

A Comparative Study of Three Chinese and North-American Indian Folktale Types*

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No systematic effort at comparing Chinese and North-American Indian folk narratives has appeared in print since the publication of Gudmund Hatt's *Asiatic Influences in American Folklore* in 1949. American archaeologists have recently discovered more reliable evidence of pre-Columbian migrations from Asia to North America, and in the last few years, historians in the People's Republic of China have joined the investigation, making their views and findings known to readers in the West.¹ Another effort to examine Chinese and Amerind folk literature, therefore, may not be superfluous. This essay does not mean to emulate the comprehensive survey by my eminent predecessors (Erkes 1915: 32-53; Hatt 1949: 73-78, 89-90). It is simply an attempt to supplement our knowledge of the subject by comparing three apparently analogous Chinese and Amerind tale types that have attracted my attention.

SMEARING THE BELL

The first of these folktale types deals with clever detection. The Chinese versions are listed in my *Type Index* under type 926E*, entitled "Smearing the Bell (Wall)" (Ting 1978: 148-149). It must have first appeared in China at least as early as the Song dynasty (960-1279), for it was recorded as a real story in a work by Shen Gua (1029-1093). Chen Shugu (1017-1080), when serving as a magistrate in Prefecture Pucheng of Fujian province, the story goes, tells a group of suspects rounded up for possible thievery of a plaintiff's private property that the bell in a temple is endowed with magical power. If a thief touches it, it will ring; if an innocent person touches it, it will remain silent. He places the bell behind a curtain and secretly orders his constables to

paint the bell all over with Indian ink. Then he commands each suspect to thrust his hand behind the curtain and stroke the bell, and examines their hands one by one. One man alone has clean hands; this man is questioned and confesses the theft.² As has been observed of other Chinese tale types, this narrative developed from a legend into a tale with the name of the magistrate either varied or omitted.³ Modern versions have also introduced other details, together with variations on the nature of the crime and methods of detection. The most interesting version is the one from Tibet, where a grand lama is first invited to solve the case by the puzzled population, but fails. Then the case is taken up by a local clever man. The local wit uses the same method as in the Han-Chinese versions. The culprit is caught and the loot is discovered in his house (Tian 1961: 199–200).

In North America, Jack London seems to have been the first person to record this tale. In his *Children of the Frost*, one of those collections of stories about what the author supposedly experienced or learned during his trip to the Klondike, London tells us of an Indian woman losing a blanket and inviting a "most terrible" shaman from a neighboring village to help pin down the thief. The big shaman, however, blames the wrong man, and the population has to turn to a local, hitherto disgraced, shaman for help. The Magus puts a raven, "The Jelchs," under a big black pot in a dark room and commands every villager to enter the room, place his hand on the pot, and leave it there for some time. When the thief touches the pot, the shaman declares, the Jelchs will cry out. When the test is over, the raven has stayed quiet but one man is found to be clean-handed. He is the thief and the blanket is recovered in his house (London 1902: 83–103). Another version very similar to this one was recorded by Richard Chase, who heard it at Beech Creek, North Carolina. The detective is now an old preacher, and the bird placed under the pot is a rooster. The man whose hands are not black from soot when the lights come back is ordered to return the money and presumably does so (Chase 1956: 55–56).

This tale type is not registered in either the *Types of the Folktale* (Aarne and Thompson 1961) or the *Motif Index* (Thompson 1955). To my knowledge it has not been discovered in any area other than China and North America. From its distribution in China and the locations mentioned in the earlier Chinese versions, one may surmise that the Chinese redaction probably originated in the province of Fujian. The close resemblance between the Tibetan version and Jack London's account may be due to the probability that the Tibetan version preserves the oldest features. Many Han-Chinese tale types with historical versions—in fact many subtypes of AT type 926, "The Judgement of

