

A Tale of Two Regions: What the Myth of Lady Meng JiangNu Can Tell about Power Dynamics in China?

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Abstract: Folklore contains more meaningful values than bedtime stories or tales for children. It is more like a belief passed on traditionally, the expressive body of culture, values, and sentiments shared by a particular group of people. In China, folklore has been used as a political tool, especially during and after the Cultural Revolution, which can be observed by many folklores created at that time. Lady Meng JiangNu, a very famous Chinese tale, is now counted as one of China's Four Great Folktales, serves as the perfect example of that folklore, or folktales, can be and used to be a strong propaganda tool used to support nationalism for political purposes, given that it has so many variations such that people from different areas of China have different versions of this story. In this article, we summarize and compare the different versions of Lady Meng JiangNu and then provide a detailed analysis of the political elements in the story. Through careful comparisons and analysis, we find that distinct sentiments of resentment and servitude with respect to authority and submissiveness delivered by the stories highlight the position of power in different parts of China, namely the North and the South.

1. Introduction

While written records of ordinary life and historic events do not always exist, folklore and myths can give us insights of people's values, perspectives, and political sentiments in the past. Folklore dates all the way back to the beginning of civilization and researchers started to study them in the nineteenth century, so we can examine these folklores to understand the people better. In other words, analyzing folklore and myths can help us infer the culture, societal norms, and other characteristics of the folklorists from a specific time period [1]. In China, folklore became prominent during the Cultural Revolution and in that period folklore became more prominent and incorporated in the culture. Folklore was also often used as a tool to support nationalism and as a means of propaganda [2]. One prominent tale from this period is Lady Meng JiangNu. Meng JiangNu was smart, studious, and with high morals. She fully understood the values of Confucianism and her filial piety to her parents. And Qiliang was an ordinary man who was forced to build the Great Wall for the Emperor of Qin. Building the Great Wall would take months, which was very labor-intensive; and worst of all, most men died building the wall. One major issue Qiliang faced was that he cannot fulfill the Confucian and filial piety values since there would be nobody left to take care of his elderly parents. Therefore, Qiliang fled from his house to escape from the soldiers and happened to be found hiding in Meng JiangNu's house. In some versions of the story, Lady Meng JiangNu was bathing while she encountered Qiliang hiding behind the bushes in her backyard. They then decided to get married since they were both of age and he had seen her naked (Old Chinese tradition demanded that they have to get wedded after this occurrence). Unfortunately, after the wedding, her husband was taken away from her by the soldiers and forced to build the Great Wall. Because of his escape earlier, he faced harsh punishment for fleeing. Meng JiangNu had no information about where her husband was or when he would come back. One night, she had a dream in which she travelled thousands of miles to the Great Wall just to send him the winter clothes she packed for him. However, Meng found out that her husband had passed

away and she encountered the Emperor of Qin. Some versions of the story depict the Emperor Qin's actions as more immoral than other versions. One main difference between the versions lies in the ending. In some versions, when Meng JiangNu and the Emperor Qin met, she asked him to host a proper funeral for Qiliang to honor him and in return she agreed to become the Empress; however, after the funeral, she committed suicide. While in other versions, she carried the bones of what was left of his husband and mourned his husband's death weeping at the foot of the Great Wall.

Different versions of this myth originated in different regions of China and Japan. Their differences serve to both highlight differences in values between the regions and between the behaviors of people in power. Among others, the different versions of the story vary in how two characters met, why the Emperor created the Great Wall, and what Meng did when she found out about the death of her husband. The power dynamics that exist between and in the North and the South today is just a continuation of the differences exhibited in the different versions of the Chinese folklore Lady Meng JiangNu.

2. The emergence of folklore research in China and historical background

Folklore not only shapes culture in the past, but can be used to influence political sentiments in the population centuries after their origin. Since the emergence of the Communist Party of China, Chinese research on folklore have shifted from European tales to Chinese ones [1], which contributes to the development of analyzing Chinese folklore as a field of science and the exploration of the connections between cultural history, sociology, psychology, linguistics, geography, fine arts, literature and, of course, anthropology, archeology, and ethnology. A facet of research became the change in perception of folktales and songs from being "low taste" to their incorporation of more revolutionary ideas anti-Nippon (anti-japan) stories [2].

