



A Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Fairy Tales: As Seen in *the Happy Prince* and *the Scarecrow*

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Abstract

As a genre of juvenile and children's literature, fairy tale has been of much renown in Chinese and western countries. Western fairy tales are well known worldwide, Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* can be taken as an example. It tells a story on the relationship, developing from unfamiliarity, acquaintance to dependence, between the happy prince and the sparrow. With regard to Chinese fairy tales, *The Scarecrow* written by Ye Shengtao is one of the early representative works in modern Chinese fairy tales. It presents three bitter scenes the scarecrow viewed in the nighttime. Based on a comparative analysis of the two fairy tales from such four aspects as historical backgrounds, characters, plots and themes, this essay attempts to detect the underlying reasons for their emergence, in the hope of achieving a further understanding of the two fairy tales.

Keywords: Comparative study; Fairy tale; *The Scarecrow*; *The Happy Prince*.

1. Introduction

As one kind of children's literature, fairy tale usually reflects reality and proves conducive to the development of children's thought and character via its artistic images based on rich imagination, fantasy and exaggeration. Xia and Chen (2010) *The Happy Prince* and *The Scarecrow* are two exemplary samples popular among children.

In this essay, a comparison in the similarities and differences between the two fairy tales is made step by step. Each detailed comparison is to follow these steps: presenting what the similarities and differences are, citing typical examples in the two fairy tales, and expounding why the similarities and differences came into being. Finally, the essay attempts to summarize some significant features of the similarities and differences between the two fairy tales on the basis of the above analysis, for the purpose of making clear the creative motifs of the two fairy tales.

2. Fairy Tale

2.1. The Definition of Fairy Tale

By virtue of its plain and vivid language, as well as its mysterious, intricate, punchy, page-turning plot, fairy tales have been favored by children, and are conducive to tackling the problems encountered in children's growth. According to its definition, as a sub-genre of literature, fairy tales are written through rich imagination, fantasy, and exaggeration, for the sake of children's literary appreciation. Generally speaking, fairy tales are featured in fantasy, absurdity and childishness.

2.2. The Happy Prince

The Happy Prince is collected in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, written by the Irish writer Oscar Wilde, who was born in Dublin on 16 October 1854 and moved to Chelsea in London to establish a literary career. The fairy tales, written for his two sons, were published in May 1888. Oscar Wilde is one of the representative aestheticist writers in the nineteenth century and has been of great popularity in the history of literature. Anee (2006) *The Happy Prince* is a story about a happy prince who never knew what sorrows were when alive, and witnessed the misery of a seamstress and her son, a down-and-out younger writer as well as a little match-girl when he stood in the form of statue. And a swallow, who was left behind after his flock flew off to Egypt for the winter, came to the happy prince, gave his hand to take the ruby, the sapphires and the golden leaves to the people in poverty after the persuasion of the happy prince. Fulginiti (1975) As the winter came, the happy prince was stripped of all of his beauty, and his lead heart broke the moment the swallow died by the feet of the happy prince as a result of his selfless deeds and the severe cold. Frame (2005) The statue then fell apart from the pillar column and was melted in a furnace, leaving behind the broken heart. And the workmen at the foundry threw it on a dust-heap where the dead swallow was also lying. Fortunately, the angel was designated to take the broken heart and the dead swallow, being deemed to be the two most precious things in the city, up to the paradise.

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2.3. The Scarecrow

The Scarecrow was written by Ye Shengtao. As a writer, he was a pioneer in the field of Chinese fairy tale writings. His works of fairy tale are the gem treasured in the classic juvenile and children's literature in contemporary China. They are an accurate reflection on the pulse of his time, as well as the people's life, dream and pursuit of that time. They have been of real significance and educational value hitherto.

The story took place at night in the fields, the possession of an old woman whose husband and son both died. As the protagonist, the scarecrow is a puppet that is made to frighten pests and beasts in the fields by the mistress. With a strong sense of responsibility, he stood straight and went all out to fan away the moth for fear that the harvest of his old and poverty-stricken mistress would come to nothing. When the old woman came to the field, the scarecrow failed to help her to get rid of the disaster of the moth's eggs. At that time, a fisherwoman was casting her net into the river. Her child coughed now and then. The scarecrow worried over the next-day gruel of the fisherwoman and the thirst of her sick son. And then, he came in sight of another woman's drowning. The scarecrow's efforts were all of no avail. Eventually, immersing himself in the atmosphere of sadness, the scarecrow fell flat on his face in the devastated field.

