

# Research on the Legends of Yang Shen\*

Xuewei Hu

Research School of Social Sciences  
Northwest Minzu University  
Lanzhou, China 730030

**Abstract**—Folk legend is an art narrative that shows the spiritual world of the people in an oral form. There are a lot of legends with characteristics about Yang Shen in Yunnan, Sichuan and other places. They include interesting episodes of his early youth, extraordinary talent as the "Number One Scholar", the journey in Southern Sichuan and anecdotes in Yunnan, etc. With the characteristics of narrativity, emotionality and nationality, these legends are of great significance in emotional catharsis and multi-ethnic cultural exchange, etc.

**Keywords**—folk narrative; legends about Yang Shen; narrativity; emotionality; nationality

## I. INTRODUCTION

With fate adverse and circumstance unfavorable all his life, Yang Shen was banished for speaking out against wrongs and got no pardon until he died in a strange land. As the only Number One Scholar, Yang Shen was relegated from the national political and cultural center Shuntian Prefecture, Beijing to Yongchang wei, Yunnan, the border area inhabited by ethnic minorities. There, he share happiness with the people and rid them of harm, and his ideas and literary tastes changed greatly. There are a lot of legends with rich content and distinctive features about Yang Shen in Sichuan, where he was born, and Yunnan, where he was exiled.

In Yunnan, Sichuan and other places spread the legends of Yang Shen. People of all ethnic groups all admire his brave character, sympathize with his ill-fated life and speak highly of his noble integrity. The legends quoted in this paper are mainly collected from the "Legends of Yang Sheng'an in Yunnan" ("Sheng'an" is one of his art-names) compiled by Zhang Xilu of Bai nationality (Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1982) and the "Legends of Yang Sheng'an" compiled by the Sichuan Branch of China Folk Literature and Art Research Association and Yang Sheng'an Research Society of Xindu County (Sichuan Literature & Art Publishing House, 1986). These two books have different titles and contents, and have 61 legends all together, mainly including interesting episodes of his early youth,

\*Project: Special Funds Project for Basic Scientific Research Operations of Central Universities Funding Postgraduates of Northwest Minzu University (Project No.: Yxm2019011).

extraordinary talent as the "Number One Scholar", the journey in Southern Sichuan and anecdotes in Yunnan, etc.<sup>1</sup>

There are 10 legends of the interesting episodes of his early youth recording Yang Shen's uncommon birth and remarkable intelligence, namely "The Birth of Number One Scholar Yang", "Legend of 'Children Weir'", "Number One Scholar Yang and Baoguang Temple", "The Second Line of a Couplet 'gu huang mi bai fan ru shuang' ('谷黄米白饭如霜', yellow grain, white rice and frostlike steamed rice)", "Bridge of Gentleman Yang", "The Origin of Guihu Lake", "The Strange Ape of Diancang Mountain in Dali", "Student Respected by the Buddha" and "Edge burst on the scene".

There are 13 legends of his extraordinary talent as the "Number One Scholar" recording his remarkable talents, namely "Hold the Palm", "Famous Number One Scholar Became a Poet of Song", "Solving the Unsolved Antithetical Couplet in the 'Number One Scholar Fang'", "Punishing the Lord of Fire", "Clever Device for Tribute Rice Exemption", "Mocking the Emperor Cleverly", "Being Sent into Exile on Behalf of the Emperor I", "Being Sent into Exile on Behalf of the Emperor II", "Assassin became confidant", "Acknowledgement of Teacher", "Why is the Plain Area in Chengdu so Broad", "Bringing Reproach to the Emperor Cleverly", "Number One Scholar Being Exiled to Biji Pass".

There are 12 legends of the interesting episodes of his journey in Southern Sichuan, mainly his experience of making friends and traveling in the southern Sichuan, namely "Number One Scholar and the Longma Pond", "Befriending Poetry a Mate at the Lantern Show", "Master and Servant Making Fun of the Evil Monk Together", "Devising a Stratagem to Distributing Imperial-cereals", "King of Hell Asking Him for His Scripts and Paintings", "Cursing Treacherous Court Official When Drunk", "Homesickness in the Gratitude Pagoda", "Number One Scholar Yang in Qionglai", "Number One Scholar Yang Roamed Southern Sichuan", "Visiting the Poor and Asking About Their Suffering in Fengling", "Water-avoidance Pearl" and "Number One Scholar Yang Saved the Old Dragon at Chixi".

There are 26 legends of his anecdotes in Yunnan, namely, "Number One Scholar Yang Pretending to Be Mad", "Number One Scholar Yang Expelling the Evil Spirit",

<sup>1</sup> There are some variant characters in the legends in Sichuan. In addition, there are rich contents in the legends of Yang Shen, and the statistics need to be further supplemented.

