



Constructing Gender: Power, Identity, and Language in Chinese Folktales

Dr. Sandeep Biswas

Assistant Professor

DFEL (Chinese)

Central University of Jharkhand

Abstract: *Oral narratives predate the emergence of formal writing systems and serve as foundational repositories of cultural knowledge and cosmological understanding. Chinese folktales, as a vital component of this tradition, encapsulate social values, moral frameworks, and role expectations embedded within Chinese society. While these narratives function as instruments of moral education and cultural transmission, they also reflect and perpetuate entrenched social biases, particularly gender discrimination. This study examines the representation of men and women in selected Chinese folktales, focusing on how gender roles are constructed, reinforced, and normalized through narrative structures and linguistic choices. It explores whether these tales sustain traditional family ideologies and hierarchical social arrangements by shaping perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Drawing upon gender theory and traditional Chinese socio-cultural perspectives, the paper analyzes how such narratives contribute to the formation of social identity and the internalization of gender norms. Through close readings of popular folktales, the study highlights the enduring impact of folklore in reproducing gendered worldviews and underscores the need for critical engagement with these cultural texts.*

Key words: *folktales, gender, Chinese, Confucianism, dyads.*

1. Introduction:

But for Adam no helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man." (Genesis 2:8, p-6)

Chinese folktales possess significant cultural, social, and educational importance, constituting an integral part of traditional Chinese culture. First and foremost, folktales serve as a vital vehicle for cultural transmission. Passed down through oral tradition, they preserve historical memories, customs, and collective national experiences, thereby fostering cultural continuity and a sense of identity across different generations. It fulfills a crucial function in moral education. Many stories are deeply influenced by Confucian thought, emphasizing values such as filial piety, loyalty, justice, and harmony; through the unfolding of plots and the fates of their characters, they evaluate the nature of good and evil, thereby guiding and shaping human conduct. Chinese folktales both reflect and reinforce social structures and value systems. For instance, they frequently depict familial ethical relationships (such as those between father and son, or husband and wife) as well as social hierarchical orders, subtly shaping people's perceptions of social roles and responsibilities. Finally, from a literary and artistic perspective, folktales possess immense aesthetic value. Their vivid narrative styles, rich imagination, and symbolic depth have not only influenced various art forms—such as literature and traditional opera—but continue to be reinterpreted and disseminated within contemporary culture.

Across a wide range of cultural mythologies, women are frequently depicted as embodiments of evil, moral corruption, duplicity, and cunning. Such representations, which undermine and devalue the image of women, can be understood as products of patriarchal ideology. Historically, men—who occupied positions of social and intellectual authority—have functioned as primary producers of knowledge, belief systems, and mythic narratives. Within this discursive framework, women are often constructed as inferior, enigmatic, and unpredictable, possessing a dual capacity for both attraction and threat.

This ambivalent portrayal reflects a deeper epistemological and psychological dynamic rooted in the fear of alterity. Faced with what is perceived as unknown or fundamentally different, male-centered perspectives have projected anxiety onto the figure of the woman. Consequently, myth-making becomes a mechanism through which such anxieties are articulated and managed, often by denigrating women and representing them as the origin or embodiment of disorder and evil (Sun 2010).

2. Traditional Discourses of Women's Subjugation

Prior to the consolidation of patriarchal social structures, early Chinese society is often characterized as exhibiting matriarchal or matrilineal features. Within this framework, women are understood to have occupied a comparatively more autonomous and equitable social position, participating in communal life without the rigid, gender-specific constraints that later emerged under patriarchal systems. Lin Yutang asserts that:

...Woman, who is always powerful in China, was powerful then. The Queen of Wei made the King summon the handsomest man in the country to her boudoir. Divorce was still easy and divorcees could remarry. The cult of feminine chastity had not yet become an obsession with men. (2000: 136)

