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Wilt L. Idema

Harvard University

*Old Tales for New Times: Some Comments on the Cultural Translation of China's Four Great Folktales in the Twentieth Century*¹

The English language is deceitful and its strict grammar can often be deceptive: formal features and semantics are often at odds. Culture, even in its singular shape, is always plural, and tradition may look like a noun but is actually a verb. Any given culture at a specific place and time is always a plurality of cultures. One may hope for a harmonious culture,² but it will never be homogenous, as it contains within itself many different cultures dependent on age and locality, class and belief, and is never isolated from interaction with other equally heterogeneous cultures. As a result, cultures are always in change, transforming themselves from generation to generation and from person to

¹ During the last few years at Harvard I have had the privilege of co-teaching a course with my colleague David Wang. The title of this course is “Old Tales for New Times: The Appropriation of Folklore in Modern and Contemporary China.” While David deals with the modern transformations of the Four Great Folktales (and some other legends), I deal with the incarnations of these same tales in premodern China up to the early years of the twentieth century. This paper is based on my experiences in teaching that class; while we have done our homework in preparing for this class, I cannot claim that this presentation is based on exhaustive research or extensive reflection, and I am very well aware that it will not do justice to the current reevaluation in the PRC of earlier scholarship. See for instance the radical dismissal of practically all of a century of research on Buffalo Boy and Weaving Maiden by Shi Aidong 施愛東, “Niulang Zhinü yanjiu piping” 牛郎織女研究批評, *Wen shi zhe* 2008 No. 4: 77-87. Also see the articles collected in his *Zhongguo xiandai minsuxue jiantao* 中國現代民俗學檢討. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2010. The English title of this work, perhaps unintentionally, brings out the author’s intention quite clearly: “Reflections on Disciplining Folkloristics in China.”

² On the dominant assumption of a continuous and unified Chinese civilization and nation and its relation to folklore research in the PRC up to the 1990s, see Sue Tuohy, “Cultural Metaphors and Reasoning: Folklore Scholarship and Ideology in Contemporary China,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 50 (1991): 189-220.

person, and impacting other cultures in their orbit. Tradition implies the translation of culture from one generation to the next; it does not refer to content but to process, to the continuous internalization and teaching of cultural forms and values. Any attempt to fix or define a culture is an attempt at mummification and bound to fail. There is no such thing as Western culture or Eastern culture, European culture or Chinese culture; if we use such terms they are only a lame shorthand to come to grasps with extremely complicated, internally contradictory, forever changing phenomena with very fuzzy borders indeed. Confucius would have been ill at ease in the Han dynasty and totally lost in the Song dynasty; he would not have been able to make sense of Zhu Xi and have been utterly confused by Mou Zongsan, and one can only speculate at what he would have made of the proliferation of Confucius Institutes all over the world to introduce barbarians to the wonders of the Chinese language. In many ways the Chinese word for culture, *wenhua* 文化, is actually a more suitable term. *Wen* may refer to both the single *Gestalt* of a culture as to the many forms from which it is composed and to the ever proliferating body of texts that embody its many manifestations, whereas *hua* can denote both the ongoing process of transformation within a culture as its power to effect change elsewhere.

Once upon a time limited horizons of space and time may have allowed elites to believe that only their local culture represented true civilization, but such a belief was and is always in bad faith, as the local civilizations has to be set off against its opposite, which is often defined as not only foreign, but also feminine and low class, both an outside and inside threat to cultural and political hegemony. It is easier to maintain such illusions for

the capital elites of large and powerful empires and nations, than from the courts and capitals of smaller states. The world looks quite different from Taipei, Helsinki or Amsterdam than from Beijing, Paris, or Washington. No culture has ever developed in isolation, and the translation of cultural forms from one village to the next and one continent to the other is as old as mankind. In that sense, cultural translation is not a modern phenomenon; one can only claim that it has become a much more frequent, visible and invasive fact of life since the industrial revolution. The railroad, the steamboat, and the plane each have contributed another quantitative and qualitative change to the global exchange of people, goods, and ideas. Power relations have been instrumental in steering the streams of exchange, but we should not be blind to the paradox that imposed ideas and goods may be eagerly embraced, and used for purposes they never enjoyed in their country of origin. Painful and humiliating as the confrontation with new and apparently more successful cultural forms may have been for traditional elites, few modern elites would appear to want to return to a situation of cultural isolationism, which never existed in the first place. Many indulge in cultural nostalgia but few actually want to return to a world without indoor plumbing.

