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QUESTIONING THE ORIGIN OF SOUTHEAST ASIA'S CINDERELLA NARRATIVES

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Abstract
The varieties of Cinderella-like folklores in Southeast Asia exhibit notable similarities to the tale of *Ye Xian* from China. *Ye Xian*, written by Duan Chengshi of the Tang Dynasty, is the earliest recorded version of the Cinderella tale. Given this premise, a more serious problem arises, which challenges Eurocentric claims that privilege Perrault's version as the definitive origin. Regarding such an issue, this article attempts to trace back the origin and the spread of the Cinderella narratives and their different versions in Southeast Asia as folklore. To conduct this study, comparative literature as well as area studies are used in order to look for the shared narratives between each story. The result shows that shared narratives and motifs between Southeast Asia's version of Cinderella and the tale of *Ye Xian* exist. These shared narratives and motifs are believed to have been spread in Indochina and the Malay Peninsula due to their relationship with China in the past.

Keywords: Cinderella, folklore, shared narratives.

Introduction

The origin of fairy tales and folk tales is a much-debated and discussed topic, with differences for each explained in many scholarly works. According to Zipes (2001), these continuous debates are caused by numerous theories about the origins of the fairy tale, but none have provided conclusive proof about the original development of the literary fairy tale. This is because it is next to impossible to pinpoint such proof. In addition to Zipes' idea, different scholars also emphasize different periods and developments as being the most important to the development of the literary fairy tale, ranging from the popularity of telling tales in the court of Mme d'Aulnoy to the invention of the printing press to the collection and publication of many tales by the Brothers Grimm. Thus, it can be assumed that the literary fairy tale has evolved from the stories of the oral tradition, piece by piece, in the different cultures of the people who cross-fertilized the oral tales and disseminated them.

Regarding this idea, it is, then, inevitable to discuss fairy tales without their relation to oral history, for one must take into account the rich tradition behind each tale as well as its relation to the many other, probably existent, slightly

different versions of the same tale. Fairy tales are often considered to be magic tales, a specific type of folk tale rather than as their own genre apart from folk tales, even though not all fairy tales directly involve magic. Originally, as it emerged in Europe, it simply meant the study of traditions, ancient customs and festivals, dateless ballads, myths, legends, tales, and fables (Goswami 2018). This school of thought explains folk tales as being collective and having been maintained through oral tradition. Hence, it is safe to say that fairy tales are also considered folklore.

As the aforementioned ideas that folklore is closely affiliated with oral narratives, the transmission of folklore is said to be a vital part of the folklore process (Goswami, 2018). Without any form of communication regarding beliefs, customs, and traditions over space and time, there would be no folklore creation. Thus, without a doubt, these oral narratives would be relegated to worthless cultural remains. Unlike any other research, folklore research traces live experiences into the past, rather than the future or the evolution of communities and the expression of men. Folklore is understood through its significance in passing on the knowledge in various forms, which shapes the core of oral socio-history (Bascom 1983). It transcends the barrier of language and has historical and evolutionary aspects. Historically, folklore dates to time immemorial. Hence, at its original stage, it precedes any known recorded history. They are the primitive, crude expressions out of which the literary, visual, and musical cultural heritage of the peoples of the world has emerged.

In spite of the recognition of such historical factors, a basic assumption in folklore is that those stories, songs, practices, and sayings at least exist in the same way that their ancient predecessors did and that they are transmitted from generation to generation only verbally, as they were before the advent of literacy. The oral nature of folklore is one of the crucial attributes that qualify some folklore as authentic, while those that have come in contact with written texts and have been codified become contaminated (Goswami, 2018). The idea of folklore has thus, over the years, consolidated with the expression and interrelationship of many of the above attributes. These have set the standards and boundaries for the study of folklore as part of cultural research, for folklore carries the blueprint of cultural process.

A similar case can also be found in the story of Cinderella, for Cinderella itself can be considered as a fairy tale as well as folklore. The many variations of Cinderella tales make use of “the device of changes in standing and status to suit different purposes ranging from criticism, teaching, preservation of culture, and many other aims” (Ralston, 1982, p. 3). Cinderella tales are cyclical tales in which the heroine is introduced as a mistreated stepdaughter and is kind to animals, living in a middle to upper class with a loving father who is proper to their character, birth, and other traits. However, he eventually leaves or is forced out of town for work purposes. The heroine, then, must engage in labour work to find her way back into the class and environment in which she belongs. At the moment she is bereft of hope, an otherworldly person appears out of the blue. In the following events, she is gifted with a marvellous dress for a party and a pair of shoes. As the climax, these tales generally reward the good, clever, and fair heroine with a marriage to a king’s son and punish the wicked stepsisters and stepmother.

It is said that the tales of Cinderella originally date back to a Chinese story from the ninth century about a young maiden whose name is Ye Xian. It first appeared in the miscellany of Duan Chengshi of the Tang Dynasty (Reed, 2003). Upon Reed's examination, the Ye Xian narrative is remarkably close to the story made most famous by the French storyteller Charles Perrault (1697) and the 1950 Walt Disney cartoon. By such repetitions in the narratives of the tale of Cinderella, it has become a staple in not only Western but global culture, with traditional tales being preserved and repeated while new variations and renditions of the tales are continuously produced and spread.

