

# On the Writing of Literary Ethnography in the Novel *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* in Chinese Etiquette and Custom Tradition

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## Abstract

**Shaanxi Opera Scripts**, a novel written by Jia Pingwa--one of the most influential contemporary writers in China, gives insights into people's daily life on the Qingfeng street by centering on the folk culture of Dihua ancient town in southern Shaanxi province and the intangible cultural heritage Shaanxi Opera. In terms of its writing of ethnography, this novel reflects the spiritual world of the ordinary people in the period of social change. From the perspective of etiquette and custom tradition, this paper analyzes the intrinsic implications of literary ethnography, so as to explore the internal logic of people's understanding of social culture. In addition, this paper, considering Jia Pingwa as a "folk elite", tries to analyze his impact and construction on local folk culture and explore the value and significance of literary ethnography in the current intangible cultural heritage protection. Moreover, this paper attempts to provide some help for the rural revitalization based on the actual fieldwork.

## Keywords

**Shaanxi Opera Scripts; Folk Culture; Chinese Etiquette and Custom Tradition; Rural Revitalization.**

## 1. Introduction

Folk culture is a major undertone of Jia Pingwa's works. The novel *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* won the 7th Mao Dun Literature Award and was rated as "a volume of epic of contemporary Chinese countryside". Folk cultures in *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* in the urban and rural areas have witnessed greater difference owing to economic development, in which the traditional concepts of filial piety and family ethical order are gradually disintegrating, and the Chinese countryside under the etiquette and customs tradition is facing challenges brought by modernization. Just like Liang Shuming's (a famous Chinese philosopher) long cherished wish of rural construction in the early 20th century, how will Jia Pingwa, as a folk elite, construct new rural etiquette and customs against difficulties faced by the local society? This is the core issue to be discussed in Jia Pingwa's literary ethnography, and his cognition and understanding of the changes of traditional etiquette and customs culture in the process of urbanization is also implied in this novel.

## 2. Exiting "Folk" and Constructed "Folk"

To explore the writing of ethnography in Jia Pingwa's novel *Shaanxi Opera Scripts*, the difference between "folk" in the writer literature and folk literature should be clarified to the very beginning. The research on the relationship between writer literature and folk literature has been a basic topic in the study of folk literature since Mr. Zhong Jingwen, a Chinese expert on folklore. In order to figure out the specific presentation of the interaction between folk culture and etiquette and customs in literary works, the difference between the folk in the eyes of cultural elites represented by writers and that in the daily life of ordinary people. Duan Baolin

believes that folk literature, as part of literature, is parallel to the writer literature and stands to be the source of literature". Different from folk literature, the writer literature is a written literature represented by personal signature, which is relatively fixed once the work is finished. However, folk literature is the result of people's joint efforts, which has been constantly varied and improved by people during its propagation. Wan Jianzhong defined folk literature as an oral collective creation, a kind of three-dimensional and practical literature, which is featured by people-based, three-dimensional, oral, propagation-based variability, tradition and versatility. It's clear that there are both differences and similarities between folk literature and writer literature. As the database of writers in literary creation, folk literature provides them with abundant materials. The folk culture in the works of contemporary local native writers is more complex and diverse. Although Shen Congwen, Mo Yan, Yan Lianke and Jia Pingwa are representative local native writers, their folk positions and views stand to be dramatically different.

Professor Chen Yongchao believes that the folk elite is an open-ended concept, which is not confined to a specific group or stratum. Folk elite refers to individuals and groups who have obvious discourse power and dominance over a specific folklore and actually lead its integration and variation. Likewise, Jia Pingwa has an obvious voice in Qingfeng street. Following the publication of *Shaanxi Opera Scripts*, the local government restored the original appearance of Dihua ancient street and the relevant shops in the novel according to *Shaanxi Opera Scripts*, and renamed the previous Dihua ancient street Qingfeng street. In terms of the impact of *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* on the tourism development of Dihua ancient town, Jia Pingwa can be well considered as a "folk elite". Yet it does not mean that all intellectuals who write folk culture can be regarded as folk elites. There is no denying that Jia Pingwa is different from other folk elites owing to his writing stance and realistic writing, so his so-called folk is closer to the folk in the eyes of the folk elites.

