

Chinese Folktales contribution in shaping values of Youth during Mao Era.

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Abstract

Chinese Folktales contribution in shaping values of Youth during Mao Era.

Folktales are artistic creations consisting of network of symbolic meanings and values embedded in culture handed down by the common people of a community. Folktales are para historical documents, mythological records of social phenomenon. They are reflections of values, meanings, traditions, social practices of lives, activities and psychology of different community of people at different periods in history. They are stories or a narrative that originate orally and has no single author. Folktales are often considered as a mirror that reflects different communities' culture and values. The category includes myths, legends, fables, songs, jokes and fairy tales.

This study is based on the study of popular folktales that became instrumental in shaping values of youth in contemporary China. What are the major reforms undertaken by the Communist Party of China to address the issues of contemporary youth in order and shape values and socialisation.

This paper has tries to address following questions:

1. Locating status and role youth in folktales particularly the preceding feudal society in China.
2. The traditional cultural values as reflected in Chinese Folktales.
3. Contemporary role of folktales in shaping values of youth in contemporary China

Keywords: Chinese Folktales, Youth values, Mao era

Introduction:

China has a history of more than 5000-years. Chinese culture is one of the most ancient cultures in the world, which has lasted for 3000 to 4000 years without any suspension. The strong vitality could be attributed to its innate structure and essential quality. The structure of the Chinese culture is typical of ‘integrated pluralism’. ‘Pluralism’ refers to the fact that the Chinese culture is a blending of many different cultures, which displays strong tolerance in embracing the cultures of all ethnic groups including those from extraneous places. “Integrated” means various cultures melt into a unity, forming a distinct Chinese culture with common thread of values, norms and beliefs.¹ Its integrated pluralism has developed a self-confident magnanimity so much that the Chinese culture, which gives priority to itself, can absorb foreign cultures continuously, thereby getting revitalised in the process of discarding the old and embracing the new. Throughout history, the Chinese culture has survived all kinds of ordeals and turmoil. Confronted with today’s challenges of globalised China,, it is ready to face them calmly, revealing its fascination for assimilation and keeping its youthful vigour in the process of remodelling itself in fast changing world.

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This study is based on the study of popular folktales that has been included in Chinese academic curriculum, which has become instrumental in shaping values of youth in contemporary China. After the establishment of Peoples Republic of China, politics and ideology has become inseparable entities in China. The objectives and scope of literature has already been defined and elaborated in Mao Zedong’s Yenan speech at Yenan in 1942. China has initiated Economic Reform and Opening up in 1978 and until today, it has not initiated political reform and in near it is unlikely to do so. Therefore, whatever academic curriculum it has adopted, it is

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reflective of the ideology of Communist party of China which in it turn is reflective of its efforts to inculcate youth values in general.

For the purpose of this paper, three folktales have been chosen for an analytical analysis.

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Methodology:

This study has selected three important folktales from the Han nationality (the dominant Nationality of China) to analyse the depiction of Chinese youth as prevalent in ancient China. These folktales form the Elementary Chinese Readers (four volumes) published by Beijing foreign language press.1. 《愚公移山》 (Foolish man removing mountains) i.e. Fables 2. 《梁山伯与祝英台》 (Butterfly lovers) it is romantic folktales though it has sorrow ending. 3. 《牛郎织女》 Cow boy and Weaver girl. A detailed narration followed by analysis of these three folktales separately has been undertaken and an attempt has been made to locate the values prescribed for the youth in ancient Chinese society. Further, those analyses have been examined in the context of contemporary Chinese society, which are reflective of the policies of the Communist Party of China; and finally, we analyse these folktales are shaping the values held by youth in Contemporary Chinese society.

