

Folk studies should avoid fragmentation: scholars

By HAO RIHONG

Contemporary historical studies have emphasized the role of societies. This is not just due to new perspectives on historical studies, but also due to increasing analysis of folk historical documents.

Defining 'folk documents'

Common folk historical documents include genealogies, inscriptions, epitaphs, contracts, litigation papers, village regulations and folk conventions, bill books, and letters. Generally, documents that are formed and used in ordinary people's daily lives are believed to contain "folk" features.

However, Zheng Zhenman, director of the Center for Folk Historical Documents Research says that this definition is too simplistic.

He said that folk documents should be understood on multiple levels. First, they are formed and used among the people. Second they are used, not created, by the people. Third, they are created, but not used, by the people.

"For example, textbooks for the imperial examination were not written by the people, but were widely used in the civil society, thus falling under the purview of folk documents. Moreover, recipes or prescriptions for the imperial families, if originally coming from the people, should also fall into the category," Zheng said.

Zheng points out that there are other complicating factors, such as contracts that originally served to handle ordinary people's business but once adopted by the court, became official documents. He said that when it comes to accurately defining the concept, the key lies in judging its functions, namely whether it is used in people's daily lives or official affairs.

Role evolution

Chang Jianhua, director of the Key Research



Experts digitize ancient Tibetan books.

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Institute of Social History of China in Nankai University, said that folk documents used to be considered supporting evidence for official history, standing as a supplement to relevant historical figures, events and systems.

Later, they changed role, taking on a number of other functions, such as in the analysis of the nature of society, land systems and class relations.

In the last few decades, research focus in this field has turned to grassroots society, communities and daily life as well as its correlation to historical memories, local society and historical evolution, providing a new perspective to view history, Chang said.

"Compared to the past, current studies stress basic philosophies, such as how people make their own history and everyday life is the base of social existence, which in the end upholds historical materialism and tries to understand historical evolution from the perspective of ordinary people," Zheng said.

Avoiding fragmentation

Chang said folk document studies need to further improve in two respects. First, they should be used with traditional political and official records in all possible ways. Second, the materials should be examined from a cultural perspective.

"Folk documents are often used in economics and but we focus more on exploring the

cultural heritage and historical memories in it," Chang said.

Zuo Yuhe, a research fellow from the Institute of Modern History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, believes that hands-on practical work is necessary. "Field investigation is an effective means to distinguish folk documents from odd customs," he said.

Zheng said there are plenty of folk documents in existence that cover every aspect of social life and it is essential for research to connect the dots and reveal the overall picture.

"Individual folk documents should not be seen as a lonely island. Rather, they should be put into the social and cultural system," Zheng said.

"However, in reality, due to multiple market operations of cultural relics, some of the major documentation systems were disrupted and lost their historical value," Zheng said. "In addition, some scholars like to classify historical documents but the result is the intrinsic links between documents are undermined, making it hard to restore the historical process and causing the study to be fragmented."

In this light, Zheng suggested that a comprehensive folk document database should be put in place using modern information technology. Such a database should go beyond the previous classification system, connecting folk historical documents of different times, places, figures, events, sources, and text forms to revive their original system, discourse and context, he said.

increase the value of state-owned assets while simultaneously pursuing the public mission of providing public service."

He added the profit-making mission could motivate an enterprise to pursue interests through all kinds of means, such as seeking monopoly by virtue of administrative resources and entering industries that have higher rates of profit but do not benefit the national economy and the public good. "Such a greedy pursuit of benefit will sabotage the fairness and efficiency of the market," Huang said. "Therefore, the key problem is to define the missions and functions of different SOEs and distinguish between profit-making and public missions."

There needs to be a gradual transition from centralized management of SOEs to decentralized and specialized management, Huang said.

"To be specific, SOE leaders should be divided into separate roles of Party and government officials and managers, which can maintain the dominance of state ownership on one hand and help SOEs better participate in market competition on the other," he said.

Mixed ownership

Mixed ownership has always been a focus of

reform, and scholars from various fields have been debating stock rights, employee stock ownership and intervention funds.

Zhang Zhuoyuan, a research fellow from the Institute of Economics at CASS, mentioned more than once that mixed ownership represents the general trend of SOE reform. He said developing a mixed-ownership economy would be conducive to deepening SOE reform and promoting a non-public economy, which would bring improvements to the basic economic system.

Zhang added that the development of a mixed-ownership economy would not undermine the role of public ownership as the core of China's economic system and carve up state-owned property. "The key is to evaluate the value of state-owned assets in an objective, fair and reasonable way," Zhang said.

Theoretically, the diversification of property rights does not contradict the nature of SOEs, said Liu Yuanchun, executive president of the National Academy of Development and Strategy at Renmin University of China. "Mixed ownership is an important form for realizing the basic economic system, but we should never cross the bottom line when holding state-owned shares," he said.

Postal service prompted Tang poetry development

By ZHAN FURUI

The spread of poetry during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) by way of the ancient postal service represents an important subject when studying the development of Tang poetry. Research in this field has achieved some fruitful results but more remains to be explored.

Postal Service and Tang Poetry Transmission by Wu Shuling examines the content and artistic features of poetry created either on postal service roads or in posthouses, and the formation of poetry schools and fashion, as well as the impact of the postal system on poems, rendering the book distinct from previous works.

The author pointed out that poets rarely settled down in one location. There were a number of reasons for this, such as the ups and downs in officialdom, which meant that it was common for them to be rushing about on postal service roads or taking a rest in the posthouses. However, each occasion when they arrived at or left a position represented a turning point in their lives, so their feelings were in a constant state of flux, separating their creations from the circumstances of their daily lives.

Travelling fatigue, homesickness, promotions or demotions, and social interactions often filled poets' minds with surging thoughts and emotions, which they often poured out by writing poems. A close look at the different emotions and feelings of poets on the road can to a degree reveal their attitudes toward various aspects of social life during the Tang Dynasty.

Though the book goes into detail in some parts, it offers two broader insights. First, the postal service in the Tang Dynasty ensured immediate transportation between poets and contributed to the spread of the poetry, and it also served as a bridge between the poets at great distances and assisted them in forming poetry groups and shaping fashions of the time.

Second, the rapid delivery of the poems meant that styles could be quickly updated. Whenever a new poetic style came out, it would quickly be spread all over the empire in a very short period, affecting both poets in the same era and later generations. Postal service roads covered nearly every corner of the empire, enhancing the influence of Tang poetry. *Manuscripts of Tang Poems in Dunhuang (Dunhuang Tangshi Xieben)* is an example of this.

If the author could further include studies of the role of postal transmission as it relates to each poetry genre, the book would be more concrete.

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breaking the monopoly will damage the interests of SOEs. As a result, the double-track price system is impracticable," Ping said, adding that further reform cannot simply rely on price control relaxation, large-scale sales of SOEs and management buy-outs.

Huang Qunhui, director of the Institute of Industrial Economics of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), said the new round of reform should fulfill four tasks: strategic reshuffling in line with the function of the state-owned economy, promoting mixed ownership reform, optimizing state-owned property management and improving the modern system for SOEs.

Classified, decentralized management

Some scholars said management based on classification of SOEs with different missions may be one focus of reform.

"The mission of an enterprise is an embodiment of its value and undertaking. SOEs are meant to shoulder national missions," Huang said. "However, in recent years, SOEs have been also required to accomplish the profit-making mission in order to maintain and