Solomon"—have been located in Tibet, and peripheral versions, as we all know, may come closer to the urform than those circulating in or near the place of origin. As for the two American versions, the one in Jack London appears to be based on a genuine Indian tale, though not claimed as such and mingled with many irrelevant details. Chase's version is not likely to be of European origin, since it is difficult to imagine a Christian or Jewish clergyman attributing such supernatural power to a fowl and his audience believing the claim. The resemblances between the versions from Tibet and the Klondike include the disgrace of a renowned holy man and his replacement by a local wise man at the beginning of the tale, the unusual method of detection at the middle, and the recovery of the stolen property at the end. The only important difference—the disparity in the alleged supernatural agent used for detection—may not be a real deterrent since in both pre-Buddhist Chinese mythology and Alaskan folklore the raven was the great, miraculous bird (Erkes 1915: 33–34, n. 4), and the switch to the bell in China may have come later through Buddhist influence. As this tale type has not been found outside of China and North America, such remarkable similarities may be regarded as evidence for cultural diffusion.

THE FOX WIFE

The second tale type discussed in this paper concerns the fox wife or paramour and has been recorded among the Eskimos. The three sources that I have used—Boas (1901: 224–226), Thompson (1929: 161–162), and Rink (1875: 427–428, no. 83)—all tell of a fox woman coming voluntarily to a man without apparent reason. In the Boas and the Thompson versions, he finds her cooking for him in his tent, takes her fox coat, and then marries her. In the Rink version, this motif of the mysterious housekeeper (N831) is not very clear, for he just finds her standing outside of his tent. After some time, she leaves him. The reason for her departure is his referring to her body odor in Thompson and Rink, or his exchanging her temporarily for somebody else's wife as in Boas. In the latter she refers voluntarily to the "bad smell" of her skin, which does not appear to bother him. In both Boas and Rink, the husband then searches for the woman and finds her in her fox hole, where he sees many insects and worms. The Eskimo redaction consists thus of the following motifs: B651.1 (marriage to fox in human form), N831 (the mysterious housekeeper), D361.1 (the swan maiden), a variant of C35.1 (tabu: offending animal wife by mentioning her smell), and D361.1.1 (swan maiden finds her hidden wings and resumes her form). A barely developed motif, H1385.3 (quest for vanished wife or mistress), follows in two versions, but is inconclusive as it leads to a realistic

description of a fox hole.

The fox wife or paramour, as is well known, abounds in classical Chinese literature, and one might thus expect Chinese folklore to provide many analogues to the above. The enchanting fox woman who condescends to mix with an earthly man in literary productions from the Tang to the Qing dynasty, however, is usually a fairy in the broader sense of the word. Some of these stories are legends based on popular beliefs; most of them, though, appear to be stories of real men and real women whose names or identities had to be kept secret. Few of them ever refer to the real animal nature of the fox, such as the fur, the tail, or the smell, or exhibit the swan maiden motif. None of them, to my knowledge, makes the fox woman do the chores for the man on the sly until she is discovered. The mysterious housekeeper *par excellence* in ancient Chinese literature is a fairy in the form of a snail (a mixture of F300 [marriage or liaison with fairy] and D398 [transformation: snail to person]), who allegedly blesses a poor man early in the Jin dynasty (265–419 A.D.).⁴ Tales about her and her likes (registered in my book as 400C, "Snail Wife") seem to be based on genuine folk tradition. This motif obviously would not be appropriate for rich families which could not be short of female servants. In fact, among the versions of the group (all genuine oral tales) in my index (type 400D), where I have dumped all the other animal wives, only six feature the fox wife and only five describe her also as a mysterious housekeeper. Out of these five, in two she leaves her husband because he calls her a fox,⁵ in one for no reason at all (Jameson 1932: 95–97), and in still another because of the accomplishment of her duties toward him (Xie 1973: I, 121–128). All these have been recorded among the Han-Chinese in different parts of China. The fifth version, recorded among the Owenk people in Northeastern China, may seem to deserve more attention because of its geographic location. In this version, however, the supernatural wife never leaves her husband, but lives on happily with her family (Sui 1959: 94–95). In terms of motifs, these Chinese oral tales also possess B651.1, N831, and D361.1. In all but one, the fox woman also finds her original coat and flees (D361.1.1). As to the reason for her departure, two versions use C35.1 exactly as it is given in the *Motif Index*, that is, because of the man mentioning her origin. The search, H1385.3, is but briefly suggested in one story (Xie 1973: I, 121–128).

