

A Comparative Study of Folklore from Chinese Culture and Western Cultures

A Research Project Report

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<u>Item</u>	<u>Page #</u>
Cover page	i
Approval Page	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Title Page	1
Abstract	2
Thesis content	3-19
References	20-21

Abstract

Folklore, a genre of children's literature, is always considered as one of the most mysterious and interesting genres. Folklore is defined as stories that originated orally and have no authors. Given these qualities, folklore is often considered as a mirror that reflects different groups of peoples cultures and moral values. This study based on existing research results, compared and examined a few classic folktales from Chinese culture and Western culture. The research findings show that there are both similarities and differences of folklores between two cultural systems.

A Comparative Study of Folklore from Chinese Culture and Western Cultures

When one talks about Cinderella or Little Red Riding Hood, one may be very familiar with the scene, the plot or the characters' personalities. One has heard the stories as a child, maybe at school, from family members, or friends. Someone has mentioned that these tales have been told from generation to generation. One may have been amazed by the long history and duration of these tales heard in childhood. But have you ever thought about the messages in Cinderella or Little Red Riding Hood being a universal thing? These tales with striking similar plots or characters were carried on from generation to generation around the world. They were created by people from different ethnic groups in different times. But they all came out with similar plots or values. Is this just coincidence or could there be some inner connection among different cultures?

Folklore, a genre of children's literature, is always considered as one of the most mysterious and interesting genre. Folklore is defined as stories that originated orally and have no authors (Tunne1, Jacobs, Young, 2012). Given these qualities, folklore is often considered as a mirror that reflects different groups of people's cultures and moral values. Folklore has its uniqueness, many researchers have been studied different countries' folklore's cultural values and the meanings carried on from generation to generation (Zhang, 2008). But there are few studies comparing Chinese folklores with folklores from other countries.

Current researches on folklore are often concentrated on its academic achievements, how folklore can be used to help children build their moral world. Some researchers focused on comparing the ancient folklores and modern folklores, studied how the developing of the society and globalization shaped and changed the social values of folklore. There are some researchers who studied Chinese folklores' history, people's interests in folklore and how to salvage Chinese folklore, but no comparison of social values or ideology (Lee. C. & Stevenson,H.W, 1996).

China has become the largest market for free trade, business, language and cultural study place in today's globalized world. China has more than five thousand years of history and the ideology of Chinese is deeply influenced by Confucius; Confucius' philosophy and thoughts are seen most in Chinese folklores; compared to western civilization's ideology, the Chinese have a whole different value system. It is worthy to study the similarities and the differences between Chinese folklore and western folklore. It will help students who are interested in folklore to gain some insight and increase their cultural awareness. By examining the similar and the different social significance of folklore, reflections of human nature and social values, connections can be made to students' real life; it could make the teaching more fun and have ripple effects.

Purpose of statement:

The purpose of the study is to help the writer to gain insight about comparing western folklore and Chinese classical folklore. It also will help students who are

interested in folklore and cultures to know more about the similarities and differences between cultures and increase their cultural awareness. By examining the similarities and the differences between Chinese folklore and Western folklore, children will learn more about their own and others' heritage, moral world, and lifestyles among different cultural groups of people.

Research questions:

The research questions in the study are presented as follows:

Q1: What kind of folklore exists in both Chinese culture and Western cultures?

Q2: What are the similarities and differences between two cultures' folklore?

Q3: What traditional cultural values did Chinese folklore reflect?

Definitions of term:

Folklore: stories that originated orally and have no authors (Tunnell et al., 2012).

Cultural values: cultural identity that affects people's perception and communication

Confucianism: an ethical and philosophical system developed from the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius

Chapter II: Literature Review

Comparing the similarities and differences of folktale from diverse cultural backgrounds is very challenging. Comparing Chinese folktales with western folktales is even more difficult. First, the cultural values and the way of expressing an opinion in China and in a Western culture system, for example, America, are very different, sometimes even opposite. Edwin (2010) defined Chinese culture as collectivism, high-power distance, and *zhongyong* (doctrine of the Mean) which means Chinese people value public and community good more than individual good. There is a clear power distance between people from different social classes, influenced by the philosophy of Confucius and Taoism (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2010). Chinese people desire a sense of harmony and neutral opinions on conflicts. Second, China has more than five thousand years of history and there are several traditional folktales that passed on from generation to generation; many of them not collected in texts; it is hard for systematical study. But research results showed that traditional Chinese tales and cultural values have important impacts on children; it helps to understand Chinese children's academic achievement (Lee & Stevenson, 1996).

