Critical Fantasies: Structure of Chinese Folk Tales

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CRITICAL FANTASIES:

STRUCTURE OF CHINESE FOLK TALES
(TITLE)

BY

SAIHANJULA HE

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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Thesis Abstract

Critical Fantasies: Structure in the Chinese Folk Tale

Folk tales provide a unique source of information for cultural studies. They come from the people. Springing from the people’s imagination in a social context, they carry historical truths, stir up political undercurrents, and reveal social facts that official history books will not and cannot tell. In a time when writing was a privileged form of expression, the oral folk tale popularly communicated the injustices committed by the upper class, and gave the powerless voices of their own. Common themes of folk tales all reflect, to various degrees, the people’s desires to rise above environmental, cultural, social and class constraints and to seek comfort in an imaginary world.

Once a strictly stratified society, China provides abundant resources in its folk tales to examine their significance of extending the voices of the politically powerless. In China, a country historically without a God-centered, revealed religion, ideologies exert great impact on people’s way of thinking and living. The confrontation of China’s two main ideologies, Confucianism and Daoism is dramatized in the Chinese folk tale.

Given the Chinese folk tale’s extra-literary nature, and the oral tradition’s place in the larger socio-political culture, I have taken a Marxist/Structuralist approach in this work, because this provides an holistic way of looking at verbal arts in relation to their cultural context. From this perspective, the essay focuses on core themes and strategies of the Chinese folk tale, including animal stories; the supernatural world; human transformation into other natural/supernatural beings through magic; gender transgression; the exposition of injustice suffered by subordinate women, men, and children; and the necessity of compromise in the face of Confucian authority.
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Introduction

Folk tales provide a unique source of information for cultural studies. Through collaborative authorship, the people, folk transmit their dreams and ideals in their unique form of stories. In his study of the functions of folklore, William R. Bascom refers to folk tales as a “projective system,” which gives ordinary people access to “compensation” for the harshness of life and an “escape mechanism” from reality. Common themes of folk tales (“from rags to riches,” love, gender-shifting, and metamorphosis) all reflect, to various degrees, the people’s desires to rise above environmental, cultural, social and class constraints and to seek comfort in an imaginary world.

Folk tales carry historical truths, not in the sense that tales can be counted upon for historical accuracy, but in that their presentation of the social order contributes to a full picture of a culture. Although writers such as Bascom assert that, “However accurately folklore may mirror the familiar details of culture, and incorporate common situations from everyday life, the unusual or even the impossible is an important ingredient of myths and folk tales” (292). It is my contention that, the “unusual and the impossible” oftentimes carry messages from the oppressed, whose voices would otherwise be totally silenced by those in power.

According to Bascom, one of the folk tale’s important functions is education, particularly, but not exclusively, in non-literate societies. As he writes, “The importance of the many forms of folklore as pedagogic devices has been documented in many parts of the world [...]” (292). In this regard, folk tales can hardly avoid being political. The oral tradition offers the common people freedom to articulate their true beliefs, hopes and
disillusionment in their fantasies. Two main factors contribute to this freedom. First of all, the folk tale as an oral verbal medium cannot be easily censored or stopped, since it can constantly take on different narrative forms and change in content. Secondly, collective or anonymous authorship helps to guarantees that no single individual runs the risk of being responsible for uttering the “the unusual and the impossible” and consequent punishment from those in power. Folk tales have become a convenient forum for the common people’s social protest, and a tool that they can use to cultivate (peiyang) desirable social values in the young.

Many folk tales (though by no means all) have been recorded and collected in written form. As a literary genre recorded and collected in books, folk tales serve as pedagogic devices for the politically privileged as well as the underprivileged. Removed from their oral context, such “conscripted” tales can serve as instruments of the powerful. Literary critic Heter Hunt states that, “to write is to have power; to read is only to have the illusion of power” (151). Indeed, this was especially true when education was only accessible to the privileged upper-class people. To be able to write is to have a firm grasp on a power system’s propaganda and control over its ideology. Although many folk tales may initially be collected by folklorists, for example, solely for scholarly purposes, they can be edited or changed to meet the needs of those who are at the top of the socio-political hierarchy. In this regard, folk tales can become a vehicle for the politically privileged to publicize their ethics and morals. To rephrase Hunt in these terms: to tell stories is to have power, to listen to stories is to have the illusion of power. However, due to the fundamental differences between oral and written verbal art, the story teller’s power is more implicit and volatile compared to that of the writer, and the illusion of
power that story-listeners get cannot even be held in hand, like a book. In both cases, it is potentially rewarding to explore the folk tales as venues of political discourse.

Because of the folk tale’s power as a medium of social commentary and critique, whether in the hands of the politically powerful or the powerless, some assert that it is neither possible nor sensible to categorize folk tales according to “party lines.” Questions of provenance cannot be answered in a satisfying way. Considering folk tales as an integrated literary genre, Bascom believes that they reflect the mutual dependence as well as the invisible fight for power between the institution and the individual. “Here, indeed, is the basic paradox of folklore, that while it plays a vital role in transmitting and maintaining the institutions of a culture and in forcing the individual to conform to them, at the same time it provides socially approved outlets for the repression which these same institutions impose upon him” (298). Here the politically powerful class is aligned with written forms against the politically powerless who rely on oral forms. Because of the folk tale’s problematic provenance, it may at times link seemingly unrelated motives and ends, blurring the original intent, if there ever was one. We cannot afford to forget, however, that the folk tale is, first and foremost, a living oral tradition, and that however it may be appropriated in written form, it never initially represents official or institutional “truth.” Folk tales come from the people. Springing from the people’s imagination in a social context, they carry historical truths, stir up political undercurrents, and reveal social facts that official history books will not and cannot disclose.

That variants of one folk story may surface with diverse plots and motifs demonstrates the folk tale’s ability to draw flexibly from different groups of people. This is also the source of our troubles when we turn to the issue of provenance. Ambiguities
inherent in the term “folk” can present a further complication. For my purposes, “folk” refers to the political and economic underclass. The folk is apparently at the mercy of political institutions, but those institutions are in fact ideological constructs (Marx’s “superstructure”), representations of the power of the privileged social class. Political institutions are, literally, powerful illusions. The folk does not have any direct part to play in articulating this illusion, but the privileged inevitably defend their power by upholding it. The privileged can try to suborn the folk tale for use as propaganda, but the attempt to re-write what was originally spoken and unwritten is never wholly successful. The oral nature of the folk tale naturally resists such institutionalization: There will always be variants that pass on the people’s beliefs and values from generation to generation. Ultimately, folk tales are the folk’s production.
Chapter One

Ideological Foundation of Chinese Folk Tales

It is true that, while Confucianism emphasizes social order and an active life, Daoism concentrates on individual life and tranquility, thus suggesting that Daoism plays a secondary role. But, in reality, by opposing Confucian conformity with non-conformity and Confucian worldliness with a transcendental spirit, Daoism is a severe critic of Confucianism.

Wing-Tsit Chan
A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy

Once a strictly stratified society, China provides abundant resources in its folk tales to examine their significance of extending the voices of the politically powerless. In a hierarchy that infiltrates every social and familial relationship, it is difficult to delineate the boundary between the politically powerful and the powerless. Confucianism, the orthodox voice of Chinese culture, justifies and confines the social order to structured relationships between “official and peasant, father and son, husband and wife (or wives)” (Roberts Introduction). As a result, a high ranked official is still inferior to the emperor; and a poor peasant also has his subjects: his children and wife. Since a son can grow up and become a father in the future (and master of his father’s house), women are left virtually no chance of ever succeeding to any power in this power structure. However complicated the middle part of this hierarchy might be, there is no doubt about its two ends --- with the emperor at the top, and women, especially young girls, at the bottom. Men, of course, can also be victimized when they are subordinate to social and family superiors. In a time when writing was a privileged form of expression, the oral folk tale popularly communicated the injustices committed by the upper class, and gave the
powerless voices of their own. For example, young girls are frequently the subject matter of Chinese folk tales, either for their victimization or triumphs. In folk tales, subversive anti-hierarchical impulses are illuminated constantly.