Throughout history, Northern and Southern China have always had major divisions in attitudes, culture, and entertainment. These divides are the result of major wars between the two regions throughout history, such as the Three Kingdoms (220-280), Sixteen Kingdoms (317-420) and Southern and Northern dynasties (420-589), Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period (907-960), Southern Song dynasty and Jin dynasty (1115-1234), and the Warlord era of the Republic of China (1916-1928) [4]. People in the North and South considered people in the other region barbarians [2].

During the Mongol Yuan dynasty, a caste system in China was created in which the Northern Han Chinese were the third caste and the Southern Han Chinese were the lowest [2]. For a long time, Northern China was economically dominant and more advanced until the Mongols invaded and the Emperor of the Song dynasty changed the capital from the North to the South [2]. This led to a political, cultural, and economic shift to the South and today, the South continues to dominate economically. Throughout the Qing dynasty, stereotypes based on the geographical locations arose. Policies imposed during the Qing dynasty enforced the stereotypes and furthered the animosity and differences between people from the North and South. For example, local officials couldn't serve their own home areas as well as personal and commercial relations. Many famous Chinese writers have stated that the Northerners are generally more honest, upfront, and sincere, whereas Southerners were more skilled and quick-minded. The Northerners were also more physically and mentally tough and aggressive, whereas Southerners were physically frailer and small and psychologically calmer and quieter. Now, after the Deng Xiaoping reforms, Northern China is more bureaucratic and southern China is more commercial. Cities like Beijing (North) are known more as the political and military center and places like Shanghai are the commercial and economic districts.

3. Different versions of the myth and reflections of power dynamics

The imagery of authority and obedience to superiors in northern versions of the tale reflects differences between the north and the south regarding their attitudes of different values, not only in the past but also in the present. One of the Northern versions of Meng JiangNu, Mobilizing the Gods, particularly emphasizes the idea of filial piety and obedience compared to the other versions of the

story. It also omits the bathing scene and depicts Meng JiangNu as a perfect daughter and daughter-in-law. She was described as a perfect and smart student -always reading books and at the same time memorizing and, highlighting books that she read about loyalty and obedience. Meng JiangNu is depicted as someone who fully understood loyalty, filial piety, and the four rites. She also knew the basic values such as honesty and shame and thought about the Threefold Obedience and Fourfold Virtue. This shows that the Northern version of the story takes these values to be extremely important delivering rigor and discipline as the core values. Compared to the other stories, this version doesn't talk about how Meng JiangNu and her husband met and it directly moved onto how she lost her husband and her journey to find him. Other versions of the story include a bathing scene of Meng JiangNu and how her husband was a fugitive and happened to run into her while hiding in her home.

In this version of the story, she personifies characteristics that people in the North admire, such as being upfront and straightforward. For example, when the Qin emperor wanted her to become his empress, she was very direct about how she felt about the emperor and even called him a "sinful king". Among her demands in the story were a perfect and expensive funeral for her late husband and for the emperor to act as a mourning filial son in order for her to become his empress. In the end, she defied the emperor after the emperor fulfilled all her demands and committed suicide by jumping into the river. Her ultimate sacrifice exemplifies loyalty as her core value. At the very end of this version of the story, the emperor was infuriated and regretted acting as a filial son and sent all the men home and decided never to build a wall like the Great Wall ever again. He even told the workers to show some respect to their parents. This whole story emphasizes the filial piety culture and being very straightforward. It can be inferred that the story was told in this way because it was coming from Northern China and their characteristics and values are about being direct, strong, brave, and very loyal. Although one of the similarities between this version and the other versions of the story is Meng JiangNu's perseverance of finding her husband. She was willing to travel thousands of miles in the cold winter to just deliver him clothes and she didn't stop until she found him, even though he had already died [3].