The violent confrontation with a foreign culture, its representatives, its goods and ideas, may well result in a partial or total rejection of the elite culture in place as out of time, and a search for a new culture elsewhere. But in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the age of the nation-state, the process of cultural renewal is not possible without a strong assertion or reassertion of nationhood, and the embrace of a global, modern culture will be accompanied by a search for alternative authentic and authenticating traditions in the

nation's past and its people. In this process, people and past are treated as equivalent by the embattled elite as the people, especially the rural folk, are seen as the guardians of an authentic national tradition that has not yet been denatured by elite corruption or foreign contamination. This does not mean that the elite assumes that the folk fully understands the tradition it is presumed to have preserved so well: It is left to the elite to select and collect the true tradition, to formulate its correct interpretation, and to rewrite the reinterpreted tradition so it may best serve its envisioned role in the process of nation-building. A clear model of this process is provided by the history of Germany. The ideological groundwork had been provided in the late eighteenth century by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), who had argued that every nation has its own poetry, and that the folk poetry of every nation has the same value.³ Rejecting French cultural and political domination, German intellectuals from the early nineteenth century onward glorified not only the Middle Ages of the Holy Roman Empire and a mythic Germanic past, but also collected German folksong and German fairy tales, which all were assumed to exhibit one German spirit. Medieval philology, comparative linguistics, and folklore studies accompanied nationalisms all over Europe. As Joep Leerssen has shown in his *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (2006),⁴ these branches of scholarship often actually were instrumental in creating those nationalisms in the first place. If the search in the archives or among the people did not result in sufficient or sufficiently suitable materials, these materials had if needs be created--some of these creations, such as the Finnish *Kalevala*, became the beacon and basis of local nationalism (some other

³ William A. Wilson, "Herder, Folklore and Romantic Nationalism," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16 no. 4 (1973):819-835.

⁴ Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, sec. ed. 2008. Esp. pp. 173-203.

works were rejected as too obvious falsifications).⁵ The *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* of the Grimm brothers may have claimed to have been collected from the mouth of the people, but actually contain many tales that derive from written sources, and Wilhelm Grimm continued all through his life to rewrite these tales.⁶ Despite its claim to authenticity, traditional popular culture in its modern incarnation is often and in many ways an “invented tradition.”⁷

In China, the growing lack of confidence in its own elite culture resulted in the abolishment of the state examination system in 1905 and culminated with the Literary Revolution of 1917 and the May Fourth Movement of 1919. But the same individuals who were most active in calling for an all-out Westernization, were also the most active in the search for alternative authentic traditions of a national Chinese culture. Hu Shi 胡適(1891-1962) made the bold claim that all new genres in traditional Chinese literature had emerged from popular literature. Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927) had already earlier raised the literary status of early Chinese drama, and Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936) would in his *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (*Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi lue* 中國小說史略) provide the master narrative for the development of Chinese classical and vernacular fiction. All these scholars (and many generations since then) have been convinced that a vernacular style was a sure proof of a popular origin, and drama and fiction were therefore hailed as popular genres—in contrast to writings in the classical language which

⁵ William A. Wilson, *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976. Also see Alan Dundes, “Nationalistic Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore: A Reconsideration of Ossian, the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, the *Kalevala* and Paul Bunyan,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 22 No. 1 (1985): 5-18.

