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The influence of the Chinese Cinderella (“Yeh-Shen”) on the evolving image of Cinderella in the West

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Taking Cinderella as an evolving image across cultures, this article compares the image of Yeh-Shen in major English translations to those of Cinderella in the Western classics of Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Disney. The study incorporates a comparison of the story types and the protagonists’ family backgrounds, social statuses, and personalities in constructing the evolving image of Cinderella. It is argued that the widely acknowledged story genealogy of “Basile–Perrault–the Brothers Grimm–Disney” is questionable in terms of the phenomenon of Cinderella “becoming of the people’s princess”. Evidence found in both reader acceptance and postmodernist rewritings supports the hypothesis that the story of Yeh-Shen has had a substantial influence on the evolving image of Cinderella. The analysis of its English translation and acceptance from a comparative perspective brings to light the continued legacy of the literary image of Yeh-Shen, illustrates the esthetic complexity and possibilities of image translation, and most importantly, reveals the rich roots of postmodernist themes contained in the Chinese tale that has long influenced the West.

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Introduction

“Yeh-Shen” is a Chinese tale that was collected in *Youyang zazu* (酉阳杂俎) by Duan Chengshi (段成式) during the Tang Dynasty. In the storyline of “Yeh-Shen”, the protagonist is persecuted by her stepmother but ends up marrying the king. With some magical assistance, she dresses up for a party-like activity and loses a shoe that only her small feet can fit into. According to the Aarne–Thompson classification system, this tale falls under the AT510 Cinderella story type. During the 1930s and 1940s, with the consecutive efforts of American folklorist R. D. Jameson, German folklorist Wolfram Eberhard, Chinese scholar Lin Yutang, and English orientalist and sinologist Arthur Waley, the tale was translated into English and introduced to the West. It has been widely acknowledged as “the most ancient version of Cinderella unearthed thus far” (Jameson, 1982, p. 71). There have been studies concerning the narrative differences between the Chinese and Western Cinderella archetypes (Wang and Hu, 2020, pp. 245–255) and comparative studies revealing the feminist undercurrents in “Yeh-Shen” (Lai, 2007, pp. 49–56). In this article, the author aims to reclaim Yeh-Shen’s status as an indispensable part of the genealogy of the Cinderella story and probe into its postmodernist influence on Cinderella’s becoming the people’s princess in the West.

Cinderella becomes the people’s princess

Scholars such as Jack Zipes, Armando Maggi, Cristina Bacchilega, and Ruth B. Bottigheimer generally agree that the image of Cinderella evolved through the story genealogy from Basile to Perrault to the Brothers Grimm and then to Disney (Bacchilega, 2016, pp. xiii, 27–51; Maggi, 2014, pp. 150–165; Zipes, 2000). In “Cinderella: the People’s Princess”, Bottigheimer argues that “Cinderella is the product of a nearly four-century-long evolution that began with a very different heroine, one who was fully characterized and singularly complex...but subsequent Cinderella figures were envisaged in increasingly generalized terms until Walt Disney created Cinderella as an Every-girl figure, a princess of and for the people” (Bottigheimer, 2016, p. 27). Bottigheimer places Basile at the starting point of the story genealogy and bases her argument on the Cinderella-like image of “Zezolla” created by Basile. That is why she claims that Cinderella’s image was once “fully characterized and singularly complex.”

From 1634 to 1636, Basile wrote *Pentamerone*, which contains “the first literary version” (Dutheil de la Rochère et al., 2016, p. 4) of the full tale of Cinderella in Europe. The story is entitled “The Cat Cinderella”, and Basile’s Cinderella is named Zezolla. Zezolla, born to an aristocratic family, is beloved by her father. Her mother has died, and her stepmother sees her as an unwelcome part of the family. Zezolla conspires with her private tutor to kill her stepmother. However, once the tutor takes the departed stepmother’s place and consolidates her status as the new stepmother, she likewise shows no love for Zezolla. Canepa points out that Zezolla is “hardly helpless and even less virtuous”; in contrast, she is “the ever-enterprising Zezolla...a convincing strategist” who manages to “claw her way back up the social ladder” (Canepa, 2019, p. 64). The tale is “rather than a parable of the triumph of an abused underdog, of virtue rewarded, or of sibling rivalry, [but] the story of an astute and worldly young woman’s construction of her own destiny” (Canepa, 1999, p. 163). Since Bottigheimer’s argument begins with Basile’s Zezolla, she naturally comes to the following conclusion.

These characters’ evolution begins with a fully characterized, singularly complex heroine in Giambattista Basil’s “Gatta Cenerentola” (1634) and in Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy’s “Finette Cendron” (1697), who were replaced by the

increasingly generalized girls of Charles Perrault’s “Cendrillon” (1697) and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s “Aschenputtel” (1812) on the way to Walt Disney’s *Cinderella* (1950), an Everygirl figure who is a true people’s princess (Bottigheimer, 2016, p. 29).

Bottigheimer seems to assume that the story genealogy of Cinderella flowed uninterruptedly from Giambattista Basil to Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy and then to Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, finally leading to the Walt Disney version so well-known today. However, a short reference to relevant scholarship shows that this is not the case. Despite the persistent efforts of the Brothers Grimm in translating Basile’s fairy tales, originally written in the Neapolitan dialect, into German in the 1810s; John Edward Taylor’s effort in England in the 1840s; and Richard Burton’s effort in 1893, “Basile remained virtually unknown in England and America until the twentieth century” (Zipes, 2007, p. xiii). Zipes points out that “very little scholarly work had been done on Basile’s original use of folklore, Baroque literature, poetry, and courtly customs” (Zipes, 2007, pp. xiii–xiv).

Basile remained a ghostly figure even among folklorists and literary experts, perhaps in part due to fascism and the outbreak of World War II in 1939 that hindered cultural exchanges in Europe and America during that time.

It was not until the 1970s, 1980s, and later that scholars in Europe and America began taking a new interest in Basile (Zipes, 2007, pp. xiii–xiv). It was not until Nancy Canepa’s “most complete critical study of Basile” (Zipes, 2007, p. xiv), published in 1999, that the English-speaking world’s attention was finally drawn to Basile. Nancy Canepa’s translation of Basile’s *Lo cunto de li cunti*, which was “the first full, accurate, annotated English translation” (Zipes, 2007) based on the original Neapolitan texts, was published in 2007. Therefore, Bottigheimer’s argument that Cinderella’s image has evolved from a “fully characterized and singularly complex” to an “increasingly generalized” everyday girl is questionable because Basile’s Zezolla did not reach readers in the English-speaking world until the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Once the traditional genealogy of the story is questioned, another derivative conclusion based on Bottigheimer’s argument is also worth reconsidering. If Basile’s Zezolla is eliminated as the beginning of the chronology, the argument that Cinderella has been losing her personality and subjectivity as a female is undermined and should be revised, as the image of Cinderella in Western classics was always of a female protagonist lacking personality and gender subjectivity until Basile’s Zezolla was reintroduced to the English-speaking public and feminist writers tried to reshape the narrative. According to Bottigheimer, the label “the people’s princess” has multiple connotations. “The people” first refers to the nonaristocratic class, namely, “a broad audience” and “society’s rank and file” (Bottigheimer, 2016, p. 27). Second, it refers to “the large part of every country’s population that does not live in comfort” (Bottigheimer, 2016, pp. 27–28), that is, the economically, physically or spiritually deprived, including children, adolescents, females, and elderly and disabled people. For Bottigheimer, Cinderella’s evolution from an aristocrat to the people’s princess has been accompanied by a loss of personality.

