Enlightenment or Root-Seeking: On the loss of voice of the national meaning of Grimm's Fairy Tales

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Abstract: Grimm’s Fairy Tales, originally, is a collection of German folk stories compiled by the Grimm brothers. Grimm Brothers were considered it as a resource for reviving German national culture. However, after being introduced to China, its distinctive national significance remained in a state of "silence". Studying the introduction of Grimm's Fairy Tales into China during the late Qing dynasty, it is not difficult to find that there was still the possibility of promoting the national significance of these tales. However, due to the intellectuals' insistence on the social transformation ideology of "transforming national character", they increasingly deviated from national traditions and favored enlightenment ideology, so the national significance of Grimm's Fairy Tales was ultimately suppressed under the discourse of enlightenment.

1 Introduction

Grimm’s Fairy Tales, originally titled Children’s and Household Tales is a collection of German folk stories compiled by the Grimm brothers. The Grimm brothers were also influenced by the romantic movement whilst assisting Brentano and Armin in compiling poetry collections, who played a significant role in forming what Grimm’s Fairy Tales were during its beginning. From this, the Grimm brothers began a collection of folk fairy tales which marked the beginning of Grimm’s Fairy Tales. Although the brothers insisted on saying their collection was written by adults, it still could not change the stereotype in China where people regarded it as children’s books. This was not until the second half of the 19th century, with the reform of the German domestic education system, where the situation began to change, redefining the stereotype. The image of Grimm’s Fairy Tales as a classic children’s literature has gradually faded, but its national significance has been unprecedentedly highlighted. Although, when it first entered China in the early 20th century, its national significance did not also get transmitted to China. This is not a result of the translator's negligence but rather the result of selective ignorance. Grimm's Fairy Tales, a quintessential creation of the German Romantic movement, was born out of a pragmatic approach towards revitalizing the nation. The ebb and flow of its national significance are emblematic of the decisions made by progressive German intellectuals with regards to the trajectory of national progress. Tracing the reasons behind the loss of national significance during the translation process of Grimm’s Fairy Tales aims to observe, from a specific and detailed perspective, the internal mechanism of assimilating heterogeneity and producing meaning in Enlightenment discourse. In this way, it provides us with useful references for reflecting on various debates, such as Enlightenment and root-seeking, otherness, and self.

2 Grimm’s Fairy Tales and Herderian Cultural Nationalism.

The origins of Grimm's Fairy Tales are inextricably tied to the German Romantic movement. While pursuing their legal studies at Marburg University, the Grimm brothers were introduced by their professor Savigny to the likes of Brentano and Armin, both influential figures in the Romantic circle in Heidelberg. Guided by their teachings, the brothers delved into the realm of Germanic folklore. As torchbearers of later German Romanticism, the Heidelberg group and their folklore research were deeply indebted to the pioneering works of Herder, whose ideas, as noted by Isaiah Berlin, were infused with a cultural nationalist spirit. In fact, Herder's perspectives, rooted in Vico's theories, although never overtly nationalist, often hinted at a proclivity towards cultural nationalism. Under the influence of him, Herder insisted that folk poetry was not fictional but rather the historical archives of a nation, "a mirror of the old German soul"[1], reading folk poetry was like having a dialogue with one's own ancestors and allowed direct access to the ancient spirit of the German people. Moreover, not everyone could appreciate the subtleties of folk songs; only people of the same ethnic group could understand them. Building on this idea, Herder further proposed a sense of belonging and believed that every nation had its own cultural roots. By promoting the Germanic national tradition, one could escape the fate of being assimilated by French Enlightenment ideas. Throughout his life, Herder advocated for the exploration of the roots of Germanic culture through folk literature, hoping to restore the glory of Germanic culture.
and spirit. The Heidelberg Romantic Movement inherited Herder's wishes and, with a profound sense of nationalism, dedicated itself to the compilation and study of folk literature. When assisting Brentano and Arnim in collecting folk songs and compiling poetry collections, the Grimm brothers were also influenced by this romantic movement. They began a six-year collection of folk fairy tales, which marked the beginning of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. From its origins, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* is a product of the German Romantic movement, with a distinct cultural nationalist color.

