

# *The Tricking Actions of Witty Figures in Folk Stories*

Yao Chunrui

*Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Xibei Minzu University, Lanzhou, China  
495913588@qq.com*

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**Abstract:** Even though witty figures in folk stories are brave and resourceful, they still use tricking actions to achieve their goals in special condition. Actually, the cognitive logic behind cajoling is consistent with intelligent actions which still reflects ordinary people's deep-seated pursuit of justice and fairness. The superficial cheating methods of folk witty figures do not weaken their artistic appeal, on the contrary, when powerful class makes troubles or in the process that they consciously deceives the upper class basing on given aims, witty figures' seemingly tricking actions strengthen the public's morality.

## 1. Introduction

The stories of witty figures are treasures in folk literature, and witty figures of various groups reflect universal pursuit of human values, the fervent expectation of fairness and justice which are the original driving force for the construction of people's morality.

Qi Lianxiu first used the conception of Witty Figure Story in the preface of a book that named Stories of Witty Figures in Minorities which was published in 1978, subsequently, Gansu, Yunnan and other provinces published local stories of witty figures. There are lots of smart persons in China, for example, Balagancang, Agudenba and Avanti in Northwest, also Xu Wenchang in Southeast area, and these types of tales are widely loved by the public in different times. And they look like salt in meals which make ordinary daily life delicious and colourful.

Witty Figure Story takes a specific smart person as the protagonist and runs through series of tests full of humour. Qi believes most of Chinese witty figure stories, no matter which groups or regions they are from, have a strong sense of humour, and the smart persons are good at creating humorous comedy atmosphere<sup>[1]</sup>. In the AT classification of international folktales, this type of stories is partly classified as life stories and more as jokes. And it is grouped in life story in China which the research work began from the study of Xu Wenchang in the mid-1920s. Chinese witty figures are put as life stories rather than funny stories which is different from the international classification. Why is there such a difference?

The National Academic Symposium on Witty Figure Stories held in 1984 is a milestone in the research of witty figures in China, since then, the term Witty Figure Story has been widely used. In the discussion on the image of witty figures, there are mainly two mainstream views in academic circles: one faction is represented by Qi Lianxiu, who holds that witty figures are the embodiment of justice with great wisdom and they are precious satirical literature among the folk who embody the intelligence and resourcefulness, the courage and resourcefulness, the fighting and rebellious spirit of working people<sup>[2][3]</sup>. The basic personality characteristics of witty figures are composed of

humor, wisdom and a sense of justice, which embody temperament and intelligence. The other faction, led by Kenji Suzuki, believes that witty figures are actually engaged in deceptive behaviors<sup>[4]</sup>. Lu Yilu believes that witty people are more or less crazy<sup>[5]</sup>. In the book titled *Types of Chinese Folk Stories*, Albuquerque uses funny stories as the label and collects more than 100 kinds of Xu Wenchang's stories. He thinks Xu Wenchang was often mischievous when he was alive<sup>[6]</sup>. In the view of this group, witty characters are good at using Ah Q spiritual victory method and little wisdom. Which of the above two perceptions reflects the nature of witty figures? And why are the witty ones who play the dishonorable features in some behaviors still popular among the public and what is the public trying to express behind telling the tales of the witty ones?

## 2. The analyses of typical witty figures

### 2.1. The stories of Agudenba

Agudenba (also known as Agutunba, Uncle Dengba) is a typical figure integrating strong love and hate of ordinary ones. He is smart, brave and witty, whose wisdom often shown through humorous speech and behavior. Characters like Agudenba are unable to enter the written records because of their funny features, however, the stories widely spread through oral narration<sup>[7]</sup>. In a story named *Wrestling*, Agudenba was so powerful that lifted a man named Baihu like a small bucket. In the fierce conversation with Baihu, he said "If you don't have the courage of a leopard, you won't dare to come to my door." In stories such as *Do You Have any more Orders* and *A Pot Gives Birth to A Small One*, the feature of Agudenba conveyed is witty, and he upheld justice for ordinary people through smart actions.

However, Agudenba also uses cajoling ways to deal with money-obsessed businessmen, lords or other powerful persons in some condition and deception is an important mean to cause humorous characters and the premise to achieve witty behavior. In this level, Agudenba seems to be coaxing, which Suzuki calls deceptive or fraudulent. In one story titled *Uncle Dunbar and the Prince*, Agudenba deceived a stingy prince with a pig urine bubble which reflected colorful light of the sun and telling to the prince that it was a rare treasure in the world. The prince entertained Agudenba with ghee, magnetic wine and dried meat, nevertheless, Agudenba tricked the prince out of his clothes and then he left. At the prince's wedding party, Agudenba sneaked into the celebration disguising as a nun. After taking out swords, gold and silver jewelries from the prince's bedroom, he pinned needles on the wall and put a round stone on each ladder. In the process of chasing Agudenba, the prince tripped over a stone and was stabbed with needles.

Even though there are such dishonorable behaviors in stories told by people, the reason beholding narration is still justice. Marriage is the most important transition from one social status to another<sup>[8]</sup>, thus wedding is an crucial life event and a transitional etiquette. In the contest with the prince, Agudenba incarnated as the messenger of justice and made the prince's wedding no longer holy. In conclusion, Agudenba's behavior expresses public's counterattack against the rich and powerful.

In real life, there is an unequal right relationship between lower and upper class, however, in the texts of folk narration the unequal relationship in reality is broken by an omniscient, brave and witty person. The struggle for power in the discourse system makes up for the dissatisfaction in real life and plays a positive role in alleviating the discontent of people. This kind of folk expression plays the role of safety valve and makes social structure maintain a certain stability. In this case, although the behavior of folk witty figures has not caused earth-shaking improvement to real life, it cannot be fully explained simply by the Ah Q spiritual victory method.