The twentieth-century development of film for mass markets exposed Disney’s newly constituted Cinderella to the world’s population, the people for whom she was fabricated as a people’s princess. The historical changes in Cinderella characterization that preceded filmic

presentations chart a devolutionary sequence of losses of autonomy and a stripping away of individuating characteristics (Bottigheimer, 2016, p. 28).

Bottigheimer believes that the situation “only began to reverse in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as feminist writers pushed for new sets of narrative models for young girl readers” (Bottigheimer, 2016, p. 28). However, Zipes’ observation of Cinderella films and cartoons provides us with another clue about when the changes took place. Zipes points out that cartoons began to “challenge and distort the conventional narrative... in the 1920s” rather than the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Zipes, 2016, p. 365). He carries out a detailed analysis of Cinderella films and concludes that “from the 1930s onward, the association of a disowned, downtrodden, maltreated lower-class female (and sometimes male) was enough to recall the Cinderella fairy tale” (Zipes, 2016). Not only does this push the time of the change back, but it also means that the feminist trend occurred earlier than Bottigheimer thought. Zipes points out that “in 1914, times were about to change, and a new woman was on the horizon” in Cinderella films, particularly during the 1910s to 1930s, as “women were coming into their own and becoming more independent thanks to the women’s suffrage movement, World War I, and the modern industrial transformation” (Zipes, 2016, p. 363). That is, there is no causality of necessity between Cinderella’s becoming of “the people’s princess” (or “the underdog survivor” in Zipes’s words) and the seeming losses of autonomy and stripping away of individuating characteristics. In contrast, Cinderella began to gain her personality and female subjectivity somewhere between the Grimms’ version and the Disney version, but neither Bottigheimer nor Zipes has located the textual evidence signifying such an important change.

In this part, the current author argues that by placing Basile at the starting point of the story genealogy, scholars, including Bottigheimer and Zipes, fail to see the true evolving dynamics of the image of Cinderella. Bottigheimer’s conclusion is based only on the major Western texts of Cinderella. Even though Zipes does notice that “[t]he other tendency is to create a savvy heroine who outwits her stepmother and stepsisters and determines her fate without the help of some higher power” (Zipes, 2016, p. 360), he focuses on films and cartoons rather than literary works. To bridge the gap between the Grimms and Disney and figure out what actually happened to Cinderella’s image, this article next discusses the translation and reception of “Yeh-Shen” in the English-speaking world.

Yeh-Shen’s image in major translations

The talented cave-dwelling girl. Since the first English translation of the Chinese Cinderella story, “Yeh-Shen”, was published in the 1930s, the story has gained long-lasting popularity and attracted profound interest in the West. In 1932, American folklorist R. D. Jameson, who was then a professor at Tsinghua University, delivered “Three Lectures on Chinese Folklore”. He talked about the Chinese Cinderella story and had it translated into English. As his lecture notes were collected and published in Beijing in that same year, Jameson’s English translation of the story became the first English version ever published. Jameson’s lecture on the Chinese Cinderella and his English translation was included in the 1932 edition of *Cinderella: A Casebook* by American folklorist Alan Dundes, which has been a must-read for those studying the Cinderella story and reprinted many times. Since then, the Chinese story has attracted the attention of Western academic circles and has been widely cited.

English translations of the Chinese Cinderella story

| | Title | Translated by | Source | Year |
|----|---|---|--|------|
| 1 | Cinderella in China | R. D. Jameson | Cinderella: A Casebook, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press | 1932 |
| 2 | Cinderella | Wolfram Eberhard; Desmond Parsons | Folk Tales of China, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press | 1937 |
| 3 | Cinderella | Lin Yutang | The Wisdom of China and India, New York: The Modern Library | 1942 |
| 4 | Yeh-Hsien | Arthur Waley | “The Chinese Cinderella Story”, <i>Folklore</i> , vol. 58, 1947, pp. 226–38 | 1947 |
| 5 | A Chinese Cinderella | Lotta C. Hume | Favorite Children’s Stories from China and Tibet, North Clarendon: Charles E. Tuttle Company | 1962 |
| 6 | Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China | Ai-Ling Louie | Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China, New York: Puffin Books | 1982 |
| 7 | The Golden Carp | Yin-lien C. Chin; Yetta S. Center; Mildred Ross | Traditional Chinese Folktales, New York: Routledge | 1989 |
| 8 | Yeh-Hsein | Judy Sierra | The Oryx Multicultural Folktale Series: Cinderella, Wesport: Oryx Press | 1992 |
| 9 | Wishbones: A Folk Tale from China | Barbara Wilson | Hodder & Stoughton | 1993 |
| 10 | A Chinese Cinderella Story | Victor H. Mair | Hawai’i Reader in Chinese Culture, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press | 2005 |
| 11 | Yeh-Hsien: A Chinese Cinderella | Dawn Casey | Mantra Lingua | 2006 |
| 12 | Yeh-Shen: A Chinese Cinderella Story | Ruth Mattison | Yeh-Shen: A Chinese Cinderella Story, Pioneer Valley Educational Press | 2017 |
| 13 | The Golden Slippers | Rosie Dickins; | Usborne Illustrated Stories from China, | 2019 |

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|---|---------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| | Andrew Prentice | London: Usborne Publishing | |
| 14 Yeh-Shen | translator unknown | Buffalo Schools/ Grade 2/Lesson 28 | electronic edition |
| 15 Yeh-Shen: A Chinese Cinderella Story | Sari Bodi; Karen Troll | www.scholastic.com/story | electronic works edition |
| 16 The Story of Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Tale from China | Liane B. Onish | www.tingroom.com | electronic edition |

“Yeh-Shen” was recorded in *Youyang Zhazu* in the middle of the ninth century, more than 700 years earlier than the European version appeared, making it “the most ancient version of Cinderella unearthed thus far” (Jameson, 1982, p. 71). The possibility that the Cinderella story has its origins in the Chinese tale “Yeh-Shen” grants both research value and poetic status to the text. By digging into the tale, Jameson challenged the speculations of folklorists, including the Brothers Grimm and the Austrian scholar J. G. von Hahn, who believed that “stories were originally the myths of the unvidued Aryan people in their central Asiatic home” (Jameson, 1982, p. 72). Jameson pointed out that with the discovery of “Yeh-Shen” (translators adopted various names for Yeh-Shen, but in this article, “Yeh-Shen” is used consistently to avoid confusion; Jameson translated it as “Sheh Hsein”), the English anthropologist Andrew Lang’s belief “in the independent invention of many incidents in popular tales and that some similar sequences may have been evolved independently” could be proven, as the problem of origins would be clarified (Jameson, 1982, p. 72).

It may be well, before we become completely lost in the mist of controversy, to examine a particular series of stories, drawn in this instance of China, and see what light the various discussions throw on the story and how the story may modify the theories generally accepted. Perhaps, when a more complete analysis is made than is possible with the materials available in Peiping, the suggestions which are here adumbrated will be helpful in furthering our apprehension of origin, distribution and folk psychology (Jameson, 1982, pp. 72–73).

