

On Chen Sihe's historical writing from a folk perspective

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Abstract: Chen Sihe is an influential literary historian and critic in the study of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, whose academic propositions and practices exhibit an intrinsic unity and coherence. The "folk" perspective serves as his foundational stance in constructing literary history; through continuous excavation, exploration, and practice of the "folk" theory, he has developed a unique perspective on literary history that examines the development of modern Chinese literature and the vicissitudes of intellectuals, while simultaneously delineating a cultural space for establishing the intellectual spiritual and cultural tradition. This series of research and practices has significantly enriched literary history, bringing to light many previously obscured phenomena.

Keywords: Chen Sihe, folk perspective, literary history, humanistic spirit

1. Introduction

Professor Chen Sihe is an influential literary historian and critic in the field of modern and contemporary Chinese literature studies. His series of academic investigations have injected new vitality into the development of Chinese literature; whether through his proposal of the "folk dimension" or his advocacy of the "holistic perspective" and "humanistic spirit," his academic theories and practices have influenced numerous literary scholars and hold pioneering academic significance.

Chen Sihe's scholarship exhibits a deep internal coherence between his theoretical propositions and his academic practice. "The Folk" serves as a foundational standpoint in his construction of literary history. In his seminal essay, *The Ebb and Flow of the Folk: An Interpretation of the Literary History from the Anti-Japanese War to the Cultural Revolution*, Professor Chen defines the folk cultural formation as follows: "First, it emerges in social spheres relatively insulated from state power, preserving relatively free and vivacious forms... possessing its own independent history and traditions. Second, unconstrained freedom constitutes its most fundamental aesthetic style. Third, it constitutes a unique configuration characterized by 'harboring both filth and treasure.'" [1] Subsequent scholarly endeavors—such as the excavation and systematization of concepts like "potential writing", "hidden structures," the "psychology of war culture," and the dynamics between "shared names" and "namelessness"—have significantly enriched the theoretical framework surrounding the folk. Concurrently, his concrete research on authors, literary works, and literary history serves as the practical application of this "folk" theory. Studies such as *Rickshaw Boy: An Enlightenment Tragedy from the Folk Perspective*, *The Folk and Modern Urbanization—A Re-examination of the Eileen Chang Phenomenon*, *The Folk World within the Metropolis: Love in a Fallen City*, *Yu Hua: The Turn from "Avant-Garde" Writing to the Folk*, and *The Restoration of the Folk—An Interpretation of Certain Post-Cultural Revolution Literary Trends* demonstrate the profound influence of the "folk" paradigm on his scholarship. Adopting "the Folk" as a unique lens for literary historiography, Chen Sihe scrutinizes the development of modern Chinese literature and the fate of the intellectual class, while simultaneously delineating a cultural space for the establishment of the intellectual spiritual tradition. This series of theoretical and practical engagements has substantially enriched the narrative of literary history, bringing numerous previously obscured phenomena to the surface.

2. The "rewriting" of literary history

2.1. The proposal and context of "rewriting literary history"

In 1987, drawing upon his unique historical perspective, Chen Sihe proposed the "Overall View of Modern Chinese Literature": "Since the 20th century, Chinese literature has constituted an open whole both in time and space... This whole will evolve alongside the changing circumstances of modern society..." [2], aiming to connect and integrate the entire history of Chinese literature from a macroscopic and holistic standpoint. Subsequently, guided by this "Overall View," Chen Sihe and Wang Xiaoming advocated for a "rewriting of literary history" in 1988; they established a special column in **Shanghai Literary Theory**, hoping to "re-examine and reassess important writers, works, literary trends, and phenomena within modern Chinese literature," thereby "stimulating a vibrant atmosphere of literary criticism, challenging conclusions in literary history that seemed established, and reigniting people's interest and enthusiasm for rethinking the past" [3].

