



The Effectiveness and Limitations of “Context” Reflections Based on Ethnographic Research of Myth Traditions

“Context” has, since the mid-1990s, become a guiding perspective in Chinese folklore research. Based on the ethnographic field study of myth traditions in three communities, this article carefully examines the effectiveness and limitations of the perspective of context. It finds that context plays an important role in shaping myth texts, regulating the narrative occasions of myth, defining the composition and scale of narrators and audiences, and determining the functions and meanings of myths. On the other hand, the influence of context on myth traditions is limited. The combination of core motifs and the type and basic content of the story remain unchanged. Thus, the perspective of context alone cannot adequately express the essential core of the form and content of myths. To make contextual studies more effective, the article proposes a synthetic approach to myth research.

KEYWORDS: context—text—myth—synthetic approach

THE INTRODUCTION of new theoretical concepts has shaped the practice of Chinese folklore research. Among these, “context” has gradually become a keyword of folklore scholarship in China. Especially since the mid-1990s, traditional textual analysis has been overshadowed by contextual studies and has emerged as the dominant approach (LIU 2009; YANG 2011a).

This article reflects on the popularity of context studies by examining the role of context in the transmission and transformation of folklore, in particular of specific linguistic features. It addresses these questions using three fieldwork-based case studies. These studies derive from a ten year ethnographic project (2000–2010) entitled “The Transmission and Transformation of Modern Orally Transmitted Myth,” which was co-conducted with graduate students under the author’s supervision.¹ These projects were conducted in Huaiyang 淮 county in Henan 河南 province by Yang Lihui and Tong Yunli; in Sigu 司鼓 village of Zouma 走 Town of Chongqing 重 city by Zhang Xia; and in Hou 侯 village of Hongtong 洪洞 county of Shanxi 山西 province by Xu Fang (see FIGURE 1 for the location of the field sites).²

Before moving on to my analysis, it is necessary to first define the two core concepts that are used in this article, “context” and “text.” “Context” is one of the central concepts in the fields of ethnography of communication, linguistic anthropology, philology, and pragmatics. But what “context” means and refers to has continuously been shifting. Different scholars have different understandings of this concept. In their introduction, DURANTI and GOODWIN (1997) point out that,

When the issue of *context* is raised it is typically argued that the focal event cannot be properly understood, interpreted appropriately, or described in a relevant fashion, unless one looks beyond the event itself to other phenomena (for example cultural setting, speech situation, shared background assumptions) within which the event is embedded ... the context is thus a frame that surrounds the event being examined and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation (3, emphasis in original).

“Text” usually means discourse that can be “bounded off to a degree from its discursive surrounding (its co-text)”; it is “internally cohesive (tied together by various formal devices), and coherent (semantically intelligible)”; and can be



FIGURE 1. Location of field sites. Map by author.

objectified, for example, it “can be referred to, described, named, displayed, cited, and otherwise treated as an object” (BAUMAN 2004, 4). Finally, this article defines “myth” as a genre of verbal art. It is a narrative about gods, remote ancestors, cultural heroes, sacred animals, and their mythical achievements. It tells one or a series of stories before or at the moment of creation to explain the origins of the universe, human beings (including specific ethnic groups), and culture, as well as to the present order of the world (YANG 2009).

The three cases studies examined in this article come from three geographically dispersed Han communities: Huaiyang, in the east of Henan province, Sigu in the southwestern municipality of Chongqing, and Hou village in northern Shanxi province. It was said that Taihao Fuxi 太昊伏羲—the primogenitor who repopulated the world by marrying his sister after the great flood—once constructed his capital city in Huaiyang. A large Renzu 人祖 (ancestor of mankind) temple complex is located here. This temple was severely damaged after 1949 due to the impact of political and cultural campaigns and movements. Since the reform and opening up in the late 1970s, the temple festival has been revived gradually. Nowadays, the annual temple festival, which is held from the third day of the second

lunar month to the third day of the third month, is one of the biggest occasions to worship the ancestors and to conduct trade in the central plains.

