

## Chinese Ethnic Minorities and their Oral Poetry: A Perspective from Ethnopoetics

Cai Qin<sup>1</sup>, Cheng Ta Seah<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Literature, Shaanxi Normal University, China No. 620 West Chang'an Street, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China

<sup>2</sup>School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. 14 Nanyang Drive, Singapore

**Corresponding Author:** Cheng Ta Seah, E-mail: chengta.seah@ntu.edu.sg

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: June 18, 2021

Accepted: August 11, 2021

Published: October 31, 2021

Volume: 12 Issue: 5

Advance access: October 2021

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: This study was supported by the Fundamental Research Funds For the Central Universities (2021TS086).

#### Key words:

Ethno-poetics,  
Chinese Ethnic Minorities,  
Oral Poetry,  
Literary Anthropology,  
Multiculturalism,  
Native

### ABSTRACT

Ethnopoetics involves in the conducting of translation experiments on oral poems of native ethnic groups, converting its relevant oral texts into written forms. The theory of ethnographic poetry begins in the 1970s and was translated and introduced to China in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, most ethnic minorities in China do not have textual writings. Their oral creations from primitive society to modern society such as epics, long poems, narrative poems, ballads, and folk songs are mostly in form of oral poetry. The collection and translation of oral poems of ethnic minorities in China began in the late 1950s, that demarcated the beginning of ethnopoetics in China. In this article, the reasons behind the collection and translation of Chinese ethnic minority oral poems will be analysed. The restoration process of ethnopoetics and the connections between the collections and the translations, and the issues on whether translation is consistent to Chinese ethnic minority oral poems will also be further elaborated. The history of Chinese ethnic minorities oral poetry traces back to a long history and consists of a variety of themes and contents. Therefore, the restoration process of ethnopoetic research on the relationship between oral culture and written culture not only have gained the attention from the Chinese academic community, but also shown strong interests by the Western academic research community and worldwide.

## INTRODUCTION

### Research Problem

Ethnopoetics was first discussed in the United States in the 1970s, it later became an important and widespread method of oral poetry research worldwide. However, in China, discussion on ethnopoetics was only translated and introduced in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was till this time that the exploration in oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities thrived after the discussions of ethnopoetics was brought into China.

However, before the introduction to the ideas from the perspective of ethnopoetics, the collection, sorting, translation, and publication of oral poems, such as epics, long poems, narrative poems, ballads, and folk songs of Chinese ethnic minorities have been active since late 1950s. The efforts, especially the process of poem collection and translation can be found in two time period. Firstly, from the 1950s to the 1960s and secondly, in the 1980s. However, prior to the 1950s, the collection and translation of oral poems through the vision of ethnopoetics are rare, and the conversion from oral text to written text of oral poetry by Chinese ethnic minorities focusing on historical contexts is of near non-existent.

### Aim and Goals

Without the practice of oral poetry translation guided by ethnopoetics theory, resulted in a lack of discussions on ethnopoetics in China. Thus, it is essential to re-examine the collection and translation history of Chinese ethnic minority oral poems since the end of the 1950s and study its possible relevance with the ethnopoetic theory. In order to begin the analysis of the ethnopoetic studies in the oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities, we shall refer to the different narrations on the ethnopoetics theory that were originated from the United States, especially on the studying of the characteristics of oral poetry from theoretical sources. It is significant that, by pointing out the commonalities between Chinese and Western oral poetry, by looking into the epics, long poems, narrative poems, ballads and folk songs in the oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities, we are able to discover the linkages between Chinese and Western oral poetry that provides us on the crucial fundamental knowledge for the poetic studies.

Secondly, with reference to ethnopoetics theory and studying on the characteristics and composition of Chinese ethnic minority oral poems, it is highly possible to achieve a

good overview on the collection and translation of Chinese ethnic minority oral poems, and it further leads to the discussion if China has its own history of ethnopoetics practice before the theory introduced by the west.

Thirdly, the collection and translation of oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities has its own practices and processes. These characteristics and processes demonstrated the uniqueness and dimensional values of each poems. In short, with the theory of ethnopoetics, it is necessary to re-analyse and evaluate on the impact of the collection and translations of oral poems by ethnic minorities in China, that is also similar in terms of methods of reading the ethnopoetics studies as in the west, that will provide crucial viewpoints during the comparison between the east and the west.

### ETHNOPOETICS: FEATURES OF ORAL POETICS AND ITS THEORETICAL CONNOTATIONS

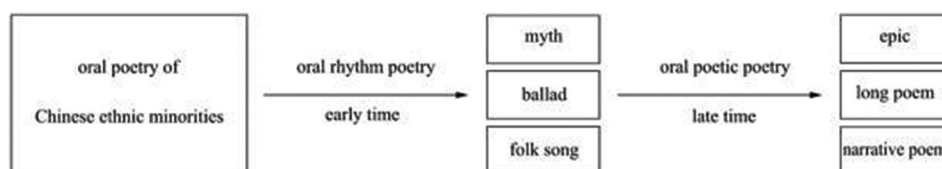
The study ethnopoetics emerged in the United States during the 1970s. The journal *Alcheringa Ethnopoetics* that is co-founded by Dennis Tedlock, Jerome Rothenberg is a sign of its growing influences. (Bamo Qubumo, Chao Gejin 2004: 90-91) For more than half a century, ethnopoetics has spread its influences beyond United States and has become an advanced and significant theoretical method for scholars from all over the world who conducts researches in oral poetry or oral cultural tradition.