The proposal of this assertion is not without reason: throughout Chinese history, the writing of historical accounts has always been divided between official histories and unofficial histories, reflecting different approaches to historical writing as well as varying historical consciousness and positions among writers. The writing of modern Chinese literary history, particularly after 1949, has exemplified a power-driven approach to writing, where "the historical consciousness of official circles" has become the dominant thread running through literary history writing, thereby forming a discourse pattern dominated by mainstream ideology—namely, evaluating and presenting history through the lens of mainstream ideology. This writing method is prominently manifested in the articulation of national ideology, thereby erasing personalized and pluralistic approaches to literary history writing. Consequently, the proposal of "rewriting literary history" put forward at the end of the 1980s has drawn particular attention. The concept of "rewriting" advocated by these scholars does not entail erasing the existing historical record nor does it oppose history shaped by mainstream ideology; rather, it seeks to break free from the "traditional revolutionary historiography paradigm," shatter the monolithic writing model, and construct a personalized narrative of literary history through aesthetic and pluralistic dimensions.

2.2. The "three sections of the world" framework in literary history

2.2.1. *The "folk" stance and the construction of an autonomous historical system*

To this end, Chen Sihe conducted a series of academic practical activities, including research on war-related cultural psychology, anonymity and collective naming, folk cultural forms, and latent writing phenomena, thereby establishing "a grand historical consciousness and perspective on the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, and gradually forming an autonomous literary historiography system" [4]. Within this system, while individual theories may appear independent, they exhibit intrinsic connections that are governed by the "folk" standpoint.

Chen Sihe focuses his research on the literary history since the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. Adopting the concept of "folk culture" as his ideological stance, he argues that the literary history since the War of Resistance should follow a "three-part division" namely: the state power ideology, the elite cultural form dominated by intellectuals, and the folk cultural form. This unique perspective on literary history breaks away from the singular, power-driven classification of literary history, thereby fostering its pluralism and richness. In Chen Sihe's view, the concept of "folk culture" refers solely to "a real cultural space that has already emerged in the history of Chinese literature during the 20th century, where it has survived and developed according to its own distinctive modes, and has nurtured certain prospects for literary history" [1].

2.2.2. *The fragmentation of three cultural forms*

The development of folk cultural forms follows a distinct trajectory. From the Xinhai Revolution to the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the three major domains of Chinese culture were largely isolated from one another; during this period, cultural conflicts primarily occurred between the "palace" and the "public square"—as society faced internal turmoil and external calamities under the dual pressure of Chinese and Western cultures, the ruling class failed to establish a lasting cultural system; meanwhile,

influenced by new ideas, intellectuals developed severe disagreements with political ideologies, thereby establishing a "public square" outside the "palace" —which represents "constructing a space for continued deliberation on state affairs after being expelled from the palace" [5]. At this time, folk culture existed in a marginal zone under the control of political power, being excluded from the elite cultural tradition.

2.2.3. *The infiltration and transformation of national ideology*

From the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression to the Cultural Revolution period, the war provided opportunities for the development of folk culture, during which three distinct cultural forms emerged in a tripartite equilibrium. This segment of literary history primarily reflects how the state power ideology transformed both the elite culture and folk culture among intellectuals. During this period, Chinese literature constructed contemporary cultural norms—norms shaped by the dominance and control of state power ideology, as well as by the wartime cultural psychology. In this era, war, as a significant factor influencing literary creation, had penetrated deep into people's subconscious minds, affecting their modes of thinking and cultural psyche. At this stage, the transformation of intellectuals' thoughts under the guidance of state ideology was particularly evident. The state ideology advocated unity among the masses; thus, guided by this policy, intellectuals were required to engage closely with the masses, reform their own ideologies, adapt to new cultural conventions, and transition from their roles as "pioneers and bridges" to those of subjects undergoing transformation under the sway of this ideology. Meanwhile, folk culture during this period served as a focal point for state ideology—both as an object of its reliance and as an advocate for literary creation—undergoing extensive infiltration and transformation, which manifested through three distinct phases: the first phase involved the "Yan 'an era's transformation of traditional Yangge opera and traditional opera"; the second phase was characterized by the tragedy associated with Zhao Shuli's approach; and the third phase marked the "model plays of the 'Cultural Revolution' and the return of folk culture to the grassroots level."

