

A Study on Ethnic Literature

Discussion on Mr. Mark Bender's Contribution to the Study of Chinese National Literature*

Ruihong Peng

School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Jianzhu University
Jinan, China

Abstract—Ethnic minority literature is not only an important part of literature research, but also an important topic of concern in folklore (folk literature) research. In the past few decades, many overseas Sinologists and folklore have paid close attention to Chinese minority literature. Especially in the past 20 years, under the influence of the performance theory, there have been many literary works on minority nationalities, which can be called excellent works. Among them, Mark Bender, an American folklorist and sinologist, is especially diligent in the study of Southwest minority literature, including the Miao and Yi nationalities. Professor Bender's greatest contribution to the study of Chinese minority literature lies in his change from the academic tradition of regarding ethnic literature as a purely research object to the path of understanding Chinese minority culture and life, which not only opens up the thinking of minority literature research, but also causes the paradigm revolution of minority literature research to some extent.

Keywords—minority literature; national literature; Yi studies

I. INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, Chinese minority folk literature and folklore culture have been paid more and more attention by western academic circles, especially American Sinology circles.¹ Among them, the spread of Yi folk literature and oral tradition in the English-speaking world, especially due to the efforts of several American scholars, including Professor Mark Bender, to translate and promote the literary and oral traditions of Yi writers. The process of translating Yi folk literature by these scholars is not only to expand the influence of Yi nationality culture abroad, but also to interpret Yi folk culture. Professor Mark is committed to the translation of folk literature such as Yi, Miao, WA and other ethnic minorities. He visited the minority inhabited areas in southwest China many times and went deep into the life scene of the minority nationalities to conduct field investigation, which is the ethnographic study of Yi's folk culture and life world. Based

*This work is one of the results of "Research on Missionaries in Modern China and Shandong Education" (16DJYJ01) program supported by Humanity and Social Science Youth Foundation of Shandong Province of China in 2016.

¹ As early as 1982, Professor Mark Bender translated the Yi folklore "Saibo" into English, and later translated "Tiger traces: Nosu of Akouwu, Selected Chinese Poems" and other works of Yi Literature and "Daur Folk Story" "Mother Butterfly: the creation epic of Miao nationality in Guizhou, China", "Epic of Miao nationality" and other folk literature works of other minority nationalities.

on these field materials, Professor Mark has written dozens of related research papers, which provide a useful perspective for the study of folklore and ethnology in China.² Next, with the cooperation of Professor Mark and Professor Akuwuwu in the translation of his literary works as a starting point, this paper briefly discusses the necessity and feasibility of the shift of the research perspective of ethnic minority folk literature under the background of the rapid penetration of modernization into all aspects of daily life of the Yi people and the huge social transformation.

II. PERFORMANCE THEORY, NATIONAL LITERATURE AND LIFE TRADITION

In the last ten years, influenced by western performance theory, many scholars who study Yi oral tradition or national literature begin to introduce context into specific research. Among them, Barmou Zub, the Yi scholar, is most diligent and has made remarkable achievements. She combined the performance theory from the United States with the oral tradition of Yi nationality and national literature, and further expanded the theory into the theory of "five presence"³, which had a great reaction in folklore circles. It should be said that scholars of ethnic minorities pay attention to the combination of western theory and their own literary works and oral traditions and interpret them, which is an attempt to localize western theory. All in all, these attempts are the feasible way to understand the folk culture and cultural model of ethnic minorities for the subjects of folklore, ethnology and folklore.

However, we must also see that the use of Western theories to interpret Chinese native folk literature and oral traditions is, in any case, limited. In academic practice, a number of academic works have even been cut to the point of self-examination of written or oral materials obtained through field work, that is, materials that are difficult to explain with

² On the classification of minority folk literature, Professor Mark put forward in his article "How to Look at Meige: a literary text of Chuxiong Yi nationality oriented by tradition", according to the special system and context of the text in the process of creation and dissemination. National folklore can be divided into three categories: that is, "oral text" or "oral text", "text originating from oral" and "text oriented by tradition". (See: [US] Mark Bender, "How to Look at Meige: a literary text of Chuxiong Yi Nationality oriented by tradition", translated by Fu Wei, Folklore Research, Vol. 4, 2002) The article generally agrees with his classification method, there is no special distinction in the text.

