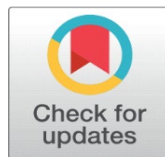


# CHINESE FAIRYTALE “WEAVER GIRL AND COWHERD”: A SOURCE OF LEARNING CHINESE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

Fairytales never get old and outdated. Even in the 21st century of a globalised and digitalised world, it remains a source of inspiration for our basic human nature, inspiration, and imagination. Besides this, fairytales are also a strong source for understanding a particular culture, its customs, traditions, and common practices. China is no exception. Even in today's information age the essence and importance of ancient fairytales have not got mild. Since learning the Chinese language and culture has become one of the new global trends at rise; this paper will explore the link between ancient Chinese fairytales and Chinese language learning. Taking a case study of the famous fairytale “Weaver girl and the Cowherd” from the Chinese language textbook “Elementary Chinese Reader” referred in India, the paper tries to explore how the tale helps foreign learners to understand the language, culture, geographical set-up, social norms as well as the aspirations of Chinese people at a particular time. And further, it highlights the relevance of fairy tales in the present information age world.

**Keywords:** Fairytales, Chinese Language, Culture Learning, Human Imagination, People's Aspirations

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the present globalised and interdependent world order, intercultural competence, mutual understanding and respect for each other's cultural beliefs have become the need of the hour. Language is the bridge that fills the gap between two different cultural communities. Through any country's language and literature, one outsider gets a view of its culture and society and further comes closer to that country, community, and its people. Language is the door and literature is the window to any culture. Moreover, folk literature originating from oral tradition and being directly connected to the social beliefs and practices of any community leads to deeper understanding of the community and its culture. Folklore, folk stories, fairy tales of any language or community are sources of traditional knowledge, belief as well as moral values and social conducts of a society. Experts have discussed about the relevance of folklore in the education system of today's globalised world. In the present globalised world, by blindly chasing the Western development models

we are going away from our roots and traditional cultural values which are creating an imbalance in our society. Present generation children and youth are going devoid of own cultural heritage, knowledge system and moral values. For this reason, folktales and stories become so significant in today's world, providing cultural awareness, developing deeper understanding for own and other cultures. In this competitive era, it also prepares any outsider with the knowledge required to deal with the other community and people all around the world. Therefore, folklore is important genre included in the Chinese language text books for natives as well as for foreigners. After the outstanding economic rise of Peoples Republic of China, Chinese language has become one of the sought after foreign languages throughout the globe. With growing India-China business prospects and its varied job opportunities, handsome salary packages and growing trend, learning Chinese language has turned a wise career option even in India. More and more numbers of Indian people are getting attracted by the economic opportunities attached with this new trend and going after the decision of learning Mandarin language (official Chinese language). Students are putting efforts to master the new sound system and writing pattern to become able to communicate with the Chinese people in a smooth manner. But, very few are aware of the fact that, when one wants to really master any language, one has to get acquainted with the cultures and customs of that country or community associated with the language as well. Language cannot be learned in isolation, cultural understanding is an integral part of the foreign language learning. That is why after getting familiar with the basic linguistic and grammatical understanding of Mandarin, the learner comes across with the texts with stories and descriptions embedded with cultural knowledge. Folk stories, fables, fairy tales are integral constituent part of any Chinese language text books practiced in China, India or abroad. The elementary level Chinese language text books followed in most of the Indian Universities teaching Chinese are “Elementary Chinese Readers” in set of four books taught in undergraduate first year. The students have to learn several proverbs and Chinese sayings originating from oral folklore and rich in cultural specificity. To understand and decipher well these cultural contents imbed in the language one has to understand the cultural background and stories behind these proverbs which are mostly mythological tales or folklores. However, to anyone's surprise besides other genre of literature, the set includes mythological stories, fairytales and folk stories as well. The syllabus for introducing Chinese culture to the Indian Chinese language learning students incorporate ancient Chinese folktale like, ‘pangu kaitian pidi’ (盘古开天辟地), ‘nvwa zaoren’ (女娲造人), ‘houyi sheri’ (后羿射日), ‘change benyue’ (嫦娥奔月) etc. These folktales and mythologies at one hand are considered to be imparting knowledge of traditional Chinese culture and values to the children abroad; on the other hand they are also believed to inculcate empathy among the readers towards Chinese people.

Believed to originate to China's Han Dynasty, the legend of Niu lang and Zhi nu is connected with the stars Altair (Niulang or Cowherd) and Vega (Weaver Girl or Vega) which finds its traces from the painting of three legged crow of Later Han period (25-220 CE) and inscribed in the stone memorial hall at Mt. Xiatong.

