

Seminar imparts values of popular literature

By WUNAN

At a seminar on popular literature recently held in Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, scholars conducted in-depth discussions on such topics as the compilation and research of popular literature documents.

Popular literature includes folk literature created orally by the people and popular literature written by literati in the form of folk literature, said Duan Baolin, a professor from the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Peking University. Popular literature is fundamental to literature. Despite an aggregate of crude works, popular literature also includes many high-quality works, which can be uncovered via long-term collective transmission and processing.

Popular literature reflects the lives, thoughts, and emotions of the general public, which is a research focus for understanding a nation and its people. According to Liao Kebin, a professor from the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Peking University, current popular literature of China mainly refers to works produced before the 1911 Revolution, or the Xinhai Revolution. Popular literature in a broad sense includes ancient novels, operas, *shuochang* literature (literally tell-sing literature, an art form that utilizes talking and singing to tell stories), folk ballads, folk tales, and so on. In a narrow sense, popular literature refers to *shuochang* literature.

The various genres of *shuochang* literature are deeply rooted in folk life, and condense traditional society's values, national psychology, and lifestyles, including *Pinghua* (monologue story-telling in a local dialect), *Daoqing* (a folk operetta originated from the chanting of Taoist scriptures),

Baojuan (literally precious scrolls, a genre of prosimetric texts of a religious or mystical nature, often written in vernacular Chinese), *Tanci* (literally plucking rhymes, the singing of verse portions to a pipa, which consists of both spoken storytelling and sung ballads), and *Guci* (drum lyrics).

The study of popular literature can correct academic circles' contempt for popular literature and construct a more complete framework for Chinese literature. We can thus better understand generation mechanisms, the trajectory of changes, and motivation for development of popular culture. In addition, revealing the internal connection between popular literature and folk beliefs, enlightenment, and entertainment can deepen understanding of the composition and changes of national psychology, providing a reference for cultural construction in the new era, said Wang Dingyong, director of the Popular Literature Research Center at Yangzhou University.

Despite its long history, the study of popular literature did not truly enter the halls of modern academia until after the May Fourth Movement of 1919. According to Liao, after the movement, many representative research works on popular literature appeared, such as Wang Guowei's *History of Traditional Opera in the Song and Yuan Dynasties*, Lu Xun's *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Hu Shih's *Textual Research on Chinese Zhanghui-Style Fiction*, and Zheng Zhenduo's *History of Chinese Folk Literature*.

In terms of methodology, *On Destiny of Rebirth* (1959) by Chen Yinque is a paragon of popular literature studies.

Since the 1980s, the study of popular literature witnessed a new wave. Fiction and operas have become important objects

for research on ancient literature, while *shuochang* literature and folk ballads have received increasing attention.

Up to now, there have been large-scale or thematic literature compilations in the fields of fiction and opera. In terms of *shuochang* literature, *Tanci*, *Baojuan*, *Zidishu* (literally bannermen tales, a popular storytelling genre created in early 18th-century Beijing), and *Muyushu* (a genre of *Tanci* in Cantonese) have received growing attention. Academic circles have launched a series of research projects and completed an abundance of data compilations, Liao continued.

The survival and preservation of various popular literature genres varies greatly, Wang said. On the one hand, early *shuochang* literature such as *Bianwen* (a form of storytelling literature which flourished in the Tang Dynasty), *Zhugongdiao* (popular in the Song and Yuan dynasties, 960–1368), and *Taozhen* (prevalent in the Song Dynasty, 960–1127) have disappeared. On the other hand, some of them still exist, including *Shuoshu* (monologue storytelling), *Daoqing*, and *Baojuan*, as well as *Tanci* and *Guci*.

The study of different popular literature genres has an uneven status quo. Fiction and operas have become independent subjects, with many researchers involved, while *shuochang* literature research is largely niche, though it clings on to the subjects of ancient and modern literature. *Shuoshu* has a natural kinship to popular fiction, especially to *Zhanghui*-style fiction (a type of traditional Chinese fiction where each chapter is headed by a couplet giving the gist of its content). Therefore, *Shuoshu* has received attention from fiction researchers. In contrast, studies of other literary forms are still unpopular, mainly because of a lack of literature.