The southern version criticizes those in power and is told in a more spiritual sense, which reflects the softer and more tranquil characteristics they present. This story was very different in that it was told from a perspective of gods and immortals. The story was also much shorter and focused on criticizing the emperor. The story directly tells how gods and immortals felt about the emperor because the words "evil" and "stupid" were used in the story to describe the emperor. It also focused on the emperor's evil thoughts and intentions with the Seventh Heavenly sister. In the story, he had touched the Seventh Heavenly sister and the Jade Emperor smelled the mortal scent on her and chopped off her head. Her body parts turned into yin and yang: the yin became Meng JiangNu and the yang became Fan Xiliang (the husband). The other heavenly sisters were outraged and blamed the Qin Emperor for everything. He then even displayed incestual intentions with his mother, the empress-dowager, because he was intrigued by her beauty and wanted to make her his empress. This empress-dowager demanded that in order for her to become his empress, he built a wall on the Eastern Capital to block out the sun. This version calls him foolish and stupid for listening to the demands of the empress-dowager because the first wall built was destroyed by the currents of the water, so they had to bring in many men to risk their lives and help build this wall [3].

The story emphasizes the fact that innocent men and civilians had to suffer from the Qin Emperor's cruelty and brutality. The story is very similar to other stories: Xiliang and Meng met when Xiliang was running from the soldiers, they then got married and later Xiliang was forced to leave to work for the Qin emperor. But the difference is that when the heavenly sisters heard about this, they gave Meng a danger candle and danger incense to protect her from men with evil intentions. Meng JiangNu then walked across the entire wall and still didn't find her husband, then she ran into the Qin Emperor who, again, was impressed by her beauty and wanted her to become empress as well. Meng JiangNu said she would if the Qin Emperor built a bridge across the river and invited monks and Buddhists to release her husband Xiliang, and mourned like a filial son. The story then describes the Emperor as a "stupid lord" for immediately obeying whatever the Meng JiangNu says just to impress Meng [4]. Then at the end Meng JiangNu entered the river because as she was weeping for her husband, she was stomping

on the bridge. This version of the story emphasizes the Qin Emperor's evil desires for beautiful women. This shows that the south heavily criticizes this hierarchy and abuse of power held by the emperor. This criticism correlates with the stereotypes of northerners and southerners. The main difference in the southern version of the story that the other stories didn't include was the motives behind why the Qin emperor wanted to build the wall which was only because he wanted a beautiful woman to be his empress, then he repeated the same thing for Meng JiangNu. It emphasizes that he sacrificed many civilians just for his selfish desires and that he would do anything to get a woman.

4. Changes to the interpretation of the myth and modern spins on the tale of Lady Meng JiangNu

People change the story of Meng JiangNu throughout the time that demonstrate different levels and representations of power. Meng JiangNu was one of the most popular Chinese folktales in the 1920s and 1930s and multiple versions of the story were translated into English. One of the first translations was in 1878 and this story as well as the White-haired Girl were considered the first Western-style Chinese opera. However, by the 1940s the legend lost its popularity and importance because the Great Wall and the First Emperor had a different representation of power. It was during the Anti-Japanese War that the Great Wall turned into a symbol of China's "unity and will to fight" rather than the "folly of a lustful tyrant" [5]. It also later became a symbol of clever Chinese engineering. Mao Zedong as China's unifier also praised the First Emperor but there was no way to combine the sad story of Meng JiangNu losing her husband with the "glorification of the Great Wall and its maker" [5].

In Idema's book "Meng JiangNu Brings down the Great Wall," one of the versions of the folklore, sleeping with the Bones, was told by local women in the Southern Hunan. The women created their own scripts and produced songs and ballads of this story as well. They were portrayed as strong female protagonists. This version of the story surfaced shortly before and at the beginning of the Anti-Japanese War, so there are also different interpretations of power throughout this version. Some of the main differences is that they make Meng JiangNu seem stronger and more independent and this is largely due to the fact that it was retold by women. Similar to most of the other versions of the story, Meng was perceived as a loyal woman who loved her husband endlessly and was devoted to him throughout life and death. The way they showed her loyalty was very different from the other versions because this version doesn't end with Meng JiangNu committing suicide and jumping into the river; instead, she carried his bones that she endlessly looked for inside The Great Wall, home and slept with them every night. She also never married another man for the rest of her life. This not only shows how the perspective of a woman can change the attitude of the story and make it more uplifting, but it also shows the softer characteristics/stereotypes of the South. Although, it is also important to note that during the Cultural Revolution, the scripts of these women were destroyed and cultural workers and scholars had to find the older women who had heard the story and were able to retell it. This is because the Liberation Army (Communist Party) took this women's script to be a secret code for the enemy and they attempted to train women to sing the regime, but it ultimately failed. This also is connected to how women viewed marriage.