Yet, although Cinderella and Ye Xian are parallel in spirit and series of motifs, recent scholars interested in the story's diffusion, such as Anderson (2000), disregard the Asian roots of the story and instead trace a few motifs back to other stories told by Greeks about Egyptians. While the Tang Dynasty text emphasizes the significance of a magical fish with red fins and golden eyes, which differs greatly from the story famous in the West, Ye Xian herself demonstrates familiar character traits such as hardworking, virginal, kind, lonely, wishful, and willful. Thus, along with this Asian context, this folk narrative reflects more about collective unconsciousness. Setting aside the daily narratives, even the ancient myths and legends in the artistic narratives serve as explanations for the ownership of land and the survival of a certain group, as well as judgment tools (Eliade, 1963).

In Southeast Asia, for example, the tale of *Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih* (literally translated as Shallot and Garlic) from Indonesia, *Tam and Cam* from Vietnam, *Angkat* from Cambodia, *Abadeha* from the Philippines, and *Jouanah* from Laos are some of the many different adapted versions of Cinderella. These repetitive narrative patterns and motifs in the Cinderella tale eventually lead to a more serious problem, that is, Charles Perrault, who is believed to be the original author of Cinderella, is questioned. Given such an issue, this article attempts to trace back the origin and the spread of the narratives on Cinderella and its different versions in Southeast Asia. This study also tries to figure out which motifs and structures characterize Southeast Asia (hereafter SEA) Cinderella variants, alongside the diffusion pathways that are considered plausible via Sino-SEA exchanges. In order to get an adequate result, a parallel reading of each narrative and the motifs of Southeast Asia's versions of Cinderella tales would be conducted.

Method

Etymologically, the term comparative literature denotes any literary work or works when compared with any other literary work or works. In line with this notion, Sahin (2016) also states that comparative literature is the study of the interrelationship between any two or more than two significant literary works. It is essential that while making a comparative study, taking the sources, themes, myths, forms, artistic strategies, social and religious movements, and trends into consideration is a must. To answer the first question about the motifs and structures that characterize SEA Cinderella variants, this study adopted Proppian morphology, as

> "… it is possible to make an examination of the forms of the tale which will be as exact as the morphology of organic formations. If this cannot be affirmed for the tale as a whole, in its full extent, it can be affirmed in any case for the so-called fairy tales, that is, tales in the strictest sense of the word. It is to these tales that this work is devoted" (Propp, 1968).

In addition, the Aarne Thompson Uther Index (ATU) 510A classification was applied to code functions and motifs of Cinderella-like narratives in Southeast Asia folklores. According to ATU 510A, the characteristics of a Cinderella-like narrative include a persecuted heroine who is typically mistreated by a stepmother or stepsisters, aided by supernatural or magical assistance such as a fairy godmother or enchanted animals, and undergoing a transformation or disguise that allows her to attend an important social event, often a ball. These narratives also commonly feature a lost object, most notably a shoe or slipper that becomes the key to revealing her true identity, ending in a recognition scene in which she is identified and elevated in social status, frequently through marriage to a prince or nobleman (Thompson, 1966). To summarize these, a table consisting of the corpus, time frame, sources from both textual and oral, and operative classification was also provided in order to make the analysis more coherent.

As this study concerns the narrative of Cinderella-like narratives in Southeast Asia, the analysis of research data was also reinforced by area studies as well as structural methods. Area studies were used for identifying the shared sociological and anthropological characteristics of Southeast Asian cultures (Ahram, 2011) to answer the plausible diffusion pathways via Sino-SEA exchanges. This theory was applied as maritime Silk Road routes, trade, and cultural exchanges are also considered to play an important role in the Cinderella narratives across Southeast Asia.

Findings and Discussion

The development of folklore

Naturally, folklore in its primary state has never been claimed to represent a pure and uncontaminated primordial form. Repeated recitations, loss of memorization, creative improvisation, and more general historical processes of cultural contacts and evolution have contributed to the alteration of themes and tenor of folklore. However, it is also a fact that only those of these folklore transmissions that have withstood the test of time have been found to be communally and culturally beneficial to society. Many have naturally been lost or discarded. This, therefore, as Smith (1959) states, provides the scientific underpinning to folklore.

Traditionally, the concept of folklore also meant that it conceals the identity of the authors, obscuring their origins, as these were transmitted from generation to generation. In this sense, it legitimizes ancient songs and tales as integral parts of the cultural and historical heritage of a particular society. Yet, the anonymity of traditional narratives leads to their complicated origin. There are no certain creators responsible for the narratives spread around. To trace back this case, these traditional narratives have to be placed in the hands of some creator,

whether it is divines or human beings. In the absence of any individual creator, such narration was assigned to the collective tradition of the community. Thus, folklore emphasizes communal authorship, though private tales may later become traditional. Any expression has to pass through the sieve of communal approval before it can be considered as folklore. By such measure, the notion that myth forms a sort of pragmatic charter to the social order is considered the first step to deem folklore as also an embodiment of a communal practice expressed and forged within a particular community to serve some particular purposes, such as teaching norms or even as superstitions (Bascom, 1983).

As well as communality, intertwined with the attribute of folklore is the notion that folklore is universal (Dundes & Bronner, 2007). Such a premise gives comprehension that folklore transcends the boundaries of language and space. These expressions are manifested in diverse groups and remote countries, and the links help to recreate historical processes of the past in such distinctive ways. By which, it means that the study of folklore, as it developed throughout time, relied on the above markers that distinguished it as a separate branch of study and helped to trace its historical roots.