Generally, ethnopoetics advocates and encourages cooperation among poets, ethnopoetics scholars, performers, and researchers who collect and translate native oral poems. Oral poetry in native languages displayed the poetic characteristics of oral poetry (Thomas Dubois 2000: 58-65). That indicates the essential aim of ethnopoetics of bringing in researchers from different fields who are able and willing to evaluate trends and uniqueness of oral poetry, analysing on its singing and performances, conduct field researches, keeping experiments and records, and the researchers should “look from the inner context of the communication” (Ye Shuxian 2001: 151-154) recognizing oral poetry, and then “show the oral and performance of oral poetry on writing through translation and transcription” (Yang Lihui. 2004:49-54). The process of translation and transcription is also a crucial step in the recording of oral poems, keeping the important source of heritage.

The formation of ethnopoetics is largely influenced by contribution from Oral-formulaic composition theory, performance theory and narrations on ethnopoetics theories, and it can also be perceived as “a set of perspectives and methods on the recording and translation of oral art texts in written

culture” (Yang Lihui. 2004:49-54). Oral-formulaic composition theory, also known as “Parry-Lord theory”, was founded by American scholars Parry Milman and Albert Lord.” The origin of its thoughts can be traced back to aspects of linguistics and anthropology in the nineteenth century. Especially its relations with the famous ‘Homer Question’” (Yin Hubin 1996:86-94). Parry Milman is the founder of Oral-formulaic theory. In the early 1930s, he discussed the six-metrical feet and rhythm of Homeric Epics Ernst Ellendt, Heinrich Duntzer, Kurt Witte and other predecessors. Among research results, it is conjectured that “Homeric Epic” was written orally, and it was “completely stylized” (John Miles Foley 2000.). To justify this perspective, Parry and his student along with collaborator Albert Lord travelled to Yugoslavia (where the study of oral epic tradition is heated and popular), to conduct fieldwork. (John Miles Foley 1997:86-90) After Parry passed away in 1935, Lord inherited and developed Parry’s oral theory. Lord continue to proceed with Parry’s project, which followed under “the same step conditions, based on the studying of certain basic findings through the usage from a set of vocabulary” (Parry Milman 1971). The research “starting from the performances and trainings of singers, focusing on the formulations and conceptual theme of oral poems”. (Yin Hubin 2000:65) The research came to an important conclusion: oral poems when at the “moment of creation is performance”. (Albert Bates Lord 2004) His conclusion of “creating in performance”, on the one hand, illustrates the oral creation and stylized performance (singing) of “Homeric Epic”, and also serves a basis to recognize and interpret all oral poems (folk literature). Through the readings on the establishing process of this methodology, we can read into the different dimensions of Oral-formulaic composition theory. It is clear that the Oral-formulaic composition theory mainly focuses on the concepts and formulations of oral poetry. However, in poetry, other factors related to poems are important as well. From an understanding at the oral epic performance, together with the examinations on its creations and themes, the insights and discussions on the poems will be enhanced when looking into the improvisations, memories, and the diverse backgrounds of oral poetry. (Yin Hubin 1996: 86-94)

Performance theory and the narrative in ethnopoetics are two identical theoretical sources that profoundly influenced ethnopoetics poetry. Albert Lord discovered and indicated that oral poems, especially the elaboration on the elaborations on oral epics, in “The Singer of Tales” (1960), use relatively rigid formulas (words, sentence patterns, etc.) and themes in performing presentations, with a certain usage of improvisation. In the 1970s, in the field of folk literature and oral literature, the “American Performance School” emerged



The composition and development of oral poetry of Chinese Ethnic Minorities Since the birth of mankind

in the United States emphasizing on the study of the performance and process of folk literature and oral literature. (Yang Lihui 2004:30-46) Richard Bauman 's Verbal Art as Performance that was published in 1977 is a sign of the theoretical maturity of the "American Performance School". In Verbal Art as Performance, Bauman emphasized that "performance" in the field of folk literature and oral literature is essentially "a mode of oral language communication" between the performers and audiences (Bauman Richard 1984). This further signified that performance theory is a theory that focused on performance, paying attention to the dynamic formation process of oral art text in a specific context, as well as the practical application of its form. (Yang Lihui 2004:30-46)

Narrative ethnopoetics is a research perspective developed by Dell Hymes well-known from the field in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics (Wang Jiewen 2012:11-24). Like performance theory, narrative ethnopoetics focuses on and studies the role of "performance", specifically regards it as a form of "narration" (performance is often a combination of narration and singing). But unlike performance theory, which explores the derived language and analysing the specific formulas of the performance process; narrating ethnopoetics focuses on the materialized result through the performance. That is to say, in addition to reading into the special forms of language (such as rhythm, phonology, stylized syntax, verse and narrative paradigm etc.), the theory also addresses the visual effects of posture, the level of voice and tone quality, the configuration of instruments, and even costumes, are all regarded as having specific symbolic and instructional meaning (John Miles Foley 2000).

