

POETICS TRANSFORMATIONS FROM THE TÀY ETHNIC FOLK TALE “CON CHIM SÁO” [THE STARLING] TO THE NARRATIVE POEM “CHIM SÁO” [THE STARLING]

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Abstract

“Chim sáo” [The starling] is a typical Tày folk poem, whose author draws material from the Tày folk tale, “Con chim sáo” [The starling]. The poetics elements from the folk tale are inherited and creatively developed in the poem, creating a long narrative work. This article studies these two works as a pair of interconnected texts to examine the transformations in plot, characters, and language. Based on this, the article aims to analyze the changes in poetics between the two texts, thereby clarifying the characteristics of folk narrative in the context of genre transformation.

Keywords: *Folk tale, folk poem, starling, plot, characters, language*

Among the folk narrative poems of the ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous regions, the narrative poem “Chim sáo” [The starling] is a remarkable work in both content and artistry. The story is widely circulated among the Tày and Nùng ethnic communities in many localities, especially in Cao Bang. It is based on the narrative material from the Tày folk tale “Con chim sáo” [The starling]. From an existing folk plot, the author creatively adapted it to create a narrative poem with a much larger scope than the folk tale. Furthermore, the transformation of poetics aspects such as plot, characters, and language reflects a fundamental shift in narrative thinking: from a formulaic, simplified, and functional folk narrative style to a narrative style with rich individualization and connection to a specific social context.

In fact, studying the issues of ethnic minority folklore from a poetics perspective is not at all new. Previous studies on folk tales and narrative poems have also addressed poetics issues such as plot, characters, motifs, time, and artistic space. However, existing studies mainly focus on examining each genre individually or generalizing the relationship between them at the content level, without delving into clarifying the mechanism of poetics transformation in the process of transition from folk tale to narrative poem. In particular, the case of the Tày tale “Con chim sáo” [The starling] and the

narrative poem “Chim sáo” [The starling] has not yet been approached as a pair of interconnected texts to examine the transformation at the levels of plot, characters, and language. Based on that, this article aims to analyze the poetics changes between the two texts, examining the dynamic characteristics of folk narrative regarding genre transformation.

Plot

According to the “Từ điển thuật ngữ văn học” [Dictionary of Literary Terms], “Cốt truyện là hệ thống các sự kiện cụ thể, được tổ chức theo yêu cầu tư tưởng và nghệ thuật nhất định tạo thành một bộ phận cơ bản, quan trọng nhất trong hình thức động của tác phẩm văn học thuộc các loại tự sự và kịch” [The plot is a system of specific events, organized according to certain ideological and artistic requirements, forming a basic and most important part in the dynamic form of literary works of narrative and dramatic genres] (Lê et al., 1992, p. 88). The events in the plot are organized and linked together to create an overall narrative structure of the literary work. Folk tales and narrative poems, intellectual products of folk authors, also adhere to this principle.

Surveying folk tale and narrative poem texts from the perspective of plot, we can first identify the main events as follows:

Folk tale “Con chim sáo” [The starling]

1. Trương Anh, an orphan, lives in poverty and works as a hired buffalo herder for the village chief.
2. Trương Anh catches a starling and brings it home. The starling helps Trương Anh by stealing silver from the wealthy Quý Tú.
3. The starling is captured. The wealthy man ties up the starling and takes it to the king to file a complaint. The king assigns the case to a judge. The judge accepts a bribe from Quý Tú. The starling is executed by having its feathers plucked.
4. The starling takes revenge.

Narrative poem “Chim sáo” [The starling]

(During the reign of King Việt Vương, in Tô Châu)

1. Trương Tam married Trương Thị and they had a son, Trương Anh.

2. Both parents died → Truong Anh was orphaned.
3. Truong Anh suffered hardship → Begged → Was given buffalo to herd by Ngô Giang.
4. Truong Anh caught a starling and brought it home → The starling helped Truong Anh by stealing silver from the house of official Quý Tử.
5. The starling was caught → Was taken to the capital for trial.
6. Met the prince consort → Was judged by the prince consort who ordered soldiers to pluck all its feathers.
7. The starling took revenge.

This is just one of many instances where folk tales and narrative poems share similarities. The two versions mentioned above were selected from numerous translated and published texts to study and analyze some aspects of the plot.

