

REVIEW ARTICLE

May Fourth Intellectuals and Chinese Folk Literature*

NAI-TUNG TING

Western Illinois University, Macomb, Illinois

Since the 1950's, American publications on China seem to have stressed modern China. Most of them discuss historical and economic problems; humble folklore has been neglected all the time. The appearance of a book concerning Chinese views of and achievements in folk literature during and soon after the May Fourth Movement certainly calls for cheers.

Dr. Hung's book, besides the acknowledgements, table of contents, and preface, contains seven chapters: 1) The Discovery of Folk Literature; 2) Pioneers; 3) Folksongs; 4) Legends; 5) Children's Literature; 6) Proverbs; and 7) Intellectuals and the Folk. Following 180 pages of text are 95 pages for notes, bibliography, glossary, and index. The bibliography occupies 33 pages, including inter alia articles from obscure journals and newspapers. The editorial work appears impeccable. The English is fluent and excellent; only one misprint has come to my attention. The display of solid scholarship and the prestige of the publisher naturally induce a reader to look for exhaustiveness and perfection. It is the search for these qualities that has led to the following remarks.

In spite of the title and the subtitle, the author's real purpose is, as he points out in the preface, "how it [Chinese folk literature] appealed to a number of leading May Fourth intellectuals" (xiii). By "a number of," he probably means Gu Jiegang 顧頔剛 and Zhou Zuoren 周作人,

* HUNG, CHANG-TAI. *Going to the People. Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918-1937*. Harvard East Asian Monographs 121. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1985. Xiv+275 pages. Bibliography, glossary, index. Hardcover US\$21.00; ISBN 0-674-35626-8.

to whom he devotes far more space than to some others of similar (if not greater) importance, such as Zhong Jingwen 鐘敬文, Zhao Jingshen 趙景深, Hu Shi 胡適, and Lu Xun 魯迅. In folk literature, his favorite is evidently the folksong. Chapter 3 (58–80), one section of Chapter 5 (126–134), and most of Chapters 1, 2, and 7, all center around folk poetry. Of the period indicated in the subtitle, 1918–1937, his emphasis is evidently on the first ten years. A more precisely worded subtitle could have demonstrated more accurately the scope and the nature of the book.

The most outstanding feature of this book lies in its readability. It treats the folk literature movement as a part of China's intellectual history, without bothering too much about the mass of details and the jargon that often characterize books on folklore; it is thus relatively easy for readers to follow. The first chapter traces the historical development of the movement; the last chapter, which presents an appraisal and an analysis of the principal characters involved, is clearly the most original. It could have been improved, however, if the perspective had been broader.

A comparison of this movement with similar movements in other lands would have shown, for instance, that the powers that be during this period in China were not really so mean to folklore research and writers on folklore as readers may gather from pp. 158–160. Without the encouragement and the support of Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, the president of Peking University—whose knowledge of the subject is not mentioned in this work—and the permission of those above him, the entire movement would not have been possible. The Guomindang regime that followed was sometimes inhospitable to certain aspects of folk culture, but sex is still taboo to average Americans and superstition is often laughed to scorn by both the Church and the academe in the West. The lack of financial aid to folklore research is surely not unusual. For instance, American Folklife Center in Washington, D.C., the only folkloristic institution funded by the Federal Government, was not established until after the American Folklife Preservation Act was approved in 1976, after years of strenuous lobbying. The report of the only case of the Chinese government persecuting a folklorist on pp. 159–160 is not entirely truthful. The statement “Lou himself was found guilty of slandering the Moslem religion and jailed” (160) cannot be borne out by the sources the author employed (p. 107, note 12). Documentary evidences show that the case never went to court, Lou Zikuang 婁子匡 lay low for some time, and the government dropped the matter soon after Moslem wrath subsided. Critics of the government's measures blamed and satirized the absence of due processes of the law (cf. especially Li Qingya's 李青崖 article listed on p. 207, note 12). The Guomindang

was certainly not justified in closing down Beixin Bookstore and suspending *Nanhua wenyi* 南華文藝 (the former was not reported in the book), but it does not seem to have unduly harassed Mr. Lou (cf. Lee-hsia Ting 1974, 99–101). In fact, folkloristic operations in some areas received considerable aid from government-supported adult education institutions, two of which (in Hangzhou and Wuxi respectively) provided much space in their journals, and one (in Shandong) issued two folk literature collections in one year.