As elaborated previously, performance theory and ethnopoetics narratives demonstrated the depth and dimensions of research in folk literature and oral cultural traditions. In this sense, it is a clear indication that, when comparing to Oral-formulaic composition, performance theory and ethnopoetics narrative breaks away from the traditional text-centrism concept in the field of epic research (that consists of texts compilations and translations from field recordings), and in turn, looks into live performance of epic and folk literature, that is said to be applicable to all fields of folk literature and oral literature such as folk songs, myths, epics, stories etc., that leads to the practising of oral poetry in analysis and collection in ethnopoetics research.

Oral-formulaic composition theory, performance theory, and ethnopoetics narration are the theoretical sources of ethnopoetics poetics, and they nurtured and initiated the discussion in the subjectivity of ethnopoetics poetics. The theoretical basis and the method of development for the collection and translation of native oral poems carried out by ethnopoetics poetics are basically derived from Oral-formulaic composition theory and performance theory. In the process of native oral poetry becoming written poetry, Oral-formulaic composition theory explains and interprets the rhyme, syntactic formula and theme of epic and oral poetry, and performance theory provided a further examinations into oral art text. The method jointly constructed the collection, sorting and conversion experiment of oral rhyme

texts of natives around the world, especially those ethnic minorities without written words. Ethnopoetics poetics, the experiment and exploration of converting oral poems and oral (voice) texts into written texts, presents its poetic pursuit of transforming oral culture into written culture.

Unlike the Oral-formulaic composition theory that were dominated by oral epic and the performance theory covering all types of folk literature and oral literature, ethnopoetics focuses on the poetic transformation of oral poetry or oral verses. Oral poetry, as a genre, can be discussed in forms of epics, long poems, narrative poems, etc. that are orally created by ethnic minority groups around the world. The sound text of oral verses is the rhyme text for oral creation and oral performance. To better comprehend oral verse sound text is a kind of oral poetry, we need to explain and refer to the Oral-formulaic composition theory of Parry Milman. That is, from the relatively fixed rhythm and many repetitive syntax features in the text of "Homer's Epic", Parry concluded that Homer is an oral poet and "Homer's Epic" is an oral epic. In conclusion, that is to say, those natives and ethnic minority groups that have not been recorded in writing, but have passed on oral texts from ancient times to the present, are verbal chants, oral inherited voices, and performances created with fixed rhythms and repetitive syntax. The buildings of sound texts are oral poetry. These verse sound texts, that is, oral poetry, should include oral tragedies, myths, ballads, and folk songs. The reason for saying that the tragedy without a written record is oral poetry is similar to that of Parry Milman's statement that "Homer's Epic" is oral poetry. In Poetics, Aristotle positioned the tragedy based on ancient Greek mythology as "developed from a temporary occupation", "by causing pity and fear to cultivate this emotion", and is a style with a fixed rhetoric in verse. (Aristotelous Horatius 1997) Aristotle's "temporary oral occupation" refers to the folk chorus or singing team, and the "rhetorical style of rhyme" refers to the combination of "sarcasm" (four double-step short and long format) and "hero style" (six-tone "Rhymes" or songs based on short steps). Here, we see that Aristotle's understanding of tragedy coincides with Parry's understanding of the fixed rhythm and repetitive syntax of "Homer". On the close relationship between myth and poetry, Richard Chase argued: "Myth is not an indispensable substructure of poetry, but poetry is an indispensable substructure of myth." (John Victor 1995) "Poetry is myth" is Chase's conclusion, though this conclusion is arbitrary, it adds to the rational characteristics of rhyming poetry to the myth art in the primitive period of human society. Among the various ethnic minorities in southern China, the creation myths(创世神话) and the creation epic (创世史诗) are the same text, which also portrayed that myths are also poems (although we should not view all myths as poems, but the myths in poetic style and poetic prose are part of poetry). The oral creations of various tribes and ethnic groups, emphasizing on rhyme passed down by oral tradition, leading to songs of repeated syntax, and creating the intuitive traditional folk songs that are oral poetry.

Through analysing the meaning of ethnopoetics poetics theory and its theoretical sources, on the one hand, we have



a better comprehension the practical method, process and purpose of ethnopoetics collection and translation of oral poetry; on the other hand, we seek to clarify the difference in the composition characteristics of oral poetry in China and the West, especially when comparing with the ethnic minorities in China. This has made important preparations for our subsequent inspections and discussions. As a research theory derived from the inheritance and development of Oral-formulaic composition theory and performance theory, ethnopoetics focuses on the collection and translation of oral poetry, poetic experiments and its explorations, while not neglecting on its sound text in oral poetry and oral verses. The value and significance of the oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities requires re-discovering from the collection and translation history in Chinese ethnic minority oral poetry.