Sigu village is located in the northwest of Zouma town of Chongqing, southwest China. The population in 2001 was 844. Hou village is in the southeast of Zhaocheng 城 town in Hongtong county in Linfen city, Shanxi province, with a population of 5,350 in 2001. There is a Nüwa 女 temple in this village to enshrine and worship the primogenitor, Nüwa, who was believed to have created human beings by molding earth. It was an imperial temple during the Song (960–1279), Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. In the civil war of the 1940s, the prosperous temple festivals fell into decline, and came to an end during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In the mid-1990s, people in Hou village repaired Nüwa temple, and a new temple festival was held in the third lunar month of 2000.

EFFECT OF CONTEXT: THE IMPACT OF CONTEXT ON MYTH TRADITIONS

Ethnographic studies in the three Han communities have shown that context exerts important effects on certain aspects of myth tradition.

Context Shapes the Construction and Change of the Text

In my research on Huaiyang mythic tradition, I analyzed a case that took place in 1993 when three scholars at Henan University and I were conducting fieldwork on myth-telling at the Renzu temple festival. Upon our request, a farmer named Wang Donglian 王 (female, 58 years old), who was selling local food at the fair, told us a brother-sister marriage myth that was popularly circulated in the local area. As she narrated, many pilgrims came around to listen to the story. People constantly questioned her narration skills and her knowledge of the content of the myth. When we asked her questions, many people helped to answer. Thus it became an open, fluid, and negotiable communicative event, which influenced her narrative and performance strategy as well as the form of the final text. Below is an excerpt of the conversation:

Wang Donglian (Wang): After the sky and the earth crumbled, there were no human beings any more. There was a tortoise, to whom two students fed a steamed bun every day. These two students were brother and sister. When the sky and earth crumbled, the tortoise *carried them on its back* [verbal emphasis by storyteller]. It spit out one steamed bun each day to feed them.

After several years ... they came out of the tortoise's belly. The sky—people said *its northeast corner still had a crack* (emphasis by storyteller). Nüwa mended it with ice. That's why it's cold in the northeast.

Audience member 1 (old woman, 82 years old): It's cold when it blows wind from the northeast. It's not cold if it does not.

Audience member 2 (old woman): Blowing the wind from northeast—

Audience member 3 (old woman): Don't make any noise. She's doing an audio recording.

Audience member 2: Why am I not allowed to make any noise?

Audience member 3: She's recording.

Wang (talking to audience member 1): How about you tell the story, OK?

Audience member 3: Her story has more detail than yours.

Wang: Maybe.

Yang Lihui (Yang): (reminding Wang) You said that Nüwa.....

Wang: Oh, yes. It's cold when it blows wind from the northeast. Why is it cold if it doesn't, right?

Yang: Nüwa was one of the two students, right?

Wang: Yes.

Audience members: They were brother and sister.

Yang: Are they Renzu Grandfather (Renzu ye 人祖) and Renzu Grandmother (Renzu nainai 人祖)?

Wang: No, Nüwa is Renzu Girl (Renzu guniang 人祖姑娘). You cannot call her Renzu Grandmother (storyteller's emphasis). The two ancestors didn't get married.

Audience member 1: They didn't get married at all.

Wu Xiaoqun 效群 (one of the scholars, abbreviated as Wu): Where did human beings come from if these two did not get married?

Wang: They climbed up a mountain. There was nothing on it. What could they do? There was a set of millstones on the top of the mountain and [they stuck] some grass into the earth at the foot of the mountain.....

Audience member 4 (middle-aged man): Stuck the grass like a stick of incense.

Wang: Yes, like incense. They decided if the millstones were not separated after rolling, they would get married. If not, they were still brother and sister. Where can one find a set of millstones that do not separate after rolling down the mountain? But they did not this time.

Audience member 1: No, they were separated. This was the reason why they did not get married.

Wang: Separated? No. They were not dispersed after rolling down the mountain.

Yang: Please finish telling your story first. We will record this old lady's story after this. She has a different story.