³ Liao Mingjun, Bamotrobumo: "'five presences' in Field Studies-interview with Bamotrobumo". "National Art", No. 3, 2004.

presupposition theories, simply filter out themselves, and finally combine the appropriate materials with Western theories. A seemingly complete and perfect combination of Chinese and Western formed, with the Chinese case for the Western theory endorsement. As early as the 1980s, Zhong Jingwen shouted that Chinese folklore could not be a police station for Western theory. However, over the past few decades, this situation has not changed much. The mainstream research paradigm and theoretical system in academic circles are still derived from the West, and scholars' research routines are basically stuck in either endorsing them, or it is not so persuasive as the so-called criticism of scratch.

As a Western scholar, Professor Mark may go a little further than many domestic scholars in this regard. He himself came from the United States, one of the birthplaces of modern western theory. When he studied Chinese folk culture, national literature or oral tradition, he did not carry with him superstitious ideas about western theory. There is no denying that his academic expression has a natural Western perspective, but as he said in an interview, he agreed with "using their own national theories to analyze the literary texts of their own nationalities".⁴ In the study of Yi nationality literature and oral tradition, he paid special attention to this, so he chose to cooperate with Professor Akuwu. In Mark's view, Professor Akuwu is just such a national scholar. He has his own theoretical consciousness, and at the same time he wants his own national cultural consciousness, is able to express the folk cultural feelings and thoughts of the nation through poetry or localization theory. For example, in Professor Akuwu's poems, the unique folk cultural symbols of the Yi nationality such as the sun and Bimo often appear.⁵

Undoubtedly, these folk cultural symbols contain the life wisdom of Yi nationality and the meaning of people's life. Mark paid special attention to this when he translated Akuwu's poems, so he noticed the culture and the world of life behind these lively poetic languages and symbols. As a result, in the cooperation between the two men, Mark repeatedly "asked" Professor Akouwu to take him to the scene of the folklore cultural events involved in poetry. For example, he would like to see Bimo's practice, to go to the scene of the soul-raising to feel, to investigate the birthplace of Gan Mao Aniu and so on.

Through these painstaking fieldworks, Mark realized the original intention of better understanding the literary and oral traditions of Aku and other Yi writers. At the same time, these national literary and oral traditions have become a way for Mark to understand the Yi nationality and the folk culture of the minority nationalities in southwest China. In a sense, Mark's contribution is not so much the translation of Aku's literary works as the realization of cultural exchange between

⁴ [US] Mark Bender, Huang Li: "the Literature of Southwest China's ethnic minorities toward the World", "Journal of Ethnology", No. 5, 2014

⁵ In fact, in the literary or oral traditions of ethnic minority writers, it is a common literary phenomenon to express their views and perceptions of the world with their own cultural symbols. Besides Professor Akuwu, the Yi folk cultural symbols often appear in the literary works of such writers as Bamoqubu and Jidimajia.

the two places, but rather that Mark finds a key to understanding and interpreting the life world of Yi people through the literary works of Aku and others. This key is the national literature itself.

III. TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION OF MINORITY LITERATURE

Compared with Mark, the scholars of Han nationality or scholars who use Chinese idiomatically have a certain degree of convenience in understanding Yi literature. For scholars who are proficient in both Chinese and Yi, such as Akuwu, this advantage is even more evident. But there is no denying that not all scholars who use Chinese as well as scholars who are proficient in Yi and Chinese are like Mark who realizes that there is such a wonderful theoretical implication in Yi nationality's national literature and oral tradition. Through the text of ethnic literature, we can see that the world outlook and survival wisdom are very different from those of the Han nationality people, and this kind of world outlook and survival wisdom are manifested in every aspect of the daily life of the Yi people, form their unique view of the world of life. This unique angle of view needs to attract the attention of scholars and create the sparks of the Chinese native theoretical system in the collision with the national or mainstream culture. Many years ago, Akuwu put forward the concepts of "second mother tongue writing"⁶ and "mixed culture"⁷. In fact, there is a strong theoretical tension, which is the "theoretical effect" that will inevitably occur when the minority language meets the Han nationality language. The fact is that many Western anthropological theories are born out of this cultural shock when two different cultures meet.