2.3. The "non-visible folk structure" and the plural narratives of literary history

However, the richness of folk cultural forms manifests everywhere in its resistance to ideological transformation and infiltration. A key factor in this process is what may be termed the "implicit folk structure." This structure refers to the way folk cultural forms are embedded — latently and in fragmented fashion — within a literary text, functioning as an alternative discourse and thereby constituting an invisible structural layer. To some extent, this mechanism facilitated the emergence of a body of literary works that not only received mainstream cultural recognition during the era of unified literary production in contemporary China but also retain a certain artistic appeal even by today's standards. For instance, in Shajiabang, while certain characters and plot elements were shaped by dominant ideology into political symbols, the underlying folk narrative pattern of "one woman pitting three men against each other through wit" operates as an implicit structure, lending the work its artistic vitality. Similarly, in Zhao Shuli's fiction, the characters that possess the deepest artistic power — and are most frequently praised by readers — are precisely those drawn from folk society and endowed with authentic folk characteristics: figures such as "Little Leg Pain," "Third Fairy Maiden," and "Can't-Get-Enough." It is evident that this "implicit structure" greatly enriches the artistry of literary works, enabling folk cultural forms to survive and develop to a certain degree.

As Chen Sihe observes in *The Restoration of the Folk: An Interpretation of Certain Post-Cultural Revolution Literary Trends*, it was not until the late 1980s that the "folk" emerged as a conscious, explicit category within literary historiography. Prior to this pivotal moment, it could only manifest as a "hidden structure" embedded within intellectual discourse and the dominant public narratives of the time.

Chen Sihe delineates the literary history spanning from the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War to the 1990s through three pivotal domains: the "Imperial Court", the "Square" and the "Folk". Throughout this framework, the "Folk" remains the focal point of his scholarly inquiry. By constructing literary history from this "Folk" standpoint, Chen has not only disrupted monolithic narrative paradigms and enriched historiographical practice but also illuminated the complex, dynamic interpenetration and mutual accommodation between state ideology, elite culture, and folk formations across distinct historical periods.

3. The "reconstruction" of the humanistic spirit

3.1. The ebb and flow between intellectual and folk discourses

The introduction of "folk"-related theories has significantly enriched the construction of literary history, enabling us to observe the interrelationship between intellectual discourse and folk discourse since the 20th century. When intellectual discourse encounters obstacles, folk discourse begins to gain prominence; conversely, once intellectuals have established their own discourse system, folk cultural forms reappear in a concealed state. However, from another perspective, one can observe that the entire trajectory of literary history reflects the fate of intellectuals: the May Fourth New Culture Movement served as a "square" established by intellectuals seeking to return to the "palace"; the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression positioned intellectuals as subjects of transformation (or self-transformation); during the 1980s, intellectuals strove to perpetuate the tradition of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, such as through the movement of "root-seeking literature"; and in the 1990s, the elite cultural tradition began to disintegrate. It can be argued that Chen Sihe, while focusing on folk cultural forms, also pays considerable attention to the fate of intellectuals, asserting that "the curve depicted in literary history precisely reflects the reality of how the minds of intellectuals in a given era were distorted" [6]. The introduction of "folk" -related theories has significantly enriched the construction of literary history, enabling us to observe the interrelationship between intellectual discourse and folk discourse since the 20th century. When intellectual discourse encounters obstacles, folk discourse begins to gain prominence; conversely, once intellectuals have established their own discourse system, folk cultural forms reappear in a concealed state. However, from another perspective, one can observe that the entire trajectory of literary history reflects the fate of intellectuals: the May Fourth New Culture Movement served as a "square" established by intellectuals seeking to return to the "palace"; the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression positioned intellectuals as subjects of transformation (or self-transformation); during the 1980s, intellectuals strove to perpetuate the tradition of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, such as through the movement of "root-seeking literature"; and in the 1990s, the elite cultural tradition began to disintegrate. It can be argued that Chen Sihe, while focusing on folk cultural forms, also pays considerable attention to the fate of intellectuals, asserting that "the curve depicted in literary history precisely reflects the reality of how the minds of intellectuals in a given era were distorted" [6].

