

SOME SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN VIETNAM'S  
AND SOUTH KOREA'S FOLK LITERATURE  
(IN TERM OF FAIRY TALES)

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Vietnam and South Korea have experienced thousands years in history and were much influenced by Confucianism. With their basic characteristics of agricultural production economy and a crowded creative force, the two countries have plentiful literature treasures. With major features are “collective composition and spread by worker’s word of mouth” (1, pg. 9), the folk literature become an important part in the two countries’ literature before and after the foundation of written literature.

In folk literature, if mythology and legend that describe the specific foundation of each country were born when society had not been divided into classes, funny stories, fables, rhymes, proverbs developed strongly when society had classes. Assessing the fair tales’ role, many scholars believe that “it is less or more influenced by feudal ideology and religion; however it still remains its public characteristic. Fairy tales reflect every faces of nation life under people’s viewpoint. It can be said that fairy tales is one of the most loyal mirrors of our society in previous period. Fairy tales’ theme is plentiful,

and its content is very complicated” (2, pg. 298). Therefore, fairy tales are considered abundant resources describing society, life and thought of people.

In this article, we would just study about some similarities and differences in Vietnam and South Korea fairy tales to apprehend the specific characteristics of culture, manners and customs, lifestyle, etc, of the two countries’ people through the kind of folklore.

**I. In terms of similarities**

Using analytical method of fairy tales by folklore researcher Lê Chí Quế (see: 3, pg. 141); we divide Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales into 3 main types to compare. Those are:

- Animal fairy tales
- Miraculous fairy tales
- Social life fairy tales

Basing on the above division and the research of some typical Vietnam-South Korea Fairy tales, some similarities can be mentioned:

*Regarding the content and the plot:*

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<sup>(\*)</sup> M.A., The World Movie Magazine.

The fairy tales' plots are the full and most important event system being core of the relationships and character personality development. It is formed from overlapped relations between characters and situation, characters and characters, which both reveal character personality and reflect social relation. In general, because of conventional and symbolic characteristics, Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales' plots are rather simple in which people's appearance is severely one-sided and indefinite. However, through the plots, everyone can preliminarily imagine the then people and society. Normally, in Vietnam and South Korea fairy tales, human factor is built with types: a good turn is never lost and sowing the wind and reap the whirlwind. Therefore, it's not by chance that the folk authors make a happy ending for fairy tales.

Their contents are plentiful which associate with farmer's life. There are many stories having common theme and through Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales' content, the authors show an educational purpose to each person in the society. Though describing nature or original animals, the authors coordinate the description with educational ideology, humanity, patriotism, self-help for self-improvement will of each person and the whole nation, as well as solidarity and unanimity. In origin, people destinies theme (especially, the destiny of women) and fairy tales' expression show us that the matter of love and happiness in Vietnam and South Korea fairy tales are similar (the story Choon Hyang – spring fragrance

(South Korea) and Xuân Hương (Vietnam).

Moreover, Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales have many similarities in themes, purposes, and significances. Although, there are some different details, in the end the ways to resolve problems are similar.

#### ***In terms of psychology and character's personality***

As we know, character's personality is a synthesis of awareness, affection, and will, etc, of each character in fairy tales in general as well as awareness, expectation of each character in specific circumstances. Fairy tales' characters are the most basic factor, a focus revealing the theme and the theme's ideology in the stories. In turn, it is described by formal factors. As a result, the characters are a convergence of ideological and artistic values of fairy tales.

The characters' psychology and personality in Vietnam and South Korea fairy tales have many similarities. The characters are divided into two main lines: good and evil, high-minded and humble, honest and deceitful, etc. Therefore, building the characters' psychology and personality has many similarities. Rulers and exploiters' psychology and personality (king, mandarins, landlords, brothers, stepmothers, etc) are usually wicked, rapacious, mean, and foolish and always wish to harm others. Psychology and personality of Ruled class (farmers, sharecroppers, servants, employees, younger brothers or sisters, etc) – represent for a crowded working class –

is always altruistic, compassionate, hard-working like Hung Bu in story *The gift of wild goose queen* (South Korea), or Hung Bu in story *Hung Bu and Nol Bu* (South Korea), a good-natured farmer in story *The strange flower* (South Korea), a kind-hearted younger brother in story *The thistle* (Vietnam), *Hà râm hà rạc* (Vietnam) and many other fairy tales expressing the common points in describing characters' psychology and personality. It can be said that they hardly change and upset in the plot. A clear division between good and evil, beauty and bad, high-minded and humble, etc, is the most common feature in ideological depth of Vietnamese as well as Korean people.

