Saving the Nation through Culture

The Folklore Movement in Republican China

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The chronic inability of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) and the republic that succeeded it to reform and modernize China in the crisis years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries caused a great many classically trained Chinese scholars to repudiate the traditional Confucian thought and values that had served as the philosophical underpinning of the nation for most of the previous two millennia. The New Culture Movement, launched in 1915, was in every sense of the word an intellectual revolution, and its members were a who’s who of China’s most accomplished scholars. The movement was eclectic and broad, and its proponents saw it as a means of advancing a variety of progressive causes, ranging from the adoption of vernacular literature to democracy, science, and gender reform, which explains in large part why it has been of such great interest to contemporary historians of modern China. However, very little scholarly attention has been devoted to one of its more novel branches, the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement that emerged in 1918 at National Peking University (Beijing University).

Chinese intellectual activists of this era yearned to use their academic training to save the nation by rediscovering traditions and enlightening the common people. They saw Chinese folklore – a nebulous idea that came to encompass popular songs, stories, beliefs, and customs, among other subjects – as a means of providing evidence of unity and a rich, vibrant popular culture that would, they believed, rally the people around the flag in a time of great national difficulty. Those pursuing this noble
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quest faced tremendous difficulties arising from the political and social upheaval that accompanied the rise and fall of warlordism, the National Revolution, Japanese invasion, and full-blown civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists in the late 1940s. These crises provided added impetus for the Folklore Movement while at the same time rendering its efforts arduous in good times and virtually impossible in bad.

During this relatively short period of time, from 1918 to 1949, the Folklore Movement evolved through a series of transitory phases. At first, it supported a literary revolution with aspirations of saving the nation. Then it shifted to establishing folklore as an academic enterprise in China. This was followed by a new focus on ethnological studies in the southwest region that stressed national unity as a component of the anti-Japanese resistance. Finally, it was co-opted and replaced by the Communist New Literature and Art Movement. While the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement failed to achieve its impossibly lofty goal of saving the Chinese nation because of the weakness of the Chinese state and the lack of any government support, it did leave a significant legacy. Besides establishing folklore as a modern discipline in China, the movement transmitted and disseminated folk culture, supported the new intellectuals’ struggle for nation-state building during China’s modernization process, and promoted a spirit of pursuit of intrinsic academic value and independence that still influences Chinese intellectuals today.

Historical Context

Britain forcibly opened China to foreign trade with its resounding victory in the First Opium War (1839–42); sensing China’s weakness and the potential for great commercial gain, other Western powers and Japan inflicted several more military defeats on the Qing Dynasty over the next half-century. These wars enabled outsiders to impose humiliating unequal treaties that granted foreign powers control of Chinese territory, great commercial advantages, extraterritoriality for their citizens, and the right to flood China with imported opium, which in turn intensified internal crises that led to devastating uprisings that terminally weakened the Qing. Most galling for the Chinese was the Qing’s defeat to upstart Japan, long seen by the Middle Kingdom as a minor regional power and cultural backwater, during the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894–95.

A group of enlightened Chinese officials and gentry who desperately sought an end to China’s suffering convinced the youthful Qing emperor
Guangxu (1871–1908) to initiate the Hundred Days’ Reform from June to September 1898, which consisted of an ambitious overhaul of cultural, political, military, and educational structures along the lines of those implemented with great success in Meiji Japan. Conservative elements who opposed the reform, led by Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), launched a coup in early autumn 1898 that effectively removed the emperor from power and killed his modernizing approach to rectifying many of the challenges facing the nation. Lurching from crisis to crisis without the will or means to restore order, the Qing Dynasty was finally toppled by the Xinhai Revolution in 1911, which tossed out the monarchy in favour of a new republic that was based in theory on a Western-style parliamentary system. A generation of revolutionaries expected the new republic to replace old Confucian political-ethical principles emphasizing loyalty to the throne with new values of the sort associated with Western democracies that centred on the state’s obligations to the people as a whole. Lamentably, the nascent republican government failed to live up to its lofty expectations and was incapable of bringing about any significant measure of peace, order, or unity. In the aftermath of the revolution, the president, Yuan Shikai, who had been a powerful Qing general, not only abolished the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China but also attempted to revive the Chinese monarchy and install himself as the “Great Emperor of China.” After Yuan’s death in 1916, warlords plunged the country into a new period of political chaos and backwardness. The lofty expectations of 1911 had quickly given way to a new reality in which most Chinese continued to find themselves the victims of oppressive, ultraconservative officials who demanded strict obedience.

Western and Japanese aggression coupled with rotten government spurred the growth of nationalism from the late nineteenth century to the point that it became one of the most significant features of early twentieth-century China. Before the Manchu invasion of the Chinese heartland and the establishment of the Qing Dynasty in the seventeenth century, the Chinese nation was identified with Han Chinese. During the Qing Dynasty, the Chinese nation included the Han and some distinct ethnic minorities, such as Manchus, Tibetans, Mongols, Uighurs, and others. In the late nineteenth century, Chinese nationalists identified the Han as authentic Chinese and argued for the overthrow of the Manchus, who were considered to be foreign occupiers outside the realm of the Chinese nation. In this work, I adopt the concept of the Chinese nation as it was accepted in the Republican era. After the revolution of 1911, the official definition of “Chinese” was expanded to incorporate non-Han ethnicities.
into a comprehensive Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*), although this definition went through many changes. Furthermore, the Chinese belief that their empire was the centre of the world, a civilized island surrounded by barbarian races, began to erode as the Qing Dynasty revealed itself to be incapable of preventing Western powers from forcing their way into China in the middle of the nineteenth century. Thus, the introduction of foreign ideas from the late nineteenth century onward led more and more Chinese to accept the concept of China as one nation among many in the world, and encouraged them to work towards earning China a position of respect in the international community.