"Outsmarting Corrupt Official", "Mocking the Imperial Commissioner with a Drinking Game Verse", "The Shuangbi Temple", "The Origin of the Yubo Pool", "Removing Crooked Officials with Posthumous Papers", "Couplet Satirizing the Gentry", "Ridiculing the Imperial Commissioner", "The Marriage Between Yi and Han Nationalities", "Legend of the Zhengta Pool", "Origin of Chinese Toon Planting in Bai Nationality", "Bamboo Nail Fish in Erhai Lake", "Learning to be a Hermit", "Nine Inscriptions in Yunjue Temple", "Distress in Weibao Mountain", "The legend of the Ximachi Village (xi ma chi means 'horsepond)', "Celebrating the New Year", "Mount Number One Scholar in the Stone Forest",

"The Story in the Little Porterhouse in Shiping", "Iron Building", "Inscribing a Fan poem", "The Legend of the Poem 'Stone Ox', "Stop meeting", "Venting His Spleen Even After Death" and "Number One Scholar Yang Making His Presence and Power Felt". Spending most of his life in Yunnan, Yang Shen had become a legendary figure in the hearts of the people of Yunnan.

Folk legend is an art narrative that shows the spiritual world of the people in an oral form. From the legend of Yang Shen in Yunnan area, the folk narration characteristics of ethnic minority can be summarized as follows. First, the folk narrations of ethnic minorities are mostly simple stories with linearity, clear themes and concentrated conflicts. Second, the feelings are simple and warm, expressing the praise of Yang Shen and the abomination of corrupt officials and crafty sycophants in the dualism structure. Third, the national color is bright, which is mainly reflected in the national customs, festival ceremony and other aspects.

## II. NARRATIVITY

Narration is the basic meaning of folk narration, and narrativity is an important feature of it. Ethnic minority areas are rich in folk literature resources. The legends of Yang Shen have been spreading in Yunnan for hundreds of years. Its narrativity is mainly manifested in two aspects: prose narrative language and structural narrative time.

### A. Prose Narrative Language

The main forms of folk narration of ethnic minorities are prose, verse and combination of prose and verse, etc. The legend of Yang Shen in Yunnan is mainly spread in forms of narration, with folk songs and nursery rhymes sometimes mixed in. "Prose narration is more about the promotion of plots focus on more on conflicts, and the content is mostly a simple story."<sup>2</sup> With a clear theme, the legends of Yang Shen aim to narrate Yang Shen's daily life and show his personality charm. For example, in "Learning to be a Hermit", Yang Shen led a life of farming, reading and writing; according to "Celebrating the New Year", Yang Shen lived a poor life and had no rice to eat even in the Spring Festival; and from the "Ridiculing the Imperial Commissioner", it can be seen that Yang Shen had an

<sup>2</sup> Lin Jifu. *Folk Narrative and Intangible Cultural Heritage* [M]. Beijing: China Society Press, 2012. 12.

unyielding character and wouldn't stoop to compromise for a pardon. The plots of the legends are simple. Each legend focuses on presenting a contradiction and solving a problem. The creation of folk legend is intended to conform to the character setting of the subject of legends. The main body of Yang Shen's legend is the literati, and there are many poems, songs and couplets in the legend. The prose narrative language conforms to the identity of the literati, and the combination of folk narration and literati narration is of great folk wisdom.

### B. Structural Narrative Time

There are many common terms to present time in the folk legend, which mostly appear at the beginning or in the end of the legend. The beginning can be "one day", "long time ago" and "once upon a time", etc., and the end is mostly the hero overcoming difficulties, to achieve a happiness divorced from reality. "The ingenious part of this narrative is that it separates the audience from the daily life, establishes the distance between the narrative world and the present world from the very beginning, and implies that the story world is a world of the past, a world left much to people's imagination, and a world away from the narrator." The "Bringing Reproach to the Emperor Cleverly" begins with "One night in the middle of summer"<sup>3</sup>, and ends with Yang Shen being unpunished after admonishing to "discuss over the most solemn of ceremonies". "Couplet Satirizing the Gentry" begins with "in the past"<sup>4</sup> and ends with the gentry being humiliated and an unhappy halted banquet. This kind of structural narrative time forms the effective closure of legend telling and produces a unique narrative world. In this kind of narration, the characters and the narrator are separated. With a few exceptions, the ending leaves room for commentary by the narrator, pulling the listener back to reality. For example, the "Iron Building" ends with "The iron building in Baoshan is still there at present. That is, 'He had intended to ridicule the other for 'living in solitude', but what he didn't predict is that the 'iron building' is bustling with activity today."<sup>5</sup>

