

# What Is Folk Literature?

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Each of us has probably heard, in childhood, folk tales such as *Pei-Chhat-Chhit* (白賊七 or “Chhit, the Liar”), *Ho-Go-Po* (虎姑婆 or “The Vicious Auntie Tiger”), and the like, told by our mothers, aunts or elders; we might have listened to the recitation of ballads, such as *Hoe-Kim-Chhi* (火金星 or “The Fireworm”), *Goe-Kng-Kng* (月光光 or “The Shining Moon”), and so on.<sup>1</sup> However, these interesting and heart-warming stories and ballads have been fading away, little by little, as those able to tell or recite the folklore have grown fewer and fewer. Additionally, although there are still some able to tell or sing the lore, there are no longer many willing to listen. In short, folk literature appears in the form of tales and ballads with which we grow familiar in childhood, but what is the importance of folk literature? What is its scope? What follows introduces the reader to a particular tradition of oral folk literature.

## I. How to Understand Folk Literature?

Many people talk about literature, yet few have heard of “folk literature” in Taiwan. Indeed, some may ask whether there is any literature among these people? The terms “folk” and “literature” seem to compound something strange, simply because literature is an art of language, composed of works arousing thought and readerly reflections. Folk literature, also known as oral literature, is composed of popular, orally transmitted folk tales and ballads. The existence of folk literature may provide a sharp contrast with the written literature of professional authors. Since folk literature is a kind of literary form handed down orally, it does not — traditionally — exist in written form. How, then, is it “literature”? This seems somewhat peculiar.

The term “folk literature” has become recognized worldwide as a cultural good among peoples who have no written language, yet possess forms of literary works resembling literature, such as tales, ballads, and so on. These stories are handed down orally, not written down, and there is no existing nation without its own variation of this particular cultural tradition. Even today, there are numerous peoples who do not

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<sup>1</sup> The phonetic spelling system adopted here to translate the Taiwanese language (*Tai-oan-oe* [臺灣話], *Ho-lo-oe* [福佬話, the Fukienese Dialect] or *Ban-lam-oe* [閩南話, the Southern Ming Dialect]) is that of the Taiwanese Romanization alphabets used by the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan since the nineteenth century. The major reason for the adoption is due to the fact that the Taiwanese Romanization alphabets are widely used to transcribe the Bible and the hymn, and to publish the weekly, dictionaries, and so on. The publications by the Taiwanese Romanization alphabets have conserved most of the literature of the Taiwanese language up to the present. And it should be noted that Taiwanese languages, in the broadest sense, includes Ho-lo-oe, Hakka dialect, Mandarin Chinese, and the twelve dialects of the aborigines, which belong to the Polynesian linguistic family.

possess any written form of language, including Taiwan's indigenous peoples, and yet they possess forms of popular, oral literature.

When a nation has no written form of language, the cultural tradition depends on oral communication for conveyance to the next generation. Take the Taiwanese indigenous people as an example: each group passed down their belief, customs, and rules orally in the forms of mythology, tales, and ballads. Even when a society develops literacy, not every member will be literate. This is so even in modern times, despite the popularity and availability of education, to say nothing of the case in traditional Chinese society. Even in Taiwan, which claims to be well developed, the number of illiterate persons outnumbered the literate only thirty years ago! Although Chinese culture can claim more than four thousand years of continuous development, the number of literate persons was not very great among the Chinese, even down to the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911.

During the long period of illiteracy, how did the majority of Chinese communicate, and create the conventions with one another to forge the so-called "Cathayan" or "Han" (漢) character? They did so by handing down orally their own ethnic conventions, reciting stories which cover the full scope of experience from cosmogony down to sentimental romance. No matter the form—elegies sung for relatives, friends, and acquaintances on the occasions of departure or funeral, or pleasant lyrics and drinkers' wager games sung at festive parties and ceremonies—folklore is consistently composed on the basis of shared conventions, utilizing a unique language to consolidate a special pathos. Folk literature is both contrapuntal and supplementary, with tales enriching and fertilizing one another, so much so that the literature and culture of a nation with a written language will be richer when its development is informed by such a tradition. Most of *The Book of Song*, which was canonized as a Chinese classic in a later age, originated from ritually performed folk ballads or the songs recited by, or for the nobility during specific rites. Afterwards scholars, or other authorities, collected and categorized the songs, which were gradually recognized as highly important and accepted as part of the literary canon.

In the West, there were two great epics when Greek civilization was at its peak. Although attributed to Homer, we know that the ancient literati had collected popular sagas, editing and compiling them into two great epics, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. These two works have exerted tremendous influence, and been praised and emulated by Europeans through the generations.

In ancient China, some literary figure (conventionally believed to be Luo Guan-Zhong [羅貫中]) collected and compiled a number of heroic romances, sorting and editing them into a work known as *San-Guo-Yan-Yi* (《三國演義》) or *The Romance*

of *Three Kingdoms*). This work has become a part of the canon, influencing, in turn, written and folk literature. Literary works of this sort mutually enrich one another, generation after generation, without exclusion. We cannot, with justice, say that only the literature of professionals counts whereas folk literature is vulgar and of no consequence. *The Book of Song*, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are indisputably classics, which no one would regard as vulgar, but each is derivative of folk literature. If one holds fast to the notion that there is a single form of legitimate literature and looks down upon all others, this only demonstrates a narrow-minded and ignorant view of literature. Anyone truly interested in literature should be mindful of its various origins.

