The Morphological Analysis of Folktales of Tu Nationality in Hehuang Region in Northwest China*

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The Tu nationality (also called “Tu people” or “Tus” in the paper), one of the multiple ethnic minorities in the Hehuang Region (河湟地区) between Gansu (甘肃) and Qinghai (青海) Provinces in the northwest China, has no written language of their own, but has already created the abundant and varied colorful literary genres. Since the 1980s, folktales, as the main literary product popular in the region, have received literary criticisms and reviews from scholars and researchers in China, based on the socialist realism dominant in China in the 20th century that emphasized more on contents, motifs and even ideological significance. So far, no breakthroughs have been made in their studies even if some young scholars have tried from the formalist viewpoints. Therefore, this paper attempts to make a morphological analysis of the Tus’ folktales by adopting Propp’s theories, trying to find out the morphological narrative model beneath the language level of the folktales. Through the studies, we can see that collective awareness bonded by kinship is more emphasized in Tus’ culture, and almost all tales end with good defeating evil. Therefore, the studies of these folktales will help us deep understand Tus’ psychological conditions and positive cultural life.

Keywords: morphological analysis, folktales of Tu nationality, Hehuang Region, Propp’s theory, creative rules, collectiveness

Introduction

Originally, the Hehuang Region, also called Sanhejian (三河间), referred to the large area between the upper reaches of the Huang River (黄河), the valleys of Huangshui River (湟水河) and Datong River (大通河). Specifically, it refers to the parts of Qinghai Province (Haidong Prefecture in the east and Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the southeast) and Gansu Province (Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture in the southwest and Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the south). This region has been inhabited by multi-ethnic minorities for generations, including Tus, Huis (Islam) and even Salars. Liu Yonghong (2009) ever regarded Minhe Hui Autonomous County and Huzhu Tu Autonomous County as the native residence of the Tus, where their abundant folktales have been created and widely spread. Although they have no written language of their own, they have produced various types of wonderful literary folk works about their daily life and work, like epics, folktales, myths, jokes, fables and so on. Among these literary genres, folktales are not only the largest in number, but also characterized by rich contents and motifs, and varied narrative plots. So far,

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many studies and researches have been made about the Tus’ literary types, especially about the folktales, including the conventional analysis of characters, plots, contents and even its values and significance and so on, but few formalist analyses have ever been tried. Therefore, this paper tries to make a morphological analysis of the Tus’ folktales from The Selected Folktales of the Tu Nationality (QIAO, 2015) compiled by Qiao Shenghua, a scholar of Tu nationality, based on the Propp’s morphology of Russian folktales. By comparative studies between Russian and Tus’ folktales, we have found out the deep structure of Tus’ folktales: misfortunes’ falling (a happy life’s being ruined)—heroes’ birth—heroes’ adventures—heroes’ victory (the happy life’ being restored), finally proving that good can overcome evil. This kind of creative rule is comparatively simpler whether in characters or in functions than those discussed by Propp himself, but can show the specialty of Tus’ tales and their culture.

Through the studies of the Tus’ folktales, we can see heroes are just as ordinary as those in the daily life, with no superpower, or unusual ability, but how could they fulfill the huge task of combating or slaying terrible non-human beings? They rely more on their collective efforts and close cooperation between themselves and their helpers than on their individual heroic deeds. This collective unconsciousness submerged in their psychological depth has been formed by their special farming styles and their anti-invasions from the external forces. This analysis thoroughly reflects the cultural orientation and aesthetic tendency in their development of the civilization in the past history.

