



Comparison of Thematic Narration Between English Ballads and Yao's Folk Songs

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Abstract

Both English ballads and Yao's folk songs are the art crystallizations of oral literature. They belong to the model of integrating personal creation with collective creation, reflecting the inner emotional activities and the simple way to record things when human beings living and laboring. The significant characteristics of these songs are non-individualization, non-subjectivity and non self consciousness. This paper made a comparative analysis to thematic narration between English ballads and Yao's folk songs from four key words of myth, love, hero, and success, explained their similarity, coincidence and unique style, aiming at providing a reference for us to understand the similarities and differences between the two folk literatures.

Key words: Parallel research; English popular ballads; Yao's folk songs; Thematic narration

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INTRODUCTION

Ballads or folk songs are from early humans' oral narrative literature which manifest their cultural

accumulation at the time when one nationality jointed labor production as a whole and lived for breeding offspring together. Since they reflect the mental outlooks of a nation, Ballads or folk songs generally have a high research value in both cultures and ethnic groups. The early English ballads have no fixed formats, only when certain periods had passed were they regulated by some stable structures and were presented in short narrative poems. However, those narrative poems are relatively simple in plots and full of dramatic features, very suitable for chanting. They are regarded as the beginning of English literature as well as the collective crystallization of wisdom and inspiration of English people's. Similarly, the folk songs of the Chinese Yao nationality are from their activities of labor and life, which have kept a good record of their behaviors and customs. Because the Yao nationality had once no characters of their own, they had to keep events with songs, singing when doing ancestor worship, narrating history, expressing feeling, inheriting regulations and etiquette, etc. Being colorful in subject matter and extensive content, Yao's folk songs are handing down even today. No matter how English ballads and Yao's folk songs arose, there is no doubt that they embody the early collective unconscious behaviors of the two peoples. Thus we can make a parallel comparison between English ballads and Yao's folk songs from theme, narration, style, image and creating principle in order to explore the phenomenon similarity as well as unique feature in national literature of the two, or probe their common poetics by expounding the motivation of the generating, or open up a new comparative perspective from Philosophy, aesthetics, critics by presenting their typical creating techniques and poetic structure characteristics. In this article, by means of four thematic narrative comparisons between English ballads and Yao's folk songs, the fresh, simple and natural style as well as the life pictures of all classes will be presented.

1. MYTH THEME

Myths originally existed in the stories told orally by people from all kinds of nations, but many mythical characters and story plots had more than one record as time went by. The birth of myth was by no means an accidental event, it emerged under the circumstance of human's low labor productivity and the nature's constantly changes when they faced diseases, famine, beasts and other irresistible forces. During the practice process of conquering and transforming nature, the early human beings gradually realized that they were not able to compete against the unpredictable changes of nature only by individuals or ethnic groups; they hoped to resolve conflicts and get rid of difficulties with the help of some certain mysterious superpower. Therefore, myth is human beings' spiritual ballast, a carrier of population yearning and religious believing. The mythical themes of English ballads and Yao's folk songs are from collective unconsciousness, which are the prototype images handed down from generation to generation in their own races, reflecting the early human beings' common ecological aesthetics and law of cultural inheritance. Generally, mythical themes in English ballads emphasize direct one event at a time, full of moral enlightenments, while the Yao's folk songs are implicit and full of profound metaphors. Differences come about because they have their respective living habits. As we know, the early English people were really typical immigrants from the Teutonic tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes who came from the Continent and settled in Britain. When they conquered and almost totally exterminated the aboriginal Celtic population, they brought their own fairy tales at the same time. Their early fairy tales have the nature of ballads, but they are only prototypes of them. A good example is the popular national epic *Beowulf* which tells a story of Beowulf's heroic deeds. Because Beowulf killed the man-eating demon Grendel, the people of Jutland composed a dirge to praise the great deeds of him after he died:

Of men was the mildest and most beloved,
To his kin the kindest, keenest for praise.
Then the Goth's people reared a mighty pile
With shields and amour hung, as he had asked,
And in the midst the warriors laid their lord,
Lamenting. Then the warriors on the mound
Kindled a mighty bale fire; the smoke rose
Black from the Swedish pine, the sound of flame.

(Zhang, 2003, p.4)

This way of oral narration had laid foundation for the later development of English ballads. Until the 14th century, English ballads became very popular, of which the two *Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight* and *The Wife of Usher's Well* laid myth as their theme. The former tells

a story that Elf Knight cheated six maids and murdered them through putting them into the sea, but when he met the seventh maid Lady Isabel, she got rid of the harmful monster by using clever device.

