

**STRENGTHENING NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CULTURAL COHESION:
WARTIME FOLKLORE STUDIES IN SOUTHWEST CHINA****Selina J. Gao**

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Abstract. Folklore studies were closely tied to the emergence of the modern nation states and often used to rebuild national identities. In China, nationalism held an obvious appeal as the people confronted national crises and became increasingly influential in the twentieth centuries. It was not only directly related to the rising interest in folklore from the late 1910s and early 1920s, but also became the dominant theme of the folklore research during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Leading scholars of folklore studies looked to the past in order to strengthen cultural cohesion for the nation as a reaction to Japanese imperialism. Folklore studies in the southwest region under Nationalist control thrived and progressed in related theories and studies of minority customs. Scholars adopted a multi-disciplinary approach and rallied around folklore as a nationalist tool to demonstrate the connection between disparate communities within China. This work examines the great influence of nationalism on folk studies, shining a light on folklorists' activities, folklore organizations, and primary publications during China's War of Resistance against Japan.

Keywords: *folklore studies, modernity, nationalism, Second Sino-Japanese War, Southwest China*

Folklore Studies and Nationalism

Folklore emerged as a new field of learning in the eighteenth century, when philologists in Germany and antiquarians in England began to take a close look at the ways of the lower classes [Dorson (1972): 1]. The term *folk-lore* entered the English language in the mid-nineteenth century and the meaning of it was the lore of the people. *The Handbook of Folklore* described folklore research as the study of elements of archaic culture surviving in the modern age.¹ Folklore not only embodied the primal origins of the nation, but also linked the past to the present. That is why it was seen as a resource for the creation of a new national culture.

Folklore studies became a wide-spread academic pursuit in the nineteenth century Europe and North America. It was closely tied to the emergence of the modern nation states. Alan Dundes writes, “[t]he serious studies of folklore found an enthusiastic audience among individuals who felt nostalgia for the past and/or the necessity of documenting the existence of national consciousness or identity.” [Dundes (1980): 1]

¹ This handbook was published by the English Folklore Society. This society was founded by George Laurence Gomme in 1878. It was one of the first organizations in the world devoted to the study of folk culture.

Later, folkloric evidence of the primordial and persistent national spirit was evoked by nationalist movements worldwide. In the work of the nation-builders, folklore mostly served two functions: it provided both historical information and a model for future action. The concept of folk was often tightly linked to the rise of modern nationalism.

In China, nationalism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and became increasingly influential thereafter. It held an appeal as Chinese people faced a national crisis. After the Xihai Revolution, the new republic was not able to build a strong nation-state, therefore many nationalist scholars turned their attention to the role of the modern media in the construction of nation state by discovering Chinese culture and enlightening Chinese people. They believed that China needed to strengthen itself in order to survive in the world of competitive nation-states. They also believed that the Chinese nation could be integrated through the mobilization of mass sentiments, especially those sentiments that strengthened individual identification with a set of goals common to the nation [Hobsbawm (1990): 141-142].

These modern scholars agreed with Western theories that the quality of the common people would finally decide China's destiny [Fitzgerald (1996) 106-108]. They were eager to find a new way to save the Chinese nation after they have rejected the Confucian culture and have been frustrated by Western imperialist ideologies. For them, "traditional culture," in particular the folk culture, was useful in a nationalist discourse to reach through to the masses or to respond to the cultural dilemmas of Westernized intellectuals. Under the circumstances, the concept of folklore and folk ideas were introduced into China from the West.

Nationalism was closely related to the rising interest in folklore from the very beginning in China, and it also became the dominant theme of folklore studies afterwards. In Wolfram Eberhard's *Folktales of China*, Richard M. Dorson writes "[t]he relation between the study of the folklore and the rise of nationalism is beautifully illustrated in China" [Dorson (1968): v]. Chinese scholars turned to the past in part as a reaction to foreign imperialism, but also to create a sense of an independent cultural identity for the nation [Gao (2019): 14].

Folklore Studies before WWII

Folklore studies emerged in 1918 at Beijing University (Peking University). This elite institution, known in Chinese as Beida 北大. The May Fourth intellectuals were convinced that they could save China from below, by awakening the social consciousness of their countrymen [Schwarcz (1986): 24]. These scholars called for a critical re-evaluation of China's cultural heritage in light of modern Western standards and were determined to accept Western science, democracy, and culture as the foundation of a new order. Disillusioned with the "high culture" represented by Confucianism, young Chinese intellectuals found hope in the "low culture" of the common people. The new intellectuals thus began to redefine the status of folk culture and their relationship with it. They developed a romantic view of the folk, arguing that this rich and untapped folk culture could be used as an alternative to Confucianism to convey new ideas that retained a Chinese cultural identity while furnishing urgent solutions to China's myriad of problems.