3. A Comparative Study of the Two Fairy Tales

The reason why the two fairy tales are chosen for the present research due to the various similarities and differences existing in both of the works, but most important of all, the Chinese author Ye Shengtao was apparently influenced by his western counterpart, Oscar Wilde, among others together with his *The Happy Prince*. As Ye once said, "I wrote fairy tales, which had certainly received the western influence. Around the May Fourth Movement, the fairy tales by Grimm, Andersen and Wilde were introduced to China in succession. As an elementary school teacher then, I would, of course, pay attention to this form of literature suitable for children's reading, and thus I had the idea of attempting it by myself." (Ye, 1980) It is obvious the two fairy tales have many similarities and differences in historical backgrounds, characters, plots and themes as follows due to the influence relations and various historical and cultural reasons.

3.1. Comparison in Historical Backgrounds

As a matter of fact, the scenes in both of the fairy tales are the very epitome of society at that times respectively. There is certainly a great difference between their respective historical background. To be concrete, in the Victorian Age, the Industrial Revolution was finished, natural science tore people's old thoughts of the world, and religious beliefs were challenged. With the abundance of social products, the fervour of the pursuit of wealth and materials could be seen distinctly. People tended to move to the developed cities rather than stay in the rural areas so that urbanization became a social issue. However, at that time, the gap between the rich and the poor was in a dramatic contrast.

Culturally, the Aesthetic Movement swept over in English literature and art in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Oscar Wilde is the most popular spokesman due to his lifestyle and humorous wit and *The Happy Prince* demonstrates the core concepts of aestheticism by the mention of the opinion on the happy prince's beauty at the very opening of the tale (Yang, 2014).

The Scarecrow depicts the panorama of the rural life around the May Fourth Movement. Modern industries just arose, hence, the labor force was unfairly treated and the rural people did their utmost to struggle out of coldness and starvation. Li (2017) With the deepening influence of western science and liberal minds, some prophetic young people and those who knew the trend of that time strove to study overseas so as to learn the western culture and view the world, with the ideal of saving the nation from subjugation and seeking powerful national strength.

In the 1920s, Chinese literature entered a new stage, although the new literature had not matured. At the same time, the vernacular literary works were numerous written, which provided the support of the rising of Chinese fairy tales. Li (2017) Especially, those youths, who paid more attention to the national rejuvenation and socially dynamic states, could not help caring about the suffering of the common people and actively participating in the "For the People" Literature Research Society where a great number of realistic literary works were created, revealing and criticizing social realities. It is surprisingly obvious that *The Scarecrow* describes three miserable scenes that the ears of rice of the mistress were eaten up, that the fisherwoman and the silver carp were dogged by terrible misfortunes, and that the woman was sold out of cruelty. A sharp comparison was made between the dark society and the brightness of the scarecrow, which illuminates the grave concern for the hard condition of the poor people (Li, 2017).

3.2. Comparison in Characters

The sameness in the main characters is kindness and sacrifice. The happy prince would not hesitate to spend his wealth in helping people out. Therefore, he commanded the swallow to bring the ruby out of the sword-hilt to the seamstress; to pluck out sapphires and to take them to the young writer and that match-girl even though they were once served as his eyes; to pick the fine golden leaves off to send out to the poor and the children. To sum up, each time the happy prince exerted himself to offer assistance for those people in distress, no matter how dull and gray he would be. The first time when the swallow entered the scene of *The Happy Prince*, the impression he left was steadfast love. And this kind of love continues spreading till the two protagonists' death in the same place. As the messenger, the swallow maintains his quality of mercy. It can be concluded from these scenes: he showed sympathy for those people in need and agreed on taking precious stones to them with good grace.

Similarly, in *The Scarecrow*, the scarecrow is also compassionate and obliging like the happy prince. The scarecrow felt happy that a promising harvest had been in store when it started, while he expressed sympathy for the sorrow-stricken mistress. He also expected to frighten the moth away, warn the old woman to clear away the moth's eggs, make tea and give warmth to the sick child. And he sought to save the carp from the pail, and hinder the drowning of the forsaken woman. How eager he was to have done what he wished. Faithfulness, kindness and beauty in characters are the common characteristics of protagonists in both of the Chinese and western fairy tales.