Before turning to the importance of Chinese folk tales as a forum for the powerless, it is first necessary to take a look at the ideological foundations in which folk tales are rooted and from which they develop. My selection of traditional Chinese folk tales in scholarly Chinese versions and English translations reveals similar structures, themes, motifs, and values, despite the tales' various story-lines and characters. Usually, these folk tales fantasize the stories of the human society by intermingling elements of the supernatural, thus rendering the unreal tangible, and reality something that can be escaped. For instance, one recurrent theme of Chinese folk tales is how supernatural beings associate with humans either to help (when the visitor is a good spirit or god) or hurt (when the visitor is an evil spirit or ghost). There are also instances of human beings subliming themselves into supernatural states, and changing into other forms with the help of magic. In many love stories, lovers go through hardships before being united, either through the help of the supernatural, or in the supernatural world. Also (often assisted by a supernatural being) a virtuous poor man defends himself against an evil rich villain, so that justice is ultimately served. In Chinese folk tales, women characters are commonly endowed with power and strength that are out of proportion to their conventional roles in the real life. Sometimes they fight their fate, and sometimes they challenge the authorities, both of which would be nearly inconceivable in reality. All these examples reflect a huge gap between reality and the folk's imaginary world. That is why official history or literary works seldom touch upon such subjects, as either they
cannot do so, or would not do so. In consequence, this gap between the folk’s daily and fictive worlds is a rich source for exploring the opposition between official “truth” and the folk beliefs. A scholarly perspective on the tension between the politically powerful and the powerless will offer us a better understanding of the folk tales as a mirror of the common people’s beliefs.

Folk tales voice the folk’s opinion, and the official view of reality opposes, contradicts and certainly looks with disfavor on such opinions. Such oppositions between the politically privileged and underprivileged can be embodied directly in folk tales. Invisible and ubiquitous authority hides in the margins, but to various degrees, most folk tales reveal, expose, or criticize this invisible power. In Chinese folk tales, the critique comes across most clearly in a Daoist response to Confucian values.

Confucianism

Confucius established the ideological foundation of China’s thousand years of feudal history. During his lifetime from 551 BCE to 479 BCE, Confucius, as a great thinker, educator, and politician, actually never won any favor from the ruling class even though he devoted his whole life to lobbying them (Luo 445). Mengzi, the follower of Confucius and an important co-founder of the philosophy, shared the fate of his teacher. It was only subsequent generations of feudal aristocracy who realized that Confucianism not only justified, but also exalted the feudal hierarchy. Thus they promoted Confucianism, helped it to flourish and become predominant in Chinese culture. Confucius has thus come to be esteemed as the greatest “saint” in Chinese history.
When Confucianism was at its nascence, China experienced a burgeoning of different schools of philosophical thought, such as Daoism, Mohism, Legalism, and so on. Not yet a unified empire, the kingdoms of China's central plains fought against each other for ultimate control. The competition among the kingdoms demanded the kings employ great politicians, thinkers, and strategists to help them intensify their countries' power. That was when the above mentioned schools of thought found their vivid expressions in the political, social, literary, and philosophical arenas. Confucianism gradually distinguished itself as highly compatible with the interests of the feudal rulers. After the country's unification, it was officially recognized as the national socio-political doctrine, and afforded importance tantamount to that of a national religion. Around 140 BCE, emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, following his counselor, Zhongshu Dong, proscribed all non-Confucian schools of thought. Ever since then, Confucianism has been China's state ideology, the source of the people's intellectual and moral guidance. During the country's long history of feudal official examination system, students had to memorize all the canonical teachings of The Saint, meaning Confucius, to become officials in local and central governments. This also marks the institutionalization of the complex philosophy in order to justify the feudal social and political order.

Confucianism is particularly compatible with the Chinese feudal social order because its tenets echo the values of the privileged class. Politically, Confucianism advocates the rule of a virtuous aristocracy over subjects in a stable social hierarchy. The stability of the hierarchy is maintained through moral education of the common people, and a self-conscious moral promotion of the nobility as moral exemplars. As Mengzi
states, those who work with their brain rule and those who work with their brawn are ruled.

In terms of ethics, Confucianism promotes filial piety and benevolence as the essences of humanity. Filial obedience to one’s parents, in Confucian belief, anticipates and parallels the subject’s loyalty to the emperor. The rule of a family is analogous to the rule of the state, so if the hierarchy in families can be guaranteed, so can that of the country. The hierarchy entails the superiority of official, father, and man to peasant, son, and wife. Furthermore, Confucianism holds that the hierarchy is predestined by the mandate of heaven. The emperor, for example, is thus regarded as son of heaven. Considering the male-female relationship, Confucianism uses the Yin-yang theory to validate the male supremacy, as heaven is higher than earth, so man is superior to woman. In every instance, hierarchical superiors should receive the due respect and obedience from their subjects, and they, in turn, should treat their inferiors with love and benevolence. Confucianism believes that human nature is benevolent, and it is up to the emperor and his noble officials to promote and cultivate this quality among his subjects through benevolent government. This, in effect, attributes the supreme virtue to emperor as the highest ruler.

The ruling class manipulated the official Confucian ideology. Since this group of people had the privilege of elaborating the Saint’s teachings that were to their advantage, and de-emphasizing those that were not, Confucianism could become a tool of dogmatism. Serving as the feudal society’s theoretical foundation and behavioral code, the Confucian canon was recognized and standardized by the governments of successive dynasties to exert control over the people. Selected Confucian doctrines were presented
to people as normative. For example, Confucius’ teachings for a woman are “the three obediences and four virtues,” namely “obedience to father before marriage, to husband after marriage, and to son after husband’s death; morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work.” (Qiu 857) Common people were expected to observe the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues: “ruler guides subjects, father guides son, and husband guides wife; benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity” (857).

Understandably, such rigidly defined ethical codes provoked dissent. Among the chief dissidents, Daoists, never ceased their critical response to Confucianism, not only as a philosophy, but also as a system of political thinking, a way of life, and ultimately an epistemology. It is the shadowy and yet universal presence of Daoist ideas in Chinese folk tales that makes the otherwise muffled voice of the underprivileged folk recognizable and even powerful.

**Daoism**

The philosophy of Daoism is embodied in a small classic called *Lao-Tzu*, or *Tao-te Ching*, which is only about five thousand words. The writer of the book, Lao-Tzu was traditionally considered a custodian of imperial archives, whose real name is Li Erh, and he is twenty years senior to Confucius. In his book, he advocates “simplicity, spontaneity, tranquility, weakness, and most important of all, non-action (wu-wei) as a way of life” (Chan 136).

Zhuangzi, another philosopher whose influence was significant to the development of Daoism, was born during the Warring States Period in China around
2,300 years ago. Born in a poor family, however, he refused King Wei of Chu’s offer as Prime Minister, since he firmly resolved not to pursue an official career. In his lifetime, he enjoyed the reputation of being a sincere friend to his peer, and charitable to the poor. The *Zhuangzi*, expounds his philosophy in an easy manner through fables and folk stories, all of which have had profound influence on Chinese culture, especially the folk culture.

*Dao*, in Chinese, means the *Way*: “It is the One, which is natural, eternal, spontaneous, nameless, and indescribable” (Chan 136). It represents the highest aspect of the universe, the origin of nature and the principle of natural changes. In addition, it is also the source of the human society, which encapsulates the cause, nature, and law of things (Shi, *et al* 57). A basic concept in Daoism is *wu wei*, “do nothing”, or “inaction”, understood as no unnatural action, rather than complete passivity. In Daoist belief, do nothing and everything is done, which embodies in its political proposition is to govern by noninterference, for instance, by keeping a minimum government organization and regulation (Luo 1067). The Daoists worship the decree of nature, and detest anything artificial. Therefore, Daoism eschews dualism and such absolute dichotomies objectivity and subjectivity, right and wrong, big and small, death and life, noble and humble from each other, because all the oppositions are in essence the same and interchangeable. Quantitative “knowledge” is useless to the Daoist, because it is ultimately arbitrary, a function of limited human cognition restrained by limited human judgments. Such beliefs manifested in Daoist ethics, then, the ideal virtue is to abandon all desires, drop all affectations, and return to original purity and simplicity. To Daoists, the biggest cause of ruin in a society is insatiable desire, because all “actions” induce vices. Put more directly,
all the Confucius ethics and morals, in the eyes of Daoists, will only lead a society into an uncontrollable mess. Only the Daoist "do nothing" can provide a solution to all social problems.