As we have stated above, those who major in literature and those concerned with folklore should understand clearly the importance of folk literature. But it is otherwise in Taiwan. In the departments of Chinese in Taiwan's universities today, there are not many students who know anything of folk literature. Why? "Because folk literature comes from the people," and is too much concerned with the language, customs, culture, and emotions from every walk of life. More than half of the curricula taught in traditional Chinese departments focuses on the literature of the intellectuals and nobility, and are, therefore, reflective of the intellect. Popular movies and plays which speak to the ideas and emotions at play in lives of the folk are largely despised within Chinese departments, which relegate them to the status of cheap, dispensable goods: that is, mere commodities. Folk literature, which more often actually comes from among the people, fares still worse. Teaching no popular literature in the classroom, professors of Chinese demonstrate a great indifference to the folk literature passed orally among their grandparents. "They do not care a farthing. It is not because they are noble; it is because they are ignorant." Ever since the advent of the twentieth century, no developed country has neglected to collect and categorize its folk literature and culture... save for Taiwan, which is poised to join the ranks of the truly ignorant should it insist on remaining oblivious to importance of folk literature to the national cultural treasury.

In addition to the reasons outlined above, a further major factor contributing to the ignorance of, and negligence of folk literature in Taiwan is political interference by a government fearful and reluctant to face the consequences of acknowledging the independent traditions of Taiwan's native culture. As a popular artistic form, folk literature represents people's emotions and cognition in their local mother tongues, but these were for many years suppressed and tramped down by successive authoritarian governments. We should all remember that previously we might be fined for speaking the Southern Min dialect, Hakka (客家話), the Fu-Zhou dialect (福州話), or any of the indigenous languages when we were children. Could there be any room

for acknowledging the *raison d'être* of folk literature if one cannot use one's mother tongue to sing or narrate stories?

Under a variety of influences, Taiwanese intellectuals who had known the importance of folk literature in the Japanese Occupation Period ceased to pursue their studies. In Mainland China, during the May Fourth Movement (1919), for a time folk literature became an issue of concern for scholars. But when the Nationalist Government retreated from the Mainland to Taiwan, very few great masters of folk literature came to the island, and ordinary professors tended to know little or nothing of folk literature. Setting up departments of literature here and there, what they taught was nothing more than a severely reduced canon of classical works and philological techniques. Intellectuals of Mainland China, and Taiwanese intellectual alike, began investigating folk literature at the same time. That work was largely, although not completely, disrupted when the Nationalist Government moved to Taiwan. Still some experts of Academia Sinica and the Department of Archaeology of National Taiwan University were able to continue investigating the indigenous people's mythology and legends related to etiquette, customs, and beliefs. However, folk literature has a broader scope than this, and indigenous peoples are not the only ones possessing myths and legends. Certainly there were some persons who adapted or rewrote the stories collected by their predecessors and declared that they were working on folk literature. But this approach is rather unscientific, and sometimes they misunderstood the nature of folk literature. What the fellows of Academia Sinica had done earlier deserves some credit, but their work was limited to the etiquette, customs, and mythological legends of minority ethnic groups, and was focused on the study of ethnography: therefore, the scope and methodology were somewhat narrow, and shifted away from our subject. As a result, today, a great deal of unfinished work remains, awaiting attention.

## **II. The Importance of Folk Literature**

There were large scale collections of folk literature in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and the eve of the nineteenth century, which exerted tremendous influences on various European cultures and arts—especially their literature. When I was invited to lecture in France in 1981, I met a graduate of National Taiwan Normal University who had gone to France to study on her thesis “The Birth of Lao-tze.” I did not know from where her title and content came, and she told me: “The title of my thesis was assigned by my adviser. I went to Yi-Lan (宜蘭) to record the legend of Lao Tze's birth as narrated by an elderly person.”

This is an interesting master's thesis on authentic folk literature, orally presented. She recorded the stories in the Southern Min dialect, then translated them into

Chinese and French, and finally wrote a thesis analyzing its significance. This event provided me with a great stimulus at that time, and I thought that only in a place like Europe, where there was a deep and profound tradition of collecting, sorting, and studying folk literature would the professor encourage students to work on such a thesis. In the conservative atmosphere of Taiwan's academic community at that time, especially in Chinese departments, no one would think that the title of a thesis or dissertation could be something not already set down in some tome but rather narrated by an elder. This stimulus was the equivalent to planting a seed deeply in my mind, at a time when Taiwan was still a folk literature desert.

Afterwards, I checked the records of the collections of folk literature around the world, and all sorts of feelings welled up. Finland, a Scandinavian country historically invaded and bullied by neighboring countries, a great number of "foolish" people were outfitted with backpacks to visit the remote backwater countryside to collect folklore. When they were done, they edited and published a great Finnish epic: *Kalevala*. This is an epic that we in Taiwan had never before heard, because we only know about *Odyssey*, *Iliad*, and Chinese *The Book of Song*. From whence does *Kalevala* come? What is the consequence of its compilation? An independent Finland, one that is admired worldwide, has emerged from a Finland nearly torn asunder of old as a result of its strong sense of national solidarity—that is, a sense of self nurtured by the persistent efforts and endeavors of field workers who collected, edited, published, and studied Finnish folklore. Today, the headquarters of the World Association of International Folk Literature Workers is in Finland. Since the last century, countries taking the lead in studying folk literature include developed countries such as Germany, the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, and Japan. To be sure, each of these countries values the collection of folklore at least insofar as it focuses attention on local cultural traditions.