In the “Xiaoya (Lesser Odes)” part of the anthology Shijing (Classic of Poetry), there is a passage of verse that is thought to be the oldest reference to the mythology. It is believed that the Milky Way was discovered in China during the Spring and Autumn period (BCE 771-476). The personification of the two stars began to become a folktale towards the end of Later Han, and during the Six Dynasties period (265–589), it developed into the legend of “Weaver Girl Crosses the Silver River to Meet Cowherd”. The book Jingchusuishiji (Record of the Year and Seasons of Jingchu) contains the earliest version of this story.<sup>1</sup>

Besides the Chinese Qixi or Valentine day's festival, this romantic folktale of cowherd and weaving fairy has been the origin and source of inspiration behind several similar festivals in neighbouring countries like Japan's Tanabata festival and Korea's Chilseok festival. This highlights the length and width of the popularity and influence of the Chinese folktales and ancient culture.<sup>2</sup>

all have long heard about the sad love stories of Romeo-Juliet and Heer-Ranjha in English and Hindi literature from respective folktales. Let's go to the Chinese parallel of such love story found in ancient Chinese mythologies. The story of “Niulang-Zhin” (Cowherd and Weaver girl), being considered as one of the four most famous folktales of ancient China, is still popular and have its relevance in the Chinese society.<sup>3</sup> On the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, Chinese

<sup>1</sup> LeeJiyoung(李志映), Gyeonujiknyeo, Korean Folk Literature, Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture, 2019-06-20, <http://folkency.nfm.go.kr/en/topic/detail/5427>

<sup>2</sup> Schomp, Virginia (2009). *The ancient Chinese*. New York: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, p.70

<sup>3</sup> China's four great folktales are the Legend of the White Snake, Lady Meng Jiang, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai and Cowherd and Weaver girl.

people celebrate their Valentine's Day, called Qixi festival, which has evolved from this classic love story and mythological tale of weaver fairy and cowherd which has an extensive influence on Chinese youth. Lots of Chinese couple can be witnessed tying their knots on this auspicious day to commemorate the love spirit between a fairy and mortal.

The Chinese folktale of "Niulang-Zhinv" (the Cowherd and the Weaving Girl) is an ancient classic love story between a Cowherd, a human being, and a Weaving Girl, a fairy. The poor, orphan cowherd was very ill-treated by his brother and sister-in-law. One day, he was kicked out of his home by his brother's family with a cow as his only companion. With the help of that magical cow, the cowherd gets to meet with a fairy. The fairy named zhinv with her other seven fairy sisters used to live in the heaven under strict control of Xi wang mu or the Empress of heaven. All these fairies had long aspired to someday visit the planet earth but under restrictions of her mother wang mu niang niang they were unable to move anywhere. Once they got opportunity and come down to earth to take bath in a lake at night. There came the cowherd and met with fairy zhinv, they both fell in love with each other and decided to marry. Hence she stayed back on earth defying the Empress or her mother Xi wang mu's instructions. They both used to work hard and started living happily with their two kids. The other fairy sisters were happy for her but also very worried since it was prohibited for a fairy to marry any human being from earth. Unfortunately, zhinv couldn't hide herself for long and one day Wangmu niang niang came to know about her whereabouts and furiously came down to take her back. Eventually, with her magical power the empress forced the loving couple to separate. The cowherd became extremely sad and helpless in front of powerful Empress of heaven's wills. At that time cowherd's companion, the magical cow helps him with his skin to drape over to be able to fly in the sky after zhi nv and xi wangmu. Even though chased hard by the cowherd, the Empress separated the couple by drawing a Milky Way in the sky in between them. The cowherd tried extremely hard but in front of mother empress's magical powers, he couldn't reach to her loving fairy wife. However in the due course, mother Empress also realized the deep and true love between the cowherd and the fairy weaver. Therefore out of compassion for them, she allowed the couple to meet ones in a year. Every year, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, flocks of magpies gather to form a bridge over the Milky Way with their bodies, and thus allowing the Cowherd and the Weaving Girl to meet with each other.