The conflict between Confucianism and Daoism lies in their fundamental differences, including (among others) sympathy with different social classes. According to Confucianism, emperor incarnates supreme virtue, absolute order, and the highest wisdom. This imperial superiority also extends to the whole bureaucracy that supports the emperor. However, Daoists challenge such ideology at its very root. Daoism’s *laissez faire* notion of “inaction,” or “doing nothing” renders problematic the very necessity of a government. Its glorification of nature repudiates the Confucian hierarchy of beings. One key Confucian conviction is that of female inferiority. The Daoists use the *yin-yang* theory upon which the Confucian view is based in order to repudiate it. They argue that man is the spirit of heaven, and woman the spirit of earth, and therefore they are equal since both genders are essential. To abuse women is to abuse human race as a whole. There is hardly a moral standard or political conviction in Confucianism that the Daoists do not judge arbitrary and/or hypocritical. Whereas Confucianism reflected the outlook of the politically powerful, Daoism naturally reflected that of the politically powerless.
Chapter Two

The Daoist Presence in Chinese Folk Tales:
A Structuralist Approach

Folk tales provide an unfettered ground for the exuberant growth of Daoism. Based on the above-mentioned Daoist tenets, there are several recurrent themes of Daoist expressions in Chinese folk tales. These themes include, but are not limited to the following: animal stories; the supernatural world; human transformation into other natural/supernatural beings through magic; gender transgression, and the exposition of injustice suffered by subordinate women, men, and children, and the necessity of compromise in the face of Confucian authority. In general reading, such underlying themes oftentimes are not immediately apparent. When we probe the depth of these popular fantasies, however, we come to the core concerns of folk culture.

Given the Chinese folk tale’s extra-literary nature, and the oral tradition’s place in the larger socio-political culture, I have taken a Marxist and Structuralist approach in this work. Robert Scholes states that “Marxism and structuralism share certain values which can be seen very clearly in their response to the problems of epistemology --- specifically to the problem of the relationship of the human subject with his own perceptual and linguistic systems, and with the objective world” (2). He makes his point more directly saying “Both Marxism and structuralism are integrative, holistic ways of looking at the world, including men” (3). This emphasis on looking not at the isolated things but rather at the relationships among them is essential to the study of folk tale, because folk tales in themselves reflect diverse layers of relationships from different angles --- to name a few, that of physical reality and social reality, human subject and his perception, thought and
matter, language and the objects it designates, and so on. Such complex aspects of the perceptual relationships, manifested in philosophy, science, religion, history, art, music, and of course, literature, including folk tales, are condensed sensibly in Caudwell’s observation: “[T]hought is a relation of matter; but the relation is real; it is not only real but determining. It is real because it is determining. Mind is a determining set of relations between the matter in my body and in the rest of the Universe” (Scholes 3).

Speculating from another perspective, Claude Levi-Straus contends “the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but bundles of such relations and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning”(6). The structuralist believes that such approach can treat anthropologically (thus scientifically) “large masses” of literature characterized by “recurrent functions,” although they may be distant in time or space (8). Again, as Scholes put it, “in particular, structuralism seeks to explore the relationship between the system of literature and culture of which it is a part”(11). Rather than looking at the folk tale in isolation, a structuralist point of view offers us a fuller approach to the tales in relation to the literary tradition, and the cultural background in which they originated.

Examining the basic tenets of structuralism, we find that folk tales welcome structuralism as an approach. According to Scholes, “at the center of the idea of structuralism is the idea of system: a complete, self-regulating entity that adapts to new conditions by transforming its features while retaining its systematic structure” (10). Such systematic structures, in literature, specifically in folk tales, relate us back and forth into all infinite, past and future, local and
universal experiences, making possible the gigantic body of folk tales living and growing. Specifically, the structuralist emphasis on relationships validates its value in folklorist study: “[W]e cannot even define ‘literariness’ without setting it against ‘non-literariness’ ---and we must recognize that these two functions are in an unstable relationship which changes along with other functions of a given culture” (11). As a result, through a structuralist approach, all the seemingly disparate elements of folk tales can be interrelated and seen to be “mutually inferable from any significant sample”(11). In Chinese folk tales, for the very same reason, taking a structuralist approach will provide a systematic view of Chinese folklorist tradition, and the Chinese culture of which it is a part.

The Supernatural World, Magical Transformations, and Animal Stories

Dao is the universal ancestor and the universal annihilator. As the ultimate leveler of all living creatures, it creates all things equal, giving no one of them dominion over another by virtue of birth or any other inheritable power. Animals and all other creatures exist on the same level as humans, and each exists for one lifetime alone, free of obligations to either ancestors or descendants.

Moss Roberts
Chinese Fairy tales and Fantasies

Frequently, Chinese folk tales fantasize the extraordinary transformation of one creature into another. “The Seventy-two metamorphoses” that is repeatedly mentioned in Chinese folklore reflects the basic Daoist belief of universal interchangeability.

Originally, in the “Monkey King’s Journey to the West”, the seventy-two metamorphoses refer to countless changes, as the number seventy-two in ancient times represents an
indeterminately large number. There is no limit to the number of changes a person can go through. One can change into another person, one can also change into a thing, and things can change into human beings, while they can also change to other forms of things. The concept of metamorphosis in Daoism encompasses an infinite range of things, such as animals, plants, celestial objects, spirits, and so on.

Pan Gu’s story is China’s creation-story, and it is dense with Daoist transformations. Pan Gu, the legendary all mighty creator came into being out of primordial chaos in the mists of time. He performs a kind of cosmic qi guang that separates Heaven and Earth. According to the tale “Heaven and Earth and Men”, Pan Gu, having brought shape to the cosmos through his life, literally sur-renders his body in death to make the cosmos rich and beautiful:

He gave the breath from his body to form the winds and clouds, his voice to be the rolling thunder, his two eyes to be the sun and moon, the hairs of his head and beard to be the stars, the sweat of his brow to be the rain and dew. To the earth he gave his body for the mountains and his hands and feet for the two poles and the extremes of east and west. His blood flowed as the rivers of earth and his veins ran as the roads, which cover the land. His flesh became the soil of the fields and the hairs of his body grew on as the flowers and trees. As for his bones and teeth, these sank deep below the surface of earth to enrich it as precious metals. (Birch 4)

There are, of course, many versions of this story in Chinese folklore and in other culture creation by divine sacrifice, but this account is the most common. I would argue that its popularity results from its profoundly Daoist elements.
Pan Gu’s creation story mirrors the Daoist belief that the human being is an integrated part of nature, and conversely nature is a vibrant part of human life, since it is Pan Gu’s body that forms the whole universe. This fundamentally challenges the Confucian belief that stresses the decree of heaven and, consequently, the role of emperor, supposedly the son of the heaven.

