

Interpretations on Chinese Ethnic Minorities' Literature

--In the Perspective of American Sinology

Zhang Han

Chinese Language and Literature Department, Northwest Minzu University, China;

School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou University of Technology, China.

Abstract

Compiled by American sinologist Victor H. Mair, *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* focuses one section on Chinese minority literature, in which explores the written pattern and presenting form of Chinese ethnic minorities' literature and investigates the cultural factors through discourse analysis from the perspective of comparative literature. The interpretations from the perspective of American sinology can be revealed and the values beard in Chinese ethnic minorities' literature between cross-culture and multi-ethnic literature can be explored.

Keywords

Chinese Ethnic Minorities' Literature; American Sinology; Cross-Cultural & Multi-Ethnic Perspective.

1. Introduction

It should be pointed out that since the beginning of the new century, with the development of globalization, the protection of the heterogeneity of ethnic minorities' literature has increasingly shown its value. In this context, the Columbia University has published a series of works introducing Chinese literature. Compiled by American sinologist Victor H. Mair, *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (hereinafter referred to as *The Columbia*), published in 2010 by Columbia university press and had Chinese version by New Star press in 2016, has caused a heated discussion in the academic circles of China and abroad. The compilation of *The Columbia* is characterized by the writing of the diversity to Chinese ethnic literature, in which Minority literature is listed as a separate chapter (chapter 50) and the interactions between the Han and minorities (chapters 50 and 51) are considered as an important factor in this series to explore the "powerful driving force in the development of Chinese literature".[1] What is worth thinking about is: in the perspective of comparative literature, how do American sinology scholars describe the ethnic minorities in China and how do they interpret Chinese ethnic minorities in the literary history?

2. The writing of Chinese ethnic minorities

The writing of Chinese ethnic minorities' Literature system in *The Columbia* is mainly carried out from two aspects: the culture of Chinese frontier region and the image of the minority nationalities. The first aspect concerns the description of the natural climate, environment, history and humanistic language of Chinese ethnic area, which is the foundation in construction of the whole system. Americans have always had a strong interest in Chinese ethnic area. These mysterious regions attracted western explorers and missionaries to explore the hinterland for a long time. Especially since the Opium War in 1840, when China was forced to open its door, more westerners went deeper into them and published various official and folk travel notes. However, *The Columbia* has a unique way

to construct the aesthetic image of northwest China from the perspective of the whole ethnic minority literature system, and put the main ten ethnic minorities into the system of dynamic interactions with the Han nationality of the central plains in China.

In constructing the cultural image of China's frontier region, the following three stereotypes with characteristics in *The Columbia* can be presented: Firstly, the mythological image of the other. When expressing the Tibetan, Manchu and Uygur, they all emphasize the close relationship between their ethnic origin. Literature, religion, and myths often are cited in literary texts. For instance, the Tibetan king Gesar is considered as a protector of people, which has been a life model for the Tibetan people. Secondly, the image of utopia untainted by western civilization. The attitude in *The Columbia* towards Mongolian and Manchu is to praise and appreciate. For example, the language of *The Secret History of Mongolia* is described as vivid and poetic, and the character Tamerlane with fortitude and forbearance in *The Secret History of Mongolia* finally becomes the great king. Thirdly, the doughty image of the conqueror. When describing the history of these ethnic minorities, the conquest of Chang'an, capital of Tang dynasty in the eighth century, was regarded as by the Tubo, which was the predecessor of the Tibet, as a major factor in the downfall of the Tang dynasty. The mention of the Mongols and the Manchus mainly focuses on the fact that they dominated China for most of the 10th to 20th centuries, occupying at least half of the country. [2]

3. The Interpretations of Chinese ethnic minorities' Literature

The last decades of the 20th century has witnessed "a rise of new historicism criticism", which changed the opinion of text - context binary mode to explore the relationship between literature and history.[3] The interpretations of American sinology to Chinese ethnic minorities' literature in *The Columbia* are represented in the following aspects.

3.1 Multiple selection of texts

Literature takes on different forms in the context of China's ethnic minorities. *The Columbia* has a unique understanding of the category of Chinese ethnic minority literature and the choice of texts. In the cultural context of the new historicism, the writer is not subject to the understanding of the traditional Chinese literary history to the text, but brings into the scope of interpretation the texts that affect the relations between the minority nationalities and the Han nationality in the ethnic region, and even the relations between the various nationalities in the world. The most typical example is the "Mongolian" part, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when European and Russian scholars, with the help of early Middle-eastern and European historical documents, reorganized and published the Mongolian secret history. [4] *The Columbia* explores the opposition between literature and history, and holds that context (history) is also a kind of text, which should break through the connotation and extension of literary text in the traditional sense.

3.2 Multiple genres of texts

When the so-called "great tradition" literary history of Chinese literature is written according to the stages of the dynasty, the dominant literary genre is still the traditional tapes like poetry, novel, prose, etc. The most frequently used literary words in *The Columbia* are myth (10 times), narrative (6 times), oral traditional works (5 times), and oral traditional texts (5 times). Genres relating to Chinese minorities' literature in *The Columbia* concerns myth, legend, epic, Buddhist sutra, long narrative poems, folk songs, rap, as well as the opera.

