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CONSTRUCTING CHINESE PAREMIOLOGY: A GLIMPSE
OF THE PAST SEVENTY YEARS

Abstract: The studies of Chinese proverbs entered a new stage since 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded, following the inceptive stage in the early 20th century when Chinese folklore studies began to take shape by introducing the Western theories and concepts. From 1949-2019, Chinese proverb studies have systemically developed into a research area through collection, categorization and analysis. In particular, the *Grand Collection of Chinese Proverbs* project in the late 20th century set an epochal mark in collecting proverbs in use, and in building academic discourses both at domestic and international levels. This essay surveys this history of seventy years in terms of collection and theoretical studies within the context of Chinese folk literature and folklore studies.

Keywords: Chinese proverb studies, history, verbal art, agriculture and weather proverbs

Chinese proverbs, with a history of several thousand years, have been freshly and frequently used in everyday communication with their strong vitality and practicality. While there are different views regarding the definition and usage of proverbs, this essay begins with the idea that "Proverbs are a form of verbal art of speaking with its distinctive rhyme and stable syntax as a complete sentence, containing experience and knowledge from the past, telling the reasons and ethics identified by a common nation or folk group, and functioning as the truth in everyday life" (An 2008: 584). In terms of content, proverbs are here divided into two main categories: proverbs about social interaction; proverbs about the natural and material production.

Two notes about this essay should be made here: First, while proverbs are also the target of some other disciplinary studies, this essay focuses on the development of proverb studies within the framework of folk literature studies in China, and includes the aspects of collecting, recording, categorizing, and analyzing.

Second, proverbs have a strong adaptability as a literary form and are often used in everyday life, but this essay will not include many examples due to the limit of length; it is meant to draw a general picture of how proverb studies have been developed in the past seven decades in China, though with an obvious lack of theoretical discussion in this regard.

The early records of Chinese proverbs can be traced to such classics as the *Book of Changes* (*Yi Jing* 易经) and *Book of Songs* (*Shi Jing* 诗经) before the 3rd century BCE. However, Chinese proverb studies in modern academic sense began only in the early 20th century, influenced by the New Cultural Movement (1915-1923) (Li 2001: 29). During this period, both Chinese scholars in China and European missionaries conducted extensive collecting work. Two representative publications by Chinese scholars are the *Studies of Proverbs* (1925) by Guo Shaoyu (1893-1984), and the *Proverb Studies* (1936) by Xue Chengzhi (1907-1988). In general, there was not a systemic theoretical framework of proverb studies during this initial stage.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked a new stage of proverb studies in China. On March 29, 1950, the China Association for Folk Literature and Arts was founded. This is a national organization specializing in collecting and studying folk literature. The goal was clearly stated by the Chairman of the Association: "From now on, through collecting, categorizing, analyzing, criticizing, and studying folk literature and arts, we will contribute to the new culture in new China with more excellent and richer works of folk literature and arts" (Zhou 1985: 10). Against this background, proverbs were taken as one form of folk literature. As a result, there appeared a high wave of collecting various proverbs about social life, agriculture, and weather. However, theoretical proverb studies were very limited, with only a few publications in Mainland China and in Taiwan (Wang 1982; Zhu 1964, 1970).

It was after the Open-up and Reform in China in 1978 that proverb collecting and studies entered an unprecedented stage, with the historical national project of *Grand Collection of Chinese Proverbs* (Ma 1990-2009). Meanwhile, Chinese scholars began to study proverbs in Macau and Hong Kong (Tan 2003), showing diverse interests in collecting and studying proverbs in the Chinese language.

I. Collecting, categorizing, and publishing proverbs of social life as the blossom of wisdom

“Social proverbs,” or proverbs about social life or interaction, are the human wisdom in blossom. This wisdom is “the result of social interactions related to inter-personal relations, ethical conducts and social norms, and are inseparable from all aspects of social life” (An 2008: 588-589). The collection of social proverbs became quite popular in China after 1949, not only in the Han-Chinese communities, but also in all minority groups. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, there were many collections published such as on the Mongolian proverbs (Na 1954, 1956; Eerduntaoketao 1959, 1965) and Uyghur proverbs (Zhai 1957; Jin 1958; Liu 1962). Since 1978, there have been more comprehensive collections published, including collections of proverbs from multiple ethnic groups (Enenjiyatai and Chen 1981; Li 1985; Ma 1991, 1993; Xu and Li 2016: 65).