### AN ANALYSIS OF THE ETHNOPOETICISM IN CHINESE MINORITY ORAL POEMS

In China, the composition of poetry is mainly divided into two types: writer poetry (written poetry) and folk poetry (oral poetry). Although the division of ethnic minority poetry shares similar traits between the east and the west, there are differences in its structure. In the General History of Chinese Poetry · Minority Nationalities Volume(《中国诗歌通史·少数民族卷》), Professor Liang Tingwang (梁庭望, 1937—) from Minzu University of China pointed out: “From the overall structure, the rhyme literature of ethnic minorities, like the Han, is composed of folk poetry and poetry by writers.” (Liang Tingwang, 2012) But the biggest difference between the two is that “in a long historical period, the verse works of most ethnic minorities are folk songs and folk long poems instead of writer poems” (Liang Tingwang 2016). The quote leads us to look into the differences between ethnic minority poetry and Han poetry, both in written and oral forms. In China, historical development of ethnic minorities in written scripts is much later than Han. The fact that most ethnic minorities have no written characters for a long time “until the eve of the founding of New China(1949)”. (Liang Tingwang 2012) Prior to that, most ethnic minorities did not have poetry in written form, so folk poetry focuses on a dominant role in ethnic minority rhyme literature. In this sense, we can know that: different from the way Han uses writing forms in the spreading poems, the poems of most ethnic minorities in China (verse works) are mainly an influenced genre by oral folk poems. After the founding of New China, with the popularization of writing, the development of ethnic minority poetry leads to the rising problem of transforming from the original folk oral poetry to written poetry. This kind of transformation from oral poetry to written poetry is a kind of developmental process in ethnopoetics poetics.

As previously discussed, the epics, in forms of long poems, narrative poems, tragedies, myths, ballads, folk songs etc, in terms of its characteristics of poetic styles(诗体文本) and verse sound texts(韵文声音文本) are oral poems, these oral poems are created and inherited by Chinese ethnic minorities and have developed its own poetic styles. Chinese

ethnic minorities that are verbally passed down orally for generations are translated and converted from the original verbal creation, to a oral inheritance state and eventually, to the written text.

From a historical point of view, the research studies of Chinese ethnic minority poetry (literature) from folk oral inheritance to written conversion roughly began in the late 1950s and was matured after the 1980s. From that, we can divide the ethnopoetics analysis of the oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities into two stages: (1) the 1950s to the 1960s. and (2) the 1980s. The field investigation, involving the collection, sorting and translation of epics, long poems, narrative poems, myths, ballads, folk songs, etc. were mainly completed in these two historical stages.

(1) The 1950s to 1960s as a period of “census”(普查). Since ancient times, China has been placing emphasis on the importance of having its pluralistic unity. (Fei Xiaotong et al., 1989) After the founding of the People’s Republic of China (1949), under the influence of the ethnic policy of ethnic equality, the literature of ethnic minorities’ status was seen as an equal position with the literature of the Han ethnic group. For instance, in a newly compiled “History of Chinese Literature”(中国文学史). It is to be set at, for a four-volume edition, the minority should have two volumes. If it is a twelve-volume edition, ethnic minorities will occupy three volumes etc. (The Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 1984) The Han literature in form of written literature has a relatively clear historical traces. The history of Chinese literature in the past was majority the Han’s works, which also means that the Chinese literary history is dominantly focusing on the Han people. This negligence of the literary history in ethnic minorities is a serious problem that seeks to be re-solved. Situations becomes more challenging as ethnic minorities do not have written scripts, their literature is basically folk oral literature, in form of a “person-to-person”(人传人)structure.

The first response to the challenge is to initiate the compilation of the history of ethnic minority literature that involves the organizing of manpower to collect the folk oral literature from ethnic minorities who live in various parts of the country. Viewing the protection of ethnic minorities as a major importance, the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China held the “National Folk Literature Workers Conference”(全国民间文学工作者大会) in July 1958, Beijing. Representatives of ethnic minorities across the country came together and discussed the issue of compiling the literature and writing of literary history of ethnic minorities (ie. The first symposium focuses on the steps of compilation of ethnic literary history (第一次少数民族文学史编写工作座谈会), they came to a conclusion to initiate 13 ethnic minorities, including Mongolian(蒙古族), Hui(回族), Tibetan(藏族), Uygur(维吾尔族), and Zhuang(壮族), are the first few minorities to compile their literary history or literature. In August 1960, the Institute of Literary Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences held the second “Work Forum on the Compilation of Ethnic Literature History”(少数民族文学史编写工作座谈会) in Beijing to summarize the problems and

experiences in the process of compiling literary history of various minority. Based on the fifteen minority literatures that have written their literary history or compendium in 1960, a special “discussion on the first draft of the history of minority literature” (少数民族文学史初稿讨论会) was planned at the meeting. From late March to mid-April 1961, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences held a “Discussion on the First Draft of the History of Minority Literature” based on “A Brief History of Mongolian Literature”(蒙古族文学简史), “History of Bai Literature”(白族文学史) and “History of Miao Literature”(苗族文学史). Issues, methods and principles of the compilation of national literary history. And on this basis, the “Compilation and Publication Plan of Chinese Minority Literature History and Literature Overview (Draft)” (《中国各少数民族文学史和文学概况编写出版计划(草案)》), “Chinese Minority Literature Works, Translation, Compilation and Publication Plan (Draft)” (《中国各少数民族文学作品、翻译、编选和出版计划(草案)》), “Chinese Minorities Compilation of National Literature Materials: Editing and Publishing Plan (Draft)” (《中国各少数民族文学资料汇编》编辑出版(草案)》), and compiling the publishing plan of “Three Series of Books” were materialized. We can also say that, these are beginning of the collection, sorting and translation of national and census-based ethnic minority folk oral literature from the 1950s to the 1960s.

