The Legends of Celestial Master
Zhang and Jataka Tales

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For as long as 2,000 years, the exotic Buddhism from India and the indigenous Taoism in China have exerted far-reaching influences on various aspects of Chinese culture. The legends of Celestial Master Zhang (abridged as Zhang legends in the following pages) are the essence of Taoism art widely transmitted and permanently kept in different ethnic groups of China. They are favorably comparable to Jataka tales which have enjoyed great literary prestige throughout the world.

The stories about previous and present lives of Buddha found in Pali Jataka tales can be traced back to the 3rd century B.C. in ancient India. Jataka tales were selected and published in modern Chinese as late as 1985; however, these classic tales had been imported in ancient Chinese through Buddhist scriptures such as Six Paramitas Sutra (《六度集经》), and other sutras. In fact, a large number of them had been degraded into Chinese folktales.

Zhang legends scatter in not only ancient literature since Song Dynasty but also contemporary folk literature materials, and I, the present author, have collected more than 100 of them by myself. They have been published by the present author, titled as Comprehensive Researches into the legends of Celestial Master Zhang (《张天师传说汇考》).
Comparison between these classic tales about religious figures respectively in China and India is of significance.

I. Jataka Tales

In the spread of Buddhism, various tales and legends about Shakyamuni Buddha have been invented, which are well known as Jataka Sutra or Jataka tales. Some are generally called Buddha's biography stories for they are about Buddha in this world, while others are widely-spread Jataka tales with the idea of reincarnation, and they are about Buddha in his previous lives as human beings, birds, animals, worms, various kinds of fish, etc.

*Six Paramitas Sutra*, which consists of 91 Jataka tales, was translated by Kang Senghui as early as the Three Kingdom Period. Consider, for example, a short tale, “Jataka of Buddha as a Child: Nephew and Uncle Purchase a Plate”:

Once upon a time when Buddha was a mortal, he was converted to Buddhism and observed all the precepts. Living by doing business with his maternal uncle, the boy reached foreign land. His uncle crossed river first and arrived at a widow's house. The young daughter of the widow said to her mother: “We have a hidden washing plate, which can be used to trade for white pearls with this merchant.” The mother followed the daughter's instruction, and showed the plate to the merchant. The merchant used a knife to scratch the plate, finding it is a true treasure. He pretended to throw it to the ground and said: “It's so dirty that my hands were smeared.” He went out right away and left. The mother and the daughter felt so humiliated. Later the boy came. The daughter asked her mother again to show the plate to exchange pearls. The mother said: “We should take the former humiliation as a lesson.” The daughter said: “This boy appears benevolent, unlike that merchant who is so greedy and brutal.” Again the mother showed it to the boy who said: “This plate is made of pure gold. Can I barter all my goods for it?” The mother agreed. The boy said: “Please give me two coins to hire a boat to cross the river.” Soon, the uncle returned and said: “Now I offer you a few pearls, give me the plate.” The mother said: “A kind boy has purchased my gold plate by all his pearls, and still felt sorry for not paying enough. If you do not go away quickly, I will beat you with a stick.” The uncle reached the river, stamped his feet and shouted: “Return me the treasure!” Being so vexed, he thumped at his chest to vomit blood to death. The nephew went back to his uncle to return the plate, finding him dead. Choking with sobs, he said, “you have so much rapacity as to lose your life!”
Buddha gained the treasure for his honesty while Devadatta died of his deception and rapacity. The boy is me while the uncle is Devadatta. [4]

Being incorporated into Six Paramitas Sutra, the tale remarks in the tone of a narrator, and emphasizes that the faithful boy is Buddha himself while the greedy and deceptive merchant in his previous life was Devadatta, who split Buddhism. The story ends when Buddha got the treasure for his honesty and Devadatta died from deception, embodying the Buddhist principle that “good and evil will always be rewarded”. Thus, a folktale changes into a Jataka tale with distinctive religious features.

As to Jataka tales, the famous Chinese scholar Ji Xianlin has an incisive remark:

The number of Jataka tales made by Buddhists is very big. The present Jataka Tales in Bali has consisted of 547 tales while lots of other Jataka tales have not found their way into this collection. These stories, which are more than 500, differ from each other not only in length, but also in contents. In this collection, there are fables, fair tales, short anecdotes, jokes, jests, short stories, ethic stories, maxim stories, and saint stories. They are quite different in thought and style. Most of them have nothing to do with Buddhism, and some of them are even sheer secular. In spite of it, according to a fixed form, Buddhists invent a Jataka story from a ready-made one by referring a human being, a spirit, or an animal in it as Buddha. [5]

Thus we can see most of Jataka tales are various secular tales orally transmitted by folk in India, whose characters can be played by animals as well as human beings, and whose dramatic and attractive plots are made up of conflicts between good and evil. With the idea of reincarnation, Buddhists regard, unjustifiably, the heroes as the previous lives of Buddha, the villains as those of the adversaries, and embed some principle into the stories subtly. After such borrowing, those popular secular stories have been transformed into Jataka tales and thus obtain new life.

