

# Using Chinese Folktales in the Classroom

By Howard Giskin

Teaching Chinese folktales is a challenging but ultimately rewarding activity that can be a way to teach students core cultural beliefs and practices of the Chinese people. Teaching folk literature, however, presents some special challenges to the instructor, since folk literature differs in some crucial ways from more familiar forms of literature such as poetry, fiction and non-fiction narrative, novels and drama. Perhaps one of the key areas of difficulty when using folktales is that they are sometimes constructed in a way that makes them seem transparent. Often students will say that they enjoy a story, but just can't seem to find much to say about it, and on other occasions students have been less generous upon their initial contact with Chinese folktales. My evolving response is one of patience in the knowledge that if given the opportunity students will warm up to Chinese folk literature, and not merely enjoy it but have something to say about it as well. The following, then, is a brief attempt to retrace some of my steps in learning how to better meet students' needs when discussing Chinese folktales, followed by a folktale I have used in several classes, along with the type of analysis that might be used to shed light on the tale.

An experience all teachers have had is introducing literature one loves only to have students greet it with dampened enthusiasm. In my case, since I had collected, edited, and adapted the folktales I wanted to teach (stories I collected when I was in the People's Republic on an academic exchange in 1993–4 at Northeast University in Shenyang), I felt the temptation to be annoyed at students' apparent lack of appreciation. Instead, however, I took the most obvious next step: I asked my students to comment, in an open-ended way, about the folktales they had read. The responses surprised me somewhat, though perhaps shouldn't have. Among students' reactions/complaints were (1) the stories all seemed simple, almost as if they were for children; (2) there were too many stock characters, such as cruel mothers-in-law, poor, kind orphans, and evil landlords; (3) the stories were hard to relate to, since they didn't know enough about Chinese culture and history; (4) the stories were nearly all very brief, some only a page long; (5) some of the stories didn't seem to pull together at the end, leaving the reader with an "unsatisfied" feeling after finishing the tale; (6) the stories seemed to be patterned, and somewhat predictable; (7) the stories were moralistic; and finally (8) some of them were just plain hard to make sense of.

The students' accounts of the stories we had read reflected their genuine frustration with an unfamiliar genre; the students' reactions were, however, a valuable point of departure for an in-depth discussion of folk literature, and furthermore, a key to presenting Chinese folktales in a way that led to an enjoyable and profitable learning experience. A natural starting point is that folktales are very different from other forms of literature. An ancient genre

dating from before the dawn of recorded history and the written word, folktales do nearly everything modern short stories are *not* supposed to do; so while it is tempting to read folk literature as simply communally created stories, this won't work if we continue to use the written short story as a model. Most short stories, good ones at least, do not pretend to put forward anything resembling a moral—their purpose is not to inculcate a particular belief or encourage a particular kind of behavior, but rather to raise complex issues in an aesthetically pleasing way. Folktales, on the other hand, are meant to teach us something, and to encourage particular kinds of behavior, though this in no way makes them simple.

So folktales are doing something very different from short stories. They are not short stories, though they *are* short and *are* stories; and I would argue that most (perhaps all) of the aspects of folktales that trouble students can be explained by the tales' radically different function than short stories. The stories appear simple, though they are in fact not simple, since much social, psychological, ethical, mythical, religious, and historical information is encoded into the text in the form of symbols and other literary and structural devices. There are many stock characters in folk literature, but these are meant to be there, and function as cultural templates in which readers/listeners may see repeated in tale after tale the central character motifs of a society. The stories are indeed sometimes difficult to relate to, since, by their very nature they are tales or stories created by, and most often about, the common folk and incorporate a large amount of culturally specific information. The stories are frequently brief, though length varies considerably, and seems as much to be a function of the particular version of the story one happens to hear or record, and the personal style of the storyteller.

Some folktales don't end in ways one would expect a story, at least a traditional story, to end—and here I would suggest that in folktales aesthetic concerns are generally subordinated to the didactic. Since the primary aim of a folktale is to teach a lesson (often admittedly a rather complex and sometimes ambiguous one), aesthetically pleasing endings, while not specifically excluded, do not form part of a story unless the didactic aspect of the tale can remain intact; the stories are predictable, in some sense, because they are meant to be, because lessons, especially important ones, bear repeating often; and finally, folktales are sometimes difficult to make sense of (but not inherently more so than other forms of literature), since we must move beyond a literal level of interpretation in order to appreciate the deeper levels of meaning embedded in the text, seeing such tales as complex repositories of symbolic, metaphoric, allusive, imagistic, mythic, archetypal, cultural, moral, and humanistic material.<sup>1</sup>

The following story is one I have taught a number of times in various undergraduate literature classes, and takes place in a

remote part of China. It seems to stress the idea that no matter where you are, or who you are, when good fortune comes, it is our responsibility to share our luck with others. While most find this story entertaining, there is, as I will later argue, much in the way of concealed meaning in the text.