Wang: Why not separated? There was a tree at the foot of the mountain. The two pieces were stopped and blocked by it, and they were not separated because of it.

Audience member 3: The time when the sky and earth crumbled, who would know what happened at that time?

Yang: What happened after that? They got married?

Wang: Yes, they got married. They said, "Let's make clay figures." After making them, they put them under the sun to dry. When it rained, [they tried to sweep all the figures together and moved them]. Legs were broken during sweeping.

So the human [body], even though one cleans and scrubs, it still has mud and dirt. Isn't this so?

The myth-telling process described here is a product of interaction and negotiation among the narrator, the researchers, and the audience, which also produces a “specific” myth text. Upon the researchers’ request, Wang Donglian began to tell the brother-sister marriage myth. But she was interrupted in the middle by several older members of the audience who might have been more skillful at myth telling. They disagreed with Wang’s explanation about whether cold weather in the north-east came from when Nüwa used ice to mend the sky. Their disagreement interrupted Wang’s thinking and diverged from the topic. Her narrative seemed to end at this point. Then after the researchers’ intentional inquiry, she finished the other important part of the narrative, which was the marriage of the brother and the sister after rolling the two pieces of a millstone down the mountain. When members of the audience again disagreed with this explanation, which is actually a common plot in this myth type, Wang started to appeal to tradition by saying “people used to say that” and “I heard it from the stories told by other people.” In addition, she intentionally added an explanation in the narrative in particular to reinforce the rationality of her story, which was that the two pieces of stone were not separated because one tree blocked them. It is obvious that this explanation was added to the story at that moment because of the audience’s questioning. She wanted to use everyday knowledge to make a reasonable explanation and to continue her myth-telling in a logical way. Details like “sticking the grass like incense into the earth” in the text were provided by the audience and then added to the story. So, in this specific performance event, the narrator, audience, and researchers of different knowledge and ability all participated in the narrative process. Their interaction and negotiation not only produced the moment when this specific myth was transmitted and transformed but also constructed a specific, new myth text. The text of orally transmitted myths is thus not an unchanging system of form. It is produced in the performance process during which the narrator performs his/her knowledge in specific communicative events. This process, which is influenced by numerous complicated factors, consequently leads to different myth text versions of particular characteristics (YANG 2005; 2011b).

In the case of Sigu village, ZHANG (2011) studied a famous storyteller, Mr. Wei (Wei daye 魏大 , 1930–2009). Zhang compared five myth variants relating to the great hero Yu controlling the flood that were narrated by Wei over thirteen years (1988–2002). She found that Wei showed a distinct sensibility toward performance context. He would make changes to language, content, structure, and even the theme of the story according to time, place, audience, and environment. And each storytelling transformed the original motifs and resulted in the production of variants (ZHANG Xia 2011, 81–82).

Context Regulates the Occasions of Myth-Telling

In our research, we find that the Chinese political climate and state ideology have had an important impact on the transmission of myth tradition, especially the

question of when and whether the narratives could be recounted. For example, in Sigu village, Wei barely told any stories or sang any songs during the Cultural Revolution, a time when ultra-leftist ideology regarded the old traditions as feudal superstition. Myth-telling could lead to public denouncement and even more serious punishment for the narrator. However, with the opening of China in the post-1980s, ideology relaxed its control on folk tradition. In 1983, after approval from the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China (Zhongguo minjian wenyijia xiehui 中国民间文艺家协会), the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Association (formerly known as Zhongguo minjian wenyi yanjiuhui 中国民间文艺研究会, "Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Research Society") began to consider a national survey and collection of Chinese folk literature. Formally initiated in 1984 and basically finished in 2004, the project is named "Three Collections of Folk Literature" (*santao jicheng* 三套集成) (YANG and AN with TURNER, 2008, 14–16). At that time, a secretary in Zouma Town who was in charge of collecting folk literature found Wei. Wei initially hesitated and refused to tell any stories. Then this secretary repeatedly told Wei about the significance and importance of the "Three Collections." He even persuaded his own mother to tell stories first and then let Wei listen to her recording. Wei was touched and recalled many stories in his memory. The myth-telling tradition was revived through this old man's narration, which had ceased for many years (ZHANG 2011, 59).