II. The Legends of Celestial Master Zhang

Zhang legends in China, while similar to Jataka tales, still differ greatly from them for having been generated and transmitted in a different culture.

The coincidence of Jataka tales and Zhang legends is embodied in the following facts: both of them take their respective religious idols as central characters, imply some religious philosophy in fantastic plots, and spread along with the belief
activities, both of them correlate closely with their native folk oral narratives, assimilating the secular plots or motifs and returning to the folk after its shaping up, before they get long-lasting vitality in the communication between religious and secular cultures.

However, Jataka tales and Zhang legends still respectively cherish distinctive features.

"Celestial Master Zhang" is the title of the founder of Taoism (Zhang Daoling) as well as his successors; however, in legends it is a general literary character. The image of Celestial Master Zhang is a Taoist priest with the historical figure Zhang Daoling as its prototype, and is endowed divinity while based on the image of an ordinary person. "He is both a living person and a living god, being empowered by the Jade Emperor (the Supreme Deity of Taoism) to combat ghosts, monsters and deities in human world. Being beyond reincarnation, he defeats monsters and demons, cures disease and prevents disasters, which makes him be greatly loved and esteemed."

The following two differences between Jataka tales and Zhang legends are noteworthy:

Firstly, Jataka tales invent a previous world where the Buddha is incarnated as various human or animal characters to bear Buddhist philosophy. The six paramitas in Six Paramitas Sutra, "making donation", "Sila", "enduring contempt", "diligence", "meditation", and "prajna", are six approaches from this world to the other world, and intensively reflect the Buddhist principles. "Making donation" can overcome parsimony, "Sila" can overcome slanders, "enduring contempt" can overcome hatreds, "diligence" can overcome laches, "meditation" can overcome distractions, and "prajna" can overcome delusion. Six Paramitas Sutra selects Jataka stories by such principles, and more than ten stories focus on the approach to go to the other world by making donation. They deal with not only the alms of the rich to relieve the poor, but also the king's contribution of his national treasury, and even his wife and son to others. The stories also appreciate Bodhisattva's giving his life to a hungry tiger, the rabbit's burning himself alive to feed the ascetics, etc. "Hinayana contribution can eliminate personal parsimony and rapacity to avoid poverty in afterlife, while Mahayana relate alms to the religious doctrine of infinite compassion and mercy to release all living creatures from the sea of misery."

Zhang legends mainly focus on exorcism, warding off calamities, and blessing people. One literary sketch book in Qing Dynasty says: "Celestial Master Zhang is a
title inherited from generation to generation by descendants of Zhang Daoling in Han Dynasty. Worship of Celestial Master Zhang developed highly in Yuan and Ming Dynasties. Celestial Master Zhang always succeeds whenever he prays for rain or sun, and is especially skilled in expelling demons."[8] Driving off demons is surely out of fiction while it really means to fight against the natural and social evil powers which are threatening human beings. People pray Zhang for protection from the hurt of demons in water because southern China is frequently stricken by flood. They work out tales of Zhang's demon-repelling by magic because various diseases are threatening their lives. Both the contents and forms of such legends evolve continuously, and in the end, Zhang, under the direct leadership of the Jade Emperor, becomes the "ghost king" governing the spirit and ghost world and protecting living creatures. To make food tasteful, he even stole four salt bricks from the heaven when he visited the Jade Emperor; he threw salt bricks into the sea to pass the examination of heaven soldiers, and a new business, extracting salt by exposing sea water under the sun, thus begins in human world. Zhang blesses human beings with omnipotence and great authority, and dominates the mysterious world which, although cannot be perceived or controlled by common people, relates to their lives closely. This is the characteristic of Zhang legends. Through it, both the connotation and the romanticism of these legends can be illustrated.

Secondly, the difference between Zhang legends and Jataka tales lies in their origins of two oral literatures, especially in their relations with ordinary folktales.

As to the constitution of Jataka tales, the cited paper by Ji Xianlin has presented a generalized statement. In Introduction of Eastern Folk Literature[9], there are more detailed remarks about it: the Buddhists recompose stories from the folk materials, generally following certain formula and frameworks, i. e., after the birth or reincarnation of somebody, whoever he is, a person, an animal or a deity, he must do things good or evil, which have their reward at last and decide the nature of his afterlife. The reincarnated lives can be any animal or any deity, as well as anybody from king to the populace. So this formula is easily attached to or used to any folktale, usually taking Sakyamuni as the hero and his opponent's reincarnation as the villain.