## III. EMOTIONALITY

Folk narrative has certain selectivity, and one of the selection criteria is emotion. Folk creation often has sharp contrast of emotion, which is the side reflection of public emotion. The public feelings expressed are either ardent love or deep hatred. "The active images and expressive contents in the field of folk narration are full of emotional factors, and the narrator uses emotion to shape the narrative world of people and tell the story of the narrative world."<sup>6</sup> The feelings expressed in the legends about Yang Shen are simple and warm, representing the praise of Yang Shen and

<sup>3</sup> Zhang Xilu et al. compiled. *Legends of Yang Sheng'an in Yunnan* [M]. Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1982. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Zhang Xilu et al. compiled. *Legends of Yang Sheng'an in Yunnan* [M]. Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1982. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Zhang Xilu et al. compiled. *Legends of Yang Sheng'an in Yunnan* [M]. Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1982. 85

<sup>6</sup> Lin Jifu. *Folk Narrative and Intangible Cultural Heritage* [M]. Beijing: China Society Press, 2012. 13.

the abomination of corrupt officials and crafty sycophants in the dualism structure.

#### A. Poverty and Richness

In the "Couplet Satirizing the Gentry", the son of the local gentry Liu Banbao earned himself the name of Xiucui (one who passed the imperial examination at the county level) and the Liu family provided dinners and banquets while playing music and firing cannons for celebration. Liu Banbao sent people to invite Yang Shen to dinner, and asked for a pair of couplets. But when the guests looked at the couplets, they found it read "Dogs can't wear official hats with their ears down; Pillow is still a straw bag even with embroider on. And the top scroll read "Do you have any sense of shame".<sup>7</sup> Yang Shen spares no efforts to satirize the local rich businessman and gentry. According to the "Visiting the Poor and Asking About Their Suffering in Fengling", Yang Shen met the Lady Feng and her daughter when passing by Jingyan County and helped them to open a teahouse to become prosperous.

#### B. Civilians and Officials

The story of "铁楼" ("Iron Building") took place in "Yongchang", where he was exiled, which was "Baoshan", a place where peoples of Han, Hui, Dai and Jingpo, etc. lived together. Because of the exploitative ruling of the headmen and corrupt officials, people there lived in misery. A headman official invited the Number One Scholar Yang to inscribe the tablet. Yang Shen wrote "铁楼" (which is supposed to be "铁楼"), for which the official fainted for exasperation. "The left part of '楼' is '金', referring to the first people of Dai nationality, namely the place of Yongchang; the right part is '夷', referring to the people living there. The radical the left side of '楼' was supposed to be '木', which he wrote as '水', making the whole character '楼'. '楼' means scraping up the upper layer of earth, namely 'squeezing money out of the people'. So the meaning of what he wrote was a building built with the money squeezed from local people".<sup>8</sup>

#### C. Good and Evil Behaviors

The legend of "Number One Scholar Yang Making His Presence and Power Felt" has been spreading among the Bai people living near Erhai Lake. There was a young fisherman called Duan Wu in Haiyin village beside Erhai Lake. Hanging on together with his sixty-year-old mother, he led an impoverished life. Yang Shen gave Duan Wu a "gold-producing stone" so that the life of people living there got better. However, the local tyrant Dong Dafu threw Duan Wu into Erhai Lake in order to seize the "gold-producing stone". Later, with the help of Yang Shen, Duan Wu went back to his mother.

<sup>7</sup> Zhang Xilu et al. compiled. *Legends of Yang Sheng'an in Yunnan* [M]. Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1982. 24

<sup>8</sup> Zhang Xilu et al. compiled. *Legends of Yang Sheng'an in Yunnan* [M]. Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1982. 82.

#### D. Loyalty and Crafty Sycophant

In the "Number One Scholar Being Exiled to Biji Pass", a treacherous court official told the emperor that Yang Shen had been exiled to Yunnan with treasures. The emperor sent someone to check, only to find that the chest contained only water and earth. Yang Shen said he wanted to bring the capital's soil and water to Yunnan to make a statue of the emperor, and pay homage to it every morning and evening. The informer thus committed a crime of deceiving the king and his head was cut off to display to the public.

The legends of Yang Shen was out of the love of the minority people in Yunnan for Yang Shen, with people's general value judgment and is the product of national emotions. "Emotion is the basis of the formation of folk narration and the premise of its inheritance. The emotion of folk narration includes national emotion, regional emotion and individual emotion. National emotion and regional emotion are the common emotion of the people within the nation, village or community."<sup>9</sup> In the folk narration of poor and rich, civilian and officials, good and evil, loyalty and crafty sycophant, justice always triumphs over evil, treacherous officials are killed, and the people come first. This is the embodiment of spiritual rebellion and carnival in the folk and the expression of folk emotion incisively and vividly.