Regional proverb collections and publications were also “like the new bamboo shoots after the rain” --- growing massively and rapidly. In particular, the publications and studies in Taiwan reached a climax, represented by the works of the paremiologist Zhu Jiefan (1912-2011) (Zhu 1950, 1957, 1959, 1961, 1962, 1964, 1970, 1987). His masterpiece is *The Ethnography of Chinese Proverbs* (Zhu 1989), which “highlighted his dedication of 60 years in paremiology” (Wang and Guo 2005: 242).

The categorization of proverbs by theme was a new achievement, which resulted in many publications of those categories at both national and regional levels, for example, on regional weather, selecting seeds, and legends in proverbs (Wang and Pan 1981, 1983; Qiu 1983; Xia 1985; Liu 1986; Liu 1986; Ren 1987; Zhang 1987; Peng 1988; Su 1988; Wang 1989; Wen 1989; Yang and Dong 1991; Zhang 1996).

II. Collecting and popularizing agricultural and weather proverbs as a body of knowledge and verbal art

The proverbs of agricultural production and weather “are the knowledge that are cumulated and distilled from experiences of material production and the related activities that are closely connected to the nature” (An 2008: 588). Proverbs of this category are directly on agricultural production and weather. Early in the 20th century, intellectuals began campaigns of “going to the peo-

ple” and “joining the rural construction.” Subsequently, they collected many proverbs of this kind. The representative work is the *Chinese Agricultural Proverbs* (Fei 1937), which contained a total of 5,953 proverbs and they are categorized into five types: seasons, weather, crops, breeding, and adages. In addition, proverbs about other modes of production such as, forestry, husbandry, and fishery were also given relevant attention after 1949 due to the fact that the government called on developing those economic sectors (Mu 1986).

Agricultural proverbs are the most significant component of Chinese proverb repertoire because agriculture has been essential to Chinese society and culture. Thus, proverbs of this category have the most practical meaning to the common people. Such proverbs are about “every stage of agricultural production from ploughing to harvesting” (Wu 2014: 196-198). Many of them are proven to be “correlative to modern science” (Fei 1937: 6-7) because “they are from production practice and are proven repeatedly” (Wang 1982: 341). “While old agricultural proverbs are already rich, new agricultural proverbs are continuously being created. This requires us to regularly collect, examine, categorize, and analyze them. Such work is significant because it will not only help provide meaningful material to the understanding of the history of agricultural production in China, but also improve current agricultural production. It can be said for sure that agricultural proverbs are still one of the most effective ways to spread knowledge and experience” (Wang 1982: 341). Clearly, this is due to the fact that proverbs are easy to be memorized by the rural population that is still mostly illiterate or semi-literate.

As a result, many provinces have published collections of agricultural proverbs guided by the central government since 1949. For example, in 1958, the Ministry of Agriculture organized a project to collect agricultural proverbs, which resulted in more than 100,000 proverbs, out of which 31,400 proverbs were selected for publication (Li 2016: 61), which can be seen as a compressive collection (Lv 1980). In addition, there were also smaller collections that were published (Wang and Jia 1951, 1959; Cui 1978).

Agricultural proverbs are inseparable from observing the weather change. Those proverbs about weather are also a form of artistic verbal expression of the experience and wisdom from agricultural production. They are “the artistic generalization of the

experiences of farmers, woodcutter, fishermen, and herdsmen” (Duan 2018: 180), “containing simple philosophical thoughts and scientific knowledge” (Deng 1994: 53). As the folklorist Dong Zuobin said, “The common people can quite accurately predict weather changes based on proverbs without using any modern technology for weather-forecasting” (Dong 1927: 1).

A number of collections of weather proverbs have been published since the 1950s (Yu and Hu 1960, 1960, 1974, 1977). In 1977, *The Application of Weather Proverbs in Long-Term Weather Forecast* was published, and “All the proverbs in this book are scientifically proved by identifying their specific locations, seasons, and conditions in using them, and combined scientific proof and popular experience” (Xu and Li 2016: 65).

In 1990, *Chinese Weather Proverbs* (Xiong 1990) was published as the result of eight scholars’ hard work for ten years. It contains nearly 20,000 weather proverbs from every part of China, “with extensive contextual information and explanation, and is seen as the most comprehensive collection of its kind” (Feng 1990: 30).