In her research in Huaiyang, TONG (2011) pointed out that Renzu belief in Huaiyang and other related myth narratives were also labeled as "superstition" (*mixin* 迷信) and "feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism" (*feng zi xiu* 封修) from 1949 to 1976. These myths gradually disappeared from public community events. However, politics did not destroy entrenched local beliefs. Even without an organized group, pilgrims continued to worship the primogenitors secretly instead of conducting public incense-offering. Nor could the tradition of myth telling be completely forbidden. People still recounted the merits of primogenitors orally, although in secret among families, lineages, and private places. After the 1980s, Renzu belief and myth broke out of the political interference and gradually came to be regarded as part of the foundation of the national culture. It gained more space for transmission, reappearing as folk tradition in everyday life and being shared by the community as a public cultural treasure (TONG 2011, 295–96).

Besides the political influence, the sociocultural and economic transformations also shaped the narrative occasions of myth. XU (2011) found that occasions for storytelling (including myths) in Hou village have lessened in the last thirty years. The main reasons for the declining tradition include the influence of the economy—the primary concern of villagers is now economic benefit. The diversification of production patterns makes it difficult to have a unified work schedule. Therefore, villagers are neither interested in telling stories, nor do they have much free time to get together. In addition, the rapid development of the mass media also influences the transmission of myth tradition to some degree. Every household in Hou village has a television. Children and youths are not willing to listen to elders to tell stories. As storyteller Shen Jiliang 申亮, said, what is shown on

TV is “full of sound and color.... We cannot tell stories as well as the ones shown on TV” (XU 2011, 192–93).

Thus, it is clear that the political, economic, and sociocultural contexts have influenced the narrating occasions of myth in different ways, especially state policies and ideologies.

Context Defines the Composition and Scale of Narrators and Audience

According to TONG’s (2011) fieldwork in Huaiyang, most myth narrators during the Cultural Revolution were senior family members and the elders of the village. It was safe to tell myths in the family setting, which also added joy to the family gathering time after a meal or tea. Some religious elders secretly told the myths they knew to the youths in the village. At that time, a small underground social circle formed and the elders in this circle secretly taught songs and told myths. Many of these elders became the key figures in the revival of local folk beliefs after the 1980s. In contrast, some creative bearers of myth tradition became passive bearers of myth tradition due to political reasons (YANG and AN with TURNER 2008, 61). Myth-telling activities were reduced and even disappeared from these bearers’ personal lives. For instance, Li An 李安 (pseudonym) was an excellent narrator. However, he was punished after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China due to his administrative position in the local government before 1949. From 1949 to the end of the Cultural Revolution, his personal life was inseparable from political events. Although he had the ability to tell myths he had neither the interest nor the opportunity to do so (YANG and AN with TURNER 2008, 289–91).

XU (2011) pointed out that local Nüwa belief was already fading before Hou village rebuilt its Nüwa Temple in the 1990s. Nobody told Nüwa myths and naturally there was no audience. The event of rebuilding the Nüwa Temple prompted some newcomers to the myth tradition to become active myth narrators, effectively creating an audience for the myth tradition. For example, Shen Jiliang, who was in charge of the temple rebuilding project, took it as his own responsibility to know Nüwa myths. He read books and consulted the elders to better understand and grasp Nüwa myths. During his myth-telling, he also integrated his own understanding and recreation. After the rebuilding of the temple, Hou village became the center of local Nüwa beliefs. Visitors to the temple festival included both Hou villagers and the pilgrims from neighboring counties and rural areas. While praying for blessings and offspring, listening to local operas, and looking for fun, the fair-goers also had the opportunity to listen to Nüwa myths and communicate the experiences of Nüwa beliefs. The existence of an audience transformed Nüwa myth tradition in Hou village from its “passive existence” without narrators or an audience to its “active existence,” in which Nüwa myths were actively told and listened to by those interested (XU 2011, 207–10).