Literary genres play an important role in minority literature. According to Earl Miner's view in *Comparative Poetics*, common terms such as "novel" are far from inherent attributes of literature, but virtual objects commonly known as social conventions; when literature is bounded on the practical basis of a particular "kind" or "type", the laws of literariness appear. [5] The choice and definition of the literature genre in ethnic minority literature by the editor of *The Columbia* can clearly reflect the way of presenting ethnic minority literature. There are more than a dozen types of literature involved *The Columbia*, however, why did it only touch the surface of folk literature? The reasons lie in, one

hand, the vast majority of ethnic minorities have a rich oral literary tradition and most of texts inherited from the ancient oral literary works; while on the other hand, the modern ethnic minority literary works are less introduced, even almost no contemporary works involved. Written literature of ethnic minorities is mostly preserved for oral literature with records to support. *The Columbia* presents this fact, that is, firstly, Chinese minority literature has a rich oral literary tradition, which is inherited by many oral ways such as myth, legend, epic, folk song and drama. Secondly, the oral inheritance of works in ethnic minorities, after the May 4th movement until the founding of the People's Republic of China, have been re-published in written form, creating a new type of Chinese literature: translated ethnic minority literature.

3.3 The use of discourse with western characteristics

Discourse is one of ways to interpret Chinese ethnic system, which means that the literature style of western mainstream culture, literature, language, writing paradigm with typical western characteristic are used in shaping the characteristics of Chinese ethnic system. However, the discourse expression will be limited by western mainstream social and cultural influence. In the section on the Tibetan epic Gesar, for example, the name is thought to derive from the Latin word Caesar; On the other hand, the Tibetan Poet Milarepa (1039-1122) was called Poet-saint. The use of these words will enable western readers to associate and compare with ancient Greek and Roman literature, therefore the image of the Tibetan nation will instantly become lofty and sacred. In the Mongolian part, "Genghis Khan" and "Kublai Khan" are frequently used words, which are also easily associated the eastern images with to western readers. British romantic poet Coleridge's fantastic poem Kublai Khan, written in the 19th century, was hailed as "the greatest poem in English literature" by the Encyclopedia Britannica. In the Manchu section, "Manchu" is taken as the focus of expression. A large number of works of Chinese literature before the 17th century have been translated into the language of Manchu. The collection history for Manchu materials in Europe is closely linked with European interest in China. French studies of the Orient date back to 1685, when king Louis the 14th sent a ship to China to collect data and introduce European technology. It arrived in Beijing in 1688 and then the first batch of 49 volumes of Chinese block printing as a gift from emperor Kangxi of the Qing dynasty to French king Louis 14 and arrived in France on June 2, 1697, which was placed in the royal library. The second batch of 2,000 volumes was brought to the French court as a diplomatic gift by the Qing dynasty in the 18th century.¹⁷ The Russian Academy of Social Sciences and the British Library also have a number of Manchu written documents. Therefore, in the 19th century, the mastery of Manchu language became a necessary academic discipline for European sinologists because it was grammatically clearer and easier to master than Chinese characters. The choice of these words reveals the significance of overseas sinology researchers to consciously communicate with the culture in the northwest minority areas.

The above construction process of Chinese minority indicates that American sinology researchers are aware of the essential characteristics of the previous regional culture research in China, which is an important part of the local people's life in the specific cultural area. This method and path of regional history has gradually penetrated into the literary research. The regional cultural writing of the minority literature in northwest China is the historical context that must be faced in the study of the minority literature in China.

4. The value and enlightenment

Although the writing and interpretation of Chinese ethnic minority in *The Columbia* is very sketchy, it is still a window for the west to understand Chinese ethnic minority and also a bridge for the Chinese academic circle to understand the latest achievements of the western Chinese minority literature research. More meaningful, based on their introduction, we not only have insights into the main body of Chinese ethnic minorities, namely overseas sinology research scholars abroad in the 21st century such as Victor H. Mair, the scholar with a world-vision watchers, shown under Chinese cultures to stimulate thinking of minorities and its social history cultural context; but also the relationship

between China and west also can be observed by observing the image of China's ethnic minorities. Just as the theorist Jurgen Habermas (1929-) put forward the concept of "mutual subjectivity": through the interaction between the image of the other and the viewer, it can help us to re-understand the ethnic minorities in northwest China in *The Columbia* and break through the self-closed system.[6] By writing and interpretation of Chinese ethnic minorities' literature from the perspective of American scholars, we find that their images are relatively one-sided, that is, there are more positive ones and fewer negative ones. From a theoretical perspective, the exotic image in comparative literature is a pluralistic complex, which is part of the social culture behind the viewer. The image created by the other is shaped by the one being watched. All images arise from a conscious awareness of the relationship between the self and the other, even if that awareness is very weak. [7] Comparative literature is not to explore whether the image is the reflection of the real social image, but to explore how to form the difference of such a different image, which is also the significance of comparative literature. Through the writing of discourse, Chinese ethnic minorities' literature constructed by the American sinologists in *The Columbia* is used to strengthen their own social identity and reflect American's points of view on ethnic groups and literature.

5. Conclusion

Compilation and publication of *The Columbia* are in the context of the deepening cultural exchanges between China and the west. Western scholars construct the system of Chinese ethnic minorities from the position of comparing Chinese and western literature. As from the discourse of the west, western scholars build the pattern of "Self - Other - Other's Other" unique relationship, which expands the new angle for the domestic research in the ethnic minorities' literature and promote deeper exchanges between China and the west in a larger space of world literature.

Acknowledgments

Postgraduate Innovative Research Project, Item Number: Yxm2019001, Northwest Minzu University.

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