Each character has his own good points, sure enough. From the very beginning, the author indicates the happy prince must certainly be the happy one in the tone of others. One is a sensible mother, who said to her son: "Why can not you be like the happy prince? The happy prince never dreams of crying for anything." By comforting her son, the other woman hoaxed him into poppet; still another is a disappointed man who murmured: "I am glad there is some one in the world who is quite happy." Wilde (2018) Besides, the little prince lived where sorrow was not allowed to enter when he had a human heart.

The unyielding scarecrow was reluctant to give up to his efforts to lend others his hands. The only thing the scarecrow could do seems to wave the fan. He moved his fan to drive away the moth with all his might. However, all his fanning came to nothing. The scarecrow's soft heart was touched by the silver carp's earnest entreaty. But he had nothing to do except shaking his head. The sense of helplessness nearly broke his heart. Moreover, the scarecrow lost his consciousness as the woman fell into the water. Even though he fell down in the demolished fields, he never failed to have a heart of gold. Children have a keen need for the brightness in characters for their edification. The creation of these literary works are hoped to bring children around the world plenty of enlightenment.

3.3. Comparison in Plots

A similarity of the two fairy tales is the constant shift from the real world to the imaginative world and from the latter to the former. Concretely speaking, the statue of the happy prince, the swallow, and the reed are personalized. In the conversation between the happy prince and the swallow, the incidents that happened actually are mentioned. Some examples are as follows. In an impoverished house far away from the happy prince lived a seamstress and her son who had a fever; the old Jews bargained with each other and weighed out money in copper scales in the Ghetto; the little match-girl let her matches fall in the gutter and her father was likely to beat her. These miserable but actual happenings were inserted into the direct speech made by the main characters.

Likewise, the scarecrow was the embodiment of the personification. So was the silver carp. There are some soliloquy of the scarecrow and the interactive talk between him and the fish. By the vividness of various lives, the fairy tales appear to appeal to more and more children. The reality contained triggers the thought of children on things around them. There is no telling of the fact that the children's perceptive and constructive organs can work well. In truth, Children are more pleased with and even adjust themselves better to the shift between the real and virtual world.

Another similarity lies in the mode of narration in the body part. Their body parts are made of a series of short and similar stories. Repetition is frequently applied in the narration of *The Happy Prince*. These repetitive sentences as marked words draw a clear line of demarcation for each part. To name but a few, "Swallow, swallow, little swallow, will you not stay with me for one night (longer)?" "Swallow, swallow, little swallow, do as I command you." (Wilde, 2018) What is more, the stories in *The Happy Prince* are equipped with the similar pattern: the swallow's farewell; the narration on an unfortunate experience of his people by the happy prince; the polite refusal of the swallow; the happy prince's asking for the swallow's company; being in agreement on staying one more day; the relief process by the swallow.

It is stated in *The Scarecrow*: "here are some things the scarecrow saw at night." *The Scarecrow* bears an uncanny resemblance to *The Happy Prince*, since those things are also narrated in similar logic: the unhappy experience; the scarecrow's helplessness; the sorrowful end. There are some repetitions in *The Scarecrow* as well: "But like a tree rooted to the ground, he was unable to move a step." (The following similar narration reads: "But I am rooted to the ground like a tree to move a step." and "He hated himself for being rooted to the ground like a tree, unable to move a step.") (Ye, 1961) The plainness and simpleness in language represents one of the defining features from such other literary genres as essay, poem, drama. Through the similar story-telling patterns and repetition of key sentences and paragraphs, the children are more liable to expose themselves to the pleasure of reading fairy tales.

One difference can be found in the place in which the stories happened. At the very beginning of *The Scarecrow*, the setting is distinctly pointed out to be the fields in the countryside. In *The Happy Prince*, the story unfolds in the city as is seen from the first sentence: "High above in the city, on a tall column, stood the statue of the happy prince." (Ye, 1961) The difference emerges from the different historical background. As is shown in the first comparison, British modernization spread rapidly. The story setting is likely to be the city though with quite many poor people in distress. However, nearly all the common people in China lived in the countryside in the 1920s.

