INTRODUCTION

Thematics in Chinese and Tibetan Folk Literature
INTRODUCTION

Folk literature has been described as verbal art in the West. It includes such forms as folktales, legends, myths, proverbs, riddles and poetry. Folk literature is merely a constituent part of folklore. In the West, folklore is studied under the subject--Cultural Anthropology, not as an independent subject as in China. In Euro-American terms, folk literature means verbal forms of expression. In non-literate societies it is virtually identical with cultures, but in literate industrialized societies it is only a fragment of culture. Folk literature through its various forms reflects culture, society, myth and psychology of a people at the grassroots level.

Society generally imposes certain sanctions or restrictions on the individual. There are particular things that are denied by the world of reality. These things are granted in the world of fantasy. An individual is released psychologically from socio-cultural bindings when he chooses to dwell in the domain of folk literature, or he consciously and unconsciously creates his wonderland.

Folk literature acts as a tool to impart education in many societies, especially in the nonliterate societies. Knowledge, values and attitudes are transmitted from one generation to another through the medium of fables. The fables, either in the written form or in the oral tradition, plays a major role in the continuity of culture. Folk literature also serves the purpose of political propaganda and social change. Ethnic unity, regionalism, nationalism and anticolonialism are promoted through the use of myths, legends and folk songs. Social institutions and religious rituals are validated through folk literature. Rights to social position or political authority are often justified by citing myths. Myths, legends, fables or even proverbs validate expressions of dissatisfaction and scepticism.

Now let us discuss folk literature from the Chinese point of view. From the origin point of view, the peculiarity of folk literature lies in its very creation—that is through collective efforts, and not through individual endeavour. From the point of the mode of transmission, folk literature belongs to oral tradition and hence handed down from one
generation to another by the word of mouth, and not by means of written symbol. The type of language involved is entirely a spoken one. Moreover, its contents undergo frequent variations. Its dissemination is not restricted by copyright. From the mode of expression point of view, folk literature mainly uses the method of narration in colloquial language, and not making comments or portraying something in literary or archaic form of language. Viewing from the choice of themes, folk literature narrates or eulogizes the things which happen in our immediate vicinity and reflect the down-to-earth feelings of the toiling masses. (See Table 1).

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<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Folk Literature</th>
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<td>origin</td>
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<td>author</td>
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<td>mode of transmission</td>
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<td>mode of narration</td>
<td>colloquial language</td>
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<td>themes</td>
<td>reflect human desire and social structure</td>
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<td>mode of preservation</td>
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Folk literature is a peculiar subject, tightly knit with other disciplines, viz, cultural anthropology, ethnology, sociology, theology, linguistics, psychology etc.

The Chinese scholars have categorized folk literature in the following manner: (1) Myths; (2) Legends; (3) Folktales- (a) fantasy tales, (b) stories about human life, (c) fables, (d) folk jests or jokes; (4) Folk songs and ballads - (a) rammers' work chant or work song (sung to synchronize movements with one person leading), (b) ceremonial song, (c) political songs and parodies, (d) love song, (e) nursery rhymes; (5) Epics; (6)

Folk narrative poems; (7) Folk proverbs and adages; (8) Folk riddles; (9) Folk genre - (a) Dagu (versified story sung to the accompaniment of a small drum and other instruments), (b) Quci (a type of verse for singing, popular in the Yuan dynasty), (c) Kuaishu or quick-patter (rhythmic story-telling accompanied by bamboo or copper clappers), (d) Kuaibanr or clapper talk (rhythmic comic talk or monologue to the accompaniment of bamboo clappers), (e) Xiangsheng (comic dialogue, cross talk), (f) Huaji (jokes and farces), (g) Pingshu or storytelling (by a professional storyteller), (h) Pinghua (a style of storytelling popular in the Song dynasty); (10) Folk dramas and plays. These again can be classified into several sub-groups.