Many ancient folk tales manifest the Daoist notion of universal transformation, either through magic (certain spell, or elixirs of life), or through vague implication, for example, in people’s dreams. The Daoist laissez faire attitude that rejects political and religious authority, in fact, intrinsically connects the human, animal and supernatural realms together. Unlike their Confucian rivals, who uphold human superiority over animals, and the impropriety of talking about supernatural forces, Daoists impose no restrictions upon people’s perception of the world. “Butterfly Dreams”, a story from the Chuang Tzu that is known wherever Chinese folk tales are told, best epitomizes the Daoist metaphysics:

Chuang Tzu said, “Once upon a time I dreamed myself a butterfly, floating like petals in the air, happy to be doing as I pleased, no longer aware of myself! But soon enough I awoke and then, frantically clutching myself, Chuang Tzu I was! I wonder: Was Chuang Tzu dreaming himself the butterfly, or was the butterfly dreaming itself Chuang Tzu? Of course, if you take Chuang Tzu and the butterfly together, then there’s a difference between them. But that difference is only due to their changing material forms.”(Roberts 19)
Here through the medium of a dream, the storyteller tacitly blurs the boundary between human and animal, waking and dream. Another story, “The Fish Rejoice”, expresses similar ideas:

“Chuang Tzu and his close friend Hui Tzu were out enjoying each other’s company on the shores of the Hao. Chuang tzu said, “The flashing fish are out enjoying each other, too, swimming gracefully this way and that. Such is their joy!”

“You’re no fish,” Said Hui Tzu. “How can you tell they are enjoying themselves?”

“You’re not Chuang Tzu,” Said Chuang Tzu. “How can you tell I can’t tell?”

“As surely as I’m no Chuang Tzu’ proves I can’t tell,” said Hui Tzu, “You’re no fish’ proves you can’t tell. It’s perfectly logical.”

“May we begin at the beginning?” returned Chuang Tzu. “By asking ‘How can you tell the fish are enjoying themselves?’ you acknowledged I could tell you! And what’s more I can do it from up here!” (125)

These two stories, simple as they are, reflect the Daoist belief that everything shares universal essence (zhi-4) regardless of its physical form. Such conviction reflects Daoist scorn of hierarchy, since anything can be either elevated or demeaned, enhanced or diminished, or translated into another world. In another dream-versus-reality story, “Suited to Be A Fish”, exposes the meaninglessness of so-called “reality” and targets social hierarchy as an object of ridicule. Hsueh Wei, a high-ranking official passes out for
twenty days, during which time he receives an edit permitting him to live life as a fish.

His joy in a fish-world without social roles is boundless:

   Living on dry land and swimming free in the deep are ways apart. Those on land never know the waves unless they love the water.

   Hsueh Wei has expressed a wish to swim and dive, yearning for the leisure of the carefree deep. Finding pleasure in its boundless realm, he would give himself to its pure waters. Tired of high land, he forsakes the mortal world of illusion[...](22)

While the fish have had fun, however, he cannot resist the temptations of the human world in the form of bait. Hsueh Wei’s real-life cook catches him, and Hsueh Wei the fish cries out in vain for help. The highlight of the story is the words that Hsueh Wei shouts to his cook. They ironically poke fun at the vanity and emptiness of human society. As the fish moves its mouth and cries, “I’m an official who is wearing the suit of a fish merely for fun” (23), all the cook cares about is the size of the fish. Hsueh Wei’s second cry is even louder, “I am the deputy assistant magistrate of your own county. I shifted into the shape of a fish and have been swimming through the waters of the kingdom. How can you fail to bow to me” (23). In the end, due to the cook’s limited human senses, and the fish’s stubborn human memory, Hsueh Wei comes back to life, reluctantly, the moment the fish’s head falls. The story implicitly values the pleasures of a “fishy” dream world above the “bad dream” of waking reality.

Aside from those transformations that have been accomplished through dreams, many others are realized through magic spell. Again, taking the seventy-two metamorphoses as an example, we can see the application of many different forms of
magic, such as duplication, petrification, substitution, disappearance, etc. All of these different magic tricks, however, are accomplished by means of a spell, that is, the power of language to do imaginary things. Such a sense of language’s magic can often be found in folklore. The vibrant growth of folk tales, to certain extent, reflects a folk belief in language as agency (Chen 145-57). Similarly, those fantasies that supposedly come into reality through people’s dreams reflect the folk’s attachment to folk tales, because folk tales, indeed, are the wonderland of the people where their complex dreams come true.

Linguist Noam Chomsky concludes that all men share “an innate predisposition to organize their linguistic possibilities in a certain way, thus all men participate in knowledge of some ‘universal grammar’ that enables each one to learn his own language creatively”(Scholes 4). This linguistic theory has a counterpart in the context of folk tales. The “deep structure” of the Chinese folk tale includes formal elements, narrative patterns, contents, motifs, virtually everything the story-teller employs in creating his microcosm. In Chinese folk tales, the macrocosmic ground is the conflict between Daoist popular beliefs and official Confucian “truths.” The microcosmic growth of each and every folk tale is the individual’s creative response to this cultural and ideological background.

This dynamic interplay of a broad culture and individual creativity can be observed in animal stories in Chinese folk tales. In “Man or Beast,” a folk tale that relates how an ancient sage teaches beasts to talk, this idea of nature’s primacy is expressed more straightforwardly. The critique in the tale goes:

“those alike in mind may differ in form. Those alike in form may differ in mind. The sage prefers what is like-minded and ignores what is alike in
form. Ordinary men stick close to what is alike in form and keep their distance from what is like-minded” (Robert 122).

In disapproval of those “ordinary people”, however, the story-teller goes further to point out that “But it is not possible for a man to have a beast’s heart. Yet if he does, he will still be treated well because of his human form […] But it is not impossible for a beast to have a human heart. Yet if it does, men still shun it because of its looks” (122). This statement illuminates the subversive anti-hierarchical outlook of many animal stories. In the same story, the story-teller openly says, “In the most ancient days the beasts lived and moved alongside men. Only in the reign of emperors and kings did they disperse in fear. And now in our own evil times, they lurk in dark places or scurry for safety lest man slay them” (123). Here the Daoist sense is clear: Nothing matches the ferocity of human hierarchy. Human “masters” (those at the top of the hierarchy) are more brutal than beasts. Many animal and spirit stories resonate with similar political and social meanings.

Tiger stories are the best examples of folk tales illustrating these themes of “the man with a beast’s heart,” and “the beast with a human heart.” Traditionally, the Chinese regard the tiger as king of the forest, ruler of the beasts, and therefore analogous to the emperor. “The Tale of the Trusty Tiger”, “The Repentant Tiger of Chaocheng”, “Tiger Boys”, and “The Censor and the Tiger” are a few stories that present tigers in exceptional ways in order to illuminate truths about human, animal, and supernatural worlds. As readers may observe, in these stories, sometimes the tiger is depicted as a beast with humanity, or as supernatural being or agent from heaven. Sometimes human beings, especially the ruling class, are rendered as fierce beasts without the least trace of
humanity. The audience can hardly fail to see the allegorical implications of these stories and “decode” them.

“The Tale of the Trusty Tiger” and “The Repentant Tiger” are stories of tigers as “beasts having human hearts”. In the first story, the tiger saves the life of a woodsman, and goes on to maintain a natural bond with the man. Abiding by his oath to repay the beast, the woodsman later risks his life to reward his animal friend. In the second story, a tiger eats an old widow’s son. Conforming to the human judicial order to make compensation, the tiger then assumes the role of the old widow’s child and supports her until she dies. Ironically, the old widow is better supported by the tiger. As the story tells us, “and so the woman became quite well-to-do---far better cared for than when her son was alive” (101). This comment implies that when animals possess the “human” virtues, regardless of their physical forms, they are as worthy of praise as comparable human beings. Perhaps virtue is not the sole prerogative of human beings. So-called human virtues are, in fact, universal in nature. It follows that just as beastly behavior can be found in human beings, so the nominally human virtues can be found in the bestial world. The Daoist conclusion is that physical forms don’t matter, what is significant is the inner quality that all creatures equally share.