Zhou Zuoren was the first to define "folk" in modern China, and Wan Jianzhong pointed out in *Chinese Folk Culture* that the meaning of "folk" in folk culture is completely consistent with that in folklore. Therefore, the author believes that the understanding of "folk culture" can start with the "folk" of the folklore. Zhong Jingwen also put forward that for the study of folk culture, it's necessary to clarify the scope of "folk" prior to its definition. By combing the definition of "folk" in folklore, it is found that the understanding of "folk" in folklore is a continuous development process. From Brüder Grimm to Alan Dundes and Gao Bingzhong, many researchers on folklore have given definition to "folk". Though Chinese and foreign folklore researchers are enthusiastic about defining "folk", most of them have not thought out of the box. Gao Bingzhong defines "folk" starting with "customs" and he thinks that "folk" of folk customs are not equal to people in real life. Only when people show the "customs" of folk customs, they are regarded as "folks" in this sense. Simply speaking, all people, regardless of educational level, race, nationality, can be regarded as "folk" so long as they show "customs". Wan Jianzhong believes that the focus of this concept of "folk culture" is "folk". After we clarify the so-called "folk" in folklore and folk literature, the core issue has been solved.

So what is culture? American scholar Linton believes that culture refers to all ways of life of any society, not confined to the more elegant and refreshing ways of life acknowledged by society... Moreover, for cultural researchers, these worldly behaviors are not better or worse than those acknowledged elegant behaviors. Therefore, the author of the paper tries to put forward her understanding of folk culture. Since "folk" can be understood as all people against the background of customs, and culture is all ways of life in any society, "folk culture" can be interpreted as people's all ways of life in the society. Likewise, folk culture and official culture are not opposite, but co-exist and interact with each other, all indispensable parts of national culture.

### 3. Performance of Literary Ethnography in Shaanxi Opera Scripts

The description of daily lives of the people in southern Shaanxi province during the period of social change in *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* reflects folk cultures, and the novel is known as “an important landmark of contemporary Chinese local native writing”. The writing of ethnography in *Shaanxi Opera Scripts*, be they are funerals, weddings or traditional festivals and customs, has showed Chinese etiquette and customs. *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* is a work written by Jia Pingwa as a monument to his hometown and Dihua ancient town in Danfeng, Shangluo county, southern Shaanxi province is the place where the story happens. The novel *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* attracted many tourists after its publication in 2005. The original Dihua ancient street was renamed Qingfeng street in the novel, and this is the internal expression of “returning to life” in the writing of literary ethnography.

*Shaanxi Opera Scripts* written by Jia Pingwa, a folk elite, shows the history of more than 20 years of rural reform in modern China and the changes of rural social life, ethical values and people’s psychology under the impact of market economy by means of ethnography writing. The writing of daily life in the literary ethnography of *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* is mainly reflected in terms of life and spiritual folk customs. In *Book of Rites*, it is said that “the code of conduct in dietary activities is the beginning of etiquette”. From this, it can be seen that Chinese etiquette and customs also began from people’s eating activities. Etiquette appears on eating behaviors and becomes the fixed code of conduct followed by people following long-term development and evolution. Etiquette is the basis of customs. From the perspective of dietary activities in folk culture, etiquette is derived from customs, and the change of customs into etiquette also reflects the interaction between etiquette and customs. Food etiquette and custom is the treasure of traditional etiquette and custom and also the most universal one. *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* is very successful in writing daily life. Different from the previous grand historical narration, it hews the charm of folk culture through daily narration. “Bread is the stall of life and diet plays a very important role in people’s life, which can not only meet people’s physiological needs, but also cater to people’s spiritual needs to a certain extent thanks to its rich cultural connotation.” As China has a vast territory and many nationalities, its dietary customs are rich and diverse. The distinct regionality of customs can also be seen from the different dietary customs between the north and the south. The frequently appeared diet in the novel *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* includes Guokui (crusty pancake), steamed bun, noodles, dumplings, rice, bean jelly, etc. Villagers in Dihua town mainly eat pasta-based food, which is the major food customs in the villages of northern China.

