

Cinderella in Different Dresses: From A Narrative Perspective

Aidong Zhang

Abstract—The Ye Xian, written by Duan Chengshi of the Tang Dynasty, is the earliest recorded version of the Cinderella story. Its comparative study with the European versions of Cinderella has garnered the attention of scholars. This essay aims to examine the Ye Xian of the Tang Dynasty, the French version of the Cinderella tale by Charles Perrault and several other versions of the Cinderella story from Asia. By comparing their plots, narrative modes and strategies, this essay intends to display the cultural and narrative diversities of the same story in different language settings, which reflect various embedded values, religious influences, and other historical factors.

Index Terms—Ye Xian, cinderella, literary genre, comparative children literature, narrative mode, narrative strategy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The tale of Cinderella is probably one of the most recognizable stories we know today. While there are many versions of the story in circulation, the most famous among them are the two European Cinderella stories -- the French version of Cinderella, by Charles Perrault, and the German version, by the Brothers Grimm.

The Cinderella story has been a topic of interest for many researchers. While there are numerous variants of the story, they commonly feature a young woman in unjust and oppressive circumstances whose fortune are remarkably and often unexpectedly changed with the assistance of divine or fantastical elements such as magical animals and fairy godmothers.

According to American folklorist Stith Thompson, there are at least 500 different versions of the Cinderella tale in Europe alone. [1] And a survey of Chinese folk literature in 1990 revealed that there were over 70 versions of the Cinderella story in China circulating among 21 different ethnic groups. [2]

While the European versions of Cinderella are considered archetypal, some prominent folklorists have suggested that the first recorded Cinderella story emerged in China during the Tang Dynasty. The Chinese folklorist Zhong Jingwen proposed that the Ye Xian, was the earliest Cinderella story we have evidence for. It is a tale from *The Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*, a miscellany of folk legends written in the 9th century by Duan Chengshi (died 863).

Another folklorist, Nai-tung Ting, conducted systematic research into the Cinderella story archetype in both China

and Indochina. He concluded that the story could have originated from either the ethnic minorities in southern Guangxi Province of China or northern Vietnam. The story then spread to Europe via central or western Asia, ultimately achieving world renown. [3] Liu Xiaochun held a similar view. He proceeded from both the specific and common themes of the Chinese Cinderella story and concluded that the story likely originated from ethnic minorities in southern China. It could have spread to Europe from southern China, the northern part of the Indochina Peninsula and the Balkan Peninsula. [4]

The above researches are of great significance to the historical inheritance and the development of the Cinderella story. However, in my opinion, the narrative of the Cinderella story is also worthy of interest.

In contemporary literature and cultural studies, great attention is paid to how narratives are created, and how they operate in various contexts. Roland Barthes once asserted in his *An Introduction to Structural Analysis of Narrative*:

Narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives. All classes and all human groups have their own narrative works, and these works are often enjoyed by people with different, even opposite cultural backgrounds. Therefore, narrative works are not divided into noble and inferior literature. They transcend the nation, history, culture, and exist forever like life itself [5].

While this is considered the best confirmation of the widespread existence of narrative, the British scholar Michael Carrithers emphasized the unique cultural significance of narrative with the term "narrative thought." [6]

Narrative thought is a unique thing that distinguishes human beings from other species. It touches the core of human ability to imagine, conceive, and interpret the mental state of others, enabling humans to seize a longer past, a more complex future, and a more diverse social environment.

Therefore, the Chinese and the European versions of the Cinderella story coexist as the "international" narrative modes. The former representing an important part of the ancient and evolving form, which is of great significance for exploration of its origin.

Modern literary critics believe that the language used in a story and how it is narrated are often more important than

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Aidong Zhang is with Asian Language and Culture, NIE, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (e-mail: yfang2020@outlook.com).

the story itself. As such, this study will look at the *Ye Xian* written by Duan Chengshi of Tang Dynasty, the French version of *Cinderella* by Charles Perrault (1628–1703), the classic version (hitherto referred to as the European version) and several other versions from Asia. By comparing and studying their plots, narrative styles and strategies, this paper intends to showcase a rich and diverse cultural landscape.

II. PLOT SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Since the plot of the European version of *Cinderella* is reasonably well known, this paper will focus on the plot of *Ye Xian* in the Chinese version.