Researchers after the mid-1990s on children's literature in China have found that there is growing evidence denoting the changes in the socialization process for Chinese children. Researchers examined Chinese children's decision making in the contexts of peers, schools, and family and found the presence of some Western values, such as individualism and democratic norms were immersed in Chinese children's daily life. A recent comparison study on the topic of children's psychological well-being between

China and America reported that in the urban areas in China, children share some common values with American children. The study results also indicated some Chinese children and their families have been exposed to Western cultures in recent decades (Lee & Stevenson, 1996). These research results showed the importance to compare Chinese folklore and folklore from Western cultures.

Researchers have found that folklore can serve some basic functions in today's education field for every child. Yolen (2004) talked about the four basic functions of folklore in her book *Touch Magic (2004)*. Yolen described the four functions as follows: to provide a landscape for allusion, a way to look at another culture from the inside out, be used for therapy, and a framework or model for an individual's belief system. (Tuckfelt, 2004). Yolen's statement demonstrates the value of the study of folklore. It has practical significance for children in today's society to study their own oral tradition and folklores from other cultures. It can help them develop cultural awareness, and gain some insight about globalization. These tales from both their own culture and other cultures will equip them with the knowledge they need in future competition with people from all over the world.

Some researchers examined tales from different cultures and found there are some themes and characters seen in the tales across different cultures. For example, several cultures have a version of Cinderella. When examining tales from China and Western culture (i.e., America), researchers found that most Chinese folktales are short with

simple plots. The characters in the tales varied from animals to human to magic, and there is a mixture of mythology and history in the stories. When considering traditional American folklores, the Brothers Grimm are the most well-known. American traditional folklores can be categorized as “Once upon a time” (i.e., Little Red Riding Hood), “happily ever after” (i.e., Cinderella) and historical tales with characters like Johnny Appleseed (Virtue, D. C. & Vogler, K. E., 2008).

The common characters found both in Chinese folklore and Western folklore are: royal class, magistrate, wise or foolish man, magic, animals, a good son or daughter, a scholar, and poor people. The common themes are: justice over injustice; wisdom over strength; good wins over evil; cleverness and resourcefulness (Tuckfelt, 2004). These studies provide evidence that comparing folklores from different cultural systems are important and necessary. The studies also prove that contrast and compare, data collecting, and categorization are useful methodologies in the study of folklore.

Chapter III

Purpose of the Study:

Folklore provides a way for people to see and understand life from many different perspectives, both personal and cultural (Virtue & Vogler, 2008). Folklores teach children about their and others' heritage, moral world, and way of behaving. Through the examination of some traditional Chinese folklores and traditional folklores from Western cultures, the following research questions will be addressed: What are some common

tales that exists in both cultures? What are the distinction and similarities between selected Chinese folklores and Western folklores? What traditional cultural values does Chinese folklore reflect?

Methodology:

Sample Study

Six sample tales from Chinese culture and Western culture will be selected for this study. A detailed analysis will be made to the six samples. The analysis will include the summary of the tales; the comparison of characters, the language, and the values and lessons that are revealed from the tales.

Categorize

Based on previous literature reviews on categorizing tales from different cultural backgrounds, a comparative category will be made to the six sample tales that are selected by this study. The six tales will be divided by 3 groups, and the study will focus on the same/similar type of tales, what are the resemblances and uniquenesses revealed by tales from the Chinese culture and Western cultures.

Checklist

Checklist of traditional Chinese cultural values. After reviewing previous literature of Edwin (2010) on core concepts of Chinese culture, a checklist of traditional Chinese cultural values was made. The items of traditional Chinese cultural values summarized

items from previous researches on Chinese society, children and family, e.g. collectivism, high-power distance, *zhongyong*(doctrine of the Mean), etc.

Checklist of Western cultural values. Based on Stouffer's (2010) study of Western values, a checklist of Western cultural values including individualism and low-power distance (Samovar et al., 2010), was cited.

Data Analysis

After studying the sample tales, the similarities and differences between Chinese folktales and Western folktales will be decoded respectively. Combined with the collected data from previous literature reviews, a descriptive study will be presented to answer the questions stated from the previous section of the study.

Limitations of study

It is important to note the limitations of this study. The sample size is quite small. This may be the reason why the classification of the tales from Chinese and Western cultures is not comprehensive. There is a clear limitation to compare the similarities and differences of choice of characters, cultural values, and social functions with such a small sample size. With a larger sample size, future studies may be able to find the similarities and differences of folktales from Chinese and Western cultures in a more synthesized way.

In the study, population/sample was not examined due to the lack of appropriate measure of data and the limited access to children from a Chinese cultural background. It

is worthwhile to access children from both Chinese cultural background and Western cultural background. Children's reading preference of types of folklores indicate the type of cultural values to which they are more exposed. By examining children's reactions to folklores, more evidence will be found to prove the four basic functions of folklores in today's education field (Tuckfelt, 2004).