The “Tiger Boys” touches upon the animal-human transformation, which ultimately gives rise to the Daoist emphasis on inner qualities instead of appearance. This outrageous tale describes how the three sons of an old peasant change into tigers, and become man-eating because, as they explain, “we are not acting of our own free will. The highest in Heaven compels us” (103). However, it turns out that “the highest in Heaven” puts the tiger boys’ father on the list of victims, and orders them to kill him. The tiger
boys have to play a trick in order to save their father’s life. In this story, it is interesting to look at the rationale behind the plot. When the three sons act freely, not in control of the “highest in Heaven”, they enjoy a harmonious relationship with their father. It is only upon assuming the role of “agents of the highest in Heaven” (code for the emperor), that they acquire the tiger’s taste for human flesh. The (imperial) “decree of the highest in Heaven” interrupts the natural family bond between a father and his children. Even the story-teller is incredulous: “How the Highest could let the boys’ own father be on their list of victims is beyond me” (103). Even tigers, though, are compassionate and filial. Despite their change in appearance, the tiger boys still love their father. They finally resort to a subterfuge (they dress their father in three skins) that allows them to save his life while they nominally fulfill the edict (each son “takes a skin”). To me, this particular folk tale makes a Daoist affirmation of Natural Law’s precedence over the “official order.” It condemns any official hierarchy which would destroy a natural human relationship. Heart (zhì) is more important than formality (xìng).

Another tiger tale “The Censor and the Tiger” tells the story of how a corrupt official is unable to maintain his human form due the crimes he has committed, and “devolves” into a man-eating tiger. Ten years before the story begins, a corrupt official disappears while on his way to accept a promotion. In the story, the formerly corrupt official, transformed into a man-eating tiger encounters his former friend, the censor. The tiger/official regains his conscience and confesses his sinful past. Ironically, the man-eating beast is less dangerous than the formerly corrupt official. As the Chinese proverb has it, ke zheng meng yu hu: Tyranny is fiercer than a tiger, and nature is less fearsome
than bureaucracy. When women are placed as the center of this tyranny, it only seems
crueler.
Chapter Three

Feminist Themes

Joining in the politically powerless, Daoists often use the folk tale transgressively as a medium of social commentary and critique. This subversive nature of Daoism comes into sharp focus when we look at women in Chinese folk tales. However women’s subservient roles may be defined by Confucian reality, the female characters that we encounter in folk tales are brilliantly courageous and intelligent. Generally the audience feels sympathy for those who rebel against authority; and women of exceptional strength are celebrated. In folk tales, this appreciation of strong female characters runs counter to the Confucian ideal of female subservience.

Mulan, the Yang “Simulatrix”

Mulan is a brave woman warrior who willingly takes her father’s place on the battlefield and achieves one victory after another. The story’s historicity is problematic, and many variations of the Mulan story have appeared since the first ballad, “Ode of Mulan.” The general belief is that the original Mulan was from the region known as the Central Plains of China in approximately the fifth or the sixth century. Mulan may not have been as great a military figure as the tales say, but the interest she has received as a woman warrior mirrors people’s ideals and expectation of women in a time of turmoil. The fact that she has never been recorded in official history books does not affect people’s telling and retelling of her story as means of entertainment and moral education to the young.
Adding to the recent popularity of this tale is the Disney adaptation, which contributes in its own way to the continuing enrichment of the story. The Disney *Mulan* incorporates changes reflective of a Western, "orientalizing" sensibility. For example, very rarely has Mulan's love and marriage figured in the Chinese tales. In the Disney animated movie, however, it is not only touched upon, but made one of the central themes. Another Disney invention is the addition of Mushu (the name a racist "play" on Chinese cuisine), the dragon, a pet-like figure, as Mulan's companion. In Chinese civilization, dragons are deeply symbolic and serious creatures, not mere pets. The dragon is engraved in the country's social and political structure, as a symbol of imperial power (emperors are deified as the descendants of dragon), and sons of heaven (emperors have the same pedigree). In consequence, in this a westernized version of *Mulan*, we can see, on the one hand, the flexible, living and expansive nature of the folk tale when transplanted in other cultural grounds. On the other hand, Disney's changes consistently involve misunderstandings of and insensitivity to the story's cultural roots. (This is sanguine way of putting it. A less generous view would see them as blatantly racist.)

The love plot and the dragon companion are both absent in the earlier tales. In the Chinese versions, although people adore Mulan for many different reasons (her strength, for example, as well as her determination, respect for the elderly, and filial piety), her extraordinary, radical male disguise is what most contributes to her legendary stature. Here I believe two factors in particular contribute to her special place: first, taking her father's place raises her status from young child to qualified substitute for the older generation. Age matters greatly in the Confucian hierarchy, and eliminating the generation gap indicates competence of the young. Secondly, Mulan's entrance into and
excellence in the heretofore male domain of martial arts show her to be the equal of any man. The plot of Mulan undermines the Confucian ethos by showing that a woman, too, can be yang.

Mulan as yang "simulatrix" doesn't just embody women's courage and skill at the martial arts (traditionally arenas of male dominion), but also female wisdom, which is not inferior, either. For thousands of years in Chinese tradition, the saying "no talent is women's greatest virtue" has been proverbial, and reflects orthodox expectations of woman. Should they have no talent at all, women would be more obedient to their superiors, and accepting of their fate. However, in Chinese folk tales, a surprising number of stories eulogize females who are more talented and clever than their male counterparts. Given the Confucian teaching that "those who work with their brains rule and those who work with brawn are ruled," this female intellectual competence mirrored in Chinese folk tales is actually just as important as the Mulan's physical competence. Mulan's intellectual power subversively asserts female equality not just with the male, but with the superior male, the one who rules.

"The Clever Daughter-in-law" is a story well known in almost every household in China. It is about a tea shop owner's clever daughter-in-law, who solves her father-in-law's difficult riddles and finally outwits the local governor and saves the family fortune. Jang Guo-lau, the tea shop owner, has three sons, all of whom have bad qualities, such as stupidity, bad tempers, and laziness. The wives of the two elder sons are just as stupid, since "(they) were raised in accordance with traditional belief that men commanded and women obeyed" (Chin, Center, and Ross 4). As a result, all they can do is "help their mother-in-law with the household work and do as they are told without complaint" (4). A
wise man himself, Jang Guo-lau is quite disappointed in his offspring, sons and daughters-in-law alike. Therefore when time comes for him to find a daughter-in-law for his youngest son, he hopes not for a beauty with a wealthy father. "It would not disturb me if she came from another village. I would not reject her if she were a little older than the boy. But she must be intelligent" (4). Phoenix, a girl of extraordinary wit and wisdom, meets the requirement and becomes his third daughter-in-law. Entrusting all his business to Phoenix's management, Jang is happy to see that the family has experienced prosperity and wealth unimaginable before. When a haughty local governor learns of the family's good fortune, he becomes jealous and tries to frame the old man. Again, it is Phoenix who ingeniously solves the governor's riddles and restores the whole family fortune. It is interesting to look at the description of how the governor reacts to his failure: "the prefect was speechless. Fuming and fretting for the rest of the day, he canceled all official business and refused to see anyone. To think that he had been outwitted by a mere woman! It was degrading"(14). However, from Jang's perspective, "he realized that of all his money and wealth, the greatest treasure he possessed was his clever daughter-in-law"(14). Also worth noting is the difference between the official's viewpoint and that of common people. In this intellectual competition, Phoenix first outwits the three stupid sons, to Jang's expectation and satisfaction. Then Phoenix outwits the official, much to the official's regret but to the old man's pleasure and pride. In this folk tale, the ordinary people in effect recognize women's equality and even superiority in the intellectual sphere. And the fact that Phoenix goes to the local office and wins over the official there actually implies the folkloric recognition of woman's
public voice at a time period when women were supposed to be confined to their female chambers.

Mulan and Phoenix both represent the strength of yang but they achieve their yang identity in different domains. Mulan defeats her male counterparts physically. Phoenix, in her genuine female voice, overpowers her male counterpart at the intellectual level. However, in the orthodox tradition, both of them are praised for their filial piety, family value, and their “female sex virtues”. For instance, Mulan is regarded as a good daughter, who would sacrifice herself for her father’s life and her family’s reputation. Phoenix, on the other hand, is considered a good wife and daughter-in-law, who as part of a big family performs her womanly duty well through her wisdom. It is in the folkloric tradition that their transgressions of gender boundary are implied, recognized and applauded. It is fair to say that both the literary and non-literary tradition, the orthodox Confucianists and the opposing Daoists, treat the materials of folk tales from their preferable angle, picking and fostering their suitable values respectively. But undeniably, even though Daoism is not the mainstream voice in Chinese culture, it is, however, the predominant voice in Chinese folk tales, for the reasons demonstrated at the beginning of my thesis.

