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Structure and Motif in the ‘Innocent Persecuted Heroine’ Tale in Vietnam and Other Southeast Asian Countries

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Through a study of structure and motifs in the innocent persecuted heroine tale in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries, this article argues that although folktale traditions across the world share the same plots, themes, and motifs, the function and significance of plots and motifs may perform differently in local cultural contexts. Folktales originate in a time at some distance from the present, and may contain traces of various archaic modes of thought and custom that accrue as social apparatuses change. By focusing on the different structure of the innocent persecuted heroine tale type in Vietnam and in other Southeast Asian countries, and making a comparison with other tales of the same type in other cultures, the article explores some historical layers contained in these tales. The article also offers an explanation for the existence of this unusual structure and confirms the cultural uniqueness of apparently international structures and motifs.

Key words: Vietnam, Southeast Asia, innocent persecuted heroine, folklore, Cinderella story.

A typical phenomenon of folktale is its international character. According to diffusion theory, a folktale could be transferred from one country to another regardless of the territorial boundaries between nations and the differences in language, and so folklore scholars display a particular interest in identifying international similarities of a folktale in terms of the tale type, the plot and the motifs employed. It is important to recognise, however, that the functions and significance of plot and motif are not fixed, and an element which is superficially the same in multiple versions of a tale may have a different function and meaning in accordance with local cultural practices and assumptions. For example, the ‘same’ tale will evince different implications if the cultural background for its production is Buddhist, Christian or Confucian. The cultural uniqueness of international structures and motifs is well demonstrated by the Vietnamese tale Tâm and Cám, which is the principal focus of this paper.

The theme of Tâm and Cám—the sustained, cruel persecution of an innocent heroine by a stepmother and less beautiful older sister(s) or stepsister(s), and her eventual attainment of well-being—appears in the folktale traditions of many cultures and is familiarly referred to as the ‘Cinderella-story’. In 1893,
Marian Cox collected 345 Cinderella versions, and by 1951, according to Anna Birgitta Rooth’s figures in *The Cinderella Cycle*, more than 700 variants of this tale type had been identified. There are no doubt still more to be added. Since my argument is that the tale type develops local forms and meanings, I will not prejudice readers’ expectations by referring to the tale as the ‘Cinderella-story’, but will use the admittedly more cumbersome ‘Innocent persecuted heroine tale’.1

The broad parameters of this tale (Aarne Thompson classification 510A) centre on an orphaned girl who is ill-treated by her stepmother and stepsister after her mother dies. The heroine is helped by a supernatural being to overcome her persecutors; and at the end of the tale, thanks to a magic object (usually a shoe), she is identified at her true worth and achieves marriage to a king or a prince.

In terms of the structure of the story, versions of the ‘innocent persecuted heroine’ tale across the world can be divided into two main types. In the first type, the story ends when the orphaned girl marries a king or a prince. This is the typical structure of Cinderella versions in Europe. Variants of Perrault and Grimm typically realise this structure. The second type consists of stories that do not have the simple happy ending involving the orphan girl’s advantageous marriage, but continue after the marriage with the motifs of murder, substitution, reincarnation, reunion and punishment. In particular, in the Vietnamese version, after the wedding, the protagonist is killed by the stepmother when she goes back home to observe her father’s death anniversary. The stepmother then offers her daughter as a substitute to be the king’s wife. The protagonist, however, does not utterly die but is reincarnated in many different forms. In the final reincarnation, the heroine is concealed inside a persimmon. A kind-hearted old woman picks up this fruit and keeps it in her house. Every day, when the old woman goes out, the heroine comes out from the fruit and does all the housework. One day, the old woman only pretends to go out and, from a place of concealment, sees the heroine emerge from the fruit and grow into a beautiful girl. The old woman rushes into the house and destroys the skin of the fruit. The heroine then lives with the old woman, helps her with the housework, making cakes and preparing quids of betel. Thanks to a quid of betel in the shape of phoenix wings, the king recognises his beloved wife and takes her back to the palace. The stepmother and stepsister have to expiate their sin.