*Shaanxi Opera Scripts* starts with the beginning of the wedding and ends with the ending of the funeral. It begins with the wedding of Baixue of Bai family in the west Qingfeng street, and Xiafeng of Xia family in the east Qingfeng street. According to Yang Shuda’s *On Customs of Marriage and Funeral in the Han Dynasty*, the wedding has ceremonies such as accepting betrothal gifts, asking for name, accepting auspicious, accepting bride price, asking for time, welcoming relatives and entertaining guests. Among them, entertaining guests is a ceremony of much importance in the wedding as the marriage is not only a matter for both bride and bridegroom, but also a matter of two families and descendants. Liu Xiaochun believes that the man marries the woman as an outsider through the wedding and the relevant rituals are both etiquette and customs. For the man and his family, the wedding is not only the etiquette they must follow when they conclude the marriage, but also the custom passed down from generation to generation. For both bride and bridegroom, it boasts the function and significance of etiquette in essence. The guest entertaining banquet is essentially a ceremony for Xiafeng and Baixue, but for the local people, it’s a custom inherited from generation to generation. The Chinese etiquette and customs traditions here sublimate customs into etiquette. After the wedding, Baixue was recognized as the daughter-in-law of the Xia family. Apart from weddings,

the folk customs in *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* also include funerals, especially for the funerals of Xia Tianzhi and Xiayi, the brothers of the Xia family. There are a lot of considerations in the funeral. Xia Tianzhi, the fourth of the Xia family, died of illness, and when the musician held a wine offering ceremony in front of the mourning hall, someone in the crowd should laugh. Some people even regard the funeral as a place of entertainment, playing mahjong and watching the excitement there. All these behaviors are not allowed at the local traditional funeral in southern Shaanxi province. In the *Book of Filial Piety and Rites*, it is said that “Do not laugh at the funeral. Be sure to leave your seat when bowing. Do not sing when looking at the coffin. Don’t stretch your arms when you walk in mourning. Do not sing if there is a funeral in the neighborhood. Don’t sing at the cemetery or on the day of mourning”. It’s clear that funerals are very serious. People attending funerals or neighbors can’t sing and laugh. But Bai’e laughed in front of Xia Tianzhi’s mourning hall, and Chen Xing played guitar and sang pop music in the alley, which attracted a group of people. These behaviors conflict with traditional etiquette. The death of Xia Tianyi at the end of the novel indicates the complete destruction of the traditional “benevolence, righteousness, courtesy and wisdom”.

#### 4. Writing and Value Implications of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Literary Ethnography in Shaanxi Opera Scripts

As a realistic novel, *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* gives a comprehensive and deep reflection of rural social problems. As Jia Pingwa’s *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* has distinctive ethnographic characteristics, it is also regarded as a literary ethnography. Peng Zhaorong pointed out that “the so-called literary ethnography refers to a new and experimental research paradigm with anthropological fieldwork as the basic method and literature as the object. In terms of methodology, literary ethnography advocates that “returning to life” will help to return to the nature of life. Literary research with the help of ethnographic paradigm will contribute to “landing” the “suspended” part of literary works, at least more clearly understand the original appearance of literary works “derived from life”, which surpass the “prototype of life”. As a result, by comparing the text with the field, the internal connotation of local culture can be understood more comprehensively.

The novel *Shaanxi Opera Scripts* is a pun, which refers to both traditional opera and folk traditional culture. Shaanxi Opera, as an intangible cultural heritage, has been listed in the first batch of intangible cultural heritage list with the approval of the State Council since May 20, 2006. Jia Pingwa describes the dilemma faced by the traditional culture represented by Shaanxi Opera under the background of the rapid development of modern economy, the change of people’s daily life and traditional ideas in local society by means of ethnographic writing in his novel *Shaanxi Opera Scripts*. With the popularization of pop music, traditional culture can no longer meet the needs of the current modernization. People’s entertainment in their daily life is becoming more and more diverse, and popular songs and dances have replaced Shaanxi Opera for young people. Jia Pingwa, by recounting the impact of pop music on Shaanxi opera, highlights the status quo of the traditional culture Shaanxi Opera in the countryside, a real state of Shaanxi Opera in the period of social transformation. The novel makes a detailed introduction to Shaanxi Opera: Shaanxi Opera, also known as Shaanxi Sound, is one of the earliest Bangzi tune (Chinese local operas performed to the accompaniment of wooden clappers) in China. It originated in the Ming Dynasty, one of the four popular tunes (Kunqu opera, Yiyang tune, Liuzi tune, and Bangzi tune ) since the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In Shaanxi Opera, there are five roles, painted face, white face, black face, red face and pure face, and special facial makeup methods, such as female role wearing male role’s makeup, and vice versa. With a detailed introduction of nearly 700 words, readers can generally understand the cultural knowledge of Shaanxi Opera through reading and its development under social change. It’s