The Literature Review of Studies of Tus’ Folktales in China

Despite a long history of Tu nationality and their literature, the literary studies or reviews of their literature are only new things, which started in the 1970s and flourished in the 1990s. Then, deeply influenced by the socialist literary realism that only dominated Chinese literary circles for almost half centuries since 1950s, the scholars and experts in China would rather tend to focus themselves upon the concrete contents, the ideological values and the aesthetic orientations of the folktales. In this paradigm, people would pay more attention to what the tales tell, that is, the contents than how to convey them, that is, the form. Xing Quancheng (1999) in his On Folktales of Tu Nationality began to only analyze the ideological contents and artistic features of the folktales of Tu people. Cai Xilin (1990) ever briefly introduced rich and various types of the folktales of Tu people, including ballads, dancing, narrative poems, myths, children’s stories, tales, fables, and proverbs and so on. Xi Yuanlin (1995) ever analyzed the cultural components in the folktales of the Tu people, and summarized his discussion,

Considering the collections from the Tu people, diverse genres, extensive themes, and rich contents concentrated on their struggles against the nature and the social classes in their daily life so far. As the artistic representations of their spirits, the folktales directly express their cultural components, including living, production, thinking, cultural interest, and even their close connections with other nationalities. (XI, 1995, p. 36)

Li Yongcong (2002), a scholar of the Tu studies, introduced the aesthetic viewpoints from folktales, which included heroic aesthetics in their historical development, positive social orientation, like diligence, kindness, generosity, justice, happy love and marriage and so on. The realist analysis of folktales of the Tu people is always misleading readers into ignoring the rules of stability and variety in their literary creations, so that the readers cannot thoroughly grasp the creative rules of literary stories.
In the past few years, especially in the beginning of the 21st century, scholars and experts realized the limited and type of monotonous realist literary studies in the folktales of the Tu nationality, and tried to introduce and apply more new literary theories into the studies, hoping to find a new understanding of the folktales. Despite the limited number, these scholars have made some breakthroughs in the literary studies of Tu ethnic nationality, with Xing Haiyan, a young anthropologist, as the representative in this field. Xing (2014) tried to systematize and classify the characters into different groups, and also summarized the motifs from some folktales, based on the Propp’s theories of the *Morphology of the Russian Folktale*. She has even published two academic articles, one of which is “Analysis to Figures System and the Characteristic in the Folk Narrative Poems of Tu Nationality”, in which she tries to classify the figures based on the division of human and deity, and probe into Tus’ special aesthetic dispositions and characteristics of their personalities (XING, 2004). The other is “An Analysis on the Tus’ Folktale and its Motif Types”, in which she classified the folktales, so far collected, into three types, including daily-life type, animal-monster type, and wise-men type. Then, based on the theory of Propp’s the *Morphology of the Folktale*, she classified the themes and motifs, trying to display their beliefs, customs, ethics and aesthetic interest (XING, 2006). What Xing has done has provided some new hints for further understanding Tus’ folktales, but still limited in the traditional realist criticism of literary genres.

So far, only several academic articles concerning the Tus’ folktales have been published in English. Ma Jianchu et al. (2007) have ever published an article, entitled “A Cultural Interpretation of Interactive Relations Among Ethnic Groups in the Hehuang Region”, in which they tried to verify the close communications and cultural exchanges among the ethnic groups in this region (MA & ZHOU, 2007). Kalsang Norbu, Zhu Yongzhong and Kevin Stuart (1999) have researched Wutu, a ritual winter exorcism in Gynan Thog Village, Qinghai Province, and explored its origin, history and even its significance for the Tu nationality. Hu Jun and Kevin Stuart (1992) described the wedding ceremony of Tus in details, including the meaning of marriage, marriage types, partner selection, engagement, ceremonies, and so on (HU & Stuart, 1992). Feng Lide and Kevin Stuart discussed “the sex and the beauty of death in Hua’er (Northwest China Folksongs) and provided very detailed information about Hua’er, a very popular folksong in the northwest China” (FENG & Stuart, 1994). These English-written articles have touched Tus’ folktales in parts, but no monographic articles and works have been published. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze the deep structure from selected Tu’s folktales and tries to probe the creative rules beneath the folktales and the shared ethnographic models of the Tu nationality.