Story One :

《愚公移山》²(Foolish man removing mountains) is story which dates back to 4-5 centuries B.C. in 《列子》 <<Liezi>>Written by a famous Chinese philosopher 列御寇 (Lie Yu Kou) 。 The Foolish Old

²第六十三课《愚公移山》北京语言学院编 基础汉语课本-IV 修订本, 北京, 华语教学出版社, 中国, pp.73-79

Man Who Removed the Mountains". It tells of an old man who lived in northern China long, long ago and was known as the Foolish Old Man of North Mountain. His house faced south and beyond his doorway stood the two great peaks, Taihang and Wangwu, obstructing the way. He called his sons, and hoe in hand they began to dig up these mountains with great determination. Another gray bearded man, known as the Wise Old Man, saw them and said derisively, "How silly of you to do this! It is quite impossible for you few to dig up those two huge mountains." The Foolish Old Man replied, "When I die, my sons will carry on; when they die, there will be my grandsons, and then their sons and grandsons, and so on to infinity. High as they are, the mountains cannot grow any higher and with every bit we dig, they will be that much lower. Why can't we clear them away?" Having refuted the Wise Old Man's wrong view, they went on digging every day, unshaken in their conviction. God was moved by this, and the god sent down two angels, who carried the mountains away on their backs.

Here the story reflects the following points:

1. Collective values i.e. collective efforts can achieve any results
2. The tradition values of family unity and respect for the elderly
3. Efforts of the human being not simply relying on god and leaving everything on him to solve

This folktale is being taught in China's school curriculum to inculcate the above mentioned values among the youth, which later on has become the instrument for the ideologies of the Communist Party of China and its youth wing Communist Youth League to impart the loyalty towards the Party and service for the masses before self(为人民服务)。 Mao Zedong taking lesson from these fable, on June 11, 1945 said, "Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?"³

2. Story Two:

《牛郎织女》⁴ (The Cowherd and the weaver girl) is love story. It is a story of an orphaned boy whose parents died at very young age and was brought up by his elder brother and his sister-in-law. When he grew old and was having a very bad relation with his sister-in-law, both the brothers decided to separate and distribute their family fortunes. His elder brother and wife cleverly divided the family fortune and the Cowherd boy was offered one old cow. The younger Cowherd boy without any resistance accepted the cow and left silently without any malice against his elder brother. As time passed by, the cowherd boy met with a fairy (weaver girl) that had fled from heaven to save her-self getting exploited by her maternal aunt on the earth.. Her grandmother used to assign weaving job day and night without any rest.

The younger cowherd boy and the weaver girl got married on the earth and were blessed with two cute babies. Later on the weaver girl was caught by her maternal aunt and was forcefully taken back to heaven. While she was taken back, the Cowherd boy tried to catch them with the magical skin gifted by the old cow while dying. The cowherd boy could not catch his wife as the wicked aunt created a vast sea that he could not cross. When the aunt realized the love between these two couple, allowed both of them to meet once on Chinese Valentines that are marked as 七夕 (Qi xi) and the Chinese youth still celebrate this lunar festival as the Chinese Valentine's Day.

As we can see from the above narrated story, there are four inherent values in focus here namely :

- a) Respect for family and obedience towards elders as the cowherd boy happily accepted the family booty without uttering a s word of resentment.
- b) It also talks about the feudalistic suppression as the feudal lord try to exploit the have-nots.
- c) It also provides the strength of “hope” as one day will come when these exploited classes will get justice and will become happy.
- d) State of Education[???? Totally vague –not at all clear from or evident in the story stated above]

⁴ For detailed story please see 第六十三课 《牛郎织女》 北京语言学院编 基础汉语课本-IV 修订本, 北京, 华语教学出版社, 中国, pp.73-79

4. Story Three:

《梁山伯与 祝英台》⁵ **Butterfly Lovers,(the earliest record can be traced back to late Tang dynasty).**

This story has a history of more than 1470 years and is very popular among Chinese people. It is known to every household and has touched the heart of Chinese people. It is a story of a young boy named Liang Shanbo and a girl named Zhu Yingtai who happened to be the daughter of Mr. Zhu, a rich and influential man in a district in China. Zhu Yingtai wanted to study in school but the customary practices didn't allow a girl to study in school with boys. Therefore, she disguised as a boy and left her home to study. While on her way to school, she met with Liang Shanbo, who too was studying in the same school where Zhu Yingtai had joined.