However, on the side of British anthropologists who are conscious of their debt in this respect to Malinowski, they tend to follow Malinowski in stressing that myth forms a sort of pragmatic charter to the social order (Firth, 1957). Myth function, according to this view, is "to maintain the established tradition as a living reality" (Boas, 1916, p. 421). Thus, it is said to be "an ever-present, live actuality" (Bascom, 1983, p. 336). In this respect, however, myth is distinguished from folklore, which is only traditional and mirrors the past rather than the present. The interest of these anthropologists, therefore, has been in myth rather than in folklore. They do not pay critical attention to 'folklore', nor do they take a glance at 'tradition' or 'survival' (Smith, 1959, p. 304).

As the counter-argument following the British School, the American School has also insisted on the verbal aspects of folklore. As Boas pointed out, "primitive prose is based on the art of oral delivery" (Boas, 1914, p. 491). Therefore, it is associated more with modern oratory than with the printed literary style. Given such circumstances, anthropologists recently tend to use this verbal characteristic as the trait by which folklore may be defined. It has been pointed out that in primitive cultures, the non-verbal aspects of the total field of folklore are studied by the anthropologist as part of general ethnography. Superstitions and beliefs, material culture, dance, and music all belong to other branches of anthropological study. Meanwhile, the collections of the 'folklore' of primitive peoples are in practice always collections of oral narratives (Smith, 1959).

Formulaic, shared narratives and motifs in SEA's versions of Cinderella

Referring to the historical development of folklore, a well-known example of such an oral narrative tradition is the Cinderella tales. The earliest recorded version from China tells the story of a girl named Ye Xian who is mistreated by her stepmother and stepsister after her father remarries. Like the heroines of many other Cinderella tales, Ye Xian is helped by a magical talking animal. A similar pattern is also found in Charles Perrault's *Cinderella* (or *Cendrillon* in French). A girl who was mistreated by her stepmother and stepsisters was helped by a fairy godmother who transforms animals and objects to assist the heroine. Both

narratives then end with a happily ever after ending in which the heroine finally got to marry a charming prince. The tales are brief, more like an outline or summary than a real story, yet they are difficult to forget.

The similarities between *Ye Xian* and its predecessors, *Rhodopis* and *Cendrillon,* may come from the historical expansion of culture from the Zhongyuan region along the Yellow River, as seen from how the Qing dynasty extended cultural and political influence across Vladisvotok (Amako, 2017). As China expanded its trade route through the Mediterranean Sea, it was represented by Rome. "Sinae" was the name used by countries that traded with China by sea, who regarded China as the end of the marine route. "Serica" was used by countries that traded with China by land, and these countries regarded northern China as the end of the Silk Road. For example, both the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela and the naturalist Pliny the Elder called ancient China "Serica" (Luo, 2022). The interaction mirrors how foundational narratives spread outward, adapt, and reinforce social structures. Hence, proving that stories also travelled across regions, reshaping themselves while preserving core functions.

In Cinderella, the story reflects French courtly values such as grace, virtue, and reward through social elevation, aligning with a structured, hierarchical society similar to imperial China's centralized order. Meanwhile, the ancient Greek tale of *Rhodopis* presents a variation where identity and legitimacy are established through recognition (the shoes fitting), which reflects how origin stories or myths validate status and belonging. By so, to consider Cinderella as a social text means to approach its refashioning across languages, media, and cultures, as seen in the contributions that focus on translation and adaptation as cultural texts (Rochère et al., 2016).

Such narratives can also be found in Southeast Asia. For instance, a folklore called *Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih* exists in Indonesia, *Tam and Cam* are found in Vietnam, *Angkat* is the Cambodian version of Cinderella, *Abadeha* is considered the Philippines' version of Cinderella, and *Jouanah* from Laos is also deemed an adapted version of Cinderella. All of these folklores share similar narratives as well as the plot itself.

In *Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih*, the story starts with the narratives on a rich widow who had a spoiled daughter named *Bawang Merah* (Shallot) and an honest, hard-working step-daughter *Bawang Putih* (Garlic), whom she and her daughter mistreated and forced to do all the menial tasks while they relaxed and enjoyed themselves. One day, while doing the laundry, *Bawang Putih* lost a sarong in the stream. Desperate to retrieve it, she ran along the river and came to a decrepit hut where an old crone lived, who promised to return the sarong if *Bawang Putih* would clean and cook for her, which she did to the old woman's satisfaction.

The old woman, then, offered *Bawang Putih* a choice between two pumpkins, a large one and a small one. *Bawang Putih* took the smaller one. On her return, she was told to cook the pumpkin, but when it was opened, it contained priceless jewels, which the mother and *Bawang Merah* promptly seized. Hearing how *Bawang Putih* obtained the pumpkin, the mother told *Bawang Merah* to throw a sarong in the river and make her way to the old woman's house. As before, the old woman promised to return the sarong if *Bawang Merah* cleaned and cooked, but she quickly got fed up and demanded a pumpkin. Grabbing the

big pumpkin, she made her way back, but could not wait till she got home and broke the pumpkin open, only for a poisonous snake to leap out and bite *Bawang Merah* until she died because of the snake's poison.

