INSIGHTS INTO CIVILIZATIONAL MUTUAL LEARNING FROM THE OVERSEAS DISSEMINATION OF CHINESE FOLK TALES

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Abstract: The translation of Chinese folk tales into foreign languages constitutes a form of "going global" and a cross-linguistic reproduction of knowledge, whose impact on the development of Chinese folk tales is indirect yet latent. Through the Chinese academic community's critical engagement with and reinterpretation of translated texts, the process of translation enables a reverse flow of knowledge, namely, a "coming back", thereby shaping a bidirectional and dynamic mechanism embedded within the broader framework of civilizational mutual learning. The civilizational significance of the overseas dissemination of Chinese folk tales lies in three aspects: first, it expands the global influence of Chinese folk tales and, by extension, Chinese literature, thus enhancing China's participation in global literary discourse; second, it contributes to the formal renewal and creative development of Chinese folk tales, enriching the expressive forms of Chinese literature; and third, it facilitates the modernization and innovative transformation of outstanding traditional Chinese culture, fostering an integration of cultural inheritance with contemporary relevance.

For more than a century, Chinese folk tales have been translated and introduced abroad by foreign scholars, disseminated worldwide, and won the affection of readers. As a distinctive category of Chinese storytelling, these tales carry China's cultural heritage and embody a uniquely Chinese spirit and generative power. Their translation not only presents the spiritual outlook of Chinese culture to the world but also brings global elements into the very scene of the emergence and evolution of modern Chinese literature. Unlike didactic or lyrical literary texts, Chinese folk tales display remarkable productive vitality in cross-cultural transmission due to their unique generic mechanisms. Specifically, the elements of fantasy, animistic thinking, and symbolic imagery found in these tales contain deep-seated cultural genes of humankind, interwoven with layers of historical memory, expansive imagination, and reflections on lived reality. Rooted in culturally specific motifs yet resonant with archetypes of the collective unconscious, Chinese folk tales elicit a sense of shared human experience and exhibit strong regenerative capacity when transmitted across cultures. This penetrating cross-cultural adaptability allows Chinese folk tales not only to circulate readily within the global literary system but also to serve as mediators in processes of identity formation and civilizational imagination. In this sense, the translation of Chinese folk tales is not merely an extension of the long-standing transregional circulation patterns of traditional Chinese culture; rather, it functions as a knowledge-producing mechanism in which a "light" literary form carries "weighty" cultural meaning.

The difficulty involved in collecting and recording folk tales lies not only in assembling the various categories of folk narratives preserved in ancient texts, but also in establishing clear scholarly classifications for them. The question of whether categorization should precede differentiation—or vice versa—has long been a thorny issue. When compiling their collection, the Brothers Grimm consulted hundreds of variant versions of stories but ultimately discarded them to preserve the integrity of the folk narrative form; narrative continuity appears in their texts only incidentally. Even if their revisions did not undermine the oral nature of folk storytelling, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* still lack the formal independence or disciplinary

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distinctiveness of a fully developed genre and remain "a new form situated between the folk tale and the literary tale." (Li, 2013) The Western tradition of rewriting folk tales entered China during the May Fourth period and profoundly shaped the development of Chinese folk-tale genres. Influenced by the New Culture Movement and the rise of the New Historiography, the study of folk literature, folklore, and social surveys gained tremendous momentum and effectively integrated knowledge from related disciplines. The knowledge production that unfolded during this period could not avoid a theoretical premise: each field needed a specific cognitive framework for understanding "the folk" and, on that basis, had to articulate its own relationship to it. (Yuan, 2024, p. 5) As a result, when the slogan "go to the folk" was adopted, different groups sought ways to position themselves in relation to "the folk," hoping to turn it into a movement grounded in its own internal logic. Compared with the enthusiastic reception of the Grimm tales in China, the literary fairy tales of Andersen and Wilde drew far more ambivalent responses, a difference closely tied to the degree to which a tale type could align with the mechanisms through which the New Literature sought to construct modern cultural thought.

It is undeniable that knowledge produced through translation has enabled Chinese folk tales to reach global audiences and to contribute to the flourishing development of world literature. Therefore, any examination of the compilation and translation of Chinese folk tales abroad must break out of a culturally insulated framework: it requires not only long-term, cross-cultural reflection on foreign interpretations of China, but also an effort to discern the cultural subjectivity of China within dialogues among civilizations. Approaching the history of the translation of Chinese folk tales with such a perspective helps, on the one hand, to situate these tales within the coordinates of world literature, and on the other, to furnish interpretive tools for grasping the historical currents and sociocultural dynamics of the broader world. Over the course of more than a century of translation, Chinese folk tales have undergone a process that can roughly be described as a movement from knowledge repackaging to knowledge circulation and return—a development that is an inevitable outcome of civilizational mutual learning. Viewed in this light, the question posed long ago by Béla Balázs when rewriting Chinese folk tales—whether they are "taking root in the national soil or world Horizon" (Zipes, 2010, p. 41)—no longer constitutes a dilemma for translators. Instead, the process now resembles what Jane Yolen remarks in the foreword to *Chinese Fairy Tale Feasts*: "They'll become yours the more you pass them on." (Yolen, 2015, p. 8) In other words, with an awareness of the interconnectedness of knowledge, Chinese folk tales not only travel farther but also reveal their inherent distinctiveness more clearly. Correspondingly, the translation of Chinese folk tales has expanded the scope of overseas

