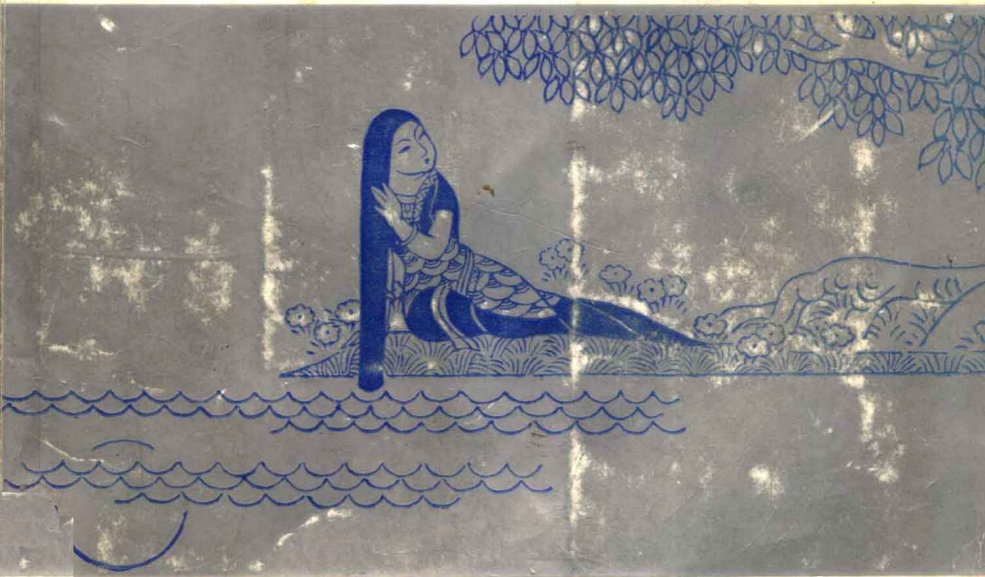


FAVOURITE FOLKTALES OF CHINA



**Translated by John Minford
Introduction by Zhong Jingwen**

NEW WORLD PRESS

FAVOURITE FOLKTALES OF CHINA

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

These translations were begun in Tianjin during the summer of 1981 and completed during a trip to Guangxi, Guizhou and Yunnan in January 1982, when I also had an opportunity to see at first hand some of the colourful minorities living in China's southwest. Although responsibility for the finished product is mine, I have been greatly aided by my students — Hu Xiaohua, Lin Kenan, Liu Yingmin and Zhen Chunliang — with whom I have discussed all of these stories in class, and many of whose suggestions have been adopted.

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Contents

INTRODUCTION Zhong Jingwen	5
GOLDEN CHISEL AND THE STONE RAM (A Han Folktale)	17
THE PEARL THAT SHONE BY NIGHT (A Han Folktale)	27
THE GOLD COLT AND THE FIRE DRAGON SHIRT (A Han Folktale)	39
THE STORY OF A PINT OF FLAX SEEDS (A Han Folktale)	49
"OF COURSE!" (A Han Folktale)	61
THE MAGIC BIRD (A Mongolian Folktale)	67
HAILIBU THE HUNTER (A Mongolian Folktale)	74
THE BIRD OF HAPPINESS (A Tibetan Folktale)	81
THE STORY OF THE THREE GENJIAS (A Tibetan Folk- tale from Sichuan Province)	87
ANIZ THE SHEPHERD (A Uygur Folktale)	95
THE WOODEN HORSE (A Uygur Folktale)	101
SISTER LACE (A Miao Folktale)	122
THE VULNERABLE SPOT (A Yi Folktale)	129
THE SAGE BAO LUOTUO (A Zhuang Folktale)	133
THE MAGIC MONEYBAG (A Korean Folktale)	143
THE LONG HAIREED GIRL (A Dong Folktale)	148
THE GOLDEN REED PIPE (A Yao Folktale)	161
	3

THE KING AND THE POOR MAN (A Kazak Folktale)	168
THE DOUBLE-HEADED PHOENIX (A Dai Folktale)	173
THE THREE HEROES (A Daur Folktale)	180
APPENDIX	
Some Facts About China's Minority Nationalities	195

INTRODUCTION

Zhong Jingwen

The ordinary working people of every nation in the world are the creators of the material wealth of society. At the same time, they are the creators of spiritual culture, which ranges from social organization, customs and traditions to medicine, technology, literature and art.