This is the typical structure of the innocent persecuted heroine tale not only in Vietnam but also in Myanmar (*The big tortoise*), Thailand (*The gold fish*) and Cambodia (*Neang Kantoc*). In this paper, I will argue that the significance of details and structure is open to various possibilities in the versions from these countries.

HISTORICAL LAYERS

Oral literature, in this case folktale, contains traces of various cultural and ideological changes that have occurred over time (see Jack Zipes 845). In the
case of Tâm and Cám, the tale reveals a number of archaic elements from past centuries. The first trace can be found in the onomastics of the names of the two characters, the persecuted innocent heroine, Tâm, and her stepsister, Cám. In Vietnamese, ‘Tâm’ means ‘broken rice’ and ‘Cám’ means the husk of rice. Thus the names of both characters pertain to rice. At this point, it may be assumed that the tale was created soon after the time rice had become the staple food of the culture. Particularly, since Southeast Asia and China are considered to be the provenance of wet rice civilisations, the names of the two characters in the Vietnamese version confirm the centrality of rice for such a civilisation. Although broken rice is deemed inferior to whole-grain rice, it seems that the names express a binary opposition of a widely familiar kind, that between the kernel, that is, the edible part of the grain, and the husk, or chaff, which is fed to animals (thus ‘cám heo’ in Vietnamese refers to pigfood). On the surface, then, the names express a contrast between the value or virtue of the two girls. As Eleazar Meletinsky suggests, a structuralist analysis of such an opposition points to a dualistic system that describes ‘the world-view of non-literate peoples’ (93). Thus, along the lines of often adduced oppositions such as fresh/rotten or upper/lower, the seed/chaff opposition here exemplifies what Meletinsky says of the paradigmatic structure more generally: ‘the value of these oppositions is very closely connected with etiology in the structure itself of the text’ (93). This etiological aspect is only present as a trace in the sophisticated articulation of the Vietnamese versions, but survives more overtly in a Khmer pourquoi tale which explains why a particular broken rice dish is widely popular: the only food allowed to the persecuted heroine was left-over broken rice intended for chicken feed. When an old woman comes to the house asking for food, and is roughly turned away by the heroine’s stepmother, the heroine wraps her scrap of food in a banana leaf and runs after the old woman, offering it to her. The woman (needless to say) is a disguised prince in search of a generous-hearted girl to make his wife, and so he marries the girl.

This is a simple version of the first type of persecuted innocent heroine tale, but has two particular points of interest: first, its outcome pivots on the idea of the qualities appropriate to a good wife, which I argue is the essence of the extended form of the tale type; and second, when the use of broken rice instead of a magic object is considered in conjunction with the onomastics of the Vietnamese Tâm and Cám, an etiological structure emerges which links the overcoming of the heroine’s misfortunes to the positive value ascribed to grain after threshing. The ‘broken rice’ variant of the tale is not known, or, more probably, has not survived in Vietnam, perhaps being displaced by the more elaborate form. In a version collected and retold in French by Antony Landes (in 1886), the names of the female characters have been transposed, perhaps indicating that the names had by then lost the symbolic force of their opposition.

Further evidence of social customs from an archaic past might also be identified in the incident in which the stepsister is offered as a substitution after the death of the innocent persecuted heroine. This incident is assumed to be shaped from a marital practice named ‘sororate marriage’ in which a husband
whose wife dies is authorised to marry his dead wife’s sister. This archaic custom is encouraged by both sides (the wife’s family and the husband’s) because this type of marriage preserves the properties and contract between the two and also strengthens the relationship of both sides. In fact, this sociological custom still exists in some ethnic groups in Vietnam and in other Southeast Asian cultures.