Changes in China’s economic, social, and political situation at the turn of twentieth century nourished the rise of populism. The self-sufficient agrarian economy of the premodern era underwent great change after the opening of China by the West. Industry began to expand, and new merchants, industrialists, and urban citizenry took advantage of accompanying economic changes. The establishment of a republic eroded the power of landlords and the old gentry as a new intelligentsia emerged and some degree of a modern Western-style educational system began functioning at an appreciable scale.

A new generation of Chinese intellectuals characterized by the combination of a solid Western learning foundation and a strict domestic academic background came of age in the First World War era. Even as they broke free from Confucianism, these intellectuals inherited and pursued its strong cultural traditions, particularly the scholar/bureaucrat’s obligation to use his voice and influence to promote the nation’s best interests. Hu Shi (1891–1962), for example, a leading public intellectual of the interwar years, later conceived of his advocacy during this period as an effort to usher in a Chinese renaissance of the sort Europe had experienced centuries earlier.¹ Intellectuals were impelled by the double stimulus of political decline and rising nationalism to search for a new way to save the Chinese nation that acknowledged the previous generation’s failed efforts to promote meaningful political reforms and even social revolution. In earlier times, these intellectuals would have served the emperor as officials, but the Revolution of 1911 had broken their ties to power and they distrusted the new breed of so-called political reformers, leaving them no alternative but to focus on academic and cultural pursuits. Renowned Sinologist Vera Schwarcz argues that the intellectual agenda of the late 1910s and early 1920s had changed dramatically, writing: “Unlike the generation of 1898, which had tried and failed to save China from above by relying on a reform-minded emperor, the May Fourth students were convinced that they could
save China from below, by awakening the social consciousness of their countrymen.”

This national enlightenment movement became fixated on the question of how to effectively propagate its cultural messages to the masses. It quickly found an important means to this end in the use of vernacular language (*baihua*) as a medium to help the nation-state building process. This not only simplified the translation of modern Western literature into Chinese but also enlightened the common people through the communication of ideas in terms they could understand. Haiyan Lee writes that “the adoption of the vernacular was not only to facilitate the modernization projects of the nation-state but also to connect the May Fourth generation to the imaginary roots that had been rendered invisible by the incrusted overgrowth of artificial (Confucian) culture.” Chinese intellectuals finally made this breakthrough when a group of professors at National Peking University began looking for vernacular works in folk culture that would support the Literary Revolution’s aim of replacing classical Chinese with vernacular language in literature. These were the unique circumstances that generated so much interest in modern folklore study in early twentieth-century China.

As in other nations, modern Chinese folklore research began with the collection and survey of folk literature, a popular endeavour led by academics who often had limited or no direct training in folklore studies. On February 1, 1918, the Folksong Collecting Bureau (*Beida geyao zhengjichu*) was opened at National Peking University, and one of its first orders of business was the solicitation of folksongs from the public. The formation of the Folksong Research Society (*Geyao yanjiuhui*) in 1920 reflected the upsurge of interest in folklore both inside and outside of the ivory tower. The society was reorganized in 1922 and the landmark *Folksong Weekly* (*Geyao zhoukan*) began publication at National Peking University. From early 1918 to 1937, the university made an exceptional contribution to folklore studies and laid the foundation for the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement. Under the university’s influence, folklore studies appeared in various newspapers and other research institutions in Beijing and Shanghai in rapid succession.

Still, political tension and financial crises at National Peking University forced many intellectuals to abandon Beijing and the Folklore Movement after the Chinese National Revolution initiated by the Nationalists in Guangdong in 1925. From then on, the movement migrated southward, where it found a new home at the universities in Xiamen and Guangzhou. In November 1927, the Folklore Society, the first official organization with
“minshuxue”⁴ (folklore) in its title, was established at Zhongda (short for Zhongshan daxue or Sun Yat-sen University) in Guangdong. The society was comprised of diligent intellectuals led by Gu Jiegang (1893–1980), the most influential Chinese historian of the Republican era, and Rong Zhaozu (1897–1994), a well-known literary historian. Collectively, they exerted a remarkable influence on Chinese society through their noteworthy publications and the public support they enjoyed, especially from 1927 to 1933.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Folklore Movement developed vigorously in China, especially in the south. This was significant given that it faced open hostility from the Nationalist government, which, from 1934 onward, attempted to impose, through the New Life Movement, a highly centralized, ultraconservative neo-Confucian ideology with little concern for seemingly frivolous academic pursuits. Many intellectuals from different provinces and cities not only wrote for the Folklore Weekly (Minshu zhounkan) and other folklore series published by Sun Yat-sen University but also established scores of folklore associations and created corresponding local folklore publications. Most importantly, in the new centre of the Folklore Movement, Hangzhou, intellectuals produced a massive volume of noteworthy work, carried out a large number of valuable investigations, and undertook many remarkable academic projects. In 1935, folklore activities experienced a renaissance at National Peking University and Sun Yat-sen University, while the Folksong Research Society and the Folklore Society were re-established one after another. Just as the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement was poised to enter its golden age, however, the eruption of the eight-year War of Resistance in 1937 disrupted the revitalization process and most folklore activities came to a standstill.