The above data do not seem to offer firm support for any theory regarding possible Sino-Amerind affinity as regards this tale. The resemblances between the Chinese and the Eskimo versions are certainly very considerable. But the Chinese redaction has been sinicized: the

fox wife shows no animal feature except for her coat, and she gives birth to human children (B631)—a motif which Chinese raconteurs generally attach to supernatural wife yarns. The Eskimo redaction represents, on the other hand, an earthier or less fanciful tradition. The abundance of literary tales in classical Chinese literature is not likely to prove helpful to the researcher because, in them, B651.1 (marriage to fox in human form) is usually submerged under F300 (marriage or liaison with fairy), and few such accounts seem to have any folk origin.

Since the fox wife and the mysterious housekeeper are both quite popular motifs in North Asia and other parts of East Asia in addition to China, a more thorough investigation of the lore of these areas is a *must* before any meaningful conclusion can be drawn. In spite of the enthusiasm of Hatt (1949:101-102) and Jameson (1932: 100-102), I do not feel like pushing any farther. My only suggestion is that these Chinese and Eskimo as well as some other Asian versions of the fox wife story that I have come across⁶ are built essentially around the same motifs and appear to form a coherent cluster. They should be regarded as a regional type, perhaps a truncated sub-type of the much more complex and fully-developed type 400, "The Man on a Quest for His Lost Wife." Should there be another effort at revising the *Types of the Folktale*, I hope this suggestion might be taken into consideration.

THE FORGOTTEN WORD

The third tale type included in this paper is type 1687, "The Forgotten Word," a tale known almost all over the world. Its best told and most detailed Amerind versions hail from the Zuni. In the three Zuni tales I have managed to read (Coffin 1961: 83-85; Cushing 1901: 255-261; Parsons 1918: 222-225), a coyote hears the locusts (or one locust) sing, thinks the song will make a pretty lullaby, and wishes to learn it. The obliging locusts allow him to sing it with them again and again, and he finally learns it. But, on his way back home he falls into a mole hole, forgets the song, and has to return to the locusts. The relearned song is lost again when he stumbles over a plant, or at the intrusion of a flock of pigeons. In two of the three versions (Cushing 1901: 255-261; Coffin 1961: 83-85) he meets with two more accidents (again because of a mole hole and a plant). After his last mishap, the locusts lose patience and go into hiding. The angry coyote tries to attack them, but merely injures himself. This is why, according to one version (Cushing 1901: 261), the coyote has broken teeth and, according to the two others (Coffin 1961: 85; Parsons 1918: 225), locusts can be found at Wempo whereas coyotes dwell at Kosenakwi. Broken down into motifs, this tale apparently consists of J2671 (the forgetful fool), J1064 (futility of

trying to teach the stupid), D2004.5 (forgetting by stumbling), and A2434.3.1 (why locusts live in certain towns). All these motifs except the last one are meant in the *Motif Index* to apply to a foolish man, not animal.

In other areas and among other tribes, this tale appears in simpler and maybe cruder forms. The forgetting happens usually only once. In a version from Acoma, the fool remains a coyote and the object that causes the forgetting is still a hole in the earth (Parsons 1918: 225–227). In a Pueblo story, the coyote just loses the song when he comes close to a pool.⁷ In both, the frustrated predator finally gives up the ghost. Elsewhere, the coyote changes into either a rabbit or a woman. In a Chitimacha version, the rabbit forgets an important message entrusted to him by God after a tragic stumbling and fall, and brings death to men (Swanton 1917: 476). In a Crow version, a woman who has learned a fatal message—a warning to her brother of impending death—from a woman visitor, forgets it four successive times because of the interruption of household duties. After the last time, however, she puts a feather left by the visitor in her hair and thus enables her brother to discover the warning, although he still cannot escape death (Lowie 1918: 124–125). In the four versions above, one can see that J2671 (the forgetful fool) and J1064 (futility of trying to teach the stupid) are present or implied, but deemphasized. D2004.5 (forgetting by stumbling) is strong but not repeated at all; it is absent from the Crow tale although the woman there also forgets four times. All of these tales, though, end on the note of death, whether for coyote or man. The Chitimacha tale features A1335.1 (origin of death from falsified message), a well-known motif in mythology.

