

The CALA 2019 Proceedings Paper 10 - 1

*Language Minorities and Majorities, Paper 1*

**Decoding Female Characters in Grimm's Tales and  
Nguyen Dong Chi's Tales from the Socio-historical  
Viewpoint and Comparative Study**

On Thi My Linh

*Thai Nguyen University of Education, Vietnam*

# Decoding Female Characters in Grimm's Tales and Nguyen Dong Chi's Tales from the Socio-historical Viewpoint and Comparative Study

On Thi My Linh<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Thai Nguyen University of Education, Vietnam*

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## Abstract

This article examines how the Brothers Grimm and Nguyen Dong Chi reflect cultural issues through female characters in their folktales and how researchers decode their tales from the socio-historical viewpoint. By showing some aspects such as harsh conditions and gender roles, feminine virtues, the lessons of being a good woman and the concept of feminine beauty, the article argues that by picturing female persons, the Brothers Grimm's tales and Nguyen Dong Chi's tales encode common and different hard facts and social values of German and Vietnamese people. The article is based on ten tales of the Brothers Grimm and ten Vietnamese tales collected by Nguyen Dong Chi.

*Keywords:* Female characters, socio-historical approach, folktales, social values, the Brothers Grimm, Nguyen Dong Chi

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## Introduction

There has been a related trend among scholars paying attention to the question of how to decode folktales. In the book entitled *Interpretation of Fairy tales: Danish folklore in a European Perspective*, Bengt Holbek mentioned some trends of folktale interpretation since the 19th century, including a mythological approach, a comparative anthropological and ritual approach, historic-geographic studies, a psychological interpretation, morphological and structural approaches, and socio-historical and socio-psychological approaches (1987, 187-401). Based on each approach, its followers unearth one or some meanings of folktales. The researchers of the socio-historical approach consider folktales as mirrors of reality, values, beliefs, social issues, politics issues and ideologies of a people at a specific time. From the viewpoint of the socio-historical approach, folktales are “a reflection of the reality in which they were produced, the characters and the settings being based upon real people and their surrounding culture” (Haase 2008, 887). Sparing, another follower of the socio-historical approach, encoded the tales of Schleswig-Holstein through questions: To what extent do folktales reflect the people's perception of reality? What aspects of worldview are revealed in folktales? The researcher focused on interpersonal relationships and the worldview of the community reflected in the folktales of Schleswig- Holstein (Sparing 1984). Folktales can be considered as messages of everyday realities (Bottigheimer 1987, 17) or emotional impressions of beings, phenomena and events in the real world, including problems, hopes, and ideals of a community at a given time (Holbek, Fellows et al. 1987, 435). Another influential follower of the socio-historical approach, Jack Zipes, stated that “there is no doubt that folk and fairy tales participated heavily in the creation

of beliefs and norms and symbolically reflected changes in the social orders of Germany” (1991, 134). Folktales do not only reflect reality, but also create reality.

Applying the socio-historical approach and comparative research, this paper examines the relevance of the Brothers Grimm’s folktales and Nguyen Dong Chi’s folktales to reality and the set of values in German and Vietnamese communities.

## Methodology

In this article, I use textual analysis as the crucial and most appropriate method of gathering data. Ten chosen tales of the Brothers Grimm includes Aschenputtel (Cinderella)- ATU 510 A in the Aarne- Thompson- Uther index of folktales, Der Froschkönig Oder Der Eiserne Heinrich (The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich)- ATU 440, Die Drei Schlangelblätter (The Three Snake Leafs)- ATU 612, Brüderchen Und Schwesterchen (Brother and Sister)- ATU 450, Die Kluge Bauerntochter (The Clever Farmer’s Daughter)- ATU 875, Die Zwei Brüder (The Two Brothers)- ATU 303, Die Zwölf Brüder (The Twelve Brothers)- ATU 451, Hansel Und Gretel (Hansel and Gretel)- ATU 327, Die Nixe Im Teich (The Nixie in the Pond)- ATU 316, Vom Klugen Schneiderlein (The Clever Little Tailor)- ATU 850-869 (Aarne- Thompson- Uther 2004). Ten chosen tales of Nguyen Dong Chi includes Tấm Cám (Tam and Cam), Người Lấy Cóc (A Student Get Married with a Toad), Ba Giọt Máu Hay Sự Tích Con Muỗi (Three Drops Of Blood Or The Origin Of Mosquito), Mụ Dì Ghẻ Ác Nghiệt (The Evil Stepmother), Cuộc Phiêu Lưu Của Chàng Ngốc Hay Làm Theo Lời Vợ Dặn (The adventure of a fool or following the wife’s instructions), Sự Tích Trầu Cau (The Origin of Betel, Areca and Limestone), Ai Mua Hành Tỏi Hay Lọ Nước Thần (Who Want To Buy My Onions Or The Miraculous Vase of Water), Bốn Cô Gái Muốn Lấy Chồng Hoàng Tử (Four sisters Want To Get Married With A Prince), Sự Tích Đá Vọng Phu (The Origin Of The Waiting-for-husband Stone), Làm Cho Công Chúa Nói Được (The Orphan Causes The Princess Speak). I chose these tales classified into ten pairs of tales as they represent the crucial image of female characters and their common content elements.