The initial stage of modern Chinese folklore research began as it had in other nations with the collection and survey of folk literature [Gao (2019)]. In the early of 1918, budding folklorists opened the Folksong Collecting Bureau (*Beida geyao zhengjichu* 北大歌謠征集處) at National Beijing University as a vehicle to collect folksongs from the public. Its mission was to set up a crowdsourcing framework for folk material collection that amateur enthusiasts could follow. The bureau's initial efforts were met with a positive response, prompting the formation of the Folksong Research Society (*Geyao yanjiuhui* 歌謠研究會) in 1920 and then two years later the launch of *Folksong Weekly* (*Geyao zhoukan* 《歌謠周刊》) to share this work with readers at and around National Beijing University. In short order, a small, but growing number of professors joined the movement, rules and regulations for collectors were modified based on experiences gained in the field, the invitation to submit folk materials was extended to a nationwide audience, and other influential journals and newspapers pledged to devote space to folklore discoveries. There was a conservative backlash at Peking University over the publication of this supposedly vulgar material in the campus paper, but it was nowhere near sufficient to snuff out popular demand for more [Gao (2019): 45]. Over the ensuing years, a growing number of researchers, newspapers, and publishing houses influenced by the folklore activities at Beijing University, joined in the folklore field by writing monographs, starting new columns, and publishing books.

However financial crisis and political tension at Beijing University forced many intellectuals to leave Beijing. Many of them moved to the south China following the Chinese National Revolution initiated by the Nationalists in Guangdong in 1925. These scholars found a new home at Xiamen and Zhongshan Universities. At the end of 1927, the Folklore Society² was founded at Zhongshan University (中山大學 Sun Yat-sen University). This Folklore Society was composed of diligent scholars who had a significant influence on Chinese society through their remarkable publications and the public support, especially from 1927 to 1933.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the folklore studies activities vigorously increased within China, particularly in the south. Scholars from all over the country not only wrote for the *Folklore Weekly* (*Minsu zhoukan* 《民俗周刊》) and other folklore series published by Zhongshan University, but also established scores of folklore associations and created corresponding local folklore publications. Heavyweight intellectual Gu Jiegang served as the founding president of Chinese Folklore Society from 1927, guiding affiliated historians, anthropologists, and other scholars in their efforts to establish a firmer academic framework for folklore study [Gao (2019): 103]. Most importantly, scholars in Hangzhou produced a massive volume of significant work, carried out many valuable investigations, and undertook many remarkable academic projects. In 1935, folklore activities entered a renaissance era at Beijing University and Zhongshan University. The Folksong Research Society and the Folklore Society were re-established one after another.

² It was the first official organization with “*minsuxue*” (民俗學 folklore) in its title in China. *Minsuxue*, the modern Chinese term for “folklore,” is precisely a modern term: it was not part of the Chinese language until 1913. Zhou Zuoren adopted into modern Chinese from Japanese.

Unfortunately, the war brought all of these positive developments to a halt. After the Marco Polo Bridge (Lugouqiao 盧溝橋) Incident near Beiping on July 7, 1937, an accidental skirmish between Japanese and Chinese forces that quickly expanded into a full-scale war, the whole situation in China took a sudden turn for the worse as the KMT rapidly lost ground on all fronts. Beiping and Tianjin first fell into Japanese hands, then the flames of the war spread to Nanjing, Wuhan, and Changsha; finally, Guangxi was thrust into a state of emergency. By year's end all of China was thrust in the abyss of war. It was no longer tenable for most folklore institutes and publications to continue their work, while the Chinese intelligentsia grew increasingly divided over the question of how to live and work in wartime.

Folklore Studies in Nationalist Controlled Areas

The war splintered the Folklore Movement even as folklorists and other related scholars continued their research and investigations in both Japanese-occupied areas and Nationalist-controlled territories during the eight-year War of Resistance against Japan. A small group of dedicated scholars persisted in carrying out independent folklore investigations and writing despite extremely adverse conditions in Japanese-occupied Beiping and Shanghai. Their freedom of movement was severely curtailed and there were dire consequences to publishing anything that might offend the occupation authorities. In Nationalist-controlled areas, folklore studies progressed in related theories and began to explore minority customs in southwest China. Academics operating there had been forced to the border regions by the fighting, which led them to discover and study non-Han groups that likely would have been overlooked if not for the wartime academic migration deep into the interior.