Liang Shanbo unaware of the gender of the Zhu Yingtai, became a very good friend of her and started spending their days happily. During their study and stay, they helped each other and developed deep affection for each other. After three years, her father asked Zhu Yingtai to return home. Liang Shanbo went to see her off. Before leaving, Zhu Yingtai disclosed her love for Liang Shanbo to the wife of her teacher. She also tried to disclose her true identity while seeing together in the well. However, the ignorant Liang Shanbo could not understand her.

When Liang Shanbo returned to school, the teacher's wife told about the true identity of Zhu Yingtai. Liang Shanbo became very happy and wanted to marry Zhu Yingtai but unfortunately, the rich father of Zhu Yingtai had already fixed her marriage with the son of other rich landlord. Knowing this, Liang Shanbo became depressed and died. When the news of Liang Shanbo death reached Zhu Yingtai, she urged her father to take the palanquin through the grave of Liang Shanbo. When she reached the grave, it automatically opened up and she entered inside the grave. After a little moment, two butterflies appeared from the grave yard. It is believed that those two butterflies were Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai.⁶

This story reflects:

1. Existence of different class in the Chinese society.[

⁵ 听力材料3 《梁山伯与祝英台》赵菁编，汉语听说教程（上），北京，北京语言大学出版社，2000,pp.45-46

⁶ For the detailed story see,

2. There is existence of gender disparity in the form of “重男轻女” 。 The females were not allowed to study, therefore Zhu Yingtai had to disguise as a boy and went to study in the city. The male were respected more and women were looked down upon in the ancient Chinese society.
3. Respect for the family values without any protest.
4. Status of education

How these Folktales are shaping the values of Youth in Contemporary China?

The major social issues such as class hierarchy, gender inequality, income and regional disparity etc existing during ancient period are reflected in the above three narrated Chinese Folktales which have integrated into the school curriculum by the Communist Party of China. People’s Republic of China under the leadership of Communist Party of China initiated a planned economy’s process to a great extent that brought positive changes in the living standards and satisfaction of the Chinese people in the early phases of the Mao period (1950s). The Land Reform initiated by the Communist Party of China, changed the life of the common masses specially the landless peasants, who had always desired to become the owner of the land that they were tilling since ages under the feudal framework. That is, the lands were in the hands of the few landlords who exploited the farmers generation after generation. The changes in the ownership structure initiated at the beginning of Mao period early 50s changed the mindset of the common masses. These landless people had never experienced the joy of owning lands and independence to strategise their economic future.

Communist Party of China being well aware of the nature of Chinese economy, initiated revolution from the countryside in later part of 1920s,&30s. The resentment against the misrule and exploitations from the influential landlords and the rulers were well perceived by the Communist leaders. The Party received a great support and active participation from the peasants and other people, which contributed in the victory of Communist revolution of and establishment of People’s republic of China in 1949. It is a universal truth that everyone no matter rich or poor aspires for three things “Bread, Cloth and a House to live in”. Chinese people cannot be exceptions. Communist Party of China too tried to provide their people with the ‘three Important’ “衣, 足, 食” (cloth, shelter and food,). After the establishment of People’s Republic of China, the government under the leadership of the Communist Party of China initiated the policy of ‘Iron Rice Bowl

(铁饭碗)', where the State provides food, clothes and shelter to its citizens. Its goal was to create a socialist society, where everything belonged to the State, with complete equality in the society and no divide between rich and poor.

The major focus areas of economic reforms during the Mao period (period) that have addressed the social issues existed during the ancient and modern China, which is been reflected in the folktales are:

Mao's development program included rural collectivisation, central planning, state control and ownership of industry, self-reliance and isolationism as a policy of its economy protected from outside.

1. Agriculture: In realm of Agriculture Mao period(1958-78) mostly relied on the Collectivisation of the rural land. The people were working together in a commune and the yield was given to the State, keeping Commune as core of the economic development. It had a structure with three-level system of ownership with production as its basis. In the vast majority of Communes, the ownership of land, labor, basic farming equipments and animals were vested in a team , a unit with an average population of fewer than 170.

China under the leadership of Mao Zedong could not look for other countries for help as it would have in violated the basic principle of the Communist Party's ideology.⁷ There was not a single economically developed communist country to be taken as model 'communist' country except Soviet Union. Rest of the developed countries was following the capitalist model.