### IV. NATIONALITY

Nationality is the unique feature of folk narration of minority nationalities. Yunnan, Baoshan area in particular, was a typical area where various ethnic groups lived together. The legends about Yang Shen have incorporated the customs and festivals with national characteristics, reflecting the style of multi-ethnic cultural exchanges.

In the "Mount Number One Scholar in the Stone Forest", the "Torch Festival" and "wrestling match" in Lunan area in the southeast of Kunming were mentioned. Yi, Sani, Axi and Miao people celebrate the torch festival in the stone forest on the 24th day of the sixth month of the lunar calendar: another example is the "huazi fair". "According to the "Venting His Spleen Even After Death", Yang Shen was feeble and sick in his old age and relied on the treatment of Dong Canglin, an elderly man of Bai nationality. Because of exorbitant taxes, Dong could not sustain himself and often begged for money. Yang Shen got rid of the evils for the people though beheading a group of treacherous court official by a coffin of which the bottom boards were removed used to carry him after his death. The legends of Yang Shen in Yunnan are not only spread among the Bai nationality and other minority nationalities, but also among the Han people. The use of homophony, metaphor and other narrative techniques is an important embodiment. "Number One Scholar Being Exiled to Biji Pass" and "Stop Meeting", etc. are all examples.

The national character of ethnic minority folk narration is also reflected in the multi-ethnic cultural exchange. In "The Marriage Between Yi and Han Nationalities", Yang Shen

<sup>9</sup> Lin Jifu. *Folk Narrative and Intangible Cultural Heritage* [M]. Beijing: China Society Press, 2012. 14.

solved the problem of ditching water for drinking and irrigation for Jiantou Village and Yingpan Village, and made a match between the Yi girl Xia Yan and the Han boy Chen Qiang who get married on the Mid-Autumn Festival. "Legend of the Zhengta Pool" tells the story of Yang Shen and his good friend Li Zhongxi (Li Yuanyang of Bai nationality literati) who worked together to make the Chongsheng Temple Tower which was canted due to the earthquake become right. In "The Legend of the Poem "Stone Ox", Yang Shen and Li Zhongxi traveled together to Jianchuan Shibao Mountain, visited Shizhong Temple, and watched the figures of Nanzhao kingdom. "Origin of Chinese Toon Planting in Bai Nationality" tells the story of Yang Shen guiding the Bai people to eat Chinese toon. In the "Distress in Weibao Mountain", when Yang Shen rode a mule to Weibao Mountain, local villagers mistakenly thought him was a dishonest trader caught him up. After the misunderstanding was cleared up, local headman asked a person to tell about "Jiulong" mythology and the story of the "Burning the Songming Building" and guided Yang Shen to visit the relics of Xinuluo, ancestor of Nanzhao country. Yang Shen collected a lot of information about the origin of Nanzhao Kingdom and wrote it into the "Unofficial History of Nanzhao Kingdom". Folk legend According to the "Iron Building", the Number One Scholar Yang ran a school especially for the children of poor Han, Hui, Dai and Jingpo people, which earned him the love and respect from local people."<sup>10</sup> In the soil of minority culture, folklore and folk culture coexist, and folk narration with national characteristics is produced.

- [5] Lin Jifu. Folk Narrative and Intangible Cultural Heritage [M]. Beijing: China Society Press, 2012. (in Chinese)

## V. CONCLUSION

There are both generality and individuality in the narrative features of the legends about Yang Shen, and there are both prose narration and verse insertion. The emotional expression is warm and sincere, with distinct love and hatred. In multi-ethnic cultural exchanges, unique ethnic characteristics are displayed. In addition, the legends are also regional, legendary and performative. For example, there are local dialects, local customs, and narrative plots like Yang Shen made his presence felt and the Number One Scholar pinned flowers on his head, etc. all of which are to be further explored.

## REFERENCES

- [1] (Qing) Zhang Tingyu et al. History of Ming Dynasty [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974. (in Chinese)
- [2] Zhang Xilu et al. compiled. Legends of Yang Sheng'an in Yunnan [M]. Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1982. (in Chinese)
- [3] Sichuan Branch of China Folk Literature and Art Research Association and Yang Sheng'an Research Society of Xindu County compiled. Legends of Yang Sheng'an [M]. Sichuan Literature & Art Publishing House, 1986. (in Chinese)
- [4] Feng Jiahua. Critical Biography of Yang Shen [M]. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1998. (in Chinese)

---

<sup>10</sup> Zhang Xilu et al. compiled. Legends of Yang Sheng'an in Yunnan [M]. Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1982. 79.