3.2. Identity crisis and the discussion on the "humanistic spirit"

Entering the 1990s, the market economy gradually transformed people's pace and manner of life, altered their cultural psyche and value pursuits, while also profoundly impacting China's existing cultural system, causing literature to increasingly deviate from its own essence—wherein its spiritual and evaluative values were progressively diminished, replaced by the commodification and marginalization of literature. This shift gave rise to crises in the identity of certain intellectuals, who downplayed literature's role as a vehicle for society, the nation, and history, opting instead for a path driven by self-interest. To attract public attention, they disregarded literary artistic standards and insisted on producing market-oriented literary works. In their view, the value criteria of humanistic spirit had already vanished, and the judgment of literary quality was now based solely on economic interests and mass acceptance.

In response to this situation, between 1993 and 1994, the Shanghai academic community—including Chen Sihe—initiated a broad discussion on the "humanistic spirit," aimed at re-establishing the cultural tradition of intellectuals during China's period of transition and thereby engaging in reflection and critique of consumerist culture. Chen Sihe argued that the "humanistic spirit" refers to "a spirit that defines what it means to be human, a sincere concern for the future development of the national spirit, and an overarching reflection by intellectuals on how to integrate their personal social responsibilities with their professional roles" [6].

3.3. "Civil post awareness" and value foundation

3.3.1. Introduction of the "non-official position awareness" concept

3.3.1.1. From the "imperial court" to the "square"

Chen Sihe's proposition of "positional consciousness within the folk" is a profound response to the historical vicissitudes of intellectual identity. This concept operates on a dual register: it addresses the pragmatic necessity of the intellectual's vocation while, more crucially, safeguarding the "vital essence" of cultural traditions. Chen identifies three distinct ideological formations that have historically governed intellectual existence. The first is an ideology of attachment to the "Imperial Court", where intellectuals served state power. The second is the ideology of the "Square", a space of public discourse and elite opposition established in the pursuit of reclaiming the Court. The third is an ideology grounded in the "Folk", which emerged as a sustainable alternative.

The May Fourth New Culture Movement stands as the quintessential manifestation of the "Square" ideology. During this period, intellectuals leveraged this relatively autonomous space to unleash their democratic spirit, articulating demands for social reform and exposing societal pathologies to prompt "remedying." This era saw the flourishing of an elite cultural formation centered on the intellectual subject—a dynamic cultural space facilitating dialogue with the "Court." However, the limitations of this "Square" gradually became apparent. Subsequent historical periods revealed their inherent illusions and inadequacies, leaving intellectuals in a state of prolonged hesitation and uncertainty, unable to locate an authentic cultural value. This historical trajectory sets the stage for Chen's advocacy of the "Folk" as the new site for intellectual labor and cultural continuity.

3.3.1.2. The shift toward the "folk"

The ascendancy of folk culture provided intellectuals with a new anchorage, fostering a renewed "positional consciousness" and giving rise to a cultural formation grounded in the "Folk." Superficially, this transition appears to betray the intellectual's critical spirit, resembling a compromise with reality. Yet, on a deeper level, it represents a pragmatic and effective modality for intellectuals to engage with society, thereby reaffirming their intrinsic value and the traditional Confucian ideal of "poetic instruction."

Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*, often hailed as a seminal work of New Historicism, exemplifies this shift. Mo Yan's historical consciousness is firmly rooted in the folk stance; he deliberately downplays and revises the meta-historical narratives emphasized by dominant ideology, instead drawing upon folk resources to depict a free-spirited folk culture. Similarly, Ge Shuping, a prominent contemporary Shanxi writer, has produced numerous works anchored in folk culture, portraying the populace's resilience amid suffering and expressing her own affirmation of folk vitality. These instances illustrate intellectuals operating within a folk-based ideology. It is precisely within this ideological framework that intellectuals have rediscovered their "positional consciousness," enabling genuine cultural reflection and critique.