Meanwhile, in Vietnam, a tale of *Tam and Cam* tells the story of a girl named Tam and her evil stepsister Cam. Cam tricked Tam so that she was able to marry a prince, and later on, she killed Tam. Miraculously, Tam, the persecuted heroine, transformed into a slender bamboo tree shoot that the prince tended upon hearing her death. One day, when the prince was out hunting, Cam cut the bamboo shoot, cooked it, and ate it. After doing so, she threw away the bark, and from that bark sprang a durian tree. One evening, an old beggar woman sat beneath the tree. She asked the tree to give her a fruit, and magically, the fruit fell directly into her basket. The next day, when the old woman was out, Tam emerged from the durian fruit. She cleaned the hut and prepared dinner for the old woman before she went back inside the fruit. The old woman was astonished when she returned home. The old woman then asked Tam what she could do as a gesture of gratitude, and Tam told her to invite the prince to dinner. The prince accepted the request, yet he demanded some requirements. With the help of the spirit, Tam waved the carpet in the space of a night and spread it on the ground before sunrise, and so the prince came. Tam prepared a feast for him, then she hid behind a curtain. The prince looked sadly at the delicacies that lay on the old beggar woman's table. Then Tam came forth from behind the curtain. The prince rewarded the old woman with gold and silver, and joyfully, he took Tam back to the palace. When Cam saw her stepsister returning with the prince, she was amazed. Tam had been a girl when she had last seen her—now she is a beautiful woman. Cam asked how Tam became really beautiful, and Tam answered that she took a bath in boiling water. Cam believed her and threw herself into boiling water; thus, she perished. Later on, Tam had Cam's flesh salted and sent it to the stepmother, who believed it was pork and ate it.

In the Cambodian rendition of Cinderella, the tale of *Angkat* is perhaps as grim as Vietnam's *Tam and Cam*. The narrative begins with the story of a lonely fisherman's daughter. Angkat and her father resided in a tranquil riverside home in Cambodia. The father soon encountered and married a widow from the opposite riverbank, who had a daughter named Kantok. The two girls vied to be the "number one" daughter, enjoying privileges and recognition, rather than the "number two" daughter, who was burdened with cleaning, cooking, and various chores. Angkat found solace and companionship in animals, yet her sense of isolation persisted. The Spirit of Virtue came to her rescue, offering kindness and guidance. One morning, two golden slippers appeared, accompanied by specific instructions to hide one slipper under her mat at night and place the other by her open window. A bird swooped down, snatching one slipper and delivering it to the Crown Prince during a party. He then embarked on a quest to find the maiden whose foot fitted the slipper, as she would become his bride. Eventually, he discovered Angkat, and they wed. Consumed by jealousy, Kantok devised a wicked scheme with her mother. They persuaded the fisherman to cooperate and send a message to Angkat, claiming her father was ill. Being a dutiful and loving daughter, she rushed to him. Upon her arrival, the stepmother instructed Angkat to prepare soup. As she stepped outside, the fire blazed, and the large iron soup pot boiled over, burning Angkat. The Princess was devastated and died instantly.

Therefore, Kantok went to the palace in her place. The prince did not love her, but he allowed the new wife to stay. In the very place where Angkat had been killed, a beautiful red-leafed banana plant had mysteriously appeared. The father's guilty conscience caused him to chop the banana tree down with his machete. However, as he threw the pieces aside, a sturdy bamboo shoot rose out of the ground. The bamboo was later discovered by the prince, who was out hunting. One day, softer than a breath, he heard Angkat's voice whispering in the bamboo that she was always by his side. Falling to his knees, the prince beseeched the Spirit of Virtue for the return of his one true love. Suddenly, he felt a presence in the pale, green bamboo surrounded by a shining light, and there stood his cherished Angkat, glowing with inner beauty. The prince reached out to his beloved princess. Their hands touched, and they were blessed by the spirit. Kantok, who saw this, fled from the palace pursued by cats hissing, dogs howling, and birds fluttering. Together with the cruel, scheming stepmother and father, the three were banished forever from the land. Eventually, the prince was crowned King, and Angkat became his rightful Queen.

Another version is the Philippines' Cinderella, namely *Abadeha*, which also has a similar plot. Abadeha is often described as a kind and hardworking young woman. Yet, her wicked stepmother and stepsisters abused her and asked her to carry out impossible tasks. Grieving, Abadeha then asked for the help of Bathala (the creator God), her ancestors, and her dead mother. At the river, her cries for help were heard by the Spirit of the Forest (counterpart of the fairy godmother). With her guidance, Abadeha was able to accomplish all that her stepfamily demanded. One day, a prince out hunting in the forest came upon the enchanted tree by the grave of Abadeha's mother. He saw a ring among the branches and put it on. By the time he returned to the palace, his finger had become swollen and painful. The king called for the Babaylan, the priest-healer of the land, yet even he could not take the ring off. That night, the Prince learned in a dream that only a girl can remove the ring from his finger. Upon hearing this, the king announced to his people that any girl who could take the ring off his son's finger would be offered marriage to the prince. Of all the maidens who tried, only Abadeha was successful. Thus, the prince married her.

In Laos, *Jouanah* is considered its version of Cinderella, for it tells the story of how a young girl overcame hardship and injustice. It is said that in the mountains of a Hmong village, a farmer, his wife, and a beautiful daughter named Jouanah lived in a poor condition. The family was struggling to harvest a good crop without a cow; thus, the wife offered to become a cow temporarily to benefit their farm. The farm prospered, but sadly, the farmer married another woman who also had a daughter. Like any Cinderella narrative, Jouanah's new stepmother and stepsister mistreated her and made her do household chores. Upon seeing this, the farmer's wife, who was still in the form of a cow, died of a broken heart. One day, evil as they are, the stepmother and daughter went to a festival and left Jouanah behind to clean their house and farm. Jouanah was sad, but luckily her mother's spirit gave Jouanah the courage to go to the festival. Jouanah got dressed and went to the festival, where she fell in love with a young man. Afraid of being discovered by her stepmother and stepsisters, she accidentally left her shoe behind. After the festival, the young man searched the whole town for

Jouanah to return the shoe she had left behind. Once he found her, they took off and began their new life together.