From the census of Chinese minority folk literature between 1950s—1960s is actually a sign that it is dominated by oral literature, especially oral poetry. The census constitutes an ethnopoetics exploration of oral poetry by ethnic minorities in this period. In order to complete the compilation of the national literature history within the specified time, various provinces and regions have established folk literature research teams composed of scholars, poets (writers), and folk artists. The folk literature research team composed of people from different fields, for instance, one of the involved team is the American ethnopoetics school, its purpose of involvement is to collect folk oral creations and oral inherited literature of various minorities, and translate them into written forms literature. At the end of the 1950s, the background census of folk literature from all China ethnic minorities appeared to be a requirement when compiling the literary history of all ethnic minorities. But the situation was further hastened during the times when China was in the “Great Leap Forward” (大跃进, 1958—1960) Period. (Reporter of Folk Literature. 1961:24) During this period, the national mainstream literary creation in New China was what chairman Mao Zedong (1893—1976) called “to develop new poems on the basis of classical poetry and folk songs” (Zang Kejia 1994) and “new folk songs” with the characteristics of political propaganda and mobilization for the emergence of socialism. “New folk songs” are termed “new” as they are based on folk songs and ballads that were originally orally created by various ethnic minorities, and mainly reflecting new socialist, communist ideas and new life after the founding of New China. (Dong yingchun, Qin Cai. 2020:106-113) It is essentially an oral poetry with a fixed rhythm format written by ethnic minority folk sing-

ers, modified by “decentralized cadres and young students to help peasant poets” (Dongfeng Literature and Art Publishing 1958). In this period, ethnic minority oral poetry was regarded as ethnopoetics. Another important achievement of poetic exploration is that [Wei Qilin (Zhuang) (韦其麟【壮族】), Xiaoxue (Bai) (晓雪【白族】), Mu Lichun (Naxi) (木丽春【纳西族】), Miao Yanxiu (Dong) (苗延秀【侗族】), Bao Yutang (Mulao) (包玉堂【仫佬族】), Danzhen Gongbu (Tibetan) (丹真贡布【藏族】)]. The creation of national narrative long poems by the first generation of ethnic minority poets after the founding of New China. Their creation of such national narrative long poems is mainly the story prototypes of folk myths and legends that they have investigated in their own nation and in folk literature based on the translation or re-creation. For example, the Zhuang poet Wei Qilin created a long narrative poem “Hundred Birds Clothes”(百鸟衣) that is based on the folklore of Zhuang’s “Hundred Bird Clothes”, that is a canon in Chinese literary history. Other classics examples that adopted from folklores: Bai Poets Xiaoxue created a series of national narrative poems such as “Butterfly Spring”(蝴蝶泉), “Wang Fuyun”(望夫云) and “Yanglongtan”(羊龙潭) based on the rich myths and legends of the Bai ethnic groups.

(2) The systemization stage since the 1980s. After the mid-1960s, due to the occurrence of the “Cultural Revolution” (文化大革命, 1966—1976), the development of Chinese literature and art was forced to a stoppage. “Due to the interference from the ‘Left’, the work stopped shortly” (The Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. 1984), the compilation of the history of minority literature and the census of folk literature were not immune too. This kind of interruption and pause continued until the third plenary meeting of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Communist Party of China(十一届三中全会) in 1978. A fundamental change takes place after the convention. In an era of upsetting chaos(拨乱反正), the reforming and opening(改革开放) and restoring socialist economic and cultural establishment were raised. The Institute of Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences held the third national symposium on the compilation of the literary history of ethnic minority in Kunming in February 1979. Compared with the collection and sorting of folk literature from the 1950s to the 1960s, the focus of folk literature at this stage is to review, revise, and complete the “Three Series of Books” publishing plan(“三套丛书”计划) formulated in 1961, and the focus was to all the minorities in China, and not selected few. The national literary history aims to collect literature of all nationality in China (Wan Jianzhong 2010:84-88); on the other hand, it comprehensively collects, sorts out, and studies Chinese minority literature (including folk oral literature and written literature), and advanced the study of Chinese minority literature to systematization stage. In this process, the systematic and integrated research of ethnic minority folk songs and oral epics was fully implemented.

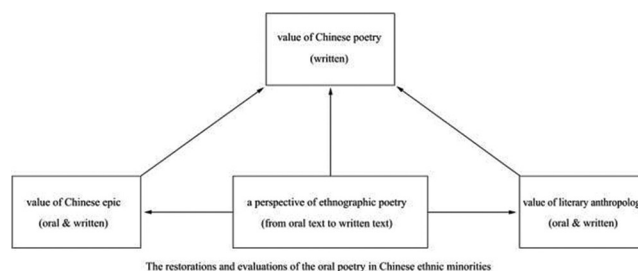
In 1983, the annual work (expansion of directors) meeting of the Chinese Folk Literature Research Association(中国民间文艺研究年度工作【理事扩大】会议) formed a