Comparing the two texts reveals that the plot in the Tày tale "The starling" and the narrative poem "The starling" essentially follows a familiar narrative model: an orphan character falls into hardship, encounters a magical force (the starling) for help, then clashes with wealthy and powerful forces, leading to unjust punishment and culminating in revenge. However, in narrative poetry, the plot is significantly expanded compared to the folk tale: characters (Truong Tam, Truong Thị), setting (Tô Châu, = the capital), and power structures (the prince consort, the court) are added, creating a narrative structure with a clearer historical and social context. This increase in intermediate details and power hierarchies shows the process of "actualization" and "secularization" of the folk tale plot when it is transformed into narrative poetry, while also changing the narrative rhythm from concise and focused to longer, branching, and more dramatic.

Character

"Nhân vật văn học là khái niệm dùng để chỉ hình tượng các cá thể con người trong tác phẩm văn học - cái đã được nhà văn nhận thức, tái tạo, thể hiện bằng các phương tiện riêng của nghệ thuật ngôn từ" [Literary character is a concept used to refer to the image of individual human beings in a literary work - which has been perceived, recreated, and expressed by the writer through the specific means of linguistic art] (Lê et al., 1992, p. 114)

At the character level, both texts build a system of images revolving around the familiar opposing axis of folk narrative: the orphaned, poor but kind character (Truong Anh/Truong Anh) is opposed to the wealthy, greedy and unjust forces (nouveau riche/officials). The starling plays the role of a functional intermediary character, both a magical

force to help and an agent to promote conflict and resolve contradictions. However, when transitioning to narrative poetry, the character system has expanded and become more clearly individualized: characters not only have specific names but are also placed within defined social relationships (family, village, court), and powerful figures such as the prince consort and officials appear, creating a complex network of relationships. This increased level of identification and socialization shows a shift from the formulaic, functional character type of folk tales to the individual character type linked to a specific historical and social context in narrative poetry. The individuality of the character is shown through the fact that the character has a name, a hometown, and a clear origin. When recounting the character's origin, in folk tales, the narrator briefly introduces: "có chàng Truong Anh, mồ côi cả cha lẫn mẹ từ ngày còn nhỏ tuổi" [There was a young man named Truong Anh, orphaned at a young age]. In the narrative poem, with the opening 15 lines, the narrator seems to focus more on the authenticity of the story by adding the detail: "bố Truong Anh là Truong Tam, mẹ là Truong Thị" [Truong Anh's father is Truong Tam, his mother is Truong Thi]. The characters appear in a fairly clear context in terms of both time and space.

"Đời xưa vua Việt Vương tức vị
Khắp thiên hạ hết thầy an khang.
Tô Châu có một chàng trưởng giả
Tên thường gọi cậu cả Truong Tam
Kết duyên với cô nàng Truong Thị
Đẻ được một chú bé Truong Anh,
Số phận hèn mỏng mang dùm tuổi,
Mẹ cha đều bỏ cõi trần gian,
Chưa có sức làm ăn cực khổ" (Truyện thơ Tày - Nùng, tập 1 [Tày - Nùng narrative poems, volume 1], 1964, p. 345)

[In ancient times, King Việt Vương occupied the throne.

The whole world was peaceful and prosperous.

In Tô Châu, there was a wealthy young man.

Oldest son, called Truong Tam.

He married a young woman named Truong Thị.

They had a baby boy named Truong Anh.

His fate was humble and fragile at a young age.

His parents both passed away.

He was not yet strong enough to work hard]

Regarding the name of the main character, there is a difference between the folktale and the narrative poem: Truong Anh (folk tale) and Truong Anh (narrative poem). However, this is probably just due to the pronunciation of the local people during the process of the work being transmitted and performed, or the author of the narrative poem intentionally changed it slightly to suit their creative mindset. What is noteworthy about the narrative poem is that the story takes place with specific characters and specific locations (the Chiết Giang

province). This is different from the folk tale, where the characters also have names, but the story can be told about any character or any region because folk tales cannot have the specificity and individuality that narrative poems possess.