Let us turn to the case of People's Republic China (PRC), which is relatively underdeveloped politically and economically. Under the auspices of the Department of Cultural Affairs in the State Department (the equivalent of the Executive Yuan in Taiwan's government system), a decade ago they began to undertake a census, investigation, and collection of folklore at the levels of provincial, municipal, and county governments, down to the level of towns and villages, because they fully realized the importance of folk literature. The lesson is one that Taiwan—a country economically affluent but culturally poverty-stricken—has yet to learn. Mining the treasury of folk culture of the counties, municipalities, and provincial governments from towns and villages, they finally edited, categorized, and published *Zhong-Guo Min-Jian Wen-Xue Ji-Chen* (《中國民間文學集成》) or *The Compiled Works of Chinese Folk Literature*) with public funds. Even though PRC's performance in the sectors of

politics and economy is not quite satisfactory, they have benefited from the positive influence of Russia, Germany and Finland in this respect, and have had good results from their work. The data that they have collected are truly amazing: from 1984 to 1990, they gathered 1,380,000 folk tales, 3,020,000 ballads, 700,000 entries of proverbs... all in only six years. In total, the number of words published runs to 4 billion, and the effort is ongoing. The traditional culture of every people within the PRC's territory may be able further sustained and developed after the data is sorted out and conserved. It is, truly, a great work.

In contrast, Taiwan claims to be a developed country, but here few people understand folk literature. We only know about the newly edited and published collection of American fairy tales (George Washington chopping down the cherry tree) and the story of a brave Dutch boy plugging a crack in the dyke with his finger. We have compiled and edited a great number of tales by folklorists from many other countries, but where are our own tales? Is it possible that we have never had our own legends and stories? It is truly pathetic that the Taiwanese do not seem to believe that they possess anything native of worth, and believe that they have no true folk tales. Taiwanese children listen to American stories, and sing Western songs when they go to college. Earlier, the singing of some Taiwanese songs in public was forbidden or regarded as a means of losing face. Taiwanese are good at making money, but not at understanding or appreciating the characteristics of their own culture. Paradoxically this failure is a result of our educational system's successes. We have successfully encouraged everyone to enter to higher education, and the more education one has, the more money he can make. But what about culture? Generally speaking, our students do not know anything about their own native culture, for this seems irrelevant to economic success. Thus, students in Taipei know where New York is, but cannot tell Yun-Lin (雲林) from Yuan-Lin (員林).<sup>2</sup>

If we do not collect our folk tales at once, most of them will be lost, because folk literature is handed down orally and by and large, only the elderly still remember the tales. If we do not excavate, collect and record these tales, it will be difficult to retrieve them. Therefore, we must set out to promote this work as soon as possible, lest we—all too soon—be rendered forever ignorant, and look back with regret and shame on our failures when we stand face-to-face with our ancestors and descendants.

### **III. The Scope of Folk Literature**

In what follows I list some of the contents and features of folk literature. Before doing so, I would emphasize again that oral literature is folk literature, that is,

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<sup>2</sup> Yun-Lin is a county south of the Zhuo-Shui River (濁水溪; or the Muddy River) whereas Yuan-Lin is a town in Zhang-Hua County in central Taiwan.

literature handed down through oral traditions, in the telling. People possessing a written language will have their folk literature, while people without any form of written language will depend on oral convention to pass down tales, ballads, and the like to continuously recreate and preserve their cultural traditions. Traditional folk literature is a reservoir of interesting language and folk and religious wisdom. Every member of an ethnic group, if concerned with cultural preservation, should lose no time in collecting, categorizing, and otherwise working to conserve the group's folk literature.

## **A. Prose Stories**

### **i. Mythology**

What is mythology?

The scope of mythology embraces humanity's varied attempts to decipher and represent the universe, its creatures, and every manner of cultural phenomena. Ancient people often anthropomorphized or super-naturalized their cognizance of the origins of the Heavens and the Earth, for lack of scientific knowledge couching cosmogony in the form of tales. Proto-literature, proto-philosophy and proto-science are the mothers of literature, philosophy, and science: these are also the origins of mythology.

Considering its origins, it should be clear that mythology is not merely a collection of absurd or funny stories, but rather an exploration of questions concerning the existence of Heaven and Earth. People living in the scientific age apply scientific methods to explore these questions, for instance postulating that the Big Bang created the Galaxy, and that the Earth and solar system were later created out of the aftermath, and so on. Generally speaking, scientific knowledge gives us confidence in our understandings of the formation of the Earth and origins of humanity, such that, free from fear, we can enjoy peace and stability, both physically and spiritually. Like us, ancient people also needed to define their own positions with regards to the outer world in order to survive and pursue a peaceful life.

As a result of their habits of thought, ancient peoples often thought that other creatures might possess spiritual powers similar to those of human beings, and made use of personification tales to represent the characteristics attributed to them, as well as cosmic phenomena, mountains, rivers, and the *fauna* and *flora* of the environment. Thus things animate and inanimate were intimate and mnemonic. As for establishing oneself and managing to get along in the world, a great number of rituals arose which served to mediate between the human spheres and those of the godhead (or ghosts). In their ritualistic means of communication, mythology and religion may be regarded as essentially indivisible. Indeed, in many areas, mythology was formerly narrated solemnly and ceremoniously. Afterwards, this identification with the sacred and mysterious dissolved little by little, until, gradually, people knew mythology only as

collections of weird tales.