The Ye Xian tells a story that took place before the Qin and Han Dynasties in China. The protagonist, Ye Xian, is the daughter of a tribal leader in the south. Both of her biological parents have passed away and she lives with her stepmother and stepsister. Even though she is intelligent and hardworking, her stepmother often abuses her and makes her gather firewood in the mountains and water in the deep pool. One day Ye Xian chances across a small fish with red fins and golden eyes. She decides to feed it with food saved from her ration. The fish grows very quickly and develops a close bond with her. Every time she showed up by the shore, it would appear. When her stepmother learns of this, she puts on Ye Xian's clothes to lure the fish, then eats it and buries its bones. Unable to find the fish, Ye Xian becomes extremely upset. Under the guidance of a divine being, she discovers the fish bones and learns that the fish bones contain magical wish-granting powers. Her life is hence radically transformed, and she can have whatever her heart desires. Ever since then, her life undergoes a fundamental change.

Subsequently, on the day of the national festival, Ye Xian puts on her exquisite dress and golden shoes (granted by the magical fish bone) and attends the festival in secret.

When her stepmother and stepsister discover her appearance, she flees back home, losing one shoe on the way. A member of the tribe finds the shoe and presents it to the King of another nation, Tuohan. The king, curious, orders that the owner of the shoe be summoned, and eventually, Ye Xian is found and brought before him. Ye Xian and her fish bones come to Tuohan and she is honoured as the "Royal Lady," while "her stepmother and stepsister are eventually killed by some flying stones."

On closer look, we can find that *Ye Xian* contains similar plot elements to the European version of *Cinderella*: an abusive stepmother, divine assistance, losing a shoe at the tribal fair (ball), and getting married after fitting into the shoe. The various *Cinderella* stories have these elements in common and one can see also the universality of human experiences and their mental states reflected in them. Obviously, there are narrative differences between the European and Chinese versions of the story.

In terms of the theme of "divine assistance", different versions of *Cinderella* from Asia have diverse depictions:

The Korean version of *Cinderella* named Pear Flower receives helps from various animals. A frog helps her plug a leak in the water tank, sparrows pierce the husks off of the grain and a cow pulls up weeds from the rice paddy. The

Indian version of *Cinderella* receives help from a divine snake and finishes her heavy household chores quickly. The Vietnamese *Cinderella* receives guidance from a fairy and a flock of birds.

Although centred on this element, *Ye Xian* differs from *Cinderella* in other texts: her appearance at the festival is beautiful but low-key. Once she is spotted by her stepmother and stepsister, she leaves quickly and quietly, attracting little attention from the other festival-goers.

The European version of *Cinderella* is not only beautiful, but also very elegant in demeanour. *Cinderella* appears at the ball with her refined and brisk dance and catches the attention of the prince as well as the admiration of everyone around her, thus becoming a shining star. Whereas it seems crucial in the European story, in *Ye Xian*, there is no detailed descriptions of the emotional and mental states regarding the fair, nor are there any ups and downs in the plot. It only uses the shoe as a medium to give Ye Xian the good fortune in a passive manner. The shoe as well serves a limited purpose -- to deliver Ye Xian's good fortune.

The Korean version of *Cinderella* omits the ball scene totally, but Pear Flower meets a high-level official by the lake on her way to the village festival. She is so scared that she runs off without talking to him, but losing a golden shoe on the way. They meet later by coincidence and she is identified as the owner of the golden shoe.

The meeting in the European version of *Cinderella* and the prince foreshadows the beginning of a romance. While *Cinderella* is full of hope, the prince is also faithful to love. After *Cinderella* flees, the prince finds her shoe, he stops dancing but only focuses on appreciating it. The shoe thus becomes the symbol of love between the two young people. The arrangement of having girls "try on the shoe" is to find his lost lover, which is different from what the King of Tuohan has in mind. The latter only wants to satisfy his curiosity, namely to confirm the owner and the source of the golden shoe.

While Ye Xian was not able to meet the King at the festival, the European version of *Cinderella* has nice dance with the prince and spends a lovely and unforgettable night with him because of the ball.

