

The Story of the Three Main Characters in Magical Fairy Tales about Humans in Animal Forms

Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Lan¹

¹ Hanoi Pedagogical University
Hanoi, 100000, Vietnam

Abstract

Humans in animal forms is a unique type of story among the countless Vietnamese fairy tales. After a survey of stories belonging to this particular kind, it was found that this kind of story has different types of plot structures. However, within the scope of the report, I only examined the most common plot structure – The three main character plot which revolves around the human in animal form, the wife and the father-in-law. This type of structure can be visualized through a diagram: The human in animal form meets a beautiful girl (A kind man) → Encounter challenges → Overcome those challenges → Get married (or Get married → Encounter challenges → Overcome challenges) → Transform into a human.

Keywords: animal form, fairy tales, Vietnamese

After examining 21 fairy tales about humans in animal forms (see APPENDIX), it is clear that these stories are often built upon a number of plot structures, the most common one being the three main characters: The human in animal form, the wife, and the father-in-law.

The plot can be visualized through the following diagrams:

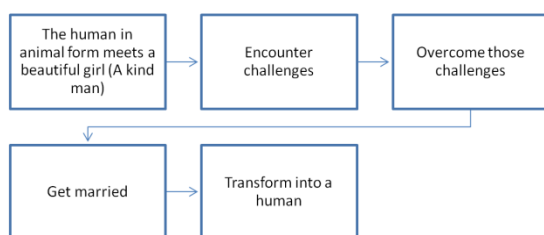


Figure 1 Plot structure

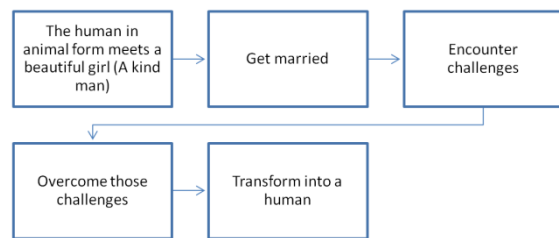


Figure 2
Alternative plot structure

A notable example is the plot of “Chàng ếch làm vua” (Mông people). The story began with a childless elderly couple who stumbled across a large egg that eventually hatched into a frog. The frog could speak and made a series of demands, one of which was to marry the king’s beautiful daughter. However, the king thought of the frog as a dirty creature, so he presented a number of virtually impossible challenges for the frog. Only when the frog completes these challenges can it marry the princess. When the frog succeeded, the king attempted to assassinate it. At night, the king entered the room of the newly-wed couple and saw a well-dressed man next to his daughter. Later, the princess also discovered the identity of the frog, and hid the frog skin, forcing the frog to maintain his human appearance.

This kind of plot can be found in other stories: “Người lầy cóc” [Human marries toad] (Việt people), “Chàng chuối” [Channa man] (Việt people), “Chàng rùa” [Turtle man] (Mông people),... In these stories, the characters in animal forms usually hide in the form of various animals: toad, frog, snake, turtle, monkey, weasel, goat,... Whatever forms they appear as, the fantasy element is still the most crucial element in the creative process of folk authors. The fantasy element in fairy tales reflects their fictional nature, and fiction is always rooted in reality.

In this kind of plot, Nguyễn Thị Huệ (1999) put the ugly but talented character in a relationship with a beautiful woman and the father-in-law. Other than the characters in animal form that are male like Nguyễn Thị Huệ (1999) has stated, in my 2022 study, I also

found that characters in animal form can be female, though the percentage is not very high (Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Lan & Thành Đức Bảo Thắng, 2022). Such characters can be found in “Người lấy cóc” (Việt people), “Nàng tiên khí” (Mông people),... Female characters in animal form often dream of handsome, kind men and the ones who challenge the protagonist are the husband’s father or friends.

The realism in these fairy tales is portrayed through community activities and family. As such, at a higher level of development, fairy tales in general and stories about humans in animal forms, in particular, were able to truthfully reflect the many conflicts that occur in families as well as in society. Stories about humans in animal forms have a rather complex plot along with the appearance of multiple sides, which is shown through the relationship of the characters in animal forms with their spouse, their father-in-law, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, and other factors of society.