If the theory of performance has an incomparable explanatory power in the structural interpretation and analysis of national literature and oral traditions of ethnic minorities, so when we turn our research eyes from the structure to the life world, we must break away from the performance theory and return to the text, and change from text research to research. In other words, the focus of our study is not the text itself, let alone the process and context of producing the text, but to return to the world of life and the meaning of life, that is, to interpret the national cultural patterns and life wisdom behind the text.

It should be noted that the return of research thinking still requires vigilance in overemphasizing the details of the field and neglecting the overall meaning of the text. As Liu Zongdi said, the field was originally used as a method of collecting literary texts. Now in ethnology and folklore, Text has become very unimportant, and even become a dispensable material in fieldwork.

It is undeniable that both the oral tradition of ethnic minorities and the oral tradition of the Han nationality, their full meaning of life is accomplished in a specific context. Context is the most important element in performance theory.

⁶ Luo Qingchun, Wang Ju: "Novel review", The 3rd issue in 2008.

⁷ Luo Qingchun and Liu Xinglu: "Cultural hybridity": the formation of contemporary Chinese minority literature culture, Ethnic literature research, The 1st issue in 2006.

In the case of Barmou Zub, context implies at least five presences. In these "presence," the "text" itself falls into the second place, which in a sense is a misunderstanding of Western contextual theory. It is precisely because of this misunderstanding that contextual theory has at least two kinds of problems when applied to the study of Chinese native folklore and ethnic folk literature: One is that in academic works, context becomes an indispensable academic decoration, that is, researchers describe the elements contained in context in the form of white sketch, and then analyze a certain folk custom or an oral traditional text, and the subsequent analysis is not much related to the pre-context; The other is that in the face of national folk literature, the importance of context is overemphasized while the value and significance of the text itself is neglected intentionally or unintentionally.

IV. TEXT, CONTEXT AND THE LIFE WORLD OF ETHNIC MINORITIES

In the western discourse system, context as "context" is formed on the basis of text, that is to say, the relationship between text and context is not balanced, but primary and secondary. The focus on context is to better interpret the text, and the text must be put into context to achieve its full meaning. The two are complementary. Specifically, the study of Yi nationality folk literature is also true. Generally speaking, the Yi nationality folk literature includes two categories: One is the literary works written by Yi writers in Yi language or in Chinese based on Yi folk culture; one is the oral tradition of Bimo of the Yi Nationality, the common people and so on. As far as academic research is concerned, these two types of national folklore and their folklore cultural context are interpretation relations, that is, literary works themselves are the way to understand Yi folk culture and cultural model. At the same time, the folk culture and cultural practice of Yi nationality are the realistic basis for interpreting the connotation of literary works. In many specific studies, the dialectical relationship between text and context has been neglected to some extent.

The biggest danger of the separation between text and context in academic research is that many academic works regard context as the object of study in order to avoid the mere study of text, so as to overemphasize the importance of context and weaken the importance of text. Finally, there is an embarrassing situation of overcorrection. The tendency to study the separation of context and text is, in the final analysis, a problem that arises when context is found, but the significance of context to academic research has not been discussed in depth, and the meaning of context to text has only been discussed extensively. As far as academic research is concerned, context is the process of giving meaning to the text. We must understand the meaning of life contained in context itself when we seek the meaning of the text. As Wang Jiewen said, "When folklorists find that text and context are inseparable and interdependent, they begin to look for the generation of meaning in the context of folk phenomena. However, after all, the process of folklore involves a series of interrelated acts. Apart from the phenomenon itself as a performance event, there are also a series of acts in which folklorists participate in the collection, recording, translation,

analysis, interpretation, archival, publishing, development and utilization, and this whole process of folklore, this whole "folk process" is the "context" to understand the meaning of a particular "text".⁸ Professor Mark Bender, in a recent article, also highlighted the many difficult problems of "context" in the translation and study of minority literature., "One of the difficulties in translating epic poems and interpreting them as literary works lies in the images related to folk culture, especially material culture, that is, the local environment in the form of animals, plants, land, and rivers."⁹ In view of this, Professor Mark Bender suggested that in the study of minority literature, the use of image technology and the combination of various images and texts must be used, and pointed out that the use of images will promote the understanding and interpretation of the meaning of epic reference.

