

THE PLOT OF THE TALE OF ÔNG NGÂU AND BÀ NGÂU IN VIETNAM, CHINA, KOREA, AND JAPAN

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Abstract: This study examines the cross-cultural phenomenon of folklore repetition within the “shared cultural motif” nations of Vietnam, China, Korea, and Japan, specifically through a comparative analysis of the “Cowherd and Weaver Girl” tale type. While these four nations share a common narrative structure involving a weaving maiden and a herdsman separated by an authoritative figure and allowed to meet only on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, the study highlights how distinct natural environments and national psychologies have created unique local variations. The research contrasts specific cultural elements, such as the Japanese depiction of a joyous reunion amidst clear skies versus the Vietnamese version (Ông Ngâu - Bà Ngâu), which is characterized by prolonged rains and cultural taboos against marriage during the seventh month. Additionally, the article explores the philosophical symbolism of the number seven, the varying roles of helper animals like crows and magpies, and the adaptation of the buffalo or cattle as the foundation of livelihood in different regions. The author concludes that while these tales likely originated from a common source, potentially among ethnic groups south of the Yangtze River, they have been assimilated and modified to reflect the distinct cultural and environmental identities of each nation.

Keywords: geoculture, Ngâu rain, shared cultured motif

1. Introduction

If, in literary creation, people strictly avoid repetition, imitation, clichés etc., then in folklore, this is a common phenomenon that forms a unique characteristic, a specific creative method of the genre. Repetition, similarity, or imitation does not only exist within one nation or region, but is often of a global nature, even among nations very distant from each other, making cultural exchange difficult. Due to this specific characteristic of folklore, people rarely study each individual work, but rather study motifs and story types that have a general nature of the entire nation, region, or even the whole of humanity in folklore.

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In the four countries of Vietnam, China, Korea, and Japan, folklore shows even greater similarities, primarily because they are geographically close, share similar living conditions, and have many corresponding cultural elements. Furthermore, for a relatively long period, all four nations used a common script, the Han script (chữ Hán). This condition of “shared cultural motif” (đồng văn) made cultural and literary exchange much more favorable. These are the reasons why the cultures and folklores of the four nations have mutually infiltrated, borrowed from, and influenced each other, creating similarities and closeness among them. However, alongside this, the distinct features of the natural conditions, not entirely identical national psychologies, and communal life adhering to separate customs and traditions have created the unique and distinctive features of the culture and folklore of each country against that similar common background.

There is an ancient tale present in all four “shared cultural motif” nations mentioned above, which is the tale of Ông Ngâu - Bà Ngâu¹ in Vietnam, Nguru Lang - Chúc Nữ in China, Kyon U and Chik Nyo in Korea, and Tanabata or Ori Hime and Hiko Boshi in Japan (Đặng Văn Lung, 1998; Dương Tuấn Anh, 2009; Nguyễn Thị Bích Hà, 2005). All four of these tales are beautiful and deeply touching love stories of a weaving girl and a peasant boy who herds buffalo or cattle. Reading each of these folk tales, we immediately relate it to the Vietnamese tale of Ông Ngâu - Bà Ngâu because of the nature of “great similarity with small differences” (đại đồng tiểu dị) among them.

2. Analysis

The themes of the tales are similar, and their narrative structures across the four countries are largely the same, with only a few minor differences. For example, in the tales of China, Vietnam, and Japan, the girl is the daughter of Heaven, while the boy is a mortal. In Korean mythology, both the girl and the boy are Heavenly beings. In the tales of all four countries, the boy and the girl meet, become husband and wife, and live happily. However, their love encounters hardships that force them to separate, and they are only allowed to meet once a year at a specific time. The tale of Nguru Lang - Chúc Nữ in China recounts that Chúc Nữ (Weaving Girl) is the daughter of Heaven, the granddaughter of Tây Vương Mẫu (the Queen Mother of the West), a girl very skilled in embroidery, sewing, and weaving. One day, she bathed with the celestial maidens in sông Ngân (the Silver River), where Nguru Lang (Cowherd), a poor cowherd, sneaked over to the river and stole her celestial robes. Unable to return to Heaven, she had to stay and become Nguru Lang's wife. They lived together very happily, having one son and one daughter. But Thiên Đế (the Heavenly Emperor) and the Queen Mother learned of the matter and were very angry, immediately forcing Chúc Nữ to return to Heaven. The Vietnamese tale was not mention the Queen Mother, but also recounts that Bà Ngâu (Mrs. Ngâu) was originally the daughter of Heaven, who descended to the mortal world to play. Seeing the charming landscape and clear water, she took off her robes

¹ The title of the tale is assigned by the author based on its vernacular (folk) designation.