The Morphological Analysis of *A Black Horse the Third Brother Zhang*

Vladimir Propp selected 100 Russian folktales from the famous A. H. Afanasev to be the language material for his further anatomy. He then divided the stories’ structure into several compositions for the comparison among different folktales. From his repeated experimental observation, he concluded that all the folktales have shared the very similar structure beneath their contents, and the sequence of the functions performed by the limited number of characters remains almost the same. Therefore, he identified seven dramatist personae and 31 functions in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, published in 1928 and then first translated into English in 1958 by Laurence Scott. The seven dramatist personae included Hero, Villain, Princess, Dispatcher, Donor, Helper, and False hero (Propp, 1968). According to their special roles, they are roughly divided into three groups: protagonists (hero, princess), Antagonists (villain, false hero), and Mediators (dispatcher, donor and helper). The three groups of characters represent three quite different functions. Protagonists in our traditional sense
often represent the positive forces: superpower or superman, who is always experiencing hardships for his
decisive solutions or his final triumph over his opponents. Antagonists, on the contrary, are those who can offer
oppositions to protagonists and often represent the positive forces: evil or wickedness. Mediators are those who
act as links between two parties and often help protagonists overcome the obstacles or difficulty designed by
antagonists. Around seven roles or characters, 31 activities or functions are derived which, as highly repeated
and stylized models, can be predictably and regularly be fulfilled by these characters. Meanwhile, he also
identified 31 activities, in his own term, called “functions” which can be arranged in the alphabetical order
(Propp, 1968).

1. One family member’s *absentation* from his family. (p. 26)
2. *Interdiction* addressed to the hero. (p. 26)
3. *Violation* of the interdiction. (p. 27)
4. *Reconnaissance* tried by villains. (p. 28)
5. *Delivery* of information about his victim to villains. (pp. 28-29)
6. Villain’s *Trickery* to take possession of his victim or his belongings. (pp. 29-30)
7. The victim’s *Complicity* in willingly helping his enemy. (pp. 30-35)
8. The villain’s *Villainy* in harming or injuring a member of the family. (pp. 35-36)
9. The seeker’s *Mediation* for settlement of misfortune under the hero’s request or command. (pp. 36-38)
10. The *Beginning Counteractions*: The seeker agreed to or decided on counteractions. (p. 38)
11. The hero’s *Departure* from home. (p. 39)
12. *The first Function of the Donor*: The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepared the way for his
    receiving either a magical agent or helper. (pp. 39-42)
13. The hero’s *Reaction* to the actions of the future donor. (pp. 42-43)
14. *Provision or Receipt of a Magical Agent*: The hero acquires the use of a magical agent. (pp. 43-50)
15. *Spatial Transference between two Kingdoms or Guidance*: The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the
    whereabouts of an object of research. (pp. 50-51)
16. The direct *Struggle* between the hero and the villain. (pp. 51-52)
17. The hero is being *Branded* or *Marked*. (p. 52)
18. The hero’s future *Victory* over the villain. (p. 53)
19. The initial *Misfortune or Lack is Liquidated*. (pp. 53-55)
20. The hero *Returns*. (pp. 55-56)
21. The hero is being *Pursued* or *Chased*. (pp. 56-57)
22. The hero’s *Rescue* from pursuit. (pp. 7-60)
23. The hero’s *Unrecognized Arrival* at home. (p. 60)
24. A false hero’s *Unfounded Claims*. (p. 60)
25. A *Difficult Task* being presented to the hero. (pp. 60-61)
26. The *Solution* of the task. (p. 62)
27. The *Recognition* of the hero. (p. 62)
28. The *Exposure* of the false hero or villain. (p. 62)
29. The hero’s *Transfiguration* into a new appearance. (p. 63)
30. The villain receives the final *Punishment*. (p. 63)
31. The hero’s success by a magnificent *Wedding* or by *Ascending the Throne*. (pp. 63-64)