At that time, the myth origin theory and the independent origin theory were influential theoretical views, which directly affected the interpretation of the image and story of Cinderella. By referring to the Chinese version of the story, Jameson challenged some Western scholars’ attempts to interpret the Cinderella story as an ancient myth. One group of scholars interpreted Cinderella as the rising sun pursued by the sun prince (Jameson, 1982, p. 82). According to Jameson, the Chinese story took place in “T’o Huan”. Although it was difficult to prove that was the real setting of the story, the possibility of the Cinderella story originating from mythology could be ruled out. Meanwhile, by digging into the details of the Chinese Cinderella story, he noticed that Yeh-Shen’s clothing did not match the color of the clothes of the spring god in Chinese culture. Therefore, Jameson ruled out the possibility of the story’s mythological origins. Taking the story of Yeh-Shen as an exception, Jameson confirmed that the mythological origins theory, although popular in Western academia at the time, could be easily disproved. The theory came about because some learned scholars “t[ook] a popular tale and ma[de] a myth out of it” (Jameson, 1982, pp. 85–86). In addition, Jameson analyzed in detail the connotation of shoes and fish in Chinese folk culture, both elements in the story, to examine the animal totem theory of Western folklorists (Jameson,

1982, pp. 89–91). He pointed out that in Chinese folk culture, “fish” has a unique meaning, as it is a homophone with “yu”, which means “richness”, and carp is often regarded as an embodiment of the dragon king in folk stories. He questioned the view that folk stories originated from ancient animal totems and cast doubt on analysis from the perspective of psychology and psychoanalysis (Jameson, 1982, p. 94). It seemed to Jameson that the Chinese Cinderella story was even more longstanding than any other version of the tale. The status of “Yeh-Shen” as a classic was not only readily recognized by Jameson but also timely tapped into the renewal of folklore scholarship in the West. Jameson’s translation and relevant research solidified the story’s status as a classic within the Cinderella story genealogy. Before Jameson, scholars including English folklorist Marian Roalfe Cox, Australian folklorist Joseph Jacobs, German historian August Nitschke, and Andrew Lang tried to determine the origin of the Cinderella story (Cox, 1892, p. xi; Lang, 1893, pp. 413–433; Philip, 1989, p. 7). In 1951, after collecting over 700 Cinderella stories, Swedish folklorist Anna Birgitta Rooth pointed out that Duan Chengshi’s “Yeh-Shen”, dating back to the ninth century, shared the same themes as a story found in nineteenth-century Indochina. Her findings led to the conclusion that the Near Eastern and Indo-Malayan versions originating from the Chinese tale spread to Europe and developed into the well-known Cinderella stories in the West ((Dutheil de la Rochère et al., 2016, p. 4).

In academia, scholars like Jameson and Rooth focused on the “Yeh-Shen” story’s source text and its potential as the earliest Cinderella version. However, this article emphasizes the impact of its English translations. While the question of originality falls outside the research scope of this article, the “Yeh-Shen” story and its English renditions have sparked significant interest among Western scholars since the 1930s and 1950s. These exchanges introduced Yeh-Shen’s captivating imagery to the West, influencing the Western perception of the Cinderella archetype.

In addition to establishing the status of “Yeh-Shen” as a classic, Jameson’s translation brings to light an alternative image of Cinderella whose social status, family background, and individual personality are completely different from the Cinderella stereotypes in the West. Yeh-Shen is the daughter of “a chief of a mountain cave whose name was Wu” (Jameson, 1982, p. 75), rather than the stereotypical Cinderella in pre-1930s Western classics whose protagonist is always born to a well-to-do family. Yeh-Shen’s family are cave people, who were marginalized and weak compared to the people of T’o Huan: “The cave was near to an island and on that island, there was a kingdom named T’o Huan whose military power was the strongest among more than thirty islands” (Jameson, 1982, p. 76). When the king obtains the shoe, he first asks his court to try it on their feet. Then, he asks all the women in the kingdom to try it. It is only later that the king thinks of the cave-dwellers and has the shoe placed on the roadside and sends people to search every house. There is a hierarchy with the T’o Huan people at the top and the cave people at the bottom in the original Chinese story, and Jameson accurately translated this arrangement into English (Jameson, 1982, pp. 75–77). Although Yeh-Shen’s social status is marginal and inferior, she is nonetheless very resourceful, as she is “a very intelligent girl and very clever in (sifting gold?)” (Jameson, 1982, p. 75). Jameson puts a question mark here to show that he is not sure of the meaning of “善陶” (sifting gold) and has translated it literally. Jameson’s literal translation presents a resourceful Cinderella widely different from the stereotypes in the West and draws attention to Yeh-Shen’s talent. Since then, Yeh-Shen’s talent “has been translated differently into various domestic skills, such as “working on gold” (Lin, 1942, p. 941), “making pottery on the wheel” (Waley, 1989, p. 18), and “spinning gold thread”

(Moioli, 2018, p. 296)” (Wang and Hu, 2020, pp. 245–255). Thus, the emphasis on Cinderella’s talent rather than her beauty began with Jameson’s English translation of “Yeh-Shen”, and this shift in focus happened in translated literature that preceded feminist changes in literary writing by a few decades.

Yeh-Shen’s talent in sifting gold has aroused interest among feminist scholars and continuously inspired increasingly feminist interpretations. Amy Lai pointed out that such talent is usually attributed to males rather than females (Lai, 2007, pp. 49–56). Fay Beauchamp argued that since Yeh-Shen is capable of making shoes of gold thread and cultivating carp, she is not “culturally impoverished” but rather “a girl with cultural resources who subverts attempts to change her status to one resembling a household slave” (Beauchamp, 2010, pp. 447–496). Ma argued that the ability to sift gold represents some kind of natural female instinct and talent, a deep female wisdom (Ma, 2009, pp. 75–91). The skill of sifting gold has until recently been elevated to a “supernatural” ability “to communicate with mystic beings, such as...talking fish and...wish-granting fish bones” (Wang and Hu, 2020, pp. 245–255).

When “Yeh-Shen” was first translated into English in the 1930s, its acceptance in the West took place against the background of the first wave of women’s liberation movement, which was initiated at the end of the nineteenth century and lasted until the beginning of the twentieth century. On the one hand, literary critics and the general reading public were becoming increasingly disenchanted with the Cinderella stereotypes created by mass-market books in the nineteenth century. As observed by Jane Yolen in “America’s Cinderella”, the mass-market popularization of the story created a “wrong Cinderella” who is a “weepy, sentimentalized, pretty girl incapable of helping herself” (Yolen, 1982, pp. 297, 300). On the other hand, Jameson’s translation of “Yeh-Shen” presents a wholly new image of Cinderella who, although born with low social status, is nevertheless gifted, resourceful, and talented, thus serving as a perfect textual resource for crafting a hardy, helpful, inventive Cinderella that met the feminist expectations of the time.

The headstrong class struggler. German folklorist Wolfram Eberhard’s interest in the Chinese Cinderella story is mostly sociological rather than literary. From 1934 to 1936, he visited China and collected a great number of Chinese folk tales. The tales were published in German in 1937 when he returned home, and the English version of *Chinese Fairy Tales and Folk Tales* was published in the same year, giving readers in the English world access to another version of the Chinese Cinderella story. Eberhard’s visit to China took place during a unique period in Chinese society. His visit to China was not far from the New Culture Movement. In 1917, the “New Youth” magazine published Hu Shi’s article, “Humble Opinion on the Improvement of Literature” (Wenxue gailiang zouyi). Hu’s advocacy of vernacular Chinese called for exploring new literary forms and content from folk songs and folk stories. By the 1920s, the collection of folk songs and folk tales was very active. Folklorists, including Gu Jiegang, Dong Zuobin, Zhong Jingwen, and others, were active in Beijing, Guangdong, Hangzhou, Xiamen, and other places, and they collected a large number of folk songs and tales. Eberhard himself attached great importance to the epistemological function and value of folk tales. In his book *Types of Chinese Folk Tales* (Zhongguo minjian gushi leixing), he noted that Chinese folk tales, like the folk tales of any other ethnic group, offer unique insights into their culture and social structure. Typical rural culture can be seen in Chinese folk tales, with fields, peasants, and woodcutters playing an extremely important role (Eberhard, 1999, pp. 439–440). He cherished a great many tales coming from