In contrast, Chinese versions of type 1687 are pure comedy. The earliest account may be dated at least to the Wei dynasty (220–265 A.D.). It tells of a fool learning a funeral chant or lament before going to his father-in-law's funeral. He sings it all the way but loses one of his stockings when fording a river. Then he hears cuckoos sing, begins to imitate them, and forgets the funeral chant. Thus he attends the funeral standing on one stockinged foot and singing "cuckoo." When others laugh, he protests: "Don't laugh! If you have found that other stocking, return it to me" (Handan 1961: 4). In a later, Ming dynasty version, what the fool forgets is the phrase "this is absurd." He loses it after crossing a river and looks for it around the ferry boat. When the ferryman comments, "How can one lose a phrase? This is absurd!", he replies curtly: "If you have found it, why have you not told me sooner?" (Zhao 1961: 214). Modern oral versions are mostly boisterous horseplays. Of the nineteen versions listed in my book, only

two do not follow the Wei dynasty version in identifying the fool as a stupid son-in law.⁸ His wife is not presented as inculcating the lesson to him over and over again, as the locusts have done to the coyote, except in two versions.⁹ But the fool always sings or reads the words aloud all along the way in order to memorize them. The instructions are always domestic or social in nature—either a “ buji ” (weaving loom) which the wife wants to borrow from her parents¹⁰ or polite greetings. The youth usually loses the message because he stumbles and falls, but occasionally this might also be due to curious questioning by other people on the road (Lin 1933a: 128–132, 190–193), the need to relieve himself (Lin 1929–1932: III, 121–124), or his fear when crossing a creek or a river (Lin 1929: 73–76; Qiu 1930: I, 65–66). Sometimes he searches for the lost words everywhere in the open.¹¹ When the lost words are “ buji,” as in most of the cases, however, he believes he is supposed to tell his in-laws of his “ duji ” (hunger). His in-laws are startled by his incessant complaint of hunger, and feed him again and again until by a fluke (such as catching sight of a weaving loom) he remembers the right name and clears up the confusion.

As compared with the North-American Indian versions, the Chinese group evidently neglects J1064 (futility of trying to teach the stupid), but emphasizes J2671. 2 (fool keeps repeating instructions so as to remember them [he usually forgets them]). It centers around the essential motif of D2004.5 (forgetting by stumbling), of course; but it often resorts then to J1920 (absurd search for the lost), and almost always winds up with various forms of N211 (lost object returns to owner) and N400 (lucky accident). The fool not only gets his message across, but is wined and dined. Though perhaps a bit more hilarious than those of many other national groups, the Chinese redaction shows close affinity with several major Asian redactions. Motifs J2671.2 and N211, not conspicuous in the Amerind tales, are both integral parts of the Indic and the Japanese traditions as described by Roberts (Thompson and Roberts 1960: 161) and Ikeda (1971: 267). Another motif characteristic of the Indian tales, J1920, is not uncommon in China, as has been demonstrated. When the name forgotten is also that of a delicious dish and is looked for everywhere on earth, as in a Chinese tale (Lin 1929–1932: III, 121–124), one even finds a peculiarly Indic motif, J1924 (numskull forgets the name of a certain food and thinks that it has fallen into sand). As in the Japanese tradition, though, the fool usually has to be a stupid son-in-law, and the confusion of “ duji ” for “ buji ” in China is reminiscent of the confusion of “ yoisho ” for “ dango ” in Japan. I am not here to compare the Chinese redaction with those of her neighbors, however. I wish only to point out that

the similarities between the Chinese and the Amerind redactions of type 1687 may seem striking at the first glance, but appear much less so upon closer examination. Except for the nucleus, made up of J2671 and D2004.5, these two redactions do not have very much in common.