Another cultural difference that is vividly brought out when we contrast the *Cinderella* stories is how different cultures and literary traditions tackle concepts such as life and destiny. Although Ye Xian is honoured with the title of a Royal Lady from the king of Tuohan, the story fails short of giving us the "happily ever after" ending a reader often sees in romances and fairy tales. Instead, the author focuses the attention of the story to the fish bones that create miracles and wealth. Here, utility of the fishbone, rather than the romantic element, is emphasized. The king "takes both the fish bones and Ye Xian back to his country." During the first year, he greedily asks for treasures from the bones and receives "unlimited supplies." but when he asks for more a year later, the fish bones "no longer respond." Obviously, the King does not love Ye Xian, but is instead driven by his curiosity and covetousness. Soon, the king asks his people to bury the fishbone with hundreds of pearls by the seashore. In the face of a mounting rebellion one year, however, he tries to dig the bones out and use their powers to strengthen his force. But in one evening, everything is

swept away by the tides.” With the entire nation of Tuohan facing chaos and ruin, one might reasonably wonder what kind of happiness Ye Xian could expect.

In addition, the eastern and western texts differ regarding the fates that befall the story’s antagonists. The ending of *Cinderella* in the French text is filled with the beautiful flare of a fairy tale, “The prince and Cinderella live together happily ever after.” The eternal bliss shown by this story reflects the utopian ideal, which allows *Cinderella* to retain its charm forever from one generation to the next. It is also worth mentioning that Cinderella in the European version eventually forgives her two stepsisters and invites them to live in the palace. She even arranges for their weddings with care. This narrative seems to highlight the Christian spirit of forgiveness: “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12). “Shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee? (Matthew 18:33). Similarly, Paul gives clear guidance on the issue of forgiveness: “And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Meanwhile, the endings of the wicked ones in various Asian versions of Cinderella are not uniform. In *Ye Xian*, the stepmother and the stepsister are killed by some flying stone. In the Cambodian version, the stepmother, stepsister, and the father “are chased out of the country forever.” In the Vietnamese text, the stepmother and her daughter are ridiculed by others, while the two characters become beggars in the Indian version...

The endings of several Asian texts seem to reflect the moral principles of “good begets good, while evil begets evil.” Buddhism believes that the destinies of all beings and their circumstances are caused by their own “karma.” It refers to one’s behaviours. Good behaviours are good works, while evil behaviours are bad works. Every act will inevitably lead to its consequences. As the Bodhisattva scripture indicates, “it doesn’t come from the heaven, nor from the earth, nor from other people. You suffer whatever you have created yourself.” (*Sui Yan Scripture: Volume 8*) Based on the principle of reaping the fruits of one’s own deeds, the *Bodhisattva scripture* indicates that good fruits are born of good causes, evil results from evil causes. (*Volume II*).

In Chapter Six of *An Interpretation of the Book of Change*, (*Volume II*), Confucius says, “Without accumulating the good deeds, one will never make a name for oneself. Without accumulating the evil acts, one will never get destroyed.” This is the ultimate principle of the *Book of Change*. In the Chinese Cinderella tale *Ye Xian*, we see this principle reflected in the way the story is unfolded.

In the Malay version of Cinderella, we also see religious and cultural values reflected. Forgiveness and tolerance are among the most fundamental principles emphasized in the *Qu’ran*, and accordingly, it seems, the punishments meted out to the stepmother and stepsister are somewhat mild. The kind-hearted Cinderella eventually forgives them. *The Quran* has always listed forgiveness and tolerance as a basic principle. “And indeed, the hour is coming; so forgive with gracious forgiveness” (*The Quran*, 15:85). “But if you pardon and overlook and forgive – then indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful” (*The Quran*, 64:14). When Prophet

Muhammad liberated Mecca with tens of thousands of Muslim army, the opposition who had persecuted the Prophet were scared and waited for their ultimate punishments and trial, but Prophet Muhammad declared instead, “You are all free today!” As such, the Qu’ran spirit of forgiving and mercifulness is reflected in the Malay version of Cinderella story.

III. THE DIFFERENCES IN NARRATIVE MODE

A. Difference in Literary Genre – Anecdotes vs. Fairy Tale

The *Ye Xian* comes from the sequel to *The Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*, which is an anecdotal folk legends written by a literati. This narrative mode is distinctly different from the fairy tale adopted by Charles Perrault.