Thirdly, the reincarnations of the innocent persecuted heroine in the extended part of the story are, arguably, made possible by the Buddhist belief in the concept of metempsychosis. Moreover, the process of the reincarnations of the heroine then seems to be subsumed into a Confucian ideology of female comportment and behaviour. For example, the heroine’s transformation into a wooden loom signifies woman’s industriousness, or in the last reincarnation, when she transforms from a fruit to human shape, and does the housework and cooking for the old woman, the tale draws upon the social norms for a proper woman in patriarchal society—that is, to perform domestic tasks.

In the light of the femininity paradigm, Tâm and Cám offers the social attitude and expectation of female values in a male-dominated society. Particularly, Tâm—the innocent persecuted heroine—suffers both primary persecution and secondary persecution, the former in her childhood home, the latter in the palace and beyond as she passes through her reincarnations. The primary persecution is a means of bringing the heroine up to the point where she attains marriageable age and sexual desirability (when the Cinderella-type concludes), and then the secondary persecution tests her worthiness to be the wife of the prince. The structure thus discriminates the two elements of persecution and female worthiness that were seen to co-occur in the more basic Khmer Broken Rice tale. The behavioural pattern followed by Tâm broadly reflects the traditional behaviour appropriate to a Vietnamese woman as set out in Neo-Confucian texts, especially following the thought of Zhu Xi (1130–1200), which, in its exposition of the ethical virtues of filial piety, loyalty, and human kindness, shaped intellectual and cultural development across China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan until the beginning of the modern era. According to the Confucian morality imposed on the Vietnamese woman, there are three submissions to which a woman has to be subjected, that is, submission to the father before her marriage, submission to the husband during her marriage and to the son when widowed. The dogma of what a proper Vietnamese woman should be and do is also reflected through the innocent persecuted heroine in Tâm and Cám. Thus Tâm adheres to the principle of chastity (trinh) in her faithfulness towards her husband even beyond her own death and in the purity of her spirit; she observes the first two of the three submissions (tam tòng) in her obedience to her father and then her husband; and she demonstrates the virtues of labour (công) and proper behavior (ha. nh) not only during her primary persecution but in the forms of her reincarnations. Her virtue thus seems to attract supernatural help which, in combination with her own resourcefulness, enables her to escape the cycle of destruction and reincarnation and to return to her former status of wife and princess.
Further, an informative analogy with the elements of Tấm’s experience can be observed in a ceremony typical to some ethnic groups in Vietnam, called ‘lễ thành dinh’: this is a coming-of-age, or rite of passage, ceremony which girls undergo in order to become recognised as adults and confirmed as a member of a specific community. There is a similarity between the persecutions that the folktale heroine suffers during her childhood and the tests that girls have to undertake in this rite of passage ceremony. ‘Lễ thành dinh’ is a coming-of-age ritual that confirms a person as a member of a specific community. The subject is required to live far from her parents and must pass a series of lessons and tests. Under the tutelage of a strict older woman, girls will be taught some skills necessary for becoming a good wife: doing housework, cooking, or taking care of children. The purpose of the ‘lễ thành dinh’ ceremony is to train girls to acquire proper behaviours which are appropriate to social norms. Hard work and obedience are required when girls follow this training. Girls usually get married soon after ‘lễ thành dinh’ (Lê Văn Hảo, 103–5). In the innocent persecuted heroine tale type, the heroine also suffers a series of persecutions (mostly involving the more laborious forms of housework) and in spite of being ill-treated, she always listens to her stepmother. Although there is no clear proof that the tale type is directly derived from ‘lễ thành dinh’, the analogy between them points to versions of similar social and personal experiences and hence suggests another socio-historical layer in the innocent persecuted heroine tale.

In the performance of femininity, and within the context of a number of socio-historical frames, Tấm thus upholds the social order which is placed under threat by the actions of her female relatives. It seems significant, for example, that after the primary persecution has ended, the cycle begins again when Tấm returns to the family home in order to observe the anniversary of her father’s death. In taking this opportunity to murder her, her stepmother and stepsister exhibit not only their own lack of the ethical virtues (obedience to father and husband) but also the propensity of such a lack to overthrow the social structure and push society into chaos. The two persecutions thus signify beyond the rites of passage endured by the heroine on her path from girlhood and daughterhood into womanhood and wifehood, as they become part of a larger narrative about human relationships within the social order.