evident that such a kind of ethnographic writing, for one thing, can help readers appreciate the charm of traditional culture, and for another, it also enable readers to understand the relevant knowledge of traditional culture, which is also another way to inherit traditional culture.

In his writing of literary ethnography, Jia Pingwa holds Shaanxi Opera, an intangible cultural heritage, from the very beginning to the ending. The description of the career changes, family contradictions and income sources of Shaanxi Opera actors, this novel reflects the survival dilemma of intangible cultural heritage inheritors. The folk art Shaanxi Opera boasts a long history. In terms of the performance content of Shaanxi Opera, the story in Shaanxi Opera is more often than not closely related to the "benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom and faith" emphasized by traditional Confucian culture. Based on the views of the older generation represented by Xia Tianzhi on Shaanxi Opera, Jia Pingwa tells readers about Shaanxi Opera in the tone of characters in the novel, and creates an environment for readers to truly perceive Shaanxi Opera through actions performed by Shaanxi Opera lovers. Xia Tianzhi is thinking about Shaanxi Opera and sticking to the love for the traditional Shaanxi Opera culture in the last breath of his life. After his death, Shangshan covered his face with hemp paper, which then slipped, but there was no wind in the house, and this surprised people present. Shangshan said, "uncle, uncle, Xia Tianzhi will be buried at eleven a.m. the day after tomorrow. Don't worry. I'll preside over the funeral ceremony. Everything will be settled". Then he cover the hemp paper on Xia Tianzhi's face again. Strangely, the hemp paper slipped again. The room was silent for a moment, and even Shangshan's face turned white. Baixue suddenly cried and said, "my father dislikes the hemp paper, and he prefers Mashao Facial (a type of facial make up of ladle)!" Then, Shangshan put a Mashao Facia on Xia Tianzhi's face, whose size matches his face exactly. Such a description seems exaggerated, yet it is exactly the expression of folk belief. There is a folk saying that people's soul will not die after his/her death. In many places, including Shaanxi province, there is a talk: if the dead fail to close their eyes after death, it's regarded that the dead still have worries and wishes. Only when his descendants understand and finish such wishes can the dead close their eyes. In addition, the repertoire contents and actions performed by Shaanxi Opera performers at the funerals of the people in Qingfeng street are introduced in the novel. The writing of intangible cultural heritage in literary ethnography can be counted as the material of intangible cultural heritage protection to a certain extent, which may inspire new paths of intangible cultural heritage protection and development.

## 5. Conclusion

The development of tourist attractions in Dihua ancient town in southern Shaanxi is a reflection of the writing of intangible cultural heritage in literary ethnography promoting rural revitalization. While fully protecting local resources, the government has taken the initiative of creating tourist attractions in combination with the writing of literary ethnography, which has attracted a large number of tourists, thus driving the rapid development of local economy. At the same time, Dihua ancient town does well in taking advantage of local cultural resources and collecting and sorting out its nearly 100 years' history and culture during the development of tourist attractions, which promotes the sustainable development and living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage in Dihua ancient town. The protection and inheritance of rural intangible cultural heritage in the new era call for the joint efforts from the government and the people to coordinate their relationship in the etiquette and customs tradition. Only when the government respects the local culture and folk elites' construction of local culture can the local resources be fully tapped and rural revitalization be promoted. Of course, as for the protection of intangible cultural heritage and rural revitalization in etiquette and customs tradition, how to give full play to the strength of the community to promote the integration of intangible cultural heritage and culture and tourism, as well as the protection of local folk culture in the

process of innovation and development of intangible cultural heritage, further explorations are needed.

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