The real tragedy with this movement is that it coincided with increasing Japanese encroachments on Chinese territories, to which Dr. Hung only occasionally alludes. Any educated person brought up in China during those years knows that the overpowering concern with the miseries and the future of the nation militated against pure academic enthusiasm and ambitious scholarly projects. The intellectuals in question “showed little interest in the methodology” (161) because few Chinese libraries during those years could afford to buy many foreign language books and periodicals, certainly not those in the humanities. Also, many scholars trained for Chinese studies did not have the time or peace of mind to devote much time to study foreign languages, without which they could not learn Western theories at first hand. The only Western authority they knew well, to my knowledge, is Burne; some of them undoubtedly knew also Andrew Lang. The one reference to Müller mentioned by the author on p. 20 comes perhaps from second-hand information. Introduction to the historic-geographic method by Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 and Jameson (161) produced no perceptible effect, probably because no study or index based on this method was known in China.

Burne's book contains, however, pages of good advice to collectors of folklore (Burne 1914, 6–22). The remissness in active collecting, therefore, could not be due to the lack of “guidebooks,” as the author asserts on p. 55. The shortage of “trained staff” was true, since there were no courses in folk literature in Chinese universities, and thus no easy means to mobilize students to help in recording, as folklorists often do now in China. The principal reason for the absence of organized efforts was the extreme hardship of life in many rural areas in China, which were frequently infested with bandits and devastated by famine. It is no surprise, consequently, that the only region where such efforts met with some success was the more stable and affluent area where James Yan carried out his experiments. Still, constant fear for personal safety and other worries are not sufficient excuse for the lackadaisical way of recording folk literature, especially in regard to tales, the most mercurial of genres. Reliance on nineteenth-century methods and the neglect of

bibliographic data (Nai-tung Ting 1979, 1342) are unfortunate errors for authors who, I believe, had no desire to distort the truth. Limitations in field work, besides, prevented them from realizing the actual extent of Chinese folk literature. They knew it to be rich, but did not know how very rich it is, as most folklorists in the People's Republic have discovered.

The above observation is certainly not meant to belittle the folk literature enthusiasts of this period vis-à-vis their successors. Some of the prominent figures of the Republican Period are still active in China, and many younger people there are students of Zhong Jingwen. However, the more generous (though still insufficient) support of the communist government, which has enabled professional folklorists and their assistants to achieve impressive results, has also done them immeasurable harm by imposing on them an ideological "frame" or *kuangzi* 框子, to borrow a word frequently used now in China. Although it is much less severe now, the imposition has done them a great deal of injury, especially in recording. The publication of verses invented by cadres and students during the "Great Leap Forward Movement" in the name of folksongs, for example, has been condemned in China as well as abroad; and rightly so.

Another advantage which Chinese folklore enthusiasts of the Republican Period had over their successors was the freedom to publish and analyze religious beliefs and literature. Essays and reports on temples and religious observances in periodicals such as *Minsu* 民俗, and legends of Taoist saints and popular superstitions in booklets such as those edited by Lin Lan 林蘭 (cf. Nai-tung Ting 1978, 259-260) are invaluable from retrospect because of the almost total neglect of this subject in mainland China until the recent years.

One feature that bewilders me is the author's use of certain English words. The application of the term "romantic" to some views of the Chinese scholars of this period (e.g., pp. xiii, 10, 12, 74, 166, 167) does not sound right to a reader used to the meanings of this term in connection with Western civilization. Concepts such as return-to-nature and idealized rural life characterized Chinese Taoism and Chinese art and literature inspired by Taoism, as they did Western romanticism. These concepts were in the mainstream of Chinese culture, which fact deserves more emphasis than the casual reference to one passage from Laozi on p. 14. In calling such ideas "romantic," the author may be misconstrued as suggesting that the writers he analyzed learned those ideas principally, or solely, from the West—a suggestion likely to raise eyebrows in some Western academic circles, since China never had a Romantic Movement or the historical circumstances that produced it

in Europe. His presentation of several related ideas, namely, the purity of childhood and the evil influence of society versus the innate goodness of man, may reinforce such an impression, because on pages 15 and 114–116 he gives only the Western sources without mentioning similar views in Confucianism. He could have said that the writers in question were encouraged to declare with greater confidence certain traditional Chinese concepts when they found them expressed also in Western philosophy and literature, often more emphatically and clearly. Employment of a different term not so closely associated with a European movement, or an explanatory note in the preface, would be helpful.

Another word frequently used by the author which bothers me is “traditional.” Since folklore is often identified as traditional folk culture and the functions of folklore have been widely accepted in the West as “maintaining the stability of culture” (Bascom 1954, 297–298), assertions such as “from the beginning, the folk-literature movement [in China] was strongly anti-traditional” (xii) may startle some readers. Surely, by “anti-traditional” the author means only “anti-Confucianism” and opposition to the old ideology, institutions, and ways of life among the upper crust of the society. Again, more precise wording could prevent confusion.