Today there still exist many tribes or peoples who have lagged behind in their social evolution and are still leading a rather primitive life. Yet they all possess a rich store of folk songs, myths, legends, folktales, painting, sculpture and dance. Many are of a high standard, and we are often astonished and delighted to discover their

Zhong Jingwen, a prominent scholar of Chinese folk literature, is now professor and head of the Chinese Department of Beijing Normal University. He is also Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Research Society and a National Committee member of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles. Among his major publications are *Myths and Legends in the "Songs of Chu"* (1930), *An Introduction to Folk Literature* (1980) and *Random Talks on Folk Literature* (1981).

true beauty. These artistic achievements, which form a fundamental part of the civilization of these tribes or peoples, make an important contribution to the fund of culture so treasured by the whole of human society.

The existence of this great diversity of folk cultures is today a well-known fact. The realization of its significance has, however, been a slow historical process. It has taken a long time for us to recognize that folk culture is a phenomenon that has been widespread since the dawn of history. Although we are now starting to turn our attention towards its study, we can often only look in retrospect.

In the history of China, the development of folk literature and art as part of the life of the people can be traced back to neolithic times, and its progress can be charted alongside the advance of society. Its character underwent an important transformation. While the appearance of a class structure in society led to the stratification of culture, Chinese folk literature and art continued to grow and develop in its own course. However, due to the forces of prejudice within society, scholars of the upper levels of society looked upon folk culture with disdain and, apart from a few rare exceptions, refused to consider its worth. A notable exception is the famous "Songs from the States" from *The Book of Songs*. But even this great work only gained respect by virtue of the fact that it was included from an early date in the classics that were used to educate the upper class people. Moreover, the original work was greatly distorted and often misinterpreted by the upper class scholars in a way reminiscent of the sanc-

tification of the myths and folk songs of the Hebrews by later generations of religious devotees.

During the last years of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the character of Chinese society underwent a tremendous change. These years witnessed the invasion of China by foreign capitalist countries, the economic stimulus provided by the new capitalist mode of production, development of national capitalism and the collapse of feudal dynastic rule. These developments, coupled with the contacts of many progressive intellectuals with modern cultures in other parts of the world, resulted in the spread of new nationalistic and democratic ideologies and in the launching of many related practical activities. All this helped to bring about a radical change of outlook on the part of the intellectual world towards the artistic traditions of the ordinary people.

With the May 4th New Cultural Movement — China's Renaissance, the old prejudiced attitudes towards the cultural traditions of the working people were strongly denounced. Many progressive intellectuals started to collect and compile folk songs and stories, which were then published by national university presses. At the same time, they carried out serious research in this field. Conservative scholars, however, totally disapproved of these activities.

After the founding of New China in 1949, folk literature was collected and compiled on an even wider scale and its significance even more clearly understood. Due to the change in the political status of the vast masses of ordinary people and the improvement of their economic

conditions, the merits of folk culture gained genuine respect. During this period China established specialized academic organizations, such as the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Research Society, which further widened the scope of collection and investigation. Research work has made great steps forward under the guidance of the new ideology, and in the past few years especially, work in this field has developed at a greater pace.

As seen from the above, attitudes towards folk literature and art have gone through a process of constant change. These changes in attitude are closely related both to the rise and fall in the social status of those who create and those who enjoy folk literature and art, and to the trying historical tests faced by their entire cultural tradition. Only with the constant improvement and enhancement in the democratic life and democratic ideology of the people can one have a true respect for folk literature and art and gain a clear understanding of its value.

* * *

The abundance and quality of China's folk literature is worthy of our special attention. Within the vast boundaries of China, alongside the Han nationality which has long played a major role in the political and cultural development of our country, there exist over fifty other nationalities. Although they differ in the pace of their social advance (all are now part of the socialist system), they all possess a noteworthy store of folk literature. Lyric poems and stories that have long been circulated and handed down among the people are both abundant and richly varied in form and style. Some of

these have received the acclaim of international scholars. The Tibetan epic *Khan Gesar*, the world's longest epic poem, is a case in point.

Another example is the story of "Cinderella". Everyone has heard of this story which exposes the evils of a cruel step-mother. This is perhaps one of the world's most famous fairytales and it has become an important research topic for scholars of folklore and folktales in every country. As early as the end of the last century, it drew the attention of experts in this field. Such work has continued to this day. The earliest relatively complete record of this story dates from Tang dynasty documents of the 9th century. A somewhat modified version of this story is still popular today among the Han and Zhuang peoples in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Guangdong Province.