resolution to compile three sets of Chinese folk literature(中国民间文学三套集成). In May 1984, the Ministry of Culture, the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, and the Chinese Civil Research Association jointly issued the “Notice on Editing and Publishing “Chinese Folk Stories Collection”, “Chinese Folk Songs Collection”, “Chinese Proverbs Collection” (Wen Min Zi 【84】 No.808)(《关于编辑出版<中国民间故事集成>、<中国歌谣集成>、<中国谚语集成>的通知》(文民字【84】808号)), the compilation of three sets of Chinese folk literature started. From 1984 to 2009, the compilation of three sets of integrated provincial (regional)-level volumes in 298 volumes, 440 volumes, and more than 450 million words (plus county-level volumes and district-level volumes up to 4 billion words) was basically completed. (Wan Jianzhong. 2010: 84-88) Jia Zhi(贾芝, 1913—2016) is the editor-in-chief of “Chinese Folk Songs Collection”. In his article “Talking about “Chinese Folk Songs Collection”, he pointed out: “For the first time, China Folk Songs Collection shows the world the 31 provinces, cities, and cities on the vast land of my country. A selection of folk songs from 56 ethnic groups in the autonomous region. They were compiled on the basis of the county volume data book after a national census of folk literature in recent years.”(Jia Zhi 1993:46-53) Obviously, this nationwide collection of ballads based on the census of folk literature is obviously an ethnopoetics presentation of the oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities. China is a country with very rich epics, especially ethnic minorities. There are hundreds of epics in China (such as creation epics, heroic epics, etc.), which are mainly circulated in minority areas. (Renqin Daerji, Lang Ying. 2016) Since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China(十一届三中全会, 1978), the field recordings, woodcut collections, translation and publication of China’s three major epics “Jangger” (Mongolian)(《江格尔》【蒙古族】), “Gesar” (Tibetan)(《格萨尔》【藏族】), and “Manas” (Kirgiz) (《玛纳斯》【柯尔克孜族】) also have a corresponding process. (The Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 1984) But because Chinese ethnic minority epics are basically “living” epics (“活态” 史诗) passed down from person to person, and there are few formal and unified written texts, the 1984 Chinese Folk Literature Integration Plan did not include Chinese epics. It can be said that the census, collection, sorting, translation and publication of Chinese ethnic minority epics are carried out in a relatively independent and autonomous state. The collective attention of Chinese academic circles to ethnic minority epics was first seen in the First National Ethnic Minority Epic Academic Symposium(第一届全国少数民族史诗学术讨论会) held in Xining, Qinghai by the Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in August 1983 (to discuss “Jiang Geer”, “Ge “Saar” and other epics). (Wang Keqin 1984:141) Over the past few decades, as translated single-line ethnic minority epics have been published successively, as well as the “Chinese Ethnic Minority Epic Research Series” (“中国少数民族史诗研究丛书”)(1990—1994) and the “Chinese Ethnic Minority Epic Research Series” (1999—2011) have been

published. The research on Chinese epics, which mainly focuses on ethnic oral epics, has also achieved good results and recognition. (Bamo Qubumo 2019:29-37). The “living” (“活态”) ethnic epic is a kind of oral poetry. The collection, sorting and translation of oral epics of ethnic minorities in this period obviously constituted another important ethnopoetics exploration of oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities.

In overview, this article examines the historical reviews on the discovery, restoration, as well as the collection and translation process of Chinese ethnic minority oral poems. The conversion process of Chinese ethnic minority oral poetry to written poetry, which began around late 1950s, also demonstrated that the collection and translation of Chinese ethnic minority oral poetry is a sinicized ethnopoetics without the strict adhering of poetic practices in ethnopoetic theory. The aim of the analysis is not only judging the differences in the practice of ethnopoetics in China and the West, but to re-discover the characteristics and trajectories of the collection and translation of oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities, and to view the system from the dimension of ethnopoetics poetics, in turn, ponder on the value and characteristics of ethnic minority oral poetry.

## THE VALUE OF ETHNPOETICS IN ORAL POETRY OF CHINESE ETHNIC MINORITIES



Ethnopoetics is an experimental theory that translates and transforms oral poetry into written poetry. When we defined that Chinese ethnic minority oral poetry includes poetic epics, long poems, narratives, and rhyme forms such as myths, ballads, folk songs and other oral sound texts, it can be also know that Chinese ethnic minority oral poetry has evolved from oral sound texts for more than half a century. The studying of conversion track from sound to written text is clearly visible. In other words, under the theoretical observation and inspection of ethnopoetics poetics, the modern transformation of Chinese ethnic minority oral poetry can be viewed as a form of ethnopoetics poetics. This ethnopoetics poetics value not only has the characteristics of Chinese oral poetry research, but also the inherent cultural pursuit and value of ethnopoetics poetics.

Firstly, the value of Chinese epics(中国史诗学). On one hand, as a textual research theory of translatable folk literature and oral art, the sinicization process of ethnopoetics poetics has a strong practicality. On the other hand, it maintains a mutual referential connection with Oral-formulaic composition theory and performance theory. It can even be said that the practice in Chinese epics is based on the two



methods. As soon as the poem enters the process of practical application, the collection of oral poetry by ethnopoetics poetics, that is, will begin with the singing, recording and collection work of folk creators and inheritors of oral poetry (epic poems, narrative poems, folk songs, etc.). The method of development and the form of recording will inevitably involve Oral-formulaic composition theory and performance theory. Between the two, it is vividly expressed as a relationship between theory and practice. As mentioned earlier, China is a country of rich of ethnic folk oral epics, and the usage of Oral-formulaic composition theory, as it is mainly used in the collection, collation and translation of Chinese oral epics. After decades of studies, the Chinese academic community has made concerted efforts to upgrade the study of oral epics of Chinese ethnic minorities to "Chinese epics towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century". (Chao Gejin 2010: 135-146) In addition, we have also demonstrated before that the folk oral epics of Chinese ethnic minorities are essentially oral poetry. From the results of the conversion of ethnic minority oral epics to written epics, the epic study of contemporary Chinese ethnic minority oral epics constructed by Oral-formulaic composition theory actually indirectly constructs the ethnic minority oral epics from the analysis of dimensions and practices of Chinese epics ethno-poetry.