THE UNIQUE ELEMENTS SHAPED BY LOCAL CULTURE

Although folktale represents international characteristics which are reflected through universal plots, themes, motifs and components, at the same time it performs the national traits of its particular culture. For example, the first part of the Vietnamese version includes most of the motifs which occur in European variants of the tale type, but the functions and significance of some of these motifs do not always have the same meaning in the local Vietnamese context as they do in European culture.
This difference is clearly evident in the motif of the lost shoe. According to Cox, the lost shoe incident occurs in 157 stories among 345 Cinderella variants. As has been often observed, a pair of shoes has special meaning within many cultures. Jacob Grimm, together with other scholars, suggests that the shoe incident in the Cinderella tale type relates to an old German custom of giving a betrothal present. As soon as the bridegroom has placed a shoe on the bride’s foot, she is regarded as subject to his authority (Cox 505). In North China, the words ‘slipper’ and ‘mutual agreement’ are pronounced in the same way, and a pair of slippers is given as a wedding present. In South China, as R. D. Jameson states, the bride sends the shoes to her future husband to signify her subordination to him (‘Cinderella in China’ 88). In some areas of France and Germany, the bridegroom usually presents a pair of beautiful shoes to his betrothed prior to their wedding day: he brings a pair of uncompleted shoes for the bride to try on, and then hammers in the final nails (details in Dinh Gia Khánh 50).

In Vietnam, however, a pair of shoes has no special meaning in marriage customs. A dropped shoe in the Vietnamese version only functions as a symbol of female beauty. When the king picks up the shoe, he immediately thinks that the shoe’s owner is a beautiful lady. Since a pair of shoes has no particular significance in Vietnamese culture, it seems reasonable to assume that the motif of the lost shoe is an international detail that, existing in the innocent persecuted heroine tale type in other cultures, has been imported into the Vietnamese version.

In parallel with the magic shoe that enables the heroine to reach a happy outcome in the first part of the story, there is also the quid of betel in the shape of a phoenix wing that enables her to resume happiness in the end of the story. The magic shoe and the quid of betel therefore perform the same function as precious objects that bring happiness to the character, but betel has much greater significance within Vietnamese culture. Traditionally, there is a saying that ‘the betel begins the conversation’, referring to the practice that Vietnamese chew betel on formal occasions or ‘to break the ice’ in awkward conversational situations. Betel nut and quids of betel are always placed on ancestral altars. The betel leaves and areca nuts are also used ceremonially in traditional Vietnamese weddings. This detail illustrates an obvious national character in Vietnam’s Tâm and Cám and its variants. In other words, the incident of the quid of betel performs the same function as the motif of the magic shoe in European versions but it is localised to fit native culture.

In other Southeast Asian versions, the motif of the lost shoe is replaced by another motif which is appropriate to their own culture. Specifically, in Thai and Myanmar versions, the magic object is a sacred Bodhi tree which obviously plays an important position in Thai and Myanmar cultures since these countries mostly follow Buddhism. I will return to this below in my discussion of Buddhist influences.

Another example can be seen in the motif of supernatural help, which has numerous variants as between cultures. In Western versions, the supernatural
help is usually from a fairy, while in Vietnamese versions, it is from a ‘ Буд ‘ (a Buddha). The fact that the Buddha in the Vietnamese version is a characteristic borrowing from Buddhism is understandable since Buddhism has set a deep imprint on the behaviour and the thinking of the Vietnamese. Particularly, the fairy in folktales around the world is not always a good supernatural being. There is the good fairy in Cinderella but there is also the bad fairy in Sleeping Beauty. However, a ‘ Буд ‘ always does good things and represents goodness. Vietnamese people have the saying, ‘Gentle like a Буд’, which may be derived from ‘ Буд ‘ characteristics in folklore.