Although before spreading to the East, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* have been published for a hundred years. During this period, the positioning of the *Grimm's Fairy Tales* in Western academic circles has undergone dramatic changes, especially in Germany, where they were born. Although the Brothers Grimm insisted on saying *This Children and Family Fairy Tales* was written by adults, but it still could not change the stereotype that German regarded it as children's books. Until the second half of the 19th century, with the reform of the German domestic education system, the situation began to change. A reversal occurred. Some reformers believed that fairy tales covered reality with fantasy, which weakened children's critical spirit and did not help to improve the living conditions of the working class at that time. Therefore, they suggested that *Grimm's Fairy Tales* should be excluded from children's education, which also made them as children. The reputation of the literary canon has been weakened. At the same time, since the end of the 19th century, the national significance of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* has been unprecedentedly publicized. In 1895, in Berlin, the capital of Germany, Ernst Sueck delivered a speech titled "The National Significance of Grimm's Fairy Tales". In his speech, he repeatedly emphasized that the value of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* lay not in art but rather in their meaning for the history and future of the Germanic people. Following this, the “German Youth Movement” and “Migratory Bird Movement” partly followed his theory, and their efforts also have indirectly made the relationship between *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and contributed to making national cultural traditions known to more people. It is paradoxical that, although they are both at the transition of the old and new centuries, when the *Grimm's Fairy Tales* entered China, they were endowed with a new identity of “Taixi New Novels” which translates to ‘New novels in the Western World’.

**3 From Subjects to Citizens: The Translations during the Late Qing Dynasty Based on the Purpose of National Liberation.**

On October 30, 1903, the Fable News published an advertisement named *Xin'an Harmonious Translation*, which was marked with the words “Taixi New novels” [2], and used this as the main aspect of the book's marketing. In the advertisement, the author did not mention the relationship between *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and German national traditions at all, but only called the book “a playful translation by Mr. Guisheng Zhou in Shanghai”. Combined with the context at the time, this was easier to understand. During the early stages of the Republic of China, Chinese people did not know much about German literature. According to traditional Chinese literary concepts, “strange tales” such as *Grimm's Fairy Tales* were only regarded as “childish”, “absurd”, “joke translation” [3] articles. Although, it is worth noting that the understanding of foreign novels in the early Republic of China was not as scarce as imagined.

In the same year when *Xin'an Harmonious Translation* was first published, Shu Lin knew that Europeans often used fables for enlightenment [4]. In 1908, when Yuxiu Sun curated the *Fairy Tales* series, one of the factors behind the selection of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* was the knowledge that they had been widely regarded as children’s literature in the West. However, it was not until Zhou introduced the concept of folklore in 1912 that the relationship between *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and German folk traditions was revealed. This may indirectly indicate that the mistake in the Republic of China's positioning of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* was not due to the limitation of knowledge of foreign literature, but rather a lack of interest in German literature itself. According to Pingyuan Chen's statistics, during the translation trend of Western novels during the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, British and French novels accounted for more than 50% of the total, while German novels accounted for only 1% [5]. Therefore, I believe that the mistake in the positioning of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* in the late Qing Dynasty was not solely due to the limitations of contemporary knowledge, but also the result of selective ignorance.

The contempt of German people in the late Qing Dynasty was largely related to Germany’s national power at that time, but as a post-discovery modern country, it also faced political fragmentation and a weak cultural position. Progressive intellectuals can also use Germany as an example or reference to the pursuit of national self-improvement may not necessarily follow the lead of Britain and France. However, after experiencing a series of failures such as the Reform Movement of 1898, Chinese intellectuals gradually accepted Western culture in terms of cultural values and not just the advanced state of Western material civilization. The modern Chinese revolution formed an anti-traditional way, which produced a unique combination of Chinese nationalism and betrayal of tradition.

During a time when Western literature was being introduced to China, Zhou Guisheng mistakenly included *Grimm's Fairy Tales* as part of this literary wave. Despite not fully understanding the purpose or value of these "ghost stories" at the time, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* were seen as a representation of progressive Western thought and thus a valuable cultural resource for enlightening people. Zhou’s belief was that "Without the help of civilization imported from the outside world, it is absolutely difficult to change the stubbornness." [6] He hoped that by incorporating foreign culture, China could renew its civilization and avoid national subjugation and extinction.