Sinological inquiry and helped shape a more diversified paradigm for comparative fairy-tale studies. Unlike cross-cultural criticism premised on "reading China through the West" or "reading the West through China," Jack Zipes adopts a perspective that bridges Chinese and Western traditions, reminding translators not to "overlook the subtle details of history" and to guard against "misleading cultural representations." (Zipes, 2024, p. viii) Such reflections deepen translators' engagement with and interpretation of Chinese knowledge, thus driving methodological innovation in cross-cultural comparative research. As knowledge circulates more broadly, understandings of how Chinese folk tales participate in world literature have likewise become more nuanced, providing theoretical resources for constructing a shared poetics of the fairy tale across cultures.

It is worth noting that the translation of Chinese folk tales is not a one-way cultural export; it should also be understood as an active response to the world's desire to understand China. As Xu Jun observes, "China is not forcefully promoting its own culture; rather, it is actively responding to the world's need to know and understand China." (Xu, 2021) This feature of

translation as knowledge production compels researchers to examine more deeply the relationship between Chinese literature and world literature, as well as the mechanisms of interaction between the two in the contemporary global context. As a crucial link between them, translation facilitates both the circulation of knowledge and the exchange of cultures. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, translation plays a vital role in the very formation of world literature. As David Damrosch argues, world literature is "literature that gains in translation." (Damrosch, 2014, p. 309) Specifically, this "gain" lies in the construction of a mechanism for cross-lingual knowledge production, one that actively energizes and integrates the knowledge system of world literature. Yet the mere existence of translated works does not automatically secure their place in the constellation of world literature. What is required is the building of bridges between Chinese and foreign literary traditions so that Chinese literature can generate resonance and dialogue within other cultural spheres and take part in the evolving processes of world literature. In essence, the westward journey of Chinese folk tales is an experiment in cultural recoding across time and space. Through translation, what once functioned as local knowledge representing China becomes, in cross-lingual circulation, a form of world knowledge. One that showcases Chinese cultural traditions while actively engaging in civilizational dialogue. However, if such extraterritorial knowledge production does not return to enrich the core of Chinese literary subjectivity and is allowed to circulate unidirectionally or homogenously, it risks depleting the very knowledge of China that translation is meant to articulate. The circulation of this diminished knowledge, in turn, shapes a genuinely pluralistic landscape of world literature. For this reason, distinguishing, interrogating, and critically evaluating the forms of Chinese knowledge produced abroad becomes all the more necessary. This is precisely why Wang Ning takes "canonicity" and "criticality" (Wang, 2018) as epistemological grounds for defining world literature.

Furthermore, although the overseas translation of Chinese folk tales constitutes a form of hetero-representation, it should not be understood as standing in binary opposition to China's self-representation of its own cultural subjectivity. Treating the two as disconnected would obscure the complex interplay between self and other in civilizational exchange and would contradict the internal logic of cross-cultural knowledge production. Unlike the translations of Western fairy tales into Chinese, which directly intervened in the generic development of Chinese folk tales, the overseas translation of Chinese folk tales functions as a mode of cross-lingual knowledge reproduction that moves outward. Its influence on the evolution of Chinese folk tales has therefore been indirect and largely latent. Through the critical responses and reinterpretations produced by Chinese scholars, however, this outward movement of knowledge is accompanied by a return flow, creating a bidirectional dynamic embedded in the broader framework of civilizational mutual learning.