**Li Chi, The Yin “Simulatrix”**

In folk tales, Daoist ideas tend to validate women’s rebellion against authority. In “Li Chi Slay the Serpent”, a young girl eleven years of age, bravely kills a monstrous serpent by offering herself as a sacrifice. By consciously manipulating her yin or subservient public role, she challenges evil itself as well as traditional female constraints.
Readers may be struck by the different ways Li Chi speaks to her parents and to the dead girls after she slays the serpent. When speaking to her parents, Li Chi is a conventionally meek daughter who is well aware of her worthlessness. She says to them, "[...] (as daughter) I cannot take care of you in your old age; I only waste your good food and clothes. Since I'm no use to you alive, why shouldn't I give up my life a little sooner" (Roberts 130). Similarly, when in contact with others, Li Chi’s words exemplify the conviction that girls are useless and inferior. On her own, however, she cleverly plans and masters her fate. While alone at the serpent’s cave, she comments on the slaughtered girls, “For your timidity you were devoured. How pitiful” (131). When she goes against her parents’ will, killing the serpent and then collecting the dead girls’ skulls, Li Chi reveals her real character to be quite the opposite of her public image. After her heroic exploit, Li Chi marries the king. But this happy ending reflects public approval of Li Chi’s heroism rather than (apparently) conventional submissiveness. When Li Chi is allowed to have a public voice, she speaks the way she is supposed to. Li Chi’s stereotypically feminine public persona is as dissimulative as Mulan’s male disguise. Both devices enable the women to transgress into the male domain. Whereas Mulan wears a Yang mask to overpower male dominance on its own terms, Li Chi, wears a subversively Yin mask subversively to overcome male authority. Like a modern feminist separatist, Li Chi only expresses her true voice in the female domain of the cave, and she is celebrated for this in the folk tale.

Similar to Li Chi’s story, there are many Chinese folk tales that share the basic plot of an evil supernatural being forcing the common people to sacrifice annually. Usually, women, typically young girls are the sacrificial victims. To me, these stories
reflect historical injustices to which young women have been subjected. In one type of story, a monstrous supernatural being endowed with human qualities threatens to destroy a people unless they provide him with a number of young girls to satisfy his voluptuous appetite. Typically, the demon is an animal spirit, for example, a serpent, scorpion, or other beast. It rules over people, and enjoys their worship and sacrifice. However, when a hero defeats it, the demon resumes its original form. There are a number of structural elements here. First of all, a beast is deified. In a country that has long tradition of worshipping dragons as symbol of imperial power, the image of a reptile is particularly symbolic, since snakes and serpents are usually associated with dragons, or nicknamed “little dragons”. Even if the animal is not reptile, usually it is the ruler of its species. Thus the demon, to a certain degree, may represent the highest ruler of a social hierarchy, very likely, that of a country. Secondly, young girls are the sacrificial victims. In ancient China, emperors are entitled to keep numerous wives and concubines (so many that some of them might never have an “audience” with the emperor). For a young girl to be conscripted into the imperial palace meant that she would disappear, much like a victim sacrificed to and devoured by a demonic spirit. Finally, when the demon gets hurt or killed, it resumes its original form. This may reflect people’s doubts about the emperor’s divinity. After all, the ups and downs of different dynasties provoke the common people’s suspicion on emperors’ origin as mandate of heaven. When a dynasty is overthrown, the imperial family becomes just as common as any other; and when a new ruler mounts the throne, he will start the “decree of heaven” tale all over again, even though he had been in rags only a few days before. Therefore, in folk tales, a demon’s return to its original form very possibly mirrors the people’s view that feudal rulers, as
divine and mighty as they claim to be, are after all just common people. In fact, since they often have “beastly” hearts, they can be inferior to ordinary human beings.

In Li Chi’s story, she is the one who bravely saves herself from the serpent spirit. In other stories, a male hero generally rescues the female victim, and the female accuses the monster of vicious behavior. This formula of [woman rescued from a monstrous being] + [metamorphosis of monster] is especially prominent in the story of “The Black General.”

The hero of “The Black General” is Kuo Yuan-chen, who on his way back home happens to meet a girl dressed as bride sitting lonely in an abandoned house. Learning that she was forced to marry “the black general”, a demon bringing the local people good fortune or ill, Kuo makes up his mind to get rid of the monster, and save the innocent girl’s life. After an exhausting fight with the black general, Kuo finally seems to have triumphed. The black general turns into a black swine, and the girl is saved. What is unique about this story is that after the fight, instead of showing gratitude, the local people are enraged by Kuo’s deed:

Then the elders grew angry because he had injured their local divinity. ‘The black general is a god that guards this village,’ they said, ‘and we have served him for a long time. Each year we offer him one of our young maids as a mate, and we keep safe and sound by doing so. If the ritual should be delayed, we will suffer storm and hail. By what right does a stranger who has lost his way come to harm our illustrious god and bring down on us his divine violence? What has our village ever done to you to deserve this? (Roberts, 134)
From this passage, we can see the foolishness that is attributed to the local people, specifically the elders, in their blind obedience. Kuo ridicules them by answering, “is he whom you call General a real divinity? Surely no divinity has a pig’s foot! Has heaven ever given its mandate to a lustful demonic beast? Indeed, is not such a beast a criminal in heaven as well as on earth” (135). The Daoist undertone is clear: to worship such a beast would be out of harmony with the Way. At the same time, the girl who is saved by Kuo exposes another anti-hierarchical theme by turning upon her people, including her parents and kinsmen, who forced her into the calamity. As sharp as her words are, however, she is still careful to observe female propriety. She says:

I was fortunate to be born a human being and your own flesh and blood. I had never been out of my chambers and surely committed no offense deserving death. Yet for the gain of five hundred strings of copper, I was to be married off to a demon. You were hard-hearted enough to lock me up and leave me behind. Is that what human beings ought to do? If it were not for Master Kuo’s courage and humanity, I wouldn’t be here today. He gave me life; my parents gave me death. It is my wish to go with Master Kuo and never give another thought to my old home. (135)

In her social and cultural context, the girl is clearly just as courageous as Kuo. In her words, her strength is in her implicitly, however, her anger is tangible, and her rebellion is obvious. Furthermore, she then marries herself to Kuo. Bowing to Kuo, she says, “I swore to become your servant” (135). It is in her seemingly servile attitude and humble words that we see a strong woman who is tacitly confronting the authority and taking charge of her own life. Even though she does not have the power to save herself from
adversities, she is brave enough to challenge the authority and decide for her own life. In this regard, the girl is also wearing a yin mask as Li Chi does.

**The Serving Maid: Woman as Embodiment of the Oppressed**

Mirroring reality, many stories straightforwardly depict the victimization and abuse of women under patriarchal dominion. These women are not only powerless but bear the added burden of misfortune. These folk tales do not look down upon the women, but rather express sympathy. They are elegiac.

“Master and the Serving Maid” unfolds the sad story of a woman forced to have an affair with her master while trying to be loyal to her own husband. Having sex with men other than one’s husband has always been considered women’s worst social offense in ancient China. However, none of the various versions of this folk tale condemns the heroine. On the contrary, the serving maid’s compromise is compassionately accepted, and her master gets the reproach he deserves. This story clearly displays a major departure from Confucian orthodoxy. Confucianism asserts male dominion and justifies polygamy: it condones men’s promiscuity while compelling women’s chastity. This story implicitly critiques such belief by exposing the hypocrisy of the sanctimonious upper class.