and bathed, and was consequently tricked by Ông Ngâu (Mr. Ngâu), who stole and hid her robes, leading her to become his wife (“ngâu” means “nguru” - buffalo/cattle). The two lived very happily, but Bà Ngâu missed her parents greatly, so when she found her robes, she secretly flew back to Heaven. The Japanese tale recounts that the weaving princess Ori Hime (Ori is her name, and Hime means princess) is the daughter of Heaven. One day, Ori descended to the mortal world to bathe, but the cowherd Hiko Boshi secretly stole and hid her robe. The two fell in love at first sight and were immersed in earthly happiness. But one day, she found her celestial robe, put it on, and flew back to Heaven. The Korean tale recounted that in a distant kingdom in Heaven, there was Chik Nyo (Chik Nyo means weaving princess), a beautiful princess very skilled in weaving, while Kyon U was the prince of a neighboring country with a talent for herding livestock. The kings of the two countries were very pleased to arrange the marriage between their families, and the couple became happy. Thus, all four couples, whether Heavenly beings or mortals, whether they married voluntarily or by circumstance, subsequently loved each other and lived happily.

The entity that separates their happiness is often the authoritative father (Heavenly Father/Emperor). To overcome this separation, the couple often has to overcome many difficulties to find each other again. In the Chinese tale, the father (Heavenly King) forced Chúc Nữ to return to Heaven. The young boy carried his two children up to Heaven to find his wife, but the Queen Mother took her hairpin and drew a long line, creating the Silver River, forcing everyone to stay on one side, only able to look at each other but not get close. They are only allowed to meet once a year on the night of Thát Tịch (the 7th day of the 7th lunar month). In the Korean tale, after getting married, the two became so engrossed in each other that they forgot to eat. The girl neglected her weaving, and the boy let his livestock wander everywhere, even into the imperial garden. The Heavenly Father was angry and forced the two to separate, with one on the east side and the other on the west. He only allowed them to meet once a year on the 7th day of the 7th month. In the Japanese tale, the man had to weave 1000 straw sandals and bury them at the base of a bamboo plant so that the bamboo could reach up to Heaven and take him to find his wife. However, he miscounted and only had 999 pairs, encountering difficulty when ascending to Heaven. The Heavenly King strongly opposed the marriage, forcing the two to separate, each on one side of the sky, separated by the Silver River. They are only allowed to meet once a year on the 7th day of the 7th month. In the Vietnamese tale, the girl, missing her parents, secretly flew back to Heaven. The man brought his child up to Heaven to find his wife, but the Heavenly Father forced him to herd buffalo on one side of the river, while the lady wove on the other side. They are only allowed to be near each other for a few days in the 7th month. Due to its proximity to neighboring China, Vietnam is also familiar with the Seventh-Night Festival (the seventh day of the seventh lunar month). However, in Vietnamese cultural consciousness, the celestial lovers Niulang and Zhinü are almost absent; instead, there are Ông Ngâu and Bà Ngâu, whose

reunion is believed to be so sorrowful that their weeping surpasses that of all lovers in neighboring countries, causing incessant rain not only on the seventh night of the seventh month but throughout the entire month. The Vietnamese refer to this month as the “Ngâu month”. The profound impression left by the tragic separation of Ông Ngâu and Bà Ngâu has persisted to the present day: Vietnamese couples still avoid marrying in the seventh lunar month (the Ngâu month), fearing that they too might be fated to endure separation like Ông Ngâu and Bà Ngâu.

In ancient tales, people used quite a few numbers. However, their presence never seems random or without cause; they all originate in a deeply cultural perspective of the nations. From that perspective, the number 7 is also a sacred number carrying philosophical meaning and expressing profound folk beliefs. 7 is a sacred number, a number that combines the two elements of Yin-Yang with the Five Elements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth - the first and most important material elements for the ancients). The operation of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements causes humans and nature to reproduce and flourish. For this reason, the number 7 symbolizes the universe in motion, representing the completion and renewal of a cycle. Each cycle is counted as a week of 7 days, and after the 7th day, a new cycle begins. The number 7 is also associated with human life, especially for men, who are believed to have “three souls, seven corporal spirits”. Hence, when a child is 7 days old, the family holds a full-week ceremony. When a person dies, a memorial ceremony is held after 7 days, and this ritual is repeated every 7 days until the “seven sevens” ($7 \times 7 = 49$), marking the 49th day ceremony. Folk belief holds that after 49 days, the person ceases to be attached to the mortal world to return to the other world, and a solemn ceremony is held to bid the deceased farewell forever. Because the number 7 is sacred, it seems not to be a number reserved for ordinary people in daily life. In folklore, it becomes a taboo number: “don’t travel on day seven”. The Chinese also believe that “seven” sounds like “thất,” which is homophonous with “mất” (to lose), hence this taboo! In ancient tales, the number 7 is often used to express strange phenomena or to foretell something sacred. For instance, a baby cried for 7 days and 7 nights until a name was given to it that satisfied it, then it stopped crying (Epic of Đăm Săn); The 7th child, upon birth, immediately jumped over 7 mountains (Seven Strong Young Men - Tây Nguyên folk tale); Hô Rum ate a fallen pomelo on the road, and 7 days later saw her body changing, then went into labor and gave birth to a baby boy... The number 7 is also often used to express the repetition of a phenomenon as a cycle: Every 7 days, the villagers brought rice and wine to the pagoda for offerings; every 7 years, a beautiful girl had to be offered to the Dragon God ... Similarly, the tale of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl meeting once a year on the 7th day of the 7th month also falls within this meaning.