Indeed, *The Miscellaneous Morsel from Youyang* written in the ninth century cannot be considered a novel. Duan Chengshi only wrote down some of the interesting and strange anecdotes he heard as though they were fun historical records. *The General Catalogue of the Complete Library of the Four Branches (Siku Quanshu Zongmu Tiyao)* says it is “a distinguished novel” since the Tang Dynasty. The “novel” here refers to what was defined by Chinese historian Ban Gu in the *Treatise on Literature (Yiwenzhi)*. Namely, “the so-called novelists used to be low-level government officials. Their stories mostly came from gossips and rumours heard around streets and alleys.” It is markedly different from the concept of “fiction” in the western sense. The fantastic legend in *The Miscellaneous Morsel from Youyang* can be merely considered the prototype of the novel, for it has a certain degree of twists and turns used in the narrative mode of a novel, but it is still far from the established style of fiction. The *Ye Xian* is the retelling and recording of a story based on what others have said, and it lacks an artistic process and creation. The fantastic legend shows a certain degree of amusement and authenticity, but not vivid plots and rich characters.

The Cinderella story spread across the world over many years, thereby accumulating both the wisdom and the humour of several generations of storytellers. It wasn’t until the seventeenth century that Charles Perrault polished it with his fine touches, allowing this piece of literary work to have the fun, imagination and the meaning a fairy tale is supposed to possess.

In fact, polishing the folk narrative reflects more about a “collective unconsciousness”. According to Cheng while illuminating Jung’s view, setting aside the daily narratives, even the ancient myths and legends in the artistic narratives serve as explanations for the ownership of land and the survival of a certain group, as well as judgement tools. [7]

Having a happy marriage is the basic desire of mankind. *Cinderella* can be said to encompass all of the rich elements of a romantic tale. It reflects a collective fantasy and desire of folks.

The scenes in the story allow the readers to subtly connect the imaginary world with their individual experiences, which may not actually happen in reality. Henceforth, the charm of a fantasy resides: the reader finds the correlation between his actual experiences and the fantastic adventures,

thereby living temporarily in a desired imaginary world and escaping the hardships of life temporarily.

B. The Narrative Intent – Truth vs. Fiction

In his *Chinese Narrative*, Andrew Plakes has summarized the Chinese and the western narrative literature in the following manner: “the Western literary theorists have tended to ascribe the central role to the storytelling function in defining the narrative mode,” which assumes all depictions to be fiction, whereas the Chinese tend to prioritize the *transmission* aspect of defining narrative modes. In the Chinese tradition, the central role of a story “a faithful representation of what did, or what typically does, happen in human experience—that is, that the facts in question are true”. This explains why the concept of ‘passing down’ or ‘transmission’ is always the core of the two main forms of Chinese narratives – both the historiography and fiction. [8]

Consider how the *Ye Xian* begins. “According to the legend of the southern people, there lived a tribal leader Wu before the Qin and Han Dynasties and the local called him Wu Dong.” Here it indicates the exact time and place: the protagonist has a surname and he lives in a specific time period. The author Duan Chengshi wants to show that he is telling a true story. It ends with the narrator Li Shiyuan saying that “most of the tribal people in Yongzhou remember the strange happenings in the south,” which is once again intended to let the readers believe the authenticity of the story.

The beginning of *Cinderella*, on the other hand, belongs to the typical narrative form of folktales: “Once upon a time there was a gentleman...” The narrator does not explain the time, place, and the name of the person. He leads the reader into the story and experience many difficulties with the protagonist. The beginnings of these two stories have shown the different identities and the roles of a narrator.

The narrative mode employed by Duan Chengshi in *Ye Xian* is transmissional. Intentionally or unintentionally, the narrator imposes his moral judgments on the legend. The king of Tuohan loses his empire because of greed, and the death of stepmother and her daughter may all reflect the author's value judgement on virtues and moral desert, which in turn are largely determined by folk ideologies of the time and place. However, Charles Perrault allows the characters in the story to fully develop. He seems to expect a result that “whoever on stage can act freely.” He would then write down what they do and say, that’s all.” [9]

This might explain why Perrault’s story has touched the hearts of hundreds and thousands. The different identities and attitudes of the narrators indeed reflect the universal differences between the Chinese and Western narrative modes.