Positive characters (kind-hearted, good-natured, truthful, etc) – represent for the good, high-minded things usually have a life with a happy future. Negative characters (wicked, greedy, deceitful, foolish, etc) – represent for the evil, the bad, the humble things are usually punished deservingly or must be paid the penalty by a death. However, it is a fact that in some cases the positive characters with honest, good-natured, kind-hearted personality has an unlucky, unhappy ending. In the cases, the ending usually explains any phenomenon. The hewer in the story a hewer and a fairy (South Korea) suffered a great misery and died for not seeing his wife on the heaven again. After that he is turned into a cock that each time he coos he looks up the sky.

A different version spreading by word of mouth about a rock waiting for her husband is remembered in South Korean

people memory with an ending that everyday the wife holding her child climbs up a mountain peak on the beach to wait for her husband. However, the husband never comes back. The mother and child stand until turning into a rock (4, pg.77). Building a happy ending in the plot as well as praising the good, kind-hearted, altruistic people, and condemning wicked, false-hearted, greedy people, Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales expressed the desire heading to the good, the high-minded thing of people. In story *Thạch Sanh* (Vietnam), Thạch Sanh is a good-natured and charitable person; lastly he gets married to a princess. Lý Thông and his mother are stricken by lightning because of being wicked and devilish. In story *The magpies' gratefulness* (South Korea); a charitable and hard-working student is saved from a snake's poison by a couple of magpies because he saved their flock of spring magpies, etc.

#### ***In terms of miraculous factor***

When studying about Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales, major viewpoints believe that in Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales, spirit factor plays a supporting role as catalyst improving the development of the plot. Therefore, in comparison to myth and legend, gods and miraculous factor accompanies with the interchange from deities relations (in myths) and the relation between deities and the world (in legends) to people and people relation (the relations in the world) which heightens people factor, reflect artistic factor's development in a close ties and is influenced by social development in history. Deities and

miraculous factor originate in the ancient belief and customs such as totemism, hylozoism, scarifying custom, etc, after that there is the participation of the factor like the appearance of Buddha (Buddhism), fairy (Taoism) which are popularized and nationalized. They help and advise people in different and dangerous situation. In Vietnamese and South Korean people imagine, Buddha and fairy have different characteristics in comparison to European fairy tales. In general, they are clement, kind-hearted, and close to daily life. They do not represent for strength and power like European Genies.

Normally, in Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales, miraculous factor is used creatively in characters, deities, devils, things, or miraculous animals. They are characters being creative to punish evildoers, help the goods, or withdraw lessons in human life. It can be said that these factors play a key role improving the characters' lives development (normally are people). In story *An old man and a hump* (South Korea), the devils (or Tokkaebi), the miraculous characters, help the old man to cut his hump by chance and give him a pocket of gold and precious stones. At the same time, they punish the greedy old man who has already had a hump by another one. In story *Two girls and their hump* of Vietnamese fairy tales, the girl in the next village also want to cut her hump, she imitates the girl whose hump has already been cut by cheating devils. However, at last, she receives another one from the devils. It is clear that in the fairy tales, people ridicule the foolish

and greedy people as well as opportunists, dogma people. Things in life can be repeated; however their effects and result will not be similar to the previous time. This is a lesson for foolish imitations. The miraculous factor in the fairy tales is partly dim (through devils and the detail of sticking another hump) but emphasize the lesson in human life.

### ***Relating to experience of behaving in life***

In daily life, people have to cope with many challenges. For example, ruled class has to cope with ruling class, goods cope with evildoers. This fact is reflected in fairy tales.

In Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales, it is easy to see the situation in which characters try to outdo each other in wits to win. People, in any era, any country, have to be intelligent, and flexible in behavior to exist. This is shown in specific characters and events in which Vietnamese and South Korean people think and act similarly. The story *An old man and a deceiver* (South Korea) show that the deceiver can not avoid the old man's artifice in disclosing who the owner of the dispute blanket and umbrella is. In Vietnam, there are a fairy tale having such content, only the detail is a little bit different (the story *A deep art*). In South Korea fairy tales, the thief counts the umbrella's splints before hand to make the owner confused, and in Vietnam fairy tales, the person who has lost a horse is asked which the horse's eye is nipped by the thief. He's troubled and detected being a malefactor. In story *Pretending to be blind*, the thief is also

discovered cleverly and suddenly like that. In South Korea fairy tale, the old man throwing the blanket and pretending that it is a piece of rag makes the thief surprise and elucidate that it is a beautiful, colorful and high valuable piece of cloth. In Vietnam fairy tale, there are also stories about a deceiver who pretend to be blind to take some coins in a basin of water. Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales create the story about the way of behavior in daily life, which is similar in development, and the way to resolve.

### ***In the tendency of explaining natural phenomenon***

The natural phenomenon is expressed much in legend. Vietnam and South Korea are the countries having a long-standing history. Almost everywhere, there are the stories about the appearance of natural phenomenon, which exist since ancient time and are close to working life and cultural activities of working class. These are the legend of a rock, a mountain, or a river. Therefore, mastering the nature to learn the natural phenomenon's origin is also a popular spirit activity and a similarity between South Korean people and Vietnamese people.

### **II. Some different points**

The different point, which most easily realize is the origin of things and characters' form in the fairy tales of the two countries. In Vietnam fairy tales, the origin of the mosquito is an unfaithful wife, the origin of the koel is a heartlessness, the origin of the amouornis phoenicurus is a faithful friend, and the origin of the frog is an

inhumane Buddhist monk, the origin of the limuloid is a couple loving each other deeply, the origin of the cordyline is the knife of a butcher, the origin of *Hít cô* bird is a nephew. In South Korea fairy tales, the origin of the crow is a wicked stepmother, the origin of the wild duct is a couple who died unjustly, the origin of the streptopelia chinensis is a stepchild of a husband or a daughter-in-law of a severe woman, etc.

### ***Regarding the way to exploit the theme of country's nature and customs***

We all know many fairy tales relating to the theme of country's nature and long-standing customs of the two countries. In Vietnam, associating with the custom of making Chung and Dày cakes in New Year festival and spring festival is the legend *Chung cake and Dày cake*, associating with the custom of chewing betel is the legend *Betel and Areca*, etc. The customs have appeared a long time ago since Hung King period. The legends of *Mr. lime-pot*, *Mr. Earthen tripod*, *Lunar New Year pole*, etc, also associate with ancient customs of Vietnamese people. The stories were composed to explain the customs, which people do not know about its origin. Moreover, many other Vietnamese legends are to explain natural phenomenon in Vietnam, especially the customs being familiar with Vietnamese daily life. Therefore, in Vietnam, there are the stories sticking to natural and national, customs theme such as *the legend of watermelon*, *the legend of betel and areca*, *the legend of durian*, etc.

In South Korea fairy tales, you can see a

difference in explaining the natural phenomenon and customs. For example, things and national customs through the legend about ginseng in the story *A gift of mountainous God*. In addition, there are many fairy tales composed to explain the phenomenon and customs like the carp in winter, rice of God, earthworm soup, the reason why ants' back is very big, the secrete of the toad's appearance, the reason why the pig has a short nose, 7 brothers of Northern star constellation, the reason why sea water is salty, the chirp of the streptopelia chinensis, the origin of wild ducks and its chirp, the origin of the streptopelia chinensis and crow, etc.

#### ***In terms of building character images***

Character image is a picture of life that is both specific, impulsive and general and aesthetic valuable. The character image in a fairy tale is not outside its plot and on the contrary, the plot is the plot of the character image, especially central characters. The plot and the character image are different but close to each other. The two things are regarded as one and the one is regarded as the two things. This explains that they are inseparable but are not able to unify.

Considering the way of building the character image in Vietnam and South Korea fairy tales, we can find some differences.