III. Proverbs as important resources of national identity reconstruction

Studies of the relationship between proverbs and national spirit or identity are very limited, with only brief touches here and there. Folklorist An Deming points out, “In China, proverbs were developed to a mature literary style, in terms of syntactic structure and artistic expression, as early as the 3rd century BCE. Many proverbs that have been popularly used were created during that period. The content ranged from ethics and social norms to routine affairs, which also became the core of the Chinese national spiritual traditions. Therefore, at least by that time, proverbs had already become the special expression of the national spirit and national cultural system, which in turn strengthened the national identity” (An 2017: 20-21). While there are also studies of the Han-Chinese cultural values (Lin 1995), Han-Chinese mentality (Huang 2015), and Confucian thoughts (Li 2005), they are not the same as the national spirit in Chinese culture.

Today, the Chinese national spirit is reflected in such proverbs as in the political ambition: “Worry about the worries of the country at first, enjoy the joys of the country later”; the patriotic

passion: “Not to forget the duty to the country even at a humble status” and “To rather die for the life of the country, but not to prioritize the need for personal wealth”; the dignity with justice: “Not to be abusive with wealth; not to lose dignity in poverty; not to subordinate to violence”; and the devotion and dedication: “Everyone dies, but leave a mark in history with a loyal heart” and “Strive to the utmost and spare no effort to die for the country.”

Proverbs of national spirits are about cultivating individual ethical life and maintaining the ethics and values of contributing to the reconstruction of the country. These proverbs are commonly used by political leaders to emphasize national spirit to reconstruct national identity. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, Chairman Mao Zedong frequently and creatively used proverbs to call upon the nation to build the new country. He once said, “China is a big country, if the east is not bright, the west is bright; if the south is dark, the north is not dark” (Mao 1952: 182). He also used “Modesty makes people progress, pride makes people fall behind” to encourage people in the reconstruction of a new nation (Mao 1959: 35). In the early 1980s, Deng Xiaoping also used the proverb, “People can be short of money, but can’t be short of ambition,” to promote economic development as well as maintaining communist ambitions (Deng 1983: 290).

At a national conference with the youth representatives from all walks of life in China in 2013, Xi Jinping used the proverb, “Doing good deeds is as hard as climbing a mountain, doing bad things is as easy as falling with an avalanche,” to remind the young generation of keeping positive life-views, be virtuous, and living a healthy life (Li 2015: 64). Such uses not only reinforce the Chinese tradition and national spirit, but also help promote using proverbs in various situations.

IV. Achievement, experience, and reflection of the Grand Collection of Chinese Proverbs

The national project of collecting and compiling the *Grand Collection of Chinese Proverbs* was launched on May 28, 1984, as one of the *Three Grand Collections* (the other two being on Folktales and Ballads). The Editor-in-Chief was Ma Xueliang, a highly respected scholar of Chinese folk literature and art. He believes that “proverbs are one of the precious cultural treasures that have been verbally passed down by the people of all ethnic groups

in our country for thousands of years. The *Grand Collection of Chinese Proverbs* will surely record and preserve proverbs in China, which will provide real historical information for various scientific research” (Ma 1988: 512). According to the report from the editorial board, there were about 2 million individuals/times involving in surveying and collecting proverbs from 1984-1990, resulting in a total of 7,180,000 proverbs (Liu 2006: 709-711).

The *Three Grand Collections* are edited and published with the principle of “being scientific, comprehensive, and representative” on the basis of nation-wide survey and collection, and thus have high literary and historical values as the collectanea of folktales, ballads, and proverbs from all regions and ethnic groups in China (Liu 2014: 72). They have provided rich sources for holistic studies with native thoughts and theories (Xiang 2014). At a recent conference, Li Yaozong, Associate Editor-in-Chief of the *Grand Collection of Chinese Proverbs*, summarized that this collection awakens all Chinese people with their self-awareness of the treasure of proverbs in our culture, so that they can be even more actively engaged in safeguarding this treasure at a larger scale and with more experiences (Xiang 2014).