A third term that bemuses me is “folklorist.” The author explains its meaning on pp. xiii–xiv as “intellectuals who interested themselves in folk literature or the other fields of folklore and who spoke or wrote about them.” Since students and experts of many disciplines in the West have at least once written or talked about one of the many genres of folklore, this definition can be applied to a very large number of intellectuals. Most of the Chinese scholars discussed in this volume made their major contributions in other disciplines, and were generally known as experts in their own respective disciplines, *not* as folklorists. Sometimes, Dr. Hung may refer to Western and Chinese scholars in the same passage just as “folklorists,” and I have had a hard time trying to figure out whether the experts he refers to are Chinese or European. Towards the end of his work, he demonstrates that, like the Russian popularists, the “Chinese folklorists” had a sense of “social guilt” (178), but the references to prove this point (p. 208, notes 63–69) are all from the writings of Gu Jiegang. What other Chinese authors shared Gu’s feelings? Is Gu a representative of Chinese “folklorists”? If so, in what ways?

Other advices of mine concern omissions. In listing Western works on and collections of Chinese folk narratives that influenced China (20), Dr. Hung has left out those by Adele Fielde (1912) and A. L. Shelton (1925), the former quite well known then in China. His account of Feng

Menglong's 馮夢龍 contributions to folk literature (25–31) is long on *shan'ge* 山歌, brief on the famous *sanyan liangpai* (三言兩拍), but mum on *Zhinang* (智囊 A Bag of Wits), a valuable source for research in jokes. Even the chapter on the folksong, his favorite genre, leaves something to be desired. The description of *duige* 對歌 in Guangxi on p. 73 should have been accompanied by a qualifying phrase explaining that this custom has been very popular with the Chuang nationality, but much less so among the Han. Many collections of Chinese folksongs (e.g., *Anhui minjian geyao* 安徽民間歌謠 [Folksongs from Anhui], *Wuge yiji* 吳歌乙集 [Songs from Suzhou]) and some English translations (such as the one by Kinchen Johnson) deserve at least a little space. Among the types of nursery rhymes (127–130), the author has regrettably left out a most amusing and prolific group, wherein one absurd happening after another is dragged in for fun. The same chapter on children's literature does not allude at all to periodicals like *Xiaopengyou* 小朋友 (Little Friend) and *Ertong shijie* 兒童世界 (Children's World), which were extremely popular among Chinese children in the 1920's and 1930's, and helped give them glimpses into folk literature. A journal that played a considerable role in promoting children's literature, *Funu yu Ertong* 婦女與兒童 (Women and Children), is also ignored in both the text and the bibliography.

The parts devoted to folk narratives, which are usually considered the *pièce de resistance* of folk literature, are disappointingly inadequate. The myth is completely disregarded and the *märchen* receives only a reluctant nod. The chapter on the legend (81–106) does not point out the predominance of legends in the Chinese repertoire. No reference is made to the innumerable legends concerning the literati, which are usually positive in tone. Those on the more dubious characters, the Xu-Wenchang-type 徐文長 group, are treated at some length (83–93), but Dr. Hung did not explain the peculiar historical background that produced such stories. Instead, he compares them with the stories of Nasreddin Hodja and Till Eulenspiegel, and sees similarities between them (90–91). Since Hodja and Eulenspiegel stories are usually regarded as jokes and classified under *märchen*, their inclusion under the legend baffles researchers. Such episodes, it may be added, have been attributed to so many other characters with little change in detail that most raconteurs could not possibly believe them to have been true (cf. Nai-tung Ting 1978, 11).

Fairy tales are technically regarded as *märchen*—a word which could have helped folklorists in their bearings but is scrupulously avoided even in the short sections on the folktale. Discussions of the folktale, generally acknowledged as the most important genre in folk literature,

are confined to less than ten pages. The section on the fairy tales (117–126) centers around arguments about their educational values, which are sure to remind American readers of a similar controversy in the U.S.A. Dr. Hung, to the relief of the young at heart, brings in Bettelheim and Tolkien. The tale he cites to support their theories, unfortunately, is not a very happy choice, for both the Chinese Tiger Grandma and the Western Little Red Riding Hood have lurid, tragic versions which may represent an older form. Of Chinese studies of the folktale, he does not mention those that trace historical developments. Many excellent essays by Zhong Jingwen, Fu Xihua 傅惜華, Zhao Jingshen, Huang Shi 黃石, etc., cannot be found in the bibliography. He does not seem to have noticed either the impetus given the scholars of those years when they found tales similar to their own not only in Europe but also among China's minorities. First-rate studies of minority cultures by Wu Zelin, 吳澤霖 Ling Chunsheng 凌純聲, etc., all examine tales against the cultural background. To me, his conclusion on p. 133 that "most Chinese work on children's literature was descriptive rather than analytic" is not fair, certainly as regards the folktale.