### THE MAGIC KETTLE<sup>2</sup>

In the middle of Jiangxi Province, high in the mountains, an old man lived in his little wooden house. He was very proud of his home and never tired of admiring the whiteness of his straw and the pretty wooden walls, which in warm weather allowed the fragrance of the trees and flowers to come in.

One day he stood looking at the mountains when he heard a rumbling noise in the room behind him. He turned around and in the corner he saw a rusty old iron kettle, which had not seen the light of day for many years. The old man did not know how the kettle got there. He cleaned off the dust and took it into the kitchen, saying with a smile, "That was luck. A good kettle costs money. My other kettle is nearly worn out now." He took the old kettle off the fire, then filled the new one with water and put it on the fire.

No sooner was the water getting warm when a strange thing happened. The man, standing nearby, thought he must be dreaming. First, the handle of the kettle gradually changed its shape and became a head. Out of the body sprang four paws, and in the first few minutes the man found himself watching not a kettle, but a fox.

The fox jumped off the fire and bounded around the room like a cat, running up the walls and over the ceiling. The old man was afraid. He cried to a neighbor for help, and the two of them managed to catch the fox and shut it up safely in a wooden box. Then, quite exhausted, they sat down and talked about what they should do with this troublesome little beast. At last they decided to sell it and asked a child passing by to send them a certain tradesman named Wang.

When Wang arrived, the old man told him he had something that he wanted to get rid of, and he lifted the lid of the wooden box. To the old man's surprise, no fox was inside, only the old kettle. It was certainly very strange, but the man remembered what had taken place on the fire and did not want to keep the kettle in the house any longer. After a little bargaining about the price, Wang went away carrying the kettle. Wang had not gone very far before he felt the kettle getting heavier and heavier. By the time he had reached home he was so tired that he was thankful to put the kettle down in the corner of his room and forget about it.

Around midnight, however, he was awakened by a loud noise in the corner where the kettle stood, so he raised himself up in bed to see what it was. Nothing was there except the kettle. He thought he must have been dreaming and fell asleep again, only to be roused a second time by the same noise. He jumped up and went to

the corner and, by the light of the lamp he always kept burning, he saw that the kettle had become a fox, which was running around chasing its tail. How should he deal with the creature? The tradesman was much troubled, and it was almost morning before he managed to get any sleep. When he opened his eyes in the morning, there was no fox, only the old kettle in the corner.

As soon as he had cleaned his house, Wang set off to tell his story to a friend. The friend listened quietly and did not appear too surprised, for in his youth he had heard something about a wonder-working kettle.

"Go and travel with it; display it," the friend suggested, "and you'll become a rich man. But be careful to ask the fox's permission. It would also be wise to perform some magic ceremonies to prevent it from running away at the sight of people."

Wang thanked his friend for his instructions, which he followed exactly. The fox agreed, so Wang built a booth and hung a notice outside inviting people to come and witness the most wonderful scene. They came in crowds, and the kettle was passed from hand to hand. People were allowed to examine it all over and even look inside. Then Wang took it back and set it on the platform, commanding it to become a fox. In an instant the handle began to change into a head and the spout into a tail, while the four paws appeared at the sides.

"Dance," said Wang, and the fox did its steps. Then people could not stand still any longer and they began to dance, too. Day after day the booth was so full that it was hardly possible to enter it. Wang became a rich man, yet did not feel happy. He was an honest man and thought he owed some of his wealth to the man from whom he had bought the kettle. One morning, he put a hundred gold pieces into the kettle, and hanging it on his arm, he returned to the old man who had sold it to him.

"I have no right to keep this kettle any longer," he added when he had finished his story, "so I have brought it back to you. Inside you will find a hundred gold pieces I have put there as the price of its hire."

The man thanked Wang, saying that few people would have been as honest. The kettle brought them both luck. Everything went well with both men until they died, which they did when they were very old and respected by everyone.

#### Analysis

"The Magic Kettle," said to have taken place during the Ming Dynasty, is a tale about humans' relationship to the cosmos, but more particularly about how right action brings about a kind of cooperative relationship between nature and humans, which, incidentally, we are free to embrace or reject.

Everything in the first paragraph of the story, the old man's location high in the mountains in the middle of Jiangxi, his little wooden house, his pride in his home, the whiteness of his straw and the pretty wooden walls, "which in warm weather allowed the fragrance of the trees and flowers to come in," evokes images of simplicity, purity, remoteness from civilization, peace, beauty,

communion with nature, and a peculiar permeability with and receptivity to the forces of nature. The old man, according to a pattern seen often in folktales, is first established as someone worthy of having good things happen to him. Yet this old man, even by folktale standards, is exceptionally good, and perhaps for this reason does not have to be tested as so many other (mostly younger) folktale protagonists must be.