The three main character plot

The human in animal forms, the wife and the father-in-law are shown in detail through the kind of stories that involve humans in animal forms. This plot was also explored by Nguyễn (1999).

The characters in animal forms can appear through magical birth like toad man, toad woman (“Người lấy cóc” – Việt people, ...), fish man (“Chàng chuôi” – Việt people), frog man (“Vua ếch” – Mông people), goat man (“Lấy chồng dê” – Việt people),... The creation of these characters is the result of births that have mystical elements. An old couple wished for a child and the wife, after endlessly praying to god, finally got pregnant; widows, and unmarried women got pregnant after eating something; mothers that got pregnant after through a relationship with gods; characters that were born from the knee, the toe of their mother... There are also characters that do not appear from a magical birth, such as monkey woman (“Kim Quế” – Tày people, “Nàng tiên khí” – Mông people,...), fox man (“Chàng ca đác” – Thái people),...

Though their background circumstances may be different, these characters all went through a period during which they took the form of an animal before that of a human. When they are in animal form, they often suffer from the injustice and unfairness of society and even their family. However, these characters are later given well-deserved compensation, which is a chance to get married to a beautiful woman or a kind man. The toad man (“Chàng cóc” – Kadong people) got married to the king’s daughter, toad woman (“Người lấy cóc” – Việt people) married a poor but kind student... Turtle man (“Chàng rùa” – Mông people) married the youngest

daughter of the king, weasel man (“Chàng chồn” – Thái people) married the daughter of Châu Mùng... While the characters in animal forms have to face challenges, the presence of a wife or husband offers some much-needed stability and safety. This is because, out of everybody, the husbands or wives can see the beautiful soul hidden behind the ugly appearance of the characters in animal forms. The poor student after he heard the gentle voice of the toad stated that: “Ugly but good-natured, how rare” (“Người lấy cóc” – Việt people); the youngest prince heard the velvety greeting of the monkey woman, then as if under a spell, he proposed after spending only one day with her (“Hoàng tử cưới cô vợ xấu xí” – Nùng people),... The beautiful ladies and the kind men are all sympathetic at heart, truly a priceless gift for these unfortunate people who long for happiness.

To reach the end goal of getting a wife or husband like normal people, humans in animal form have to go through a multitude of challenges. This is where the plot introduces the third character – the one that presents these challenges. These are the kings, and the Jade Emperor – wealthy and powerful beings in society. The youngest of their children are also high-class individuals, while the humans in animal form belong to the lower class, not only ugly but also poor. That is why before or after proposing to their lovers, the humans in animal form must accept the challenges from their lovers’ parents. The turtle man (“Chàng rùa” – Thái people) earned the affection of his father-in-law and everyone else after doing all the tasks that the father-in-law gave him better than the brothers-in-law. The toad woman (“Người lấy cóc” – Việt people) and monkey women (“Nàng tiên khí” – Mông people, “Kim Quế” – Tày people) all went through the challenges posed by the fathers-in-law or the husbands’ friends. Here, the characters in animal form participated in three competitions: Cleaning, sewing and a beauty pageant. The humans in animal form surprised everybody by appearing in a beautiful body... Only through these challenges can the characters in animal form showcase their talents. From simple tasks like herding, cleaning, and chopping wood to grand missions such as fighting off enemies, the characters in animal form always perform superhuman feats that no normal human can achieve. Turtle man (“Chàng rùa” – Mông) managed to build a new house for the king in a day. Frog man (“Chàng ếch và nàng công chúa út” – Cơ Ho people) herded as many buffaloes as there are leaves in the forest. Weasel man (“Chàng chồn” – Thái people) led thirty buffaloes to the fields in the morning, and hunted dozens of deer in a day.

