

Folktales and Social Structure: The Case of the Chinese in Montreal

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Article abstract

L'étude des contes folkloriques parmi la population chinoise de la région de Montréal indique que la conservation et la continuation de cette littérature est due à deux facteurs: les traditions ethniques fonctionnelles et les festivals communautaires. Ces traditions pratiques et ces festivités sont ressenties dans la structure familiale et communautaire, ces dernières étant également affectées par les conditions et l'histoire de la société en général. La plupart des contes recueillis jusqu'à présent consistent en des versions abrégées qui manquent de détails descriptifs: c'est ce qui les différencie des contes originaux. On retrouve aussi, dans ces contes, certains changements dans le but ou la morale à apporter de même que dans le style, ceci étant dû aux changements dans leur milieu socio-culturels. Après la Loi d'exclusion des chinois (1923-47), les communautés chinoises ont fait face à une absence de vie familiale, aux pressions de l'assimilation, aux problèmes de langages et à certaines forces envahissantes de la société moderne. Tous ces éléments n'ont pas, bien sûr, favorisé la transmission des contes folkloriques au sein de la famille et de la communauté chinoise.

*Folktales and Social Structure: The Case of the Chinese in Montreal**

BAN SENG HOE

Any folk tradition when transplanted will have to undergo a period of stresses and changes in the new social environment. A general survey of folk culture among the Chinese in Montreal in the summer of 1976-77 indicated that the transmission and maintenance of an ethnic tradition are affected by the political, social, economic and cultural conditions of the larger society, for these conditions affected both the family and community structures which are the bases on which a folk tradition survives. In other words, without a community, there will be no support for the communal traditions; and without a family, there will be no ground for the transmission of traditions from parents to children. This is especially so for folktales, the transmission of which needs a tale-telling tradition at both the community and family levels. The present paper will examine broadly the maintenance and transmission of folktales as affected both by the community and by the wider social order.

The Chinese in Montreal: An Overview

The Chinese came to Montreal before the 1880s and settled around the harbour and the railway station. The location gradually developed into the present Chinatown, an area between Jeanne Mance to the west and St. Laurent to the east, and between Dorchester to the north and St. Vitre to the south.

According to newspaper accounts, the earlier "Chinese colony" was said to have only 30 inhabitants (*Montreal Star*, July 1, 1888). The numbers in the city increased to 500 in 1894 (*Montreal Gazette*, October 29, 1894; and December 21, 1894), 700 in 1902 (*Montreal Gazette*, February 24, 1902) and 800 in 1904 (*Montreal Gazette*, February 12, 1904).

* This paper is a revision of one read at the 1977 Annual Meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton.

Many Chinese came after the completion of Canadian Pacific railway construction in British Columbia. Montreal also served as a crucial transit point for the Chinese who wanted to go to the West Indies, Mexico and the Eastern United States. The *Montreal Gazette* reported that there were 125 Chinese travellers who passed through Montreal on July 4, 1900, and 250 on May 21, 1902.

The Canadian Census records the numbers of Chinese in Montreal to be 1,608 in 1921, 1,705 in 1931, 1,884 in 1941, 1,272 in 1951, 3,998 in 1961, and 10,655 in 1971. However, according to an estimate by the Chinese themselves, the number of Chinese in Montreal in 1976-77 was said to be around 25,000 with more than 3,000 families.

The earlier Chinese settlement was a close-knit community, the members of which were predominantly male, as immigration laws restricted the entry of their wives and children. Living together necessitated a social structure that could regulate their communal life and internal problems. Associations were formed, based on the traditional criteria of kinship, clanship, shared dialect and common geographical origins. These associations usually provided mutual protection, common benefits and social security. Some of the earlier clan associations are the Huang, Lee, Yee, and Tan. Today, there are more than ten clan associations in the city.

Protestant missionaries began work among the Chinese before 1895. A Montreal Chinese Mission (*Montreal Gazette*, January 24, 1898) and a Chinese Christian Endeavour Society were founded in order to facilitate work among the "natives of the Flowery Kingdom" (*Montreal Star*, October 23, 1900). A Chinese Young Men's Christian Institute was started in 1910 to provide educational and recreational needs to the younger Chinese.

Catholics worked among the Chinese before 1904 (*Montreal Gazette*, November 25, 1904), and a Chinese Catholic Mission was officially established in 1922. With the help of the sisters attached to this mission, the Chinese community started its own hospital which has developed into a modern facility in recent years.