Looking at the basic difference between the definition of folk literature in China and the Occident, we would find that like in the West, the Chinese scholars do not use the word "nonliterate societies" while describing folk literature. Moreover they would like to emphasize repeatedly that folk literature is the crystallization of wisdom of the common people. The Chinese having the oldest written records, dating from 4000 BC, and being the inventors of paper, started having a good historiography.

Sources: The history of Chinese folk literature witnessed systematic recording of rhymes, ballads and poetries of folk origin in the pre-modern era. Before and after the May Fourth Movement of 1919, new effort was made in collecting ballads throughout China—as

2. *Shanhaijing* (The Book of Mountains and Seas) written in the pre-Qin and Qin-Han period; *Huainanzi* (The Book of Scholars) compiled by Wang Liu'an and others of the Han era; *Xiaolin* (Forest of Jokes) by Handan Chun of the Wei State; *Soushenji* (Records of Spirits) by Gan Bao of the Jin State; *Shuyiji* (Accounts of Marvels) by Ren Fang of the Liang State of Southern Dynasty; *Youyang Zazu* (Youyang Miscellany) by Duan Chengshi of the Tang Dynasty; *Yuefu Shiji* (Collection of Han Era Folk Songs and Ballads) compiled by Guo Maoqian of the Song Dynasty; *Gujin Fengyao* (Popular Ballads - Old and New) and *Gujin Yan* (Proverbs - Old and New) by Yang Shen of the Ming Dynasty; *Shange* (The Mountain Songs) by Feng Menglong of the Ming Dynasty; *Yuefeng* (Ballads from Guangdong) by Li Diaoyuan of the Qing Dynasty; *Yueyan* (Adages from Zhejiang) by Fan Yin of the Qing Dynasty, etc. Cf. Zhong (Ed.), n.1, pp.143-144.
part of the New Culture Movement. From the May Fourth to 1930 China developed much in the field of folk literature. Outstanding works were published. After the founding of the People's Republic of China there had been massive campaign for collecting works of folk literature of different ethnic groups within China. Slightly more than a decade before the Cultural Revolution the work of collecting and systematizing of folk literature was carried out in a large scale, but due to improper understanding of the subject and lack of methodology, the work undertaken often used to show totally different results. From another angle we can say that the notion of communist interpretation of folk literature is primarily propagandistic and classificatory and not conceptual as

3. Geyao Zhoukan (Ballads Weekly) was started by the end of 1922. It opened up a new academic domain and laid the foundation of modern folk literature in China. In the late twenties Minjian Wenyi (Folk Literature and Art) was brought out from Sun Yat-sen University of Guangzhou. This weekly later came to be known as Minsu Zhoukan (Folklore Weekly). Cf. Zhong (Ed.), n.1, pp. 144-146.


6. "Lun Chijiuzhan" (On Protracted War), Mao Zedong Xuanji (Selected Works of Mao Zedong). One-Volume Edition. Beijing: People's Press, 1968, p.448 says that aspiring to be victorious but at the same time ignoring political mobilization is just like "Can He Ever Reach Chu?" Gonggong has been eulogized by Mao saying that he was a victorious hero. See "Yujia Ao--Fan Diyici Da Weijiao" (To the tune of Pride of Fishermen -- Against the First "Encirclement" Campaign), in Mao Zedong Shicixuan (Selected Poems of Mao Zedong), Beijing: People's Literature Press, 1986, pp.30-35. One proverb Yegong hao long (Lord Ye's love of dragons) or professed love of what one really fears, has been used in the 5th volume of Mao Zedong's works, Beijing: People's Press, 1977, p.234 to criticize the local party leadership, etc.
understood in cultural anthropology.

Folk literature were collected, compiled, edited and published in relatively less radical periods of modern history such as in 1950s and 1980s. Even then Marxist influence in selection and interpretation of folk literature was quite evident. Communists tended to use some folk tales to convey political and ideological message. In such political or ideological usages, distortion of folk literature is quite apparent.