Today, mainland China is investigating the mythology of minority peoples and encouraging explorations of the concept of living mythology. Indeed, in some areas, the mythology of minority ethnic groups remains a living tradition, for example, in the annually held solemn rituals to worship ancestors and Heaven, priests summon initiates to a ceremony in which they devoutly recite a series of mythological tales, either in song or narration. They sing of the origins of Heaven and Earth, the mountains and rivers, and the origins of men, women, and various peoples, and of their own actions: why do we come to this place, hold these ceremonies and the like? These holy ballads or tales are not sung casually—and they are sung—but carefully handed down, generation after generation singing and reciting them, time and again, from the lost, distant past unto the present. When anyone participates in the ceremony (ritual), that person is edified by the influence of the convention, ideas and religion, which convey intimate knowledge of the identity and ethnicity of the people. This is a living mythology; a mythology that is a part of life and living.

The progress of civilization dissolves mythologies such that, today, a great deal of our remaining traditional mythology is incomplete. But if we are interested in its collection, that task is still possible. There are times when we still hear fragments from our grandparents. For instance, in my childhood, my mother explained why the heavens are so high: “A woman who was airing her laundry on a bamboo pole felt that the heaven was too low for her to conveniently do her work. So, using the bamboo pole, she pushed heaven up, up... and the heavens arose at last.” Rather than just listening to and enjoying these myths, they should be recorded and the disparate fragments gathered and systematically ordered. By doing so, we may also discover the significance of these absurd and funny tales.

Stories very similar to the raising the heavens on bamboo poles can be found in many countries the world over. Folk literature involves an interesting application of wisdom by analogy. Sometimes you find that the stories your mom told you are similar to those of American natives or Africans. Are we related? Does common descent explain the cultural convergence? Certainly not. The similarity is due to the universality of mythology, which draws on concepts and modes of thought common across mankind in the early stages of history. Why is this? Our interest in folk literature lies here. On the one hand, folk literature is local because it is expressed in the vernacular. On the other hand, folk literature is highly cosmopolitan because it speaks to the universal human condition.

Consider the many myths on the origins of the races. For instance, people of She (畬) and Yao (徭) nationality claim that their ancestors arose from the *quan* (犬 or canine). *Quan* is a literary term, the equivalent of the vernacular *gou* (狗 or dog). Later,

they converted *quan* (the canine) into *quan huang* (犬皇 or the Emperor Canine), alias *pan hu* (槃瓠), which some hold as the origin of *Pan Gu* (盤古), though this is still indeterminate.<sup>3</sup> While it may seem odd for a people to regard themselves as the descendants of the canine, this has to do with their totemic cult. The relationship between a totemic cult and mythology is very complicated, and we do not propose to go into detail here. Suffice to say that we all know that the Chinese in Taiwan, mainland China and around the world have a special sentiment towards the dragon and phoenix. Looking back at the cult in time immemorial, the dragon may have become prominent as a totemic creature, originally a snake, or possibly a crocodile, and before poking fun at those who claim descent from “the canine,” it must be remembered that the Chinese people (or Han [漢] people) cannot claim to be superior, regarding themselves as the descendents of the snake, for it is by no means obvious that a snake is any wiser than a dog. Deeply rooted in our ancestors’ hearts, the totemic snake was transformed, little by little, turning into the dragon: a symbol of sublime imagination; but it’s humble origins should not be forgotten as we consider the seemingly ridiculous beliefs of others.

Today, minority ethnic groups in mainland China have greater confidence in themselves, and in the absence of prohibitory taboos and prejudices, the “Song of the Emperor Canine” may again be heard, and image of the “Emperor Canine” again be seen in association with rituals of ancestor worship in many areas.

In addition, mythology also offers explanations for the origins of a variety of cultural affairs: for instance, *Huang Di* (黃帝 or The Yellow Emperor) invented transportation vehicles (boats and carriages); *Cang Jieh* (倉頡) invented the hieroglyphs, and so on. The characters in mythology are often regarded as, or drawn from the ranks of, cultural heroes.

## ii. Legends

For the most part, legends are composed of tales, and may be categorized as follows.

### a. Legends centered on characters.

In addition to the official historical records, the populace will have their own views on historical characters handed down generation after generation. For instance, in mainland China’s southwest, the focus of many legends is Zhu-Ge Liang (諸葛亮),<sup>4</sup> about whom there are a great number of legends and tales in circulation among minority ethnic groups, and extraordinary stories about Lu Ban (魯班) are popular among the Han (Chinese) people almost everywhere in China.<sup>5</sup> Even when based on

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<sup>3</sup> In Chinese cosmogony, Pan Gu is the one who creates the Heaven and the Earth.

<sup>4</sup> A legendary statesman in the period of the Three Kingdoms in Chinese history (A.D. 221-263). His story is embellished in the novel, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

<sup>5</sup> Lu Ban is a legendary character who invents carpentry.

historical characters, folk legends usually go beyond historical limitations to present a variety of noble or admirable characteristics.