⁶ Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

⁷ John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture: From Folklore to Globalization*. London: Blackwell, 2008.

were believed to be part of the “dead” elite literature. To this very day, if I am not mistaken, traditional drama and fiction are still primarily introduced in China as a popular alternative to literati culture, and if these writings cannot very well be presented as deriving from the folk, they are at least described as representative of the values and tastes of the rising merchant class. But a closer look shows that the drama and fiction that were so eagerly embraced by the iconoclastic May Fourth intellectuals actually were the very plays and novels that had been part of the literati reading culture at least since the middle of the sixteenth century. In fiction, the more popular the book, the more classical the style. Plays and songs have to be written in the vernacular, but that applies as much to the plays performed at court as those that are performed in the village, but court manuscripts prepared by professional artists have a far greater chance of survival than village scripts.

Now pre-modern China had a rich tradition of truly popular literature, an even far richer tradition of performative literature (which might or might not make use of texts), and a wide range of oral traditions. Our knowledge of these traditions up to the late nineteenth century is limited because elite literati rarely commented on these matters except in vague and dismissive terms, while most of the modern intellectuals, who might be willing to accept popular origins of literary genres in a distant past, preferred to keep their distance from their low-class and vulgar contemporaries who continued to practice these popular traditions. The number of scholars in the 1920s and 1930s who were really interested in popular and oral literature is very limited indeed, and even they, partly for practical reasons, mostly focused on texts. That is very clear in the activities of the

members of the Folksong Society, which played a pioneering role in promoting folklore studies.⁸ Gu Jiegang 顧頔剛 (1893-1980) may well have heard performances of the legend of Meng Jiangnü 孟姜女 as a child, but his famous and trend-setting research on this legend is primarily armchair research, not field work. He applied the same philological methodology he applied in his cutting-edge historical research to the texts of the Meng Jiangnü legend he received from all over China. In his historical research, by the way, he saved China's ancient history by reinterpreting it as mythology, in this way providing China with its own ancient mythology just like the Greeks.⁹

Gu Jiegang's work on the Meng Jiangnü legend has recently been the subject of an important critical article of Lee Haiyan in the *Journal of Asian Studies*.¹⁰ She draws attention to the fact that Gu Jiegang and his contemporaries not only created the modern notion of folklore in China by naming, classifying and interpreting textual materials that so far had been ignored, but that the language in which they did so was borrowed, and that they interpreted these materials with terms and notions that might have become commonplace among modern intellectuals by the 1920s but were alien to the materials subjected to these terms. Gu Jiegang was looking for spontaneous emotion and true love, which he easily found, and popular protest against a suppressive state power, which he

⁸ Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectual and Folk Literature, 1918-1937*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985. Also see Sandra Eminov, "Folklore and Nationalism in Modern China," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 12 No. 2/3 (1975): 257-277. A very convenient survey of scholarship on traditional Chinese popular literature is provided by Chen Pingyuan 陳平原, *Xiandai xueshushi shang di suwenxue* 現代學術史上的俗文學. Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004.

⁹ Laurence A. Scheider, *Ku Chieh-kang and China's New History: Nationalism and the Quest for Alternative Traditions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.

¹⁰ Haiyan Lee, "Tears that Crumbled the Great Wall: The Archaeology of Feeling in the May Fourth Folklore Movement," *Journal of Asian Studies* 64 No. 1 (2005):35-65. A somewhat abbreviated version of this article is also included in Wilt L. Idema, *Meng Jiangnü Brings Down the Great Wall: Ten Versions of a Chinese Legend*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008, pp. 24-41 as Haiyan Lee, "Meng Jiangnü and the May Fourth Folklore Movement."