Beside the ‘ Буд ‘, in other Southeast Asian versions the aid offered to the innocent persecuted heroine is from animals like a fish, a turtle, a bird or a sacred tree. The French folklorist, P. Saintyves [Émile Nourry] (1870–1935) suggests that ‘the animal may be an individual totem or a guardian spirit’ (quoted in Jameson 89). According to totemism, some particular animals or plants are considered the ancestor of particular tribes. These particular animals and plants are worshipped and should not be killed or eaten by these tribes. In some Southeast Asian versions, the helpful animal is defined as the heroine’s dead mother (in the Thai version, the heroine’s dead mother is in the form of a fish and sacred trees, or in the Myanmar version the dead mother is in the form of a turtle and sacred tree).

The phenomenon of localised motifs can also be found in the series of motifs in the extended part. In depicting the punishment of the miscreants, the final part of the Vietnamese and Myanmar versions incorporates the motif AT S112.1 ‘Boiling to death’, the motif AT G.61 ‘Relative’s flesh unwittingly eaten’ and the sub-motif AT G61.2 ‘Mother recognises child’s flesh when it is served to be eaten’. When the heroine is reunited with the king, her stepsister asks her to reveal the secret of how she has become more beautiful, and the heroine tells the stepsister to have a bath in boiling water. The stepsister follows this advice and dies. There are then two different versions of the death of the stepmother. In one version, the stepmother simply falls to the ground and dies after hearing that her daughter has been scalded to death. The other version, which seems much more inhumane, relates that the persecuted heroine salts the sister’s flesh and sends it to her stepmother. The stepmother eats her daughter’s flesh without knowing and when she realises what she has done, she is so horrified by her breach of one of human kind’s fundamental taboos that she collapses and dies.

Although the extended part of the innocent persecuted heroine tale type in Vietnam and Southeast Asia is a unique structure, the motif AT S112.1, AT G.61 and the sub-motif AT G61.2 exist in the international treasury of motifs across the world. However, the function of these motifs in Vietnamese and Southeast Asian versions has developed local nuances. In the Vietnamese version, AT S112.1 ‘Boiling to death’ is not a motif of murder but of punishment. The function of AT G61 ‘Relative’s flesh unwittingly eaten’ is similarly transformed: as pointed out in Thompson, the motif normally refers to a mother eating her child’s flesh unwittingly,” while in the innocent persecuted heroine tales
in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, the motif is used to signify the punishment given to the stepmother for her wickedness. Therefore, it can be said that the unintentional action of the stepmother in this situation is an implication by folk narrators that ‘curses come home to roost’.

**THE UNIQUE STRUCTURE OF THE INNOCENT PERSECUTED HEROINE TALE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

The reason for the unique structure of the innocent persecuted heroine tale in Southeast Asia may be that the tales are recorded later in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations than in other cultures and the extended part in Vietnamese and Southeast Asian versions is the expansion made by the folk narrators who live in the following generation. In his study of the transformations of the wondertale, Vladimir Propp suggests that some possible changes may occur, such as ‘reduction’, ‘expansion’, ‘contamination’, ‘inversion’ and so on. Scope for expansion is pertinent for the tales discussed here. Although Propp’s argument only applied to a single element within a tale, rather than to the larger structure, his theory can be extended. The oldest persecuted heroine analogue (the general consensus is that the oldest ‘Cinderella’ version is the Chinese version recorded around 850–860 CE) offers supporting evidence for such an explanation as its plot, like the Perrault and Grimm versions, ends at the point of marriage. Interestingly, China also has a more recent version in which the plot and its structure are similar to the Vietnamese version (see Eberhard 156). Based on the principle of development from simplicity to complication of the story, we could infer that the version which ends at the time of the orphaned girl’s marriage to the prince is the older one.