Different endings show the different religious beliefs in two cultural backgrounds. As we have mentioned above, all the main characters in both two fairy tales, the happy prince, the swallow, and the scarecrow, did not escape from death. The happy prince would be melted in the furnace. The swallow, not having the heart to leave the happy prince, delayed the deadline to go to Egypt and died lying by the feet of the happy prince. Nonetheless, the happy prince and the swallow went to heaven with God's blessing. They just died in the real world, but lived in the paradise, a more ideal and happier world. Oscar Wilde defuses the tragic color of the ending in an detached manner, burning a glimmer of hope to the happiness of the secular world. It embodies the western Christian culture. The Christianity that God remains the greatest authority prevails in the western world, especially in the UK where Oscar Wilde lived. And this religious belief has been deeply rooted in the minds of British citizens.

For the denouement of *The Scarecrow*, the scarecrow with a broken heart hated himself for doing nothing. Full of remorse, the scarecrow fell flat on his face in the devastated field. No one could lend him a hand, even any religious beliefs, for they could not be so many people's salvation in China around the May Fourth Movement. In fact, the Chinese people have never relied much on religion since ancient times, under the influence of a tremendous Confucian ideological system. That is not to say, there was no religion in the history of China. Religion was established to rule the mass with more authority. The common people had no freedom in the choice of religious belief. Therefore, China had become a pantheist country through the rule of a few ethnic groups by the second decade in the twentieth century. Christianity did not serve as the mainstream religious belief in the 1920s.

3.4. Comparison in Themes

Both of the fairy tales, regarded as realistic pieces, reflect the social phenomena to a large extent. The purpose of writing them seems to tell children or even more youths what the world they had been in looked like. With different historical and writing backgrounds, the themes of the two fairy tales differ noticeably.

From the perspective of Ye Shengtao, children attempt to perceive the world naturally and form their view of point on anything. In the preface of the English edition of *The Scarecrow*, it reads: "My intention was to call upon children to take an interest in real life and be attentive to things around them." (Ye, 1961) By reading *The Scarecrow*, the children were expected to know the Chinese people were living in a dark world, and were driven to summon up enough courage to pursue the light and show the sheer determination to fight against the darkness.

The Scarecrow was finished quite late in the creation of the collection. Readers are not liable to seek hope, for disappointment or even desperation lies in the work. The end of the story was permeated with a layer of sadness, melancholy and depression. *The Scarecrow* reveals the cruelty of reality, and what the life in the rural areas was like in the 1920s of China. The peasants, especially the women, bore the intolerable burden. The story is filled with the severe accusation against the dark side of that society. In the three sub-stories, the mistress, the fisherwoman, the "stealthy" woman are all female characters. The mistress seldom smiled in that she once worked hard to pay off the money borrowed for both her husband and her son's burial one after another. For this year, she would earn nothing for the sake of moth. As for the fisherwoman, she could not stay with her child even though he fell ill on such a cold night and had a great desire for tea. What is more, she also was concerned about a bowl of gruel for the next day. There was another woman in a short loose jacket, and with dishevelled hair complaining about her man's cruel treatment by the river bank. It seemed that there would be no other way for her but death. Could anything in the world be more pathetic? (Ye, 1961), No, definitely not. However, these cases are the realistic portrayal of the suffering rural women. The personal feeling of the writer, and his sympathy for the low class are more likely to resonate with the children, who are regarded as the most compassionate.

Differing from the theme of *The Scarecrow*, the recurring theme in *The Happy Prince* are hedonism and Christianity. The criticism on hedonism is one theme of *The Happy Prince*. Hedonism argues that seeking pleasure and avoiding suffering are the only components of well-being. Some minor characters uncover the weak points of human beings. The town councillor serves as a typical sample. He is hypocritical and self-contained. He deliberately praised the happy prince for his beauty as a weathercock in the hope of gaining a reputation for having artistic tastes. Even fearing lest people think him unpractical, he added the happy prince was not quite so useful. After melting the statue of the happy prince, each councillor had the courage to quarrel with the mayor on whom the statue should be molded by the look of. On the administrative cases as usual, they never expressed negative opinions against the mayor. In addition, selfishness is illustrated through the minor characters. The palace girl who waited for the seamstress to finish her dress for the ball show was a girl who thought of the world in terms of utility, and she seemed too much impatient. The professor of Ornithology who pompously wrote what was only accessible to a few. All the people devoted their lives to the private enjoyment. An isolated, carefree, pleasure-seeking life was incited to pursue. Griswold (1974) Oscar Wilde used *The Happy Prince* as the "mask" to reveal the real social evils: hypocrisy, selfishness, or utilitarianism.