During the new wartime environment, folklorists and other related scholars engaged in folklore investigations and carried out folklore academic research separately in three different areas: the Japanese occupation zone, Nationalist-controlled inland areas, and Communist-controlled territories. A handful of scholars in Japanese-occupied areas persisted in independent folklore investigation and writing even though most upper-tier Chinese universities and leading figures in the Folklore Movement gradually relocated to non-occupied territory. Scholars who remained in the occupation zone often had contact with foreign-backed institutions and were able to continue working, but they produced little of note during the war years. In southwestern Nationalist-controlled areas, folklore studies progressed in related theories and minority customs. Here the
movement produced its best, most academically significant work by adopting a multidisciplinary approach. An influx of scholars – some fleeing the occupation zone and others attracted by the strong, new academic community forming in a few large cities in the Southwest – discovered an area where a large number of minority peoples were concentrated in a relatively small space. Here, academics rallied around folklore as a Nationalist tool to demonstrate the connection between disparate communities within China. In the Communist bases, a New Literature and Art Movement began with the collection and organization of folk literature and art, which were then remoulded into anti-Japanese and social reform messages. The New Literature and Art Movement differed from the established Folklore Movement in that it was a highly politicized mass social movement rather than a purely academic enterprise.

At the conclusion of the Anti-Japanese War, an uneasy truce collapsed and civil war broke out between the Nationalists and Communists, who vied for control of newly liberated China. The Modern Chinese Folklore Movement, focused on academic studies, struggled on during the civil war but was gradually replaced by the New Literature and Art Movement as the Nationalists retreated and the sphere of Communist control expanded. As it had during the War of Resistance, the Communists’ cultural policy placed almost exclusive emphasis on “revolutionary folklore” or “remoulded folklore.” This approach was designed to serve political aims and address workers, peasants, and soldiers, seen as the most important elements of the popular masses. The continuation of this type of wartime cultural policy greatly affected Chinese folklore studies after 1949, and any academic pretense of independence effectively came to an end.5

**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 look closely at the ways of the lower classes.6 The basic concept of the “folk” has remained crucial throughout the entire development of folklore as a field of study. The term “folk” has Germanic roots, with volk meaning “(of) the people,” as opposed to different clans, tribes, or nations. The concept of folklore developed as part of the nineteenth-century ideology of romantic nationalism, leading to the reshaping of oral traditions to serve modern ideological goals.
The term “folk-lore” entered the English language on August 22, 1846, when William John Thoms, an English antiquarian writing under the pseudonym Ambrose Merton, published a letter in the British journal *Athenaeum*, a magazine catering to the intellectually curious, in which he introduced the term as “a good Saxon compound” meaning “the lore of the people.” Thoms intended “folklore” as a replacement for more prolix terms – especially “Popular Antiquities” – long employed in England. He listed the areas constituting the field of folklore as “the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc., of the olden time,” and he pleaded that they needed to be “rescued” before they were “entirely lost.” In 1878, George Laurence Gomme (1853–1916) discovered Thoms’s publication from 1846 and was inspired to found the Folk-Lore Society (FLS) of London for the purpose of collecting and preserving the fast-perishing relics of folklore, in which we first witness an official attempt to understand folklore as a science of social man. The Folk-Lore Society published the pioneering journal *Folklore Record* (1878–82), which evolved into the *Folk-Lore Journal* (1883–89) and ultimately *Folk-Lore* (1890) and continues today as *Folklore*.

*The Handbook of Folklore*, first published in 1890 by the English Folklore Society, one of the first organizations in the world devoted to the study of folk culture, defined folklore research as the study of elements of archaic culture surviving in the modern age. Folklore enthusiasts saw their subject as a resource for the creation of a new national culture, one that embodied the primal origins of the nation and linked the past to the present. The aim of those who studied it was to create a new culture that was both modern and distinctly national.

In the nineteenth century, folklore studies in Europe and North America became a respectable and widespread academic pursuit that was closely tied to the emergence of the modern nation-state. Alan Dundes, a prolific American folklorist, writes that folklore was much more than a literary or academic concern, arguing that “the 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.” Folklore studies were often used to reinforce support for new forms of political organization by casting them as natural expressions of these timeless and essential identities. For example, German scholars such as the famous Brothers Grimm embraced folklore research as a national duty that saw them articulate a pan-Germanic cultural identity to serve as the ideological underpinning of political efforts to unify the
separate Germanic principalities into one nation-state. Grimm sentiments such as “we can grasp nothing else as surely as our innate powers” and “Nature herself guides us towards the Fatherland” had an inspirational quality to them while Germany was divided and lived under France’s shadow in the first half of the nineteenth century, but took on darker tones once Hitler rose to power. Folkloric evidence of the primordial and persistent national spirit was evoked by nationalist movements in Eastern Europe, Russia, Ireland, Greece, and other countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The best-known example of the power this folk ideal exerted over the political imagination is perhaps found in Finland, where an epic poem cobbled together from fragments of poetry preserved in oral traditions was published in 1935. Known as the *Kalevala*, this epic was accepted as a core component of Finnish heritage and became a focal point of Finnish nationalism.

