy was heated at the first annual meeting of the Youth Forum on Folk Culture (*Minjian wenhua qingnian luntan* 民间文化青年论坛) in Beijing in July 2003 (Chen 2004). Chen Jianxian (2003), a folklorist focusing on the study of Chinese myths, first pointed out that fieldwork research was necessary in the study of Chinese myths but that textual research should lie at the core. He emphasized that contexts kept changing while text were perpetuated and stable and thus had their own autonomy. He explicitly called for a “return to the text” in order to create China’s own theories in folk literature. At the meeting, Shi Aidong (2004), a folklorist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, even radically proposed that Chinese folklorists should abandon fieldwork research and focus on textual research because the introduction of the fieldwork method to Chinese folk literature studies did not solve its academic crisis; instead, it made the discipline of Chinese folk literature lose its independent status in the academe. Their statements stirred a heated debate on the relationship between text and context among Chinese folklorists. At the end of the discussion, many

folklorists came to the conclusion that fieldwork research was essential for Chinese folklore studies because it was not only a method to collect data but was itself also a process of independent studies. Since then, some scholars have continued to reflect on “the effectiveness and limitation of context” as well as on the stability and core role of texts (Yang 2015).

Despite the controversy over textual and contextual research, nowadays young folklorists have widely drawn on ethnographical case study to conduct their research, which is well reflected in this book. With concrete ethnographic fieldwork conducted in local communities, the contributors’ studies are grounded in Chinese social reality and folklore disciplinary discourse while situating particular case studies in the specific social context and an individual’s everyday life. In general, Chinese folklore research has shifted from studying the folk as homogeneous groups and the lore as self-contained and unchangeable text or custom to studying an individual’s practice and agency in everyday life, the dynamic process of cultural production, and the reconstruction and new invention of folklore in an ever-changing society. This contributes to end the binary paradigm of studying lower-class people in contrast to upper-class people in Chinese folk literature studies (Hung 1985). The shift of folklore study subjects toward individuals, daily practice, and dynamic process also enables Chinese folklorists to look into and process the complexity and multiplicity of the complicated, misguiding, and often contradictory world. Folklore exists in a network or networks formed by various elements such as history, politics, economics, interpersonal relationships, state institutes, and global organizations. Meanwhile, the folklorists establish intersubjective relationships with the person or group they study. They break the confined definition of the folk in terms of their social status and class, and their informants can be individual folklore practitioners regardless of class, race, gender, ethnicity, occupation, religion, and so on.

In contemporary China, there is an accelerating integration of tradition and modernity as well as of rural and urban areas. As shown by Yon-gyi Yue’s case study of childbirth customs in this volume, the rural and the urban are intertwined and interacting cultural space rather than separated spaces isolated and contrasted to each other. The influence between rural and urban cultural elements is regarded as a more complex interactive process rather than one-direction assimilation. In any circumstance, Chinese folklorists no longer take the rural area as their only research focus. There have been a significant number of studies devoted to urban folklore,

including the urban literature and folk practice of a particular group in the cities. And as illustrated by Yue's chapter, some scholars study city residents who are widely influenced by modern scientific knowledge and at the same time keep or renovate part of the tradition in their daily life. Not like the romanticism and nostalgic scholarship that idealize and cherish the old tradition, contemporary scholars take a more comprehensive and factual approach to study the continuity, transmission, transformation, production, and reproduction of folklore in people's daily life.

Contemporary Chinese folklore studies shows the distinctive feature of critical spirit and reflective strength. The critique and reflection are either targeting the political hegemony and the authorized ideology or pointing to the disciplinary tradition and practice itself (Wang 2016). Folklorists observe, unpack, and examine social practices in people's everyday life as well as in institutional systems. While folklorists have been critically reflecting upon and reevaluating their "activist role in China's sociopolitical landscape" (Li 2015) and making an effort to maintain scholarly independence and objective perspectives in their research, political ideology and institutional hegemony in reality penetrate every corner and aspect of social life and individual life, which is the subject of folklore research. Thus, folklorists' objective standing and disciplinary autonomy are crucial in their seeking possibilities of alternates and varieties despite the hegemonic and penetrating official discourse.