This cultural treasure house of China's various nationalities is an important contribution to the spiritual nourishment of all peoples of the world. The present collection of twenty folktales* from thirteen different nationalities is no more than a small morsel from this great feast. But as an old Chinese adage says, "A single drop of sea water contains the tang of the sea". Likewise, this small selection tells us a great deal, for although the stories are few in number, their content is immensely rich.

Folktales are artistic creations handed down by the ordinary people of a nation. They are neither historical

* Of these, the story "The Sage Bao Luotuo" is in fact a type of fairytale, while several of the other stories could perhaps be more accurately described as "local legends".

documents nor authentic records of social phenomena and yet they are a reflection of the lives, activities and psychology of different peoples at different periods in history. In other words, they are direct or indirect artistic representations of the realities of society and the mental world of the people based on the experiences, imagination and ideals of their creators. The stories here presented are all very revealing in this respect.

These stories contain descriptions of the different occupations and social status of various characters and also of different societies in which these characters lived. These range from hunters, farmers, stone masons, carpenters, weaving maids, shepherd boys and hired hands to emperors, kings, tribal chiefs, princes, princesses, courtiers, stewards and landlords. We can gain a glimpse of the arena of their activities, of the society in which they lived. This also varies greatly from primitive to feudal society. The conduct and personality of the characters are greatly influenced by their social backgrounds. Emperors, kings, courtiers and landlords are generally cruel and rapacious. It is always they who bring misfortune to the virtuous yet defenceless common people. But the long suffering working people in these stories never bow down to such mistreatment. Instead, they exercise their own form of "poetic justice" which finally results in the humiliating and often amusing downfall of the wicked power holders.

These folktales also highlight the collective wisdom and strength of the people. For example, in the story "The Three Heroes", Fista joins with two other heroes and

finally settles accounts with the ferocious and powerful three-headed boa. In the story "The Vulnerable Spot", the man-eating witch that threatens to devour a man digging the ground is finally vanquished as a result of the schemes of the man's neighbours and their on-the-spot help. The ill-treated farmhand, Zhao Da, in the story "Of Course!", also gets the aid and advice of his neighbours and is hence able to punish the evil and avaricious landlord Pepper-peel. Although they have been given a few artistic embellishments, these stories are directly inspired by the everyday lives of the common people and are examples of collective wisdom and strength that provide much food for thought. Collective wisdom and strength is also expressed in other Chinese folktales, such as "The Ten Strange Children" and the stories about the Pig Spirit. There are also numerous Chinese proverbs that illustrate this same theme: "Many people means great wisdom" and "many minds working together are even cleverer than the resourceful Han Xin".* Clearly, this ideological truth is deeply embedded in the minds of the Chinese people.

Although the creators of these folktales emphasize the importance of collective wisdom and strength, they in no way negate the role of the individual in society. As a matter of fact, they highly extol the wisdom and strength of the individual. For example, the carpenter Genjia in "The Story of the Three Genjias" is victimized by the

* Han Xin (?-196 B.C.) was a military strategist who played an important role in the establishment of the Western Han dynasty (206 B.C.-24 A.D.).

tribal chief's steward who has plotted to kill him. He not only devises a clever plan to save his life but also thinks up an ingenious way to get his revenge. In the story "Sister Lace", the young maiden is skilful at making lace. She bites the emperor's finger with her teeth and then, by using her human and super-natural power, gains victory over him. Although the emperor places all sorts of obstacles in her way, she finally succeeds in burning him to death and the royal palace to the ground. Of course, these stories include many elements of fantasy, but they all reflect the ideas and emotions of the people, which are well grounded in reality.

In folktales, the good moral qualities and lofty thinking of the common people are prominently portrayed. The characters will often go as far as to sacrifice their own happiness or even their lives for the benefit of others and in this way save a critical situation or even prevent the death of others. This selfless attitude is promoted in many Chinese maxims, for example: "Be ready to take the cudgel for justice" and "die for a righteous cause". Such noble ideals represent the zenith of human morality and a spotlight that illuminates human history. The people who best put such ideals into practice are often those who are born humble and receive little education. Examples of these noble qualities can always be found in the lives of the ordinary people; hence, characters who embody such virtues are frequently portrayed in folktales. One such example is "Hailibu the Hunter," who rescues the little white snake (the Dragon King's daughter) from the mouth of the grey crane. By doing this, Hailibu obtains