Overseas translation and domestic translation are not isolated phenomena. The positive and negative effects of the overseas translation of Chinese folk tales have both served as theoretical references for China's reception of external resources, and the deep interconnection between these two processes has provided momentum for the simultaneous nationalization and internationalization of Chinese folk tales. In this ongoing process, the decontextualization and recontextualization of knowledge have given Chinese folk tales renewed vitality. Once situated within the system of civilizational dialogue, they begin to reveal a dual dynamic that draws simultaneously on their national specificity and their capacity for global resonance. The value of their overseas translation for literary history is reflected in several dimensions. It broadens the global influence of Chinese folk tales and, more generally, of Chinese literature, strengthening China's participation in worldwide literary conversations. It contributes to the generic renewal and creative development of Chinese folk tales, enriching the expressive possibilities of Chinese literature. It also encourages the modern transformation and innovative reinterpretation of traditional Chinese culture, allowing cultural heritage to interact productively with contemporary sensibilities. Within the broader landscape of civilizational exchange, the development of human subjectivity consistently occupies a central position. The cross-cultural transmission of Chinese folk tales has deepened readers' understanding of the

relationship between human beings and the world, expanded the shared spiritual horizon within which humanity and civilization are co-created, and illuminated the dialectical unity of subjectivity and alterity in an age shaped by cultural globalization.

The translation of Chinese folk tales highlights the tension and interaction between national characteristics and worldliness in cross-cultural communication. When discussing the relationship between the national and the global, Chen Sihe incisively pointed out that "the more national something is, the more universal it becomes," yet this formulation still relies on the standard of "the world." (Chen, 2001) In other words, on the path toward world literature, reaffirming the subjectivity of Chinese literature is particularly essential. Of course, the establishment of such subjectivity does not presuppose a rejection of the global. According to Zeng Jun, the "world" in world literature should not be understood as a noun but as a verb, meaning the process of "worlding." (Zeng, 2022) From this perspective, achieving a true integration of the national and the global requires breaking free from narrow, self-enclosed viewpoints and engaging deeply with the roots and origins of world civilizations. This also opens to another dimension implied by Zhang Fugui's statement that "the more universal something is, the more national it becomes." (Zhang, 2022) In addressing the misreadings found in translations of Chinese folk tales, Chinese scholars have not remained silent. Instead, they have generated a critical Chinese discourse that helps correct distortions of Chinese knowledge produced under Western narrative dominance. This discourse has become a vital resource for the modern reconstruction of Chinese folk tales. At the same time, Chinese scholars have not clung exclusively to local resources or rejected outstanding foreign ones. Rather, they actively explore new pathways for the integrated development of Chinese and foreign fairy tales. It is precisely because of this vision of civilizational dialogue that the knowledge production surrounding the translation of Chinese folk tales avoids falling into the trap of "literary cosmopolitanism." (Jiang, 2018)

In presenting the spirit of Chinese culture to the world, the translation and introduction of Chinese folk tales are no longer the exclusive domain of foreigners. Chinese translators have also taken an active role in this outward transmission. As early as 1948, Lin Yutang translated Chinese folk tales into English, humorously describing himself merely as a Chinese storyteller. Taking into account cultural differences in customs, behavior, and empathy, he argued that these stories "must be retold in entirely new versions." (Lin, 1948, p. xvii) To maintain historical authenticity, he presented Chinese stories in a globalized form. For example, when narrating the story of Ye Xian, he rendered the title as "Cinderella," thereby fusing Chinese and Western versions of the tale, although the awareness of intercultural dialogue remained limited. By 2022, with the translation of *The Dragon Daughter and Other Lin Lan Fairy Tales*, Chinese translator Juwen Zhang further enhanced the cross-cultural dimension of knowledge circulation, expanding the stories' universality while remaining faithful to the original meaning so as "to resonate within the English-speaking world." (Zhang, 2022, p. 13)

Clearly, integrating Chinese and Western perspectives elevates translation quality and benefits cultural exchange and civilizational dialogue. Even more significantly, the cross-media adaptation of Chinese folk tales has introduced global audiences to a new panorama of Chinese knowledge. In recent years, the dissemination of Chinese folk tales and mythological motifs in the West exemplifies this trend. For instance, the American detective comic company produced *The Monkey Prince*, extending the mythological lineage of Sun Wukong. Chinese animated films such as *White Snake: Origins* and *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* have been introduced to North American streaming platforms and received high ratings, representing "Eastern mythology" to a global audience. Moreover, picture books adapted from Chinese folk tales continue to emerge abroad, creating a wave of "Chinese-style" narratives. In sum, the overseas translation and dissemination of Chinese folk tales have enriched the plurality of Chinese

cultural narratives abroad and, to a certain extent, shifted the representation of China in foreign contexts. The translation process not only reshapes the interaction between Chinese and world literature but also offers a knowledge-production model of civilizational exchange grounded in cultural subjectivity. Only by maintaining the subjectivity of Chinese folk tales and Chinese culture can such works transition from passive reception to active construction within a globalized context. At the same time, the interaction between overseas translation and domestic translation should be considered part of the entire process of knowledge circulation. Their synergistic effects not only enhance the interpretive power of Chinese folk tales in relation to global experiences but also provide resources and reference points for constructing a contemporary Chinese narrative paradigm, thereby demonstrating the originality and interpretive capacity of Chinese theory within the global cultural system.

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