Thus, folklore served two functions in the work of the nation builders, providing both historical information and a model for future action. Folklore itself became a symbol of national wealth and a treasure-house of history and culture. These were the reasons why scholars entered the field, collecting, studying, and publishing the traditions they found. The concept of folk was closely linked to the rise of modern nationalism, although not all nineteenth-century folklore studies or folklore were explicitly nationalistic. For example, in a relatively well governed and stable society like that of Great Britain, the English school of ethnography and folklore – highly influential in the later nineteenth century – described the task of folklore research in terms of its contributions to a universal human history, not in terms of its bearing on national identity. The English school of folklore drew on an understanding of universal historical development that was deeply ingrained in nineteenth-century intellectual culture.

Nationalism has been defined as an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation. It was linked to a specific political and territorial organization of society and the nation-state within a discourse of international power. Nationalism served the nation-state by legitimating and propagating territorially bounded ideas about the natural organization of human beings according to nationality. According to Leonard Tivey, “what was invented in the early nineteenth century was the ideology – the belief that nations were the natural and only true political units, the foundations on which
states, governments, and their policies should be depend.”

Prasenjit Duara also argues that what is novel about modern nationalism is the world system of nation-states. This system, which has become globalized in the last hundred years or so, sanctions the nation-state as the only legitimate expression of sovereignty. The nation-state is a political form with distinct territorial boundaries within which the sovereign state, “representing” the nation-people, has steadily expanded its role and power.

Nationalism spreads, according to historian and political scientist Benedict Anderson, as a result of industrialization, which is accompanied by rising literacy, printing press capitalism, and mass access to literature and thus to new ideas.15 These phenomena entered China later, but had the same result as in Europe. In China, nationalism held an obvious appeal as a solution for people confronting a national crisis. It emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and became increasingly influential in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chinese nationalism was articulated in terms of protecting the nation as a whole, an entity physically as well as culturally defined. The most easily identifiable expressions of Chinese nationalism as a relationship was the rapid growth of anti-imperialist sentiment and organized political movements.16 Xu Guoqi argues that “the concept of modern nationalism did not enter the Chinese mind until the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). Before that time, the key elements of nation-state mentality and nationality were missing.”17

According to Xu’s study, Chinese political thought was primarily based on a tianxia system before the First Sino-Japanese War. The basic unit of the tianxia system was civilization rather than nation-state. This system “not only refused to acknowledge the world of formally equal states, but more importantly, it disregarded Chinese national sovereignty.”18 Chinese people believed that China was superior in high culture and morality, and with this superiority, China could hua (transform) the barbarians that lived beyond China’s borders and maintain its central position in the tianxia system. Xu also notes that unlike the Western system, based on diplomacy and equality, tianxia relied on rites and tradition, and downplayed the role of military and economic power in maintaining the world order ... In the tianxia system, state legitimacy was determined by divine right (son of heaven), by bloodline, and
by the so-called mandate of heaven, which appealed to no national identity. This system offered no distinction between state and society, between nation and state.\textsuperscript{19}

After painfully confronting new international realities after China’s military defeat to Japan in 1895, the Chinese gradually came to the conclusion that the \textit{tianxia} system should be replaced by the concept of a modern nation-state system “based on a non-Chinese world order and determined by the norms of the Western-dominated international system.”\textsuperscript{20} James Townsend suggests that after the Sino-Japanese War, modern China was characterized by a new environment “in which nationalism replaces culturalism as the dominant Chinese view of their identity and place in the world.”\textsuperscript{21}

In the new nation-state system, the state’s obligations were twofold. Externally, it should claim sovereignty within distinct, but not disputed, territorial boundaries. Internally, the state should claim to represent the people of the nation, and, through this claim, steadily expand its role in society.\textsuperscript{22} The new Chinese republic born of the 1911 revolution failed on both counts, which directed the attention of many scholars to the role of the modern media in the construction of nation-state. This was possible, they believed, through an extensive exploration of Chinese popular culture coupled with a vigorous campaign to enlighten the Chinese people about just how rich it – and, by extension, they – truly was.

These nationalist scholars believed that China needed to strengthen itself in order to survive in the world of competitive nation-states, and that the Chinese people could be rallied to the cause through the proper mobilization of mass sentiments, especially those that strengthened individual identification with a set of goals common to the nation.\textsuperscript{23} They accepted contemporary Western theories of cultural evolution that held that the strength or weakness of a national state was a reflection of the character of its people, and they agreed that the quality of the common people would finally decide China’s destiny.\textsuperscript{24} For these modern Chinese intellectuals, “traditional culture,” or the presence of the past, in particular the folk culture was useful in a nationalist discourse to reach through to the masses or to respond to the cultural dilemmas resulting from Westernization. These new intellectuals, having rejected the orthodox Chinese tradition – Confucian culture – and frustrated by Western imperialist ideologies, were eager to find a new way to save the Chinese nation. Under the circumstances, most of the basic strains of thought associated with the
development of the concept of folklore in the West were introduced into China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Not only was nationalism closely related to the rising interest in folklore from the late 1910s to early 1920s but it also became the dominant theme of the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement thereafter. As Richard M. Dorson writes in Wolfram Eberhard’s classic *Folktales of China*, “the relation[ship] between the study of the folklore and the rise of nationalism is beautifully illustrated in China.”