Oh turn away, thou false knight villain,
Oh turn away from me;
Oh turn away, with your back to the cliff,
And your face to the willow-tree.
He turned about, with his back to the cliff,
And his face to the willow-tree;
So sudden she took him up in her arms,
And threw him into the sea.
Lie there, lie there, thou false knight villain,
Lie there instead of me;
Twas you that promised to marry me,
For some of my father's fee. (Child, 2014, p.25)

In *The Wife of Usher's Well*, a rich woman sent her three sons to go to sea for business, unfortunately the three sons died from sea wreck a week later, causing the mother extremely sad, she yearned them day and night, looking forward to meeting them again. Until the night of St. Martin's Day (11, November), her three sons came home with branches and leaves of birch on their head. The old woman had thought they returned alive and immediately bade the house maid to make a fire for cooking. But when the cock crow at dawn, the three sons hurried to say goodbye to their mother and returned to the hell.

Historically, the Yao nationality is a Diaspora ethnic; they usually had no fixed abodes and were accustomed to migrate from north to south, taking a shape of large dispersion and small concentration in residence and at last disappeared in deep mountains in south China. Besides, a part of the Yao people even traveled far away across the sea to live abroad. Thus, myth themes in Yao's folk songs reveal naturally the hardships as well as eulogizing their ancestor's help for them; one of the most important songs is *A Song of the Root*, which describes the twelve surnames of Yao people sailed across the sea with the help of their ancestor Pan Wang during their migration to the south.

Since the reign of the king of Han,
A four-year drought hit the land wan.
With famine they could no longer bear,
And consulted to migrate to the sea rear.
But ships stopped and paddles cracked,
What a horrible sign they met wrecked!
Until they made a wish on the verge of fate,
Were the Yao people able to land another state.
First they settled down in Canton district,
And then in mountains they stayed restrict.

(Yan, 2014, p.70)

The long-time mountain life had made the Yao people develop the habit of caring for the grasses and trees.

Therefore, fairy tales in Yao's folk songs diffused Chinese traditional view of simple materialism; they thought the world is made up of materials and everything has a soul, life and death are natural phenomena. In *Ancestor Peng* they sang:

At the death of Ancestor Peng
Men and women were lost in sorrows
Three days fogs hung over their home Keng
From distance the mourning travelers were in rows
At the death of Ancestor Peng
The sun seemed disappeared in the west
And the rocks had turned to sands in Keng
Everything returned where they came and laid best.
(Wang, 2010, p.20)

It was because the Yao people showed special preference to landscapes that their folk songs are rich in prototype images of mountains, rivers, plants and animals, manifesting Totem Worship in mountain god, tree god and animal god.

2. LOVE THEME

Since ancient times, love has been the lust expression of human beings' pursuing psychological beauty, implying the release of original impulsion hidden in human beings' inner heart. Besides, love is an eternal theme to literary works including ballads and folk songs, which is always praised and advocate by writers and artists. "As a special emotion, love is always comprehended by means of modificatory terms, such as attractive, poetic, ardent, jealous, loyal, exclusive, lovesick, obstructed, sad, painful, or even temerarious, dead or alive, and so on (Zhai, 2017, pp.129-133). We find that in English ballads the narrative of love theme has its own characters; the English people pay more attention to adventure, full of romance, for all of them live on the islands, though love tragedies occasionally emerge in ballads, they do not bring any impairment in the spirit of active exploration and true love pursuit. As in *Riddles Wisely Expounded* they sang:

"If thou canst answer me questions three,
This very day will I marry thee."
"Kind sir, in love, O then," quoth she,
Tell me what your [three] questions be."
O what is longer than the way,
Or what is deeper than the sea?
Or what is louder than the horn,
Or what is sharper than a thorn?
"Or what is greener than the grass,
Or what is worse then a woman was?"
O love is longer than the way,
And hell is deeper than the sea.
And thunder is louder than the horn,
And hunger is sharper than a thorn.
And poyson is greener than the grass,

And the Devil is worse than woman was.
When she these questions answered had,
The knight became exceeding glad.
And having [truly] try'd her wit,
He much commended her for it. (Child, 2014, p.63)

This ballad depicts a story of a noble knight's finding his beloved wife. One day, when he knocked at the door of beautiful girls, the knight faced a problem of choosing one of the three. He elaborately thought out four riddles and at last the youngest girl answered the questions without any hitch. As a result, all's well that ends well, they two became a couple. The whole song is full of a breezy atmosphere by cheerful and smooth moods, nobly revealing the style qualified by fair maiden and great gentleman of England. However, in *Lord Rendal*, the love theme reflects another emotional appeal of sadness, permeated with moving atmosphere.