Secondly, the value of literary anthropology. Literary anthropology is an interdisciplinary theory dedicated to the study and discussion of the "complex relationship between literary text and cultural text". (Ye Shuxian 2013:1-7) Formed from the basis by the theory of the poetics schools is, it was initiated in the 1960s, mainly based on the myth-prototype criticism school of the 1960s, the ethnopoetics school of the 1970s, the cultural poetics school of the 1980s and the anthropology of the 1990s. The ethnopoetics poetry school represented by Dennis Tedlock and Dell Hymes is an important theoretical school of literary anthropology. They invited poets, anthropologists, linguists, folk artists and people from different fields to cooperate, carry out the collection and translation experiments of native oral poems, especially the poetic transformation and exploration of the oral poems of tribes and ethnic groups that have no written form for a long time period, even till current time. These cooperation in research works showed the importance of literary anthropological value of ethnopoetics. On the East, since the creation of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese academics and people from different fields have worked together to conducted field surveys, recording, sorting, translation, and re-creation of oral poems such as ethnic folk epics, long poems, narrative poems, ballads, and folk songs. The result is Transform the oral poetry of Chinese minority cultural text into written poetry of literary text. This result that the conversion of Chinese ethnic minority oral poetry from cultural text to literary text is actually the relationship between literary text and cultural text that has been discussed by literary anthropology. Significantly, research students of ethnopoetic have later develops the value of literary anthropological research on oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities.

Thirdly, the value of Chinese poetry. The absence of written words is a known common trend in the historical devel-

opment of most ethnic minorities in China. This trend has led to the result that most ethnic minorities in China did not have written poems until after the founding of New China. The historically absence of written poetry by ethnic minority writers constitutes the serious assumption that ethnic minorities are without poetry in contemporary times. Furthermore, Chinese academics and the general neglecting of Ethnic minority role in literary history (before 1980s, mainstream Chinese literary history works making low efforts in introducing ethnic minority literature to national literature).

The wrong allegations and ignorance to ethnic minority's role to literary history is undesirable. The lack of written poetry in ethnic minorities does not mean that they have no poetry. From the composition of oral poems and written poems, the historical absence of ethnic minority written poems has leads to the "presence" and continuity of their oral poems. That is to say, oral epic, which is the narrative folk poem, "is also a relatively large-scale ancient work. It uses the language of poetry to narrate legends, such as the formation of heaven and earth, the origin of mankind, and the migration, war and the glorious achievements of national heroes and other major events." (Zhong Jingwen 1980) The emergence of narrative folk poem can also be traced back to the primitive period of human society, and the records in these poems have been seen as great value in contemporary Chinese poetry. Therefore, it is a fact that since the end of the 1950s, the Chinese academia have made tremendous efforts to unify and translate different versions of oral poems, from different areas such as epics, long poems, narrative poems, ballads, and folk songs, as well as to trace the origin of their production time and age. Ethnopoetics experiments are conducted through the transformation of ethnic minority oral poetry from oral text to written text. This literary text transformation not only restores the "presence" of ethnic minority poetry in an era when there were no written characters, but also generates ethnic minority poetry as an important part in modern Chinese literature, at the same time highlighting the value and significance of ethnic minority poetry". (Dong Yingchun, Qin Cai. 2019: 135-142)

In summary, for more than half a century, the collection, sorting and translation of oral poetry of ethnic minorities in China has been retrospect and restored through the emergence, inheritance and evolution of oral poetry of ethnic minorities. In the process of transforming ethnic minority oral poetry into written poetry, a theoretical examination of ethnopoetics, ethnic minority folk poetry also shows its value in Chinese epics, literary anthropology and Chinese poetry. The values of these different aspects are not only different, but also show the inherent commonality and significance of writing culture.

## CONCLUSION

Ethnopoetics are often related to the study on the theory of oral poetry translation. In order to successfully transit from oral poetry into written poetry, researchers require cooperation with expertise from different fields as well as in-depth field investigations to obtain the results produced during the process of performance. The study of ethno-

poetic poetry's translation of oral poetry demonstrated on the one hand its many similarities with the Oral-formulaic composition theory and performance theory, and on the other hand, it also shows that it has a strongly related to oral poetry (especially those that have no written words). These studying of theories bring focus and uniqueness of the translation studies in the oral poetry of different ethnic groups.

As previously elaborated, the ethnopoetic theory developed in the 1970s in the west was not introduced to China until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Theory often has the function of re-structuring thoughts and practices. In the oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities, it has a development characteristic that shown sign of resemblances to the practices in ethnopoetics. In the late 1950s, with the ongoing process in the compilation of literary history of minority literature and the folk literature. More Prominent results were achieved. The collection and translation of oral poems of Chinese ethnic minorities show the characteristics of ethnopoetics without in accordance with the development in ethnopoetics poetics theory. The oral poetry of Chinese ethnic minorities develops its own role, with the characteristics of Chinese ethnic minority oral poetry, providing its own literary value and significance of Chinese poetry, Chinese epic, literary anthropology, and Chinese poetry.