In fact, Professor Mark Bender, in another earlier article, also emphasized the ability to deepen the understanding of the life world of ethnic minorities through the interpretation of national literature texts, "depicting traditional referential linguistic knowledge, myths and legends, material culture, values, spirituality, rituals of the life cycle, And the regional cultural environments from the traditional 'World of ethnic life' will allow more meaningful and passionate poets to write 'ethnographic' poems in their fields, in various ways, and to translate them on a cultural basis, these poets are calling home".¹⁰

V. CONCLUSION

It is a change of research angle of view to carry on the research through the national folk literature. This perspective is not only different from the traditional research path, which focuses on the meditative interpretation of the text itself, but also differs from the structural interpretation of the text from the perspective of contextualism, but through the study of national and folk literature. The theme of the study changes from the literary text to the world of life and the wisdom of life. National and folk literature has become the research path. Because we must understand that under the influence of globalization, marketization and modernization, the folk culture of ethnic minorities is undergoing a huge social transformation. In the period of social transformation, the traditional folk culture is changing, mutating and even disappearing. For the traditional research path, its research topic is becoming erratic. In the past, the static structural study of folk literature and folk culture has met with a bottleneck. How to continue the study of folklore and ethnic folk literature in the process of social modernization has become an important academic issue that scholars have to rethink. In my opinion, in this case, we must change the research perspective. Ethnic folklore and folk culture are regarded as the undetermined origin, not the result of social development and life practice. In other words, what we should

⁸ Wang Jiewen: "contextualist" return to text". Qinghai Social Sciences, No. 3, 2013.

⁹ [US] Mark Bendel: Evidence Strategy: take the folk material culture and environmental image of Yi and Miao epic as an example. Translated by Chen Tingting, Folk Culture Forum, No. 2, 2018.

¹⁰ [US] Mark Bendel: "Ethnographic Poetry in Northeast India and Southwest China.", translated by Wang Ju, Ethnographic Journal, No. 5, 2013.

pay attention to is the projection of ethnic folk literature texts by ethnic minority people using their own life wisdom to adapt to the process of modern social life style. That is, Professor Mark said, we should pay attention to "how to use the traditional culture of ethnic minorities in contemporary poetry, how these traditional cultures play a role, how to make their nation better face the modern society"¹¹ Mark also mentioned the "national self-concept" in the interview, through the national folk literature can experience the national self-concept of ethnic minorities, which is also the academic pursuit of researchers.

In a sense, writing in minority languages, or with the peculiar thinking of minority nationalities, or based on the national cultural traditions, is itself a "writing culture", which is the interpretation and presentation of the national folk culture. Similarly, the translation of ethnic minority folk literature itself is through its academic practice of national culture and life wisdom. Translating literary works means translating folklore. Just like Mark did when he translated Arco's works, his process of translating these literary works into English is also the process of translating Yi folk culture and folk traditions in English.

REFERENCES

- [1] Liao Mingjun. Bamotrobumo: "‘five presences’ in Field Studies-interview with Bamotrobumo". "National Art", No. 3, 2004.
- [2] [US] Mark Bender, Huang Li. "The Literature of Southwest China's ethnic minorities toward the World", "Journal of Ethnology", No. 5, 2014
- [3] Luo Qingchun, Wang Ju. "Novel review", The 3rd issue in 2008.
- [4] Luo Qingchun, Liu Xinglu. "Cultural hybridity": the formation of contemporary Chinese minority literature culture, Ethnic literature research, The 1st issue in 2006.
- [5] Wang Jiewen. "Contextualist" return to text". Qinghai Social Sciences, No. 3, 2013.
- [6] [US] Mark Bendel: Evidence Strategy: take the folk material culture and environmental image of Yi and Miao epic as an example. Translated by Chen Tingting, Folk Culture Forum, No. 2, 2018.
- [7] [US] Mark Bendel: "Ethnographic Poetry in Northeast India and Southwest China.", translated by Wang Ju, Ethnographic Journal, No. 5, 2013.
- [8] Zheng Xi, Niu Zhimen. "We understand what we have lost — Dialogue with American scholar Mr. Mark Bendel", the Chinese Nationality, No. 6, 2011.

¹¹ Zheng Xi, Niu Zhimen: "We understand what we have lost — Dialogue with American scholar Mr. Mark Bendel", the Chinese Nationality, No. 6, 2011.