## 2. CHARACTERS OF THE FOLKTALE

The Queen Mother (of the west) (Xi Wangmu/Wang mu niang niang) - As per ancient Chinese texts and people's beliefs, the Queen Mother of the west is the wife of the Jade emperor (en.chinaculture.com). According to the Taoist fairy tales,

*Wangmu Niangniang (the Queen Mother of the West) is the supreme goddess in the heaven, and the wife of Yuhuang Dadi (the Jade Emperor). She lived in Kunlun Mountains, but in fact, she was a tribe's leader or totem in West China. At the end of the Han Dynasty (206BC-220AD), she was brought into the system of fairy stories and gradually became a graceful goddess.<sup>4</sup>*

Later, she was portrayed as the queen of heaven and the deity responsible for human pleasure and longevity in several ancient Chinese texts. It is believed that she possesses an elixir that may prevent humans from growing old and living forever. The well-known moon goddess 'Chang E' had flew to the moon after consuming the elixir of life. She is given a very high status in Taoism, where she is regarded as the head of all the goddesses and she and her husband are the supreme of all the gods.

## 3. REFLECTION OF THE FOLKTALE IN OTHER LITERARY AND ART FORMS

The concept of Chinese Valentine's day or the romantic traditional Chinese festival of Qixi has also emerged by this popular fairy tale of the Cowherd and the Weaving Girl. The tale has also inspired numerous poems and other literary forms in Chinese history.

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<sup>4</sup> The Queen Mother of the West -- the Wife of the Jade Emperor, [http://en.chinaculture.org/gb/en\\_aboutchina/2003-09/24/content\\_25164.htm](http://en.chinaculture.org/gb/en_aboutchina/2003-09/24/content_25164.htm)

*The most famous works being the ancient poem of the Han Dynasty Far in the Skies Is the Cowherd Star, Qixi by Du Mu of the Tang Dynasty and Fairy on the Magpie Bridge by the great ci writer Qin Guan of the Song Dynasty. In addition, traditional Chinese operas like Beijing Opera and Shaanxi opera etc have plays about the Cowherd and the Weaving Girl.<sup>5</sup>*

The story has been mentioned in various other forms of literary works as well.

The fairy tale also incorporates Chinese people's astronomical understanding about stars. In the mythological fairy tale, the Weaver Girl turns into a star called the Vega, and the Cowherd turns into a star called the Altair, across the Milky Way. The ceiling of one of the long corridors of Beijing's Summer Palace has been painted with the artwork of the loving couple and whole family's reunion on the bridge made by magpies. The ceiling painting of Nanjing's Muxuyuan station also illustrates the famous folktale's character Zhinü or weaver girl.

The folktales and legends in general which are taught to the Chinese language learning foreign students do impart varied range of knowledge related to ancient China, they increase cultural understanding, give an insight of the geographical setup, social system as well as people's life styles, traditions and customs. This particular folktale of cowherd and weaver girl reveals the agrarian society, moral and cultural values of then Chinese society as well as the origin of China's Valentine's Day festival; mythical creatures like the speaking cow and Wang mu niang niang shows the class difference and power struggle present in then Chinese society. On the positive side, the positive end reflects the positive hope of the people; besides these the story also reflects the height of the astrological knowledge of then Chinese society.

- Time to time several Chinese cinema and tv dramas were made on this mythological love story:
- Cowherd and Weaver Girl (1949 film directed by Zhou Shilu)\_Baidu Encyclopedia(牛郎织女 (1949年周诗禄执导电影)\_百度百科)
- Cowherd and Weaver Girl: 2003 Hong Kong TV series starring Deric Wan and Sonija Kwok (牛郎织女: 2003年温兆伦、郭羨妮主演香港电视剧)
- Cowherd and Weaver Girl (2009 TV series starring Tian Liang and Ady An)\_Baidu Encyclopedia (牛郎织女 (2009年田亮、安以轩主演电视连续剧)\_百度百科)
- Cowherd and Weaver Girl: 2010 Chinese animated film(牛郎织女: 2010年国产动画片)

#### 4. ISSUES REFLECTED BY THE FAIRYTALE

- 1) The folktale reflects the mountainous landscape and the beautiful topography of China which was imagined to attract fairies from heaven.
- 2) The story also gives insight about the people's occupations at that time. Cowherd's family was totally dependent upon agriculture and farming land. Besides this, animal husbandry might also be important source of livelihood. Hence, cow was holding significant place in the society at that time.
- 3) The attitudes and family relations revealed by the characters also highlight the social values of then Chinese society.
- 4) Moreover, the strict control of emperor of heaven and queen mother of the West, Wangmu also hints towards the authoritarian form of government.
- 5) This mythological love story reflects the hidden desire of Chinese people to pursue the freedom of love and marriage.
- 6) Through the discussion between the cowherd and fairy weaver, one gets the view of actual sad story of fairy world where they didn't have any freedom and were forced to live under strict command and restrictions of queen mother of the West, Wangmu. The life of fairies in the heaven has been shown equally miserable like pity human beings on earth.