3.3.2. *The value foundation of vernacular discourse*

Folk culture has always existed throughout history; however, the discourse of intellectuals has long remained dominant, thereby obscuring folk discourse. Over the course of history, these two discourses have evolved in a dynamic interplay of rise and decline. Chen Sihe's introduction of the concepts of "folk culture" and "folk-oriented professional consciousness" represents, to some extent, an attempt to address the confusion and hesitation experienced by certain intellectuals under the impact of the market economy. Chen Sihe has also noted that folk culture is "a new factor that can serve as a foundation for the values of intellectuals" [7]; clearly, this reflects his effort to help intellectuals establish their own cultural system in the new era, providing them with a means to construct their own cultural values, thereby demonstrating his profound attention and reflection toward intellectuals.

4. Exploration of folk theories

Chen Sihe approaches the writing of literary history from a "popular" perspective; this approach not only breaks through the singular model of literary history writing but also opens up possibilities for constructing a new paradigm for literary history writing; furthermore, by grounding his analysis in the fate of intellectuals, he has charted a clear direction and path for establishing the cultural spirit and tradition of intellectuals. However, upon a closer examination of his theories concerning the "popular," certain issues emerge that warrant further exploration and deeper investigation.

4.1. Neither "submerged" before nor "afloated" after: revisiting the folk

In *The Ebb and Flow of the Folk*, Chen Sihe posits that folk culture oscillated between "submergence" (chen) and "resurgence" (fu) across the twentieth century. However, this binary requires nuance. As Wang Guangdong notes, modern Chinese literature features three distinct perspectives on the folk: enlightenment-based, politically aligned, and autonomously folk-centered.[8] pre-war folk culture primarily occupied the first category. Intellectuals like Lu Xun engaged with the folk dialectically critiquing its feudal conservatism while simultaneously appropriating its vitality to shape literary archetypes. Thus, the folk was not "submerged" but actively mediated through elite discourse.

The wartime "resurgence" of folk culture was triggered by its institutional integration with state ideology following the Yanan Talks. This shift marked a transition from an enlightenment-oriented perspective to a politicized framework, rather than a simple rise from obscurity. Therefore, the pre-war folk was relatively "hidden" within intellectual texts, while the post-war folk became "manifest" through political mobilizational change in function and visibility, not an absolute absence or presence.

4.2. Hidden structures, folk subtexts, and literary value

Chen Sihe holds the concepts of "folk culture" and "folk invisible structure" in high esteem. Indeed, these concepts possess a unique charm; using the notion of folk invisible structure to uncover the aesthetic significance and value inherent in literature represents a distinctive perspective. However, it would be somewhat oversimplified to rely solely on the text's invisible structure or the underlying elements of folk culture as criteria for assessing the artistic merit of a literary work. After all, the artistic value of a literary work is determined by numerous factors—such as language, layering, rhythm, plot, characters, structure, theme, and so on—and structure is merely one component among them; the artistic quality of a work should be judged based on its overall degree of aesthetic and artistic refinement.

4.3. The "folk" theory still has significant room for further exploration.

In the preface to *Explorations and Innovations in Literary Historiography: An Introduction to the Series on 20th-Century Chinese Literary Theory*, Chen Sihe identifies a profound embeddedness of folk cultural traits within the literary creations of authors such as Lao She and Eileen Chang. His focused studies, particularly in *The Folk and Modern Urbanization—A Re-examination of the Eileen Chang Phenomenon* and *The Folk World within the Metropolis: Love in a Fallen City*, concentrate on the folk cultural formations within Chang's fiction, where the concept of "the folk" is explicitly oriented toward the urban milieu. Chen contends that a distinct folk literary tradition exists within the metropolis—one that diverges significantly from its rural counterpart—and that prevailing folk theories remain inadequate for addressing urban folk literature. This insight provides a crucial entry point for deepening folk theory while simultaneously offering a new interpretive framework for urban literary studies, thereby substantially enriching both fields. While research into urban folk literature has begun to unfold, further scholarly excavation remains imperative.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Chen Sihe's approach to historical writing from a "popular" perspective has exerted immense influence; although some of his theoretical interpretations require further scrutiny and refinement, he has provided a novel perspective for the writing of literary history, enriched the development of cultural history, and made significant contributions to academia.

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