The eminent ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius, who lived during the Spring and Autumn Period (春秋时代: *chūnqiū shidài*, 771–476 BCE), exerted a profound and enduring influence on Chinese society and intellectual traditions. Although he did not author texts himself, his teachings and dialogues with disciples were later compiled in the *Analects* (《论语》: *Lúnyǔ*). This work centers on moral self-cultivation, with particular emphasis on the foundational concept of *rén* (仁), commonly translated as “benevolence” or “humaneness.” Nevertheless, certain passages within the text reveal attitudes that have been subject to critical scrutiny. In Chapter XVII, Confucius is recorded as stating:

子曰：“唯女子与小人为难养也，近之则不孙，远之则怨。”(Yang 2017: 271)

(*Zǐ yuē*: “*Wéi nǚzǐ yǔ xiǎorén wéinán yǎng yě, jìn zhī zé bù sūn, yuǎn zhī zé yuàn*)

Confucius said: “Only women and a vile person are difficult to get along with. When they are close, they will be rude; and when alienated, they will resent.” (My transl.)

As noted by Xiongya Gao (2003), three key inferences may be drawn from this remark. First, women are explicitly compared with ‘petty persons’ or ‘vile persons’, thereby associating them with moral inferiority and reinforcing a hierarchical distinction. Second, the statement implies a perceived deficiency in women’s capacity for effective communication and mutual understanding. Third, given that this is the sole direct reference to women in the *Analects*, it may be interpreted as indicative of a broader tendency within Confucian discourse to marginalize women—suggesting that they are to be overlooked, excluded from serious consideration, or rendered silent within the philosophical tradition.

Confucian dualistic social philosophy is most clearly manifested in a gendered division of labor that assigns men to responsibilities in the public sphere while relegating women to the domestic domain (男主外，女主内: *nán zhǔ wài, nǚ zhǔ nèi*). Within this framework, a range of prescribed feminine virtues was actively cultivated, including obedience, modesty, quietness, proficiency in domestic tasks

such as cooking and spinning, personal neatness, courtesy toward a husband's associates, respect for his parents, and kindness toward his kin. These expectations functioned not merely as social norms but as integral components of a broader moral and ideological system.

Given women's confinement to the household, unwavering loyalty to their husbands was both expected and highly valorized. Chastity, in particular, became a primary yardstick for evaluating women's moral character and social standing. This emphasis extended to extreme forms of moral idealization, whereby the preservation of chastity and purity after a husband's death—even to the point of self-sacrifice—was revered as a mark of honor and virtue. Such practices were upheld and glorified within Confucian moral discourse (Gao 2003; Ng 1987; Ping 2000).

One of the central tenets of Confucius's teachings is the concept of *xiào* (孝), or filial piety, which emphasizes devotion and duty toward one's family lineage. This principle was further elaborated by the philosopher Mencius, who famously stated: “不孝有三，无后为大” (*bùxiào yǒu sān, wú hòu wéi dà*), commonly translated as “there are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the gravest is the failure to produce offspring” (Lee 2015). Within the context of traditional Chinese cultural values, “offspring” was implicitly understood to mean a male heir, reflecting the patrilineal structure of society. This gendered interpretation of filial piety contributed to the institutionalization of discriminatory practices against women, reinforcing their subordinate position within both the family and the broader social order.

3. Identity and Power Allocation in Chinese Folktales

Chinese society preserves a rich corpus of traditional stories and legends that have been transmitted across generations. These sacred narratives articulate cultural perceptions of the origins of the world and the development of human society. Regarded as “sacred” due to the active presence of deities and supernatural beings, such tales depict divine intervention in human affairs and shape collective understandings of the cosmos. This conceptualization is embedded within the Chinese language itself: the term 神话 (*shénhuà*), meaning “myth,” is composed of 神 (*shén*), signifying the divine or holy, and 话 (*huà*), denoting speech, tale, or narrative. Thus, the notion of myth emerges as a “divine narrative.” The following stories should be approached with an awareness of gendered representation, particularly recognizing that portrayals of women in folklore are often constructed from a predominantly male perspective. Anne Birrell elucidated this phenomenon in the following way:

It is in the evolution of the mythological tradition, with the changing social attitudes to male and female roles in the family and in public life, that the female role begins to be displaced by the male. This trend is seen in the latter part of the classical era when

myths of female figures are minimally or obscurely narrated, and when the potency of female deities is diminished in various ways by male scribes who recorded and altered the myths. By the medieval period of around AD 1100, when classical texts were being codified and printed, the history of women was being rewritten by a male academic and literary hierarchy who shaped and altered the presentation of ancient myths according to new ideological belief-system. (2010: 50)

Mythical Chinese narratives concerning the creation of the world, the origin of humankind, deliverance from catastrophic events, and the emergence of festivals and ritual practices are richly elaborated within the broader mythological tradition. A significant number of these folktales, however, are imbued with elements of gender bias, which has often contributed to their marginalization despite their accessibility. In light of this, the present study foregrounds a selection of such overlooked narratives, with the aim of examining how they illuminate the position of women in Chinese society. By engaging with these tales from multiple perspectives, it seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of gendered representation within the cultural and narrative framework.

The Legend of the Fox” (狐狸传说: *húli chuánshuō*) presents a prominent supernatural motif within Chinese folklore, centered on a female fox spirit. This figure is typically depicted as exceptionally beautiful and highly seductive, often targeting young men who are neophytes in matters of love and sexuality. Through such encounters, the fox woman is believed to drain the vital essence of her victims, resulting in their gradual physical decline—manifested in increasing frailty and emaciation—and, ultimately, death or transformation into a ghostly state. Over time, this archetype has given rise to the broader cultural association of the *fox spirit* (狐狸精: *húlijīng*) with female seductiveness and moral ambiguity, frequently employed as a metaphor for women perceived as dangerously alluring.

In many of the Chinese classic folktales, female and male characters are often projected in conventional fixed social identities. For example Zhu Yingtai (祝英台) from the ‘Butterfly Lovers’ (梁山伯与祝英台: *Liángshān bó yǔ zhù yīng tái*), even though an intelligent and brave woman, but was still confined to by marriage system that she couldn’t escape the tragic fate. Similar kind of stories are as follows:

The tale of the “Snail Girl” (田螺姑娘: *Tiánluó gūniáng*), also known as *The Dinner That Cooked Itself*, recounts the story of an orphaned and humble young man, Xie Duan (谢端), who is assisted by a fairy that secretly prepares meals for him while he is away at work. In one version of the narrative, during the search for a suitable bride, a go-between evaluates a prospective match on the basis of the symbolic meanings embedded in Chinese characters. The young woman’s name contains the element

“wood,” while Xie Duan’s name contains “earth.” Drawing upon the cosmological principle that “wood overcomes earth,” the matchmaker concludes that such a union would invert the expected domestic hierarchy, rendering Xie Duan subordinate within his own household (Birch 1961: 38). This reasoning reflects the deeply ingrained ideological assumption of male authority within the family structure. Consequently, the proposed match is rejected on the grounds of perceived symbolic incompatibility, underscoring how gendered hierarchies are reinforced through cultural beliefs and linguistic interpretations.

Furthermore, the narrative reveals a broader tension within Chinese cultural symbolism. While domestic labor—particularly cooking—has traditionally been associated with women, the figure of the *Kitchen God* (灶君: *zàojūn*), a widely venerated household deity, is male. This apparent contradiction highlights the complex interplay between gender roles and spiritual authority, wherein feminine-coded labor coexists with masculine divine representation, thereby reinforcing the subordinate positioning of women within both domestic and mythological frameworks.

The folktale *The Inn of Donkeys* (毛驴客栈: *Máolú kèzhàn*) recounts the story of the Third Lady (三娘: *sān niáng*), who deceives traveling merchants and transforms them into donkeys through magical means. The narrative centers on a merchant named Zhao (赵), who successfully evades her trap and ultimately subdues her by turning her own magic against her, resulting in her transformation into a donkey. Notably, the tale reinforces a conventional gendered dichotomy, portraying the female figure as a deceptive antagonist while casting the male merchant as the moral and heroic agent.