The orphaned Trương Anh/Trương Anh reveals his kind nature through specific actions and words. He catches a starling and brings it home to “nuôi bên mình sớm khuya bầu bạn” [keep me company day and night] and the relationship between the two is extremely close. When witnessing the poverty of his sworn brother, the starling decided to “lên đường tìm của” [set out to find treasure]. Before leaving, Trương Anh in the folk tale told the starling: “Chúc em chóng làm nên việc. Em đừng đi lâu ngày quá nhé. Đừng để anh phải mỏi mắt trông chờ” [I wish you success quickly. Don't be gone for too long. Don't keep me waiting] (Hoàng, 1989, p. 69). In the poem, Trương Anh also kindly instructed the starling:

“Chớ bỏ anh lên rừng em nhé!
Nghĩa đôi ta từ bé với nhau,
Cũng đừng đi vắng lâu ngày tháng
Sáo nghe lời buồn thảm thiết tha,
Rằng: - “Em chẳng la cà nơi rừng núi,
Em đi tìm của cải về nhà,
Lời anh dặn thật thà nhớ mãi”
Dứt lời, sáo bay khuất ngàn sương,
Trương riêng buồn bâng khuâng than thở” (Truyện thơ Tày - Nùng, tập 1 [Tày - Nùng narrative poems, volume 1], 1964, p. 345)
[“Don't leave me and go to the forest!
Our bond has been strong since childhood,
And don't be away for long periods
The starling heard the sad and heartfelt words,
And said: - “I will not wander in the mountains and forests,
I will go to find treasure to bring home,
I will always remember your honest words.”
With those words, the bird flew away into the mist,
Trương was left alone, sighing sadly]

Here, Trương Anh is no longer a functional orphan character like in folk tales, but is constructed as an individual character with a clear psychological life. Also in this passage, the folk author focuses on describing the close relationship between Trương Anh and the starling. The detail “Trương riêng buồn bâng khuâng than thở” [Trương was left alone, sighing sadly] indicates internal monologue and prolonged emotion, a rare characteristic in folk tales but common in narrative poetry. Thus, the character has been individualized not only through social position but also through subjective emotional life, reflecting the trend of character individualization in the transition of genre.

In the story's character system, the starling cannot be overlooked. While in folk tales, the starling mainly plays the role of a magical character with a helpful function, in narrative poetry, this character has been elevated to a conscious and emotional subject. The

starling not only obeys but also directly engages in dialogue, revealing its motives (“Em đi tìm của cải về nhà” [I will go to find treasure to bring home]) and expressing its attachment through promises (“Lời anh dặn thật thà nhớ mãi” [I will always remember your honest words]). The use of the personal pronouns “em - anh” [I - you] deeply personifies the starling, placing it in a close, even emotionally charged, relationship with the character Trương Anh. However, the act of “bay khuất ngàn sương” [flew away into the mist] retains its magical quality, creating an intertwining of the miraculous and human elements. This shows that in the narrative poem, the starling is no longer a purely narrative device, but has become a character with personality, speech, and the ability to express emotions.

Language

The transformation of language, from folk tales to narrative poems, is manifested through specific aspects such as the narrator's language and the characters' language. First, regarding the narrator's language. In folk narrative works, the narrator's language is often synonymous with the author's language.

Examining works of both genres, we encounter a simple, colloquial, everyday storytelling style suitable for the reception psychology of ordinary people. The only difference is that folk tales begin with a narrative style strongly reminiscent of ancient times: “Ngày xưa, ở vùng ấy...” [Once upon a time, in that region...]. The vagueness and indefinite nature of time, space, and place is a prominent characteristic of folk tales in general, and “Con chim sáo” [The starling] is no exception. Meanwhile, in narrative poems, the elements of time and place are emphasized more precisely by the narrator: “Đời vua Việt Vương” [During the reign of King Việt Vương] “ở Tô Châu”. Clearly, in this case, although influenced by folk tales, the traces of ancient tales have somewhat faded in the narrative poem.