## REFERENCES

- Bamo, Q, Chao, G. (2004). *Ethnopoetics. Folk Culture Forum* 6 (2004), Pp.90-91.
- Thomas, D. (2000). Ethnopoetics, Translated by Chao Gejin, *Studies of Ethnic Literature SI.*, Pp.58-65.
- Ye, S. (2001). Oral and Writing Culture: "Ethnopoetics" and Anthropological Narrative Crisis. *Social Sciences in Guangdong* 5 (2001).Pp.151-154.
- Yang L. (2004). Ethnopoetics: Theory and Practice. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Sciences)* 6 (2004). Pp.49-54.
- Yang, L. (2004). Ethnopoetics: Theory and Practice. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Sciences)* 6 (2004).Pp.49-54.
- Yin, H. (1996). Epic Poetics: Oral Formulaic Theory. *Studies of Ethnic Literature* 3, Pp.86-94.
- John, M. (2000). The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology, Translated by Chao Gejin, Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (CHINA).
- John. M. (1997). Oral Formulaic Theory: Overview of Oral Traditional Studies, Translated by Chao Gejin, *Studies of Ethnic Literature* 1, Pp.86-90.
- Milman. P. (1971). *The Making of Homeric Verse*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Yin, H. (2000). *The Singer of Tales. Studies of Ethnic Literature SI* (2000). Pp.65.
- Albert Bates, L. (2004). The Singer of Tales, Translated by Yin Hubin, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Yin, H. (1996). Epic Poetics: Oral Formulaic Theory. *Studies of Ethnic Literature*, 3, Pp.86-94.
- Yang, L. (2004). The Studies of Performance Theory and Folk Narrative. *Folklore Studies*, 1, Pp.30-46.
- Bauman, R. (1984). *Verbal Art As Performance*, Illinois: Waveland Press.
- Yang, L. (2004). The Studies of Performance Theory and Folk Narrative. *Folklore Studies*, 1, Pp.30-46.
- Wang, J. (2012). Dell Hymes and "Ethnography of Speaking". *Journal of Wenzhou University (Social Science Edition)* 1 (2012). Pp.11-24.
- John, M. (2000). The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology, Translated by Chao Gejin, Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (CHINA).
- Aristotelous, H. (1997). *Peri Poietikes and Ars Poetica*, Translated by Luo Niansheng, Yang Zhouhan, Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- John, V. (1995). *Myth and Literature*, Translated by Pan Guoqing, etc, Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Liang, T. (2012). The General History of Chinese Poetry: Minority Volume, Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Liang, T. (2016). The History of Chinese Minority Literature: Poetry Volume, Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Liang, T. (2012). The General History of Chinese Poetry: Minority Volume, Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Fei, X. (2017) *The Pluralistic Integration Pattern of the Chinese Nation*, Beijing: China Minzu University Press.
- The Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. (1984). The Compiling Reference Materials for the History of Chinese Minority Literature. Beijing: The Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
- Reporter of Folk Literature. (1961). Attendance at the Seminar on Chinese Minority Literature History. *Folk Literature* 5, Pp.24.
- Zang. K. (1994). *The Collected works of Zang Kejia* (Volume 6), Jinan: Shandong people's publishing house.
- Dong, Y. & Qin, C. (2020). The Creation of the "New Folk Songs" of Ethnic Minorities and the Generation of the Common Sense of Modern Nationality and Country. *Guangxi Ethnic Studies*, 2. Pp.106-113.
- Dongfeng Literature and Art Publishing. (1958). The Collected Thesis of New Folk Songs, Xi'an: Dongfeng Literature and Art Publishing.
- The Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. (1984). The Compiling Reference Materials for the History of Chinese Minority Literature. Beijing: The Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
- The Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. (1984). The Compiling Reference Materials for the History of Chinese Minority Literature. Beijing: The Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
- Wan, J. (2010). Judging the Academic Value of The Three Complete Works of Chinese Folk Literature. *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, 1 (2010).Pp.84-88.



- Jia, Z. (1993). Taking about the Chinese Collective Ballads. *Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art*, 5, Pp.46-53.
- Renqin, D. & Lang, Y. (2016). Chinese Epic, Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing, Ltd.
- The Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. (1984). The Compiling Reference Materials for the History of Chinese Minority Literature. Beijing: The Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
- Wang, K. (1984). The First China Minority Epic symposium Held in Xi'ning. *Studies of Ethnic Literature*, 1, Pp.141.
- Bamo, Q. (2019). Taking Oral Tradition as Method: 70 Years of Chinese Epic Study and Its Practical Approach. *National Arts*, 6, Pp.29-37.
- Chao, G. (2010). *Chinese Epic Studies towards the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Museum International (Chinese Version) 1 (2010). Pp.135-146.
- Ye, Sh. (2013). N—Level Coding Theory of Cultural Texts: the Overall Interpretative Strategy from “Great Tradition” to “Little Tradition”. *Journal of Baise University* 1 (2013). Pp.1-7.
- Zhong, J. (1980). Introduction to Folk Literature, Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Dong, Y., & Qin, C. (2019). Ethnography Writing and Ethnographic Poetics: Chinese Ethnic Poetry Study from the Perspective of Anthropology of Literature. *Journal of North Minzu University (Philosophy and Social Science)* 4 (2019).Pp.135-14.