the rich body of Chinese literature and pointed out that *pi-chi* (pen notes) contain many good tales (Eberhard, 1965, p. xxxvi). The Chinese Cinderella story is one tale that he collected from the “pi-chi” *Youyang zazu*. In addition to digging up Chinese folk tales from these literary materials, he also adopted a field research method. In his classification and analysis of the Chinese Cinderella story, in addition to Jameson’s translation, he also incorporated ten other versions collected in Guangdong, Shandong, and Vietnam. Eberhard was suspicious that the tales he collected had probably been rewritten under “Communist selection”. He noted in the introduction that according to Chinese communism, folktales “are concerned with the struggle for production, with the class struggle and all other aspects of social life”, and he observed that in the Chinese folk tales, persons from the lower classes, especially landless peasants, tended to be “good, warmhearted, helpful, and clever. It is common in these stories for women and girls to take things into their own hands” (Eberhard, 1965, p. xxxv). Eberhard encountered and recorded feminist rewritings of Chinese folk tales. His translation of the Chinese Cinderella story introduced feminist practices to the West under the ideological selection of the time and far earlier than Western feminist rewritings of the 1970s.

As commented by the Chinese folklorist Zhong Jingwen (钟敬文), Eberhard was careful to explore the original form and the evolution of the tale (Eberhard, 1999, p. 5). Eberhard believed that both the literati, representing highly developed Chinese culture, and the imperial examination system had a particularly deep influence on folk tales (Eberhard, 1999, pp. 439–440). In his translation, the Chinese Cinderella, named “Beauty”, is born to a peasant family representing the proletariat class; she meets a fishmonger, a rice broker and an oil merchant supposedly representing the bourgeoisie class on the road, and they all offer to help her pick up her dropped shoe. Beauty refuses them all and finally allows the scholar to pick up her shoe and agrees to marry him. The scholar not only comes from the proletariat class, as Beauty does but also belongs to the literati class, which, according to Eberhard’s observations, enjoyed high social status in Chinese society at the time the story was collected. Eberhard paid attention to the changes in the tale from a sociological perspective, so the image of Cinderella is malleable and serves to depict the goal of the class struggle in the culture. Surprisingly, this coincided with the expectations at a time when Western readers were tired of the archetypal Cinderella and the happily-ever-after endings. As Yolen observed, the insipid beauty waiting passively for Prince Charming was not in line with readers’ expectations. The image of a “weepy, prostrate young blonde” created by mass-market media in the nineteenth century offered the majority of American children a “passive princess” and a “wrong dream” of wishes-come-true-regardless scenarios (Yolen, 1982, pp. 297–303). Upon comparing Eberhard’s translation with other translations, Lai remarked that Eberhard presents a bold Cinderella who is “headstrong and fierce” and “who resists many of her suitors whom she does not find attractive, and who takes cruel revenge on her stepmother and stepsister in the end” (Lai, 2007, pp. 49–56). Lois Meyer retold Eberhard’s version of the tale and commented that the Chinese Cinderella “is a lusty, vital heroine who expresses anger with a vengeance...The western “happily ever after” ending following their marriage contrasts with an astounding conglomeration of post-marital adventures” (Meyer, 1975, pp. 10–11).

Given his sociological focus, Eberhard paid attention to the evolution of the tale, so the image of Cinderella in his translation is changeable, worldly, and even sophisticated. He believed that the tales furthered the “Communist selection” cause of class struggle (Eberhard, 1965, p. xxxv). Therefore, in his translation, the Chinese Cinderella marries a scholar rather than a king. Such

an open ending offered textual resources for a more feminist interpretation than was possible previously. Although Eberhard claimed that he recorded and collected the tales with an objective attitude, his translation nevertheless showed his English-speaking readers how “Communist selection”, a folklorist view supposedly furthering the goals of class struggle, also created a feminist Cinderella. In other words, the so-called Communist folklore view has been indirectly appropriated by feminists in the West. Such appropriation presupposes the shared interest of the proletariat and women in their struggle for rights. The peasant (proletariat) Cinderella in the Chinese tale is full of feminist characteristics that are lacking but desired in its Western counterparts. Eberhard perceived the “Chinese Cinderella” as multiple concepts in one, as a group of tales rather than just one story. In his eyes, the Chinese Cinderella story was not static but continuously evolving dynamically in a social and cultural context. His perception of the tale was sociological as well as pragmatic. In a certain way, his translation unearthed the possible earliest postmodernist rewriting of the Chinese Cinderella tale. He was probably the first Western scholar to discover postmodernist themes in the Chinese tale, far earlier than feminist writers in the 1970s. His collection and recording of Chinese Cinderella stories brought the rich postmodern features in the Chinese tale to the attention of Western readers.

The aboriginal young maiden. In 1942, Lin Yutang’s book *The Wisdom of China and India* was published by Random House in New York. In the chapter “Sketches of Chinese Life”, Lin selected and translated the story of Yeh-Shen under the title “The Chinese Cinderella”. On the one hand, Lin chose to translate this story because of its historical and documentary value for folklorist research. He pointed out in the introduction to the tale that the “story was stated to have come from first hand from an oral tradition” and that the “striking thing about this Chinese version is that it contains the elements of both the Slavonic tradition [...] and the Germanic tradition” (Lin, 1942, pp. 940–941). On the other hand, Lin tried to find the commonality between legends of the Tang Dynasty and short stories of the West. Lin greatly appreciated the literary value of legends from the Tang Dynasty. He compared the magnificent imagination in the Tang legends to the literary imagination of Elizabethan England and pointed out that the Tang Dynasty was not only the golden age of poetry but also the classic age of literary stories. This period of Chinese literature was full of romantic imagination (Lin, 1952, p. xii). Since Lin was trying to bridge the cultural differences between the East and the West, his translation of the Chinese Cinderella took on a unique look.

Lin translated “tu ren” (土人) as “the natives” (Lin, 1942, p. 941), which Jameson did as well, and noted in the introduction that the “cave people” are “aboriginal tribes” in Nanning, Guangxi (Lin, 1952, p. 211). Neither the original text of *Youyang Zaozu* nor Jameson’s translation specifies Yeh-Shen’s age when her mother died. It is not clear whether her father had two wives at the same time or married the second wife after the death of the first. Lin refers to Yeh-Shen as a “baby girl,” implying that Yeh-Shen’s biological mother died shortly after giving birth and rationalizing her father’s remarriage while ruling out the possibility of polygamy. Lin’s translation illustrates the tender love between father and daughter, emphasizing commonalities among human beings that not only are shared between the East and the West but also transcend time and space. He pointed out that he chose stories “which I believe have a most nearly universal appeal,” and his purpose of translation was

that the reader shall come away with the satisfactory feeling that a particular insight into human character has been

gained, or that his knowledge of life has been deepened, or that pity, love, or sympathy for a human being has been awakened (Lin, 1952, p. xi).