In the resolution of the story, Zhao, persuaded by an elderly man, relents and restores the Third Lady to her human form, suggesting an element of moral clemency aligned with Confucian ideals. Of particular interest is Cyril Birch’s retelling, which highlights Zhao’s astonishment that the woman had not been previously married. He conjectures that “[p]erhaps she’s one of these loyal widows who refuse to remarry” (Birch 1961: 90). This observation reflects the deeply entrenched cultural expectation of female chastity, even in widowhood, within traditional Chinese society. As noted by Ng (1987), widow remarriage was strongly opposed by Neo-Confucian moralists, further reinforcing the moral imperative of lifelong fidelity and the restrictive social positioning of women within the prevailing ideological framework.

Ching Hsing-shao’s story “*Social Connections*” (as translated by Roberts, 1979) offers a compelling exploration of the concept of *guanxi* (关系: *guānxì*), understood as the network of social relationships often cultivated for instrumental or ulterior purposes. The narrative recounts the encounter between a prosperous farmer and a scholar, both bearing the surname Fei. When the scholar Fei is stranded during a rainstorm, the farmer Fei extends generous hospitality, providing him with fine food, delicacies, and wine. Upon discovering the scholar’s esteemed background and influential connections,

the farmer seeks to cultivate a meaningful relationship, repeatedly offering gifts from his agricultural produce. However, the scholar fails to reciprocate this generosity. Instead, he devises a calculated scheme to feign benevolence by falsely implicating the farmer in a robbery. As a result, the farmer is imprisoned, and his son—desperate for assistance—turns to the scholar Fei. Exploiting this plea under the guise of aid, the scholar orchestrates the transfer of the farmer's land and property into his own possession.

Upon his release, the farmer discovers his financial ruin and, consumed by rage, attempts to confront the scholar, only to find him absent. Unable to direct his anger toward the true source of his misfortune, he displaces it onto his daughter-in-law, who had facilitated the initial introduction between the two men. Unable to endure this misplaced blame, she takes her own life. The ensuing tragedy escalates: the farmer's son, stricken by his wife's death, also commits suicide, followed by the farmer himself, leaving the family without heirs or property. While the story illustrates the destructive consequences of betrayal, manipulation, and instrumentalized social ties, it also exposes a gendered pattern of blame: the farmer directs his resentment toward a female relative, reflecting underlying patriarchal assumptions within the social psyche. One might further speculate that the narrative's trajectory would have differed had a male family member, rather than the daughter-in-law, facilitated the introduction. Thus, the story not only critiques opportunistic *guanxi* but also illuminates the intersection of social opportunism and gendered attribution of culpability.

Chinese folktales often reflect historical injustices toward women, portraying their lives as expendable within patriarchal structures. In several narratives, supernatural monsters threatening human communities are appeased through the sacrifice of young girls, illustrating the social normalization of female subjugation. One such story is *Li Chi Slays the Serpent*. In this tale, a monstrous serpent is placated annually with the offering of a young girl. Li Chi, the youngest of six daughters in Li Tan's family, volunteers herself in exchange for monetary compensation to her parents. Initially reluctant to let her go, her parents are persuaded by Li Chi's reasoning: "Dear parents, you have no one to depend on, for having brought forth six daughters and not a single son, it is as if you were childless" (Roberts 1979: 129). She departs secretly to confront the serpent and, when it emerges to devour her, bravely kills it with a sword. The king, upon learning of her heroism, elevates Li Chi to the position of queen. Despite her courage, Li Chi is compelled to frame her life as "worthless" to justify her own agency, highlighting the social devaluation of daughters. Notably, her assertion that her parents are childless because they have no sons underscores the entrenched patriarchal valuation of male offspring.

A similar dynamic is evident in the story *The Black General*. The protagonist, Kuo Yüan-chen, encounters a girl dressed in bridal attire, abandoned in a desolate house. He learns that she has been forced to marry the Black General, a demonic figure capable of bringing either fortune or misfortune to men, and chosen by villagers to receive a virgin bride. Determined to save her, Kuo engages in a fierce

battle and ultimately slays the Black General, revealed to be a black swine. Although he refuses any material reward from the villagers, Kuo takes the girl as his concubine, and she later bears him several sons. The story foregrounds a striking tension: while the girl's life is saved through the hero's actions, her agency is subsumed under the hero's discretion, and her ultimate social status—as concubine rather than formal wife—reflects the unequal power dynamics and sanctioned freedoms of male protagonists. Both tales reveal how folktales valorize heroism while simultaneously legitimizing the systemic marginalization and commodification of women.