found as easily. While Gu's creative misinterpretation may have been largely unavoidable, Lee's criticism does highlight the sudden and large gap in interpretation between traditional readers and the modern intellectuals, whose terminology had been borrowed from the West (often by way of Japan) over the course of only a few decades. Practically all of terms they used in naming, classifying and interpreting popular literature were neologisms coined only recently. China had always had stories about gods and about the interactions of gods and humans but these had never been called *shenhua* 神話 ("stories of gods"), the Chinese translation of "myth." With the introduction of the notion of "myth," came a whole set of late nineteenth century assumptions about the nature of myth, such as the belief that it was the product of a primitive culture. To call stories of gods from ancient history which so far had been considered part and parcel of history now suddenly "myth" entailed a drastic break with the past and a completely new way of reading these materials, also in a comparative perspective. In the same way, China had a long tradition of oral tales, but the notion of *tonghua* 童話 (tales for children), the Chinese translation of fairy tales, had been absent, just as the notion of the child that was implied in the late nineteenth century idea of the fairy tale. But whereas *shenhua* only existed in quotes from the revered ancient writings that could not be tampered with, both the origin and the intended audience of fairy tales not only allowed for drastic reinterpretation but also drastic rewriting. Those who doubt the power of naming should pay attention to the introduction of the notion of "intangible cultural heritage" in the PRC: many genres of popular and oral performative literature which until quite recently were still decried as "feudal superstition" have enjoyed a sudden and total transformation in status since they have received this new label. Lee Haiyan herself has written extensively

on the importation of the Western notion of romantic love into China in the early twentieth century, and the resulting reinterpretation of *qing* 情 from an often disruptive passion into a foundational value of society.¹¹

The application of a new classificatory terminology, developed on the basis of one or more European traditions but touted as having universal validity, may result in groupings of originally quite disparate materials, especially if it is combined with the Chinese preference for lists. China's "Four Great Folk Legends" are one such case. I do not know when and where this term was first coined, but it would appear to have been firmly in place by the 1950s.¹² It brings together the legend of Meng Jiangnü, the tale of Buffalo Boy and Weaving Maiden, the legend of Liang Shanbo 梁山伯 and Zhu Yingtai 祝英台, and the legend of the White Snake. The legend of Meng Jiangnü had established its status as Chinese premier folktale in the 1920s because of the research of Gu Jiegang. Its history could be traced back to an incident narrated in the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, which had been embellished with many details over the following centuries, until the tale of the virtuous wife of Qi Liang 杞梁 achieved its canonical version in Liu Xiang's 劉向 (79-8 BCE) *Lienü zhuan* 烈女傳. Qi Liang's wife would acquire the surname Meng only by the Tang dynasty, when the setting of the story was moved forward to the reign of the First Emperor of Qin; Qi Liang becomes a conscript laborer on the run, and Meng Jiangnü brings down the Great Wall by her weeping. The legend would be treated in every genre

¹¹ Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

¹² For representative studies on the Four Great Folktales, see He Xuejun 賀學君, *Zhongguo sida chuanshuo* 中國四大傳說. Hangzhou: Zhejiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 1995, and Luo Yonglin 羅永麟, *Lun Zhongguo sida minjian gushi* 論中國四大民間故事. Beijing: Zhongguo minjian wenyi chubanshe, 1986.

of regional drama and every genre of ballad and song, showing great variety in each and every detail. The writers of Kunqu drama and the writers of fiction, however, avoided the story, perhaps because these authors were too much aware of the contradictions between Liu Xiang's canonical account and the popular legend.¹³ The legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai has a much shorter history. While many versions of their story make Confucius the teacher of the couple, and many modern adaptations prefer a fourth-century setting in the Eastern Jin dynasty, more sober scholarship has to conclude that the story most likely only emerged as a local legend in Southeast China at the end of the first millennium to achieve a greater popularity from the Song dynasty onward. As is the case with the legend of Meng Jiangnü, the legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai was widely popular in all genres of regional drama, but not in vernacular fiction and Kunqu drama. In this case the reason may have been that the topic of a young woman who on her own initiative—not out of necessity—wants to dress as a man was too scandalous for elite writers.¹⁴

In this aspect these two legends are different from the legend of the White Snake. This is by far the youngest of the Four Great Folktales as it cannot be traced back beyond the sixteenth century, and its popularity in regional drama and ballads rivaled if not outshone the two legends of Meng Jiangnü and of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, but it also was taken up by writers of vernacular fiction (*huaben* 話本 and *zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小說)

¹³ As should be clear from this comment, I see both vernacular fiction and Kunqu drama as belonging to literati culture. For me popular culture is primarily made up out of the many varieties of regional drama (including puppet plays and shadow theater) and the many varieties prosimetric and verse narrative. Some topics (for instance Mulan 木蘭) may be popular in Kunqu and fiction, but hardly if ever make it into popular literature in this restricted sense in premodern times, whereas some topics that are widely encountered in popular literature never make it into literati-dominated literature.