A point worth noting is that all the humans in animal forms came from poor backgrounds, and had to endure many misfortunes, but they always received help from supernatural forces in return. This is shown through how the characters in animal form complete

their challenges. With special abilities and assistance from the gods, the characters in animal form easily overcome the challenges. This is a reflection of the working class's desire to conquer the world, for they live a mundane, difficult life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, humans in animal form is a common trope in stories that involve humans in animal form in Viet Nam. The presence of this type of plot somewhat reflects the conflicts that are starting to pop up or have already existed in fairy tales. The contempt that the higher class people have towards the more unfortunate ones has been put into fairy tales by the citizens to express their desire of wanting society to view the less fortunate people as equal. Furthermore, the humans in animal form stories also praise the victories that the ugly characters have over the oppressive authorities, illustrating the optimism and faith of the working class in a fairer society.

References

- [1]. Nguyễn, Thị Huệ. (1999). *Nhân vật xấu xí mà tài ba trong truyện cổ tích các dân tộc Việt Nam* [The ugly yet talented character in fairy tales of Vietnam ethnic minorities]. Hanoi, Vietnam: Khoa học xã hội.
- [2] Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Lan & Thành Đức Bảo Thắng (2022). Humans in animal form in Vietnamese fairy tales. *International Journal of Advanced Scientific Research and Management*, 7(7).
- [3] Nguyễn Đồng Chi. (2003). *Tác phẩm được tặng Giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh – Quyển I*. Vietnam: Khoa học xã hội.
- [4] Nguyễn Đồng Chi. (2003). *Tác phẩm được tặng Giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh – Quyển II*. Vietnam: Khoa học xã hội.
- [5] Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). *Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II - Quyển 1*. Vietnam: Giáo dục.
- [6] Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). *Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II, quyển 2*. Vietnam: Giáo dục.

APPENDIX
List of works examined

No.	Title	Ethnic group	Bibliography	Page
1	Người lấy cóc	Việt	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II, quyển 2. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	403
2	Chàng chuối	Việt	Nguyễn Đồng Chi. (2003). Tác phẩm được tặng Giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh – Quyển II. Vietnam: Khoa học xã hội.	86
3	Lấy chồng dê	Việt	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II, quyển 2. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	257
4	Chàng rùa	Mông	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II - Quyển 1. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	464
5	Vua ếch	Mông	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II, quyển 2. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	695
6	Nàng tiên khí	Mông	Nguyễn Đồng Chi. (2003). Tác phẩm được tặng Giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh – Quyển II. Vietnam: Khoa học xã hội.	53
7	Chàng ếch làm vua	Mông	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II - Quyển 1. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	602
8	Chàng rùa	Thái	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II -	468

			Quyển 1. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	
9	Chàng ca – đặc	Thái	Nguyễn Đồng Chi. (2003). Tác phẩm được tặng Giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh – Quyển II. Vietnam: Khoa học xã hội.	96
10	Chàng chồn	Thái	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II - Quyển 1. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	474
11	Kim Quế	Tày	Nguyễn Đồng Chi. (2003). Tác phẩm được tặng Giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh – Quyển II. Vietnam: Khoa học xã hội.	52
12	Con rùa vàng	Tày	Nguyễn Đồng Chi. (2003). Tác phẩm được tặng Giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh – Quyển II. Vietnam: Khoa học xã hội.	109
13	Lệnh Trừ	Tày	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II - Quyển 1. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	265
14	Chàng rùa	Giáy	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II - Quyển 1. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	647
15	Tướng cóc ra trận	Pu Péo	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II, quyển 2. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	673
16	Chàng ếch và nàng công chúa út	Cơ ho	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II - Quyển 1. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	453

17	Chàng rẻ khi	Ê đê	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II - Quyển 1. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	647
18	Chàng lợn	Gia rai	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II - Quyển 1. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	639
19	Chàng cóc	Kadong	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II - Quyển 1. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	582
20	Chàng rùa	Xê- đăng	Nguyễn Đông Chi. (2003). Tác phẩm được tặng Giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh – Quyển II. Vietnam: Khoa học xã hội.	95
21	Chàng rẻ cóc	Vân Kiều	Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ (2001). Tuyển tập văn học dân gian Việt Nam, tập II - Quyển 1. Vietnam: Giáo dục.	651