Numerous folktales explore the phenomenon of rain, among which *The Rainmakers* (雨师李靖: *Yǔshī Lǐjìng*) is particularly notable. The narrative recounts how Li Jing, who later became the Duke of Wei (魏) during the Warring States period, once brought rain to his village. According to the legend, Li Jing lost his way in a dark, desolate forest and encountered a mansion, later revealed to be a dragon palace. The mistress of the palace entrusted him with the task of bringing rain to the mortal world in gratitude for the hospitality he received. He was provided with a piebald horse and a small rain-jar, which could produce rain whenever a drop was shaken onto the horse's mane. Out of generosity, Li Jing shook twenty drops upon reaching his village at night, only to realize later that each drop caused one foot of rainfall, resulting in a devastating flood. Despite the unintended consequences, Li Jing was rewarded for his service. Two slave-girls were presented to him—one entering through the east wall and the other through the west—and he was invited to choose one. Li Jing selected the girl from the west doorway, as it was said, “Ministers of state come from east of the mountains, generals come from the west” (Birch 1961: 110). Through this choice, he eventually amassed wealth and attained the dukedom.

While the story celebrates Li Jing's heroism and supernatural encounter, it simultaneously raises critical questions about the gendered and social dimensions embedded in the narrative. Why was his reward presented in the form of slave-girls? Even if a girl was intended as a wife, why did she have to be a slave? Does the offering of female captives reflect a deep-seated cultural notion of women as property within the Chinese mindset? Furthermore, how were heroes who possessed multiple slave-girls perceived by society? Although the folktale provides no explicit answers, it nonetheless offers insight into the subordinate status of women and the gendered hierarchies prevalent in ancient Chinese society.

One of the most renowned Chinese folktales is the romantic narrative *The Butterfly Lovers* (梁山伯与祝英台: *Liángshānbó yǔ Zhùyīngtái*). This legend vividly reflects the gendered constraints of traditional Chinese society, particularly the systematic denial of formal education to women. Within such a sociocultural framework, women were conditioned from an early age to perceive and interpret the world through male-centered perspectives. The female protagonist, Zhu Yingtai (祝英台), is

compelled to disguise herself as a man in order to gain access to formal schooling, thereby highlighting both the rigidity of gender norms and the exclusionary nature of educational institutions.

In traditional China, female education was widely regarded as unnecessary, a notion encapsulated in the popular saying ‘marrying well is more important than studying well’ (学得好不如嫁得好: *xué dé hǎo bùrú jià dé hǎo*). The primary concern for families was to secure advantageous marriages for their daughters rather than to invest in their intellectual development. This ideology was further legitimized by Confucian scholars through the often cited dictum ‘women without talent are virtuous’ (女子无才便是德: *nǚzǐ wú cái biàn shì dé*) (Gao 2003; Ropp 1976), which framed the absence of education as a moral ideal. Consequently, in most ordinary families, daughters were excluded from educational opportunities altogether.

Even in relatively privileged households, such as those of scholarly-official families, girls’ access to learning was limited and highly instrumentalized. They might receive informal instruction at home, often regarded as an indulgent or even ‘wasting’ money (Leung 2003). However, this education was not intended to cultivate intellectual autonomy; rather, its primary purpose was to instill proper decorum and reinforce normative ideals of femininity (Holmgren 1981). In this sense, basic literacy and cultural training functioned as tools to prepare women for their roles as compliant and accomplished brides, thereby reproducing existing gender hierarchies.

4. The power of words and implied gender bias

In the language of the aforementioned narratives, lexical choice and modes of expression reveal an underlying tendency toward gender bias. In Chinese folktales, words function not merely as instruments of narration but also as implicit carriers of gendered ideologies. Through their selection and deployment, these narratives frequently reinforce conventional gender stereotypes, thereby contributing to the formation and perpetuation of gender hierarchies.