In addition, the study only studied a few traditional Chinese tales and a few traditional Western tales. The study did not examine different types of folklore in Chinese and Western cultural systems. The study only described some general cultural values presented in folklore from China and Western countries. The study did not examine the changes and fusions of cultural values under the influence of globalization. It is worthy for future researchers to study Chinese folklore and Western folklore for other important characteristics, such as the changes of cultural values in today's world, and the illustrations in stories.

Chapter IV: Results of the Study

In this chapter, five selected folklore samples are presented. The five samples are from both Chinese culture and Western culture. Each group contains two tales from both cultures, and the grouping was based on the similarity of the tales in characters, plot, or values. Some of the tales will be briefly interpreted in this chapter. Both the comparison of similarities and differences are presented. In addition, some of the Chinese tales that represented its unique cultural symbols are stressed as well.

Folklore is a cultural symbol because it reflects different cultures, but many types of folklore always repeatedly appear in folktales around the world. People lived far apart from one another but they might tell amazingly similar tales at the same/different times in different parts of the world. One Russian researcher did studies on the organization and types of fairy tales and he suggested that in spite of very different details, all wonder tales generally can be divided into a few story types (as cited in Zhang, 2008).

Some types of tales that exists in both cultures

“Grandmother Type”

Lon Po Po (Young, 1989) is the Chinese version of Little Red Riding Hood. It talks about three sisters staying home alone and endangered by a hungry wolf who was disguised as their grandmother. The eldest girl thought up a clever plan to save her sisters and herself. The basic plots of *Lon Po Po* and *Little Red Riding Hood* are similar.

Grandma tales are a universal type of tale that were told in all the areas of the world.

Research showed that there were more than 100 types of *Little Red Riding Hood* stories sold in United State (Chen, 1996). The first written form of *Little Red Riding Hood* appeared in 1967, in the book *Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals: Tales of Mother Goose*, by Charles Perrault. . The first *Lon Po Po* tale was collected in the book of *Guan Yu Chu Xin Zhi* (广虞初新志), published in 1803; the book was edited by Huang Chengzeng in the Qing Dynasty. The other *Little Red Riding Hood* tales around the world are all based on

the plot of Little Red Riding Hood and combined with their own cultural symbols or cultural values (Chen, 1996).

Even though *Lon Po Po* and *Little Red Riding Hood* had so many similarities, the cultural values were still clearly reflected from the two tales. One of the characteristics of Western culture is individualism. Little Red Riding Hood did not totally follow her mom's advice on her way to grandma's house. She was attracted by the beauty of nature and to fulfill her individual need of freedom, she went by a different route. If she followed her mom's advice, she would not have encountered the wolf. One of the key words of Chinese culture is collectivism. Child-parent relationship was not equal. Children had to listen to their parents, show respect and follow certain rules at home. In the story *Lon Po Po*, the three sisters did everything their mom told them: stayed at home and locked the door when it was dark. They encountered the wolf because they were tricked by the wolf, not because they did not follow their mother's advice. Another scene from *Lon Po Po* that needs to be mentioned here was that the three little girls were left home alone. It reflected the social reality of China back to that time. In the old China, men went to war and women and children were left at home; mothers were left to support the family and they did not have time to care for their children all day long; the children were left at home and the older siblings took care of the younger ones (Lan, 2009).

Cinderella Type

Similar to Little Red Riding Hood, “Cinderella Type” of tales exists in every culture, like the African version of Cinderella tale *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe, 1987) and the Spanish Cinderella tale *Little Gold Star* (San Souci, 2000). They all adopted either the theme or plot of Cinderella to illustrate their own Cinderella tales. The Chinese version of Cinderella tale was known as *Yeh-Shen* (Louie, 1982). Like Cinderella, Yeh-Shen is a beautiful girl who lived with her stepmother and her half-sister. She was tortured by her sister and her stepmother, she lost one of her golden slippers at the spring festival, and the story ends with her living with the king forever. The only thing different between *Cinderella* and *Yeh-Shen* was the character of the fairy god-mother. Instead of a fairy god-mother, her murdered best friend’s spirit, a fish bone, helped her go to the spring festival.

The story of Yeh-Shen appeared around the 9th century in China, it was collected in the book *Qiu Yan Za Ji*, written by Duan Chenshi (1803); as time went by, the story of *Yeh-Shen* was retold as many versions in China, and it developed as tales of *Snail Beauty*, *Magic Brush* and *Little Goldfish* (Lan, 2009). These tales have different characters and plots, but they all were based on the original Cinderella tale.

Even though Western culture and Chinese culture are very different, in the tales *Cinderella* and *Yeh-Shen*, good wins over evil in the end and it taught people to be brave when in an unfair situation, always have hope, and bravely pursue happiness.