The narrator's language is also expressed through the narrative introduction, a distinguishing feature of narrative poems compared to folk tales. In folk tales, the story is told continuously through events strung together along a linear timeline, with transitional words such as “một hôm” [one day], “từ ngày” [since], “hôm ấy” [that day], “hôm sau” [the next day]. In narrative poems, the story's content, as told, is always presented in the form of sections. This narrative style is, in fact, a fairly common formula in narrative poems in general. To link sections, the narrator always uses an introduction: “Đoạn này nói...” [This section says...], “Đoạn này lại nói...” [But then this section says...]. This transition between sections clearly shows the interactive nature between the narrator and the listener. In the way the story ends, the narrator's language in the works of both genres also has specific

expressions. In folk tales, after the starling hiding in the hollow belly of the Buddha statue accuses the official, the official is frightened and sends his family to carry a thousand taels of silver to the temple to atone for his crime. The story ends with the narration: “Hôm sau, chim sáo cùng Trương Anh gấp rút chuyển số bạc một nghìn lạng ở chùa về nhà trọ và sau này chuyển dần về nhà. Trương Anh và chim sáo đem số bạc đó phân phát bớt cho những người nghèo khổ. Họ cùng chung hưởng và đỡ khốn khổ” [The next day, the starling and Trương Anh hurriedly moved the thousand taels of silver from the temple to the inn and later gradually transported it to their home. Trương Anh and the starling distributed some of the silver to the poor. They shared it and suffered less] (Hoàng, 1989, p. 78). This ending aligns with the oral nature of folk tales. In narrative poetry, the narrator seems to want to affirm the folk oral origin of the plot and the narrator only writes to record the story.

“Bút chép lưu câu chuyện làm bia:
Kẻ giàu chẳng thiết chi người khó
Gương đời xưa còn đó soi chung” (Truyện thơ Tày - Nùng, tập 1 [Tày - Nùng narrative poems, volume 1], 1964, p. 358)

[The pen records the story as a stele:
The rich don't care about the poor
The mirror of the past still shines for everyone]

The philosophical and didactic elements are therefore more prominent compared to the folk tale “Con chim sáo” [The starling]. At the same time, the role of the narrator is more clearly defined.

Besides the changes in the narrator's language, the changes in the characters' language are also quite significant. Character language is one of the important means used to express the life and personality of the characters. Each character in the story is clearly depicted.

It can be seen that both the folk tales and the narrative poem aim to express the aspirations for social justice of the masses. This is expressed through the way the folk author constructs the image of the starling. This is a typical literary image, reflecting the aspirations for social justice of the poor working class in ethnic minority regions.

The above thematic idea is conveyed quite simply in the folk tale through the words of the starling when responding to the judge: “Trong khi bàn dân thiên hạ bị chết đói, bằng mọi thủ đoạn xảo quyết nhà trọc phú Quý Tử ăn cướp vàng bạc của dân lương thiện đem chắt đầy kho. Như vậy Quý Tử có tội với dân gian. Tôi là kẻ gỡ tội cho Quý Tử và là kẻ làm phúc cứu đói khổ cho muôn dân. Tôi không có tội. Khi lấy bạc ở kho nhà trọc phú ra, tôi đem bỏ ở ngã tư đường, mỗi người nhặt một ít. Rồi họ đi mỗi người một ngã. Ngày nay tôi không biết mà thu bạc về”

[While the people were starving, the wealthy man Quý Tử used every cunning trick to steal gold and silver from honest people and fill his storehouse. Thus, Quý Tử is guilty of crimes against the people. I am the one who exonerates Quý Tử and is the one who does good deeds to relieve the suffering of the people. I am not guilty. When I took the silver from the wealthy man's storehouse, I put it at the crossroads, and each person picked up a little. Then they went their separate ways. Today I do not know if I can collect the silver] (Hoàng, 1989, p. 73). In the narrative poem, the thematic idea of the work has been elevated with the character's reasonable and insightful response.

“Trông thấy việc thế gian chênh lệch
Người giàu bạc vàng tích vô vàn
Người cam chịu nghèo nàn lận đận
Bao nhiêu nỗi đời đoạn xót xa” (Truyện thơ Tày - Nùng, tập 1 [Tày - Nùng narrative poems, volume 1], 1964, p.350)
[Seeing the disparity in the world
The rich accumulate vast amounts of silver and gold
The poor endure hardship and misery
So much sorrow and heartbreak in life]

While both are responses to their judges and accusers, the starling in the narrative poem offers a deeper, more comprehensive perspective on the injustices existing in society. It highlights the contrast in status and living conditions between the wealthy, possessing immense riches, and those resigned to poverty and hardship - a widespread phenomenon, not confined to one region but prevalent throughout class-divided societies. In contrast, the starling in the folk tale has a more limited view, condemning only one wealthy man, the nouveau riche Quý Tử.