the power to understand the language of animals. In order to convince the villagers of his warning of imminent floods, he chooses to disobey the command of the Dragon King and is turned into stone. Another example is that of the young boy, Wangjia, who sets out to find the Bird of Happiness for the benefit of all the people of his home village. Not only does he encounter many dangers on the way, but he also refuses to obey the orders of the old monster to gouge out Baima's eyes. He would rather be turned blind himself than comply with such a hideous demand. Still another character is the Long Haired Girl, who is unafraid of the cruel mountain god's punishment. She breaks her silence to tell the villagers where they can find the water source so that they can be assured of a daily supply of water for drinking and irrigation. These good-hearted and courageous characters — the hunter, the young boy and the young girl — are brilliant examples of the positive qualities of the common people who are the pillar of a nation. They are familiar to everyone. It is only natural that they appear in folk literature. And while it is true that folktales often portray them as an ideal character type, they are by no means purely imaginary. Apart from the examples cited above, there are many more characters in this collection who display the virtues of great integrity, courage, honesty, diligence and endurance. All these models of conduct and thought powerfully reveal the lofty spiritual world of the ordinary people.

The common people have acquired a rich wealth of practical experiences through life and social activities. It

is these experiences which are either consciously or unconsciously distilled into literary creations. Several stories in the collection are created out of such experiences. In "The Double-Headed Phoenix", the strange bird has two heads which love each other and "always share their food and drink." But because of the scheme of the power-hungry courtier to separate them, their original intimacy and companionship changes to suspicion and enmity. They finally tear apart their joint waist and become two separate pheasants. What a startling story this is! It cannot be judged merely as a story of pure fantasy. Its message is extracted from the bitter experience of life, and it has a great deal to teach us.

Many other stories in this collection contain elements of true-to-life experiences, which are entertaining and educational at the same time. "The King and the Poor Man", "The Story of a Pint of Flax Seeds", "The Magic Moneybag" and "The Pearl That Shone by Night" are stories of this type. Of all forms of folk literature, folk adages articulate such human experiences in a most concentrated way. Also, the stories about animals often relate what are clearly the practical experiences of humans. Ordinary fantasy stories, like those in this collection, do not lack such integration with human experiences. Rather, this integration helps to give these stories their significance and depth of meaning.

* * *

Folktales are especially prized among the prose writings of folk literature for their artistic flavour. We cannot presume to claim that the present selection of folktales

are artistically the best; yet we can truthfully say that these tales have an original and praiseworthy literary style all their own.

Folktales throughout the world share many common characteristics in artistic expression. This is due either to the spread of ideas or to the similarity of the life experiences and creative imagination of the creators. Character types, personality contrasts, repetition of plots, problems presented and the happy ending . . . Everyone is familiar with these universal traits. But this does not mean that the folktales of various peoples can be reduced to a simple formula like in physics or mathematics. Apart from their similarities in structure, plot, set expressions and so on, the folktales of various peoples all have their own unique images to interest and captivate the reader.

We can prove this for ourselves by reading the stories in this collection, be they the very simple ones like "The King and the Poor Man" and "Hailibu the Hunter", or relatively complex ones like "The Wooden Horse" and "The Pearl That Shone by Night". Why are they so appealing? The creators of these folktales bear no comparison with professional writers in rich literary accomplishment, in elaborate conception of the plot and in a good command of vocabulary. They do possess a full experience of real life and the traditional skills of literary creation. In addition, the works they produce are not completed in a single lifetime, but are often tales which have been told, retold and improved upon by thousands of people over many generations. All peoples go through basically the same stages of social development, but their social backgrounds

and life experiences vary greatly. The inevitable reflection of such variety in literary creations gives originality and colourfulness to the works. The fact that the plots and structural forms used in folktales are often highly stylised does not imply that all differences and contrasts are lost, nor does this negate their artistic charm. It is for this reason that these stylised stories are able to fascinate and move so many readers. It is for this reason too that the folktales in this collection will enchant all those who read them.

* * *

By bringing together this collection of stories, the editors of New World Press hope to introduce readers of other lands to the folktales of China's many nationalities. This is a praiseworthy effort.

The stories have all been translated into English by John Minford, a British scholar of Chinese literature who has taught in China. I have been kindly invited to write this short introduction. There is so much that can be said about China's folktales that immense space would be needed even to explain in detail the stories within this collection. For now these few lines will suffice. The reasons for my brevity are many, but most importantly I would rather let the reader plunge straight into the magical world created by these Chinese folktales. I believe they will gain far more enjoyment this way.

Beijing, March 1982