All these functions are totally performed by five characters, or dramatist personae, not only by one, who is
only responsible for some activities, and plays a different role in the plot move of the whole story. Based on the
31 functions, Propp himself deduced the plot structure by using two binary groups: interdiction (2) vs. violation
(3), struggle vs. victory, and puzzle vs. solution. This is one of the most important findings in Propp’s
*Morphology*. For so large a number of Russian folktales, the functions are limited in number, but their
paradigmatic relations, also called lineage relations, cannot be changed due to the change in settings and time. This formulation can also be suitable for some of the Tu’s folktales, despite some unconformities. We can take *A Black Horse the Third Brother Zhang* from *The Selected Folktales of the Tu Nationality*, compiled by Qiao Shenghua, a scholar of the Tu nationality as the case study. This book has collected 40 tales, popular in the Hehuang Region, can be classified into three types of motifs according to their contents, roughly into marriage and love, social morals, fight and war, and so on. To sum up, the motivation or power for each motif’s development to the successful end comes from the conflicts or contradictions between two opposing forces: good against evil, right against wrong, sincere against hypocrite, hero against villain, oppressed against oppressing and so on. This is realistic analysis which more focuses on contents rather than expressive forms because the former is more traditionally popular in China than the latter. Although the functions may not correspond with those in Propp’s morphology, and are even less in number than that offered by Propp, there are still some similarity between them. First of all, let’s look through the plot structure of *A Black Horse the Third Brother Zhang* (QIAO, 2015).

A Grandma had a happy family with children. (p. 3)
A happy family was destroyed. (p. 3)
(F1) Members absented themselves from family or were devoured by a monster. (p. 3)
Third Brother Zhang, the hero, was born from a black mule. (p. 3)
(F9) He wanted to avenge the death of all of the Grandma’s children. (p. 4)
(F11) He left home to avenge the death of all children of the Grandma on the Monster. (p. 4)
He was donated with an arch and arrows. (p. 4)
(F12) He got the first helper, named Eldest Brother Stone. (p. 4)
(F12) He got the second helper, named Second Brother Wood. (p. 5)
They together lived in a hut for hunting. (p. 5)
They were offered delicious meals while out for hunting by three beautiful fairies. (pp. 5-7)
They got married and lived a happy and peaceful life (men for hunting while wives for housework). (pp. 7-8)
Grandma joined in their happy life. (p. 8)
(F19) Their house was haunted by the monster for three times. (pp. 8-9)
(F19) Their families were endangered. (pp. 8-9)
The monster was wounded with one head cut and escaped. (p. 9)
(F25) The Grandma gave interdictions to them to kill the monster. (p. 10)
(F26) They tried to find ways for solving the problem.
(F8) They together left home for carrying out the Grandma’s order. (p. 10)
(F9) They wanted to kill the monster thoroughly. (p. 10)
(F12) They met with a shepherd of the monster, an important helper. (p. 10)
They got the detailed information from the shepherd about the monster. (p. 10)
(F16) They started a direct fight against the monster. (p. 10)
(F30) They cut off all heads of the monster and killed it. (p. 11)
(F31) They saved the shepherd and restored their happy life. (p. 11)

On the whole, the story can be divided into three stages, or “moves” in Propp’s term, to increase the story’s unexpected attractions. In the first move, Third Brother Zhang was born not by his parents, but from a black mule. He was a superman, and wanted to wipe out the 9-head monster that devoured all children of his Grandma. He absented himself from home to seek for helpers. He got two helpers, one of whom was First Brother Stone, and the other of whom was Second Brother Wood. In the second “move”, they lived and hunted
together, and attracted three beautiful fairies from the Heaven. They got married each other and lived a happy life. But, one day, their happy life was disturbed by a 9-head monster which frequently haunted their home. Misfortunes or dangers were threatening them and needed to be got rid of. In the third “move”, with the help of a shepherd of the monster, they joined hand to cut off remaining 8 heads and killed it. At the end of the story, they restored their happy life. In this story, there are at least three progressive moves forward, which can increase the tortuosity and complexity of the plots. In a folktale, named *A Black Horse the Third Brother Zhang*, two more elements are added, including beautiful fairies descending to the earth, and animals’ fathering the hero. On the whole, the formula of this story can be as follows: a happy life—misfortunes’ falling by a monster—hero’s birth—hero’s leaving home for his fulfilling his holy oath—getting helpers—being haunted again by the monster—direct combat with monster—killing the monster—restoring their happy life. From the tale, we can see Tu’s high advocacy for heroes and a strong desire for happy life. The heroes’ great deeds are the secure guarantees for their normal life.

