

Editor's Column

This special issue of *Oral Tradition*, a joint production of the cooperative project between the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition (CSOT) at the University of Missouri-Columbia and the Institute of Ethnic Literature (IEL) of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) that was initiated in 1999, is the first collection of papers published in English on the oral traditions of minority ethnic groups in China.

Having shared a common interest in promoting Sino-U.S. discourse on oral traditions, we planned as the very first step in this bilateral project to introduce recent North American scholarship to Chinese readers, as well as to present Chinese research on ethnic verbal art to English-language readers. In 2000, seven English papers recommended by Professor John Miles Foley were translated and published in *Studies of Ethnic Literature*, a quarterly journal founded in 1983 under the sponsorship of the IEL to encourage study of the oral and written literature of ethnic groups in China. In that special Chinese issue, subtitled *American Scholarship on Oral Tradition*, we were fortunate in assembling contributions from groundbreaking scholars in the United States. We also had the honor of including Professor Foley's succinct headnotes to each paper, and his insightful perspectives on the discipline in an addendum in order to show our readers new directions in the field. It is worth mentioning that the issue has been warmly welcomed by Chinese scholars from relevant disciplines. Now we are very happy to see the counterpart publication appearing in the United States. The authors whose work is represented herein are all my colleagues, and the great majority of them either come from minority ethnic groups themselves or have a specialized knowledge of indigenous traditions and ethnic verbal arts.

From the green grassland of the north to the lush jungles in the south, from the coastal areas along Taiwan Strait in the east to the "top of the world" in the west, there are 56 official ethnic minority groups residing in Mainland China. The largest group, the Han, make up over 92% of China's enormous population, and thus it is somewhat understandable that when the rest of the world talks about "Chinese culture" they often refer implicitly to "Han culture." The other ethnic minorities, largely living away from the major population centers on China's vast frontiers but still inhabiting 64% of China's territory, have been struggling to maintain their own languages, oral traditions, and cultural identities for centuries.

In this special issue, thirteen authors examine oral traditions from various perspectives. Quite obviously, no single collection of papers could adequately cover the extensive range of traditional expressive arts observed

in the diverse cultures of a country as huge and complex as China. Nonetheless, some important genres are represented here—among them epic, myth, sacred songs, and incantation epos—as practiced by the Tibetan, Mongolian, Kirghiz, Manchu, Nakhi, Yi, Miao, and Dong peoples. These papers reveal, in a sort of composite thumbnail sketch, the diversity, multiformity, and complexity of oral traditions in China. But we are also aware that the present collection merely provides a close-up picture, illuminating current Chinese scholarship and exploring the roots of human expressive cultures.

We are confident that international scholarship on oral tradition has a promising future. One leading arena, the journal *Oral Tradition*, has been keen on broadening our vision to include other cultures and on discovering and reexamining the rules of verbal art. We hope that this volume will help to inaugurate a new stage of our common discipline, moving toward a wider and deeper dialogue. We aim to foster exchanges with others who seek to better understand the expressive culture of human beings in general and the oral traditions of ethnic groups in China in particular.

Hearty thanks must go first to Professor Foley; it was his suggestion that made this volume possible. Much credit for the publication of the collection should go to the translators and the editors. Not only is the subject matter difficult, but there is also the matter of style: original texts in the Chinese academic format do not easily translate into Western academic style. My old friend Dr. Naran Bilik and his comrades have expended enormous effort in translating the majority of the papers into English. As for the editing process, I myself worked together with Dr. John Zemke, Michael Barnes, Kristin Funk, Heather Hignite, and Heather Maring for many months, during my year-long residency as a Ford Foundation fellow at the CSOT. I know how demanding the job was for them. Aaron Tate also helped me in some ways with the editing of the papers. I extend special gratitude to my colleague Ms. Bamó Qubumo for her generous and timely assistance to the CSOT editors. Finally, we would also like to acknowledge the Foreign Affairs Bureau of CASS, especially Dr. Pei Changhong and Mr. Zhang Youyun, and to thank them for the subvention applied to the preparation of this landmark issue.

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