During the Folklore Movement, Chinese intellectuals searched for national vitality and essence, a basis upon which to unify and revive the nation; they were concerned with Chinese culture and traditions but were motivated above all by the desire to capture China’s uniqueness. 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. Scholars such as Gu Jiegang were concerned with the historical and cultural basis of national survival. The participants in this enlightenment movement promoted folklore research for the sake of the social reform that would come from locating the true voice of the people and the real sentiment of the nation. They made every attempt to serve the public but never overlooked the greater cause of fostering nationalism. These efforts were designed not only to make manifest the hidden light of the people but also to promote the development of national culture. These folklore researchers also argued that the gentry and educated people in premodern China despised the intrinsic value of folk culture. Thus, the task of these twentieth-century folklorists was to right this wrong through research on the literature and customs of the common people. Folklore scholars marked off their territory as separate from that of specialists in literature by specifically defining the topic, scope, and methodology of folklore studies.

Folklore studies became the embodiment of national spirit and tradition while serving as a cultural link between different ethnic groups in China during the War of Resistance. Furthermore, the Communists took the nationalist element of such studies to the extreme in wartime, to great short-term benefit for the party. Their highly politicized forms of art and literature were remoulded from the folk arts and traditions to become both a highly effective tool for uniting the people and a weapon with which to attack the Japanese enemy. In turn, the New Art and Literature Movement won the support of the masses, helped the Communists defeat the Nationalists during the Chinese Civil War, and ultimately served as a means of reconstructing China as a strong nation-state in the international system.
Literature on the Chinese Folklore Movement

The Modern Chinese Folklore Movement was part of a larger social/cultural process that emerged in the late nineteenth century and continued to influence both Chinese academic circles and the general public throughout the early to mid-twentieth century. It has received little attention in the West, however, and the existing research on this Folklore Movement in Chinese has focused mainly on its academic achievements in literature and folklore studies, or the biographies of individual folklorists. The movement has not received sufficient attention as a whole despite its importance to the comprehensive historical understanding of Republican China.

The most significant English-language book on the Folklore Movement is Chang-tai Hung’s *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918–1937* (1985). Hung’s book examines the new intellectuals’ achievements in folk literature during and soon after the May Fourth Movement, covers the history of leading folklorists, and includes much discussion on the discovery of folk literature, the genres of folklore (including folksongs, legends, children’s literature, and proverbs), and the relationship between intellectuals and the people. In spite of his emphasis on the literary aspects of the Folklore Movement, Hung astutely observes that Chinese folklorists were much interested in discovering folk culture as a means of bridging the cultural divide that separated the common people from their Chinese heritage.

Hung’s book examines how the new intellectuals discovered folk literature outside the traditional academic domain in the early twentieth century, and how they elucidated the cultural status of the folk literature of their times. He promotes a core argument that Chinese intellectuals were cognizant of the importance of folk literature research to truly understanding the common people, and that researchers played a central role in enlightening the masses. He therefore indicates that the significance of the Folk Literature Movement came in part from the manner in which it integrated folk literature into academic research, but more importantly from the profound influence it had on intellectual thought in modern China. Shi Aidong, a Chinese folklorist, says:

Many people regard *Going to the People* as an academic history of folklore or folk literature, but I would rather consider it one of the history of modern Chinese culture and thought. If we evaluate Hung’s work as an academic history book, we could find that it has omitted many historical events,
neglected many causal relations, and been deficient in comprehensive text explanation; but if we estimated it as the latter, we cannot but acknowledge Chang-tai Hung’s elaboration is solid and reliable.31

As the first book in English on the Chinese Folklore Literature Movement, *Going to the People* exploits a new train of thought in the study of modern Chinese folk literature; in addition, Hung’s integration of material regarding individual personalities, social and historical conditions, academic debates, and folk literature achievements are also very important to English-speaking Sinologists and the wider community of folklorists.

Although *Going to the People* concludes with the outbreak of the War of Resistance in 1937, folklore studies continued apace during wartime. Hung continues to examine folklore in his subsequent study, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937–1945* (1994). His focus here is principally on Nationalist Party–controlled areas, from which he examines widely read novels, local newspapers, cartoons, folksongs, regional drama, storytelling, *dagu* (drum singing), *xiangsheng* (comic dialogue), *shuanghuang* (a two-man act with one person singing or speaking while the other acts out the story), *nianhua* (New Year’s pictures), and many other forms of news and entertainment that were enjoyed by a mass audience. In one of his chapters, Hung also surveys popular culture in Communist-controlled areas. He points out that the strategy of mass mobilization led the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, Gongchandang) to aggressively confront questions concerning the suitability of popular culture and the political trustworthiness of intellectuals, and party leaders experimented widely from the late 1930s until they found a culture suitable to their political aims.