Life among the earlier Chinese was said to be difficult and strenuous. Most of them worked long hours in the hand laundries, and some in the chop suey houses. The *Montreal Star* reported that there were twelve hand laundries in 1888 (August 19, 1888), but the number increased to seventy in 1894 (*Montreal Gazette*, June 13, 1894). There were "lots of unlicensed Chinese laundries" in 1901 (*Montreal Gazette*, January 11, 1901). According to Jack Wong (interview, 1976), there were about 60 laundries from 1910-20, and about 800 in 1920. Over 80% of the Chinese were said to rely on this "starch and iron business" (*Montreal Gazette*, April 24, 1900) for a living.

The Chinese Benevolent Association was established in 1918. Its aims

were to provide mutual protection and common welfare to all the city's Chinese, irrespective of surnames or political and religious affiliations. It claimed to be an umbrella organization, representing all the persons of Chinese origin.

The earliest Chinese political party formed in Montreal was the Reformist party; its aims were to preserve the Manchu monarchy and to reform the political, economic and social systems of the home country. It was organized before 1896 (*Montreal Gazette*, August 29, 1896), and, at one time, collected donations of \$20,000 in Canada (*Montreal Gazette*, March 6, 1902). The party was opposed by the Chih Kung Tang (later known as Chinese Freemasons), formed in 1903. The objectives of the Chih Kung Tang were to oppose the Manchu and to restore the Ming. These differences in political objectives led to internal community conflict around the turn of the century. The Reformist party became powerless when the Manchu was overthrown in 1911. A branch of the National League was established in Montreal during that year. Later, political differences developed between the Nationalist Party and the Freemasons which have fostered divisions in the community.

During the period from the Second World War until the recognition of Peking by the Canadian Government in 1970, the Nationalist Party (also known as Kuomintang) was said to have controlled the Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA). This was resented by the Freemasons and other organizations which were sympathetic to the Peking regime. A Montreal Chinese Community Council (MCCC) was thus formed in 1973, consisting of Freemasons and about thirteen other organizations. Both the CBA and MCCC claimed to represent the Chinese community and applied for grants and projects on behalf of the community. The three levels of governments then requested the Chinese to reorganize themselves and to speak with an united voice. A Montreal Chinese United Centre was formed in 1976, consisting, at one time, of more than fifty-six organizations, including the Montreal Chinese Community Council. The United Centre follows to a large extent the traditional pattern of organization. Though it claims to be nonpolitical and nonreligious, its component members include the Kuomintang, Freemasons, supposedly leftist organizations and all the Chinese churches. Moreover, five chief executive positions are equally divided by members supposedly to be neutral, right and left. It has been said that the association, because of its complexity in structure, has provoked more dissensions than solutions to problems. However, it managed to organize an Autumn Moon Festival in 1978.

With changes in the immigration laws in the 1950s and 1960s, the structure of the community was also being affected. Members of families, long separated, became united, and more educated and professional Chinese

entered Canada. Many organizations based on Western models such as the Montreal Chinese Cultural Society, Chinese Medical Society, and Chinese Arts Association were formed to cater to diverse cultural needs. More churches such as the Chinese Baptist Church, Gospel Church, Alliance Church, and Pentecostal Church were also started to keep pace with the increase in population.

The Chinese associations provide the Chinese with a network of social relations in which to operate their cultural life together. The Chinese in Montreal today are scattered all over the city, and engage in almost all kinds of occupations. Their life styles are no longer the traditional stereotypes of laundrymen and restaurant workers. With accessibility of socio-economic opportunities in the wider society, the Chinese are participating in all forms of sociocultural life. This will certainly bring changes in the kind of folk culture that they maintain and preserve.

Folktales and the Community

As evident in most of the life history interviews conducted among the elderly, most of the earlier immigrants encountered social segregation and racial discrimination. They tended to look inward into their community for comfort and security. Community institutions were used as coping mechanisms to counter the tide of anti-Orientalism. These community institutions were based on the peasant values of trust, mythology, ancestral legends and folk beliefs. Agreements and informal sanctions were imposed by mutual respect and word-of-mouth, and the violations would meet with social disapproval.

To consolidate group identity and solidarity, communal festivals such as ancestral birthday, spring, ching ming and dragon boat festivals were celebrated. In the course of these celebrations, some folktales embedded in these communal traditions were retold for those who attended. Not surprisingly, most of the folktales collected from the earlier immigrants, who came around the turn of the century or before the Chinese Exclusion Law was proclaimed in 1923, were the ones related to these communal traditions. This was because there was no tale-telling tradition in the Montreal community as in China; and as most of the earlier Chinese had to struggle for a living, they had no time to get together for recreational needs.