"What became of your bloodhounds, Lord Randal, my son?
What became of your bloodhounds, my handsome young man?"
"O they swelld and they died; mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm weary wi hunting, and fain wald lie down."
"O I fear ye are poisond, Lord Randal, my son!
O I fear ye are poisond, my handsome young man!"
"O yes! I am poisond; mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wald lie down."
(Child, 2014, p.72)

In contrast, the love theme in Yao's folk songs appears deep and implicit. Influenced by their traditional concept, love affaires were once regarded as a destiny that depended on family's conditions, free love was restricted on a certain degree, so the young men and young women had to convey their inner feelings by singing songs, with a style of grace and brevity. In *Under the Thorn Tree* they sang:

The thorn tree, the thorn tree
The thorn tree is blooming with fragrance.
Like the haw apples ripen in golden,
All praise them fragrant and sweet.
The thorn tree, the thorn tree
Under it is a pleasing shade.
Full of haw apples they look like strings of little lanterns,
Enticing the lad travel more to meet the lass.
Thanks for God giving us the chance of appointment in the orchard,
Let's meet here together if we are destined.
Since I came to the world my parents worried with my marriage,
And now I'd like to find love by singing together with you.

Like the eight Gods of the legend we sing and chat
smile,
Like the seven star maidens landing on the mundane.
(Yan, 2014, p.72)

This folk song depicts a pair of young man and woman secretly went for an appointment under thorn trees and pled mutual appeal and admiration by expressing what they were thinking. After the song, they pledged to marry without the permission of their parents, like Niu Lang and Zhi Nü, two lovers in an old Chinese love story. But man has joys and sorrows, as stars have transformation in positions. In *Discrete Song*, they sang:

Endless talking endless talking,
Our affection is long-drawn-out that cannot be
finished,
It's pleasure to spend our romance time together,
But we have to be separate as we have to be apart.
Endless singing, endless singing,
Deep as our affection is we cannot sing till the end,
The marriage of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai is
doomed,
What a pity they can not be a couple at last.
(Yan, 2014, p.63)

As Yao nationality is an ethnic minority who are good at singing and dancing, a large number of Yao's folk songs involve love themes, either expressing happiness and sorrow, or indicating parting for ever, or deciding engagement, or depicting natural sight, full of emotions and unique style, sufficiently embodying their implicit and reserved features in it.

3. HEROIC THEME

A great many hero epics are preserved in the traditional cultures of all nationalities in the world; it is obviously they are basic spiritual beliefs and strength sources for a nation, for "Heroes represent the common will of the masses, they are the brainstorms with strong personal abilities and awesome spiritual qualities who help their people out of dilemmas and sufferings." (Yan, 2014, pp.98-101) In *The Hero as Divinity*, Thomas Carlyle pointed out:

Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: The soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these. Too clearly it is

a topic we shall do no justice to in this place! (Carlyle, 1841, p.2)

The common heroic themes in English ballads are knight stories and hero's adventures at sea. Thus chivalry manner stands for the image of early English heroes, as in *Earl Brand* they sang:

He's mounted her on a milk-white steed,
And himself on a dapple grey,
With a bugelet horn hung down by his side,
And lightly they rode away.
Lord William lookit oer his left shoulder,
To see what he could see,
And there he spy'd her seven brethren bold,
Come riding over the lee. (Child, 2014, p.106)

More or less, the nature of island country determines its heroic theme related to maritime navigation and distress. One of the renowned ballads is *Sir Patrick Spens* which talks about Patrick Spens's death at the sea. Because the Scotland king listened to gossip and ordered Patrick Spens to go to sea at inappropriate season, Patrick Spens, as a most famous sailor, realizing danger ahead, had to comply with the king's order to sail, which shows the boldness of a hero's regardless death:

O wha is this has don this deid,
This ill deid don to me,
To send me out this time o' the yeir,
To sail upon the se!
"Mak hast, mak haste, my mirry men all,
Our guid schip sails the morne:"
O say na sae, my master deir,
For I feir a deadlie storme. (Child, 2014, p.404)

Of paramount importance are the beautiful ballads in which Robin Hood's feats are celebrated. Robin Hood is a partly historical and partly legendary character. In *Robin Hood and Allin-a-Dale*, Robin Hood commanded his gang to attack the execution ground and punish the evil collectors:

Then Robin Hood put his horn to his mouth,
And blew blasts two or three;
When four-and-twenty bowmen bold
Came leaping over the lea. (Zhang, 2003, p.75)

As for the heroic tragedy, *The Hunting of the Cheviot* is the most popular with the English people. It tells a story of Douglas, the hero of Scotland, who asked a separate fight with Percy in order to protect his people when the England troop invaded Scotland. As a result, Douglas was defeated and was killed. Out of admiration for the hero, Percy saluted in silence to Douglas's corpse.