A more profitable quest may probably be made among European and African versions for the origin and the near relatives of the Amerind tradition. One folktale from what was formerly Rhodesia is a case in point. There, an old woman teaches the lion the name of a fruit, "munjebele." The lion, though, stumbles and forgets it. So does the elephant. The hare alone remembers it because he ties a bell around his neck and its ringing as he falls reminds him of the right word (Smith and Dale 1920: II, 394). Here one finds animals qua characters, multiple forgetting, and perhaps also a mythical motif concerning the origin of a name, all characteristic features of the Amerind redaction.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, of the three analogues discussed in this paper, only the first one (926E* in my book) may be called significant. Because of its unique plot and unusual geographic distribution, genetic relations may be hypothesized with some safety. The margin of safety would be greatly increased if the tale could be proven to have really circulated among the Indians, especially those in the northwestern part of the American continent. The second one (presently part of 400D in my book) may become meaningful after a more thorough investigation of the broader area in which it is known. The third one (AT 1687) only shows that Chinese and Amerind versions are separate redactions of the same tale type.

As is generally acknowledged, comparative folk narrative research of this nature can only aim at plausibility, since indisputable material evidence is very hard, if not impossible, to come by. A study such as this runs an even greater risk since tales generally imply a degree of sophistication and are not likely to have been carried by the early waves of Asian settlers when the two continents were still linked by land. Besides illustrating the difficulty inherent in this type of research, this study may help throw light on a problem common to all students of non-Indo-European folk narratives. Genre and type distinctions, one old theory goes, do not apply outside of the Indo-European zone. This theory is to me partly the result of the indiscriminate use of genre terms by certain authorities in the past¹² and partly the result of the unaccountable urge of some experts in non-Indo-European folklore to classify other narrative genres as folktales—an urge which may still be alive. A careful and faithful comparison of narrative types in different lands

will reveal that non-Indo-European traditions do have real tale types too, even though they may have more legends and myths which should be recognized as such rather than dubbed unjustifiably as tales. What I advocate is therefore a more rigorous application of traditional terminology, not its partial or complete abandonment. The quite extensive use of motifs, which I have found helpful for in-depth analysis, also suggests to me that the *Motif Index*, though leaving much to be desired, will nevertheless remain a useful tool, and international cooperation to improve and supplement it, as some folklorists have proposed, is obviously a desideratum.

NOTES

* This essay is based on a paper presented at the Eleventh International Congress of the Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences on August 16, 1983, in Quebec City, Canada.

1. Gai 1983: 38-40; for a theory of a later Chinese discovery of America, see Fang 1980: 65-66, and a rebuttal of the theory in Luo 1983: 8-9; Professor Turner's recent discovery is reported in *China Reconstructs* 1983: 44-45.

2. Shen 1971: II, 137-138. The same story is also told in slightly different words in Xie Weixin 1971: 1902.

3. In a tale from Feng Menglong (1960: 1404), the name of the magistrate is given as Chen Xiang 陳襄. In another work of Feng's (1955: 21. 12b-13a), where the story appears in slightly different words, the author called him again Chen Shugu 陳述古, a name by which Chen Xiang is generally known. In a Qing dynasty collection (Yongna 1960: 4499) the magistrate's name is omitted. The crime in this version is murder.

4. The earliest record of the Snail Wife (400C in my index) is found in an edition of the *Shoushenji* 搜神記 (In quest for the supernatural) by Gan Pao 干寶 (fl. 317-322 A.D.), according to Li 1962:62. 400.

5. Chen 1932: 54-56; Jameson 1932: 94-95. In the other one without the mysterious housekeeper motif (Lin 1933b: 81-85), the man's mother who keeps her skin calls her a fox demon.

6. For instance, the Riu Chew Island version in Jameson 1932: 97-98.

7. Lummis 1910: 84-86. A Hopi story contains songs of similar nature, but evidently does not belong with this tale type because it has nothing to do with forgetting. (See Voth 1905: 66-68).

8. Gu 1929: 19-23; and Mei 1929: 71-72. The latter actually does not belong in this tale type.

9. Lin 1933a: 19-21, 190-193. This motif is implied in Lin 1929: 73-76.

10. The object is a bamboo basket in Qing 1929: 110-111.

11. Qing 1929: 110-111; Qiu 1930: 65-66; Xie 1973: IV, 151-153; Lin 1929: 73-76; Lin 1933a: 18-19; Lin 1929-1932: III, 121-124.

12. Both Boas and Thompson, for instance, classified obvious Indian myths and legends as "tales."

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