Historical studies of the origins of legendary figures are not always welcome by initiates of their cults. Significantly Russian folklorist Boris Riftin (李福清) recently published an article on the birth of Lord Guan (關公) in *China Times*. The editor of the press later told him: “Our newspaper has received many letters and phone calls from followers of the cult of Lord Guan who devoutly believe in the deity of Lord Guan. They are threatening to do something vicious to you in protest, and ask how you could depict Lord Guan in such a manner.” Boris Riftin was wronged, for he approached the legends of Lord Guan in manner very different from devotees of his cult. He studies folk literature and collects Chinese legends which dwell upon the greatness of Lord Guan and the derivation of the features of his personal appearance, for instance how his face became reddened after he was born, reading character traits into appearance. In contrast, the populace -- ascribing many noble characteristics to Lord Guan -- think that speaking of Lord Guan in this way debases Lord Guan’s image. The fact that some cults of Lord Guan in Taiwan insist that others not speak ill of Lord Guan exposes their ignorance of the ever changing character of folk literature and cults. Unlike the written literature with a definite text, variation is one of the characteristics of folk literature, and it is normal that people of different times and places should have different views on the same subject.

b. Legends about historical events.

In Taiwan, Koxinga is a popular protagonist of historical legend.<sup>6</sup> The historical basis does not, however, drive out the fantastic. Indeed, one of the most popular legends about his birth is that he was the reincarnation of the whale king, which explains why he went on to become the King of the Seven Seas.

The stories about Koxinga’s defeat of the Dutch and his settlement of Taiwan touch on historical events about which we can also collect some historical legends tied to specific areas and events; for instance, the rebellion led by Dai Wan-sheng (戴萬生) in the era of Tong-Zhi (同治) had a great impact on central Taiwan.<sup>7</sup> The action was centered in Zhang-Hua County, in which there are, today, plenty of related legends. This is not unusual, as we find local historical legends in each place humans have inhabited and explored over a long period. Certainly, there are far more Taiwanese historical legends than what is to be found in *Tai-Wan Min-Jian Wen-Xue Ji* (《台灣民間文學集》 or *The Collected Works of Taiwanese Folk Literature*) published during the Japanese Occupation Period. But the historical legends we find today about

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<sup>6</sup> Koxinga, or Cheng Cheng-kung (鄭成功, 1624-1662), was leader of anti-Manchu rebellion forces after the fall of the Ming Dynasty. He ousted the Dutch colonizers from Taiwan in 1662, 4 months before his decease.

<sup>7</sup> Tong-Zhi (1862-1874) was the epoch of Emperor Muzong (清穆宗, 1856-1874) in the Qing Dynasty.

local places in Taiwan are relatively few because we have not much cared to collect folklore, relegating it to something dispensable and easily neglected. As a result, those who can remember and recite folk tales have grown fewer and fewer. If we are to remedy this failure, when finding someone who knows these stories and their narrative traditions, we need to record them at once, to sort, edit and publish these stories to make them known throughout the world.

c. Legends about local landscapes and historical sites.

These legends refer to the naming and formation of features of local landscapes and historical sites, and may or may not contain seeds of truth. For example, there must be some legends in connection with Mt. Ba-Gua (八卦山) in Zhang-Hua County, as yet undiscovered.<sup>8</sup> For instance, in Ying-Ge (鶯歌 or literally the “Singing Nightingale”), a giant bird belching poisonous smoke was shot down by Koxiga’s cannon, falling to the ground to be transformed into a rock in the shape of a nightingale. That is why the town is named Ying-Ge (or Singing Nightingale). Likewise, the name Jian-Jing (劍井 or Sword Well) derives from a story about Koxiga leading his army to a place where his soldiers had no water to drink, thrusting his sword into the ground and causing water to spring forth; thus the name.

A friend of mine who has been doing research on Koxiga found that there are many places with names associated with Koxiga legends, although the historical figure never visited those places. His study indicates that Koxiga’s legends can be found almost everywhere in Taiwan except for a very few areas of the eastern part of the island, including Yi-Lan, Tai-Dung, and Hua-Lian. Moreover, most of the legends are embedded in stories about mountains and rivers. As for the area around Tai-Nan in which he actually lived, interestingly, there are a great many of historical relics associated with him, but fewer legends touching on the landscape (mountains, rivers, and historical sites).

d. Legends about the *flora and fauna*.

Legends about the cracked design of the turtle shell are popular the world over. There are some local legends in China to the effect that a great deluge fell from heaven, flooding the land and drowning all of mankind except for a brother and sister. The species was in danger of extinction if they did not marry and have offspring, thus a god instructed them to marry one another. Disturbed, they asked the turtle what they ought to do. The turtle replied, “Since a god told you to get married, get married.” Enraged by this answer, the sister angrily pounded on the turtle’s back, causing its shell to crack. The offspring of the turtle thus unjustly acquired their flattened, but beautifully fractured shells in this way. Another story goes this way: the couple told

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<sup>8</sup> *Ba-Gua* (八卦 or The Eight Diagrams) in Chinese horoscope is eight combinations of three whole or broken lines formerly used in divination.

the god that, if the bamboo were to revive after being chopped into pieces, they would immediately marry. (The story goes on to explain that in ancient times chopped bamboo was hollow and without any knots.) Consequently a god utilized supernatural power to reform the bamboo piece by piece, resurrecting the dismembered plant. Henceforth, bamboo grew, not smooth, but with “knots.” And so the brother and sister married, and the story of mankind did not come to an end. It is significant that legends typically account for traits in ways like this.

e. Legends of local products and specialties.

There are many legends about the origins and features of local products and specialties identified with a specific place. For example, ginseng is a specialty of northeastern China, where legends abound to warm the heart of any digger of the root. We ought to expect there to be a like number of legends about local products and specialties in Taiwan. For instance, what of the origins of tailless mud-snails? Why are they tailless? Why is Da-Jia famous for its specialties—straw mattresses and hats?<sup>9</sup> Legends accounting for the features of local products enrich the minds and lives of thousands of people, but it must be admitted that Taiwan has done very poorly in terms of collecting and sorting through folklore in this respect.

f. Legends about rituals and customs.