#### ***Tiger image***

Tiger is an image, which usually appears in Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales. It represents for power (king of forest), therefore it is used to express each country's thought and behavior. The

difference about the two nations' viewpoints is revealed in the fairy tales writing about tigers. If the image of tiger in Vietnam fairy tales represents for archcriminal that can not stand under a sky with people, the image of tiger in South Korea fairy tales is more flexible and implied the ridicule. The story *Kotgam* (South Korea) talks about the foolishness of a big tiger as in the story *My intelligence* or the story *A buffalo, tiger and a farmer* (Vietnam). However, the story details are completely different and do not mention the animals' appearance. Sometimes, the tiger's image represents for the high-minded things in friendship and love, which only have in the relationship between people and people. The story *A high-minded tiger* talks about a female tiger, who is responsible for the deep love with the man Kim Hyon and the consequence to her tiger family, voluntarily sacrifices to burden disaster for her whole family and bring happiness for her lover. Maybe, South Korean people desire to show a implication that even a beast of prey like tiger has a high-minded, and good characteristics. This characteristic in Vietnam fairy tales hardly appears. In general, the image of a big tiger in Vietnam fairy tales usually represents for the bad, which people always want to win. And the image of tiger in South Korea fairy tales intends to reflect tolerant viewpoint and multifaceted life.

#### ***Concerning educational aim***

Educational purpose here is the target which is set to impact systematically on mental and physical development of people to make them realize gradually their quality and ability.

In Vietnam fairy tales, there are many stories which always aim at educational target of morals, and normal moral standards such as the stories: *A collected golden jar*, *Sharpening knife to teach wife*, *Killing dog to teach husband*, *the old and current affection and gratitude*, etc, or of behaving soundly, judiciously such as the stories: *a worker hammers the rake*, *the person eating sugar-cane and the owner*, *a deceiver with a horse*, *a drinking session makes the house burst into flames*, etc. The basic spirit of the stories is loving justice, reason, heightening good sense, praising the beauty, etc. And any Vietnam fairy tale refers to educational purpose in both morals and moral principles directly or indirectly.

There are many Vietnam fairy tales heading to moral theme to praise noble moral activities or denounce and criticize bad and immoral ones revealing the people who cheat and betray their friends, who are greedy, the unfaithful wives and husbands, the ungrateful children, the people who are fraudulent in business (*the legend of francolin*, *the legend of mosquito*, *the legend of frog*, *the legend of amourornis phoenicurus*, *a mercury balance*, etc).

The rewarding and punishment in Vietnam fairy tales are considered and resolved basing on moral principles. The norm to distinguish and assess whether the character is good or bad, negative or positive in Vietnam fairy tales mainly depends on moral principles. The moral principles in Vietnam fairy tales are assessed in both reality and Vietnamese people's ideology. The belief "*a good turn is never lost*" is not only an

optimistic philosophy but also a Vietnamese desire about justice. Although its form is rather similar to retribution theory in Buddhism, its content has human and national characteristics. The goods temporarily has not experienced good things and the evildoer has not been punished, but in long term, Vietnamese people believe deeply in the universal truth. And it is a big and long term truth of educational target in fairy tales.

In South Korea fairy tales, besides the purpose of education, it also set specific issues or other aesthetic demands such as sacrifice, patience, etc (The story *The king's sacrifice* is a moved story about a king who regrets for his false gains the right of burning himself to death to save his people out of drought. This action makes God touched; it rains when the flame blazes up. The story *Shim Ch'om, a dutiful daughter*, praises the gratefulness of the daughter to her blind father. To treat her father's eyes, she voluntarily sacrifices her life for sea god. Her action makes God moved. She is regenerated, gets married to prince and has a happy life with a bright eyes father. The story *Brotherhood is more valuable than treasure* talks about the two brothers who live in harmony with each other. One day, the two brothers pick two big lump of gold. They are very happy for being no longer poor and share one piece for each person. However, their envy appears to compare whose piece is bigger. Finally, they decide to throw the gold to river to back to loving time.

In short, we can see that Vietnam fairy tales mainly exploit satirical

characteristic and are separable and specific. South Korea fairy tales have educational characteristic, integrate, and borrow many features of other types.

Through further studying about similarities and differences in Vietnam-South Korea fairy tales, we hope that we can understand more thoroughly in some parts about the characteristics of the two countries' folk literature and culture.

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