Lin’s interpretation of the Yeh-Shen tale focuses on the commonalities among all human beings. In Lin’s translation, the stepmother is first aroused by curiosity, one of the most common human feelings, to find out what happened between Yeh-Shen and the fish: “This curious behavior was noticed by the stepmother who often waited for the fish, but it would never come up” (Lin, 1952, p. 212). When Yeh-Shen follows the immortal being’s guidance, she makes a wish on the fish bones and receives food and clothing. The translator implies that Yeh-Shen had the same feelings as any young maiden in the world: “Yeh Hsien followed his advice, and it was not long before she had gold and jewelry and finery of such costly texture that they would have delighted the heart of any young maiden” (Lin, 1952, p. 212). It can be seen that Lin identifies the heroine Yeh-Shen as an indigenous girl in his translation, highlighting the commonalities of humanity, implying that all human cultures share the same foundation although they have taken on different forms as they have developed since ancient times. In Lin’s translation, Yeh-Shen is not only a Chinese aborigine but also a representative of any young human maiden. Such a generalization of the identity of the main character of the tale helps solicit pity, sympathy, and love from adolescent readers across cultures. As Cinderella is generally regarded as a fairy tale aimed at young readers, the suffering revealed in the story appeals to young readers all over the world because “the tumultuous emotions of adolescence often foster a state of perceived misery” among youth, who often consider their lives unjust and readily identify with the young maiden in the story (Bottigheimer, 2016, p. 28).

The descendant of a rebellious aborigine leader. In 1947, Arthur Waley published his English translation of “The Chinese Cinderella Story” in *Folk-Lore*. He hoped that his translation would provide the necessary information to facilitate a proper understanding of it (Waley, 2005, p. 147). In the introduction and translation notes, he introduces the history, geography, and customs behind the story in great detail. He informs the readers that the story came from *Youyang zazu*, written by Duan Chengshi during the Tang Dynasty; Duan was born into a prominent family, and his father was a skilled governor of the natives in the South. Waley believes that Li Shih-Yuan may have been captured by Duan’s father during a rebellion and brought back home to become a slave, thus bringing the story to Duan’s family.

The story ends with a reference to the narrator, an old family servant called Li Shih-yuan, who was an aborigine from Nan-ning in Kwangsi. A disaster, which may have some bearing on how Li came into Tuan Ch’eng-shih’s service, befell the aborigines in 821. [...] in the autumn of 821 the aborigines were heavily defeated. Li Shih-yuan may have been the son of an aborigine captured in the campaign and bought as a slave by Tuan Ch’eng-shih’s father. Slaves and servants in general were great disseminators of stories (Waley, 2005, p. 156).

Based on his reading of Chinese poems, Waley speculates that Yeh-Shen’s family name, “Wu”, was a common name among the cave people in the aboriginal district and that Yeh-Shen’s family were descendants of a rebellious aborigine leader.

The town was besieged by rebellious aborigines, one of whose leaders was called Wu Kung-ts’ao. He had, that is to say, the same surname as the cave-owner Wu of our story and was at the head of the Hsi-yuan aborigines, whom he

brought up from further south. Wu Kung-ts'ao was eventually captured alive, and the rebellion was suppressed. There is little doubt that it was to this same Wu family that Cinderella belonged (Waley, 2005, p. 152).

Waley digs deep into the background of the Chinese Cinderella tale, renewing the understanding of the story and presenting a different image of the Chinese Cinderella to Western readers. He makes use of some historical materials about a rebellion leader named Wu. Through such a rendering, the story of Yeh-Shen appears to be more tragic than in other tales, and Yeh-Shen herself is represented as oppressed and rebellious.

The girl with a magical carp. The image of Yeh-Shen has been continually regenerated in the processes of translation, interpretation, and rewriting. In 1982, the story was retold and published by Ai-Ling Louie. By then, the Chinese Cinderella story had spread to a wider audience outside the academic circles and beyond the Chinese–American community (Hughes, 2020, p. 88). Since then, Louie's version of the Yeh-Shen story illustrated by Ed Young has gained long-lasting popularity and has been reprinted 12 times. Young's illustration places the carp in a more prominent place and triggers diverse interpretations from another perspective. The cover page of the book features Yeh-Shen wrapped in a dress covered with scales. Her hair is styled in the shape of a carp's head, with slender barbels drifting to one side. There are fins on both sides of her body. The motif of the carp can be found on every page of the illustrations. In the part where Yeh-Shen meets the old man who brings her the gift, the old man is also depicted as a carp. As Chinese scholar Liu Xiaochun (刘晓春) pointed out, there are many differences between the Chinese version and the Western version of Cinderella. Apart from the fact that Yeh-Shen's family background obviously differs, the most unique thing about the Chinese version of the story is the magical carp: "Obviously, this is a fish-treasure story type. The Chinese Cinderella tale is a combination of "fish-treasure story", "stepmother story", and "destiny twist story" (Liu, 1997, pp. 99–102).

Once attention was drawn to the magical carp, the interpretation of Yeh-Shen's story also shifted in a new direction. In 1989, Yin-lien C. Chin, Yetta S. Center, and Mildred Ross gave the tale a new name, "The Golden Carp", in their folktale collection, *Traditional Chinese Folktales*, published by Routledge. The differentiated narrative mode of the Chinese story activated a series of interpretations that differed from traditional ones. The "fish story" inspired alternative interpretations among Western literary critics and shifted the focus to the fish. On the one hand, by interpreting the story as a fairy tale rooted in the grand natural world and shifting the emphasis on the biological nature of the fish, they elevated the theme to a height that transcends cultural boundaries and species differences. For example, Hughes argued that the images of the carp, the dead mother, the immortal being, and Yeh-Shen were all embodiments of the same image in the tale. On the other hand, for readers like Hughes, transcending species differences was only the first step. The next step was transcending gender differences. They argued that the gender of the mysterious immortal was ambiguous, as they wanted to highlight the power of women to support their feminist interpretation (Hughes, 2020, pp. 93–96). Beauchamp believed that the immortal being who kindly offers Yeh-Shen help is Yeh-Shen's ancestor or the spirit of her dead father. Beauchamp argued that the gender of the immortal being is uncertain but likely female (Beauchamp, 2010, p. 456). The shaggy-haired and tattered "fairy", as Beauchamp wrote, is actually as Yeh-Shen herself, having decided to save herself using female traditions and female knowledge (Beauchamp, 2010, p. 473). Changing the

gender of the characters in the story in feminist and postmodernist rewriting and interpretation is one way to counter the gender bias of folk stories (Doughty, 2006, p. 68). The differentiated narrative mode of Yeh-Shen has enabled Western critics to interpret the Cinderella story in a way that serves their feminist agenda.

By the 1980s, feminist interpretations and rewritings of the Cinderella story had become so common that it was not easy to distinguish between "the influencer" and "the influenced", as Yeh-Shen's story was inevitably interpreted against the feminist background of the 1980s. However, the differentiated narrative mode as well as the unique images of Yeh-Shen reveal unmistakable feminist roots that differ from the story's Western counterparts. As discussed above, the feminist roots of Yeh-Shen have been unearthed and widely recognized in the West. In fact, if we consider the translators' interpretation of the story as a reflection of how it was received in the West—given that the major translators Jameson, Eberhard, and Waley are Westerners, and that translation is widely considered a form of rewriting—there is no exaggeration in saying that Yeh-Shen has influenced or even initiated the reshaping of Cinderella ever since its first English translation in the 1930s. That was a time when postmodernist rewriting of fairy tales was still rare. The English translations of the Chinese Cinderella story have provided the West with new images of Cinderella. It is natural to assume that the talented cave-dwelling girl, the headstrong and fierce class fighter, the aboriginal young maiden and the girl with the magical carp have inspired feminist interpretations and postmodernist rewriting of the fairy tale. In the next part, Angela Carter's rewritings serve as a case testifying to such influence.