Another story “The King’s Favorite” shows how men treated women as their pets. When Mi Tzu-hsia, the king’s favorite concubine, is in her prime, anything she does wins the king’s favor, even if it’s socially and legally unacceptable. When, for example, she takes the king’s carriage, a crime that deserves the punishment of foot amputation, the king praises her for “such filial devotion, for her mother’s sake she risked the punishment
of amputation” (Wang, 97). Once, the beauty finds a very sweet peach and, instead of finishing it herself, offers it to the king. To this, the king says, “how she loves me, forgetting the pleasure of her own taste to share with me” (97). However, when her beauty begins to fade, the king’s affection cools. When she offends the king, he says, “didn’t she once take my carriage without permission? And didn’t she once give me a peach that she had already chewed on” (97). This story clearly embodies the upper class’ attitude towards women, and how aristocrats interpret matters to suit their own ends. Short as it is, the story epitomizes the intrinsic hypocrisy of Confucian orthodoxy in regard to women. This story bears great influence upon folk tales of later time and is echoed in many different stories. Commonly, these stories share the theme of a man who seduces and then abandons his woman. Among the multitude of such folk tales, “Story of Ying Ying” is by no doubt the most touching and revealing.

Ying Ying and Chang are cousins who fall in love at a young age. They could have arranged a proper marriage between themselves, but because of his fervent love Chang insists that Ying Ying let him “share mat and pillow”. Her consent results in her tragedy. When Chang passes the Confucius exam and moves to a high position, he cancels all his vows of “faithfulness till death”. In her grief, Ying Ying reproaches Chang in a letter, and then spends the rest of her life in anguish. Eloquent in her speech and in her writing, Ying Ying voices her disillusion and anger at Chang and all other men who betray their love for worldly things “of’ more consequence”.

Interestingly, before each of Ying Ying’s denunciations of Chang and other men, she often uses rhetorical strategy of recognizing her “subordinate status” first. She then exalts male superiority only to expose and undermine it. In fact, this is not only the way
she writes in her letter, but also her code of behavior in daily life. For example, when Chang was courting Ying Ying, she “plays dumb,” although she excels in everything she touches. Also, she is devoted to Chang, but says nothing to show it. This is the customary passive female mask, and Ying Ying tolerates it. In her letter, in the like manner, she says “If you should abandon me after you have corrupted me, I shall not dare to complain, for that has ever been the way with men” (82). Frequently, in her letter, Ying Ying conveys the idea that “this is my fate, there is no use talking about it.” But she “talks about it” at ironically great length. This rhetorical strategy allows her to vent her strong emotions, which she could not express otherwise. When talking about her regrets, she says:

Little did I think that the meeting with my Prince would fail to result in solemn wedlock, and that I would only incur the shame of self-surrender without winning the privilege of openly waiting upon you with your cap and kerchief. This regret that will torture me to the end of my life, I can only sigh over in secret but speak to no one. (84)

Her rhetorical compromise is even more striking when she chooses to denounce Chang’s infidelity and inconstancy in love in the following passage:

But even if you should choose to be like a man of the world, who scorns the voice of the heart and discards things he considers of no consequence for the sake of what he considers to be a real moment, and decide to look upon a former love merely as an accomplice in sin and to regard the most solemn vows as something to be lightly broken---even then my love shall endure as the cinnabar endures the fire and I shall, though my bones be
consumed and my form dissipated, follow the dust of your carriage with
the wind and dew. (84)

Through Ying Ying’s words, a cynical critique is targeted at “men of the world”,
specifically, the Confucian men of the upper world. They will only listen to the “voice of
life” when it is convenient to do so, i.e. when that voice does not threaten their power.
Women, especially unmarried young girls like Ying Ying, are therefore exploited as the
sacrificial victims of an unspeakable plot. Chang demonstrates the hypocrisy of male
dominion in his self defense:

  I have observed that in treating a woman of extraordinary beauty heaven
generally ordains that she shall bring disaster either upon herself or upon
those with whom she is associated. If this daughter of the Tsui family
should meet a man of wealth and rank and bring him completely under her
spell, she would be transforming herself into cloud or rain, into scaly or
horned dragons, and I know not what else. In ancient times, Hsin of the
Yin dynasty and Yu of the Chou dynasty ruled over kingdoms of ten
thousand chariots and their might was great. Yet a woman brought them to
ruin, dissipating their hosts and causing them to die violent deaths, so that
to this day they are the laughing stock of the world. I know that my virtue
is not strong enough to avert the calamities that Heaven has ordained for
such unnatural creatures, and because of this I have suppressed my passion
(85).

In deriding women as licentious (creatures of “cloud or rain”) and “scaly or horned
dragons,” implying the ruin of men physically, Chang conveniently follows the
Confucian argument that women are the cause of disaster. Of course, such argument not only justifies his inconstancy in love, but also elevates his status to a “princely man” (*Junzi*), who can resist the temptation and “corruption” of women in the Confucian tradition.

While lauding such womanly virtues such as diligence, loyalty, and filial piety, Chinese folk tales often pass over the more demeaning expectations of female subservience: for example, obedience, soft speech and chastity. According to the Confucius tradition, women who violate such norms are universally considered worthless. It is clear where the folk tale’s sympathies lie, when it extols women who are physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually strong rather than the servile and obedient. My Yin and Yang categories are based on the different approaches that female characters take to demonstrate their courage, intelligence, and strength. In fact, however, for such strong women, female identity may assume many guises. Even such oppressed female characters as the serving maid and Ying Ying have painfully rebelled against the authority, and struggled for what they believe right. In her passive resistance, the serving maid’s strength is no less formidable than Mulan’s display of martial arts or Li Chi’s resourceful approach to killing the serpent. By defying authority and asserting their female values, Chinese folklore’s female characters consistently show, to various degrees, courage, intelligence, and strength. Depending on the opponent’s force some of them triumph, some of them win worldly recognition, and many are left unnoticed, or silent. Folk tales give voice to a strong female sensibility, which makes it possible for all people to carry on from generation to generation.
The Yin or “Feminist” Male: Men in Subservient Roles.

Naturally, women are neither enemies of men nor the exclusive victims of the Confucian order. When men are literally subject to a higher order, for instance, parents’ will or superior’s command, their status becomes reduced as well. Many such images of victimized males can be found in love stories, when a man elects not to conform to Confucian expectations but freely to pursue love and marriage. The four greatest Chinese folk tales, “Cowherd and Weaving Maid, Meng-Jiang Nyu, Liang Shanbo and Ju Yingtai, and The White Snake, all love stories, present to us folkloric figures, male and female, who freely pursue love” (He 46). Interestingly, these four folk tales share very similar motifs. First of all, all of the couples, in the folk tales fall in love not through families’ arrangement, but out of their own choices. (This is with the exception of Meng-Jiang Nyu, who “accidentally” marries her husband because he saw her exposed skin, but since she falls in love with him at the first sight, she accepts the marriage willingly).

Consequently, these couples’ choices, while at the presence of an authority, inevitably and invariably lead to their similar tragic endings---none of them have achieved their desired union; or if they ever do, is in the other world. All of the four folk tales conclude with either separation or death. And male victimization is usually part of the sacrifice.

In the story of Cowherd and Weaving Maid, the marriage of a common cowherd and the weaving maid --- the daughter of the Jade Emperor, is prevented by order of heaven. This to me signifies the common folk’s realization of an unbridgeable gap that exists in a strictly hierarchical society. In the end, heaven compels the couple to separate. The Milky Way lies between them, so that they can only meet once a year. The cowherd is then left in despair, waiting for the reunion with his wife, and he has the heavy burden
of house chores and raising their children. Ironically, the cowherd is victimized in two different senses: first, in submitting to the superior power, he must suffer for transgressing social class and free choice in love and marriage; secondly, on a more quotidian level, he has to shoulder the womanly tasks of life. Both the Daoist and the Confucianist would agree that the cowherd is victimized here, but for exactly opposite reasons.