However, like many intellectuals of the late Qing Dynasty, Zhou had mixed feelings towards Western civilization. While he recognized its progressiveness, he
also held onto his national self-esteem and the "Sino-barbarian dichotomy." This ambivalence led Zhou to overlook the true implications of the fairy tales when translating them and instead use them as a means to serve his own political ideas. In Zhou's writing, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* were transformed into an empty symbol representing the progressive civilization of the West, serving as a tool for promoting new ideas and morality.

The approach of using *Grimm's Fairy Tales* as an enlightenment resource was continued until the period of Yuxiu Sun. The main and defining difference is that the "people" who are being enlightened are not limited to adults, but also include children who have long been neglected. This is the result of the deepening of enlightenment and the beginning of the association between *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and children's literature. As the crisis facing the nation deepened, the vanguard began to recognize the crucial role that children's education played in improving governance. Children were seen as the future of the Chinese nation, holding the potential to save the nation from peril and rejuvenate the country. However, the traditional children's books aimed to instill loyalty and obedience in feudal dynasties, which was no longer adequate for progressive intellectuals who sought to cultivate a new generation of citizens. Therefore, they called for new educational ideas to nurture children, with emphasis on providing them with fresh children's literature.

However, this brought another issue. Driven by the urgent need to educate the public, many schools began to use textbooks, and "the language style of the articles included in textbooks should be solemn and serious, and it is inappropriate to be humorous or colloquial", which was not effective because "children don't like solemn and serious words".

In order to innovate the "style of textbooks" and improve the effect of enlighteners' preaching and teaching, Sun decided to compile a series of *Fairy Tales* specially for children. *Grimm's Fairy Tales* belonged to the camp of ghost novels at that time [7], and whether it is the form of storytelling "novels" or the absurd "legends" in them, they are deeply loved by children. Therefore, based on the editor's clear awareness of readers, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* were naturally selected into *Fairy Tales* and since then, it has left the impression that it's popular amongst children's books. However, this may be a "misreading" behavior that suspends the origin and confuses the concept of style. It aims to use the formal advantages of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* to achieve the goal of "enlightening people's wisdom" and "enhancing people's morality" by intellectuals in the late Qing Dynasty. In order to meet the purpose of enlightening the public, Sun did not choose all the chapters of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, but "mainly in the three categories of fables, storytelling, and science" [8], when translating, they often add, delete, and adapt according to personal will, and follow the format of "Pinghua" [9] from the Song Dynasty and Yuan Dynasty, adding a so-called "comment" introduction before the main text, as a way to strengthen the educational value of these fairy tales and convey their own ideas.

To summarize, from Guisheng Zhou to Yuxiu Sun, it can be seen that *Grimm's Fairy Tales* has strayed far its original edition in the process of spreading to the East. With the advancement of cultural reform and the new national movement, progressive intellectuals increasingly used it as a cultural resource to transforming national character. However, the deviation of meaning in the interpretation was not accidental. It was deeply related to path of national salvation chosen by intellectuals. "Looking back" or "looking forward"? Root-seeking or Enlightenment? The intellectuals of the time clearly leaned towards the latter. In fact, this line of thinking was followed until the May Fourth Period. Under the influence of this mindset, the national significance embedded in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* quietly faded away, leaving a more enduring impression of it among the Chinese people within the realm of classic children's literature.

### 4 Fairy tale and The Formation of the Concept of "Child-Centeredness".

After the "May Fourth Movement," the popularity of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* in China reached its peak, and this resurgence can be directly attributed to the "children's craze" during the same period. Intellectuals in China had been concerned about children's issues since the late Qing Dynasty, considering children as "sons of the nation" and emphasizing the importance of children's education to the survival of the nation. This tradition continued until after the New Culture Movement, with the introduction of John Dewey's "Human Literature" theory and the publication of significant articles such as "How We Should Be Father Now" and "Children's Literature." However, the modern concept of "child-centeredness" struggled to emerge in a country that had been dominated by the "father-son hierarchy" for thousands of years.

This new concept of childhood quickly made its way into the realm of children's literature. Zuoren Zhou coined the term "children's literature," arguing that children were "complete individuals" and that they needed materials that met their inner and outer needs to nourish their minds. Among all the literary genres, he recommended fairy tales as the most suitable material for children's enlightenment.

Interestingly, the use of fairy tales for children's education did not stem from the traditional application since the late Qing Dynasty. Instead, it was the discovery of the significance of fairy tales in folklore that gave theoretical support to the previous "misuse."