The framework of Jataka tales enables them to assimilate folktale materials extensively, and almost "any folktale" can be recomposed as an authentic Jataka tale. Such re-composition only needs changing the tone of narrators; the story begins with "Buddha tells the monks", and ends by taking the actors of persons or animals
as Buddha and other relative persons' previous lives. Those folktales need not change greatly; therefore the original forms of them are well kept. Most of those tales certainly are made by Buddhists of later ages, but they do originate from the preaching of Buddha. Chang Renxia, a Chinese researcher of India culture, makes such remarks:

The speech of Sakyamuni is very humane. He is expert in not only preaching, but also story-telling. He sermons with plain language and popular folktales, uses metaphors and thus attracts more devotees who listen to him with folded hands. After 2,000 years, while reading those interesting tales, we still long for the scene of that time as if we had heard the beautiful voice of Buddha. 

The constitution of Zhang legends is not the same as Jataka tales. The legends about Celestial Master Zhang come into being with the emergence of Taoism in the East Han Dynasty, begin to flourish in Song and Yuan Dynasties, and are still vigorous even in modern times. They reflect the great influence of Taoism's Zhengyi Sect, which features the belief in fasts, charms, and invoking deity to conquer demons. From the view of narrative genre, they actually originate from biographies of the immortals in ancient China. As a succession of story collections, the biographies of the immortals consist of a lot of books. Two volumes of *A Series of Immortals* (《列仙传》) are compiled by Liu Xiang in Han Dynasty, including biographies of 70 immortals. Then there is *The Immortals* (《神仙传》) by Ge Hong in Jin Dynasty, including 10 volumes about biographies of 84 immortals. Later, there are *The Immortals in Cavern* (《洞仙传》), *Sequel of Immortals* (《续仙传》), *Immortals in Three Caverns* (《三洞群仙录》), *Immortals in Yong City* (《墉城集仙录》), and so on. The highest level of Taoist discipline is to get possession of Tao and achieve the immortality. The doctrine of the immortals roots in ancient Chinese tradition and develops into the core of Taoism discipline, and thus Taoism is also called “Taoism of the immortals.”

The overall interpretation about the doctrine of the immortals by ancient Taoists can be exemplified by Ge Hong’s words in *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (《抱朴子》): “The ancient immortals grow wings and fly in changed forms, lose the nature of human being and have an alien appearance, [...] They grow old without losing their strength, live a long life with good sight and hearing, go out and come home at will, and are free from the harm of cold, heat, and damp, from the hurt of ghosts and spirits, from the damage of weapons and poisons, and from the concern of
worry and defame. That's what is highly valued." [11]

In “Taoism and the Immortals”, a paper written many years ago, I pointed out that the doctrine of the immortals was not only the extension of some basic desires of human beings, but also their expectation of creative potency. This doctrine widely assimilates ancient Chinese myths and legends, keeping and improving them. It emphasizes that human beings, the wisest of all creatures, can perceive the mysteries in universe and use magic to enslave all things on earth. The deeds of Celestial Master Zhang, who is a living immortal worshipped by people in China, are included in various books about the immortals. It is noteworthy that most of the legends we have seen nowadays are collected from oral literature, while only a few of them from ancient documents. It is turned out that the written versions of Zhang legends in books about the immortals, as the classics of Taoism, are valued by Taoism Scriptures (《道藏》) and Taoist activities. In fact, all kinds of folk oral narratives about Celestial Master Zhang derive from these classics. We can conclude that the series of legends of Celestial Master Zhang actually originate from books about the immortals in ancient China.

III. Penetration and Fusion of Religious and Secular Cultures

The relationship between the legends of Celestial Master Zhang and Chinese tales differs greatly from that between Jataka Tales and Indian folk tales. Unlike Jataka tales’ adaptation and recreation of available tales, Zhang legends are based on the anecdotes about the achievements of historical figures with inserted mysterious and attractive plots.

The Taoist activities originally involve a lot of cultural elements from ancient religion and ancient myths and legends. What’s more, the editing of the books about the immortals assimilates more imaginative motifs. For example, “Celestial Master Zhang Tests Zhao Sheng 7 Times” (《张天师七试赵升》) is a classic version of Zhang legends, in which the “7 tests” follows the usual motif composition of “problem solution” in folktales. The plots in “7 tests”, such as “staying with tiger”, “picking up peaches on the cliff”, “refusing beauty’s seducement”, and “not touching lost gold”, are usually passed on orally as narrative motifs. So this legend about Celestial Master Zhang, though is taken as biography, also features folk literature.