**A Spatial Sequence of the Plot “Move” in the Tus’ Folktales**

Comparatively speaking, there are quite a few such hero tales in *The Selected Folktales of the Tu Nationality*, including *A Black Horse the Third Brother Zhang*, *A Herding-Pig Grandma and Demons*, *The Tale of a Sheep’s Tail*, and *The Legend of Niuda* and so on. If we combine these tales to be one “large” story, their inner structure or model is unexpectedly unanimous. That is to say, despite the difference in their plot, or expressive form, they can be analyzed into one narrative model. Each story begins with the birth and the detailed introduction of the heroes. They are born of poor families, but they are strong, brave, righteous, kind-hearted, and even clever to guarantee their future performance. They usually rely on their super power, but sometimes, they also design some clever ways to defeat their opponents, such as monsters, demons and dragons to restore their happy life. Therefore, “hero’s birth (A) + hero’s adventure (B) + hero’s victory (C)” constitute the spatial sequence, and have become the basic “pragmatic structure” of such folktales. In the fixed structure, the role of hero, his adventure, and even his winning are variable and replaceable, but their sequence and functions remain unchanged. “Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale” (Propp, 1968, p. 21). If we choose different actions and different roles, based on A-B-C arrangement, then we can derive countless new stories, and see Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Representative tales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Hero’s birth</td>
<td>A1: clever, brave, unusual power (three brothers)</td>
<td><em>A Black Horse the Third Brother Zhang</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A2: clever, brave (six <em>Ahwu</em>) in Tus’ language</td>
<td><em>A Herding-Pig Grandma and Demons</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A3: clever (a young girl)</td>
<td><em>The Tale of a Sheep’s Tail</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A4: clever, beautiful (young girl named Winter Flower and 16 <em>Ahgu</em>)</td>
<td><em>The Legend of Niuda</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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1. *Ahwu* is pronounced in Tus’ language, meaning young men or young lads.
2. *Ahgu* is pronounced in Tus’ language, meaning young women or young girls.
In fact, these stories share the similar situations for future functions, as Propp himself noted, “an important morphological element … after the initial situation there follow functions” (Propp, 1968, p. 25). They play essential roles for promoting the further development of plot, which can be illustrated by the following tales from The Selected Tales.

*Third Brother Zhang* began with “a longtime ago, there was a grandma with her children living a happy life. But her children were devoured by a 9-head monster” (QIAO, 2015, p. 3).

*A Herding-Pig Grandma and Demons* similarly began with “a long time ago, an old grandma without any children lived on herding pigs, but one day, a demon wanted to eat up all her pigs…” (QIAO, 2015, p. 41).

*The Tale of a Sheep’s Tail* also began with “a long time ago, there was a family with both grandpa and grandma. They had no children, but lived a happy life, but one day, the grandma, deserted by the grandpa had to live alone and without any aid” (QIAO, 2015, p. 41).

*The Legend of Niuda* began with “Once upon a time, two brothers were living in the valley of Dragon-king Mountain, with elder brother cruel, while younger brother kind” (QIAO, 2015, p. 81).

These similar beginnings convey the similar situations for happening of these tales and wait for the debut of heroes. It should be noted that, in Table 1, Item A, as well as its variants, including A1, A2, A3, A4 and A… are ordinary young men or women with no superpower or giant stature, but share the same qualities, such as clever, brave, and so on. They realized that only by relying on the collective wisdom they could be sure to beat all the opponents.

The heroes’ adventures (B) are extremely similar in that they wanted to slay their opponents (all terrible nonhuman beings), including a monster (B1), a demon (B2) and a dragon (B4) that are always threatening the lives of their relatives and neighbors nearby. They were strong competitors and were not easy to be defeated. They posed a lot of obstacles to prevent the heroes’ progress towards the victory.

The final ending (C) is almost the same in the successful slaying monsters (C1), demons (C2) or dragons (C3) and in a happy life’s restoration. These tales have shown their firm and strong eagerness for victory and a happy life.