The *Grand Collection of Chinese Proverbs* also represents the achievements of the construction of folklore theories and methods in the second half of the twentieth century in China. For example, during the survey, experiences were accumulated through faithful recording, providing references from ancient literature, and comparing variants. In recording and selecting, the principle of “being scientific, comprehensive, and representative” was reaffirmed. In categorizing, a framework of three-level system was established for collecting proverbs: commonly used at national level; commonly used at provincial level; and commonly used at smaller regional level. In indexing, there were methods developed by the first word, by theme, by similarity, and by category of syntax and content. In annotating, this principle was applied: what can be omitted should not be included; what can be fewer should be repeated; what should be included should not be omitted; what should be comprehensive should not be concise. In designing the general format of the publication, there was the general and consistent structure: Format Example; Introduction; Table of Contents; Illustrations; Appendices; and Postscript. All of these details

contributed to the improvement in methodology and theory for the construction of paremiology in China (Li 2001: 29).

Certainly, there are shortcomings in this *Grand Collection of Chinese Proverbs*. For example, there were not enough trained staff in collecting proverbs from certain regions and ethnic groups (Zhang 2009: 27). Also, in collecting, more attention was paid to the popularity and circulation of the proverbs, while the peculiarity, relationality, and uniqueness were largely ignored. In editing, due to certain ethical restraints and publishing restrictions, certain sensitive proverbs were excluded, including those being seen “vulgar.” As a result, “the collection contains very limited number of those regionally characteristic proverbs at county and village levels, even though they have long history and great popularity” (Xu 1988: 16).

Another shortcoming is that too great attention was paid to the text itself, while the contextual information about the circulation and practitioners was little included. This practice was not in accordance with the guidance from the Editorial Board, which emphasized, “to record the tellers and collectors’ personal background information, so as to provide accuracy and reliability for academic research; related materials and images should also be included in the appendices” (*Handbook* 1987: 2-6).

With these lessons from the past, in 2003, the China Folk Literature and Art Association launched the Project of Rescuing Chinese Folk Culture to further surveying, collecting, categorizing, and editing folk culture items from all over the country. This project was also part of the greater project of Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage project at national level, and gained enormous progress (An and Yang 2012: 21).

As a form of cultural expression, proverbs are listed as a category within Folk Literature (*minjian wenxue*) during the Campaign of Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage after 2004 in China. As a result, “Shanghai Proverbs” and “Northern Shaanxi Proverbs” have been listed as “National Intangible Cultural Heritage Items” respectively in 2011 and 2014. For this Project, the principle of “being comprehensive, representative, and truthful” was applied, with emphasis on the contextual information about the local cultural and natural environment, and about the tellers’ life experience. Audio-visual recording technology has also been

used to strengthen the recording of the teller, location, time, recorder and other related factors.

In January 2018, the China Folk Literature and Art Association launched another national project, Treasury of Chinese Folk Literature (*Zhongguo minjian wenxue daxi*). “Proverbs” is considered as one of the divisions of this project. One of the guiding principles for this division, according to the *Publication Bulletin of Treasury of Chinese Folk Literature*, is “to improve text, annotate context” (2018: 85). It is highly expected that this new project will make a breakthrough from the previous projects, and yield new fruits, demonstrating the new stage of proverb collection and studies.

V. From text to context: diverse perspectives

There is a view about the continuity and popularity of proverbs in China that proverbs “put collectivism above individualism, pay more attention to the old routines than to the new things, underline more external rules than self-development, stress non-individual opinions, and emphasize survival rather than happiness” (Roh-senow 2003: 69). While this is obviously a biased view, it also points out some important aspects about proverbs in terms of their role in preserving and spreading knowledge and experience. In this regard, there is also a view that proverbs are “the encyclopedia for people to know life” (Jiang 1992: 12).

Meanwhile, among Chinese scholars, emphases have been on the uniqueness, content, and artistic feature of proverbs. These studies focus on definition, scope, function, content, rhetoric, and form, which can be called “morphology of proverbs” following the studies in the 1930s (Yue 2019: 54). Studies after 1949 were also heavily influenced by the Soviet Russian theories on folk literature, while Chinese scholars continued the tradition from the New Culture Movement in the early 20th century.

A turn in academia in China took place in 1978 when interdisciplinary perspectives began to be used in studying proverbs (Zhong 1982: 441). For example, there have been studies on the customs of housing, dressing, dieting and other aspects of folk life through proverbs, while some others are on religion (Liu 2004), medicine (Luo and Lin 2008), and martial arts (Zhang and Han 2008). There are also more and more scholars who have extended their interests in studying proverbs through a broad cultural lens

by, as mentioned above, comparing proverbs from different cultures and languages within China.