The version of Lady Meng JiangNu told by women in the south reflects their ideas/perspectives on the culture of traditional Confucian marriage. Before the 1920s, in southern China and Zishunu in Shunde County specifically, there was a movement of marriage resistance [2]. Women would pin up their hair, create sister-hoods, and vowed not to marry anyone. Women lived independently and in houses filled with women and girls that were unmarried. Throughout the early 19th century, the booming silk industry also allowed women to be economically independent as well. The marriage resistance movement eventually fell as the silk industry fell in the 1920s. This movement also connects to a custom called buluojia where women would get married and follow the entire Confucian ceremony, but they would live independently and only visit the husband on special occasions such as birthdays, family deaths, and festivals and the women would permanently move in with the husband when she gets pregnant. Buluojia was also known as "delayed transfer marriage" [6]. Marriage resistance goes against the cultural values of Confucianism because usually the women are

immediately and permanently vowed to the husband. Many Confucian authorities criticized this. These “delayed transfer marriages” were often seen in non-Han groups in an area from southeast to southwest China. This resistance is still common in the She of Fujian, the Yao of Guangdong, the Li of Hainan Island, the Zhuang of Guangxi and the Miao of Guizhou. Since the Southern and women’s version of the story depicts Meng JiangNu as a strong independent female, it represents how women thought and acted during this time period in history. This folklore definitely represents the idea that women wanted to become more individual and take charge of their own lives. Although the plot of the story still involves Meng JiangNu getting married and living with her husband and staying loyal to him even after death, it still shows this sense of independence that the other stories did not emphasize as much.

In the Hui’an county of Fujian there is a substantial amount of women’s suicides during the early 1950s. Cultural anthropologist Lin Huixiang argues that this custom represents an earlier matriarchal society. Women would practice ritual raiding of brides and premarital mates and this shows the transition from a matriarchal society to a patriarchal society. Huixiang also argued that the Han had an influence on this county and turned buluoqia into a harsher practice which resulted in the suicides. This idea of suicide as a form of resistance against marriage reflects the endings of most of the versions of Meng JiangNu because she does not intend to marry the First Emperor. Women during this time would rather take their own lives than to be forced into an unwanted and untrue marriage. This ending of the story tells us a lot about women in both the north and the south China because they are willing to defy the Orthodox belief, Confucianism [7].

5. The tale in the rest of Asia and international power dynamics

Differences in culture, characteristics, and emphasis of power dynamics in Northern and Southern China that can be seen through folktales, especially the Meng JiangNu story, which is also prevalent throughout other regions of East Asia, such as Japan. The story of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl is an example of mediums of exchange through culture and folklore between Japan and China [8]. In Japan, the Tanabata festival (The Tale of Amewakahiko) is hosted every year on July 7th where people write their wishes on strips of colorful paper and hang them up throughout the country. This day is supposed to represent the one day of the year when two lovers, a man and a woman, get to meet because their love is forbidden otherwise. They get to meet on a bridge formed by a flock of magpies across a dividing river every year and it is said that if it rains on that day, the magpies won't be able to use their wings and the couple would have to wait until the next year to meet. This story originated in China called the Qian Luwei Tale [9]. In the story, the father of the girl finds out that the boy is living with her, so he imposes impossible tasks for them making the girl weave a celestial robe, hence being the Weaver Girl because she weaves heavenly clothing. Then he makes the boy herd 1,000 cows because he is a cow herder. This obviously originates from the story of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl which is the Qian Luwei Tale. The two tales are almost identical except for the fact that the names are different and instead of the Weaver girl husband’s supernatural sleeve helping her with weaving the celestial robe, it is a Buddha who takes pity on her that helps her.

6. Conclusion

The tale of Lady Meng JiangNu can tell us a lot about cultural differences and power dynamics in China through its evolution and different adaptations throughout time. How each version handles the notion of power, gender roles, and the dynamic between authority figures and the workers differently can provide important information and materials for research. Distinct sentiments of resentment and servitude with respect to authority and submissiveness delivered by the stories highlight the position of power in different parts of China. While we can learn some things from the myths, future research should focus on other myths and see if the different characteristics exist in other stories or not. If the notions of power and authority are similar in other myths by geographic region, this would support the findings in this paper.

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