A case study: Angela Carter's rewritings

Angela Carter, a celebrated British author, gained recognition for her captivating storytelling and unique perspectives, demonstrating a deep interest in folk tales and fairy tales. Through her feminist rewritings of classic narratives, including "Cinderella," "The Bloody Chamber," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Nights at the Circus," Carter skillfully questioned established gender roles and power dynamics, offering thought-provoking and empowering alternatives to passive female characters. Her exceptional contributions earned her prestigious awards, such as the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, one of Britain's oldest and most respected literary honors, solidifying her status as a prominent representative among postmodernist rewriters in the Western literary landscape. Therefore, a case study of Carter's rewritings of Cinderella serves as the basis for the argumentation in this article.

Carter's translation of *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* was published in 1977, and the Cinderella tale was included under the title "Cinderella: or, The Little Glass Slipper". Although the translation seems to be much the same as Perrault's version, with the two iconic summarizing paragraphs preserved, Carter's attempts at feminist revision is discernible in the translation. For example, she describes Cinderella's father as "a man" instead of "a gentleman", which has a medieval connotation in the original, and the mother is described as "a kind and gentle woman" rather than "the best creature in the world." The luxurious residence and dresses of the stepsisters are toned down by dropping some of the descriptive terms, such as "(fine) rooms", "of the very newest fashion" and "mirrors (so large)", from Perrault's description, which suggests that Cinderella's family is rather rich and enjoys the luxuries imported from other countries. The stepsisters are no longer richly dressed, and "French trimming" is changed to "lace trimming" instead. They find "a good hairdresser" instead of "the best tire-woman they could get" to wait on them. Most

intriguingly, Cinderella's clothes are referred to as "workaday overalls and apron", and the "clothes/cloaths" that Cinderella wears in Perrault's tale are all revised into "overalls", highlighting the working-class status of Cinderella's family (Carter, 1984, pp. 103–112; Perrault, 1922, pp. 78–91). The abovementioned descriptions are examples of Carter's efforts to transform the story into a different social setting. A decade later, in 1987, Carter rewrote three additional Cinderella stories, namely, "The Mutilated Girls", "The Burned Child" and "Traveling Clothes". The title of Carter's rewritten "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost" pays obvious tribute to the Brothers Grimm and Perrault, as "Ashputtle" is borrowed from the former, and the title format "Cinderella; or, The Little Glass Slipper" is taken from the latter. Some scholars have noticed such a connection between Carter's translation of Perrault and her rewritten works, evident through both the inheritance and subversion of the works of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm (Dutheil de la Rochère, 2003). There is no doubt that Carter owes much of her creative rewriting to her precursors of Western classics. Not only does she imitate the style of titles, she also retains the main plot points. While the influence of Western writers such as Perrault and the Brothers Grimm has been readily accepted as obvious and undeniable, the influence of the Chinese Cinderella story, particularly as translated literature, has generally been overlooked. Despite the fact that a great amount of textual evidence can be easily discerned, thus far, little attention has been drawn to highlight the influence of the Chinese tale upon the feminist interpretation and postmodernist rewriting of Cinderella in the West, let alone its contribution to the reshaping and evolution of Cinderella's image under a broader context of world literature.

Carter's rewriting of Cinderella was first published in *The Virago Book of Ghost Stories* in 1987, just two years after Ai-Ling Louie's Yeh-Shen story hit CBS with great success. Louie's story sparked renewed interest in the Chinese tale. By the 1980s, it was not uncommon for scholars in the West to refer to the Chinese Cinderella story as the earliest known version (Zipes, 1986, p. 225). In fact, before Louie, the four major translations of Yeh-Shen had been widely circulating and exerting an undeniable influence in the West. As mentioned above, Jameson's translation, published in the 1930s, prompted Western scholars to reexplore the origin, dissemination, and folk psychology behind the story. The story was included in Dundes' *Cinderella: A Casebook*, which was published in the 1930s and has seen multiple reprints in 1982, 1983, 1988, and 1989 by the University of Wisconsin Press, Garland Press, and Wildman Press. Likewise, Eberhard's *Folk Tales of China*, published in 1937 featuring his translation of Yeh-Shen, has been published in subsequent years of 1965, 1968, and 1973 by various publishers, including University of Chicago Press, Pocket Books New York, and Washington Square Press. Lois Meyer's rewriting based on Eberhard's translation can be found in a *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology* in 1975 (Meyer, 1975, pp. 10–11). Lin Yutang's *The Wisdom of China and India*, which contains his translation of Yeh-Shen, has also experienced reprints spanning from the 1940s to the 1970s by publishers like Modern Library, M. Joseph Press, Carlton House, and Jaico Pub. House, Random House, New English Library, and Four Square Book. Since its first translation, Waley's translation has been frequently cited in journals and books (Walker, 1976, pp. 30–41; Philip, 1989). In the 1960s, the Chinese Cinderella story was included in Lotta Hume's collection *Favorite Children's Stories from China and Tibet*, which, judging from the book title, was aimed at children. When considering the English translation, discussion, rewriting, and circulation of the Yeh-Shen story altogether, it is reasonable to conclude that the story has exerted factual influence in the English-speaking world. Thus, it is reasonable to surmise that Carter was well acquainted

with the major translations of Yeh-Shen at the time of her publication.

Indeed, textual evidence supporting such an assumption is abundant. In "The Mutilated Girls", Carter refers to Ashputtle's foot as "the size of the bound foot of a Chinese woman" (Carter, 1993, p. 116). In "The Burned Child", the ghost of Cinderella's mother turns into a cow (Carter, 1993, p. 117), which is a direct reference to Eberhard's version, in which the mother becomes a yellow cow (Eberhard, 1965, p. 156). The unique yellow cow is absent in the other classic Cinderella stories in the West. The burned child is scabbed and scarred (Carter, 1993, p. 117), which also echoes Eberhard's "Pock Face" (Eberhard, 1965, p. 156). The burned child receives "a red silk dress" for her wedding, which is an allusion to the typical embroidered red robe a bride would wear in a Chinese wedding. The same red dress is referred to again in "Traveling Clothes". The influence of or borrowing from the Chinese story can be summarized according to the following three aspects, and each serves a certain narrative purpose in Carter's rewriting.

Reincarnation of the mutilated girls. There is a sense of deep sympathy for the female characters, including the stepmother and stepsisters, in Carter's rewriting. This touch of feminist sympathy is found via detailed observation, analysis, and understanding of the female characters, positive and negative alike. In Carter's translation of Perrault, Cinderella is "a lovely and sweet-natured girl" but not of "unparalleled goodness and sweetness of temper". She "bore everything patiently and dared not complain to her father because he would have lost his temper with her." Note that Cinderella is not without a thought of complaint, but she dares not voice such dissatisfaction. When her stepsisters tease her, Cinderella is "kind, and resist[s] the temptation" to make horrid tangles of their hair. Note that she resists the temptation, which means that she nevertheless thinks of the idea. The stepsisters are "unpleasant" instead of "odious". The family first gives Cinderella the nickname "Cinderbritches", but the younger sister "who was less spiteful than the older one" changes her nickname to Cinderella. Carter calls them "our two young ladies", and her description of the stepsisters' reaction, after they received the invitation to the party, is reminiscent of Lin Yutang, the Chinese scholar who adopted a similar translation tactic in constructing a bond among all the young maidens. For example, Lin writes, "busy and happy, they set about choosing the dresses and hairstyles" and "they could talk about nothing except what they were going to wear" (Carter, 1984, pp. 103–112; Perrault, 1922, pp. 78–91). Carter adds a detailed description of the female characters' subtle feelings to reveal the commonalities among them.

