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Oral Tradition, Volume 18, Number 1, March 2003, pp. 101-103 (Article)

Published by Center for Studies in Oral Tradition

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ort.2004.0027>



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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.

methodological approaches drawn from both domestic and Western origins. Scholars from different hemispheres have explored oral tradition-related fields during the past few decades. Jin Dongxun (Gim Donghun in Korean) and Piao Changmo (Bak Changmuk) have taken the lead in studying their own ethnic group's oral literature and culture. Piao Changmo's collection (Bak 1996) contains numerous stories that reflect Chaoxianzu characteristics and history. Park Heh-rah, a native South Korean scholar living in America, has examined the relationship between the nation-state narratives of the People's Republic of China and the Chaoxianzu narratives of their own history, and the influences of nation-state narratives on the subjectivism of Chaoxianzu (1996). Korean scholars of folklore and folklore-related fields, such as Im Jaehae and Gim In-hee, are helping to bridge the gap between the West and the Chaoxianzu oral literary field through analyzing Western approaches such as performance theory and actively engaging in fieldwork among Chinese minorities. Western scholars, such as Mark Bender, Vibeke Børdahl, and Louisa Schein have carried out fieldwork on local oral traditions in a number of areas in China. Although their research does not directly include Chaoxianzu oral traditions, their studies have contributed to facilitating a scholarly dialogue between China and the West.

As an "immigrant nationality," the Chaoxianzu are experiencing transformation at many levels of their society. Included in these changes is the shift in responsibility for acting as tradition-bearers from the immigrant generation to the younger generations of Chaoxianzu born in China. One of the many possible directions in the field of Chaoxianzu oral literature studies is to closely follow and examine the effects of social changes on Chaoxianzu oral literature. Other possible interesting future directions include an expansion of the above-mentioned comparative studies. Research in the images of "self" and "other" expressed in oral traditions within the Korean diaspora (including the unique perspective of North Korea) may provide a key to understanding and resolving the different political and historical agendas within Korean communities.

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