In view of this, China decided to adopt self-reliance and keep itself in isolation till it achieved the desired capability of opening up. Mao Zedong heavily relied on the human capital and even urged his countrymen to produce more and more babies through his call, “人多是力量大” (there is strength in numbers) 。 [not linked to your analysis of folktales ,is it a discussion]

2. Education: The whole of China was grappling with 'illiteracy' which was central to many issues facing China. To tackle this problem, the Mao regime ordered to simplify the old Classical Chinese characters into simplified characters, nationalise Chinese education institutions and centralise financing of

education. These all happened during the period between 1949 to 1952, which helped Chinese literacy rate to rise almost to 80 percent during Mao period. Though the main focus of the Chinese education was to teach ideology of the Communist Party of China apart from other technical and professional courses. Folktales became an important tool in communicating their ideologies and shaping the values of youth towards the party's goal.

All the above narrated three Folktales reflect the Confucian values, which preach "Filial Piety" benevolence and allegiance to the family values and norms. In ancient China, it was the family which used to decide the future of youth. This responsibility has been shifted away from the family towards the Party. In Confucian China, there was existence of god, which is quite evident in the story of 《愚公移山》 (Foolish Man Removing the Mountains)

In other words, folktales have been primarily used as Party propaganda tool during the Mao period to infuse communist values among the Chinese youth. 《牛郎织女》 (The Cowherd and the weaver girl) and 《梁山伯与祝英台》 which was symbolic of class struggle and gender inequality led to the creation of unique culture in China. In fact, the education system during the Mao period created a communist culture among the Chinese people and especially among the youth. Culture to address "同志 (comrade; literal meaning- of same will and belief) to all fellow Chinese irrespective of age and gender as became order of the day and was symbolic of equality in China.

The task of the Communist Youth League (the youth wing of the CPC) was to represent the interest of the Youth and help in shaping their values to serve the objectives and goals of the Communist Party of China. During these phases (1949-1976), CYL was entrusted with the responsibility of inculcating communist/socialist and Confucian values in its youth. 1. On March 6, 1953, Hu Yaobang in his report, determined the role of the CYL as 1. 团结全国各族青年建设祖国而忘我劳动, 为建设祖国而奋发地学习⁸(Unite youth from all nationalities to study the spirit of forgetting 'self' and contribute in building motherland). Mao Zedong on March 30, 1953, came out with call for 三好⁹ (Three

⁸ 共青团中央青年运动史档案馆 Gongqingtuan zhongyang qingnian yundongshi danganguan (The Central Archives of the Youth Movement of the Communist Youth League, "历史的轨迹中国共产主义青年团90年 Lishi de guiji Zhongguo gongqingtuan 90nian the Historical Track of Chinese Communist Youth League in 90 Years" 重庆出版社:重庆, 2012, Chongqing, Chongqing Publishing House, 2012, p.117

⁹ ibid

Good) “身体好，学习好，工作好” (good health, good study, good work). The Chinese youth were asked to contribute in the industrial development of China and was call given “把青年献给祖国，一切为了社会主义”，“争取到最艰苦最需要的地方” (sacrifice your youth energy for the sake of motherland) , everything for socialism , strive to reach to the most difficult areas and most need areas to serve the masses. Further, CYL was entrusted with the task of reclaiming the barren land and team was formed 青年垦荒队。

Conclusion:

It has been argued that the folktales indeed have played a very important role in shaping the values of youth in contemporary China. The political leaders of China have time and again referred back to the folktales in order to encourage youth and justify their action. Folktales has been recreated or re-written to suit the communist struggle movement in China. Folklore has helped Communist Party of China to attract the masses specially the youth to be loyal to the Party and has urged service to the Party first. It has addressed social issues of the Chinese society keeping its collective spirit as depicted in Folktales. We can witness the support of youth it got during the Great Leap Forward(1958-1962) and Cultural Revolution(1966-1976) from the Youth . It is all due the values they have inherited from their culture and tradition. Therefore, folktales are still playing an important role to impart Chinese values among its youth.