

REVIEW OF

ZIYING YOU. 2020. FOLK LITERATI, CONTESTED TRADITION, AND HERITAGE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: INCENSE IS KEPT BURNING. BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA: INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Abstract

This is a short review of the publication by Ziyong You on ‘Folk Literati, Contested Tradition, and Heritage in Contemporary China: Incense is Kept Burning’, which was released by Indiana University Press in Bloomington in the year 2020. The topic is highly sensitive to current efforts in reworking writings on historical developments in China. This review is important due to the fact that it allows many people to access details of the topic and to start a future discourse about some of the arising questions on heritage and historical values as well as about grassroot intellectuals and existing power structures.

Keywords

China, Folk, Literati, Tradition, Heritage

In her detailed study, Ziyong You explores the relationship between discourse, practice, and power in the process of reconstructing, deconstructing, and preserving cultural heritage in contemporary China. Focusing on rural Chinese intellectuals, she explores how local communities engage with efforts to preserve and transmit local cultural practices and traditions. You’s approach to these intellectuals, which she terms ‘folk literati’, is enriched by an analysis of and commentary on their wider contexts, exploring how local communities are marginalized through power structures that emerge as a result of these processes. In addition to the biographical accounts of the folk literati, You’s discussion of their place in local society, motivations, contributions, and how their legacies are perceived by others explores how the ‘folk literati’ have shaped the local politics and reinforced their personal sense of space.

You’s introduction draws together academic sources from both inside and outside of China to highlight problems faced by academics working on folklore studies. The author discusses her understandings of terms such as ‘tradition,’ ‘heritage,’ and ‘literati’, and presents reasons for utilizing them in this volume. Her discussion extends to Chinese terms and classificatory frameworks, namely the replacement of *minjian* (民间), meaning ‘folk’, with *chuantong* (传统), meaning ‘tradition’, to refer to music, dance, and fine art. Although this substitution serves to incorporate artistic elements favoured by the ruling classes in ancient China (p. 32), it may not account for the views of the author’s research subjects, for whom such a system may appear

arbitrary or irrelevant to their living practices. This raises questions concerning the appropriateness of the term ‘folk’ in the title of this book. The term carries assumptions which the author does not clearly unpack. If ‘folk’ can be replaced with ‘tradition’ in Chinese, why use ‘folk’ at all? I return to these issues in the latter half of this review article.

You’s research centres on three locations near Hongtong County in Shanxi, China – Yangxie, Lishan, and Wan’an. In the first chapter, You explains the historical and social context of these research sites and summarizes the local practices related to Nüying and Ehuang, providing an overview of the connections between local practitioners, those responsible for the restoration and upkeep of the temples, and individuals engaged in the transmission and preservation of local traditions. Yangxie, Lishan, and Wan’an share a belief system centred on Nüying and Ehuang, but disputes over the details of this ‘sacred’ bond more frequently provoke tensions than inspire cooperation. The interconnectedness of Yangxie, Lishan, and Wan’an, coupled with their delicate social and political dynamics—which individuals can significantly impact—make them an ideal site for You’s study. The second chapter explores the role of the folk literati in the transmission and reproduction of local traditions, focusing on the life and work of the late Qiao Guoliang. Interviews with family and friends provide details of Qiao Guoliang’s life, but through an analysis of his poetry, You suggests that Qiao Guoliang identifies himself as a member of the literati. You provides the original Chinese for Qiao Guoliang’s poems, which some readers may find useful, but not for other examples of his writings.

The author opens the third chapter by describing recent recognition in folklore studies of the importance of ethnographic research for situating traditional mythical stories within contemporary Chinese contexts. You explores the history of the story of Yao and Shun, explaining how modern archaeology has contributed to the contested presentation of these figures. Li Xuezhi, the first member of the folk literati interviewed in this book, provided You with a manuscript detailing his involvement in the reconstruction of the temple of Shun as well as the revival of other traditions. The manuscript focuses on the 1990s onward: a period often perceived by researchers as less dynamic. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the dominant narratives that compete with Li Xuezhi’s account, exposing tensions underpinned by the various proponents’ sense of space and politics.