"I wanted to demonstrate the extraordinary richness and diversity of responses to the same common predicament—being alive—and the richness and diversity with which femininity, in practice, is represented in 'unofficial' culture: its strategies, its plots, its hard work" (Carter, 1990, p. xiv).

Such commonalities are communicated to the reader through the author's attitude toward the female characters, including Ashputtle, her biological mother, the stepmother, and the stepsisters. In Carter's rewriting, the motherly love of the stepmother towards the stepsisters is juxtaposed with the mother-daughter love between Cinderella and her biological mother. There is "a fight between two groups of women—in the right-hand corner, Ashputtle and her mother; in the left-hand corner, the stepmother and her daughters" (Carter, 1993, p. 110). Note that the italic emphasis on "her daughters" is added by Carter to emphasize that there is basically no difference between the motherly love each woman feels for her daughters. The stepmother is not so evil here, as Carter writes, "with daughters of her own

whom she loves with the same fierce passion as Ashputtle's mother did" (Carter, 1993, pp. 110-111). Carter legitimates the stepmother's love for her daughters. The two mothers are not opposites of good and evil. The stepmother loves her daughter as much as Ashputtle's biological natural mother loves her. In Carter's view, the two mothers' rivalry is of the same nature, as "the mothers fight, using their daughters as instruments of war or as surrogates in the business of mating" (Carter, 1993, p. 111).

Carter alludes to the small feet of Yeh-Shen to construct a gender bond among all the female characters in her rewritten tale. At the beginning of the tale of the mutilated girls, the stepsisters are described as having had their big toe and heel cut off by their mother to fit into the tiny shoe. Then, Carter refers to Ashputtle's feet as if she were Yeh-Shen. Ashputtle's foot, according to Carter, is "the size of the bound foot of a Chinese woman, a stump" (Carter, 1993, p. 116). Carter refers to Ashputtle as if she were Yeh-Shen and describes her feet as making her almost "an amputee already" and "the stump of the foot" as fitting the shoe perfectly (Carter, 1993, p. 116). This detail can be easily overlooked if no close comparison among the major versions of the tale is made. In the classic Western versions, there is no direct mention of a bound foot. By equating Ashputtle with the Chinese Cinderella Yeh-Shen, Carter establishes a commonality between Cinderella and her stepsisters. Then, she extends such a commonality to the mothers as well. The dead mother turns into different animal and makes sacrifices. As a cow, she gives milk to the burned child until she dries up. As a cat, she combs the burned child's hair until she is "maimed". As a bird, she strikes her own breast with her beak to make the burned child a red silk dress. The sacrifice made out of motherly love is associated with being dried, maimed, or pecked—all different types of mutilation. That is, all the females, both the daughters and mothers, are mutilated. In this sense, they all become the mutilated Yeh-Shen.

The intergenerational bond among female characters is dramatized via the concept of reincarnation. Carter's rewriting makes frequent use of reincarnation, as the dead mother transforms into different animals and offers her daughter help. As observed by the author of this article, Eberhard's translation of the Chinese Cinderella story first brought up the idea of the dead mother turning into a yellow cow. When the English translation of the Chinese Cinderella story is considered part of the Cinderella story genealogy in general, Carter's borrowing from Eberhard's translation becomes obvious. Her reincarnation plot incorporates the bird and the cat; the cat comes from Basile's "The Cinderella Cat", and the bird is from the Brothers Grimm. In this way, Carter merges the storylines of Yeh-Shen, Basile, and the Brothers Grimm. The idea of the intergenerational bond between mother and daughter becomes even more obvious in "Traveling Clothes" when the dead mother gives her daughter a red dress and urges her to put it on, saying "I had it when I was your age." She then takes worms from her eye sockets and turns them into jewels, saying, "I had it when I was your age." Finally, she urges the girl to step into her coffin and says, "I stepped into my mother's coffin when I was your age" (Carter, 1993, p. 119). The reincarnation theme borrowed from the Chinese Cinderella story is a witty device here for presenting the intergenerational commonalities in femininity. With the reference to Yeh-Shen's small feet and the reincarnation theme borrowed from the same tale, Carter presents a feminist interpretation of the Cinderella tale, revealing her view that all females are trapped in the same common predicament of the reincarnation of mutilated girls.

Triumph of class solidarity. In both Perrault's and the Grimms' versions, Cinderella is the daughter of a rich man, which is a crucial obstacle preventing her from truly fulfilling the American

dream of rising "from rags to riches". Based on details in the story, readers can tell that she was likely born an aristocrat. In contrast, Yeh-Shen is born an aborigine, a cave-dweller's daughter, or a peasant's daughter. As discussed above, Yeh-Shen is actually more in line with the Western expectation of what Cinderella should be like, particularly after the first wave of the feminist movement. Scholars such as Zipes hit the nail on the head when he calls Cinderella "the underdog" (Zipes, 2016). Carter held the same view in this regard and has her protagonist born into a working-class family. Carter does not give much direct detail about the father except simply referring to him as an "old man". She implies that the man was probably having an affair with the woman attending the household chores before his wife died. Not long after Ashputtle's mother dies, the father and the other woman are married, and the woman brings home her two daughters, whom Carter implies are the father's illegitimate children. Given that after Ashputtle, or the burned child, in this case, runs away with a man, the stepmother is left to rake the ashes at home, it can be assumed that the family is not very well off after all. In addition, the man the stepmother has chosen does not seem to be very rich either, as he only manages to give Ashputtle a house and money, and they do just "all right" (Carter, 1993, pp. 103–112). Carter reshapes her protagonist as a working-class Cinderella in workaday overalls because a daughter from an upper-class family would not fulfill the feminist mission bestowed on Cinderella. Cinderella's family background is essential to Carter's postmodernist rewriting.

Another factor of vital importance in Carter's postmodernist rewriting is Cinderella's marriage. Suppose that Cinderella married a rich, upper-class man; the story might still meet the reader's expectation of an underdog rising "from rags to riches", but the feminist viewpoint underneath Carter's rewriting would be significantly undermined. A working-class daughter marrying a rich man could improve only her economic status, but her family status would remain subordinate, as the economic status between the husband and wife would still not be equal. That is, given Carter's feminist standpoint, her Cinderella could only have ended up with a working-class man, and that is exactly what happens in the tale. Cinderella's marriage to a man belonging to the same class is hardly a new plot, as Eberhard made the same choice in his collection, highlighting the "Communist selection" involved. The Chinese Cinderella, Beauty, refuses the capitalists' proposal and happily marries the scholar, a man belonging to the proletariat class like her. Carter's borrowing from Eberhard's translation of the Chinese story is subtle, but the compatriot solidarity between the couples is strikingly similar. Carter does not directly describe the man's social class but leaves some clues: "There was a man the stepmother wanted, and she asked him into the kitchen to get his dinner" (Carter, 1993, p. 118). Presumably, the man is not from the upper class, and the invitation to dinner is a covert one, as he is not asked to dine with the family. Alternatively, perhaps the family does not have a proper dining room, and they usually dine at the kitchen. At first, the man does not notice the burned child, as the stepmother has her cook dinner for the man. However, the burned child is quite headstrong and straightforward, saying to her dead mother, who had by that time changed into a cow, "I want that man for myself". The dead mother helps the child wash off her scabs, combs her raggedy hair, and gives her a red silk dress.

The burned child went into the kitchen to show herself to the man. She was not burned any more, but lovely. The man left off looking at the stepmother and looked at the girl. "Come home with me and let your stepmother stay and rake the ashes," he said to her and off they went (Carter, 1993, pp. 118–119).