I like much better the chapter on proverbs, but wish that Dr. Hung had said something about the medical proverbs. His discussion of other types of proverbs could have been improved by pointing out that the "wisdom of many" has been found to be scientifically sound (Zhu 1972, 88–99). He should have explained the stylistic features of some typically Chinese forms, such as *xiehou yu* 歇後語, instead of referring merely to the latter's "simplicity and naturalness" (176). Chinese proverbs have been studied and translated by quite a few Western scholars. Of the translations, only those by Scarborough (1875) and Smith (1902) are listed in the bibliography. Inclusion of the others and a word about the reasons for the reputation of the Chinese proverb in the West could have improved this interesting chapter. More footnotes on his echoes of and borrowings from Archer Taylor could earn it even more respect, since Taylor's writings are very familiar to most students of folklore.

By and large, the author's most regrettable omission is his neglect to interview Chinese intellectuals (many still alive in China and Taiwan) who participated actively in the movement, or at least elderly Chinese (some dwelling in the U.S.A.) who knew quite well the intellectuals he describes. Personal recollections can supplement and enliven the material he has obtained from printed sources. Such inquiries may even help solve a major puzzle: Who was actually Lin Lan, the alleged publisher and editor of the principal folk narrative series of this era?

To me, the most unfortunate *mistake* in this book is his comment on his only quotation from Mao Zedong. Mao's remark in 1940 on

the term *pingmin wenxue* 平民文學 used during this movement as representing only the literature of the "petite bourgeoisie and bourgeois intellectuals" is certainly wrong, but not necessarily "ideologically biased," as the author charges on p. 9. What Mao had in mind was probably the *pingmin wenxue* often mentioned by his former comrade Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, which the author himself identifies as "townspeople's literature (*shimin wenxue* 市民文學)" (176). Qu's confusion was not unnatural since there were, to use Dr. Hung's own words, "two basic criteria of folk literature," one seeking to include "the works of . . . 'the intellectual class among the common people'" (163). In view of the uncertainty in terminology, Mao's interpretation shows only that he was not an expert in folk literature, which he never claimed to be. In denouncing the statement as "ideologically biased," Dr. Hung may be suspected by impartial readers as letting his political opinion eclipse his judgment, an impression which I believe he does not wish to create. To be fair to Mao, in spite of the deleterious effects of his Yen-an talks, he was among the few political leaders in the world to urge writers to learn from folk literature, thus supplying a reason to folklorists in the People's Republic to bid for public support (*minjian wenxue* 1955, 7).

In short, this book is a good introduction to one of the important by-products of the epoch-making May Fourth Movement. As such, it will certainly have the high regard of scholars of modern Chinese civilization. To Western folklorists interested in China, I would recommend it without reservation had the research it was based on been more thorough and the sources the author allegedly used been more closely examined. Comparative folklore scholars planning to consult it for serious purposes will find it difficult to use, because it does not employ the familiar type and motif numbers or classify genres always in their way. It nevertheless marks the first time that a prestigious American publisher brings out a valuable book on folklore research in China. To the Council on East Asia Studies at Harvard University, there can only be congratulations and praise.

REFERENCES CITED

- ANHUI PROVINCIAL CHIZHOU NORMAL SCHOOL
 1936 *Anhui minjian geyao* 安徽民間歌謠 [Folk songs from Anhui]. Anqing.
 BASCOM, William R.
 1965 Four functions of folklore. In *The study of folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes, 277-298. New York: Prentice Hall.
 BURNE, Charlotte Sophia
 1914 *The handbook of folklore*. New ed. rev. and enl. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.

FIELD, Adele

1912 *Chinese fairy tales*. New York: Putnam.

JOHNSON, Kinchen

1932 *Chinese folklore: Peking rhymes*. Peiping.

Minjian wenxue 民間文學 [Folk literature]

1955 Fakanci 發刊詞 [Editorial remarks in the first issue] April, 4-8. Beijing.

SCARBOROUGH, William

1875 *A Collection of Chinese proverbs*. Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press.

SHELTON, A. L.

1925 *Tibetan folk tales*. New York: George H. Doran.

SMITH, Arthur H.

1902 *Proverbs and common sayings from the Chinese*. Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press.

TING, Lee-hsia Hsu

1974 *Government control of the press in modern China, 1900-1949*. Harvard East Asian monographs 57. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University East Asian Research Center; distributed by Harvard University Press.

TING, Nai-tung

1978 *A type index of Chinese folktales*. FF Communications 223. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.

1979 Chin. Erzählgut von ca 1850 bis heute. In *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, Band 2, Lieferung 5, pp. 1335-1362.

WANG Yizhi 王翼之, comp.

n.d. *Wuge yiji* 吳歌乙集 [Song from Suzhou, Second Series]. Folklore series of San Yat-sen University, no. 17. Taipei: Orient Cultural Service. (Reprint)

ZHU Zhuanyu 朱傳譽

1972 *Yanyu di yuantiu gongneng* 諺語的源流·功能 [The origins and functions of proverbs]. Taipei: Orient Cultural Service.