Context Determines the Function and Meaning of Myth

Finally, the function and meaning of myth are changing constantly in different contexts. As is shown in the case of Huaiyang, the control of state ideology over

local folk beliefs and myths during the 1930s was relatively loose. Folk beliefs and myths followed their own inclination. Myths and tales about how the primogenitors punished evil and awarded good, which were transmitted in the form of prose or verse, were not only the expressions of Renzu beliefs but also an important means of continuing historical knowledge, moral education, and regulating local social order. After 1949, myths that were intertwined with folk beliefs were restricted by ideology, while their original function and meaning weakened and withered, especially during the Cultural Revolution. With the revival of Renzu beliefs since the 1990s, myths and tales have again become an important resource for expressing folk beliefs and educating local communities, as well as a cohesive force for the community (YANG 1997, chapter 5). In addition, myths also gained new functions and meanings. For example, under the collaborative work of the local government and intellectuals, Renzu myths and beliefs are transformed into proof of the enduring history of the community. They became vital cultural capital to attract business investment to build tourism, and develop the local economy. In the case of Hou village, Xu similarly pointed out that Nüwa myth tradition became an important springboard for the local government and folk elites to revive temple festivals and to develop tourism (XU 2011, 212–13). Especially for some local governments and folk elites, myth as political and cultural-economic capital has become an important resource and rhetorical strategy.

men left. And he would permit it only if god approved. The method was that they would roll two pieces of a millstone from the top of the mountain. If they were not separated when rolling down to the foot of the mountain, it meant that god agreed. If not, that meant god disagreed. They stood on the top of the mountain to hold each piece and pushed it down. The god of Moon Palace (*yuegong* 月) in heaven considered that there must be humans in the world, and thus he helped them. Two pieces rolled to the foot of the mountain together. The brother and sister became a couple.

They were so bored that they made clay figures. One day lightning suddenly flashed and thunder rumbled. They were afraid that the clay figures would be soaked and ruined, so they hurried to move them into the room. During that time, the mouths, feet, eyes, and noses of many figures were damaged. The human beings in the world now are the clay figures made by the couple. The number of figures they can make each day is that of the children who are born each day. The disabled people are the damaged clay figures when the couple tried to sweep them into the room. (ZHENG 1934, 17–19)

This documented myth text from 1934 resembles the one that I collected from the Renzu temple festival in 1993. In 2005, Tong Yunli recorded the same type of myth text narrated by Li An at the temple festival in Huaiyang:

There were two students, who were brother and sister. On their way to school there was a tortoise that they would feed with the steamed buns they could not finish. One day the tortoise said, “It will soon be the time of chaos [*hundun* 混沌]. Heaven and earth will crumble.” On the day when this was to happen, the tortoise stopped them and said, “It’s already the time for heaven and earth to crumble. You can hide in my belly and can come out again when this period of time ends.” Immediately the siblings went into its belly.

After a while, the tortoise opened its mouth and let them come out. It said: “You two may take your time to recreate humans. You roll two millstones from the top of the mountain. If the pieces are not separated when reaching the foot, you can get married.”

The brother said: “We cannot do that. We’re blood brother and sister.”

The sister said: “We’re the only people left in the world, aren’t we?”

Then they rolled the pieces from the top of the mountain. And the pieces were not separated.

They got married and had babies. Fuxi said: “This is too slow.” Then, they began to make clay figures. It rained and they hurriedly moved the figures into the house. Some figures were destroyed. That is why there are blind and crippled people now.