Moreover, one of the criteria Propp adduces to distinguish between the basic form and the derived form of a wondertale is that ‘an international form is older than a national one’, with the corollary that, ‘a widespread form predates an isolated form’ (88). This quantitative principle is confirmed through the motif of the magic object, since the motif of the lost shoe appears in most versions across cultures while its equivalent function is performed by a sacred tree only in some particular cultures as in Thailand and Myanmar.

A second supporting idea for the argument that versions of the ‘innocent persecuted heroine’ tale in Southeast Asia may emerge later than in other cultures is that those variants in Vietnam and Southeast Asia are possibly made by the combination of different tale types found in folktale traditions across the world. In fact, the combination phenomenon is very common in folklore since one of its characteristics is the ‘additive structure’. Some stories are the products of a combination of myths and folktales or of the ‘large and small narrative units’ made by the tellers to fit the natural context. This phenomenon also occurs in some folk songs, folk poems and folk ballads when they are the assemblage of many parts from many sources. This flexible character of folklore leads to the diversification of folk traditions.
In the case of the innocent persecuted heroine version in Myanmar, Maung Htin Aung contends that this story combines the theme of tale type 403 (*The Black and the White Bride*) and tale type 510 (*Cinderella*). In tale type 403 (*The Black and the White Bride*), the theme is as follows:

1. The Persecuted Heroine. An innocent persecuted heroine is abused by her cruel stepmother and stepsister.
2. Kind and unkind. The stepsister is unkind to a person she meets and is transformed and becomes black and ugly. The persecuted innocent heroine, by her kindness, is offered three wishes; one of them is to be beautiful (to be white).
3. The King as lover. The King wants to marry the heroine because of her beauty.
4. The substituted bride. The stepmother harms the persecuted innocent heroine, causing her death, and sends her daughter to the king.
5. Disenchantment. The heroine is reincarnated as a duck and comes to the king’s palace three times. On the final occasion, the King cuts off the duck’s head, which transforms her back into a beautiful lady.
6. Conclusion. The true bride is identified and punishment is executed upon the stepmother and stepsister. The king marries the heroine.

Tale type 403 closely resembles innocent persecuted heroine tales in Southeast Asia, especially in the incidents in the extended part. Thus both stories include the episode in which the stepmother murders the heroine and offers her daughter as a substitute. Like the persecuted heroine in the Southeast Asian versions, the heroine in tale type 403 is also reincarnated. Obviously, it is impossible to have an exact explanation for the similarities between *The Black and the White Bride* and the persecuted heroine versions in Southeast Asia, but their similarities are worth considering: innocent persecuted heroine tales may well be a combination of this tale type and type 510A. Thematically, the tales share the structure whereby social order is temporarily overthrown and restored by supernatural intervention, and hence can be seen to share an affirmation of particular social forms.

THE INFLUENCE OF BUDDHISM

I turn now to another factor shaping the structure of innocent persecuted heroine tales in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, the influence of Buddhism. Southeast Asian nations have been deeply affected by two great ancient cultures, Chinese and Indian, and since India is the provenance of Buddhism, and Buddhism was long the dominant religion in China, its influence across Southeast Asia is immense.

The influence of Buddhism on innocent persecuted heroine tales is very clear in the concept of metempsychosis. According to this doctrine, after death all beings have to suffer in Samsara, and proceed from the current incarnation to other incarnations until attaining of Nirvana. A good karma in a previous life
will produce a good rebirth in the following life, and vice versa. Metempsychosis
is enacted in these tales when the heroine is reincarnated in many different
forms. These forms in turn vary according to specific cultural traits in different
countries. Thus in versions from Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar,
the cycle of the heroine’s reincarnations, and the reincarnations of her mother
before her, are as follows:

- **The Vietnamese version**
  The heroine → an oriole → a pair of peach trees → persimmon → the
  heroine

- **The Cambodian version**
  The heroine → a banana tree → a bamboo → the heroine