All of these folklores revolve around a pattern, that is, a mistreated heroine who overcomes in-room hardships because she is assisted by magical creatures, lives happily ever after, and the evil counterparts are punished. These Southeast Asian variants fall under ATU 510A, marked by the persecuted heroine, supernatural helper, and recognition test. However, there might be differences in magical elements assisting the heroines. These regional adaptations often incorporate local cultural elements, folklore, and beliefs, resulting in unique iterations of the familiar story. For instance, the supernatural helper might take the form of a local spirit or deity, rather than the fairy godmother prevalent in Western versions. The magical elements assisting the heroine may also differ, potentially involving indigenous plants, animals, or mystical objects specific to Southeast Asian mythology.

Furthermore, the recognition test in these variants might be adapted to reflect local customs or traditions. For example, instead of a glass slipper, the test could involve a piece of traditional jewelry or clothing. The setting and social context of the story may also be adjusted to resonate with Southeast Asian audiences, potentially featuring royal courts, village life, or other culturally relevant environments. Despite these regional variations, the core theme of a persecuted heroine overcoming adversity through magical assistance and ultimately achieving recognition remains consistent, demonstrating the universal appeal and adaptability of this tale type across diverse cultures. To sum up all of those narratives on many versions of the Cinderella tales, a table based on ATU 510A classification is provided below.

Table 1. The shared narratives and motifs of SEA Cinderella tales

Folklore	Time frame	Sources	Origin	Heroine	Characters	Transformed animals/ Fairy Godmother	Recognition event
Ye Xian	Tang Dynasty (9th century CE)	Primarily textual (recorded by Duan Chengshi in *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*), derived from oral tradition	China	Ye Xian	Widowed father Deceased mother Stepmother Stepsisters	A talking fish	A festival.
Cendrillon	Late 17th century CE	Textual (literary adaptation of oral French folklore)	French	Cinderella	Widowed father Deceased mother Stepmother Stepsisters	Fairy Godmother	A ball in the palace.
Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih	Pre-colonial to modern retellings	Oral (folktale passed through generations)	Indonesia	Bawang Putih	Widowed father Deceased mother Stepmother Stepsister (Bawang Merah)	Old woman who gives Bawang Putih a pumpkin	A meeting with an old woman by the riverbank.
Tam and Cam	Recorded in 19th century; oral origins earlier	Oral and textual (Vietnamese folklore anthologies)	Vietnam	Cam (later turns into a bird)	Widowed father Deceased mother Stepmother Stepsister (Cam)	Fish Cow Rooster	Dinner with the Prince in an old woman's hut.

Angkat	Oral tradition (documented in 20th century collections)	Oral (later written ethnographic records)	Cambodia	Angkat (she dies, but later is brought back to life by the spirit of virtue)	Antagonistic and complicit father figure Deceased mother Stepmother Stepsister (Kantok)	Spirit of Virtue	A ball in the palace.
Abadeha	Pre-Hispanic oral origins; later Christianized retellings	Oral and textual (ethnographic transcription)	Phillipines	Abadeha	Widowed father Deceased mother Stepmother Stepsister	Bathala and Spirit of the Forest	A contest to take off a ring from the prince's finger.
Jouanah	Pre-modern oral tradition	Oral (recorded in folk collections)	Laos	Jouanah	Unfaithful father Mother who turns into a cow (later she deceased) Stepmother Stepsister	Spirit of the mother	A festival.

The Chinese and Greek Cinderella as the antecedents of Southeast Asian Cinderella narratives

If one is allowed to argue, it might be true that these tales, known for collectively resembling the Cinderella story, are perhaps the most widely recorded of all traditional narratives in Southeast Asian folklore. However, they seem to have a shared and formulaic narrative. It might be assumed that all of versions of Cinderella combine various versions of tales regarding a girl whose stepmother and stepsiblings are cruel. In addition to that, some versions even add their own touches to make the tales suitable for a certain culture. The following introduction and the notes preceding each tale are written to be read in a particular culture in a particular country.

While *Ye Xian* is the earliest extant 510A text in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index, as it was written down in scroll form by a Chinese official, Duan Chengshi, who lived from about AD 800 to 863. However, the Mediterranean antecedent has also been proposed as another contender. A figure mentioned by Strabo in his work "*Geography*." Strabo's account of *Rhodopis*, written in the 1st century BCE, presents similarities to the Cinderella narrative, suggesting a possible earlier origin for the tale. This has led scholars to debate the true origins of the Cinderella story, with some arguing for its Chinese roots through *Ye Xian*, while others propose a Mediterranean influence through *Rhodopis* (Hansen 2019). The existence of these two early versions highlights the complexity of tracing folktale origins and the potential for parallel development or cultural exchange in the ancient world.

The tale of Ye Xian begins by explaining that after the death of her mother, the smart and industrious Ye Xian was mistreated by her stepmother, who forced her to collect wood and water. Upon one of these trips, she found a fish that she then took care of and fed. The fish answered only to her, but was tricked when the stepmother donned Ye Xian's old clothing and called to it. The stepmother killed the fish and buried the bones in the dung heap. A man from the sky consoled Ye Xian as she cried by telling her to fetch the bones and to pray to them for anything she desired. This narrative resembles other Cinderella tales in Southeast Asia for oftentimes an animal, such as the fish, is the embodiment of Cinderella's true mother or another helpful spirit.