On the other hand, Christianity manifested itself in the writing of *The Happy Prince*. When he became a statue, the happy prince gradually recognized all the pain and sorrow that existed in the city below him, and he strengthened his sense of Christianity, and became a child of light. His heart overflowed with love and pity and he sacrificed his aesthetic glory, bright sapphires, a large red ruby, thin leaves of fine gold, to help others. In this, he was aided by a swallow who underwent a similar pattern of development. Finally, he stripped himself of all his beauty, and his leaden heart cracked when the swallow's corpse lay at the statue's feet, but both were ready now to enter Heaven. (Nassar and Christopher, 2010) Christianity has had a significant impact on western literature.

4. Conclusion

Fairy tales are composed of fictional but seemingly realistic characters and take place in an imaginary but almost actual world. There are no more better resources than fairy tales to expose children to the intricate future world and the profound minds. Any research that can advance the understanding of fairy tales should be encouraged to do.

The nineteenth century was the golden time of social assets in the capitalist world. Quick economic accumulation pushed Britain to its prime of life in capitalist civilization. Enormous production and consumption brought hedonism, materialism into being. Aestheticism at that time was illustrated in Oscar Wilde's fairy tales. Oscar Wilde accomplished great success in conducting one of his works *The Happy Prince*.

As far as China around 1920 is concerned, economic and comprehensive strength had been improving in general. Learning from western culture, Chinese youths started creating fairy tales with Chinese characteristics:

special setting, ending with no religious color. *The Scarecrow* emerged as the time required. Therefore, *The Scarecrow* bears much resemblances and differences with *The Happy Prince* in other three aspects: plot, character, theme.

On characters, the happy prince and the scarecrow resemble each other. Moral integrity, sympathy, sacrifice characterize the two protagonists. They make it point to help others out. However, the happy prince as a statue can not move away, and the scarecrow has no ability to move a step as well due to being rooted to the ground. Certainly, they distinguish each other. The happy prince remains happy all the time when alive, while the scarecrow is full of remorse as a result of his incapability to do something helpful.

On plots, the viewpoint of telling the two fairy tales changed many times between the real world and the virtual world, which fits the children's powerful imagination. And the repetitive narration of similar stories enlarges on in both. It shows the fundamental principle of the fairy tales, plainness and readability. When giving an account of detailed storyline, the two fairy tales bear differences in setting and ending, caused by different historical backgrounds and religious beliefs.

On themes, the two fairy tales have something to do with realism. There are two main functions in the case of realism. The most prominent one is wearing the cloak of fairy tale to describe reality. In *The Happy Prince*, such examples as canny Jews, professor of Ornithology, the councillor, exemplify the ugliness of humanity. In *The Scarecrow*, the paddy toiled by the old unaccompanied woman was eaten up by the moth. The single woman and her son suffered the thirst and illness. The poor woman that could be sold at will had no choice but to end her life by plunging into the river. For the purpose of shaping the children's perception of the world, the fairy tales were created. Christianity provides the support for the difference. Therefore, the happy prince is endowed with mercy. He, as a twice-born prince, died again to save those in need by the gift of jewels and gold. Griswold (1974) Opposite to the western culture, China did not have the mainstream culture of Christianity in the past.

From the above analysis, it is obvious that Chinese and western fairy tales do resemble and differ a lot in many aspects. Through the detailed description and summary of these similarities and differences between *The Happy Prince* and *The Scarecrow*, the essay exerts itself to have a further understanding of the two iconic fairy tales, making its contribution to the comparative study of Chinese and western fairy tales. The innate nature of the fairy tales determines that children have a special fantasy for the spice of these children's books. And the two masterpieces with their own ethnic taste are well recommended.

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