The story of Meng-Jiang Nyu exposes more directly the despairs of male subordination to superior power. The male victimization is clearer: An imperial conscript to hard labor, Meng-Jiang Nyu's husband dies while toiling to build the Great Wall. In the effort to find her husband, Meng-Jiang Nyu treks all her way to the construction site, only to learn that he is already dead. Her tears flood the Great Wall and expose the bones of her husband. Various versions of the tale have different endings, all characterized by the heroine's revenge-attempt against the emperor. The recognition of the hero/heroine's effort to rebel against authority is a common motif in all the four folk tales. In this particular story, the male victimization is a sub-theme that is actually intend to portray Meng-jiang Nyu's constant love, daunting courage, and rebellious spirit.

Similarly, in the famous folk tale Liang Shanbo and Ju Yingtai, the hero chooses to die together with his lover, in passive resistance to their family, when it refuses to countenance their relationship. The sad yet beautiful ending of the story bears an interesting resemblance to Chuang Tzu's butterfly dream, since the young couple also transform to a pair of butterflies flying out of their grave. To die for love is to enter a dream world Of course it also reflects the common people's helplessness in reality when facing imposing tyrannical power. As common folks, male and female alike are obliged
to obey those who hold higher official posts. However, obedience doesn’t necessarily guarantee the peaceful life they long for; and rebellions are oftentimes their only choice, and often end tragically.

The combat between lovers and their superiors in the story of White Snake carries this conflict between the Confucian order and natural love to the realm of human-animal relations. The love that is shared profoundly between Xiuxian and the white snake spirit is interfered with by a monk, Fahai, who deems intermingling of human race and animal spirit profane. Ultimately this interference leads to the battle between the monk and the white snake. In different versions, either the monk or the white snake wins the battle, thus gaining possession of Xu's spirit. However, in either case the white snake wins the folk's approval. She is applauded if she triumphs, but if the monk wins, he is upbraided for his officiousness and our sympathies are extended towards the white snake. The price of Xu's subordinate status is the loss of his lover. However, when compared to his lover, the white snake, his characterization is weaker, more passive and obedient.

Despite the presence of male victims, women are still the central figures in these four, most widely known stories. For example, the death of Meng-Jiang Nyu’s husband is to mark the heroine’s persistence and constancy in love; Xu xian’s cowardliness is to depict the White Snake’s rebellious strength. The general recognition of the four folk tales as the greatest indicates the common folkloric trend and public opinion. Therefore, the motif of male victimization, from a different angle, in fact, proves to contribute to the more universal feminist theme in folk tales.

Throughout the long history of China's feudal society, women were consistently at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Not only had they been denied their political and
economical rights, but also they were denied the freedom of choice in love. Facing such truth, they live desperately, on the one hand, in a dead-end reality. On the other hand, the intense desire for freedom, first and foremost, freedom of choice in love, has long been ignited in their hearts, entrenched in which the strength of endurance and rebellion. It is not a coincidence that all of the four folk tales are all love stories. For one reason, love stories, naturally, are the long-lasting theme that manifests the general interest of human lives. For another reason, only in love stories can these female characters’ most basic and essential need in life be voiced. Unreachable in real life, the vent for their imaginary ideal finds its path into the folk tales, the world of artistic and creative impulse for the folk. As a result, the ideal images in folk tales concentrate the ideal virtues: they are intelligent, courageous, and rebellious. For example, the heroines in these four folk tales all face different sorts of power: divine, imperial, or familial oppression. But they nevertheless fight persistently against fate, which in turn, gains them folk recognition.

The Wizard’s Lesson: Daoist Compromise

According to the Daoists, the artifices of civilization only lead people away from the original and benign state of nature. Thus at one blow the Taoists shattered the fundamental premise of the Confucian order: the social hierarchy founded on hereditary right.

The Dao’s authority is absolute; it transfers no authority to what it creates—quite unlike the Confucian heaven, which gives its “son” the emperor a mandate to rule. As destroyer, Tao gathers up again all it has produced; none of its myriad creatures can transfer influence, property, or status beyond its ordained time.

Moss Roberts

*Chinese Fairy Tales and Fantacies*
However, for all its vitality, Daoism is ultimately subversive: the Confucius ethos is dominant in Chinese civilization. It is the voice of ideological authority and has an invisible power of censorship. At times it compels its opponents to resort to ambiguity, innuendo, paradox, and compromise. “The Wizard’s lesson” employs the last of these. To achieve the Daoist ideal of “rising beyond the human state to be an immortal” (Roberts xviii), Tu Tzu-Chun is tested by a Daoist wizard subjects himself to a sequence of ordeals under a “vow of silence”. In my understanding, this metaphorical vow symbolizes Daoists’ retreat into a reclusive way of life under the reign of their opponents. However, having gone through various hardships (which include being tortured, witnessing the death of his wife, and “degrading” rebirth as a female), Tu finally collapses into tears and breaks the vow when “her” son, the future of her ancestral line, is destroyed. The Daoist compromise reflected in this story lies in Tu’s recognition of the significance of family ancestral lines, and the inferiority of women. The Daoist wizard is destined to continue his search fruitlessly for the right person, for nobody in the mundane (and Confucian) world will succeed at immortality. The Chinese audience is deeply aware both of the Daoist frustration and helplessness in the face of Confucian authority.
Folk tales, when being put into focus in relation to myth from a structuralist approach, open up new channels to their cultural codes hidden in their textures.

According to Scholes, myths, folk tales, and fairy tales are especially important for literary and cultural studies, because they are "prototypes of all narrative, the ancestors and the models of later fictional developments" (Scholes 60). He states that "myth is the part of language where the formula tradittore, tradittore {translator, traitor} reaches its lowest truth value," since "the mythical value of the myth is preserved even through the worst translation." Apparently, such theory applies to folk tales as well, since the structure of a folk tale can be also well preserved. Scholes remarks:

[A] myth is a kind of message in code from the whole of a culture to its individual members. As long as a culture remains homogeneous, a particular myth will continue to have validity for it, and new versions of the myth be simply aspects of the same message. The code can be broken and the message deciphered if we arrange its mythemes in the proper way, which is not simply in the narrative order of their transmission to us. (69)

These statements place an emphasis on the affinity between the very deep mythical root and its fruit, a massive body of folk tales. Between the root and the product, the trunk absorbs and passes on nutrition from cultural, ideological and religious. The confrontation of China’s two main ideologies, Confucianism and Daoism is dramatized in the Chinese folk tale. As Scholes put it, "the myth stands behind these materials, which always reach us in some modified form, and must be reconstructed from them"(68). The
profound truth that lies in the philosophical contemplation of China's two main ideologies, Confucianism and Daoism, is made palpable within the easy reach of folk tales. Of course, in the folk tales themselves, "thematic materials reflect the presence of two rather different forces, one from the immediate environment of the writer, the other from the literary tradition in which he writes" (78). This further analysis offers us a symbol of folkloric development, in the form of a family tree. This symbol incorporates a larger set of terms, including history, linguistics and fiction technicalities and systematizes the reading and study of folk tales. After distinguishing between story and plot ("[T]he story is the raw materials of the narrative, that is, the events in their chronological sequences. The plot is the narrative as actually shaped"), Scholes goes on to conclude that "the facts of life are to history as the story is to the plot. History selects and arranges the events of existence, and the plot selects and arranges the events of story" (80). Such an analogy contributes to my view that the origins, and development of folk tales can best be approached in the cultural context and holistically.

Folk tales are precious cultural resources. From ancient times, people have been entertained, fascinated, pacified and educated by folk tales. In China, a country historically without a God-centered, revealed religion, ideologies exert great impact on people's way of thinking and living. Easy in its narrative form, free in its style, folk tales have been embedded with such ideological messages, and therefore, have become an extremely important medium for the broadcasting of values. In the world of folk tales, we find not only aesthetic beauty, but also practical value. Also, folk tales keep our imagination alive, and are a resource for later generations as they tell and re-tell their life
stories. My favorite passage from Scholes, nicely sums up this sense of the Chinese folk tale:

Life approaches narrative art in this respect precisely to the extent that we live in accordance with a philosophy sufficiently deterministic to allow us the comforting belief that everything that happens is planned, significant, designed. This is precisely the appeal of many religions---they allow us to think of our lives as divinely planned fictions. (101)
Works Cited