Elders tell many stories to explain why this or that should be done in a wedding ceremony, explaining why the attire, costumes and accessories of ethnic minorities in mainland China tend to exhibit a variety of disparate features. Each ethnic group has its legends about their costumes, and many other customs and beliefs, which have to do with the stories and legends framing popular beliefs. Presently, Taiwanese attire is Westernized, and tells no other story except that of commodity. It seems that we can do nothing about the changing fashions, but we ought to be able to look back with fond nostalgia, rather than blank ignorance. Perhaps this is another function of folk literature.

g. Gothic legends.

Each place has its local stories of the gothic and monstrous: that is, the gothic.

h. Legends about religious belief.

Miraculous stories and legends of the saints of various religious denominations are also very popular.

**iii. Folk Tales**

a. Fantastic stories of the Cinderella-type.

These are first recorded as appearing during the Tang Dynasty in China, and may be represented by the tales of the Mud-Snail Girl, Seven Fairies, and Dong Yong’s (董

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<sup>9</sup> Da-Jia, a township in Tai-Chung County, is located in central Taiwan. It is close to the sea shore with an expanse of marsh.

永) tales. The story of the Mud-Snail Girl tells of a good-natured farmer too poor to marry. One day he happened to find a mud-snail in the rice paddy. He took it home, put it in the water tank, and returned to work the farm as usual. When he returned home at the end of the day, he found that someone had prepared delicious dishes for him, but had no idea who had done so. More peculiar, delicious meals continued to appear on a daily basis. Curious, one day he hid himself to spy on his benefactor. To his surprise, he saw a beautiful woman emerge from out of the water tank to do his housework and cooking. Understanding what had happened, he hid the mud-snail's shell, preventing her from returning to the water tank, and they were later married.

The tale of Dong Yong (董永) and Seven Fairies is a variation on the theme of "the Fairy with Feather Robes." The story tells of a young man, instructed to go to a lakeshore and discovering a group of beautiful young women bathing, and hiding the clothes of one. It turned out that it was the Seventh Fairy whose robes were hidden, and as she was unable to fly upward to the heaven, she became Dong Yong's wife. Again, stories of this type can be found all over the world: the Manchurians in northeast China say that their ancestors were borne by the Swan Fairy who had descended to Earth from Heaven. Stories about treasure hunting, taming monsters, or weird children such as Prince Frog also belong to this typology, which abounds in eerie and fantastic elements.

b. Animal stories.

In the story about the current order of the Twelve Chinese Zodiac Animals, it is said that the mouse outwit the ox.<sup>10</sup> It is also said that upon sight of a dog, the cat fled. Why should the cat be afraid of the dog? Tales explaining relations between such animals belong to Animal Stories. These are related to legends of the origins and features of animals, and vary from place to place and between cultures.

c. Life stories.

Stories of this type do not deal with evil or romantic fantasy; rather they represent the reality of everyday life, for instance, the Smart Girl (巧女), Stupid Son-in-Law, the Wicked Mother-in-Law, the Diligent Younger Brother and the Lazy Older Brother, etc. Another of these stories, "Zhou Chen's Passage to Taiwan" (〈周成過台灣〉), tells of the rise and fall of a mainlander coming to explore Taiwan sometime in 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as does the story of the landlord and the serf.

d. Stories of quick-witted persons.

Stories of this type will sometimes include tales about making fools of others. In Taiwan the most popular such story is that of Khu Bong-Sia (邱罔舍), who, by

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<sup>10</sup> In traditional Chinese Lunar Calendar, the Twelve Chinese Zodiac Animals represent the twelve Terrestrial Branches to symbolize the year in which a person is born. The order of the Twelve Chinese Zodiac Animals is the Mouse, the Ox, the Tiger, the Hare, the Dragon, the Snake, the Horse, the Sheep, the Monkey, the Rooster, the Canine, and the Boar.

making fools of the people, interrupts their daily lives and renders them unable to pursue their businesses.

e. Fables.

Like the stories found in the *Aesop's Fables*, fables reflect aspects of humanity through the personification of animals. In China, one such, the story of the ungrateful Chung-San Werewolf (中山狼) is very popular. Fables are different from the Animal Stories mentioned above in that fables place greater emphasis on imparting moral lessons.

**iv. Jokes**

Humor plays an important role in folk literature. The joke is a story in embryonic form serving as a spice or gaudy linguistic flourish. In folk literature collected from the Taichung area, there are jokes deriving from the mispronunciation, malapropism, and misunderstanding of Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, and Hakka dialects. There are many “prurient” jokes in folk literature, but the collection of folklore should be as comprehensive as possible and not purposely pass over or reject these jokes, which exhibit some of the most common features of folk literature.

**B. Rhymed Ballads**

**i. Song of the Rituals**

There is as large a variety of ritual songs as there are rituals. Some of these are not properly folk literature, such as those sung at commencements ceremonies (there is even a ceremonial song for the beginning of school year). However, many of the ballads sung in wedding ceremonies among the people are a form of folk literature. A great many of ballads are ritually chanted, particularly among the indigenous people, among whom many tribal ballads have been conserved, ranging from songs for the worship of the gods, hunting, and weddings, to songs for *siu kia*<sup>n</sup> (收驚, or soul pacification)<sup>11</sup> and the invocation of the dead. The chants and recitals were performed in rituals to offer sacrifices to Heaven and the Ancestors, rituals of hunting and harvest all belong to ballads for ceremonies. The ballads sung in the occasions of soul pacification and *pha-hui-choa* (打飛蛇; or Beating up the Herpes Complex) belong to a class of incantatory ballads intended to ward off illness. Festival ballads are those which record the seasons of the festivals, while chanting and wailing during wedding and funeral ceremonies, and the toast ballads in the banquet belong to the songs of etiquette and customs.