¹⁴ In recent years Professor Tseng Yong-yih has composed Kunqu plays on the topic of these two legends.

and it was repeatedly adapted for the Kunqu stage by well-known playwrights. In contrast to the other two legends, it also was a frequent topic in (high-quality) New Year's prints (*nianhua* 年畫). The odd man out by far in this foursome, however, is the myth of the Buffalo Boy and Weaving Maiden. The myth may be traced back to the *Book of Odes* if needs be, and must have been known to all because of its connection to the Double Seven Festival, but there is hardly a story to speak of. English language surveys of Chinese ancient mythology often cheat the reader by introducing one of the modern folktales on the subject.¹⁵ The editors of a recent five-volume collection of materials and studies on Buffalo Boy and Weaving Maiden have to conclude that the story hardly if ever was treated in traditional regional drama and popular literature.¹⁶ As such, the story is quite different in nature from the three legends discussed above. Weaving Maiden, however, became associated with the legend of Dong Yong 董永. The legend of the filial son Dong Yong can be traced back to the second century. The Jade Emperor is so impressed by his filial piety towards his father that he sends down an immortal maiden to help him pay off his debts by her supernatural weaving skills. Because of her weaving skills this immortal maiden is soon identified with the Weaving Maiden. In the canonical account of the legend, known in late imperial China to every schoolchild from the *Twenty Four Exemplars of Filial Piety* (*Ershisi xiao* 二十四孝), the immortal maiden leaves Dong Yong after a hundred days and that's it. In popular literature, however, she is already pregnant when she does so, and later comes down once again to earth to deliver the baby,

¹⁵ Yuan Ke, *Dragons and Dynasties: An Introduction to Chinese Mythology*, Selected and Translated by Kim Echlin and Nie Zhixiong. London: Penguin, 1993, pp. 183-186.

¹⁶ Ye Tao 葉濤 and Han Guoxiang 韓國祥, Eds. *Zhongguo Niulang Zhinü chuanshuo* 中國牛郎織女傳說. 5 Vols. Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008. See the preface by Qiu Huiying 丘慧瑩 to the *Suwenxue juan* 俗文學卷, pp. 1-3.

a son, to Dong Yong, and that boy, once he grows up, wants to meet his mother, which results in further complications. Again, despite all its popularity in popular literature, this legend, like the legends of Meng Jiangnü and Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, did not make into vernacular fiction or Kunqu drama.

In premodern China each of the great folk legends (if we forget for the moment Buffalo Boy and Weaving Maiden) circulated in a wide variety of genres of regional drama and storytelling, each with its own characteristics. Partly in response to these genre characteristics each of these versions showed its own peculiarities in setting and plot, characterization and meaning. As all genres continuously borrowed from each other, these legends continued to change in a process that in many places is still ongoing. While many of these legends first circulated as tale and ballad, they all were adapted for the stage at some time or another, and these stage versions as a rule have had a major impact on the later development of these legends. Because of their social function plays require a happy ending; their system of stock characters will greatly influence characterization, and while tales and ballads initially may have been told very much through the focus of single protagonist, plays provide far more of an equal opportunity to all major characters to express their emotions from their personal perspective. From a folkloristic perspective all of these different adaptations have equal value. But when these stories were elevated to their new canonical status as the Great Folktales, they were very much subjected to a reductive summation and radical reinterpretation.¹⁷

¹⁷ Many works of premodern literature were subjected to radical reinterpretation in the twentieth century, but in these cases the original texts were not affected. In the case of folktales the original texts were often ignored in favor of modern retellings. In this aspect the fate of the folktales resembles that of some classical tales that were adapted to the modern nation-building project, such as the tale of Goujian as studied by Paul