Firstly, the Chinese have gone for classification of literature. No critical analysis so as to raise the level of discourse or interpretation has been done as in cultural anthropology. Secondly, the communist ideology has been reinforced for propaganda purpose. One clear example is how the story 'Yugong yi shan' (The Foolish Old Man who Removed the Mountains) was used by Mao Zedong for political purpose. Thirdly, traditional folk tales are distorted to suit political purposes, as can be seen in the story 'Niulang Zhinii' (The Cowherd and the Girl Weaver). The mythical tales 'Kua Fu zhui ri' (Kua Fu who Chased the Sun), 'Xingtian wu ganqi' (The Decapitated Man who Brandished Shield and Battleaxe) and 'Jingwei tian hai' (Jingwei trying to fill up the sea) have been used for similar purpose. The beauty and original or intended meaning of the tales are lost. What remains are simply propagandistic ideas of 'class struggle'. Fourthly, the old principles which were used for the purpose of explaining the new hypotheses, were parochialized and over-simplified. The traditional works of folk literature were revised.

7. Lin Piao in his Report to the Ninth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Beijing : Foreign Languages Press, 1969, p.48, says that the Chinese People's Liberation Army has performed great historic feats in the struggle for overthrowing the three big mountains of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism. Lin Piao talks about three mountains whereas in the story of the Foolish Old Man there are only two mountains.

and modified by the present-day standards of politics and ideology.

Tibet has always remained aloof from the rest of the world. Her age-old culture has escaped the marching feet of modernization. For thousands of years Tibet has been allowed to evolve in self-imposed segregation, cut off from the rest of the world by the Himalayan mountains. But, although poor in material progress, she preserved a wealth of art, culture, tradition and philosophy. The ancient way of life was based on the most traditional school of Buddhist thought, which mingles vividly with the colourful fairytale characters. The Buddhist concepts of rebirth and the law of cause and effect (Karma) is a recurrent theme, for, like Buddhists everywhere, the Tibetans believe that you reap whatever you sow. The good will always find happiness, while the evil suffer the pains.9

Tibetan folk literature in comparison with Chinese folk literature is less both in number and form. Most of the Tibetan scholarly attention and energy were spent on the writing of the Great Tradition. This includes Buddhist philosophy, logic, ethics, Dharma history, poetics etc. Most of the Tibetan folk literature was passed from one generation to another orally. And it is only recently, especially since 1959, that some Western and Asian scholars have recorded such folktales and translated them into English.

Thus unlike my reading of the original Chinese folk tales and fables, I found hardly any Tibetan folktales in Tibetan language. This limitation might have deprived me of some original flavour and intended meanings of various Tibetan folktales. However, since my main concentration is on Chinese folk literature, this limitation might not have been too serious. Most of the translations from Chinese sources are my own. The Tibetan section has been mentioned for comparative purpose.

In the Tibetan society, storytelling was one of the main sources of recreation.

Elderly members of a family narrated numerous folk tales to the rest of the family, and thus helped pass down this oral tradition. There were also professional storytellers, specialized either in folk stories, or in the Gesar epic. Yet others, called the Lama-manis (a sort of minstrel or bard), told tales about Buddhism.  

The mythical characters who march across the pages of legends have wandered the endless eternities of time, a remaining link to a past that defies the corruption of history. Perhaps it is only here, in the world of dreams, that we find true sanity, a breath of pure air in the poison of progress. The popular theme in all folktales is the kind, honest, simple people triumphing over the black waves of wickedness. In this respect, the tales from Tibet are no different.

So far the Western focus on Tibet was religion, philosophy and language. Folk literature has not been seriously studied for academics. It has been mainly a source of entertainment.

Both in Chinese and Tibetan folk literature, no academic analysis has been done in the way this thesis proposes to do. Both in China and in India (among Tibetans) folktales which have been oral previously are now recorded and written down by Asian and Western scholars. But neither systematic study of Chinese and Tibetan folktales nor a comparative analysis reflecting two different cultural categories have ever been attempted. Nor there had been any attempt to discover the major themes in Chinese and Tibetan folk literature.