Stories of ancestors were well remembered by members of their respective clan and lineage associations. The stories were usually transmitted by the celebration of ancestral birthdays and the association founding day the following are examples:

- (1) The Huang Clan Association acknowledges Huang Shiang Kung as its ancestor, a popular scholar-official in the Han dynasty. Huang,

according to Jack Wong (interview, 1976), was a very clever, obedient and well-behaved boy. "He was known for his filial piety. He looked after his parents well. In the summer, he would fan the bed and make it cool for his parents; and in the winter, he would warm the bed instead. He should be a good example for all the Huangs."

(2) The Chao Lun Kung So in Montreal is an association consisting of persons with five different surnames. It is believed that the ancestors of four of the surname groups were brothers, the Hsieh, Hsü, T'an, and T'an; and the family Yuan is related by feelings of gratitude and friendship. Two versions of the story were recorded:

(i) At one time in Northern China where there was constant war and invasion from the barbarians, four brothers from a family decided to

the Yuan was regarded as a part of the family. This family obligation was observed from generation to generation (H. Hum, interview, 1977).

(ii) A famous Chinese scholar-official Chiang T'ai Kung was dissatisfied with the bureaucracy and returned to his village in retirement.

the Yuan was regarded as a part of the family. This family obligation was observed from generation to generation (H. Hum, interview, 1977).

(ii) A famous Chinese scholar-official Chiang T'ai Kung was dissatisfied with the bureaucracy and returned to his village in retirement. But he had offended a powerful family who vowed to kill all the members of his family. One of his sons, five years old and very clever, was away when the army came and slaughtered all his family's members. On his way home, he sensed something wrong and ran away to a Yuan family at the next village. The army followed and pursued. It was supper time. The boy, when arriving at Yuan's residence, explained his dangerous situation. Chiang T'ai Kung was a friend of Yuan family. Mrs. Yuan quickly held the child on her lap and fed him with food as if he was her own son. When asked by the army, they claimed to have no knowledge about the child. The army left in disappointment, and the life of the child was thus saved. He grew up in the Yuan family and later got married and had four sons. Despite all these years, the army was still looking for him. So he decided to ask all his sons to spread out to four different corners of China, using different surnames as a cover but with a common identification mark. The word of Yen was chosen; and the four sons were known as Hsieh, Hsü, T'an and T'an. The Yuan family was regarded as a family which had adopted them; and whenever and wherever a member of Yuan was known to be in distress, they should provide help (C. Hsieh, interview, 1977).

(3) The Lung Kang Kung So is an association consisting of members with the surnames Liu, Kuan, Chang and Chao. The Liu, Kuan and Chang were "sworn brothers" and were respected for their loyalty, trust, righteousness and cooperation. They were all celebrated heroes in the tale, "Romance of the Three Kingdoms." Many episodes and different versions of the story were collected in Montreal. The different versions resulted from different sources and from memory lapses. I would like to quote only one episode as an illustration:

Kuan Kung was well known as a righteous and loyal general. In a battle with Ts'ao Ts'ao, the leader of an opposing kingdom, he was defeated and arrested by Ts'ao. Ts'ao, impressed by his righteousness and courage, treated him well and asked him to serve in his kingdom. But Kuan was loyal to his elder sworn brother, Liu. He declined the offer and returned to Liu.

Many years later, Kuan was requested by his army adviser Chu Ko Liang to fight against Ts'ao. Knowing that Ts'ao was once kind to Kuan, Chu asked that Ts'ao's life should not be spared if Kuan won the battle; otherwise he would be beheaded instead.

Kuan went to war and defeated Ts'ao. In remembrance of the kindness and comfort given to him by Ts'ao before, he let Ts'ao go and prepared to be beheaded upon return. Impressed by his kindness and generosity, Chu spared "his head." It was said that Chu, being a far-sighted adviser, knew by fortune-telling that Ts'ao would not die in that battle; he sent Kuan there so as to test his righteousness and loyalty (K. Cheong, interview, 1977).

The celebration of the dragon boat festival helps to perpetuate the story of Chü Yüan. Again, many versions of the story were collected, with slight variations in details. One of the versions is as follows:

Chü Kün was a well known scholar-poet. He was loyal to his country and emperor. The country was weak, and the court officials were selfish and corrupt. The emperor was incompetent and did not listen to his advice. In despair and disappointment, Chü Kün protested by drowning himself in the river. Later, the people realized that he was a loyal and honest official. In order to commemorate him, they rowed boats to where he was drowned, and threw rice to feed his spirit. However, the rice was eaten by the fish. The people then wrapped the rice with bamboo leaves and threw them into the river. The story reminds one to be patriotic to one's country (G. Chan, interview, 1976).

