

Alternation and Evolution of the Fables of Pre-Qin Scholars Along With the Contextual Changes

ZHANG Pei, LIU Tianchang

Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, China

The fables of Pre-Qin scholars occupied an important position in the history of the development of Chinese culture, thoughts, and literature, hence had profound and extensive influence on later generations. As a kind of carrier of thoughts, the fables of the Pre-Qin scholars were not immutable and frozen, for they have been influenced by various aspects in the process of transmitting and recognizing. This article attempts to study the evolution of the function, expression, and connotation of the fables of the Pre-Qin scholars.

Keywords: fables, Pre-Qin scholars, alternation, evolution

Preface

The spread of fables of the Pre-Qin Scholars has been taking place during the course of history. The function, connotation, and expression of these fables experienced a process of changing along with the alternating of dynasties, politics, and ideologies.

Alternation of Social Function

Both in terms of content and form, the fables in different periods are clearly influenced by thoughts of the time. During the Pre-Qin period, China's first group of intellectuals, which was called *Shi*, were active on the social stage. Scholars of each school tried their best to transform society by propagating their political opinions thoughts. The fables originated from the adapted historical stories and folklores, which were recreated by these scholars.

Numbers of fables in the Pre-Qin period were related with the relationship between rulers and ministers. This characteristic was inherited by the fables of the Han dynasty. The fables which contained profound political connotations were created by the authors by multiple methods to describe various kinds of ministers. Different from the sharp and irony style of the fables of the Pre-Qin scholars, the styles of fables of the Han dynasty were milder in expressing advice to the rulers. Many fables in Liu Xiang's *Shuo Yuan* persuaded kings to follow the

* This paper is the periodic research result of the research project: Beijing University Student Innovation Training Project - Research on the Text Generation and Communication Path of "Fables" in the Pre Qin Dynasty (北京市大学生创新训练项目-先秦子部“寓言”文本生成与传播路径研究, Serial Number S202210015036); Key Project of Teaching Reform and Innovation at the College Level of Beijing Institute of Printing and Technology - National First Class Major - Research on the Construction of Editing and Publishing Majors (北京印刷学院校级教改创新重点项目-国家级一流专业——编辑出版学专业建设研究, Serial Number 22150223075).

ZHANG Pei, Ph.D., post-doctoral of law, Associate Professor, master instructor, Department of editing and publishing, School of Publishing, Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, China.

Liu Tianchang, undergraduate, Tao Fen Experimental Class, Grade 2021, School of Publishing, Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, China.

example of the sages. For example, the story of *The Concern of Yin Chuo* in the book *Shuo Yuan*, is originated from the book *Commentaries of Lv*. But the theme of the story in the *Commentaries of Lv* was aimed to express the idea that the monarch should be open-minded to accept advice which was beneficial to govern the country. While the keynote of the story in *Shuo Yuan* was reminding the ministers that they should be able to advise the ruler in an appropriate way. It is obvious that the fable with similar storyline may be used to express different purposes when they were described in different books.

In later ages, with the change of social and political environments, the function of fables in the aspect of admonishing to monarch gradually diminished. The fables have been tending to express the satirical and amusing content by the methods of equivocal, exaggerations, and humor which succeeded from the fables of the Pre-Qin scholars. For example, stories in Liu Ji's *Yuli Zi* in the Ming dynasty were innovative in subject, allegory, and style, though these fables maintained the common features of the fables of the Pre-Qin scholars.

Evolution of Story Expression

Along with the influence of the social environment, the transmitting characteristics of the fables of the pre-Qin scholars have changed gradually accompanied with the contextual background.

The fables of Han dynasty have undergone a process of changing both in content and expression, although they were directly inherited from the fables of the pre-Qin. The fables of Pre-Qin scholars often clarify the theoretics by historical stories. For instance, the plots of historical stories are rich in works of *Mencius*. And historical stories also take large proportion in works of Zhuangzi and Xunzi.

The historical stories in fables of Han Dynasty were often rewritten, embellished, and even adapted, when they were used to clarify the theories. For example, the historical stories in *Annotation on The Songs of Chu* and *An Analysis of Spring and Autumn Annals* were transformed to enhance the narrative and fictional feature, and even were recreated in adding new plots. On this base, historical stories in fables transformed into literary works. The representative work of this kind was *Shuo Yuan* which was written by Liu Xiang.