The role of linguistic expression in this process is both subtle and systematic. Specific patterns of word choice, characterization, and descriptive framing encode culturally embedded assumptions about masculinity and femininity. As a result, language becomes a mechanism through which gender norms are naturalized and reproduced. The following discussion examines how lexical usage in these narratives operates across different dimensions to consolidate and sustain gender discrimination.

Chinese exhibits a distinctive tendency toward organizing meaning through oppositional and collocational dyads, in which paired elements reflect a semantic contrast. In many such pairs, the first component can be characterized as semantically ‘positive’ (or unmarked), while the second is ‘negative’ (or marked). Typical examples include high-low (高低: *gāodī*), far-near (远近: *yuǎnjìn*), right-wrong

(是非: *shìfēi*), long-short (长短: *chángduǎn*), big-small (大小: *dàxiǎo*), front-back (前后: *qiánhòu*), up-down (上下: *shàngxià*), wide-narrow (宽窄: *kuānzhǎi*), love-hate (爱恨: *àihèn*) etc. If similar ordering patterns are widely attested across languages, this may suggest that they reflect fundamental structures of human cognition rather than language-specific conventions.

Notably, the first member of these dyads often functions as the generic or primary category term. For instance, the question “How high is this mountain?” (这座山有多高?: *zhè zuò shān yǒu duō gāo*) serves as a neutral inquiry about the mountain’s height, without presupposing any particular attribute. By contrast, “How low is this mountain?” (这座山有多低?: *zhè tiáo lù yǒu duō dī*) carries an implicit assumption that the mountain is relatively low. This asymmetry illustrates how the unmarked term in such pairs operates as a default frame of reference, while the marked term introduces a more specific or evaluative stance.

This positive–negative ordering principle is further evident in the affirmative–negative interrogative constructions characteristic of Chinese, such as ‘good or bad’ (好不好: *hǎobùhǎo*) ‘whether/ have or not’ (有没有: *yǒuméiyǒu*), ‘yes or no’ (是不是: *shìbúshì*), ‘big or not’ (大不大: *dàbùdà*) etc. These patterns consistently place the affirmative or unmarked element before its negative counterpart. Taken together, such examples support the view that, in human cognitive categorization, there is a natural tendency to prioritize the positive, default, or unmarked term over the negative or modified alternative.

Sexism within Chinese culture and social consciousness is reflected in the consistent asymmetry of gendered dyads. Common pairings—such as men and women (男女: *nánnǚ*), brothers and sisters (兄弟姐妹: *xiōngdì jiěmèi*), husband and wife (夫妻: *fūqī*), sons and daughters (子女: *zǐnǚ*), fathers and mothers (父母: *fùmǔ*), and uncles and aunts (叔叔阿姨: *shūshū āyí*)—regularly position the male figure before the female, indicating a cultural perception of men as primary or normative and women as secondary. Instances in which this ordering is reversed are rare and largely exceptional, with the classical concept of Yin and Yang (阴阳: *yīnyáng*) being a notable example. Such linguistic and conceptual patterns underscore the deeply ingrained patriarchal structures within Chinese thought and social organization.

In traditional Chinese narratives, male protagonists are consistently foregrounded relative to their female counterparts. For example, in *Legend of the White Snake* (白蛇传: *Báishéchuán*), Xu Xian (许仙: *Xǔxiān*) is invariably named before Bai Suzhen (白素贞: *Báisùzhēn*). Similarly, the romantic fable *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl* (牛郎织女: *Niúláng Zhīnǚ*) prioritizes the male Cowherd (牛郎: *Niúláng*) over the female Weaver Girl (织女: *Zhīnǚ*). In *The Butterfly Lovers* (梁山伯与祝英台: *Lǐángshānbó yǔ Zhù Yīngtái*), the male梁山伯 (Liángshānbó) is named before the female祝英台 (Zhù Yīngtái).