The formulation of the plot structure of Tus’ folktales equates A (A1, A2, A3, A…) + B (B1, B2, B3, B…) + C (C1, C2, C3, C…) + … All the folktales can be reduced to this model, which can, on the contrary, inspire
countless tales, with only each element replaced by others. That is way when we ever read these wonderful folktales, we always find the similar themes and plots repetitious, and of course easy to understand.

**The Collectiveness, Cooperation and Even Respecting Elders Conveyed by Tu’s Folktales**

If we judge the roles in Tu’s folktales according to seven characters offered by Propp, we can define the roles’ specialty in Tu’s folktales. Comparatively, in Tu’s folktales, there are only four roles or characters, including hero, false hero, helper and dispatcher, with three characters (villain, princess and donor) fewer than those seven in Russian folktales. In Tu’s folktales, Heroes can be more human-like beings than supernatural ones: three brothers (Eldest Brother Stone, Second Brother Wood, and Third Brother Zhang) in *A Black Horse*, or six Ahwu (young guys: Stoneroller Ahwu, Excrement Ahwu, Frog Ahwu, Egg Ahwu, Scissor Ahwu, and Awl Ahwu) in *A Herding-Pig Grandma and Demons*, or a young lady in *The Tale of a Sheep’s Tail* and a village girl in *The Legend of Niuda*. They were not Hercules, who could conquer everything if they liked. Of course, they could find it impossible to slay the huge and powerful opponents by themselves, but only by their wisdom and jointly efforts. Although there is an obvious tendency of hero worship among the Tu nationality, collective and cooperative activities are also preferred in their culture.

In *Third Brother Zhang*, the three brothers’ killing the 9-head monster is just the concrete successful case of their jointly and collective efforts. They firstly had to seek for the helper and then discussed how to cooperate each other in the job. Firstly, the three brothers bid farewell to their wives and Grandma to look for the troublesome monster. In a village, they met a boy grazing the sheep on the slope of a hill, and asked:

“Young man! Do you know where a 9-head monster lives?” the young man answered, “I am a shepherd of the monster, and he is very cruel to me. I waited on him day and day, but he ill-treated me.” Third Brother Zhang asked: “Would you like to lead us to his den and kill him together?” the young man willingly agreed, and said, “Tonight, I will lead all of you into his den and attack him by surprise.” (QIAO, 2015, p. 10).

Then, the three brothers made a meticulous arrangement, in which each was charged with specific responsibilities, and designed a very clever way to finally fulfill the task of slaying the monster.

When night fell, the three brothers sneaked into the den of the 9-head monster among the sheep. Brother Stone and Brother Wood hid behind the door and Brother Zhang hid behind the cupboard. When the monster was falling asleep, Brother Zhang rushed to cut off his four heads. The monster was running outside. Just at the gate, Brother Stone and Brother Wood together jumped out from the door back, slashing their knives at the monster and cutting off all the heads. The three brothers together cut the monster to death. (QIAO, 2015, pp. 10-11)

In *Demons*, six Ahwu (young guys) from the same village shared a very excellent cooperation in fighting against the demon. They hid in the different places in the Grandma’s home and each was assigned a very special job for lying on for the monster.

The herding-grandma was unhappy because the monster wanted to haunt her home to devour all her pigs and herself. On her return from herding to home, she met 6 Ahwu (young guys) headed by Stoneroller Ahwu who would like to help her to get rid of the demon. They were Stoneroller Ahwu, Excrement Ahwu, Frog Ahwu, Egg Ahwu, Scissor Ahwu, and Awl Ahwu. These six Ahwu are both heroes who played a very important role in the story and helpers who only joined together to kill the demon.

At midnight, the demon whirled to Grandma’s house, hurrying to eat her who is lying on the bed. When the monster jumped unto the bed for eating her, he was pricked on the mouth by Awl Ahwu hiding under the quilt. …then, a gash was cut on his mouth by Scissor Ahwu under her pillow, …his eyes were exploded blind by Egg Ahwu in the fire, …his front
teeth were broken by Frog Ahwu. Scared, the wounded monster tried to rush out of the door, and when stepping on Excrement Ahwu waiting on lying the threshold, he slipped on the ground, throwing himself on the back. Finally, he was crushed to death by Stoneroller Ahwu from the top of the door. (QIAO, 2015, pp. 43-45)

In the Tail, the grandma’s daughter, as the heroine in the tale, fought against the wicked lama only by herself. She was a female, weak in strength, but clever, so she devised a scheme to kill the lama. In this story, wisdom is more important than anything else.

