

Tradition and Resilience: Starting from a Story by Feng Jicai and Its Screening

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This paper aims to analyze Feng Jicai's short story, "The Miraculous Pigtail" (Chinese Literature, Spring 1986), and the film based on it, "The Magic Braid" (1986), from the perspective of the adaptability of tradition, always ready to face the challenges of an ever-changing history. It examines, besides the characteristics of Chinese popular storytelling, the difference between the author's ironic style and the inevitably more impersonal language of cinema, the contrast between the description of traditional customs and their visual presentation, as well as the adaptation of the written text to meet the demands of a different art form and a different audience.

Keywords: *tradition, novelty, resilience*

1. Story analysis

Feng Jicai's story, *The Miraculous Pigtail* (Feng, 1986) is interesting under several respects: it follows the patterns of traditional popular Chinese story-telling, while also deconstructing them; it aims at presenting ethnographic and historical aspects of Chinese society at the beginning of 20th century (Tianjin, with its social diversity, folk festivals, underworld, the Boxer rebellion); it proposes itself to express a clear message about the resilience of the Chinese people, symbolized by a common character, Sha Er (傻二), during the greatest challenges of history.

We are presented with a poetics of the story and of storytelling as performance, in which the writer functions both as author and as actor.

Furthermore, if we consider a story from the early Qing dynasty, that is, *The Storyteller's Story*, by Wu Weiye (Li and Saucă 1977, 86-91)², as a meta-poetics of the genre – including its performative aspect – the connection to tradition is once again confirmed.

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² About the author, see (Hogea-Velişcu, 1983, 213).

As for its literary genre, we can argue that the story falls under the category of *nihuaben*, or pastiche story (Hogea-Velişcu 1983, 148-149), ‘imitation’ *huaben* (Wechsler 1989, xii), or that of fiction of cultural reflection (*wenhua fansi xiaoshuo*, 文化反思小说)” (Leung 2017, 80).

Among its features, we can mention its oral character (Wechsler, 1989, ix) and the presence of urban folklore (Wechsler 1989, vi-vii); furthermore, another characteristic of the folk tale – *ruhua*, the introduction or prologue, found at the beginning of each narrative, a specific technique of street storytellers (Hogea-Velişcu 1983, 169), (Wechsler 1989, viii) – serves a dual purpose: to capture the audience’s attention and to foreshadow the message the storyteller intends to convey.

Here, we have a short poem that fulfils this function:

Ancient, ancient, ancient, ancient. / Modern, modern, modern, modern. / The ancient is not modern, nor the modern ancient. / The ancient is yet modern, and the modern ancient. / Search more for the spirit, / Seek less from outward guise. / Inside books and outside books coincidence abounds, / It’s worth a laugh, but don’t take it seriously (Feng 83).

1.1. General characteristics

Although referring to the poetics of Ming popular storytelling, B. Wechsler’s characterization applies to *The Miraculous Pigtail* too:

In Ming stories, man takes centre stage in the narrative. Literature focuses entirely on reality, everyday life, and action. The heroes of Ming stories are mostly city dwellers, although they come from all social strata. The backdrop of life it contains is colourful and diverse, truly representing a mirror of Chinese society during the era of urban boom and contradiction between innovation and tradition, which was the last part of the Ming dynasty. For the first time, Chinese literature features craftsmen, small merchants, the bustling life of the streets and markets, and the vibrant crowds of the medieval city. The focus on the details of everyday life and the daily struggles of ordinary people is the great thematic innovation of Ming prose. Life bursts onto the scene for the first time in Chinese literature. (Wechsler 1989, xiv-xv)

Also, a succinct characterization of the story:

Borrowing the term “poetic eye” (Shi yan, 诗眼) – the key imagery of a poem – from the aesthetics of classical Chinese poetry, he postulates that there is also “the eye of a story” (xiaoshuo zhiyan, 小说之眼). (Leung, 2017, 78).