Wartime folklore studies in Nationalist-controlled areas flourished by contrast, continuing to develop academically. The region's geography and the folk customs and practices of its people inspired new characteristics in folklore studies as the field became closely integrated with other interdisciplinary studies, such as anthropology and ethnology. The fall of Northeast, North, East, and part of Central China to Japanese occupiers forced most of countries leading colleges, universities, and research institutions to relocate into the big Southwest region of China.³ Among these institutes, the National Southwestern Associated University (Xi'nan lianda 西南聯大) gathered many famous experts and was second to none.⁴ The intellectuals who had been engaged in folklore

³ These research institutions notably moved in Yunnan (雲南), Guizhou (貴州) and Sichuan (四川) provinces and finally converged in Chongqing (重慶), Kunming (昆明), Chengdu (成都), Guilin (桂林), Guiyang (貴陽) and other cities, which became well-known cultural cities of China at that time.

⁴ After Beiping and Tianjin were occupied by the Japanese, Beijing University, Qinghua University (清華大學) and Nankai University (南開大學)—some of the most prestigious, modern educational institutions of higher learning and research in China—moved to Changsha in Hunan Province and merged to form Changsha Temporary University (長沙臨時大學). In February 1938, Japanese forces bombed Changsha, forcing the three schools to move again, this time to Kunming, where they formed the National Southwestern Associated University. When the war of resistance ended with victory over the Japanese, the National Southwestern Associated University returned to north China campuses in Beijing and Tianjin.

research at Beijing University and Qinghua University relocated with their institutions to Kunming. The Great China University (Daxia daxue 大夏大學) in Shanghai moved to Guiyang as well, while The Academia Sinica also set up a wartime home in Sichuan province. This massive influence of human capital and physical resources transformed the Southwest into China's wartime academic heart.

Naturally, changes in the research environment led scholars to gradually shift the focus of their investigations away from the culture of the central plains, comprising the middle and lower reach of the Yellow River, to the minority cultures in the southwest border region. Yunnan and Sichuan were population-dense regions and home to many different minorities. Yunnan alone had almost 30 national minorities, and the Achang nationality could be only found there. Similarly, Sichuan was the sole inhabited area for the Qiang nationality as well as the home to the biggest Yi community in all of China and the second biggest Tibetan community. All of their unique folk customs and practices fascinated intellectuals engaged in research on nationalities, dialects, and minorities' cultural characteristics. Transplanted ethnologists, archaeologists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, litterateurs, linguists, and folklorists were quickly drawn in by lively folk culture they discovered in the southwest region.

Most of these scholars had received a specialized overseas education before the outbreak of hostilities. They responded to the disaster of war by redoubling their efforts to modernize China's folklore study, displaying a keen national sensibility and consciousness in their academic thought as they unified western ethnological theory with China's reality. Their research showed a strong consciousness of synthesis regarding different western ethnological schools and theories as these scholars advocated adopting any kind of material or methodology from any subject so long as it was related to their research topic and could be used in their studies. Scholars advocated and practiced this "comprehensive orientation" in their academic explorations. In the folklore field, this comprehensive orientation also became mainstream in research conducted during this period. The methodology and theory of ethnology and anthropology especially were widely adopted in folklore studies. This work appeared in a number of academic journals that accepted folklore investigation reports and research papers for publication, including *Journal of Ethnological Studies* (*Minzuxue yanjiu jikan* 《民族學研究集刊》), *Chinese Language Monthly* (*Guowen yuekan* 《國文月刊》), *Southwest Frontier* (*Xi'nan bianjiang* 《西南邊疆》), *On Frontier Politics* (*Bianzheng gonglun* 《邊政公論》), *Frontier Humanities* (*Bianjiang renwen* 《邊疆人文》), *Frontier Studies* (*Bianjiang yanjiu luncong* 《邊疆研究論叢》), and *Southwest Studies* (*Xi'nan yanjiu* 《西南研究》).

Folklore Survey in the Southwest Region

The move to the Southwest stoked many scholars' interests in the minorities' history and present situation, leading them to set up numerous investigation teams to carry out field surveys. The proliferation of these groups showed that the war in fact stimulated folklore studies wherever scholars could conduct their work freely beyond the reach of the Japanese military. In the spring of 1938, Great China University established

an investigative office for researching the society and economy of the minorities in southwest China. This office also edited *Social Journal* (*Shehui xunkan* 《社會旬刊》).⁵ One year later, the investigative office was renamed “Social Research Department” and its emphasis shifted to the study and survey of social conditions and folklore material. The department dispatched people to different places to carry out investigations and published many reports of these investigations [Gao (2019): 178-179]. From February 1940, the Social Research Department added a new semi-monthly edited publication, *Social Study* (*Shehui yanjiu* 《社會研究》).