A comparative study has been conducted in this paper. Some aspects regarding comparative research of folktales suggested by Satu Apo are: (1) A comparison revealing the composition and origins of traditions; (2) A structural analytic comparison; (3) Style and narrative technique; (4) A comparison of content elements reflecting cultural consciousness. According to Apo, their aim was to understand not only the diversity of national cultures but also the common characteristics of mankind (1986, 183-184). In this article, I pay attention to the comparison of content elements that reflect social and cultural aspects.

By analyzing the tales of the Brothers Grimm and Nguyen Dong Chi, based on a socio-historical approach, I want to answer some questions: (1) What do the relationships between female characters and other characters in the folktales look like? (2) What is the role of the female characters in the tales? (3) What kinds of social values are encoded in these tales? Addressing these questions, I argue that folktales encompass realistic values, moral values and aesthetic values such as the socio-economic conditions, traditional rules of marriage, family conflicts and the role of female characters and the German and Vietnamese concepts of beauty and moral lessons. I identified main plots featuring female characters, and compared these plots to establish similarities and differences. One of the most important tasks is analyzing these plots based on socio-cultural contexts and defining which social values are reflected predominately.

## Difficult Economic Circumstances, Money and the Gender Role

In the analyzed tales of the Brothers Grimm and Nguyen Dong Chi, a social historical context with harsh conditions such as poverty, the strictures of a social class system and the strong power of money is depicted.

The German tales focus more on poverty with four of ten chosen tales. Difficult economic circumstances are the main issue in *Die Kluge Bauerntochter*, *Hänsel und Gretel*, *Die Nixe im Teich* and *Vom Klugen Schneiderlein*. Regarding to the role of gender in dealing with harsh conditions, male characters seem to find more effective solutions to solve that problem and reach a higher position in social ladder. The father in *Die Nixe im Teich* makes a risky contract with the nixie to change the poor economic circumstances of his family. The German soldier of *Die Drei Schlangenblätter* tries to fulfill all requirements to marry a princess to overcome the poverty. The role and values of the female characters in the tales of the Brothers Grimm are not often portrayed with dealing their home difficult economic issues caused by natural disaster and war; rather their roles and values are highlighted through dealing domestic skills.

Money and its power and the laws of property division in the family are mentioned in the tales of Nguyen Dong Chi, such as in *Ba Giọt Máu Hay Sự Tích Con Muối* and *Mụ Dì Ghẻ Ác Nghiệt*. The male characters in *Ba Giọt Máu Hay Sự Tích Con Muối* use money as a vehicle to show their power and seduce beautiful women. Money is used to test women's faithfulness and leads them to betray their husband. In the tale of *Mụ Dì Ghẻ Ác Nghiệt*, the traditional laws of dividing property that is unfair to women who take the position of the second wife and threaten the second wife's economic circumstances is highlighted.

## Feminine Virtues, Intelligence and Lessons of Being a Good Woman

The tales of the Brothers Grimm and Nguyen Dong Chi drawing attention to feminine virtues and lessons of how to be a good woman reflect a patriarchal society ruled by men.