The old man, though clearly deserving of good things, is not shown asking for the gift of the magic kettle, for good persons, the story suggests, do not look for gifts but rather simply go about their daily chores without thought of gain. The first several paragraphs of the tale, in fact, clearly imply that the old man is unaware of any special relationship he may have with nature, a curious state reminiscent of Taoist and Zen ideas suggesting a state of oneness with nature in which an individual is not consciously aware of this union. The old man, in short, lives naturally in a state of peace and harmony in nature, not wanting anything in particular (though he needs the kettle), a seemingly paradoxical situation in which the very act of not wanting makes him more likely to receive.

The kettle's mysterious appearance, signaled by a "rumbling noise," therefore represents the first hint of an irruption of the supernatural into the world of the visible, a kind of gift from the unseen world. Described as "rusty," and "iron," and not having "seen the light of day for many years," the kettle suggests association with earthy forces lying dormant until roused by indeterminate causes. It is curious that the old man, though in part responsible for the appearance of the fox through his receptivity, nevertheless feels fear as the creature bounds around the room like a cat, and misses out (at least for the moment) on using the fox for his own benefit.

The fox's unexpected transformation from a fox back to an iron kettle further underscores the old man's lack of understanding of what he is dealing with. So while the old man's uncomplicated, peaceful nature is sufficient to call forth the fox spirit, more is needed if the fox-kettle is to benefit humans. Interesting here is the fact that the kettle gets turned over to Wang, who seems in no particular way a likely guardian of the fox-kettle, but who, nevertheless, through accident or perhaps design is made the steward of the object through a series of unusual circumstances that he does not, initially at least, voluntarily choose. Once again, a "loud noise" (that awakens Wang) signals an intrusion of the unseen into the world of the visible, and Wang, just as the old man, thinks he may be dreaming but is "roused a second time by the same noise."

As happened with the old man, instead of the kettle there is a fox, this time chasing its tail in an exuberant show, evoking an image of plentiful but unfocused energy (the circular motion of the fox suggests unactualized potential—a kind of dynamo) waiting to be harnessed towards some useful end. The fox-kettle has, up until this point in the tale, been merely a curiosity or annoyance, but now becomes not merely a natural oddity but rather something to be used to do someone some good; in particular, the kettle-fox will make Wang rich and entertain others. Yet, significantly, Wang's friend makes a point of telling Wang that should he travel with the kettle he will become rich, but that he must not

forget to "ask the fox's permission" as well as "perform some magic ceremonies to prevent it from running away at the sight of people," all of which suggests the rather delicate balance necessary to maintain the harmony required for the intelligent energy of the unseen to work in human's favor. Said another way, inappropriate action on the part of humans could easily break the spell needed for human and fox spirit to work in harmony.

Finally, the appropriate precautions having been taken, the fox co-exists with (in a sense, even serves) Wang, and entertains others—this seems to be something the fox willingly does, though Wang's friend's advice signals how easy it would be to lose the gift that has come to them. The conclusion suggested by the tale is that nature (the supernatural) will cooperate with humans under certain conditions, but only if "asked," or, in other words, if dealt with on its own terms—a lesson reminiscent of ancient tribal teachings that stress mutual cooperation between humans and the forces of nature—it almost comes down to common sense (though in the modern world we often miss the obvious when it comes to nature), that natural phenomena cannot be forced to work for us, but that their inner nature must be understood and then harnessed in the way a current is used to propel a boat down river. Once Wang reaches an "understanding," the fox-kettle "allows" itself to be handled by people, and then upon "command" the handle changes in an instant "into a head and the spout into a tail, while the four paws appeared at the sides." Amazingly, the fox even dances upon command, causing all those in its presence to dance along (the dancing is emblematic of joy, a village communion/state of harmony).

Ultimately, however, the story suggests that it is not enough to use supernatural (but really just natural) gifts merely to help oneself, another common sense lesson, but one with important implications for the Chinese cosmo-vision. The story, then, addresses not only our relationship to nature but provides an unambiguous warning against avarice, a dual philosophical and practical message so typical of folk literature. It is this unique melding of the abstract and the concrete, of probing the complexities of existence and giving advice for living a good life, that can make folktales attractive to teachers and students alike. ■

#### NOTES

1. See Howard Giskin, "Chinese Folktales and the Family," in *An Introduction to Chinese Culture through the Family*, ed. Howard Giskin and Bettye S. Walsh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 123–36.
2. "The Magic Kettle" is taken from my collection, *Chinese Folktales* (Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC/Contemporary, 1997), 78–80. For general suggestions regarding teaching the stories in *Chinese Folktales*, as well as discussion and teaching suggestions for individual tales, see my *Instructor's Manual: Chinese Folktales* (Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC/Contemporary, 1997).

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