In 1938, the Research Institute of History and Philology at the Academia Sinica sponsored *Collected Papers on Anthropology* (*Renleixue jikan* 《人類學集刊》) to highlight significant new research. In the winter of 1940, Rui Yifu and Hu Qingjun (胡慶鈞), a graduate student, left for Xuyong County to do a field survey of wedding and funeral etiquette and customs in the residence of Yaque Miao (雅雀苗 Pheasant Miao). During this investigation, they collected ceremonial songs that were very valuable for the research on Yaque Miao’s customs and their oral literature, but, unfortunately, this material was not published for 20 years [Rui & Guan (1962)]. Ma Xueliang, an Assistant Researcher at the Academic Sinica, spent a considerable amount of time in the Yi nationality area in Yunnan to learn its language and carry out ethnological investigations. Ma advocated Bronislaw Malinowski’s theory of collecting folk material in a three-dimensional reality.

In the spring of 1938, the National Southwest Associated University organized a “Hunan, Guizhou, and Yunnan travel team” composed of 200 people who set out on foot when the university moved to Kunming. Making the best of a bad situation, professors and students formed all manner of small groups tasked with carrying out surveys while the team was en route to Yunnan. The folksong group was one of them. Wen Yiduo (聞一多) supervised members investigating minorities’ folk customs, languages, costumes, folksongs, and folktales. One of his students, Liu Zaoji published *A Collection of the Folksongs in Southwest China* (*Xinan caifeng lu* 《西南采風錄》). This book not only collected popular love songs, but also improvisational folksongs on the resistance against Japan and the intense reflections of the people’s discontent and sentiment at that time. Zhu Ziqing (朱自清) praised Liu’s collection for not only helping promote the understanding of folksong’s origins, development, and changes, but also providing precious material that shed light on social customs [Zu (1946)].

Compared to the individual folk collecting in the 1920s and early 1930s, the folklore surveys and collecting activities in the southwest region during the War of Resistance against Japan not only expanded the scope of folklore study, but also boosted its academic sophistication by introducing methodology and theory from other subjects. As a special researcher group, the scholars from the fields of ethnology, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines, made an indelible contribution in the field of folklore studies. They were strong in scientific field survey and competent in investigations in different minorities’ areas, but most importantly, the material they collected withstood

⁵ It stopped publication after the 40th issue because the newspaper office was bombed by Japanese forces.

the test of time. These scholars used their research to unite foreign theory and methodology with Chinese traditional textual research, taking synthetic studies as their research orientation. However, these scholars were conducting folklore studies from different standpoints ranging from sociology, anthropology to ethnology. None really concentrated exclusively on folklore studies, and furthermore, nor had any of these scholars had devoted their entire academic life to the Chinese folklore enterprise. Therefore, the achievements of this group were limited by the nature of the school itself and did not fully develop in a meaningful way.

The Restoration of the Chinese Folklore Society

In November 1937, Chongqing became the Kuomintang's Provisional Capital and one of the important home fronts during the war. The city became home to important members of the government and a large cohort of scholars converged there in short order, including high profile folklorists Gu Jiegang (顧頡剛), Lou Zikuang, and Luo Xianglin (羅香林). Lou, the Kuomintang's head of chancery in Zhejiang province, arrived at Chongqing earlier than others and was responsible for *Folkways Weekly* (*Fengwu zhi* 《風俗志》). He had tied his fate more closely to that of the government than any of his contemporaries and was forced to flee to Taiwan in May 1949 as the KMT retreated from mainland China. Lou remained dedicated to folklore studies from his new home in Taiwan, where he founded The Oriental Culture Supplies Society (Dongfang wenhua gongyingshe 東方文化供應社) and The Oriental Culture Book Company (Dongfang wenhua shuju 東方文化書局). He later organized and published a series of folklore books that were published in previous years and made an indelible contribution to the preservation of precious resources. He earned the title of the patron saint of Chinese folklore for his efforts.

In September 1943, Gu and Lou created another monthly journal, *Natural Conditions and Social Customs Magazine* (*Fengtuzazhi* 《風土雜誌》)⁶, with the stated objective of “researching human society, and introducing local conditions and customs.” The contents of this magazine included research works on the folktales, legends, myths, and folksongs of various nationalities. During the Chongqing period, Gu also wrote many works on folklore. Of note was *his Critical Discussions of Ancient History* (*Gushi bian* 《古史辨》) [Volume 7], which was written in Chongqing and had a strong impact on Chinese myth studies.