It is difficult to discern a common theme in these four legends in their premodern manifestations, but perhaps we can say that they are all stories of failed relations (and, in some cases, the way such a failure may be remedied). In the dominant modern interpretation they all seem to have been reduced to the simple message that in the old society young people's search for true love was doomed because of the evil patriarchal system. In the twentieth century that reading has become so naturalized that many of our students find it difficult even to entertain the thought that these stories might not be a celebration of love but rather cautionary tales warning against the danger of inappropriate passion. The version of the legend that is introduced as the authentic version has of course to reflect this modern interpretation.¹⁸ In the case of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, for instance, the modern version ends with the miraculous transformation of the lovers into butterflies once Zhu Yingtai has joined Liang Shanbo in his grave. That may indeed be the Song dynasty version of the tale, but none of the adaptations of the legend collected by Lu Gong ends that way.¹⁹ Reflecting the influence of the dramatic adaptations, all of these versions have the hero and heroine return from the Underworld

Cohen in *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-century China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

¹⁸ Many discussions on the meanings of these folk legends do not specify on which version of the tale the analysis is based. Too many such discussions seem to be based on the unspoken assumption that all premodern versions basically reiterate the same story, and that any variations are minor and of no great significance (*datong xiaoyi* 大同小異), in this way ignoring the literary and artistic integrity of each individual adaptation.

¹⁹ Lu Gong 路工, Ed. *Liang Zhu gushi shuochang ji* 梁祝故事說唱集. Shanghai: Shanghai chubanshe, 1955. Early songs and prosimetric adaptations that end with the butterfly miracle do, however, exist. See for instance the text reprinted as *Jieyi xiongdì gongshu zhuan* 結義兄弟攻書傳 in Zhou Jingshu 周靜書, Ed. *Liang Zhu wenhua daguan* 梁祝文化大觀, 4 Vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999. *Gushi geyao juan* 故事歌謠傳, pp. 542-588. The text is said to be reprinted from a late-Ming woodblock edition, which carried the title *Liang Shanbo Zhu Yingtai jieyi xiongdì gongshu ci* 梁山伯祝英台結義兄弟攻書詞. I have provided a full English translation of this text in Wilt L. Idema, *The Butterfly Lovers: The Legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, Four Versions, with Related Texts*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010. The text shows clear similarities to the *cihua* 詞話 from the period 1250-1450 and may well date from the same period, as I argue on pp. xix-xxi.

one way or another: Liang Shanbo passes the examinations, shows himself a loyal husband and subdues the barbarians, and Zhu Yingtai proves herself a loyal wife. In this way “the fool” Liang Shanbo is allowed to reassert his proper manhood, and the cross-dressing Zhu Yingtai is allowed to display all wifely virtues; perhaps even more importantly, by their normal marriage, they prove the purity and therefore moral nature of their original passion. An ending along these lines apparently was quite satisfying to the premodern audiences, but in the second part of the twentieth century this traditional continuation has become so unknown that one may come across scholars who express great surprise on encountering in the course of their fieldwork versions that include an account of this continuation. Romantic love has become such a common notion in the twentieth century that modern interpreters will find love even where it cannot have existed in the premodern versions. In the legend of Meng Jiangnü as it emerged in the Tang dynasty, she marries a conscript laborer on the run when she notices that he has been observing her while she was taking a bath because only a husband is allowed to see the naked body of his wife. Many premodern versions maintain this episode. In modern retellings we are told that the young and impressionable Meng Jiangnü falls in love with Fan Xiliang as soon as she spies the young man who is hiding in the flower garden behind the house. This may well be the only rational explanation of Meng Jiangnü’s behavior for a modern audience, but I am convinced that for a more traditional audience any suggestion that she acted out of passion rather than a strong moral feeling of shame would greatly detract from the nobility of her action. The same exceptional morality she displays in this episode will also explain her behavior as a dutiful wife who will insist on taking her absent husband his winter clothes—what has love got to do with it?

