

Reflections on Chinese Minority Literature in Colombian History of Chinese Literature

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Abstract: Colombian History of Chinese literature is one series of Chinese literary history published by Columbia University press which sets up special chapters to discuss Chinese minority literature. By analyzing the minority literature part, the position of minority literature in the whole frame of Chinese literary history is sorted out, the understanding of American sinology on Chinese minority literature is evaluated, and its enlightening and innovative significance is affirmed. The understanding of Chinese ethnic minority literature by overseas sinology researchers and the enlightenment brought to the domestic research of Chinese ethnic minority literature are probed into.

1. Introduction

In 2001, Victor H. Mair, a famous American Sinologist, organized more than 40 experts in various fields of overseas sinology to compile the English version of *Colombian History of Chinese Literature*, which was published by Columbia University press. Fifteen years later, in 2016, the Chinese translation version was published by Beijing New Star publishing house. The English and Chinese versions of this series have both attracted constant attention and discussions from the academic circles home and abroad.

Aiming at creating the new category of “transcending time and prism to examine Chinese literature”, this series are written with paying close attention to minority part of Chinese literature and presenting the academic perspectives and research methods in the field of literature and culture.^[1] Compared with other overseas Sinologists’ compilation of the history of Chinese literature, the uniqueness of this series not only separates two chapters as “Minority Literature” (chapter 50 and 51) but also attribute Chinese minorities’ literature as one of the factors to strongly drive the development of Chinese literature.

By examining the contents, thoughts and limitations of minority literature in *Colombian History of Literature*, we can explore the deep aesthetic mode and psychology behind the narration of Chinese minority literature part, and promote the study of Chinese minority literature in China as well.

2. Unique Writing Arrangements

Victor H Mair wrote words on the title page of *Colombian History of Chinese literature*: to the Chinese people, whether Han or Minority, intellectual or non-intellectual, they all worked together in their own way to create today's Chinese civilization.^[2] Therefore, the attention to Chinese minority literature become the distinctive feature.

2.1 Writing Characteristics and Cognition to Chinese Minority Literature

The general idea of compiling *Colombian History of Chinese literature* is to explore various themes in a panoramic chronological framework. Following this principle, the whole Colombian series are divided into two books and seven volumes in total. The main part is classified by the subject of western stylistics and discussed respectively as poetry, prose, novel and drama. The remaining three parts are *Introduction and Foundation*, *Annotation*, *Criticism and Explanation* and *Folk and Peripheral Literature*. *Minority Literature* is arranged in the last chapter of *Folk and Peripheral*

Literature, which includes nine chapters, covering *Yuefu Poems*, *Dunhuang literature*, *Oral tradition*, *Regional literature*, *Minority literature*, and *Translator's turn: the birth of modern Chinese language and novel*, *The acceptance of Chinese literature by Korea, Japan and Vietnam*.

The classification of Minority literature into Folk and Peripheral Literature reflects the general editor's cognition to Chinese minority literature. Firstly, Chinese minority literature belongs to the folk literature. In the *Introduction* section, the editors specially remind the readers of this series that one of the characteristics of Chinese literature is that there is not only a variety of literary categories, countless literary types and stylistic rhetoric, but also a variety of legends, ethnic groups and folk tales. Putting minority literature into the folk literature category is a signification of recognizing minority literature as the folk literature, with the characteristics like the orality and created collectively, Chinese minority work, therefore, can be classified with Yue ballads, Dunhuang Literature, Oral formulaic and regional literature together. Generally, these five parts are overlapping in that oral formulaic can be found in folk epics of southwest, northwest minorities and regional literature cannot be separated from the literature of ethnical groups.