Another element sharing similarity with the narrative of Ye Xian is a social gathering, whether it is a festival or a party. As the stepmother and stepdaughters attended the event, Ye Xian was relegated to watching over the fruit trees. She wore clothing and golden shoes that were provided to her by the fish bones to attend the festival and was recognized by her relatives, but they lost their suspicions upon finding her. Ye Xian realized her relatives recognized her and hurried home, but lost a shoe on the way in her haste to return to the trees. The shoe was found by a caveman and sold, making its way to a ruler who then searched for the maiden whose foot fit the shoe. Eventually, Ye Xian was found and married the ruler, who then overused her fish bones that eventually got washed into the sea, similarly to how they originally came from the water.

Both party and shoes are the main motifs signaling the end of the heroine's struggles. The balls or other social events of these Cinderella stories are many times described as being held so that the prince may choose a suitable wife. In examining the traditions of different cultures as well as Cinderella tales, Li (2014) makes a connection between these tales and the traditions of places in China. Li also states that a royal ball is an important event where all of the noble young girls look forward to attending. That a royal ball is when the prince selects his bride is again quite compatible with Chinese custom. It is because a prince's bride-show in China took place on the occasion of a great banquet and reception at the palace. The daughters of the nobles of the kingdom, arrayed in rich apparel, were all said to be present.

All versions begin with Absentation, marked by the loss of a parent, which sets the heroine's hardship in motion. The absence of the mother or father allows the stepmother and stepsisters to act as villains (Function 8: Villainy), creating the moral conflict that drives the story. In every tale, the heroine's oppression and forced servitude underscore her goodness and humility, traits that are later rewarded. This theme of patient suffering is universal, but the way it is framed varies by culture: in Greece, it reflects moral virtue and inner beauty; in East and Southeast Asia, it is tied to filial piety and karmic justice.

The donor sequence (Functions 12–14), in which the heroine receives magical aid, reveals distinct cultural worldviews. In *Ye Xian*, the spirit of a magical fish embodies the Chinese reverence for ancestors and the belief that kindness invites supernatural blessings. *Tam and Cam* and *Jouanah* both emphasize spiritual assistance through reincarnation and maternal spirits, reflecting Buddhist and animist ideas of continuity between life and the afterlife. In *Abadeha* and *Angkat*, divine or angelic figures reward the heroine's piety and patience, connecting the story to Christianized and local religious influences. In contrast, *Rhodopis*, the Greek version, lacks overt magic; the focus instead lies on moral virtue, destiny, and social recognition, highlighting a more human-centered moral realism rather than divine intervention.

A central Proppian turning point across all tales is Recognition (Functions 23–27), marked by the lost slipper motif. Whether it is a gold shoe, sandal, or embroidered slipper, the token functions as a test of identity and purity. The universal recurrence of this symbol suggests a shared cross-cultural ideal: that true virtue is inherently recognizable and will eventually be acknowledged by those in power. The slipper test thus becomes the moral and narrative climax of each story,

bridging the supernatural and the social, serving as the divine order recognizing goodness within human society.

The resolution phase (Functions 28–31) brings moral closure through the punishment of the villains and reward for the heroine. While all versions end with justice, the form of retribution differs according to moral philosophy. In *Tam and Cam*, punishment is severe; Cam's death and Tam's reincarnation reflect Buddhist karma and the inevitability of moral consequence. In *Abadeha* and *Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih*, the ending is softer, with repentance or forgiveness replacing vengeance, aligning with Christian and indigenous Southeast Asian values of harmony and redemption. The transformation or Transfiguration (Function 29) also carries distinct meanings: in Western and Greek contexts, it symbolizes social elevation, while in Asian variants, it reflects spiritual purification or moral vindication.

Across cultures, the Cinderella narrative consistently celebrates virtue, humility, and faith as transformative powers. Yet, each region molds the tale to mirror its cultural ethos. The Greek *Rhodopis* values personal virtue and destiny, the Chinese *Ye Xian* honors filial devotion and ancestral blessing, and the Southeast Asian versions embed Buddhist and animist elements of reincarnation, moral retribution, and divine justice. These cultural inflections enrich the universal structure identified by Propp, demonstrating that while the functions remain constant, the meanings they carry are profoundly shaped by local belief systems and social ideals, which reflect the diffusion of narratives across states, as folklore can transcend the boundaries of language and region.

Table 2. Comparison of *Ye Xian*, *Rhodophis*, and Southeast Asia Cinderella-like narrative in Proppian narratology classification

Stage & Function	*Ye Xian* - China	*Rhodopis* - Greece	*Tam and Cam* - Vietnam	*Bawang Merah & Bawang Putih* (Indonesia)	*Abadeha* - Philippines	*Angkat* (Cambodia)	*Jouanah* (Laos)	Coding
1. Absentation – family member leaves	✓ Deceased mother	✓ Separated from parents	✓ Deceased Father	✓ Deceased Father	✓ Deceased mother	✓ Deceased mother	✓ Deceased mother	Common: heroine loses a parent
2. Interdiction – warning to hero	✗	✗	✓ Stepmother forbids attending the festival	✓ Stepmother restricts	✓ Spirit warns her to be patient	✓ Spirit advises her	✓	Present in moral or spirit warnings
3. Violation – interdiction broken	✗	✗	✓ Attends festival despite ban	✓ Goes to an event	✓ Prays secretly	✓ Helps the poor secretly	✓ Visits the festival	Linked to defiance for justice
4. Reconnaissance – villain seeks information	✓ Stepmother spies	✗	✓ Stepmother spies	✓ Stepmother plots	✓ Stepsisters plot	✓ Stepmother spies	✓ Stepmother plots	Typical of stepfamily tales
5. Delivery – villain gets info	✓ Stepmother learns about the fish	✗	✓ Cam learns about Tam's magical aid	✓ Stepmother and stepsister learn about the gifts	✓ Stepmother and stepsister learn about the gifts	✓ Stepmother learns about the fish	✓ Stepmother learns about the spiritual blessing	Usually by gossip or spying
6. Trickery – villain deceives victim	✓ Mother pretends to be Ye Xian	✗	✓ Cam deceives Tam	✓ Stepmother tricks	✓ Stepmother deceives	✓ Stepmother deceives	✓ Stepmother deceives	Central motif: deception of the heroine