- **The Thai version**
  The dead mother → a gold fish → a pair of Makhua trees → a pair of
  Bodhi trees U’ay (the heroine) → a bird → the heroine

- **The Myanmar version**
  The dead mother → a gold turtle → a Bodhi tree
  The heroine → a fruit → the heroine

Across all the transformations of the heroine, she is always a tree or a bird
(while her mother’s transformations may include a helpful aquatic creature). The
heroine’s transformations are a hallmark of the veneration shown towards bird
and tree amongst ethnic groups in primitive times. The kind of tree into which
the character will be transformed depends on specific local traits of each culture.
For example, in the Thai and Myanmar versions the spirit of the dead mother
usually transforms into a Bodhi tree, which, as Định Gia Khánh explains, is
highly propitious:

‘Ô Thái Lan, Miền Điện là nơi mà Phật giáo có ảnh hưởng lớn thì cây buổi để là một
cây quý. Đưới gốc cây buổi để xua kia Phật Tổ đã từng ngồi để tu niệm. Cây buổi để
trong quan niệm dân gian là cây hạnh phúc’ (53).

[Thailand and Myanmar have been influenced by Buddhism. In Buddhism, the
Bodhi tree symbolises enlightenment. In the past, the Great Buddha always sat to
pray under the Bodhi tree. The Bodhi tree in folk conception is a happy tree].

It seems reasonable to assume that the Bodhi tree in this story attains its
significance as a combination of Buddhist tradition and folk conception.

The concept of Buddhism is also clear in the Thai version, in which the final
section includes a homily by the Buddha. This homily explains that the miseries
suffered by U’ay (the heroine) in her current life are because in the previous life,
Kanitha (U’ay’s mother) killed the mother of a chicken and gave the chicken
to U’ay as a plaything. The chick fell into a boiling pot and died. Therefore,
Kanitha has to leave her child in the following incarnation (Kanitha is pushed
into the river by her husband and dies). In her previous incarnation, U’ay was
a vulture which intended to catch the chick to eat but finally let the chick run
away; therefore, in this incarnation, Ai (U’ay’s stepsister) intends to kill U’ay but
U’ay manages to escape. In his previous incarnation, Xethi (U’ay’s father) was a
talkative parrot and Kanitha was a cat. The parrot was loved by its owner. The cat was jealous of this love, and so lay in wait and killed the parrot. Therefore, in this incarnation, Xethi kills Kanitha. Finally, the Buddha says that: 'In this world, such issues continue over and over and only stop when we stop using evil to repay evil. In that way, we could break out of Metempsychosis and come to Nirvana'. The king subsequently responds to Buddha’s homily by forgiving U’ay’s father and her stepmother.

The influence of Buddhism in the extended part of Southeast Asian innocent persecuted heroine tales is very clear and this is a reasonable explanation for the development of this kind of structure. However, the concept of metempsychosis underlying the tales no longer retains its full meaning as in Buddhism. It is refashioned after the thinking of the common people, whereby after finishing her reincarnations the heroine gains happiness in the actual, material world, not in another world or Nirvana. Moreover, according to Buddhist metempsychosis, the actions (karmas) of previous lives determine the type of rebirth experienced subsequently. Bad karmas will thus produce a less happy rebirth, and hence reincarnation in the form of a bird or a tree may seem to be a kind of punishment. Such an explanation as in Buddhism suggests that the origin of suffering of the unfortunate characters in folktale — here the innocent persecuted heroine — is caused by her bad karma in the precedent incarnation. This theory militates against the content of this tale type.

In primitive belief there is also the concept of endless spirit, in which, when human beings die, their body may fade away but their spirit is eternal in various forms. Moreover, as mentioned above, characters in their rebirth are mostly in the form of a bird or a tree, objects which are often venerated in primitive belief. As Juan Eduardo Cirlot emphasises: ‘Birds are frequently used to symbolize human souls’ (Cirlot 23); and in Taoism, immortality is represented in the form of birds, and birds are linked with the spiritual world in many other cultures (see details in Chevalier 88–9).