She persuaded the lama to anoint some honey on his head … then, they went together to gather some honey from honeycomb. Suddenly, a swarm of bees flew out to sting his head. It was so painful that he asked her to beat these bees by using an iron hammer. She took the chance to knock him to death. (QIAO, 2015, pp. 16-17)

In Niuda, the heroine was just an ordinary girl who wanted to slay a terrible dragon, named Wang Mang, in order to protect the villagers. Her name was Layuehua (Winter Flower). Of course, she found it impossible for herself to carry out the task. She had to find a helper, a magical helper, named Niuda and 16 Ahgu (young girls) in Tus’ language. When her father doubted her, “Are you sure you can defeat Wang Mang?” she answered firmly, “If I can find Niuda, I am sure to kill Wang Mang” (QIAO, 2015, p. 85). Niuda was proved to be a wise cow that could give her a lot of clever suggestions, according to which she finally succeeded in beheading the dragon. Layuehua (Winter Flower), as a young girl, of course could not defeat the powerful dragon. First of all, let’s have a close look at the dragon.

Suddenly, with a dense gust of smoke pouring from the cave, a terrible monster appeared, with a bucket-large head, and a thorn in his forehead. He had a pair of eyes, just as large as a bronze bell, and a large, fierce-looking mouth, with green scales covering him. (QIAO, 2015, p. 84)

Despite a grisly countenance, the dragon is too all-mighty to be defeated. However, Winter Flower pretended to marry Dragon Wang Mang.

At the wedding ceremony, they toasted jars of strong alcohol to the monster till he was dead drunk. Winter Flower took the chance to fasten iron chains around his neck. These girls began to perform Anzhao dancing around him till he was dizzy. At the third lap, they took out knives from their sleeves and stabed at Wang Mang who could not escape because of being confined. (QIAO, 2015, p. 88)

In these tales listed above, when confronted with those supernatural beings, these heroes and helpers should meet two prerequisite conditions: one is cooperation and the other is wisdom, which thoroughly reflect social collective awareness and wisdom in the Tu’s society.

These tales vividly depict what have happened, and what they have experienced in the feudal times of the Tu nationality. Despite some disputes or disagreement about their origin, now it is agreed on that the Tus are variously suggested to be the descendants of the nomadic tribes roving in the northwest part of China, including the people of Western Xia (西夏), the Tuyuhun Xianbei (吐谷浑鲜卑), Mongolians who came to the current Qinghai-Gansu area during the time of the Mongol conquests. In the early times, the Tus mainly engaged themselves in animal husbandry, and then changed into agricultural production. In the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, the Tus began to know how to farm land for their food and already entered into feudal society from heroic ages. The typical characteristic of their society is just the system of Tusi (土司) administration. When the agricultural style dominated their society, the Tus’ society entered into the farming times, when the rulers divided their farming land into 16 chieftains (Tusi, 土司), most of whom had double identities. One is officially appointed magistrates under the government of the Yuan Dynasty, while the other is local officials
and chieftains of the same kinship who could privilege themselves with farming land and civilians. Several villages or more villages with the same surname of family name, were under the control of each chieftain, around whom all villagers were organized and administrated. Collectiveness and cooperativeness have been instilled in their mind ever since their childhood and become their psychological archetype.