7. Complicity – victim deceived	✗	✗	✓ Tam falls for the deceit	✓ Bawang Putih sent on a false errand	✓ Abadeha performed the impossible tasks	✓ Angkat falls for the deceit	✓ Jouanah sent on a false errand	Heroine often naïve, obedient
8. Villainy or lack – harm or loss	✓ Fish killed	✓ Enslavement	✓ Tam abused	✓ Mother's death, abuse	✓ Forced labor	✓ Exploitation	✓ Abuse	Core: deprivation and oppression
9. Mediation – misfortune made known	✓ Spirit helps	✓ Prince notices kindness	✓ Tam cries to a fish spirit	✓ Fairy appears	✓ Divine dream	✓ Angelic spirit	✓ Spirit mother	Marks the beginning of magical aid
10. Counteraction – hero decides to act	✓ Prays to fish bones	✓ Endures kindly	✓ Prays to a spirit	✓ Helps others	✓ Prays to gods	✓ Works diligently	✓ Keeps faith	Inner virtue emphasized
11. Departure – leaves home	✓ Goes to a festival	✓ Invited to a ball	✓ Attends festival	✓ Attends an event	✓ Attends a royal event	✓ Festival	✓ Festival	Turning point: entry to a magical world
12. First Function of Donor – donor tests hero	✓ Fish spirit	✗	✓ Fairy fish spirit	✓ Fairy/ghost	✓ Fairy bird	✓ Angelic spirit	✓ Mother's spirit	Magical benefactor test of goodness
13. Hero's Reaction – responds to donor	✓ Kind & respectful	✓ Gentle nature	✓ Obedient	✓ Humble	✓ Pious	✓ Obedient	✓ Devout	Heroine passes the test via humility
14. Receipt of Magical Agent	✓ Dress, slippers	✗	✓ Dress, shoes	✓ Magical garments	✓ Gold gown	✓ Magic scarf	✓ Gold dress	Gift symbolizing virtue
15. Guidance – led to the destination	✓ Goes to festival	✓ Goes to court	✓ Guided to festival	✓ Festival	✓ Royal event	✓ Festival	✓ Festival	Common stage in Cinderella types
16. Struggle – direct fight with villain	✗	✗	✓ Tam vs. Cam	✗	✗	✗	✗	Only Vietnamese has physical revenge
17. Branding – hero marked	✓ Lost slipper	✓ Lost sandal	✓ Lost slipper	✓ Lost slipper	✓ Lost slipper	✓ Lost slipper	✓ Lost slipper	Iconic Cinderella motif
18. Victory – villain defeated	✗	✗	✓ Cam punished	✓ Villain shamed	✓ Villain repents	✓ Villain punished	✓ Villain punished	Moral retribution
19. Liquidation – lack resolved	✓ Marries king	✓ Marries pharaoh	✓ Marries king	✓ Marries prince	✓ Marries prince	✓ Marries prince	✓ Marries prince	Happiness restored
20. Return – hero goes home	✓ Returns as queen	✓ Becomes royal	✓ Becomes queen	✓ Returns honored	✓ Returns royal	✓ Returns honored	✓ Returns royal	Reintegration theme
21. Pursuit – chased	✗	✗	✓ Spirit warns Cam	✗	✗	✗	✗	Present only in Tam & Cam
22. Rescue – from pursuit	✗	✗	✓ Tam reborn	✗	✗	✗	✗	Reincarnation unique motif
23. Unrecognized Arrival	✓ Slipper test	✓ Sandal test	✓ Slipper test	✓ Slipper test	✓ Slipper test	✓ Slipper test	✓ Slipper test	Universal motif
24. Unfounded Claims – false hero	✓ Stepmother claims the shoe	✓ Servant pretends	✓ Cam claims	✓ Stepsister claims	✓ Stepsister claims	✓ Stepsister claims	✓ Stepsister claims	Step-sibling rivalry
25. Difficult Task – assigned to hero	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	Not typical in Cinderella

26. Solution – task solved	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	Not applicable
27. Recognition – hero identified	✓ Slipper fits	✓ Sandal fits	✓ Slipper fits	✓ Slipper fits	✓ Slipper fits	✓ Slipper fits	✓ Slipper fits	Universally shared
28. Exposure – false hero exposed	✓ Stepmother punished	✓ Servant exposed	✓ Cam punished	✓ Stepsister shamed	✓ Stepsister repents	✓ Stepsister punished	✓ Stepsister punished	Common resolution
29. Transfiguration – hero changes	✓ From servant to queen	✓ Slave to the queen	✓ Reborn as queen	✓ Poor to royal	✓ Pious to royal	✓ Maid to a royal	✓ Devout to a royal	Moral/spiritual transformation
30. Punishment – villain punished	✓ Stepmother punished	✓ Servant shamed	✓ Cam dies	✓ Stepsister punished	✓ Stepsister repents	✓ Stepmother punished	✓ Stepmother punished	Moral closure
31. Wedding – marriage or reward	✓ Marries a king	✓ Marries a pharaoh	✓ Marries a king	✓ Marries a prince	✓ Marries a prince	✓ Marries a prince	✓ Marries a prince	Universal ending motif

By pointing out the similarities between these versions of Southeast Asia's Cinderella and Chinese culture, specifically the importance of women's feet, demonstrates that the upper-class Chinese ladies needed to bind their feet to adhere to the prevailing standard of beauty or else face negative consequences, such as a lack of marriage prospects and lowered class status (Rose, 1955). This particular tradition also becomes the shared plot of Southeast Asia's versions of Cinderella. With such an argument, it is concluded that there is a significant reason why the shoe-matching test in these narratives strongly points towards Chinese culture.