The celebration of the Moon Festival also helps to preserve many versions of legends, myths and folk stories. One of the popular folktales collected was a revolutionary story concerning the overthrow of the Mongolians who ruled China in the 14th century. Moon cakes were used as a means to hide the message for uprising. So, on the fifteenth day of the eighth moon, the people rose and overthrew the Mongolian invaders (G. Chan, interview, 1976).

As seen from the above, the survival of certain folktales is related to the functional ethnic traditions in Montreal. Postwar changes in the structure of the Chinese community and the increase of new immigrants also impose changes on the ethnic traditions. As the community gradually disintegrates into the broader social order, and as the educated and the younger members assimilate, the function and the significance of the ethnic traditions also correspondingly change. Ethnic traditions are no longer used as a form of entertainment and as a device to communicate with the larger society. The celebration of the Moon Festival, for example,

by associations based on the Western model may well be an occasion to eat moon cakes rather than a time to remember the overthrow of the Mongolians. From interviews conducted thus far, many younger and professional members of the associations do not know the details of the folktales embedded in these ethnic festivals. Sometimes there is also confusion as the informants tend to amalgamate different stories into one, especially the story of Chū Yüan and the revolt against the Yuan dynasty.

Already, there are indications that the folktales people remember are the ones related to their occupations. For example, the stories on folk medicine will be remembered by the herbalists; the "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" by the restaurant workers, especially in restaurants where there are joint-partnerships,¹ and the stories of painting by the painters and gift-shop operators.

Folktales and the Family

Because of the Chinese Exclusion Law (1923–47) which prevented the coming of women and children, there was an absence of family life among the earlier immigrants. Without a family life, there could be no transmission of traditions at home.

According to the Canadian Census, there were 48 females in Montreal in 1931; 200 in 1941; 259 in 1951 and 1,507 in 1961. There were not more than thirty Chinese families before the Second World War, according to an estimate by the Chinese themselves.

The absence of women and children indicated that there was an absence of family lore, children's tales, games, children's rhymes, lullabies, and celebrations of traditions in the family. Moreover, the tales brought over by the earlier immigrants were soon forgotten, as there was no opportunity to relate them to children.

Some folktales collected among the elderly women appeared to be related to marital devotion and fidelity. They stressed the values of patience and endurance. Some informants noted that they remembered the stories because there were long separations between them and their husbands. The following tale can serve as an example:

It was a story which described the marital devotion between a husband and a wife. G. Chan (interview, 1976) related that, "Once upon a time, there was a student who went to Peking to sit for an imperial examination. He passed the examination with great honour. One of the court officials was impressed by his achievements and wanted him to marry his daughter. The official requested the emperor to be a match-

¹The relationship between the "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" and the Chinese restaurants has been examined in my paper on "Chinese community and Cultural Traditions in Quebec City." Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, January 18, 1979.

maker. But the student Kao Wên Chū had been married in the village and refused. He was then ordered to get married with the official's daughter Wen Chin. Kao wrote home and informed his wife that he had no love for Wen Chin. Unfortunately, the letter fell into the hands of Wen Chin who rewrote it. In the rewritten version, Kao was said to have been remarried and had one son and one daughter, and requested his wife not to waste her youthful life and to seek remarriage.

The letter reached Kao's former wife Chen Chu who did not believe it. She decided to go to Peking and to find out the truth herself. She disguised herself as a sing-song girl, and sang all the way to Peking. She found out the address of her husband, and sang in front of the house one day. A servant girl came out and took pity of her. She later confided to the servant girl about her intention to meet her husband. With the help of the servant girl, the couple was thus reunited. They escaped from the house and lived happily ever after."

With the repeal of the immigration law, more family members were able to come to Canada, and the families were united. Some tales collected from the current Canadian-Chinese homes also indicated such changes. The family tales are no longer the separation of husband and wife but also include some "light-hearted" family events. The following is an example:

There was a man who was celebrating his birthday. At the party he asked his three sons-in-law to write a couplet on a scroll. The one who wrote the best would have half of his wealth. There was one condition — the couplet should begin with the word "man" and also end with the word "man."

The first son-in-law wrote, "Man hits you, you hit man."

The second son-in-law wrote, "Man scold you, you scold man."

But the third son-in-law whom everybody considered to be a fool and simpleton, wrote, "Man with a thief's face, and a thief with the face of a man."