**ii. Life Ballads**

Life ballads concern the every day happenings of people of every walk and mode of life: villains, adopted daughter-in-law from childhood, baby husband, life, fate and

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<sup>11</sup> In traditional Taiwanese society, sorceresses claimed that they could charm a frightened child to pacify its soul, in almost daily rituals combining elements of exorcism and lullaby.

the like.

### iii. Love Songs

Love songs are the most well known form of folk literature, and a great many traditional Taiwanese love songs were collected in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. If we study these love songs as carefully as we do the *Book of Songs* (《詩經》), we would discover works no less splendid. If we translate the *Book of Songs* into vernacular Chinese, some of the contents will be found to be very similar to ballads that we have collected. The misconception that values the *Book of Songs* over folk ballads should be corrected.

### iv. Work Songs

Work songs are those sung during one's daily labors. The most familiar of these in Taiwan is the tea-picking song. Ballads of this sort function to cheer us in our work; they also express the travail and hardship of work. For example, in mainland China in the past the ship in the Yangtze River should be tracked upstream for the lack of motor equipment aboard, usually hauled by dozens, or even hundreds of people. Therein arose the song of boat trackers. Traditional construction and road building sites, the sites of many people working with wooden sledge hammers working in rhythm -- *ding-ding dong-dong*, singing "the Song of Ding Dong," also birthed many songs, though such scenes were less common in Taiwan.

### v. Songs of Historical Legends

There are many songs belonging to this kind in the booklets of songs (歌仔冊) published island wide in Taiwan from the late Qing Dynasty through to the period of the Japanese Occupation. Now, there are still a few elderly people capable of singing the songs of Men Qiang-Nu (孟姜女), who breaks down the Great Wall by her crying, and Madam Wang Bao-Chuan (王寶釧) awaiting her husband in a shabby kiln for eighteen years, and so on. In addition, there are also some songs about issues current at the time when Japan ruled Taiwan. If properly collected these songs are likely to comprise a complete epic.

The son of a Taiwanese writer, Lai Her (賴和, 1894-1943), who was active in the Japanese Occupation Period, recalls that his father had attentively collected these songs by inviting a blind minstrel home to sing the ballad of "Raising a Black Flag to Rebel." Lai Her transcribed the ballad, but all of this data has been lost! This information would have provided the basis for a national historical epic had they been preserved and properly categorized.

### vi. Children's Songs

Children's songs, also known as children's folk rhymes, appear in the forms of game songs, palindrome songs, tongue twisters, and lullabies, and present children

with natural objects of the outer world. Even in later years, these songs remain familiar, and we would do well to undertake a general survey to collect them and enhance our knowledge of them.

### C. Proverbs

Proverbs result from finely tempered and consolidated language, and tend to express profound truths in a terse tone, often through the application of satire and popular philosophy. The beauty of a language, especially it is oral expression, is often represented by the adroit use of proverbs and *xie-hou-yu* (歇後語; or a riddle made of an omission of the last part of a common expression). Unfortunately, as Taiwanese dialects were long banned in the campus, many people did not learn the full range and beauty of their mother tongues.<sup>12</sup>

I once served as one of the referees in a speech contest for South Min dialect and Hakka alongside two senior scholars. The comments of these scholars struck me as sad, for they lamented that the accent of the South Min dialect in Taiwan is different from that of the South Min dialect spoken in Quan Zhou and Zhang Zhou in Fukien, whereas I saw no reason for sorrow, just as Americans do not feel sorry simply because the English they speak is different from that of the Great Britain. Linguistic variation is a result of natural evolution. Influenced by many cultures, Taiwanese dialects naturally possess a number of unique features and differ from Quan Zhou and Zhang Zhou dialects. Thus, it is natural that the language we now speak differs from that which our ancestors acquired in their homelands. This is nothing to lament over. The language with which one is familiar is naturally beautiful to one's ear; it would be as absolutely wrong to regard one's own language as superior and the most beautiful as it would be to look down upon another's as vulgar: both opinions are merely derivative of cultural chauvinism. Unfortunately, such opinions are common, and there are today many people who view Taiwanese as a vulgar tongue. While Taiwanese dialects were banned as a result of wrongheaded official policies, they continued to thrive among people of the lower classes who remain at some distance from official institutions, though in this way they inevitably became associated with vulgarity and coarseness. And yet, when discussing science, art, or literature, Taiwanese expressions flow as gracefully and beautifully as Mandarin Chinese, French, or any other language. I would be happy to speak in Taiwanese today, but Taiwanese is as Greek to some elementary school students present: it is a great pity that children are hardly able to speak their own mother tongues.

It must be remembered that language is conventional and only becomes 'natural' through habitual use. By way of example, consider the scientific terms for oxygen and

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<sup>12</sup> Before the lifting of the Martial Law in 1987, the then ruling party, Kuomintang (中國國民黨 or the Chinese Nationalist Party) banned the use of Taiwanese dialects in the campus for the purpose of setting up the status of mandarin Chinese as official language in Taiwan.

hydrogen. If oxygen and hydrogen are pronounced in South Min dialect, we may fail to understand simply because we are not accustomed to the sound; but once grow used to it, we have no difficulty.