Yongyi Yue, in his chapter on middle-class citizens' childbirth customs in the cosmopolitan city of Beijing, proposes the concept of urban folklore as "a way of knowing and an epistemological paradigm." He challenges the conventional disciplinary conception that regards urban folklore as studies of people and practice in urban cities. Rather, he claims that urban folklore should shift its study subject toward the tendency of rural-urban integration and examine it as a dynamic social and cultural process in the frame of modernity, especially when China is facing the fact that most cities have become "cities of migration" due to the large number of migrant workers. In addition, due to the universal presence of science and technology and the dramatic increase of population mobility, people's work and lives in both cities and villages are experiencing "everyday revolution" (Zhou 2017a; Zhou 2017b). Everyday life in a village is more or less influenced by the city while the urban people are called upon to return to traditional culture. Yue's chapter attempts to depict the dynamic picture of contemporary Beijing childbirth customs in the context of social transformation and life

revolution made possible by modernization: wide acceptance of gynecology and other specialized knowledge; state surveillance on childbirth activities; as well as traditional values of fertility supported by supernatural power.

Echoing the shift of Chinese folklore studies from the folk as the lower class and as a group to an individual's practice and agency in everyday life as stated prior, Junxia Wang, tracing the history and development of women's folklore studies in the last century, perceives the 1980s and 1990s as the turning point where the focus of studies on women's folklore in China shifted from treating "women" as an abstract and homogeneous group and calling for the liberation of women from oppression in specific historical periods to treating women as individual "female folklore practitioners" and paying attention to their everyday life practices in a specific social network. Applying the model and analytical tool of strong relationship and weak relationship, she studies the *niangjia* (a married woman's parents' home or family) kinship relationship practice and gift giving of a rural woman from Shandong Province in eastern China, examining the formation and practice of common people's gender conceptions in their personal daily life histories and life fields. Through the case study, Wang argues that although gender equality, as a so-called basic state policy, is today legitimized in China at the institutional and ideological levels, it doesn't mean gender equality has been achieved in individuals' daily practice in communities. The patriarch as a kind of long-lasting traditional thought and family structure continues to deeply influence community members' conception of gender roles in their relations and interactions with each other. Thus the realization of women's liberation at the practical level still has a long way to go. Wang thinks outside of the ideology and discourse and perceives women's folklore studies as academic research that possesses the political and realistic power to "transcends the academy" and intellectually contributes to the achievement of real gender equality by solving gender issues in contemporary Chinese society.

Levi Gibbs's chapter explores the topic of folk songs, which is one of the most significant genres in Chinese folklore studies. The collecting and studying of folk songs and folk song lyrics in the early twentieth century in the folk song studies movement (*Geyaoxue yundong* 歌谣学运动) stated prior marked the starting of Chinese folklore studies as a modern academic discipline (Zhong 1984). However, unlike the early studies of folk songs that mostly focus on the text of the songs as the production of lower-class people in a certain time period and as a form of folk expressions contrasting to the literature created by the elites, Gibbs, drawing on his own ethnographic

work with an influential professional folksinger from Shaanxi Province in northwestern China named Wang Xiangrong, examines the individual's on-stage performance of folk song in specific contexts as well as the process of performer-audience interaction and meaning-making through the folksinger's performance. Through the case study, he suggests that multiple layers of parallel narratives are brought together in the performances of iconic songs, integrating various scales of identities and offering opportunities for audiences to recover a sense of place in a changing world. Situating his study in contemporary China as a fast-changing society, Gibbs examines how Wang embodies the collective experiences of the region and the nation and through his individual performance offers his audience "a sense of continuity" amid radical social changes.