Lou also consulted with Gu about the restoration of the Chinese Folklore Society thanks to the generosity of Gu and other folklorists who had raised the sizable sum of 200,000 yuan for the society's funds by the end of 1943. In January 1944, they re-established the Chinese Folklore Society in Chongqing and on January 31 launched *Folklore* as its new mouthpiece. The journal oriented itself towards folklore, ethnology, cultural history, and social history. Gu wrote that the purpose of *Folklore* was to guide the transformation of the social traditions according to circumstances in order to create a new social atmosphere which would adapt to China in the present age, and finally to

⁶This magazine produced three volumes of 13 issues in total that ran until October 1949.

complete the task of constructing rites and regulations [Gao (2019): 183]. In addition, the Chinese Folklore Society also created *Folkways* (*Minfeng* 《民風》), mostly publishing folksongs, proverbs, social customs, legends, and some research papers.⁷

The restored Chinese Folklore Society in Chongqing was an authoritative and national organization based on its membership. It had undertaken some folklore work even though research conditions were very poor, and it held considerable influence over the Chinese Folklore Movement in Southwest and South-Central China. The academic atmosphere of the folklore circle was enlivened thanks to the influence of the newly founded Chinese Folklore Society. *Thousand-word Newspapers in the Chinese National Language* (*Guoyu qianzi bao* 《國語千字報》) was created with the backing of the Kuomintang's Ministry of Education in Chongqing in 1942 and published folklore material to a wide audience. Around 1940, the supplement of *Guiyang Daily* opened a column, "Social Study", which published many folklore articles.⁸ On September 30, 1943, *Record of Local Conditions and Customs* (*Fengtu shizhi* 《風土什志》) began publication in Chengdu. On September 1, 1945, *Folksong Collecting Monthly* (*Caifeng* 《采風》) was created by the Sichuan national *liyueguan* (禮樂館 rites and music centre) and published five issues all together. *Xikang Guide Monthly* (*Kangdao yuekan* 《康導月刊》) was a publication that originated in Xikang province, but it was published in Chengdu on September 25, 1938. Almost every issue included pieces on the folk customs, folktales, and folksongs of the Tibetan nationality in Xikang and Xizang provinces.

The Demise of Folklore Studies: Politics in the New Era

During the Second Sino-Japanese War, in the Communist bases, a New Literature and Art Movement began with the collection and organization of folk literature and art, then remoulded them into anti-Japanese and social reform messages. This New Literature and Art Movement was a highly politicized mass social movement rather than a purely academic enterprise.

It was the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that took advantage of the Second Sino-Japanese War to remould folk arts and traditions to strengthen national cohesion, rouse the national spirit, and raise people's morale. In doing so, they stripped away and discarded the academic foundation its practitioners had been building since the end of World War I. This reimagined folklore, "new art and literature" as it was called by the communists, became a tool to unite the people and a weapon to attack the enemy. To adapt to exigencies, the CCP specially emphasized folk literature and art's social function but neglected or concealed its inherent aesthetic value and folklore significance. The New Literature and Art Movement was carried out with an unequivocal class and popular nature in the communist anti-Japanese bases, especially after Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" in May 1942. As American Folklorist Dr.

⁷ Due to the chaos caused by the war, there are no remaining issues, and nobody was able to recall how many issues had been published.

⁸ The 3rd to 50th issues can still be found in the Beijing Library and most of these articles addressed minorities' folk customs in Guizhou.

Richard Mercer Dorson argued, “the propaganda possibilities of folklore for Communist ideology, first appreciated in Soviet Russia in 1936, did not long escape the Chinese Communists, who perceived in folklore a splendid opportunity to identify their cause with the great anonymous mass of seven hundred million people” [Dorson (1968): xii].

This New Literature and Art Movement successfully forged an alliance between intellectuals and the masses and helped the Chinese Communist Party finally win large-scale peasant support. After the eight-year Anti-Japanese War, China descended into civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. The Chinese folklore movement, which focused on academic studies, endured on a small scale, but was gradually replaced by the Communist New Literature Movement as the Nationalists retreated and the sphere of Communist control expanded. The Communists’ cultural policy emphasized almost exclusively “revolutionary folklore” or “remoulded folklore” to serve their political aims and the working class. Wartime cultural policy endured in Chinese folklore studies after 1949. Ultimately, the folklore movement finally died out with the Nationalists political failure in mainland China and modern folklore studies completely lost its academic independence to the communist revolution.

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