My departure from other scholars will be to select certain folktales, myths, legends etc. from Chinese and Tibetan literature which reflect greater themes concerning social life, social order and other significant events in human existence. Both Chinese and


11. Thurlow, n.8, preface, p.ix.
Tibetan traditional scholars have considered Little Tradition (folklore) less significant than Great Tradition. I shall try to highlight that grassroots or social reality of Chinese and Tibetan societies is reflected in their respective folk literature. Therefore, I focus on such folk literature from China and Tibet which reveal Chinese and Tibetan views on life and society.

Outline of this study

Man's quest for knowledge made him ask who made the world, who gave the world its present physiognomy, how he himself came into existence. Mystery behind the creation of heavenly bodies and myriads of objects in the world found answers in creation myths which also include myths about cataclysms. Only in mythologies could man discover the secrets of his own origin. Chapter 1 will explore the folk tales, legends and myths from Chinese and Tibetan folk literature that deal with respective cosmologies.

The time when primitive man relied upon simple and rough implements to sustain himself, the natural elements forced him to live amidst constant threat. In such difficult situation, man made efforts to understand nature. But since human society was still in its childhood, it was impossible for man to comprehend the laws of nature. Though his imaginative power was strong, his scientific understanding was poor. Therefore, primitive man in an attempt to protect himself, created a congregation of deities around him. With his imaginative mind, man developed concrete images of natural elements. This was actually deification of various natural elements which affected human existence. Subsequently the world of myths was born. In Chapter 2, I would discuss certain aspects of popular folk deities as depicted in Chinese and Tibetan folk literature.

Gender question is a fashionable and sometimes burning topic for discussion and social policy today. But this question is not entirely new in our era. Ancient societies, such as Chinese and Tibetan societies, have a great deal to say on womankind. Both of these societies assume that female is the weaker sex. But folk literature narrates and renarrates that certain outstanding women in Chinese and Tibetan societies have
transcended limitations imposed by patriarchal social structure and other social biases. Their life stories celebrate human achievement which not only womankind but also mankind admire and respect. Such women are shown as models to be emulated in folk societies. This is the theme discussed in Chapter 3.

Fables and allegorical narrations constitute a significant part of folk literature that inculcate moral values in members of a community. Folktales reflect the psyché and ethos of an ethnic group embedded in a particular environment and also in a certain socio-political atmosphere. Such tales, to be found in both Chinese and Tibetan folk literature, deal with popular morality. In fact, popular morality or folk ethics forms the raison d’être of folktales. The concept of right and wrong, found in every human society, is best reflected in folktales. In Chapter 4, I provide some samples from Chinese and Tibetan folk literature that deal with folk ethics or problems of good and evil in human society.

Methodology

The methodology of this research will essentially follow that of cultural anthropology and symbolic anthropology. This approach will make my study different from previous writers in the field of Chinese and Tibetan folk literature. Most specifically my methodology will consist of (1) Narration, (2) Interpretation and (3) Comparative Analysis. This means firstly, I narrate the major themes in Chinese and Tibetan folk literature. Secondly, I interpret such themes in terms of cultural and symbolic anthropology. And thirdly, I compare the two sets of folk literature thematically so as to find out the differences as well as similarities, and draw tentative conclusions about Chinese and Tibetan culture systems.

I have been for a long time interested in folk literature as one of the meaningful ways to the understanding of culture. This interest took a definite shape when I had the opportunity to study in China for two years (1986-88). During this period I studied Chinese folklore and folk literature under Prof. Zhong Jingwen, a well-known Chinese
folklorist, at Beijing Normal University, China. At the same time, I travelled extensively in various parts of China proper, starting from the frozen frontiers of Heilongjiang in the north-east to Yunnan—the subtropical homeland of ethnic minorities in the south-west. The objective of my travelling was to study the folk literature at the grassroots level and to collect material on the subject. Such field work, and interaction with people from different social strata have been enriching and insight-giving experience for me and for my work in folk literature.