When Carter writes there is a man the stepmother “wanted”, she does not make it clear whether the woman wants the man for her daughters or herself. Based on the details in the plot, the implication seems to be that the man is the stepmother’s secret lover, as he is “looking at the stepmother” all the time before the burned child presents herself. The burned child goes off with the man, which can be taken as a happy ending even though there is no explicit mention of whether they are then married. There is a sense of solidarity between the man and Cinderella that is similar to what is described between Beauty and the scholar in Eberhard’s version of the story. Beauty accepts the scholar’s proposal because he is not like the stinky fishmonger, the dusty rice broker, or the greasy oil merchant. The handsome scholar, although not particularly rich, is good enough to offer Beauty a home. After reuniting with the scholar, Beauty has her revenge on her stepmother (Eberhard, 1965, pp. 158–160). In both Carter and Eberhard’s stories, the protagonists pursue happiness through marriage or union with a man whose economic status is slightly better yet who belongs to a social class that is generally considered economically or ideologically not oppressed at the time. Marriage and union elevate Cinderella out of her misfortune, symbolizing a reward and triumph of class solidarity. The feminist subjectivity advocated in Carter’s story would not have achieved the same effect without the kind of solidarity between Cinderella and a working-class man. If Cinderella had chosen a rich man with high social status, the connection and support between Cinderella and the man would greatly undermine the empowering theme within the narrative. Obviously, the class solidarity here symbolizes the importance of alliances and support among individuals from different social backgrounds to challenge patriarchal norms and achieve greater autonomy and empowerment for women. In this regard, Carter’s postmodernist rewriting, when placed side by side with the English translation of the Chinese Cinderella tale, can be viewed as a descendant of the Yeh-Shen tale under a broader context.

Object of focalization, storyline, and narrative ending. In classic Western versions of Cinderella, the object of focalization has always been Cinderella herself. The events involving Cinderella constitute the predominant storyline. At the end of the tale, the narrative sequence comes to a seemingly natural and euphoric happy ending. However, in Carter’s tales, the focalization is shifted to the dead mother, the storyline unfolds around the dead mother who offers Cinderella support, and the tales end with uncertainty. When the major Cinderella tales, including the translation of “Yeh-Shen”, are considered as a whole, as equal parts of the Cinderella genealogy, it becomes obvious that the Chinese Cinderella tale presents an alternative to readers in the West in terms of its object of focalization, storyline and narrative end, the influence of which is traceable to Carter’s rewriting of Cinderella.

As discussed above, the Chinese Cinderella tale presents an alternative story involving fish and treasure that is largely different from the Western classics. In Ai-Ling Louie’s book, the carp enjoys as much attention as Yeh-Shen. The carp and Yeh-Shen are both objects of focalization. From a feminist perspective, scholars have suggested that the carp represents the power of women and is, in fact, meant to be Yeh-Shen. Some have even argued that the immortal being’s gender is ambiguous or likely female (Beauchamp, 2010, pp. 456, 473; Hughes, 2020, pp. 93–96). Such a feminist interpretation of the carp and the immortal, although possibly inspired by the reincarnation theme common in Chinese stories, would still be unimaginable for Chinese readers. The feminist interpretation of “Yeh-Shen” in the West essentially constructs a new tale to some extent. Linking the carp with the immortal being and obscuring the gender of the being, which would usually be assumed to be male in the Chinese

context, opens up the possibility of the carp being the embodiment of the dead mother. That is where Carter draws her inspiration from, creatively moving the focus to the dead mother. In Carter’s rewriting, the focalization shifts to the mother’s spirit, a supernatural being always looking after Cinderella. The shift in focalization allows the narrator to identify with characters other than Cinderella in the story. In “The Mutilated Girl”, the narrator expresses sympathy with the stepsisters, who have been cruelly crippled by their mother. In “The Burned Child”, although the focus is on Cinderella, the burned child, the narrator’s sympathy is obviously with the dead mother. In “Traveling Clothes”, the object of focalization is again the dead mother. However, none of the Western classics place the dead mother as a main character. In Basile’s tale, the dove and the fairies offer help to Zezolla. In Perrault’s tale, there is a fairy godmother. The Brothers Grimm have two white pigeons helping Cinderella. Although the tree on the dead mother’s grave helps fulfill Cinderella’s wish, there is no direct mention of the dead mother. In the Disney version, there are mice, birds and a fairy godmother who helps Cinderella. Given the fact that the Chinese Cinderella tale presented an alternative story about a fish and treasure to readers in the West early in the 1930s and that Carter borrows Eberhard’s idea of the dead mother turning into a cow and offering Cinderella help, the intertextuality between the Chinese Cinderella tale and Carter’s rewriting is discernible.

Once the narrative focalization is shifted onto the deceased mother, the storyline unfolds around the theme of the survival of the female. That is, the way mothers look after their daughters and the way daughters turn into mothers in turn. In this way, Carter creates a circular storyline of mother/daughter reincarnation. Within such a reincarnation, the fate of the protagonists can no longer be simplified as “happily ever after”; it is rather a realistic yet empowering end to the narrative that calls for Cinderella to go and seek her fortune. Once again, if the translation of the Chinese Cinderella tale is considered part of the story’s genealogy, its contribution to initiating an alternative ending is undeniable. In the Chinese tale, Yeh-Shen marries a king, but the king turns out to be very greedy. He prays to the fish bones for treasures without limit. Later, after there is no response from the fish bones and his soldiers are rebelling against him, the king has no more treasure to squander. The ending of the Chinese version forms a stark contrast with those in the West. As early as the 1970s, Western readers noticed the realistic and unsettled nature of Yeh-Shen’s postmarital life (Meyer, 1975, pp. 10–11). Despite the fact that she marries a king and brings her own magical dowry, there is no guarantee of a “happily ever after”. When the Chinese version of the Cinderella story is taken as part of the genealogy of the Cinderella story and given a more prominent status in that genealogy, its influence upon Carter’s rewriting is revealed. A comparison of the object of focalization, the storyline, and the narrative ending reveals Carter’s borrowings from the Chinese tale, which serve indispensable roles in her feminist interpretation and postmodernist rewriting of Cinderella.

Conclusion

In a conversation with David Damrosch, Chinese scholar Wang Ning pointed out that the criteria for judging whether a piece of work should be regarded as world literature should cover several aspects. First, it must go beyond the boundaries of nations or countries and languages with the help of translation. Second, it must be included in authoritative anthologies of world literature. Third, it must be the inheritance of different generations of writers. Fourth, the author or the work must arouse critical controversy (Damrosch, 2011, p. 171). Based on the criteria proposed by Wang, “Yeh-Shen” can be considered a piece of work worthy of the title of

“world literature” or “world fairy tale”. Since its translation into English in the 1930s, the Chinese tale has been continuously popular among Western readers. The story has been included not only in anthologies of Chinese fairy tales or Chinese folk tales but also in textbooks and teaching materials. The tale has aroused critical discussion of its feminist implications. Postmodernist writers such as Carter have benefited greatly from the Chinese tale, borrowing not only from its content, such as the symbolism of small feet, the reincarnation concept, and the idea of class solidarity but also from its style and structure, including the object of focalization, the storyline and the narrative ending. When the English translations of the Chinese tale are recognized as part of the genealogy of the Cinderella story, restoring it to an important position as its Western counterparts have long enjoyed, its contribution and influence as part of world literature becomes clear.

Data availability

No data were generated or analyzed in the paper.

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Author contributions

PO is the primary author responsible for the paper, while XZ serves as the supervisor overseeing the project.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Additional information

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