The father figure, the one who causes the separation in these stories, is actually not a malicious individual but a representative of social forces and social customs that obstruct the free love and happiness of the young couple. Here, we can vaguely see the shadow of class division, the separation between the rich and the poor, and the notion that “children must

follow parental arrangements". The separation and the lingering sorrow of the two lovers are not just those of the two individuals Ngru Lang - Chúc Nữ, Ông Ngâu - Bà Ngâu, Hiko Boshi - Ôri Hime, Kyon U - Chik Nyo, but are the sorrow, aspirations, and desire for liberation from social constraints of the young men and women of the past, in order to achieve free love and conjugal happiness.

The theme of the buffalo (or cattle) herder boy and the weaving girl is a familiar theme in self-sufficient agricultural countries. Vietnam, China, Korea, and Japan were formerly wet-rice producing countries. The images of "the buffalo (or cattle) goes first, the plow follows" and of the residents "raising silkworms, weaving cloth" lead us to a familiar way of life and work throughout the region. Furthermore, the tales about the cowherd (or cattle herder) boy and the weaving girl in all four countries are also stories that explain natural phenomena, such as the appearance of stars, rain, and wind. The tales of China, Korea, and Japan focus on explaining the appearance of the two stars, Altair and Vega, on the two banks of the Silver River, as the incarnations of the couple. They were separated into two sides, looking at each other but unable to get close, and thus transformed into two twinkling stars on opposite sides of the horizon. In the seventh month, they seem to be closer, and the Silver River appears to narrow. That is when the Heavenly Father allows Ngru Lang and Chúc Nữ (China), Hyon U and Chik Nyo (Korea), Hiko Boshi and Ôri Hime (Japan) to meet for one day. The tale of Ông Ngâu - Bà Ngâu of Vietnam is not intended to explain the stars but rather focuses on a familiar natural phenomenon, which is the phenomenon of persistent, prolonged rain for a whole month - the Ngâu rain. People say: "entering on the 3rd, leaving on the 7th, lingering on the 8th", meaning the 3rd, 7th, 8th, 13th, 17th, 18th, 23rd, 27th, and 28th are the heaviest rainy days in the 7th month, which are also the days when Mr. and Mrs. Ngâu meet and reluctantly part. Explaining natural phenomena is a fairly common theme in ancient tales across the world. That is the intimate connection between nature and culture, between geoculture and folklore. This explanation is often only slightly based on reality, with the rest being fiction. Of course, natural phenomena existed before the stories explaining their origins were created. Humans do not intend to find the authentic origin of things in this folk explanation, but rather to use it to present problems with a deeper, more generalized meaning. In the tale type of Ông Ngâu - Bà Ngâu, this is the exaltation of faithful love that triumphs over all difficulties and obstacles, and the desire for free love that triumphs over the system of imposed marriage. The story likely originated from one nation, but it resonated with the emotions and needs of other nations, thus becoming a product of all four "shared cultured motif" nations.

The endings of the tales in all four countries are the eternal separation of the man and the lady, but their everlasting, faithful love moved Heaven and Earth, transforming them into nature and becoming enduring with nature. The characteristic natural phenomena of each country often heavily influence the direction of the plot, especially the story details, because

the story cannot explain nature without being tied to the specific natural phenomenon of each country. This is clearly demonstrated in the tale of the cowherd (or cattle herder) boy and the weaving girl in the four countries we just mentioned. In Japan and Korea, the seventh month is not rainy. Therefore, the boy and girl who meet do not cry. The Japanese even say that when Hiko Boshi and Ôri Hime meet, they are very happy, so the weather on the 7th day of the 7th month in Japan is very beautiful, the sky is usually clear and bright, without rain. In the Chinese tale, it drizzles for a moment on the night of the 7th day of the 7th month. This is when the two people are most moved upon meeting again, both joyful and mournful. But in the Vietnamese tale, Ông Ngâu and Bà Ngâu only weep continuously, causing prolonged, drizzling rain throughout the whole seventh month. Meeting (on the 3rd day) - weeping; Parting (on the 7th day) - weeping; Reluctantly turning back, unable to leave (on the 8th day) - weeping. On the 3rd, 13th, 23rd, and the 7th, 17th, 27th, and the 8th, 18th, 28th, rain covers the whole sky of Vietnam. Is it that the Vietnamese are inherently so emotional when in love? Not so. The seventh month in Vietnam is rainy, so it would be difficult to explain a month-long rain if Mr. and Mrs. Ngâu only met for one day and wept for only a moment. Therefore, Ông Ngâu - Bà Ngâu in Vietnam must certainly weep more than the characters in the tales of other countries!