Much has been written in Chinese on the subject of this Folklore Movement, although critical analysis is sorely lacking. The earliest existing works appeared while the movement was still active, most notably Rong Zhaozu’s “A Brief History of the Folksong Research Society and the Custom Survey Society at National Peking University” (“Beida geyao yanjiuhui ji Fengsu diaochahui de jingguo”) (1928), Yang Chengzhi’s “A Brief History of the Chinese Folksong Society and an Index to All Its Publications” (“Minsu xuehui de jingguo jiqi chubanwu mulu yilan”) (1936), and Yang Kun’s “A Brief History of Chinese Folklore Movement” (“Woguo minsuxue yundong shilüe”) (1948). Most of these works merely chronicled events or offered brief narratives of the movement, but do provide valuable original material for contemporary research on this subject.
Lou Zikuang’s article “The Past and the Present of the Chinese Folklore Movement” (“Zhongguo minsuxue yundong de zuoye yu jinchen”) (1933) was written for his German and Japanese friends. Lou (1905–2005) belonged to the group of leading folklorists active in China during the 1930s, and the article is representative of academic standards during the movement in describing the beginnings and organization of folklore studies in China. It also provides rare scrutiny of the Folklore Movement in South China, especially in Hangzhou and Ningbo. Lou was a leader of the Folklore Society in Hangzhou and the founder of folklore studies in Taiwan, where he continued to collect tales from Taiwanese Chinese and from the island’s indigenous tribes. (He brought to this task a lesson in cultural sensitivity he had learned inadvertently in 1932, when he was jailed for publishing an offensive Gansu folktale that claimed Muslims did not eat pork because they were descendants of pigs.32) Lou preserved and edited much folklore material, partially reprinting and re-editing some of his earlier works during the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement, after he arrived in Taiwan along with retreating Nationalist forces from mainland China.33

More works related to the Folklore Movement were published after the Cultural Revolution, especially in recent decades, such as Zhang Zichen’s A History of the Chinese Folklore (Zhongguo minsuxue shì) (1993) and Chinese Folk Customs and Folklore (Zhongguo minSU yu minSUxUE) (1985), Wang Wenbao’s Investigation into the History of Chinese Folklore Studies (Zhongguo minSU yanJiu shì) (2003), and Liu Xicheng’s An Academic History of Chinese Folk Literature in the Twentieth Century (20 shìJì Zhongguo minJian wenxue xuèShu shì) (2006).34

Wang Wenbao was one of the sponsors and founders of the Chinese Folk Society established in China in 1983. As a folklorist, he uses a folkloristic perspective in his research. However, his two recent books, A History of Chinese Folklore Studies (Zhongguo minsuxue shì) (1995) and Investigation into the History of Chinese Folklore Studies, provide valuable insight into the Folklore Movement despite leaving many important questions unanswered. These books cover almost all of the folklore research conducted in China from ancient times up to the present, and Wang’s related research includes examinations of important folklorists, folklore publications, and organizations in Beijing, Guangzhou, Zhejiang, Shanghai, Shandong, and Sichuan, among other topics. More importantly, as a folklorist graduate of National Peking University who had been engaged in folklore studies for more than fifty years, he had devoted more time to the history of the Folklore Movement than any other living scholar, and had collected abundant materials on it. Wang’s article “The Chinese Folklore Movement
in the Past Eighty Years” (“Zhongguo minsuxue yundong bashi nian”) published on the hundredth anniversary of the founding of National Peking University, summarized folklore studies in China from 1918 to 1998. His arguments, for instance, on the three divisions of the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement into an initial period from 1918 to 1927, a foundation and expansion period from 1927 to 1949, and a post-1949 revival period have been widely accepted in Chinese academia. Nevertheless, Wang is subject to the expectations of the CCP and emphasizes folklore studies in the People’s Republic China as the inheritor of the legacy of the May Fourth pioneers. His writings do not acknowledge that there were substantial differences between the nationalist Folklore Movement and its Communist counterpart, which may well be the result of pre-emptive self-censorship to avoid conflict with the state.

From a literary viewpoint, An Academic History of Chinese Folk Literature in the Twentieth Century, a comprehensive monograph by Liu Xicheng, regards the Folklore Movement as a branch of folk literature study. Liu argues that modern folklorists composed one of several literary schools that sprang up at Sun Yat-sen University and in Hangzhou during the twentieth century. In this book, Liu points out that the schools of Chinese folk literature and art originated in the beginning of the twentieth century as he integrates a hundred-year academic history of folk literature from the perspective of different literary schools. Liu systematically examines the Folksong Research Society, the School of Literature and Anthropology, the Folklore School, the School of Ethnology and Sociology, the School of Popular Literature, the School of Yan’an Literature, and their representative figures and literary works to produce an objective review of modern Chinese folk literature in the twentieth century. Much detailed information on the Folklore Movement is covered in this book of over eight hundred pages, although Liu discusses it in only a couple of sections in the third chapter.

In recent decades, Shi Aidong’s doctoral dissertation, “On the Establishment of Modern Folklore in China and Its Academic Transformation – Folklore Movement at Sun Yat-sen University as the Center” (“Lun Zhongguo xiandai minsuxue de xueke chuangli he xueshu zhuanxing – Yi Zhongshan daxue minsuxue yundong wei zhongxin”) (2002), has emerged as an innovative work. Shi’s dissertation focuses on the discussion behind the establishment of modern folklore in China and its academic transformation after 1936. Although this dissertation specifically concentrates on the development of folklore research at Sun Yat-sen University, it provides profound analyses of the Folklore Movement during this short
period. Shi examines the cooperation among folklorists and their differences in academic thought, analyzing the reasons behind personnel changes at Sun Yat-sen University. He also explores the advantages and disadvantages of folklore’s transition towards anthropology, pointing out that folklore, as a new academic subject in China advanced by those with training in other fields, inevitably suffered setbacks as a result of resource limitations, inexperience, and political obstacles.