It also seems that trade routes may have significantly contributed to the spread of folklore throughout Southeast Asia by enabling cultural exchanges and the movement of people, goods, and ideas. These routes linked various regions, facilitating the sharing of cultural narratives and stories, including folklore, among different ethnic and linguistic groups. The intricate network of trade routes in Southeast Asia, as part of broader transcontinental connections, facilitated the dissemination of cultural motifs, including folklore, through interactions among traders, travelers, and local populations. The north-south land routes, such as those connecting China with South and Southeast Asia, and the maritime routes during periods like the Early Age of Commerce (900–1300 CE), were crucial in promoting cultural exchanges. These routes facilitated the flow of not only goods but also cultural practices and stories, which intermingled with local traditions and evolved in unique ways across regions (Ma et al., 2022; Wade, 2009).

As these trade routes developed, they spurred the emergence and expansion of urban centers and ports that became cultural melting pots. The diversity in these hubs enabled the adaptation and transformation of folklore, as diverse communities introduced their unique narratives into these cosmopolitan spaces. As trade prospered, the integration of distinct cultural motifs became more prevalent, reflected in the syncretic folklore traditions of Southeast Asia (Zeng et al., 2024). Artifacts, traders, and narratives traversed these trade corridors, influencing local folklore by introducing new themes and characters that were incorporated into existing stories.

This dynamic interplay between indigenous cultural expressions and external influences through continuous trade interactions led to the rich diversity in folklore observed today in Southeast Asia (Theunissen et al., 2000). Thus, trade

routes have been instrumental in shaping the narratives of folklore across Southeast Asia, creating vibrant tapestries that reflect both local traditions and far-reaching cultural exchanges.

Analyzing the narratives of *Ye Xian*, *Rhodopis*, and Southeast Asian Cinderella-like stories through the framework of Proppian narratology uncovers significant insights into their structural parallels and cultural distinctions. Vladimir Propp's analytical approach to folktales centers on identifying shared functions and character roles across various stories, offering a structured method to investigate the foundational patterns present in these Cinderella-like tales.

Based on this argument, the comparison of *Ye Xian*, Rhodopis, and Southeast Asian Cinderella-like narratives through the lens of Proppian narratology may offer valuable insights into the structural similarities and cultural variations of these tales. Vladimir Propp's approach to analyzing folktales focuses on identifying common functions and character roles across different stories, providing a framework to examine the underlying patterns in these Cinderella-like narratives.

When applying Proppian analysis to these tales, several common functions emerge, such as the initial misfortune or mistreatment of the protagonist, the magical intervention, the transformation, and the ultimate recognition and reward. However, the specific manifestations of these functions vary across cultures. For instance, the magical helper in *Ye Xian* takes the form of a fish, while in Rhodopis, it is the god Horus who intervenes. Southeast Asian versions may feature different supernatural elements altogether. These variations reflect the distinct cultural contexts and belief systems of each region, while still adhering to the overarching narrative structure identified by Propp's methodology

Conclusion

As the internal evidence gives reason to conclude, at least tentatively, it has been suggested that these characteristics may be relics from coming from an older version of the tale or from alternative versions. The Cinderella-type tales all follow the ATU 510A structure, featuring a persecuted heroine, magical or supernatural aid, transformation, recognition, and eventual reward. While the core narrative is universal, each culture adapts it uniquely, with China and France emphasizing magical intervention, whereas Southeast Asian versions highlight ancestral spirits, moral justice, and cycles of rebirth. Recognition events and rewards also vary, reflecting local customs and values. This demonstrates both the universality and cultural flexibility of the Cinderella story, conveying enduring lessons about virtue, justice, and social elevation.

It is also important to note the particular reason why such changes were made to suit the local cultures. As Southeast Asia itself consists of neighboring countries having relations with China in the past, it is safe to assume that there might be some kind of intermixed interaction between the natives and their neighboring lands through trade routes. Thus, assimilation after a few generations into one shared culture, including the shared folklore, is inevitable. The Proppian functions serve as a thorough base that narratives across cultures follow similar patterns. Although additions and changes are being made to these folklores, which are part of the natural life cycles of tales, it is interesting to note that many of the original characteristics of the tale have not survived in the most widely known

versions of the tale. Yet, these shared narrative elements are helpful to demonstrate that the age and the longevity of the Cinderella-like folklores, as well as both their malleability and resistance to change, although details may change, relics of important themes remain in their predecessor tale, which are *Ye Xian* and *Rhodopis*.

However, this study is limited by its reliance on a relatively small selection of textual versions and translated sources, which may not fully capture the diversity and performative richness of oral traditions. Future research would benefit from incorporating ethnographic methods that engage with live storytelling practices, thereby capturing the dynamic and performative aspects of folklore. Expanding the scope to include a broader range of Cinderella-like narratives from other regions would also allow for a more comprehensive comparative analysis. Despite these limitations, the persistence of shared narrative elements across cultures underscores both the longevity and adaptability of Cinderella-like narratives in folklore.

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