Secondly, there is a difference between Chinese minority literature and traditional Chinese mainstream literature. In the original version of *Columbian History of Chinese Literature*, the English language of this part is "Ethnic Minority Literature". The selection of these words is very neutral, but it has meaningful signification in that this part is different from mainstream Literature and belongs to non-mainstream one. If we do compare with the Keywords as *Ethnic Minority Literature* in the chapter titled "Local Color, Ethnicity, and Gender Issues: Comparison of different literary Groups" of *The fourth part: 1910-1945* by David Ming in *Columbian Literary History of United States* with *Columbian History of Chinese Literature*, then we may find that, when introducing the American native Literature, black Literature, Mexican Literature, Asian American humanities and female Literature, those words still often can be found.^[2]

Complex as *Columbian History of American Literature*, which is compiled according to the time order, it is not simple to tell the difference only by several Keywords in titles, however, through the arrangement and usage of Keywords in titles, we can at least pry into the views and thoughts by western sinologists and anthologists in academic fields: how they ponder Chinese minority literature's position in the history of Chinese literature as the equivalent of American minority literature. Usually they take this part as a subsystem of the mainstream culture, which can still have their own influence on the whole society. The subsystem not only rich the mainstream culture, but also encourage cross-cultural interaction. The editors of *Columbian History of Chinese literature* also realized that Chinese minority literature, as a subsystem of Chinese culture, would contribute to the in-depth development of mainstream culture with their own unique cultures.

2.2 Author of the Chapter Minority Literature

As the managing editor, Victor H Mair organized the four dozen sinologists all over the world when they write *Columbian History of Chinese literature* jointly, and sets the overall principles for compiling the volumes as a whole, but allowed and also encouraged each author of every chapter to hold their own unique point of view. Part of minority literature was written by Mark Bender, in some cases, whose academic cognition and academic personality of Chinese minorities can reflect his understanding of Chinese minorities in the American academic circle.

Mark Bender have been to China in the 1980s, worked in Yi School as a professor in Southwest University for Nationalities, and he is one of the first batch of foreign teachers coming to China after China's reform and opening up policy. He also is the first group of teachers interested and engaged in academic investigation in minorities region as early as in 1981. He first began to pay attention to the traditional culture of ethnic minorities in Guangxi, with several interviewing to Master of Zhuang Huangxianfan and gaining valuable oral historical materials. Since the beginning of his academic career, Mark Bender has paid close attention to the oral literature of ethnic minorities in Guangxi, China. He has made many academic visits to the ethnic minority areas in southwest China, and written an article on the Culture of Ethnic Minorities in the American adventure magazine, such as *Mayou Yi* nationality in Guangxi and Zhuang Festival in Yunnan province. At the same time, he

translated *Ganmo Aniu*, a narrative oral poem into English. After six years of practical investigation in China's ethnic minority areas, Mark Bender is fluent in Chinese language and has many academic masterpieces. As the author of the chapter Chinese Minority Literature, Mark Bender has a solid academic foundation and rich knowledge in Chinese minority. With his long-term academic investigation in China's minority areas, the compilation of chapter 50 "Regional Literature" reflects his extensive and in-depth understanding of Chinese literature tradition and regional literature in the Yangtze river, Guangdong province and northeast China. The period of Chinese minority literature he cared about was from around the founding of new China to the development of modern Chinese minority literature.

3. Two Unique Concerns in Chinese Minority Literature

Mark Bender chooses ten ethnic minorities to be introduced, and his emphasis of the selection involve two aspects. One concerns for Chinese minority which has the written works of ethnic minority in history, and these literary works can exist independently as an important form of literature, and also be used as an important support for oral performance. The other aspects is about ethnic minorities with modern literature written in Chinese. Mark Bender's own research focuses on oral texts of ethnic minorities, and he has the experience of studying ethnic minorities in China. Based on the combination of writer's macro and micro concerns, ten China's ethnical groups are chosen. According to their regional space, the ten ethnic minorities are further divided into two categories: five ethnic minorities and literature in southwest China and another five in Western and northern border areas. The collected works cover 10 categories of ethnic minority literature, including myth and legend, epic and long narrative poem, folk song and rap, poetry and prose, opera and novel. In addition, they also sort out ethnic minority literature among the classics texts and relevant journals. These ten major ethnic minorities all have rich oral literary traditions, and most of the ancient oral literary works are handed down generations by generations. The literature works of modern ethnic minorities are rarely introduced, and the contemporary works are hardly involved. Written literature, however, is largely recorded only to support oral literature.

