

You, Ziyong: Folk Literati, Contested Tradition, and Heritage in Contemporary China. Incense is Kept Burning.

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Review by Bai Yusheng

You Ziyong's monograph investigates how various actors and institutions engage with efforts to preserve and continue cultural traditions on the ground in northern rural China. Particularly, You focuses on the important role of folk literati, "a group of people who are skilled in classical Chinese, knowledgeable of local traditions, and capable of representing them in writing" (p. 1), in the transmission and reproduction of local traditions, manifested in a vernacular expression "incense is kept burning" ("xianghuo buduan"; p. 61). The case study is around the worship of ancient sage-kings Yao and Shun, as well as Ehuang and Nüying who are Yao's two daughters and wed Shun, situated in Hongtong County of Shanxi Province.

Benefiting from the author's intellectual backgrounds in China and the US, in the introduction section, You skillfully builds her conceptual framework through connecting Chinese and English scholarly debates, and develops a theoretical basis to the ideas and challenges of tradition ("chuantong", "chuitong"), heritage ("yichan"), agency, and literati ("wenren", "shi"). Methodologically, You combines ethnography with history, and puts a synthesis of textual sources (classic books, local gazetteers, stele texts, hand-written manuscripts, etc.), participant observation, casual conversations and formal interviews. The book is based on fieldwork that You conducted in Hongtong County in 2007, 2012 and 2013.

The book includes six content chapters. In the first chapter, You introduces the setting of her case study, namely three places of Yangxie, Lishan and Wan'an in Hongtong County, and situates the beliefs and practices surrounding Ehuang and Nüying in local contexts through gazetteers and annals, temples and stele texts, as well as ritual festivals and opera performances. You also presents the key folk groups shè and its developments during rapid social changes. Chapter 2 investigates the role of folk literati in the transmission and reproduction of local traditions. In particular, the author reconstructs the life narratives of Qiao Guoliang, through interviews with his family members and friends, as well as the literatus' own writings, including his couplet, poem and handwritten manuscript of "Biographies of Ehuang and Nüying". Over the years, Qiao was committed to preserving the cultural knowledge and continuing communal rituals regarding Ehuang and Nüying. You notes the revival of folk beliefs and practices observed by scholars is "a dynamic process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction" (p. 87), showing folk literati's dedication to carry on the cultural responsibility despite intense social and political changes.

You understands myth as “forged on the ground through a dialectic process of both continuity and contestation”, and “the cultural reproduction of myth is driven not only by different actors but by different motivations among competing agents” (p. 120). In chapter 3, the author investigates contesting constructions of stories of ancient sage-kings Yao and Shun in Hongtong. The folk literati compete to remake local traditions on the ground, and You traces the process of divergence and convergence between two “pen holders” (“bi gan zi”; p. 117), Li Xuezhi from Lishan and Liu Baoshan from Wan’an. The debates between the two aim at contributing to the significant status for their respective hometowns in honoring Shun, though the competing representations of local history and traditions also cause tense relations to local communities.

Chapter 4 uses tradition ecology as a framework to understand the “complex process of balance in cultural continuity and change on the ground” (p. 121). The author shows folk literati, an integral part of tradition ecology, as a dynamic group of individuals with different backgrounds and positions. They debate and negotiate with one another in remaking the conflict legends between Ehuang and Nüying in local communities. It is interesting to note that among the different versions of legend created by folk literati, whereas the far from reality “dowry plot” (p. 129) has to be deleted, the stories around “cooking beans” and “sewing shoe soles” (p. 144) are popular among local people, for local women relate to these experiences in their everyday lives and pass down the basic skills through the generations. You also analyzes how community members receive the viewpoints and roles of folk literati in remaking different legends.

In chapter 5, the author emphasizes though folk literati are active agents in transmitting and reproducing local traditions, they are subject to peer review by other folk literati and judgement from their community fellows, otherwise they result in isolating themselves and losing authority in cultural production. Using disaster legends, You illustrates how ordinary villagers resist cultural and political authority when their accumulated knowledge and practice are disrespected. Furthermore, You highlights folk literati’s relationships with the local shè, temple reconstruction associations, and ritual specialists, and the interactions are important in shaping cultural production and reception by folk literati. In the closing, You draws on the insight of tradition as “transfer of responsibility” and conceptualizes tradition as a dynamic process of “transfer of appreciation”, which makes it possible to protect culture among individuals, groups and communities, and across time and space (p. 183-184).

You locates her case study in China’s projects to preserve cultural heritage in early 21st century. In chapter 6, the author discusses the contentious interactions among different actors in the process of protecting local tradition as intangible cultural heritage (ICH), and closely traces the application process for listing “the custom of visiting sacred relatives in Hongtong” as an ICH element from county-level to national-level. Controversies and conflicts have arisen in local communities due to

heritage listing and designation of representative transmitters. Although folk literati view “their role as builders of bridges between the local and the national” (p. 123) and play a major role in revitalizing tradition and protecting heritage on the ground, most of them are marginalized and “excluded from the designation of representative transmitters in the ICH projects” (p. 207). You critiques that “the heritage-making process has not empowered the key folk institutions and folk literati to protect local traditions with and for local people but instead has disempowered the folk literati and put local communities at the bottom of the power relationship” (p. 185).

You concludes her book by reiterating the main arguments, highlighting the role that folk literati play in cultural transmission and reproduction. “On the ground, it is folk literati and numerous other individuals who keep incense burning and keep local tradition alive. However, their role in the process of heritage making is not fully recognized by intellectuals and the state” (p. 217). It is the author’s intention to acknowledge those important yet neglected actors. You also suggests further directions for future research, connecting with the rising field of critical heritage studies. The author considers it necessary to investigate different genres of ICH and examine the global-local interactions of ICH protection on the ground, comparatively across actors, levels and communities.

It would be more helpful for the readers if You provided a map of the research sites and the procession routes, instead of general maps of China and Shanxi Province (p. 30-31). You coins her definition of folk literati and dialogues it widely with various other relevant terms. It is a pity that the author does not explain further, while concepts like “folklore elites” (“minsu jingying”), “village literati” and “local intellectuals” (p. 64), “local elite” (p. 87), “amateur scholars”, “folk folklorists” (p. 217) are elaborated as unsatisfying, why terms like “shusheng” (p. 22) or just “wenren” (p. 159) are not chosen. Some further aspects inspire thinking, like how the sacrificial festival to ancestors under the old pagoda tree, also a popular tradition turned national heritage (p. 32), is different or similar in heritage making process with the rituals of receiving aunties; why the folk literati are overwhelmingly male though local women form the main participants in two major festivals (p. 54); how folk literati relate and interact with the local literary and art associations.

You Ziyong’s work is a timely contribution to the important, yet often underestimated, role of folk literati in keeping the incense burning. It is beautifully written and with great details. Scholars and students in folklore, cultural studies, popular religion and heritage studies will draw insights from the work. It is also readable for the general public interested in Chinese society and culture.

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