Similarly, if the buffalo has been the “foundation of the livelihood” (đầu cơ nghiệp), very familiar in Vietnam and China, it cannot be compared to the prevalence of the image of cattle in Korea and Japan. We understand why there is the boy Ngâu (buffalo) in Vietnam and Nguru Lang (Cowherd) in China, while there is the boy Hiko Boshi (cattle herder) in Japan, and Kyon U (cattle prince) in Korea. Cattle and cattle herders are more common in Japan and Korea than in Vietnam and China. Clearly, nature and proximate living conditions have greatly influenced the details and images in the tale type of Ông Ngâu - Bà Ngâu in the four countries mentioned above.

The characters who help the boy and girl meet in the tales of Japan and China are crows (in some versions, magpies). They sympathize with the couple's longing and link their wings to form the Ô Thước Bridge (Bridge of Crows and Magpies) (Ô: crow, Thước: magpie) so they can reach each other. In the Korean tale, the stars on the Silver River themselves shine brighter to guide them to meet. In the Vietnamese tale, crows and magpies carry stones to build a bridge for Ông Ngâu to meet Bà Ngâu, to the extent that the heads of these birds are bald in the seventh month. Perhaps the pragmatic thinking of the Vietnamese finds it difficult to accept a romantic bridge made of joined wings or the light of twinkling stars illuminating the path, and demands a bridge of stones arranged by birds who carry them? But the image of the golden crow symbolizes the sun (the sun is called *kim ô* - golden crow), which has long been present in Vietnamese culture and has entered the folk tales mentioned above. The rising sun signifies clear skies and good weather, as well as happiness for all creatures. This aligns with the aspirations of all Vietnamese residents, the authors who originated from a land of much sun and much rain.

Based on this ancient plot, some countries currently still retain separate customs related to the story. According to Japanese custom, on the 7th day of the 7th month, tall bamboo trees with lush branches are erected at train stations, squares, company office entrances, schoolyards, and other public places. If anyone wishes for something, they just need to write it on small white paper strips and tie them to those bamboo branches. They will receive what they wish for, because Ori Hime and Hiko Boshi, being happy when they meet, will generously bestow happiness upon all Japanese people. In China, the 7th day of the 7th month, the day Nguru Lang - Chúc Nữ meet, is celebrated as China's own Valentine's Day. If Western countries observe Valentine's Day on February 14th, China celebrates the 7th day of the 7th month, because that day is the happiest day for Nguru Lang - Chúc Nữ and also the most suitable day to express couples' love. As for the Vietnamese people today, they still abstain from holding weddings and customs related to marriage in the Ngâu month. This is not only because it is a month of drizzling rain, making activities more difficult, but also because they worry that getting married in the Ngâu month will lead the husband and wife to be separated, as in the ancient tale of Ông Ngâu and Bà Ngâu. Furthermore, not only matters related to marriage but also important tasks such as groundbreaking, opening ceremonies, and building houses... the Vietnamese also abstain from doing in the Ngâu month (7th lunar month).

3. Conclusion

Fundamentally, the plot of the tale of Ông Ngâu - Bà Ngâu in all four countries, Vietnam, China, Korea, and Japan, share many similarities that suggest a common origin. In the introduction to the Japanese tale, it is confirmed: "Tanabata is a story with its origins in Chinese celestial tales during the Tang Dynasty (618-906), explaining the two stars Altair and Vega" (Bauer & Carlquist, 1985, p. 77). Professor Đinh Gia Khánh, when commenting on this tale, also wrote: "The tale of Nguru Lang - Chúc Nữ of China and the tale of A Chúc - Chàng Nguru of ours are two variants of a very ancient plot. This tale must have circulated for a long time among the ethnic groups living from the southern bank of the Yangtze River southward, the ethnic groups that the Han people of the past called *Nam Man* (in which there were the Lạc Việt people)" (Đinh Gia Khánh, 1998, p. 157). Thus, both researchers seem to suggest that the origin of this tale is from China. But the tragic and faithful love of Chúc Nữ - Nguru Lang, Ông Ngâu - Bà Ngâu, Ori Hime - Hiko Boshi, Kyon U - Chik Nyo is a sacred and common emotion for all young men and women of the East. Therefore, it was widely transmitted and easily assimilated in all countries with similar and mutually influential cultures. This created the separate and distinct character of the folklore of these nations, which is both unique and attractive, both familiar and distinctive.

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