In terms of the relationship between a woman and a man before marriage, the male characters play the role of actively searching for their marriage partners in most of the chosen tales. In the German tales, the males born in royal families organize festivals in their castles to meet beautiful girls and then choose one of the best girls for them. The males also go out to the forest for hunting and find a great girl there and bring her back to the castle. While male characters are active in seeking their partner in the tales of the Brothers Grimm, the male characters in the tales of Nguyen Dong Chi need a matchmaker to arrange a suitable partner before a marriage can occur. The appropriate meeting places can be in a rice field or at a festival but not in a castle. The image of the rice field in the Vietnamese tales, as much as the depiction of a queen as simple and familiar and capable of doing all domestic work like other common girls, is likely owing to the agricultural environment within which the Vietnamese tale-tellers lived.

Obedying and looking after parents is one aspect of feminine virtues depicted in the chosen tales of the Brothers Grimm and Nguyen Dong Chi. However, that aspect is highlighted with more details in the Vietnamese tales. In the tale *Tấm Cám* (a Vietnamese version of *Cinderella*), after being the queen, *Tấm*, the female protagonist, prepares for the anniversary of her father's death, herself like every Vietnamese women. She does not ask for the help of her maids, but rather prepares worship rituals alone. The queen still obeys and carries out the orders of her stepmother. In another tale, *Người Lấy Cóc*, the female character, is thought of as a good girl

because of her virtues, although she is a toad. The toad cares for her parents and looks after their jobs. The girls in *Bốn Cô Gái Muốn Lấy Chồng Hoàng Tử* break the rule of filial duty in marriage and as a result they must suffer misery.

The chosen tales of the Brothers Grimm and Nguyen Dong Chi send to readers lessons on how to be a good wife and a good mother, striving for industriousness, obedience, silence, faithfulness and caring. Detailed instructions given to women in the tales leads women to follow rules of required behaviors in German and Vietnamese societies. A good woman is defined as a good mother with caring and educating children. The chosen tales transmit a message that children can seek success and happiness through the love of their mother. In *Der Froschkönig* oder *der eiserne Heinrich*, the educational role of the father is mentioned, however, in that case, the male may act more in his role as king than as father. The minor role of the male in educating children may be explained by the social context; the role of men is to go out and do business and the role of women is to be confined to housework, which also includes nurturing and educating children.

Rewards are spent for the female characters showing their feminine virtues and punishments are for people who fail to behave in accordance with the traditional norms of patriarchal society towards their husbands and sons. In some cases the rewards and punishments are unequal between males and females. In the tales of *Hänsel und Gretel*, the father agrees with his wife's plan of leaving their children in forest, but the wife is punished with death and the father goes on to live in happiness with the children. Three of the ten chosen Vietnamese tales mention the issue of unequal punishment between two genders. In *Ba Giọt Máu Hay Sự Tích Con Muỗi*, the merchant who seduces the woman and makes her become an unfaithful wife does not receive any punishment whereas unfaithfulness leads the woman to her death. The stepmother of *Mụ Di Ghẻ Ấc Nghiệt* behaves criminally in that she disregards the laws of property division; while the law privileges the oldest son and gives a disadvantageous position to the second wife and her son, she claims the property for him and herself. *Sự Tích Đá Vọng Phu* deals with the problem of incestuous marriage, and the female seems to be punished harder than the male. The unequal punishment of the different genders may result from the Confucian ideology that has deep roots in Vietnamese culture. Confucianism requires women to fulfill three subjugations (*tam tông*) and hold to four required feminine virtues (*tứ đức*) so as to be an ideal woman. *Tam tông tứ đức* asserts the dependence of women on men and puts strong moral pressure on the women in whatever they do.

Intelligence is mentioned in some of the chosen tales; intelligence seems not to be an expected virtue of women. In a few of the tales, the female characters can be active in thinking ahead and figuring out a solution for overcoming economic troubles. However, they are encouraged to use their wits under the roof of their houses instead of dealing with outside business like the male characters. Showing intelligence by female characters may lead their family relationships to a break. In *Die Kluge Bauerntochter*, after showing her intelligence in public, the German clever farmer's daughter faces her husband's anger. The wife in *Cuộc Phiêu Lưu của Chàng Ngốc hay Làm Theo Lời Vợ Dẫn*, one of the chosen Vietnamese tales, takes the role as head of the family and the tale ends with her husband's tragic death. The princesses in the tale of the Brothers Grimm *Vom Klugen Schneiderlein* and the Vietnamese tale *Làm Cho Công Chúa Nói Được* are demonstrated with intelligence. However, both of these tales come to the same conclusion; women can be intelligent but men are even more intelligent.