Similar to the fables of Pre-Qin scholars, the fables of the Han dynasty mostly reflected the political views of their authors. But their advice mainly focused on measures which may be used to consolidate the unified state. Moreover, departing from the prose style of the Pre-Qin period, the fables of the Han dynasty were more like political treatise. For example, the stories in Liu Xiang's *Shuo Yuan* and Xin Xu were rearranged and even rewritten according to writer's views, although these stories still actively assimilated classics in previous generation. So the themes of his fables always focused on politics and were good at admonishing. What's more, for the language was simple, smooth, and practical, the works in *Warring States Strategy* were popular both in form and in content, so as to cater to the psychology and aesthetic habits of readers.

Evolution of Implied Meaning

In the course of transmitting, the connotations of some fables of the Pre-Qin scholars evolved constantly, along with the change of time and cultural background of the times. These changes were influenced by the reforming of adaptation as well as interpretation.

The example of change in interpretation is the story of Cook Ding Dissecting an Ox in *Zhuang Zi*. The original text emphasized that there is an interval between each section of ox, but the blade is sharp. So it is easy to skillfully play the blade to pass through the interval. (彼节者有间，而刀刃者无厚，无厚入有间，恢恢乎其于游刃必有余地矣。). The original intention of Zhuangzi was to explain how to remain healthy mode of life

by avoiding dangerous and keeping self-saving. But this story was used to understand by later generations that practice makes perfect, or we should follow the objective law.

In addition, the main reason of the changing in connotations of the fables of the Pre-Qin scholars is that they are always adapted by later generations. Most of the fables of the Pre-Qin scholars were rather simple. From the period of Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, the fables in the books such as *Stories of Immortals and Record of the Nether World*, were rewritten by enlarging the stories, adding plots, and even altering the intension.

For example, the image of the swift horse in the fables of the Pre-Qin Scholars was important image used to express the thoughts of authors. But in fables of the Han dynasty, the meaning of the image swift horse has changed greatly. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the issue of talented scholars directly influenced the fate of the state. So the pre-Qin fables focused on the fate of the Bo Le and the swift-horse. In the fables of *Zhuangzi*, the story about Bo Le and the swift horse mainly was used to express that it was Bo Le's fault to make the swift horse bound in tragic, so as to show his belief that an unrestrained life is conforming with the nature. In autocratic society, the scholars became tools of imperial politics, thus their own individualities were suppressed. This is the reason that literature works about frustrated swift horse was so prevalent in Han and Wei period. The image of horse was the symbolism of tragedy. For example, the story about Bo Le and the swift horse in *Huainan Zi*, expresses that it was a great fortune for a horse to meet Bo Le and be appreciated. Even nowadays, Bo Le is still a laudatory title for a person who knows and recommends the talent. In the essay "Ma Shuo" of Han Yu in the Tang Dynasty, the unappreciated swift horse was used to analogy the image of suppressed and neglected scholars.

Conclusion

In brief, in the process of transmitting in 2000 years, fables of the Pre-Qin scholars have evolved constantly. Their expression, function, and meaning have changed in response to the transformation of politics and society. Nowadays understanding these changes well, we may further study how the contemporary literary texts were influenced by the political background, and deeply explore how to interpret and transmit ancient classics represented by the Pre-Qin scholars.

References

- Fan, T. T. (2013). A Brief discussion for the influence of "Shuo Yuan" to the Pre-Qin fables (Master's thesis, Northwest Normal University, 2013), 22-27.
- Gan, T. Q. (1996). A Treatise on Ancient Chinese Fables. *Journal of Sichuan University: Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition*, 96(04), 54-59.
- Quan, E. L. (2010). Study of fables in Han Dynasty, Wei, Jin and the Northern and Southern Dynasties (Ph.D. thesis, Fudan University, 2010), 19-33, 80-84.
- Yuan, Y. (2013). The Re-emergence of fables in the Pre-Qin period and Han Dynasties. *Journal of Nanchang Hangkong University: Social Sciences*, 15(02), 74-81.
- Yue, J. X. (2018). Study on the Parable of the Allegory in the Prose of the Pre-Qin Dynasty (Master's thesis, Ludong University, 2018), 44-49.