1.2. Style

As for the narrative style, as we can gather from the translation, it is oral, colloquial, accessible, and consistently ironic. Just two examples:

The saying goes: A newly rich man gets cocky. Always wary of trouble, the locals unconsciously put a little distance between themselves and the stand, not quite sure what to expect but certain that trouble was on its way. Neither was their premonition unfounded. Read on. (Feng 65)

Of course, Heaven is not biased. This world is like a set of scales, and they can't always be unbalanced. Everything gets dumped on to these scales. When one end gets weighed down, the other springs up. When the moon has finished shining through the east window it gradually moves to shine through the west. Good luck and bad luck are the same, bouncing hither and thither on the people's heads. (Feng 71)

The subtitles – in other words, the chapter titles – serve, just as in traditional Chinese folk storytelling, to capture and then sustain the interest of the reader or listener; a few significant examples: *Demon Meets Demon, Out Jumps a Blockhead, Easy to Invite a Spirit, Difficult to Get Rid of One, The Grand Master Makes an Appearance, Mr Sato's Talent Is Grabbing Pigtailed, Miraculous Pigtail Plus Miraculous Fists, One Tiny Little Foreign Rifle-bullet, No Way but to Let Down the Ancestors, Time to Cut Off the Pigtail.*

1.3. Message

Summarizing, the story's message revolves around two ideas, that of regaining national dignity through common people rejecting foreign and useless cultural borrowings, and rising up to fight against Western imperialism, and a flexible tradition, which has managed to adapt to the challenges of history, surviving and changing its face, all of this embodied in the main character “The protagonist, Second Simpleton (Shaer, 傻二), is a typical folk hero, keeping a low profile” (Leung 2017, 80).

Again, two examples:

According to tradition, Second Simpleton's ancestors had originally practised a form of Conscience Boxing. This was also a skill of his particular family originally derived from the Buddhist School and centred around the use of the head. However, to prevent an opponent from grabbing hold of the hair, they had to shave their heads like monks. After the Manchu troops occupied China men were compelled to have pigtails, and not to do so would mean decapitation. This change thus put an end to the martial art of Second Simpleton's family in one fell swoop. When people are pressed like that, they either adapt if they are skilful, or are finished if they are not. This forced Second Simpleton's ancestors to change their skills to the use of the pigtail, creating this unique and peerless pigtail style. (Feng 125-126)

If you knew how it was that my ancestors created those pigtail skills, you'd realize that I've adopted the real ability of my forefathers. However good the things of our ancestors, when the time comes to discard them, then discarded they must be. I cut off the pigtail, but I kept the miraculous. That's to say, no matter what is done to us, it will be impossible to put us down; no matter what new toys they use, we will not be pissed on by others. How about it then, shall we play? (Feng 148)

2. Film adaptation, *The Magic Braid*

The film adaptation, titled *The Magic Braid*, produced by Xi'an Studio in 1986 and directed by Zhang Zi'en [<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0397625/>], does not seem to fit very well within the conventions of the genre, as found in various overviews, which do not even mention it: (McGrath 2022), (Teo 2009), [Zhang (ed). 2012].

We find a satisfactory summary of the film's plot in (Zhang and Xiao 1998, 235), which is also mentioned in the article on martial arts-inspired cinema (Zhang and Xiao 1998, 237–239), accompanied by a perceptive observation, "Some films even build in the theme of patriotism or **nationalism** by staging fights between Chinese experts and foreign competitors," (239) – illustrated by *The Undaunted Wudang* (dir. Sun Sha) and *Pride's Deadly Fury* (dir. Zhang Huaxun), (both made in 1983).

Another reference, this time regarding the director, can be found in a translator's note accompanying an interview with director Gao Jun: "Zhang Zi'en is known for stretching the limits of more commercially established genres" (Berry ed. 1991, 130–132). Also in the same volume, we encounter an aestheticized

rejection of the genre, by Chiao Hsiung-ping, which may give us pause for thought: “‘Hero films,’ like martial arts and kung fu films, are low-class cinema.” (Berry ed. 1991, 163).

Interpreted from a literary perspective, and disregarding the distinction between high culture and popular culture (the impression one is left with after watching it is that of an author attempting – and succeeding – to create a synthesis of the two), the film comes up short.

Given the distinction made by formal Russian school between plot and subject (Tomaşevski 1973, 251) – that is, the causal-temporal connection between the events presented and the simultaneity with which they appear in the text – the film seems to sacrifice the subject in favour of the plot, oversimplifying the narrative complexity of the story.

Furthermore, one of the writer’s strengths – irony expressed stylistically, in commentary, and in cultural references – cannot really be present in a story consisting of a sequence of images; the characters, being created according to the requirements of popular culture – that is, without any particular depth – do not manifest themselves linguistically, neither in the text nor in the film.

The film’s portrayal of the festival – with its deliberate ethnographic tone – is both successful and not: the abundance of detail and the pace of the action convey a certain image, but, once again, lacking the ironic distance of the written word.

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