Zhao Shiyu’s book *Downward-Sighted Revolution – Discussion of the History of the Chinese Modern Folklore Thought, 1918–1937* (*Yanguang xiang xia de geming – Zhongguo xiandai minsuxue sixiang shi lun, 1918–1937*) (1999) is another groundbreaking work. Zhao is the first to examine modern Chinese folklore during China’s social transformation from traditional to modern times from the perspective of the history of thought. He also comments on the main historical figures during the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement and their understanding of folklore.

Besides the works mentioned above, there are many other articles on modern folklore studies and the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement. However, almost all of them come at the movement from a literary angle or fail to separate modern folklore activities carried out during the movement from those of more traditional disciplines. For the most part, the Folklore Movement remains underappreciated and understudied as a distinctive and influential academic phenomenon.

**Research Perspective, Significance, and Structure of This Study**

The Modern Chinese Folklore Movement was a literary movement, but it was also profoundly political and social. Much recent work internationally has shown that the rise of folklore studies and the development of its key concepts are intimately tied to specific historical, political, and social conditions. Therefore, this book will comprehensively examine the evolution of the Chinese Folklore Movement in the Republican era by using a detailed historical approach based on solid sources. It presents the movement against the wider backdrop of Chinese society in transition during the first half of the twentieth century, and addresses many key questions in order to fully explore the new intellectuals’ efforts to save the nation through folklore, such as their struggles in difficult situations and the influence of domestic political power on the movement. It also probes why this movement rose to prominence at the beginning of the twentieth
century, how folklore researchers advanced the movement, the reasons behind its relocation to different cities at different times, and how its development was interrupted and ultimately came to a close. It offers a broader conception of the Chinese Folklore Movement, along with detailed information on the important folklore organizations, publications, and researchers. It cannot be overemphasized that countless documentary resources were destroyed or lost from the warlord period to the War of Resistance and the civil war, rendering it impossible for any historian to fully recreate the scope of the Folklore Movement. Nevertheless, this book will help fill a void by piecing much of the information together from the scattered remaining fragments.

The emergence of the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement was the result of the introduction of Western knowledge – either directly from European countries or indirectly from Japan – but folklore studies were integrated with Chinese culture and the distinct national conditions faced by the folklore pioneers. This book explores the unique features of the movement by focusing on the dilemma faced by its practitioners between modern academic construction and national salvation.

Folklore is often identified as traditional folk culture and the functions of folklore have been widely accepted as “maintaining the stability of culture.” Inevitably, nationalism played a predominant role in the study of folklore in China after the country entered the global community and then immediately descended into a national crisis. As in other nations, the field of Chinese folklore studies developed within the context of nationalist movements and ideologies, but leading nationalist actors still determined its contents. This book clarifies how nationalism affected the Folklore Movement during specific times of cultural controversy.

The history of the movement illuminates the struggle of intellectuals to reposition themselves after the collapse of the late-imperial Confucian order and to guide China along the path to modernity. The Folklore Movement was an important pillar of the epochal New Culture Movement. This book situates it against the background of a Republican society in flux and provides a clear assessment of its place in modern Chinese history. The impulse behind the movement in all of its manifestations was to bridge the gap between the intelligentsia and the common people in a bid to create one nation capable of reviving China’s collective fortunes.

However, when the new intellectuals chose to distance themselves from political power, they left regional warlords and Nationalist Party high-ups with little inclination to embrace folklore for their own ends even though it had been an effective ideological tool for liberal nationalists.
in nineteenth-century Europe as well as twentieth-century Nazis and Communists. The rise of folklore in China was closely tied to nationalism, which meant that that folklore studies received their biggest impetus during the War of Resistance. Despite historical forces propelling their work forward, the proponents of the Folklore Movement had a formidable task owing to the hostility of political actors to folklore as a free and independent academic pursuit. Frustrated by the cruel nature of this reality, some insightful scholars refocused on the academic value of folklore study and shifted away from national salvation and literary applications in favour of the construction of the folklore discipline.

Nevertheless, even as those engaged in folklore studies attempted to distance themselves from the dirty business of politics, they could not break free of it. The War of Resistance tied folklore studies to the fate of the Chinese nation once again. Folklore became the embodiment of the national spirit and traditions, the link between cultural relations among a myriad group of nationalities in China. The Chinese Communist Party was the first political group in China to recognize the value of folklore, launching mass movements that successfully manipulated folk culture in order to unite the masses against its enemies, both foreign and domestic.

The Modern Chinese Folklore Movement is highly important for what it reveals about modern intellectuals and how it contributed to their mental development during the transformation of Chinese society on the one hand, and for its role in promoting national unity and what it actually contributed to the development of folklore studies in China on the other. For the first time in Chinese history, leaders of the elite academic community delved into the beauty and intrinsic value of Chinese folk culture.

This book consists of five chapters that chart the evolution of the Folklore Movement and the transfer of its geographical focal point. Chapter 1 investigates the rise of the movement at National Peking University in the context of the crisis of Chinese nationhood and the New Culture Movement. It addresses how the scope of folklore studies expanded from folksongs to folk customs and other forms of folk literature by focusing on early folklorists’ activities, folklore organizations, and primary publications at National Peking University. The Folklore Movement was a by-product and later a major component of the New Culture Movement and the Literary Revolution, with Western influences. However, European folklore was introduced into China indirectly via Japan in the early twentieth century and did not have much influence on folklore studies in China.
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until the 1930s. Such studies in China were Sinified from the beginning of the movement, mostly to serve literary purposes.