3.1 The Formula of the Introduction to Ethnic Literature

Before introducing each ethnic minority literature, Mark Bender briefly introduces the historical origin, development and writing history of this ethnic minority, which is the basis for understanding ethnic minority literature. Then the population of ethnic minorities, living areas and other specific information are been found as the supplement. In this way, readers would have a direct understanding of this ethnic minority. Next, we will introduce the typical representative or works of this national literature, and some of them will be quoted if they are very special.

Taking the introduction of Uyghur literature as an example, Mark Bender firstly introduced that there are more than 7 million Uyghur people living in Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region of China. Western readers will have an intuitive feeling of Uyghur group and know the scale of this ethnic group as well as the place they live. Then, Uyghur -the language is introduced, which belongs to one of the western Hungarian branch of Altai Turkic system; According to the research of linguists, the language of western Hungary is the language used in ancient western turkic tribes.^[3] In this way, the origin and history of Uyghur is naturally connected with the ancient Turkic empire. Uyghur literature contains a wide range of contents, including religion, history and philosophy. What attracts the attention of western scholars is the Turkic Stone Tablets and the Inscriptions on them. From these contexts, we can also know the history of this language which was once used by some other nationalities like ancient Huihe, Mongolian people and Manchu in history. Uyghur representative poetry collection *Happiness Wisdom* and folk legend *Afandi Story* then were presented, which is the most familiar Uyghur literary work among ordinary Chinese.

3.2 Focus on Minority Scholars

After the introductions of the ten important minority literature, the chapter of minority literature puts forward a separate section to introduce "the works of local scholars", taking into account the

class of minority scholars. In the original English version of *Colombian literature of Chinese Literature*, the word Scholar is Scholar-official. The editor defines Scholar as a person of ethnic minorities, they are those who are proficient in Chinese and can pass the imperial examinations at all levels, and those who can compose traditional poems and articles or write memorials. The editors consider these ethnic minorities to be knowledgeable scholars, some of whom have obtained official positions by taking part in the imperial examinations, and influential local figures. This understanding is consistent with the basic knowledge of “scholars” in China before and after the northern Song dynasty. However, due to the complicated formation and development of Chinese scholars, the various factors such as history, culture and society, the connotation of scholars in different times is different. The formation of minority scholars is closely related to the imperial examination system. In ancient China, the imperial examinations since Jin dynasty were very strict, requiring not only a good family background, but also a large amount of financial support. This group of people became representatives of various ethnic minorities, and they gave their voices to represent their ethnic groups by creating literary works and participated in social activities at that time.

4. Limitations and Enlightenment of The study of Chinese Minority Literary History

As a reference book for experts, scholars and lovers who like Chinese literature in the English-speaking world, *Colombian History of Chinese literature* has its limitations. One hand, due to the lack of direct documentary literature, only 10 major ethnic minorities were mentioned among the 55 ethnic minorities except Han nationality, and no introduction was given to the other 45 ethnic minority literature, especially those with a small population. The 10 ethnic minority literature mentioned above only focuses on the introduction of ancient oral literature, and has little to do with modern and contemporary ethnic minority literature, not to mention the creation characteristics, rules, styles and future development of ethnic minority literature. On the other hand, it only introduces the development of each ethnic minority's literature separately, but does not involve the interaction between each ethnic minority's literature and the integration and development of Han main-stream literature.

Even such a simple introduction to the Chinese minority literature has become not only an important window and bridge to western academics of understanding Chinese minority literature, but also the Chinese academia to understand the latest achievements in western China's minority literature research. Some viewpoint shown in this series still can be very innovative and exploratory, such as the understanding of minority scholars. At the same time, western scholars consciously view Chinese minority literature from the standpoint of the whole world literature.

5. Conclusions

Columbian History of Chinese literature provides a communicative platform for western experts and scholars interested in Chinese literature. China has the long and splendid tradition of Chinese literature and the contribution of China's ethnic minorities. In addition, *Columbian history of Chinese literature* attempts to present a panoramic view of Chinese minority literature in order to break the situation of taking Han nationality traditional literature as the center in researching Chinese literature. Observed as “the other”, *Columbian History of Chinese literature* explores the characteristics of China's minority literature and more innovative point of views are brought about in researching Chinese literature as well as the world literature.

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