Shuochang literature has a history of more than two thousand years. This matrix of opera and fiction contains high research value. However, most related research needs to be strengthened, despite growing attention paid to *Zidishu* and *Baojuan*. The time frame for popular literature research should be extended into the 1930s and 1940s, suggested Bao Zhenpei, a professor from the School of Literature at Nankai University. Scholars should carry out integrative studies between popular literature and dialect-related intangible cultural heritage that is still actively inherited.



The seminar on popular literature recently held in Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province Photo: Wu Nan/CSST

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Rachel Gisselquist, a senior research fellow with the United Nations University's World Institute for Development Economics Research, provided a deeper dive into the practical effect driven by global measurements. According to her, governance assessments using various indexes and indicators have a variety of practical implications, in spite of their use in research and academic analysis. For instance, they may influence foreign aid allocations and investor perceptions. They may also be applied by citizens and civil society groups in considering and evaluating governance in their own countries.

In response to criticism, many researchers and practitioners have put efforts into redeveloping and optimizing the indicator framework. Malito said that within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

framework, the UN is pushing the scientific community to provide better conceptualizations and measurements for governance. However, a globally shared notion of governance is difficult to achieve, and in this field the legitimacy of certain global claims to knowledge has been increasingly contested.

Concerns have emerged about the overarching acceptability, legitimacy, and actual feasibility of existing governance measures, especially regarding the monitoring of the SDGs' governance goal: A Global North-Global South divide exists in the production and use of governance metrics, as the majority of existing measures of governance are produced in high-income economies, in North America or Europe.

The balance between homogeneity and non-homogeneity under the circumstances of globalization is also involved in reflections on global rankings. Doubavka Ols-

kova, a senior researcher at the Institute for Contemporary History at the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, proposed that global rankings and relevant lists need to be made flexible enough to reflect various perspectives and solid enough to provide a full picture of international trends in the global landscape. It is also noteworthy that social sciences and humanities considerably shape national identity.

On top of all this re-examination, what should be the next step in practice? In Malito's view, to release the potential of global indicators and ranking, we need to understand metrics beyond their technocratic curtain but as part of a global system of knowledge production. Better credibility and legitimacy for governance metrics might require more intellectual and policy innovation than simply adjusting ownership or participation within existing frameworks.



The Past, Present and Future Studies on Chinese Disaster History

By Min Xiangpeng
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Scholars shed light on Chinese disaster history studies

By HE KEWEI

Edited by Min Xiangpeng, a professor from the Key Research Institute of Yellow River Civilization and Sustainable Development at Henan University, *The Past, Present and Future Studies on Chinese Disaster History* gathers interviews with ten leading scholars in the field of disaster history. In addition to reviewing their own research experiences, they discuss disaster history research's status and problems, frontier dynamics, and future trends.

In 1937, Deng Tuo (1912–1966), a student from Henan University, completed *The History of Famine Relief in China*, the first general history of disasters in China that laid the foundation for and ushered in modern research on disaster history in the country. Over the past eight decades, generations of scholars have committed to summarizing the historical experience of disaster relief and discussing the Chinese wisdom of disaster prevention and mitigation.

Scholars share a consensus of forward-looking views on the future of disaster history's research. When interviewed, Hao Ping, Ma Junya, Fang Xiuqi, and Zhou Qiong all highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary research on disaster history. The field of disaster history needs comprehensive studies that integrate the social sciences and natural sciences. Cross-over studies are necessary to further advance the field of disaster history, by drawing on the research approaches of environmental history, social history, and cultural history. The field will also benefit by comprehensively applying multi-disciplinary theoretical systems in the natural sciences and social sciences including climatology, seismology, ecology, economics, sociology, ethnology, folkloristics, anthropology, and psychology.

The book contains new insights from scholars. For example, Chen Yexin noted that disaster history studies should combine both internal and external history. Xia Mingfang proposed the concept of disaster humanities, and regards disasters as a driving force for social evolution.

The book also raises inspiring questions that deserve further discussion. For example, historical records tend to focus on central political areas in detail, while briefly introducing or even ignoring remote areas. There were few disaster records in the pre-Qin period (prior to 221 BCE), yet numerous records in the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911). The significance of these documentary differences in central and remote areas, in early and late ancient times, needs further study.

Historical data on disasters offers evidence when exploring ancient climate changes. However, in recent years, this data was found to vary from the conclusions of natural science research based on stalagmites and tree rings, which lead to doubts raised by Zhang De'er, about Gerald Haug's conclusions regarding ancient East Asian climate based on rock cores. As such, efforts should be made to further determine the accuracy of records and natural science methodology.

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