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<sup>5</sup> Myths and legends, Folktale: Cowherd and Weaving Girl, [http://en.chinaculture.org/2014-12/30/content\\_589707.htm](http://en.chinaculture.org/2014-12/30/content_589707.htm)

- 7) The fairytale also reveals the astronomical understanding of ancient Chinese people with the mention of stars position and Milky Way in sky.

## 5. LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE MYTHOLOGICAL STORY

- 1) The flock of magpies gathering together on Qixi (seventh day of the seventh lunar month) to lay a bridge for the loving couple to meet gives a positive hope to true lovers and gives a message that if one's intention is strong and feelings are pure, one can get the desired wish fulfilled.
- 2) The obstacles and struggle which Niulang and Zhinü endured in their respective lives makes this story admirable in Chinese society and beyond. The everlasting hope to reunite and the high spirit with which they both fought with all the odds gives a lesson to never give up in any difficult situation and makes the story relevant forever.
- 3) The positive ending of the story through example of good winning over evil gives a strong message to the ordinary people to be strong in any unfavourable situation, bravely fight with the odds coming in life and always be hopeful.
- 4) Lesson of perseverance and hope to the Chinese couple who are forced to live separately.

### Current traditions evolved from the Qixi festival:

- 1) Children put flowers on cow's and bull's horns
- 2) Young girls in rural areas try to acquire the craftsmanship of fine weaving or sewing by honouring the weaver goddess through trying their hands on sewing and offering prayers to the weaver fairy zhi nv.
- 3) On this day in the villages, grandparents used to show these two stars and narrate the folktales associated with this festival to their grandchildren. But such traditions of storytelling have lost its charm in modern cities.

### Folk culture's transformation into modern culture:

- 1) Originating the traditions from Chinese folk culture, now Chinese youth or celebrate this day as Chinese lovers' day or Valentine's Day and aspire to find their life partner.
- 2) Many couples do marry on this auspicious and romantic day.
- 3) Young couples do celebrate the day of mythological relevance as the valentine's day of China and gift flowers and chocolates to their lovers.

Attempts are taken to make traditional culture as popular culture. Interactive Google doodles have been launched since the 2009 Qixi Festival to mark the occasion. The latest was launched for the 2019 Qixi Festival. The doodle of 7th August 2019 was dedicated for this traditional Chinese festival with the pic of niulang and zhinu. "Today's Doodle celebrates the Qixi Festival, a romantic tradition that originated from Chinese culture over 2,000 years ago. On the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, the stars Altair and Vega appear close together in the night sky, separated by the Milky Way. This celestial convergence inspired the legend of Niulang and Zhinü, a tale of true love triumphing against all odds."<sup>6</sup>

China had launched the Queqiao relay satellite of Chang'e 4 and named it after the "bridge of magpies" from the Chinese folk tale of the cowherd and weaver girl in May 2018.<sup>7</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Chinese folktale "Niu Lang Zhi Nu" (Cow boy and Weaver girl) originating from Chinese society reveals many aspects of the society, its philosophy, and cultural values. By including this mythological story in the Chinese language text book for foreigners, the editors aim to propagate Chinese culture and belief. Through this story the foreign students do not only learn Chinese language but also get the knowledge of various aspects of Chinese society of that time and develop a better understanding of present-day society and people of China. By analyzing a tale from Chinese language text book referred in India, the paper tried to explore how the tale helps to understand the language, culture,

<sup>6</sup> "Qixi Festival 2019". [www.google.com](http://www.google.com).

<sup>7</sup> Mike Wall, China Launches Relay Satellite for Mission to Moon's Far Side, Beijing Time, May 21, 2018



geographical set-up, social norms as well as the people's aspirations of Chinese people at a particular time. And further it emphasized upon the relevance of such folk tales in present information age. Moreover, the inclusion of such cultural texts for the language learners widens the horizons of understanding of the learners and provides them an opportunity to further digging into the cultural traditions and also encourages towards doing a comparative study of two different cultures, beliefs and societies. Hence, the paper has attempted to explore how the tale helps to understand the Chinese language, culture, geographical set-up, social norms as well as the people's aspirations of Chinese people at a particular time and its correlations with the present social context of China.

Like any other form of literature, any folktale or folklore also has to be understood in its cultural context and specific societal background where it is located or from where it has originated; thus the study of the content of a folktale cannot be done without understanding the cultural context and connotations imbibed in the vocabulary and social settings used. At the same time, the language that carries folklore can be studied in sociolinguistics in order to discover its relations to the particular society.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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