Using several accounts, Chapter Four constructs a more detailed picture of the interactions between individuals, legends, beliefs, practices, history, and place. The author discusses how the folk literati are perceived by one another and by their communities. Chapter Five builds on this and explores how the folk literati interact with the community more widely and discusses their interactions with other social actors such as ritual specialists and temple reconstruction associations.

In Chapter Six, the author exposes the imbalances of the power relationships between actors involved in cultural heritage preservation projects. By outlining the infrastructure behind China’s intangible cultural heritage projects, the author suggests that while initiatives such as the *Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* can encourage people to engage with cultural heritage projects, they often arouse conflicts about ownership in local communities. In her comments on the imbalanced relationship between temple reconstruction associations and local state leaders, You notes that the folk literati are rarely selected as ‘representative transmitters’. Her critique of the heritage-making process, which has distorted power relations and alienated those most engaged with the traditions, opens discussion onto wider impacts of the existing systems surrounding cultural heritage preservation, highlighting areas in need of further development.

You’s analysis of her fieldwork data reveals a detailed understanding of the lives and work of grassroots intellectuals, but her use of the term ‘folk literati’ merits further discussion.

Throughout the volume, You admits that the ‘folk literati’ are a group of dynamic individuals who are difficult to classify as a unified group. She often justifies her use of the term by an individual’s self-representation in their work, or by recognition of their literary abilities by members of their local community. Many of You’s research subjects reject the term ‘literati’, suggesting that it is appropriate for neither themselves nor their fellow intellectuals. You’s use of ‘folk literati’ emerges from a perceived distinction between her main research subjects and other members of their communities. While it is arguable that this distinction clarifies the structure of the book, use of ‘folk literati’ is perhaps more problematic than You suggests.

You deals with the historical conceptions of the literati in the introduction of the book, and suggests that her understanding of ‘literati’ is similar to Yang Kuisong’s ‘scholar’ (书生) concept, referring to ‘those who read books and pursue spiritual goals’, but who also have personal weaknesses and problems (p. 37). If, as You suggests, Yang’s definition could be applied to her research subjects, then is it necessary to coin a new term? Throughout the book, You cites other similar designations such as Merrill Kaplan’s ‘amateur scholars’ (p. 262). The problematic use of ‘folk’ might have been avoided by building on concepts such as ‘amateur scholar’, or using *shusheng* (书生) in romanization. Although the author takes time to explain the use of ‘literati’, the concept of ‘folk’ as used in this book requires further explanation. Jähnichen problematizes the use of ‘folk’ in Chinese contexts, suggesting that it is often invoked to inspire ‘primary interest’ in a subject (Jähnichen, 2020). You’s research is interesting enough on its own and I do not believe the use of the term here is motivated by inspiring ‘primary interest’, but the term ‘folk’ is perhaps too vague. You deploys this term to highlight the efforts of grassroots intellectuals, but instead of helping the reader understand the research subject more deeply, its categorical distinctions may have implications for the way readers perceive the legitimacy and value of the work of such individuals. While the author does not intend to make value judgements on the work of her subjects, more nuanced consideration of terminology would more clearly set out her position in relation to conceptual frameworks in the field.

The author’s cultivation of a personal connection with her research subjects has resulted in an engaging account of her fieldwork, which is enriched by clear and vibrant illustrations in a high-quality publication. You’s detailed analysis provides valuable insight into the lives of often-overlooked grassroots intellectuals, and gives a voice to those disenfranchised by national and international power structures.

REFERENCE

Jähnichen, Gisa. 2020. ‘Recorded Ethnic Music in the Asian Continent’, *The Lindström Project*, 11: 128–131.