Since the late 20th century, more and more attention began to be paid to the context of proverbs in order to understand proverbs or verbal lore in everyday life (Zhong 2002; Liu 2012). In this approach, individual proverbs are no longer a linguistic item, but a “folklore event” (Huang 2002: 288-290). Thus, the studies of proverbs moved from a text-centered to a context-centered stage. In this regard, “proverbs are not only a literary form, but also a comprehensive and living cultural phenomenon, and it must be put in the concrete context to fully understand its complete meaning and function” (An 2008: 585). An Deming further points out that since the Song Dynasty (970-1279) there have been two distinctive tracks: one only focusing on text; the other emphasizing both text and context (An 2008: 585). Of course, “context” in historical studies was mostly about “inter-textuality” (Yue 2019: 71), but not the “contextualization” as we use today by emphasizing “situational” context involving “physical environment, identity of the participants as a performance, cultural background, procedural structure, and principles of interpretation, which determine what is performed, what strategies are used, what new text is added, and what the specific situation is, among other factors” (Liu 2009: 8).

Overall, the focal transition from text to context shows that multiple perspectives are being adopted in studying proverbs. This transition helps us understand our own surrounding and the changes in broad societies, and further shows the richness of proverbs through multiple disciplinary approaches.

VI. The writing of the history of Chinese Proverbs

Chinese proverbs are the cumulated wisdom and life experience over the past millennia. They have been continuing with great vitality. Although recording such proverbs had been carried out in the past centuries, more conscious collection began only after 1949. From then on, collection was changed from individual action to collective action, and from regional collection to national collection. Publications of various collections have reached to an unprecedented number. Proverb studies have gradually become a systematic and disciplinary research area. What is lacking, however, is the writing of the history of Chinese proverbs and the history of Chinese proverb studies.

Regarding the developmental history of proverbs in China, one of the systematic studies is the work “On Proverbs” by An Deming (An 2008: 581-608). In that study, he categorizes proverbs in terms of syntax and context into three historical stages: 1) early formation of proverbs (pre-3rd c. BCE); 2) expansion and enrichment of content and application (3rd c. BEC – 10th c. CE); 3) further expansion of content, structure and application (11th c. – 20th c.) (An 2008: 585). There are also approaches from other disciplinary perspectives. For example, specialized studies of the proverbs in the classics of *Zuozhuan* (左传, from the 3rd century BCE) (Li and Tu 2016), the *Qimin Yaoshu* (齐民要术, from the 6th century) (Tian 2009), and Mongolian influence after the 13th century (Peng 2008; Wang 2016).

Theoretical issues related to the history of proverbs in China have become a heated topic in recent years. For example, Li Yaozong argues that, “for various historical reasons, proverb studies began rather late in China, but a distinctive ‘Chinese Proverb Studies/Paremiology’ (*Zhongguo yanxue*) is taking shape with some basic theoretical framework” (Li 2001: 30). Fu Jianrong considers that the studies of the history of proverbs in China is still in its initial stage, and such a history should be constructed under the framework of “one nation with multiple ethnic groups” and this history must include proverbs from all ethnic groups in China with a holistic and historical view, by emphasizing that “the history of proverbs in China should be first established by dividing stages, and then, with synchronic and diachronic views, studied through the repertoire as one entirety” (Fu 2018: 117). This view represents the pioneering thinking in the construction of Chinese paremiology.

VII. The paradigm shift in Chinese folk literature studies as seen through proverb studies

Among all the forms of folk literature, proverbs is a form or genre that has two distinctive characteristics: as a type of language; as a type of speech/parole. Proverbs are certainly part of a language, and is not only a research target for linguistics, but also for folkloristics. Proverbs are also verbal speech/parole because of their nature in oral communication. This second character is particularly standing out when the research focus is transited from a text-centered to a context-centered approach. This paradigm shift

in studying proverbs also calls for a paradigm shift in the studies of folk literature in general.

Since the 1980s, new thoughts, new theories, and new methods have been introduced to China, and Chinese academy has developed into a reality of “hundred flower in blossom” (Yang 1994: 298). Among those new ideas, performance theory that treats a proverb use as a folklore event has exerted a big impact to the paradigm shift in folk literature studies, as well as in folkloristics in China.

Through the emphasis of context of performance, proverbs are seen as ways of passing down knowledge, maintaining social norms, and ways of facilitating oral communication as part of “speech.” Clearly, Chinese paremiology has emerged with its initial protocol, and will surely be a contributing part to the development of Chinese folkloristics.

(Translated by Juwen Zhang)

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