In sum, it seems reasonable to deduce a connection between Buddhist theory and primitive belief in the second part of Southeast Asian innocent persecuted heroine tales.

CONCLUSION

The innocent persecuted heroine tale is one of the best known and most popular tale types in folktale tradition around the world. The theme of this tale type in Europe, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations is similar and thus reflects the internationality of folklore. However, besides the similarity, the innocent persecuted heroine tale in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations, as I have attempted to demonstrate, also contains differences which are presented through the additive structure and unusual motifs. The differences in terms of the unique structure and motifs are not simply formal differences but deeply reflect the local nuances of each ethnic group. From an analysis of the unique structure
and motifs of the innocent persecuted heroine tale type in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries, various historical layers and cultural codes gradually emerge. Accordingly, we come to see the ways in which the tales are marked by their respective cultures and the changing socio-historical contexts within which they evolved over a long period of time. Motif and structure are affected by regional impacts upon a society’s religious contexts and cultural customs. Furthermore, it is also apparent that the innocent persecuted heroine tale in Vietnam and Southeast Asia also reveals how Confucian doctrine has impacted upon the social conceptualisation of women in patriarchal society.

Thus it can be seen that the localised versions of the tale type, although thematically related to innocent persecuted heroine tales across the world, always reflect traits specific to Vietnam and Southeast Asia. The similarities and the differences which were illustrated in this article once again demonstrate the unity and diversity of folktale.

NOTES

1. As Steven Swann Jones points out, Aleksandr Isaakovich Nikiforov was the first scholar to propose the idea of an innocent persecuted heroine genre [Jones 13]. Besides studies of the ‘male fairy tale’, Nikiforov was also concerned with female fairy tales, which he divided into two types: tales about winning and ‘tales about the suffering of the innocently persecuted (maiden or woman)’ (quoted in Jones 13).

2. The Tâm and Cám version using here is from Nguyễn Đình Chi’s collection. Other Southeast Asian versions are referenced from Đình Gia Khánh’s study. An appendix in Đình Gia Khánh’s study contains a series of the innocent persecuted heroine versions of different cultures, especially of Southeast Asia nations. Versions from Asian nations are referenced by various sources and mostly through French material. For example, the Cambodian version is from Adhémar Leclère in Contes et Légendes du Cambodge (December 1895); the Thai version is from Kasem Sibunruang in France Asie (1952); the Myanmar version is from Maung Hnin Aung in Burmese folktales (1954).

3. This structure might ultimately derive from a matrifocal and/or endogamous culture, although the practice of marrying a deceased wife’s sister has occurred in archaic cultures all over the world—either because as aunt she stands in a maternal relation to her sister’s children, or because the marriage keeps property within the same family grouping. The function of the structure in Tâm and Cám, though, might be to point out that the custom has been perverted by the murder of the heroine, and thence a supernatural process is required to reinstate the appropriate social structure.

4. For details, see Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (889).

5. In the Tales of North American Indians (Thompson 300), the motif AT G61 is used in The Trickster kills the children. An animal has a trickster stay at home to take care of the children. The trickster kills and cooks these children. The animal mother returns and eats her children without knowing it. After discovering the truth, she chases the trickster who escapes by a ruse.

6. See Opie’s argument in Gail de Vos and Anna E. Altman, New Tales for Old, Folktale as Literary Fictions for Young Adults (33); and see also Cullen (58).

7. For this feature, see De Vos and Altman (4).

8. Indochina is another name used for countries in Southeast Asia. ‘Indo-China’ was so named because it comprises the region east of India and South of China. The name also reflects the meeting of Indian and Chinese cultural influences in Southeast Asian nations.
WORKS CITED


Landes, A. [Antony Charles Celestin], *Contes et Legendes Annamites*. Saigon: Imprimerie Coloniiale, 1886.


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