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The Metamorphosing Field of Chaoxianzu Oral Literature

Peace B. Lee

The Chaoxianzu are ethnic Koreans who live in China as one of China's 55 ethnic minority groups.¹ Defining Chaoxianzu oral tradition is not a simple task. In characterizing oral literature, Chaoxianzu and Korean scholars place emphasis on the process and mechanics of oral transmission, with its vernacular origin, composition in performance, and artistic qualifications as important key features (Gang 2002, Gim 1999). However, oral performance practices in the field of oral traditions do not fully conform to that description. Chaoxianzu collector-scholars (such as Piao Changmo) are confronted with the dilemmas in which actual “oral” literary practices that exhibit influences from printed texts and/or other media conflict with academically construed oral literature.

In general, Chaoxianzu academic approaches to their oral traditions can be broadly categorized into three types. The first is the tradition of active collection and textualization of oral literatures by native investigators. Second are motif-indexes formulated by scholars (such as Jin Dongxun) and based on textualized oral literatures; these have supported various comparative studies between Chaoxianzu oral literatures and those of other Chinese ethnic groups. Third, in what is perhaps the most important category, Chaoxianzu scholars are experimenting with different approaches to develop a theoretical groundwork for their oral traditions. Chaoxianzu scholars are, from prior experience, aware of the danger in blindly following the theoretical approaches of the West, which cannot reflect the historical and social contexts of the indigenous traditions.

Within China, the scholarly study of Chaoxianzu oral literature is in a transitional phase, carefully testing and combining different theoretical and

¹ This article uses the romanization system current in South Korea, the Chinese Pinyin system (in the case of the Chinese word “Chaoxianzu”). In the case of some personal names, the individual author's own romanization preference is followed.

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