Liángshānbó yǔ Zhùyīngtái), Liang Shanbo (梁山伯: *Liángshānbó*) precedes Zhu Yingtai (祝英台: *Zhùyīngtái*), and in *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦: *Hónglómèng*), the romantic pair Jiao Baoyu (贾宝玉: *Jiǎbǎoyù*) and Lin Daiyu (林黛玉: *Lindàiyù*) similarly reflect this asymmetrical male-female ordering. This recurrent pattern raises important questions regarding the underlying logic of such naming conventions: why are women consistently positioned second, and how does this reflect broader cultural assumptions about gender, authority, and social hierarchy within Chinese literary and historical discourse? David Moser logics it in the following way:

Given that women have been conceptually viewed by most societies as less important, less typical, or even “deviant”, it then becomes “natural” for native speakers to accord them second place in such dyads, on the cognitive model of pairs like up-down, good-bad, etc. This state of affairs goes unnoticed because it is in keeping with a kind of unspoken “common sense” that is absorbed and accepted (by both males and females) very early on in childhood during the process of language acquisition. (1997: 4)

Conclusion

Myths and folktales serve a fundamental role in shaping cultural consciousness, preserving collective memory, and facilitating the intergenerational transmission of social values. Chinese folktales are far more than mere forms of entertainment; they serve as essential instruments for transmitting culture, upholding ethical standards, and articulating social values. It may be posited that, within matriarchal societies, myths and folktales were constructed with women depicted as creators or central heroic figures; however, with the transition to patriarchal social structures, this paradigm appears to have been reversed. In Chinese folktales, male characters are frequently endowed with the roles of saviors and moral exemplars. Figures such as Xu Xian (许仙) in *The Legend of the White Snake* (《白蛇传》) and the Cowherd (牛郎) in *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl* (《牛郎织女》) are portrayed as central agents who actively propel the narrative forward. By contrast, female characters are typically framed within prescriptive roles such as the “chaste woman” (贞女), “virtuous wife” (贤妻), and “good mother” (良母).

The phenomenon of sexism in Chinese folktales reminds us to treat traditional culture with critical perspective. Although gender discrimination is reflected in many traditional folktales, these stories still have historical and cultural value. Modern society should interpret them critically and give folktales new contemporary significance by exploring themes of quality and respect. In addition, creating and disseminating more diverse and inclusive stories will help promote the popularization of gender equality

concepts. These representations underscore their subordinate position and reinforce the moral expectations imposed upon women within the familial and social order. By reflecting on these prejudices, we can make efforts to build a more equal and harmonious cultural atmosphere.

References:

- Birch, C. (1961). *Chinese myths and fantasies*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Birrell, A. (2010). *Chinese Myths*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan.
- Gao, X. (2003). Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China, *Race, Gender & Class*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 114-125.
- Holmgren, J. (1981). Myth, Fantasy or Scholarship: Images of the Status of Women in Traditional China, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 6, pp. 147-170.
- Lee, J.F.K. (2015). Chinese Proverbs. How are Women and Men Represented? *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, 4 (1), pp. 559-585. doi: 10.4471/generos.2015.47
- Leung, C.K.K. (2003). Women Who Found A Way Creating a Women's Language, *Off Our Backs*, Vol. 33, No. 11/12, pp. 40-43.
- Lin, Y.T. (2000). *My Country and My People*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Moser, D. (1997). Covert Sexism in Mandarin Chinese, *Sino-Platonic Papers*, No. 74, pp. 1-23.
(http://sinoplatonic.org/complete/spp074_chinese_sexism.pdf)
- Ng, V.W. (1987). Ideology and Sexuality: Rape Laws in Qing China, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 57-70.
- Roberts, M. (1979). *Chinese Fairy Tales and Fantasies*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Ropp, P.S. (1976). The Seeds of Change: Reflections on the Conditions of Women in the Early and Mid Ch'ing, *Signs*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 5-23.
- Sun, R.J. (1997). *Gender discrimination and gender differences in Chinese* (《汉语的性别歧视与性别差异》), Wuhan: Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press.
- Wang, P. (2000). *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Watson, Rubie.S. (1986). The Named and the Nameless: Gender and Person in Chinese Society, *American Ethnologist*. 13(4). 619-631.
- Yang, B.J. (2017). *Analects Annotation* (《论语译注》). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company