The modern reinterpretations do not always go back to an early and therefore more authentic version. For instance, the modern interpretation of the legend of the White Snake often would seem to take the theatrical adaptation of Tian Han 田漢 (1898-1968) from the late 1940s and early 1950s as their basis. Tian Han did not return for his version to the earliest known version of the legend, published in 1624 by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) in his *Stories to Caution the World* (*Jingshe tongyan* 警世通言), but to early Republican stage versions. These versions stressed the devotion of the White Snake to her beloved Xu Xian 許仙 by narrating how, happily married and living in Suzhou, Xu Xian on Double Five forces his wife to drink some realgar wine in celebration; when this forces her to show her true snake body and he collapses in fright, she is then willing to risk her life by traveling to the Southern Pole Palace and steal the herb of immortality. These versions also provided the tale with a happy ending as the White Snake will give birth to a boy (Xu Mengjiao 許夢蛟) before she is imprisoned below Thunder Peak Pagoda (Leifeng ta 雷峰塔); this boy, once he is grown up and has passed the metropolitan examinations, will free his mother from her prison and bring about a reunion of his parents. His parents, who have seen through the sufferings of passion, will continue their religious careers separately, but we will have our final wedding celebration as Xu Mengjiao marries his cousin. By freeing his mother from her prison below the pagoda the filial son Xu Mengjiao confirms the sinful nature of female sexuality and desire and joins the ranks of other sons such as Mulian and Chenxiang 沉香 who, following study, free their mothers from below the earth where they have been

imprisoned as punishment for their passion.²⁰ As a modern intellectual, Tian Han had of course to do away with this filial son. For him, the White Snake was not the embodiment of lust or passion, but the embodiment of love. Still, he did not allow her husband to free her from the pagoda, but assigned this role to her servant the Blue Snake, who in the final scene of his play leads the masses of watery creatures in overthrowing Thunder Peak Pagoda, ever since Lu Xun's 1924 essay on the collapse of the old ruined pagoda the very symbol of the old patriarchal system.

Such reinterpretations could of course be far more drastic as may be shown by the transformation of the legend of Dong Yong. Dong Yong has always been hailed as an exemplar of filial piety, who as a reward receives the services of Weaving Maiden. When the traditional Huangmei Opera on this theme entitled *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* (*Tianxian pei* 天仙配; the title has also been translated as *Fairy Couple*) was adapted to modern times in the early 1950s it once again ended with the return of Weaving Maiden to Heaven, doing away with the tale of the birth of her son and his later desire to meet his mother. Whereas traditional plays had portrayed Dong Yong as an impoverished student, he was now turned into a peasant, so no explanation was needed any more for his miserable situation. But Weaving Maiden who in earlier versions had been dispatched to earth by the Jade Emperor, now acts on her own initiative: she falls in love with the handsome peasant and runs away from heaven to earth below. In the end she does not return to heaven because her term is up, but because her heavenly father discovers her disappearance, orders her to come back, and threatens with dire retaliations against Dong

²⁰ Wilt L. Idema, *The White Snake and her Son: A Translation of The Precious Scroll of Thunder Peak, with Related Texts*. Indianapolis: Hackett, pp. xviii-xxi.

Yong if she will not obey. Made into a movie in 1955, *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* became the greatest box office hit of the 1950s in the PRC and set off a craze of Huangmei movies throughout the Sinophone world.

In other cases it may not have been the story itself that changed, but rather the interpretation. Once the revival of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai following the butterfly miracle had been removed as a later addition to the tale, the remaining tale seemed to fit its modern interpretation to perfection. Zhu Yingtai is indeed a girl who wants to pursue an advanced education outside the home, and as such can be seen a representative of the desire of women for equal rights to education. However, in traditional society, an advanced education served as a preparation for the state examination and a bureaucratic career, and so a desire for an advanced education implied a desire to participate in the public and political realm, a desire which seems to be somewhat toned down in the modern interpretation. As might be expected, Zhu Yingtai falls in love with one of her fellow students, who is nice enough to be fooled by her disguise, and he falls in love with her once he realized she is a girl. This part of the story makes it easily available for the modern interpretation that the story reflects the desire of young men and women in premodern society for “free love,” that is the freedom to choose their own marriage partner without interference from their parents. One may well wonder, however, whether the legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai was always read in this way in premodern times. For all its love interest, could the legend also have been presented as a cautionary tale warning young women against a desire to leave the inner apartments? If so, the story informed her that a smart woman might have no trouble fooling most men most of the