Exploring the worship of Han Chinese mythical ancestors Yao and Shun in local communities, Ziyang You studies another important genre in Chinese folk literature in her chapter. She examines the ongoing process of myth-making on the ground in Shanxi Province from the perspective of cultural construction and reproduction. The era of Yao and Shun has been constructed as the beginning of Chinese cultural history, and their stories have been recorded as an essential part of ancient history in China. But this long-enduring construction was challenged and overturned by revisionist historians in the early twentieth century, and in the process Yao and Shun's stories were transformed from "history" into "myths" (Gu 1982). In her paper, You problematizes this process of deconstructing ancient "history" and reconstructing it into "myth" while examining the local residents' vernacular perspectives on the cultural figures of Yao and Shun and their intertwined relationship with local living beliefs in some villages in southern Shanxi Province. You's research on myth-making in local communities echoes the paradigm shift from textual analysis to ethnographic research in Chinese folklore studies since the 1990s (Liu 2009), and the new trend to study myths "in contexts" (Yang 2015, 374), with a focus on the role of myth in local communities, groups, and individuals. She agrees with Yang Lihui on a "synthetic approach" of integrating "textual and contextual research" to study Chinese myths (Yang 2011, 2015) but disagrees on the theoretic framework used to study living myth traditions. She interprets myth as a metadiscourse, on the basis of which social actors can construct social borders, and also as "a discursive act" through which actors pursue certain cultural, political, and economic goals in practice within constructed communities (Lincoln 2014, 23).

Situating her study in the ongoing government-led heritage movement and the heated scholarly heritage discourse, Lijun Zhang unpacks the process of on-the-ground heritage-making in China from the perspective of institutional practice with a focus on local government agency. Examining heritage practice in the process of nominating *tulou* (土楼 “rammed earth building”) to the UNESCO World Heritage List, Zhang explores the interactive relationship between governmental institutes and world organizations as well as local communities. The process of the *tulou* UNESCO World Heritage List nomination was a massive political and cultural undertaking through which local government officials learned and embodied a system of international and national heritage regulations and other heritage-related knowledge constructed by experts, institutions, and organizations. Through the process, local government agencies and communities defamiliarized and re-evaluated *tulou* and local culture, and local government and experts were major mediators between local communities and global organization and the nation-state. During the process of re-evaluating *tulou* and nominating it to the World Heritage List, local government agencies gained discourse hegemony on heritage matters. In her study, she finds that the discursive power relating to heritage expertise and bureaucracy becomes a decisive factor in the local practices of heritage nomination. Zhang’s study of the process of local residential houses transforming into national and global property on the institutional level reveals mechanisms and incentives of heritage production on the local institutional level as well as the segmentation of governmental institutes and the arbitrary and dogmatic tendency in bureaucracy.

In sum, the contributors of this book draw on both literature reviews and case studies to illustrate the process of discourse and practice formation related to folklore both in daily life and on important occasions. Addressing both public and personal aspects of folkloristic discourse and practice, vernacular perspectives, and interpretations of key concepts such as childbirth, gift-giving, folk song, myth, and heritage are highlighted in this book. Our volume encompasses a number of trends in twenty-first-century folklore scholarship. We have incorporated postmodern cultural critique to produce works that are reflexive, grounded in practice, and concentrated on individuals, groups, communities, and institutions as creative interpreters and/or mediators, and we are sensitive to the interplay among historical, political, economic, and cultural forces in a modernized, industrialized, and globalizing world. We do not reject the historical approach



and textual research (these are actually very important approaches in the field of folklore studies), but rather work to integrate them into broader discussions and interpretations that shed light on the past and the present. Deeply grounded in the methodology of ethnography, we continue a century-long tradition of concern with living folklore.

## Notes

1. The issue was explicitly brought up by both Chinese scholars and American scholars at the 2015 American Folklore Society annual meeting held in Long Beach, California, and the request for more work of Chinese folklore studies to be introduced to the United States has been responded to very positively.

2. Older scholars are generally referred to by Chinese names with the surname first, while many younger scholars tend to address Chinese people's first names first. We allow each author and each informant to make an independent decision concerning Chinese names, so our readers will see the usage of both orders in the book.

3. These recent publications include a special issue on "Chinese Folklore Studies toward Disciplinary Maturity," in *Asian Ethnology* in 2015; a special issue on the "New Perspectives on the Studies of Asian American Folklore," in *Journal of American Folklore* in 2015; a special issue on the "Living Epics of China and Inner Asia," in *Journal of American Folklore* in 2016; a special issue on the "Essentials and Potentials of Intangible Cultural Heritage in China," in *Western Folklore* in 2017; and a special issue entitled "Faces of Tradition in Chinese Performing Arts," in the *Journal of Folklore Research* in 2018.

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