More often, Agutemba does not take the initiative to show his wit, but there are always external factors forcing him to do. The upper class puts forward unreasonable requests like to be fooled,

otherwise, Agutemba will not be allowed to leave (or will be killed). For example, in one case called Uncle Shan, Uncle Shan asked Agudenba to deceive himself. From this point of view, Agudenba's deception is only a helpless choice at the request of powerful class.

## 2.2. The stories of Balagancang

Balagancang is as brave and resourceful as Agudenba. In stories such as Special Pot, Breeding Sheep, Difficult Delivery, Being a Long-term Worker, Donkey, Reviving the Staff, Fighting a Lawsuit, Balagancang plays a role in speaking for the people of the bottom. In addition, he often encounters the same tests as Agudenba, that is, powerful person demands to compete with him. In stories such as Throwing the Pot, Wisdom Bag and Letting the Lord Get off the Sedan Chair, Nuoyan (a typical example of master class) heard that Balagancang is the smartest, so he wanted Balagancang to compete with him. Similarly, Balagancang responded to the challenges with his ingenuity successfully.

In one story named Wisdom Bag which is widely spread in northwest China, Nuoyan thought that none of the slaves in the world could be as smarter as lords, so he asked Balagancang to cheat him. If Balagancang loses, Noyan would cut off his head with a saber. Balagancang asked Nuoyan to try another day because he didn't take the wisdom bag. However, Nuoyan was extremely angry that he asked Balagancang to compete only on that day, and letting Baragcang ride his fast horse to get the wisdom bag. Balagancang looked embarrassed and said there was no time because the tree behind him was about to fall, and he had to prevent it from falling. Noyan volunteered to top up the tree for him and gave the horse to Balagancang. Balagancang said helplessly "It looks like you force me to lie to you!" With these words, he got on Noyan's fast horse and galloped away. In this story, Baragancang's wisdom is associated with meeting unreasonable requirements of Noyan and successfully deceiving him. Therefore, the apparent deception is not unreasonable.

Facing groups that are richer and powerful, witty figures, such as Agudenba and Balagancang, do not complain, flinch or yield, but taking the initiative to respond challenges and crises with neither humble nor arrogant posture.

## 2.3. The stories of Avanti

Unlike the first two witty figures circulating in special areas, Avanti is a witty figure well-known in all regions of China. Under the influence of cartoons, his image is the one who has small mustache and often rides a little donkey. He talked with Lord Bayi leisurely, and there seemed to be endless stories between them. In one story called Tea for Pocket, Avanti poured water into the pocket of a guest who stole food from a sumptuous banquet. The guest was extremely angry, Avanti replied gently and said "Your pocket ate so much just now, thus I'm afraid he's thirsty. Please let the pocket drink tea."

In addition to above stories, Avanti is also good at responding to challenges deliberately made by the powerful class. In the story Governor of the Donkey, an emperor wanted to insult Avanti, so he recruited Avanti into the palace and declared that Avanti was the governor of donkeys in front of all the ministers. After hearing this, all of them laughed, but Avanti respectfully saluted to the emperor, then swaggered to the top of the emperor's throne slowly raising his hands and said seriously to the emperor and ministers "Quiet! Stupid donkeys! No one is allowed to scream and listen to your governor-Avanti's command!"

The story Copper Pot Births Little One is one of typical type of witty figure stories, and Avanti's stories also have such texts. In Pot Births Son, Avanti borrowed a copper pot from Lord Bayi, and when he returned the pot, he specially added a small pot to cajole Bayi saying that the small pot was the son born by the big one. So Bayi was overjoyed and repeatedly welcomed Avanti to borrow the

pot later. A few days later, Avanti came to borrow a pot again, and Bayi couldn't wait for borrowing the biggest pot. But this time, Avanti did not come to return the pot. When Bayi was ready to ask Avanti the reason, Avanti happened to ride a donkey by, and he said with a sad face that the big pot died in two days at his house. In this story, the protagonist deliberately makes greedy people believe impossible thing through deceptive action. The premise of the whole story is that the protagonist gives benefits to greedy one with a pot firstly, only after this premise is unfolded can the pot die. In this round, the protagonist's coaxing action is the premise of the follow-up lesson to the greedy.

### 3. The reasons for tricking actions of witty figures

Witty figures stories consist an unique type of folk narrative, but the deep meaning as a way to reflect the aspirations of people do not be taken seriously. In fact, the texts of witty figure stories can be treat as a representation of society, Wang argues the implied information of the text affects information in a very subtle way<sup>[9]</sup>. In witty figure tales, people talk so much about the coaxing stories, Dundees believes a mistake that all of us are prone to make is to focus on a particular plot or a particular aspect and ignore other aspects<sup>[10]</sup>. In addition to wit, the characters use deceptive means to punish or warn others, and sometimes even show stupidly on purpose. In shaping characters, the multi-faceted narration of witty figures is influenced by social ideology and the narration of folktales has a specific ideological attribute when put to a broad sense. Because of the unequal dominance relationship in practice, the concept and discourse form constructed by people consciously or unconsciously linking the ideographic process with the legalization of local interests<sup>[11]</sup>. Ordinary people use folk knowledge to make daily life work smoothly because folktales reverse the power relations and subverts the unequal role in daily life showing the struggle against the existing order.

### 4. Conclusion

The witty figures in folk stories sometimes achieve their goals through superficial cajoling and tricking actions, and the image of folk witty figures do not greatly reduced by the dishonest contents because the cognitive logic behind speaking reflect people's deep-seating pursuit of justice and fairness. When witty figures deliberately deceives the power stratum through tricking actions, it further strengthened people's view of justice indeed.

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