All civilians within the boundary of their farming land were under the administration of local chieftains, and organized by their same blood kinship. This blood-tied identity shared the common cultural customs and religious beliefs which was helpful to be recruited and mobilized to overcome all the obstacles they met in their social development. Firstly, this type of social structure helped them in farming. The Hehuang region, situated in the transition zone between the Qingzang Plateau and the Loess Plateau, boasts in multiple landforms, including mountains, hills, ravines, basins and so on. This kind of landform, as one of the most vulnerable ecologies, is not suitable for farming cultivation and increases the difficulty in supporting themselves. In order to survive the severe atmosphere, they realize they should need joint efforts and close cooperation to cultivate and plough the land, sow seeds and even harvest crops together and offer mutual help when in need. This typical of farming has also dominated the feudal society of the Tu nationality for almost 1,000 years and produced deep influences upon them. Besides, in history, the Hehuang region, as one of the most important military fields in northwest China, has been frequently contested and plundered by many nomads. In order to protect their homes and even their lives, all members of the Tus volunteered to be gathered, and recruited for the military summon at the crucial time. When faced with a large enemy force bearing down upon their border, they knew they could defend their homeland only by the collective force from communities. That is why we can see in their folktales when one is trouble or in need, she or he can get help from others nearby in the same village. In these four folktales, we can clearly identify that all the heroes could fulfill their task, only together with their helpers, which can be marked with a collective culture.

All dispatchers in the four folktales are grandmas except those in The Legend of Niuda, who would often give heroes orders to follow. That is, heroes were often dispatched by their grandmas or motivated by their grandmas’ miserable conditions, but in their deep structure, the respect for elders in the families can be regarded as their moral orientation in their culture.

In Third Brother Zhang, they tried to avenge the death of his Grandma’s children on the 9-head monster, and in a sense, they were dispatched by his Grandma to fulfill this huge task.

In Demon, a demon threatened to devour all the pigs of a Grandma and 6 Ahwu (young guys in Tu’s language) were summoned to get ready for trapping the demon.

In The Tale, the deserted grandma was bullied by a wicked lama (monk) and a young clever girl volunteered to fight against the lama.

Grandmas in the folktales can often be regarded as those of high honor and respect, and can get help and support from young men when in need or in difficulty. Many folktales begin from grandmas’ miserable conditions, including their children being devoured by monsters, her being bullied by wicked lamas and her life and possessions being threatened. The heroes in the tales were willing to offer their help to these grandmas, even regardless of their lives. In a sense, this just reflects an important social moral—women’s important roles in their families and society. In a common Tus’ family, the core members are often composed of three generations, also called big families in China, grandparents, parents and their unmarried children, who co-live in one courtyard or several courtyards and perform as the basic production unit. Elders enjoy a high social rank and the respect from younger generations who regard it as an obligation to provide for their grandparents and
parents. Those who desert or refuse to look after their elders are often despised or looked down upon. In a family, males enjoy an absolute power or authority, while females gradually become the center of the whole family by doing housework and looking after their children. Naturally, their children are deeply attached to them, who are usually regarded as the embodiment of love, kindness and even affability. Therefore, the good virtues, including collectiveness, cooperation and even respecting elders have become important motifs of Tus’ folktales.

**Conclusion**

These hero folktales of Tu nationality can be deduced into a binary contradiction: positive vs. negative. The negative side often stands for powerful evil forces, while the positive side is relatively weak, but can defeat their opponents together with their helpers. This binary story between good and evil ends with the good’s final winning. This formulation seems simple in plot development, but it is not the case. Retelling stories or tales is in fact an entertainment, in which the social moral of “doing good things as a good man” is conveyed by oral communications between tale-tellers and audience. These tales often teach people how to distinguish good from bad, how to be kind to others and how to overcome the difficulty in their work. So, folktales in a sense perform some moral education functions.

The Tus’ folktales, usually transmitted from mouth to mouth, vividly and concretely reflect Tus’ social life in different historical phases whether in contents they convey or in motifs they express. Because of the rich cultural connotations, these folktales can be regarded as a cultural carrier, from which we can directly analyze the psychological conditions and cultural characteristics they convey. On the whole, these tales convey a positive and healthy life style, which can help Tu nationality of very limited number survive the severe conditions in the corner of large-area China. Of course, this study is very limited because on the one hand it has only selected four folktales as its study target, and on the other hand, it has only covered hero tales as its study scope. Therefore, more folktales and more themes are waiting for the further research.

**References**


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