The father-in-law then clapped his hands and approved the couplet written by the third son-in-law. He explained the couplets by the first two sons-in-law were rather ordinary but "man with a thief's face, and thief with the face of a man" described the truth of everyday life to the bone. He then gave half of his wealth to the third son-in-law (A. Louie, interview, 1976).

With more children being born and raised in Canada, some children's tales also began to appear. Preliminary collection of some of these children's tales in some educated and professional families indicated that they were related to some great men in Chinese history. The stories stressed the values of intelligence and hard work. The following four examples are illustrations:

(1) The story of Dr. Sun Yet-sen. Sun was clever and was serious in his work. He did not believe in god and superstition. One day, when he was young, he went to a village temple and beat up all the statues of gods

and goddesses. He told the villagers, "If the gods and goddesses could not protect themselves, how could they protect you?" (G. Chan, interview, 1976).

(2) The story of Kung. Kung was a famous scholar in the Han dynasty. He knew how to behave and to follow the rules of propriety. One day, a basket of pears was passed around in the family. He picked up the smallest one for himself. People asked why didn't he pick up the big one? He answered big pears were for adults and small ones for the children (T. Wong, interview, 1976).

(3) The story of Wên Yen Po. Wên was a scholar-official in the Sung dynasty. He was patient and intelligent. One day, a group of children were playing ball on the field. The ball later fell into the hole of a tree. None of the children could think of a way to take it out except Wên who quietly went to fetch a pail of water and poured it into the hole. The ball then flowed out automatically (G. Chan, interview, 1976).

(4) The story of Han Hsin. Han was a famous army general in the Han dynasty. He was very poor when he was young. The people used to bully him. One day, a strong man confronted him and said, "If you have courage, you can come and fight with me; otherwise, you better crawl through under my legs." Knowing that he could not beat up the man, Han complied. Many people thought Han was a coward, not knowing that Han had great endurance and patience (G. Chan, interview, 1976).

Some of the stories were told to the children in English as they did not speak and understand Chinese. This may pose a problem in the future, as one informant noted that tales may be transmitted in English and the children may not understand some of the traditional cultural values underlying those tales.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that the surviving folktales in Montreal are affected by the family and community structures, which in turn are affected by the history of society. The earlier community institutions were functional in and significant to the lives of the early immigrants. The folktales served as one of the cultural forces to sustain those institutions. The maintenance of folktales was thus associated with the communal festivals and functional ethnic traditions. When the community began to disintegrate in the post-World War II years, the cultural significance and meaning of these festivals were also affected. Folktales are no longer used to reinforce group solidarity and cohesiveness. Therefore, the folktales that are embedded in these communal festivals will gradually change. Already, there are indications that the surviving folktales are lacking in descriptive details and are shorter in versions. Certainly the numbers of motifs and the styles of presentation have been affected.

Most of the earlier immigrants lived lonely lives, as they were not

allowed to bring over their wives and children because of the Chinese Exclusion Law. As a consequence, there were not many family and children's tales transmitted from parents to children. Postwar changes in the Chinese population composition and the arrival of more family members also resulted in the revival of tale-telling in the family. However, there are new social conditions. Modern societal forces and the problems of language and dialects will also impose changes on the tales. Already some of the tales are being transmitted from parents to children in English and in summarized forms. Perhaps in the future generations, the tales that are transplanted from China will adapt and transform themselves into Chinese-Canadian versions.

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July 1, 1888

August 18, 1888

October 23, 1900

Canadian Centre For Folk Culture Studies
National Museum of Man

Extrait

L'étude des contes folkloriques parmi la population chinoise de la région de Montréal indique que la conservation et la continuation de cette littérature est dûe à deux facteurs: les traditions ethniques fonctionnelles et les festivals communautaires. Ces traditions pratiques et ces festivités sont ressenties dans la structure familiale et communautaire, ces dernières étant également affectées par les conditions et l'histoire de la société en général. La plupart des contes recueillis jusqu'à présent consistent en des versions abrégées qui manquent de détails descriptifs: c'est ce qui les différencie des contes originaux. On retrouve aussi, dans ces contes, certains changements dans le but ou la morale à apporter de même que dans le style, ceci étant dû aux changements dans leur milieu socio-culturels. Après la Loi d'exclusion des chinois (1923-47), les communautés chinoises ont fait face à une absence de vie familiale, aux pressions de l'assimilation, aux problèmes de langage et à certaines forces envahissantes de la société moderne. Tous ces éléments n'ont pas, bien sûr, favorisé la transmission des contes folkloriques au sein de la famille et de la communauté chinoise.