Through the dialogues of the starling, we see that in the narrative poem, it was given significant attention in terms of personality portrayal.

“Mày đưa tao đến nơi hoàng đế
Tao sẽ đem sự thể tâu tường
Nếu giết tao phi tang bạc mắt
Giết tao không đủ rịt mũi người
Số bạc của nhà ngươi cũng vứt” (Truyện thơ Tày - Nùng, tập 1 [Tày - Nùng narrative poems, volume 1], 1964, p. 348)

[Take me to the emperor
I will report the matter to him
If you kill me, the silver will be lost
Killing me won't even cover up the crime
Your money will also be gone]

The clear and concise responses, with the assertive use of “mày - tao” [you - me] (informal pronouns), showed the character's shrewdness and sharpness. The logical reasoning and arguments, grasping the enemy's weaknesses, coupled with a defiant and uncompromising attitude towards the opponent,

demonstrated the starling's prowess. This was more pronounced compared to the folk tale, where the starling only issued a warning: “Tôi còn sống thì cái đầu các anh mới còn. Tôi bị đánh chết, thì cái đầu các anh cũng rụng ngay” [As long as I live, your heads will remain. If I am beaten to death, your heads will fall off immediately] (Hoàng, 1989, p. 71).

While the starling in the folk tale boldly defended its theft of silver and affirmed “Tôi không có tội” [I am not guilty], in the poem, through explaining its actions, the starling also expressed a fair attitude, wanting to eliminate disparities between the rich and the poor. This expression reaffirmed the theme of the poem. The starling takes from the rich to help the poor, thus leveling social injustices. This is also the dream of the vast majority of working people, and the starling character is the embodiment of this dream.

A significant step forward for the narrative poem compared to the folk tale is that the author of the narrative poem has delved deeper into describing the feelings of the starling character. Therefore, the character's language is not only expressed in dialogue but also in monologue. In the description of the starling after being judged, on its way back home, in the folk tale, the narrator only summarizes it in one sentence: “Trải qua hàng tháng trời rông rã, chim sáo mới lần được về tới nhà” [After months of long journeys, the starling finally made it back home] (Hoàng, 1989, p. 74). Conciseness is a common characteristic in folk tales, which typically feature a simple narrative style, leaning towards memorability and ease of learning. But the narrative poem contains a long passage describing the extremely difficult journey of the starling, and it is here that the starling reveals its emotions.

“Nghĩ buồn bực ngăn ngợ tắc dạ
Bao giờ về đến xã Ngô Giang,

Lo trăm mối ngổ ngang bứt rứt
Nỗi lòng đau ruột xót buồn thiu...” (Truyện thơ Tây - Nùng, tập 1 [Tây - Nùng narrative poems, volume 1], 1964, p. 352)

[My mind is filled with sorrow and bewilderment
When will I return to Ngô Giang,
Worried about a hundred tangled matters
My heart aches with sorrow...]

In the folk tale, the entire plot simply recounts the sequence of events and incidents related to the character's fate. However, in the narrative poem, the author focuses on analyzing and dissecting the character's psychological development. The starling, when faced with adversity, reveals specific nuances and levels of emotions: “buồn thiu” [sorrow], “lo” [worried]. These psychological upheavals show that the character has transcended the framework of the functional, action-oriented characters commonly found in folk tales.

Conclusion

The narrative poem “Chim sáo” [The starling] affirms its value in both content and art. The changes show the advantage of narrative poetry in expanding the ability to reflect social and human reality. Inheriting the theme, plot and character system from folk tales has been realized by the poem, increasing the depth of expression. Through examining a number of poetics aspects such as plot, characters and language in the folk tale “Con chim sáo” [The starling] and the narrative poem “Chim sáo” [The starling], the process of genre transition as well as the development of folk artistic styles can be clearly seen. While this study provides valuable insights into the core aspects (plot, character, language), it also opens up several avenues for future investigation. Future research could expand on the topic, looking into other aspects and their impact.

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