During his studies in Japan, Zhou discovered that fairy tales and mythology share the same origin and that they are literature of primitive people. According to the viewpoint of evolutionary anthropology, "human ontogeny and phylogenetic procedures are originally the same," and the interests of children and primitive people are roughly the same. Therefore, the literature of primitive people can also be used as children's literature, and fairy tales, which can reach the spiritual world of primitive people, can meet the needs of children's hearts. Thus, fairy tales, not novels, became the hallmark of May Fourth children's literature, and *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, as representative of folk fairy tales, was bestowed the honor of being "closest to the primitive and farthest from adults." This trend gave a boost to *Grimm's Fairy Tales,*
reestablisht it a model of children's literature. However, from the late Qing Dynasty to "May Fourth", the classic images in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* were not independently claimed, but formed after comparing with multiple modernization paths, such as revolution, enlightenment, religion, folk path or elite orientation, etc. For enlightenment, the "May Fourth Movement" intellectuals reconstructed these images.

When we studying Zhou's folklore activities before the beginning of the New Culture Movement, especially his work, "Minsheng Shuo" and the fairy tale theory derived from it, we can find that there is another reason for the popularity of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, that is, its potential cultural nationalism. Zhou’s interpretation of fairy tales had undergone a great change, furthermore, this transformation was closely related to his understanding of concepts such as nation and country. Even before his journey to Japan, young Zhou Zuoren had developed a clear racial consciousness amidst the crisis of national extinction. During his study period in Japan, his concept of nationality further developed and deepened under the influence of the German Romanticism movement. Diverging from typical nationalists, he regarded the emotional connection of individuals to the land in which they were raised as the foundation for the formation of ethnic consciousness, and believed that such ethnic sentiment served as an inherent force upon which a nation relied for its survival and continuity. During this period, his interest in fairy tales was based on this nationalistic ideology. From the works of the anthropologist pioneer, Edward Burnett Tylor, Zhou Zuoren learned that fairy tales were the literature of primitive people, reflecting the early life of a nation. He believed that through fairy tales, one could gain insights into the livelihood, sentiments, and destiny of a nation. Zhou Zuoren referred to fairy tales as "Angelic Voice" and believed that their inherent vitality could nourish a weakened national spirit. He emphasized the role of fairy tales in preserving national spirit and awakening of national memory. Zhou Zuoren's early theories and practices of fairy tales shared many similarities with Herder’s. Both of them focused more on collecting fairy tales rather than creating new ones. Except for fairy tales, they maintained a considerable enthusiasm for other folklore and antiquities.

Within the historical context of the late Qing and early Republican era, Zhou imagined the nation from a cultural perspective, from which we got a glimpse of his political intention to separate the Manchu dynasty from the Chinese nation. Simultaneously, it also conveyed his dependence on folk forces. However, with the occurrence of events like Yuan Shikai’s attempt to proclaim himself emperor, many intellectuals, including Zhou Zuoren, were more disillusioned with the national character. The change of political power did not bring about substantial rejuvenation for the Han ethnicity; on the contrary, it highlighted the importance of intellectual and cultural enlightenment.

For this reason, they increasingly deviated from national tradition and favored enlightenment. Under the strong momentum of enlightenment discourse, the national significance of *Grimm's fairy tales* is far less important than the value of enlightening people's wisdom. Therefore, the "misreading" of *Grimm's fairy tales* as a classic of children's literature was getting deeper and deeper, but its national significance and folklore origin were put aside.

5 Conclusion

Reviewing the beginning and end of the dissemination and reception of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* in late Qing Dynasty we found that its national significance is often silenced, and its impression among Chinese people gradually becomes fixed in children's literature. The deviation in their interpretation and meaning was not accidental; it had a deep origin in the path chosen by Chinese intellectuals for national salvation. In the choices between "looking back" or "looking forward," seeking cultural roots or learning from the West, late Qing intellectuals tended to choose the latter. The repression of the national significance of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* reflected the trend of progressive intellectuals trying to transform national character (or national identity) through enlightenment ideology. As Lin Yusheng argued, this traditionalism emerged from the intellectual's trust in the holistic thinking mode of "ideological reconstruction." This way of thinking was fully reflected in the process of the classicization of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and deserves continuous reflection by contemporary people.

Reference

2. Ad, Fable, 30 October 1903.
9. Chinese short- or medium-length story or novella written mostly in vernacular language, sometimes including simple classical language.