The leading intellectuals of the movement at this time, such as Liu Bannong, Gu Jiegang, Dong Zuobin, and others, united folklore studies with Chinese local culture during the Beida Period, which is the colloquial name (Beijing daxue shortened to Beida) for National Peking University. Their debate in 1924 over a name for their organization clearly revealed that folklore, as a new field of learning, remained ambiguous to these scholars even though the range of research subjects had been expanded. Chapter 1 also examines other folklore studies in Beijing and Shanghai, then analyzes the financial crisis and political tension at National Peking University in the late 1920s. Influenced by the folklore activities at the university, individual scholars, newspapers, and publishing companies in Beijing and Shanghai began getting involved in folklore studies. After the mid-1920s, however, a hopelessly corrupt warlord regime appeared in Beijing. National Peking University was plunged into financial crisis, and the Folklore Movement in Beijing came to a standstill.

Chapter 2 examines folklore activities in Fujian Province, mostly at Xiamen University, which became for folklore researchers a southern refuge from the crisis at National Peking University. Professors from National Peking University, leaders of the New Culture Movement, and sympathizers of the national revolution were all increasingly repressed by the warlord regime and left Beijing for southern China one after another. They gathered first at Xiamen University and continued folklore studies there. Following the Nationalist Party's initiation of the Chinese National Revolution in Guangdong in 1925 and the launch of its Northern Expedition against the warlords the following year, Guangzhou became the supreme headquarters of the Chinese revolution and represented the most progressive force in China. Many folklore scholars flocked to the city, which became the new centre of the Folklore Movement. Chapter 2 will also look at the prosperous phase of the movement, mainly observing the folklorists' activity, folklore organizations, and primary publications at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou. The Folklore Society at the university included almost all of the active folklorists in China. It published 123 issues of *Folklore Weekly*, established the Folklore Material Display Room, cultivated talented individual scholars with an interest in folklore, began field surveys of minorities in Southwest China, and issued a large number of folklore series. The Sun Yat-sen University Period (1927–30) finally established folklore study in China as an independent science in the field of ethnology.
Introduction and laid a solid foundation for the Modern Chinese Folklore Movement later on.

After the movement entered a period of decline at Sun Yat-sen University, Hangzhou became its centre, thanks to the efforts of Zhong Jingwen, Lou Zikuang, and others. Neither the number of folklorists nor the scale of folklore organizations in Hangzhou could compare with the Sun Yat-sen University Period, and folklorists in mainland China have basically reached a consensus that the Hangzhou Period marked a weaker phase in the Folklore Movement’s evolution. Chapter 3 argues, however, that the Hangzhou Period (1930–35) actually saw very vigorous study. Although the members of the Chinese Association for Folklore were decentralized in different cities and almost all of their publications were ephemeral, the Folklore Movement spread to many cities and a considerable number of folklore organizations were established under the aegis of the association.

More importantly, the Hangzhou Period witnessed deeper consciousness of the discipline’s construction, along with advances in folklore theory and methodology. Folklorists, especially Zhong Jingwen, completed the transformation of their academic thought. Folklore studies were understood to be separate from literary pursuits and had their own special academic value as an independent discipline. At the same time, folklore activities were also carried out in the Academia Sinica under Cai Yuanpei’s leadership, while folklore studies experienced a renaissance at both National Peking and Sun Yat-sen universities. A revitalized Folklore Movement spread all over the country and entered into a prosperous phase. Unfortunately, the eruption of the War of Resistance in 1937 interrupted its progression and most folklore activities ground to a standstill.

Chapter 4 begins with the onset of the War of Resistance and investigates academic folklore research conducted separately in three different areas: Japanese-occupied zones, Nationalist-controlled inland territories, and Communist bases. Folklore study in the Southwest under Nationalist control was the leading light of the Chinese Folklore Movement during the war as folklore studies continued to develop academically. Research there focused on minorities’ folk culture as the folklore field became closely integrated with other interdisciplinary studies, such as anthropology and ethnology, thanks to influences stemming from the political situation wrought by the War of Resistance, geographical position, and local folk customs and practices. Folklore studies in Japanese-occupied areas were mainly carried out by a few individual scholars and a handful of academic
institutes with a foreign background, while the Communist New Literature and Art Movement became a tool to launch a mass movement and to serve communist ideology and the political needs of the CCP.

The Conclusion looks at the main problems of Chinese folklore studies and the difficult situations that faced the movement while it was active, and discusses the transition of its research aims and focus. The Modern Chinese Folklore Movement could not operate free from political influence, and it ended in failure when the CCP took power. Folklore study in China was rushed by a handful of intellectuals who were not specialists in folklore but rather in other fields supporting the Literary Revolution. Their desire to use folklore to enlighten common people prevented it from evolving into a distinct academic discipline during the movement’s first decade. Folklore could not develop academically in China without state support or in the face of continued political chaos, despite the dedication of scholars who had formed a consciousness of the discipline’s construction. Folklore studies spread all over the country, many folklore organizations were established in different cities, and the Folklore Movement even limped on after the War of Resistance, but it was replaced by the Communist New Literature and Art Movement and came to an end with the failure of the Nationalist Party to retain control of mainland China. There is great irony in the fact that folklore played a major role in the CCP’s ultimate victory and national reunification in 1949, but in the process lost all semblance of independence from its new political master. This may well have warmed the hearts of many May Fourth Movement pioneers, but it surely came as a disappointment to a legion of folklorists who endured many adverse conditions in attempting to create a new academic discipline.