We require a common *lingua franca* to communicate with people of different ethnic groups, but the necessity of a *lingua franca* does not presuppose the eradication of the mother tongue of particular ethnic groups. Whatever language one speaks, doing so is a manifestation of acculturation: we grow accustomed to expressing ourselves in our mother tongues, and the beauty of the language appears naturally. Understanding this, we should also know that language evolves as temporal and spatial changes occur. The Southern Min dialect differentiated from Quan Zhou and Zhang Zhou dialects as a result of special circumstances, for which there is no need to feel regret. Feeling sad or sorrowful can easily lead to an inferiority complex. Not long ago a television station recruited a couple of children from Beijing to act in plays. As a result, many Mandarin Chinese speakers were wailing, “Aiii! I do not speak standard Mandarin Chinese after all. Theirs is the standard!” In fact, this is far from the truth, I think. What they speak is the common speech of the Beijing language, and what we speak is Mandarin Chinese. Of course, they are different. But to question which is the more beautiful is nonsense: both of them are differently, and equally, beautiful. We ought to perceive this, least we find ourselves marginalizing ourselves, unable to confidently realize that the locality in which you are located is itself a subjectively independent, cultural entity. Americans know that their language and culture originated from Great Britain, but never feel that they exist on the margins of the British tradition. They are confident in themselves, and have produced their own American language and culture. We have no need to resort to cultural or linguistic chauvinism. Perhaps this is sufficient to demonstrate the characteristics of proverbs and *xie-hou-yu* (or verbal riddles). Insofar as we pay much more attention to collecting the proverbs and verbal riddles of our own disparate ethnic groups and apply them in our speeches, we will find that the language of each of us is equally beautiful.

#### **D. Riddles**

Riddles are one of the constituencies of folk literature, with a diversity of expressions. More often than not, the more interesting riddles are the ones with stories behind them. Literati lamp riddles do not belong to this category, because they are deliberately fabricated by scholars.<sup>13</sup>

#### **E. Conclusion**

The difference between folk literature and written literature lies in the fact that

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<sup>13</sup> Lantern riddles are written on lanterns for public contests held on the Lantern Festival (元宵節), 15 days after the Chinese Lunar New Year.

the latter requires a unique creativity on the part of the writer himself. The text of the written literature is unchangeable, while no one knows who the author of a folk tale is, or indeed, whether it is appropriate to consider folk literature to be the product of a single author as people pass these stories and songs from mouth to mouth, improvising constantly in their singing and telling. Inevitably, something changes as these tales pass from one place to another, though usually in the details, not the main structure. So, the first characteristic of folk literature is its collective authorship. The second characteristic is its mobility and fluidity. For that matter, we must not proclaim that we have collected a great number of data from somewhere. Since they are something of the same or similar kind, it is not necessary to collect from some other places, because the data are probably the same. Obviously it is wrong to think like that. I can tell you that there is a Taiwanese ballad beginning with “*ge-kng-kng-siu-chai-long*” (“月光光秀才郎” or “Shining Moonlight, the Young Lierati.”) There are more than 10 ballads of this kind that have been collected just from Taichung County. These 10 ballads are similar in the main, but there are nonetheless variations among them. If we undertake further efforts to collect them, we may find a dozen more versions of this song, and a general survey island wide will find many more, because different localities present disparate local colors, linguistic features, and folk customs and belief. We are able to present the variorum by means of general survey. Moreover, the same is true with regards to folk literature. For example, the stories of the Mouse Getting Married (老鼠娶親) and *Ho•Ko•Po* (虎姑婆) appear in forms of different plots by being told here and there. The different plots reflect the disparate features circulating in different places. This is the second characteristic of folk literature—changeability. By collecting the different versions, we can undertake research professionally, mapping out the difference of narrative form and content in terms of localities. A story or ballad fully researched and investigated is likely to reveal patterns of Taiwanese immigration history and features of cultural distribution, etc.

This article has ranged from the importance of folk literature and what folk literature is, to the differences between folk literature and written literature. In extending an invitation to individuals interested in this field to cooperate with one another to preserve, for own homeland, these stories and ballads which have been passed down generation after generation, I hope earnestly that we can set out to do investigation work, so that the children of next generation will know more than the story of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree: we have our own stories, which our children should know. We also hope that all of us come together to preserve the disappearing native heritage. First of all, we have to gather what remains of lost folk literature, for those who can tell stories or sing ballads are ageing day-by-day. If

we do not work diligently, and in time, it will be too late for anything but regrets. Let us quickly fill in the past 40 years of blanks. Certainly someone may ask that there were traditional opera and lyrical arts of singing and talking for popular entertainment (說唱藝術) in early years in Taiwan. Aren't they branches of folk literature? Certainly. What we want right now is the concept of coordinating teamwork to collect and sort out the data. Due to the rapid changes in the past 40 years in Taiwanese society, the arts of singing and talking for entertainment did not exist actually. The storytelling broadcasts at the moment is nothing but "telling something by books," which is far-removed from the orality of folk literature, and no longer qualifies as folklore. And folk opera, such as *gu-le-koa* (牛犁歌; or "Ox Plow Song") is seldom performed. As scholars have already devoted much time and energy to the study of traditional opera and music, we need not dwell upon it here.