IV. THE NARRATIVE STRATEGY OF THE CHARACTERS AND ITS EFFECTS

In his *Semantique Structurale* (1966) Algirdas Julien Greimas proposed that there are six “actants” of narrative works, namely, the protagonist and the object, the helper and the opponent, as well as the sender and the receiver [10]. Through analysing the functions of the “helper” and the

“opponent”, characters in *Ye Xian* and *Cinderella*, it is discovered that it is precisely because of their appearances that result in the different narrative effects of the text, giving the story twists and turns, henceforth making it interesting.

From the perspective of narrative structure, each helper is a necessary condition to achieve the goal. The “helper” can be an animal or a variety of relationships or forces. The most important miracles are fishbones in *Ye Xian* and godmother in *Cinderella*. As supernatural “helpers,” they assist the protagonist in resisting obstructions from the “opponent” and fulfil their wishes. They both bear the important function of the plot change in their respective stories.

Being grateful to *Ye Xian*’s kindness and protection, the magic fish uses the thrilling power imbued within its bones to help her after its death. However, the divine power of the fish bones is limited. Once it encounters the insatiable demands, it will no longer be effective. In this way, Duan Chengshi ends the *Ye Xian* story with his morality compass, which makes it different from its European counterparts.

The Fairy Godmother in *Cinderella* is the saviour of the hardworking and kind *Cinderella*. She helps the girl win love and happiness in life, so that she lives happily ever after with her “Prince Charming”. With the combination of the “opponent” and the “helper,” the tension of the story is formed, which enables the plot to develop in conflict.

In *Ye Xian*, there is no such development of the conflict between the heroine and her stepmother. Albeit the evil characters end up being killed.

The heroine in European version of *Cinderella* is not only abused by her stepmother, but also often ridiculed by her two sisters. This work gradually develops the conflict through their behaviours and dialogues, giving the story the necessary twists and turns. Through comparing role settings and their functions, one can see the differences between *Ye Xian* and *Cinderella* in their narrative mode and effect. Seemingly, a *Cinderella* story, *Ye Xian* lacks the vivid and fascinating narrative style in *Cinderella*.

By comparing the narratives of *Ye Xian*, the European version of *Cinderella* and other *Cinderella* stories in Asia, we may summarize the different missions of these stories: what one ought to appreciate about the European *Cinderella* story is that it was in some sense to be so popular and written to be a children’s story that had wide and everlasting appeal; while the Eastern *Cinderella* stories have presented distinctive features and important values.

The folklore narratives represented by *Ye Xian* can be said both simple and rich in meaning and artistic form. They “have (shown) hidden cultural traditions, which communicate their specific psychological and world views.” From the narratives of these stories, one may also be able to “discover some meta-language of ancient human narratives.” [11].

V. CONCLUSION

This paper examines a few versions of *Cinderella*, namely, the European version and its counterparts from Asia, particularly, the Chinese version, *Ye Xian*. By comparing several dimensions of the story, including plots and

narrative modes and strategies, this study illustrates how the same story has been presented in different socio-historical settings. It is proposed that the discrepancies are the manifestation of diverse cultural traditions, values, religion influences, and other historical factors.

These fascinating and intriguing aspects will certainly warrant further exploration.

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- [10] The actantial model, developed by A. J. Greimas, allows us to break an action down into six facets, or actants: (1) The subject (for example, the Prince) is what wants or does not want to be joined to (2) an object (the rescued Princess, for example). (3) The sender (for example, the King) is what instigates the action, while the (4) receiver (for example, the King, the Princess, the Prince) is what benefits from it. Lastly, (5) a helper (for example, the magic sword, the horse, the Prince's courage) helps to accomplish the action, while (6) an opponent (the witch, the dragon, the Prince's fatigue or a suspicion of terror) hinders it.
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Aidong Zhang obtained her PhD in classical Chinese poetics from University of Toronto, Canada.

She is teaching at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore). Dr. Zhang teaches in the areas of modern Chinese literature, classical Chinese literature, and Chinese language and culture. Her current research covers classical Chinese literature, Chinese poetics, and comparative literature, as well as effective teaching.

Dr. Zhang has published in academic journals from USA, Canada, Australia, China, and Singapore, as well as Taiwan and Hong Kong. She authored and edited books by established publishers has served in the editorial board of international book series, and international academic journals. She has delivered keynote speeches to academic summit and international conferences. She has been invited to conduct workshops and seminars on topics of Chinese literature, culture and literary theories for Chinese universities and for Singapore school clusters.