Traditional Values reflected from Chinese folklore

Except for some universal types of folklores, there was a special type of folklore in Chinese culture. This type of folklore was a mixture of history and mythology in the stories; it often involved a relationship with nature. For example, *The Hunter (Casanova, 2000)*, talked about a man who sacrificed himself to save other people in his village and he transformed into a mountain after he died. Some of the tales contained certain Chinese cultural symbols, like *The Great Race: The Story of Chinese Zodiac (Casey, 2006)*. This book talks about how the twelve animals were selected by the Jade Emperor to represent the years in his calendar. Most of the tales are used as proverbs which are significant to Chinese values.

Research found that deeply influenced by the philosophy of Confucius and Taoism, the illustration and expression of feelings in Chinese traditional folktales are based on the rule of zhongyong (doctrine of the Mean), which made it difficult to keep the original spirit of the tales when translated into other languages. For example, the classic Chinese legend *Butterfly Lovers (Fan, 1999)*, a Chinese version *Romeo and Juliet*, was not a just a simple heartbreaking love story; the unique history and social construction of ancient China made the tale hard for people from different cultural backgrounds to understand. The tale talked about two people from different social classes who fell in love, but because the social reality was that they came from different social classes; they cannot be together. The illustration and the expression of feelings in the story were complex. The *Butterfly Lovers* tale reflected the extreme social hierarchy and the difficulties of civilians' lives under feudalization (Lan, 2009). All the history and background information, and the

way of expressing feelings, made this classic Chinese legend hard to understand by people from different cultural backgrounds.

Discussion

Folklore is a unique genre of children's literature because it is a mirror that reflects different groups of people's cultures and moral values. The purpose of the study is to help the writer to gain insight about comparing western folklore and Chinese classical folklore. It also aims to help students who are interested in folklore and cultures to know more about the similarities and differences between cultures, and increase their cultural awareness. By examining the similar and the different social significance of folklore, students can make some connections from these tales to their own life and gain some global awareness. The results show that some types of tales are universal, like Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood. They exist in almost all the cultures around the world. There are some similar tales that can be found in both Chinese culture and Western culture. For example, the Cinderella type tale, not only the plot and characters of the tale are alike but the theme and the social values are similar too. The results of the study also indicate the differences of folklore between two cultures is obvious too. Some classic Chinese tales are difficult to translate into other languages; also some of the cultural values and the way of thinking from Chinese folklore are not easy to interpret to readers from different cultural backgrounds.

The present study indicates there exists a barrier to comparing Chinese folklore and Western folklore due to the different lengths of histories and limited access to some important Chinese tales. At the same time, the study claims the importance and the values to study Chinese folklore and Western folklore because research results show traditional Chinese tales and cultural values have important impacts on children. It helps to understand Chinese children's academic achievement, psychological well-being, and Chinese parenting styles. Besides, under the influence of globalization, the socialization process for Chinese children has changed. Investigation results show that Chinese children share some common values with American children. The investigation results also indicate some Chinese children and their families have been exposed to Western cultures in recent decades (Lee & Stevenson, 1996). With these data, it is reasonable to study both Chinese and Western folklores, and compare the differences and similarities between them.

When comparing Chinese folklore and Western folklore, an interesting pattern emerges. Research result indicates that folklore is a cultural symbol because it reflects different cultures, but many types of folklores always repeatedly appear in folktales around the world (Lan, 2009). Research also suggests that in spite of very different details, all wonder tales generally can be divided into a few story types (Zhang, 2008). Study results show the common elements found both in Chinese folklore and Western folklore are: royal class, magistrate, wise or foolish man, magic, animal, a good son or daughter, a scholar, and poor people. The common themes are: justice over injustice;

wisdom over strength; good over evil; cleverness, and resourcefulness. The research results provide important support to categorizing the tales from two cultural systems, to identify the similarities and differences, and to decode the unique cultural values from Chinese tales.

The research offers a detailed description and comparison of some well-known traditional tales from Chinese culture and Western culture. It can help to facilitate future discussion about folklore in different countries and its development and changes. Practically, this study indicates there are values to study folklores from different cultures; it can help students to develop cultural awareness and learn more about the world.

Folklore can serve some basic functions in today's education field for every child. It offers clear guidelines to help educators with teaching. Due to the lack of access to students, this research did not have the opportunity to examine students' reflections on the stories, and their reading preferences for folklore. It is worthwhile for future researchers to study children's reading preferences and their reflections on folklore; it is also necessary and interesting for future study to examine the applicability and reliability of the four functions of folklores as Yolen describes in practical educational settings.

Final Summary

The research studied folklore from both Chinese culture and Western culture. Based on the existing research results, the study compared a few classic traditional tales from both cultures. The findings show that folklore is a unique genre in children's literature, it

carries cultural values of different groups of people. It is helpful for children to gain cultural awareness and understand different cultural values from reading folklore. While there are obvious limitations of the study, it is a worthwhile topic for future research.

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