These three texts were recorded over a span of seventy years. Comparing these texts carefully, one can notice many differences in descriptive details and motifs. For example, in the text recorded in 1934, the motifs of “tortoise forecasts the flood” (Motif No. 873.3), “escaping from the flood by hiding in the belly of tortoise” (Motif No. 923), and “tortoise as the matchmaker” do not appear (motif

numbers refer to the *Motif Index of Chinese Mythology*; see YANG and ZHANG 2013). But the motif of “the god of Moon Palace as matchmaker,” which appeared much later, was added to the text. There was also an ending to explain the origins of mankind: “The clay figures they could make each day are the number of children who are born in the world each day.” In the text recorded in 1993, the motif of “mending the sky with ice” was added (Motif No. 992.7) and it also had an origin-explanation for the natural phenomenon of why it is cold when the northeast wind blows (Motif No. 562.10). In addition, the text included details to explain why the two pieces could be united. Some of these variations are related to the performance context of the stories as shown in the text recorded in 1993, in which the narrator explained why the two pieces did not separate. However, these different motifs and details can be called an “auxiliary decoration,” whose existence is intended to make the story more full, attractive, and specific. However, these additions generally do not influence the completeness of the narrative content or the structure or form of this myth type. What is more important is that the core motifs and their combination, type, and basic content of these core motif chains display enduring stability. The same motif chain could be found in all the three texts as following:

- (1) Crumbling of heaven and earth. The collapse of the universe. (Motif No. 961)
- (2) The primogenitor brother and sister escape from the disaster. (Motif No. 972.1)
- (3) Deciding the marriage by rolling down the millstones. (Motif No. 153.1)
- (4) The primogenitor brother and sister got married. (Motif No. 152)
- (5) Recreating human beings by making clay figures. (Motif No. 971)
- (6) Damage to the clay figures in rain explains the origins of the disabled. (Motif No. 1088.1)

These six core motifs and the sequence of motif chains, which constitute the main formal structure and basic content of this myth, remained stable. This stability also led to the stability of the myth type in spite of the countless changes to the social and cultural contexts and to the individual narrators or audience. The details change, but the essence remains constant.

We may say that this kind of stability is determined by the genre nature of myth. Among various genres of verbal arts, myth is often regarded to be sacred and possesses more stability (FIRTH 1984). However, many scholars have similar findings when studying other genres. For example, in his research on the history of Chinese proverbs, An Deming suggests that, although the contexts for using proverbs change, the formal structure, content, and artistic expression of many proverbs display great stability during their historical transmission for centuries (AN 2011, 9, 134). Finnish folklorist Anna-Leena Siikala compared the different narrative texts of the same tale by the same narrator and those by different narrators. She points out that the content material that is essential to the plots does not change and repeatedly occurs in a tale although the narrative content can be shaped by the context (SIKALA 1990, 81–82).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

2004). Chen's views stirred a heated debate on the relationship between text and context among scholars. In my 2004 article, I also pointed out that, when it comes to the interaction between context and text, contemporary folklore research seems to pay particular attention to textual changes and to overlook the stability of text (YANG 2004). However, generally speaking, the voice of reflection as mentioned above is rather weak. Chinese folklorists have not developed in-depth reflection on the effectiveness and limitation of context. The majority still focus on the observation and description of the changes occurring in context and overlook the discussion on the stability of the core of myth text.

Similar to other perspectives, the perspective of context cannot be a panacea. It is necessary to recognize and combine the strength of various approaches, or what I call a "synthetic approach." Specifically, this approach proposes to integrate textual and contextual research, the strength of the conventional historical research with the focus of performance theory at the very moment, historical-geographical comparative research with the ethnographic research in specific communities, and research on collective transmission with the understanding of individual creativity (YANG 2009, 258–59; 2011b). It still takes time and practice to verify the effectiveness of this approach, especially how to synthesize the perspective of context and research on the stability of myth text, which can be seen as a potential future research topic.

NOTES

1. The funding of this program is supported by the "Reward Plan on Teaching and Scientific Researching of Excellent Youth Teachers in Universities" of the Chinese Ministry of Education (Zhongguo jiaoyubu "gaodeng xuexiao youxiu qingnian jiaoshi jiaoxue he keyan jiangli jihua" 中国教育部 "高等学校 秀青年教 教学和科研 励").

2. The research generated from this project was originally published in Chinese; see YANG et al. 2011.

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