time, but that eventually her body would tell on her, and that in the meantime she would land herself in great trouble. Modern versions, one might add, tend to turn Zhu Yingtai's fiancé young master Ma 馬 into a villain, but in the earliest versions he is the blandest of personalities possible if he makes any personal appearance in the story at all. His main sin is that following the death of Zhu Yingtai he too commits suicide in order to reclaim his bride in the court of King Yama. There he is told that in this life Zhu Yingtai is destined to be the bride of Liang Shanbo, but that she will become his wife in a future existence.

The modern fate of the legend of Meng Jiangnü deserves special commentary. In the 1920s and 1930s this legend by itself constituted the one great Chinese folktale. One version of the legend had been turned into English verse as early as 1878 by George Carter Stent as "Meng Cheng's Journey to the Great Wall,"²¹ and another version was turned into English verse by Genevieve Wimsatt and Geoffrey Chen in 1934 as *The Lady of the Long Wall*.²² In the 1940s the legend provided the inspiration for *The Great Wall*, an opera composed by Aaron Avshalomov (1894-1965), a Russian composer who in the Interbellum was active both in China and the USA. This work, which had its premiere in November 1945 Shanghai has an equal claim with *The White-haired Girl* (*Baimaonü* 白毛女) of being the first Western-style Chinese opera.²³ After Liberation, however, the

²¹ In his *Entombed Alive and Other Songs, Ballads, Etc. from the Chinese*. London: William H. Allen and Co., pp. 63-100.

²² Genevieve Wimsatt and George Chen (Chen Sun-han), *The Lady of the Long Wall: A Ku-shih or Drum Song from the Chinese*. New York: Columbia University Press.

²³ Jacob and Aaron Avshalomov, *Avshalomovs' Winding Way: Composers out of China—A Chronicle*. N.P.: Xlibris, 2001, pp. 23-34; 201-221. Despite its initial success and high patronage (of the Soong sisters), the opera has never been staged since 1949, as *Baimaonü* was touted as China's first (western-style) opera,

legend quickly lost its preeminent position because the symbolic value of the Great Wall and the First Emperor had completely changed by that time. During the Anti-Japanese War the Great Wall changed from the folly of a lustful tyrant into the symbol of China's unity and will to fight; later it would also be hailed as a prime example of Chinese engineering ingenuity. The First Emperor now was hailed by Mao Zedong as China's great unifier. As long as Meng Jiangnü's husband has to die of exhaustion to be buried in the body of the Wall, no adaptation has been able to successfully combine the sad tale of Meng Jiangnü with the glorification of the Great Wall and its maker.

I will not dwell on the many rewritings of the Four Great Folktales in recent decades. Especially the legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai and the legend of the White Snake have given rise to an ever growing number of adaptations, parodies and spoofs, which can only be fully appreciated against the background of the status these legends had achieved by the middle of the twentieth century and the high seriousness of the interpretations of these tales.

In conclusion I would like to spend a few words, however, on yet another function these tales may have acquired in modern times and which they never could have had in premodern times. These remarks are inspired by *Love Eterne*, the 1964 Shaw Brothers screen adaptation of the legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai. The movie enjoyed an unparalleled success in the Sinophone world outside the PRC and is a very well made movie indeed. Apart from its story and the performance of the actresses playing Liang

even though members of the Communist underground in Shanghai had played a major role in the preparation and initial staging of the opera.

Shanbo and Zhu yingtai, part of its appeal, I would suggest, was the nostalgia it embodied for an idealized Chinese past, full of sweet colors and sounds. At the same time, and that also must have been part of its appeal, it provided an explanation why that beautiful past had had to be abandoned. When in the final scene the grave closes behind Zhu Yingtai, the door had also been closed on traditional culture and the society that lived by its rules. If the audience cried, it cried not only for Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, but also, thanks to the modern device of a full-color movie, for a traditional China that would never return.