## The Definition of Feminine Beauty

Through the female characters in the tales of Brothers Grimm and Nguyen Dong Chi, the concept of beauty is defined with some questions concerning what beauty is, how to recognize beauty, who can own beauty and the hope of change supported by beauty.

The definition of feminine beauty differs between the German and the Vietnamese tales. The Cinderella of the Brothers Grimm suggest small feet as a sign of feminine beauty; this may be a traditionally held concept of beauty. The concept that beauty belongs to a girl who has small feet seems to be popular in various cultures; it derives from a historical and social context in which rich girls did not do hard work and their hands and feet thus did not become big and calloused. The German tales emphasize the simultaneity of a pretty physical appearance and a nice soul and spirit. Little Sister is beautiful in appearance and is kind-hearted; her evil stepmother and stepsister are described as ugly and wicked. Indeed, most of the German female protagonists are described as very beautiful in appearance and show their good feminine virtues. The German tales anchor the ideas of Romanticism and they thus idealize human beauty as spiritual perfection.

In contrast, the Vietnamese tales draw attention to a traditional idea: Beauty is only skin-deep; handsome is as handsome does (*Cái nết đánh chết cái đẹp*). The female toad seduces the student's heart not with her ugly appearance but rather with her good behavior. The farmer's wife in *Ai Mua Hành Tỏi Hay Lộ Nước Thần* shows her good character traits even before her appearance is transformed from ugliness into beauty. The difference between the German and Vietnamese concepts of beauty can be explained by the different economic and social contexts. The traditional economic system in Vietnam was mainly built on wet rice agriculture and that economy must rely on hard work on the field regardless of harsh weather conditions. Working hard, sunlight, and rainwater might turn a beautiful woman into an ugly woman. On the one hand, the transformation of the female toad or the farmer's wife in the Vietnamese tales raises poor girls' hopes and dreams; figuring out something magical to make them become very beautiful. On the other hand, the tales also reflect the Confucian ideals that value women's virtues above a nice appearance.

The tales of the Brothers Grimm and Nguyen Dong Chi transmit a message of the owners of beauty are the rich upper class men. These rich male characters unintentionally or intentionally find a poor but beautiful girl during a festival, in a forest or in a remote area and bring the girl back to their home. This issue is foregrounded in the German tales *Aschenputtel*, *Brüderchen und Schwesterchen*, and *Die zwölf Brüder*, and in the Vietnamese tales *Tám Cám*, *Ba Giọt Máu Hay Sự Tích Con Muỗi*, *Ai Mua Hành Tỏi Hay Lộ Nước Thần*. Most of the kings or princes ask beautiful girls to marry them without hesitation.

## Conclusion

Through the examined tales, the Brothers Grimm and Nguyen Dong Chi depict the image of a patriarchal society in which the roles of the women largely unfold in doing domestic work as well as nurturing and educating children, whereas the role of men mostly entails facing economic difficulties. However, the patriarchal ideology seems to be demonstrated more strongly in the

tales of Nguyen Dong Chi: The tales mention the weak position of the second wife and the responsibility and privilege of the oldest son in the family. Both the German and Vietnamese tales contributed to the glorification of the beauty of women as expressed in appearance and behavior. The feminine virtues are foregrounded through different relationships that require women to carry out various duties, and not only those of a good wife but also those of a mother.

The Brothers Grimm inscribed into their tale collection a mixture of Romanticism and bourgeois ideology; on the one hand, they praised women's beauty as perfection and drew a picture of moral values for women defining them as obedient, industrious, friendly and faithful; on the other hand, the two collectors and editors drew attention to the female cunning and women's ability to seek, support and rescue their men. Nguyen Dong Chi, influenced by Confucian ideology, focused his attention on the moral aspect of social values; subjecting themselves threefold to their parents, husbands and sons and learning the four virtues may bring women happiness.

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