The popular narrations about the subduing of demons and monsters by Master Zhang relate more closely to the belief and legends on ghosts, gods, spirits and
monsters. The star characters in oral literature, from snake spirits, fox spirits, to the Jade Emperor, Dragon King, Zhang Wulang, the Hunting God, and Tailless Dragon, all enrich Zhang legends and permit their characteristics of Chinese folk literature. However, these stories do not simply borrow secular folktales, but assimilate their personages or motifs to weave series of new fantastic tales centering on Master Zhang. Such elegant tales as “Celestial Master Zhang Steals Salt” (《张天师偷盐》), “Celestial and Prefecture Official” (《张天师和府官》), “Celestial Master Zhang and Zhang Wulang the Hunting God” (《张天师和猎神张五郎》), “Celestial Master Zhang Identify the Fox Spirit” (《张天师识狐狸精》), not only involve secular life and folk literature, but also embody Taoist philosophy.

Consider, for example, the story “Scholar Hao Rescues Prince Black Dragon in Celestial Master’s House” (《郝夫子天师府救乌龙太子》) in Jingshan County of Hubei Province: Scholar Hao, whose name is Hao Jing, was born in Jingshan, an Official at Civil Ministry in Ming Dynasty. One day, he visits Master Zhang and sees a young man locked to a pillar. It is turned out that the young man is Prince Black Dragon, who is punished by Master Zhang at the Jade Emperor’s will, because he rains to relieve drought and thus violates heaven laws. Scholar Hao then asks Master Zhang to beg the Jade Emperor to remit the sentence. After the relief, Prince Black Dragon flies Scholar Hao back to Hao’s hometown Jingshan, and whenever this place is hit by draught, the Black Dragon will accumulate heavy clouds and make rain when his name is called out. From then on, Jingshan has become the barn of Jianghan Plain. The belief in Celestial Master Zhang and the mysterious Taoist world, the local conditions and customs, and the simplicity and honesty of peasants, are all integrated into this imaginative story.

Lots of Zhang legends, as classic pieces of Chinese folk literature, have been selected into The Corpus of Chinese Folktales (《中国民间故事集成》). These legends embody the characteristics of Taoist culture, and integrate religiousness and secularity, imagination and reality. Jataka Tales, as a famous classical masterpiece, integrate hundreds of tales with variety and harmony, while Zhang legends mainly consist of living oral narration, and prove their charm in a unique way.

IV. Conclusion

In 1989, I submitted to the 9th ISFN a paper “The Taoism Character of Chinese Folk Narration” [12]. In that paper, the legends of Eight Immortals and the legends of Celestial Master Zhang are taken as the masterpieces of Taoist folk narratives, whose
aesthetic features and cultural values are judged as following:

Chinese folk narratives, influenced by Taoism, not only are endowed with outstanding imagination, but also present the robust and profound beauty with grand scenes, rich connotations, and abundant meanings. Though such artistic style cannot sufficiently stand for the general features of Chinese folk literature, it is a kind of culture type rooted deep in Chinese tradition, especially in southern Chu culture from which Taoism originates. This culture type has been ignored for a long time because it had not occupied predominance in culture history of China. Deliberate researches into it are necessary for its value in modern time.

Those words were written 20 years ago, but while I compare Zhang legends and India Jataka tales, I still think it is novel and practical enough to be the conclusion of the present article.

(Trans. by Xiaohui DING)

Notes:
[1] 郭良絃：《佛本生故事选》，黄宝生译，人民文学出版社，1985 年。
[2] 刘守华：《张天师传说汇考》，华中师范大学出版社，2009 年。
[3] Kang Senghui is a Monk named Hui from Kangju, whose name is a combination of Kang (the first pronunciation of his country Kangju), Seng (his profession, monk), and Hui (his original name).
[4] 《六度集经》，巴蜀书社，2001 年，第 149 页。
[5] 季羡林：《关于巴利文〈佛本生故事〉》，见《比较文学与民间文学》，北京大学出版社，1991 年。
[6] 刘守华：《宗教与艺术的融合》，《中国民间文化》，1994 年第 1 期。
[7] 茹正信著：《六度集经》，巴蜀书社，2001 年，第 6 页，正文，第 2 页。
[8] [清] 俞蛟：《梦厂杂著》·《齐东野言·卷下》。
[9] 陈岗龙、张玉安等：《东方民间文学概论》，解放军文艺出版社，2006 年。
[10] 常任侠：《佛经文学故事选·前言》，上海古籍出版社，1957 年。
[11] 弘学：《六度集经·序二》，巴蜀书社，2001。
[12] The English version was published in Budapest, and the Chinese version was published on People's Daily (Overseas Edition, Mar. 6, 1990).
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