The heroic theme in the Yao's folk songs rooted from their national hero worship. According to the legend, the ancestor of the Yao was a dog of the King Gaoxin, because he had a contribution in defeating the enemy,

the King of Gaoxin kept his promise and allowed him married the second princess. On the wedding night, the dog revealed his man's feature and became the princess's ideal husband, so he was the ancestor of the Yao people. In *Songs of Great King Pan* they sang:

As the God Taibai descended to the earth,
Inviting the king to the forest hunting.
Panhu happened to accompany them the fifth,
Hearing by chance the king of Ping commanding:
If any brave man could sail across the sea
To kill the enemy, to protect our territory,
I would show the world hero thee,
To marry my second daughter for victory.
(Wang, 2010, p.45)

Influenced by the Han culture, some heroic figures in Yao's folk songs are actually transplanted from the images of ancient Chinese heroes; others are the recombination of legends of Han, Zhuang and Yao. For during their continuous migration process, the great integration of nations came into being and realizing at last a cultural sharing of all ethnic groups. In *Flood Retreated* they sang:

As the king of Long shot the sun,
Li Guang was preparing his bow.
Three hundred for the arrow,
And four hundred for the bow.
General Li Guang shot ten suns down,
And left two for lighting the world. (Wang, 2010, p.51)

Here, Li Guang is originally the famous general of Xi Han dynasty, he was regarded the hero of shooting down the suns and was good at shooting. Obviously, the Yao people borrowed the legend from the Han nationality.

4. SUCCESSFUL THEME

It is well known that success is a common psychological expectation to human beings, whether kings or ordinary people, success that they pursuit is actually the value that they try their best to get rid of difficulties to get more living space, so as to realize the great significance of life. Thus, successful theme recurring in English ballads and Yao's folk songs shows that the two nations have a common aspiration in pursuing a happy life and building a beautiful homeland. But the successful theme that English people hold is usually expressed explicitly, due to their satisfaction with conquering and overcoming nature, considering more honor than material comforts. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* they sang:

Great Romulus to Rome repairs in haste;
With boast and with bravery builds he that city
And names it with his own name, that it now bears.
Ticius to Tuscany, and towers raises,

Langobard in Lombardy lays out homes,
And far over the French Sea, Felix Brutus
On many broad hills and high Britain he sets,
Most fair. (Zhang, 2003, p.28)

Influenced by the Chinese Taoism, successful theme in Yao's folk songs reveals its connotation feature, which emphasizes to respect the laws of nature, arrive at the unity of nature and humanity, and realize the goal of harmonious ecology. Therefore, many images of landscapes, pastorals, plants and animals can emerge in Yao's folk songs, spiritually reflecting a national temperament of optimism, happiness and ambition. As a result, the Yao people either take advantage of scenes to express their emotions or look forward to leading an easy and peaceful life. For example, in *Creating the Heaven and the Earth* they sang:

The trees and bamboos are grown by King Liu,
The willows around the well are planted by the saint.
The flowers blooming in the garden are picked by the saint,
And all the roads are built by the forefathers.
The trees and bamboos are grown by King Liu,
The banyan tree near the garden is trimmed by the forefathers.
As the trees the saint planted grow taller,
His descendants are happy more than one thousand years. (Li, 2006, p.48)

In addition to daily life, there are also examples of exploring the meaning of life through overcoming natural disasters or resistance to oppression. In *Shooting the Sun* they sang:

Twelve suns come out of the east,
With flames they burn the sky red,
With flames they bake the earth black.
Causing the Ninth brother angry with fire,
While two arrows flee to the sky,
Two suns are shot down disappear. (Sha, 1981, p.25)
And in *Legend of Fu Tai and Fu Cheng* they sang:
A red sun lighted in the mountains,
My brother got resurrection from death,
Like the vines grew on the snow slope,
Rooted and sprouted at the same place.
Like rock bamboos on the Feng Huang Ling,
Shook their trunks in the winds,
Thy some day turned military forces,
To kill Jin Shou with blood. (Su, 1980, p.111)

CONCLUSION

Most English ballads and Yao's folk songs are from the folklore, they are summary of experience in labor, life, sacrifice and entertainment of the two nations. As to language style, they are plain and fresh, concise and

beautiful; as to narrative mode, they usually outline the colorful folk customs in terms of metaphor, hyperbole and personification; while in narrative theme, they present a resurrection of myth, love, hero and success, which obviously represent the human beings' basic consciousness in emotional expression and ethnic identity. English Ballads and Yao's folk songs reflect their common law of cultural inheritance but have respective cultural origin; they are primordial and precious materials of discovering the two nations' cultures.

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