

Altair and Vega, *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*, an Analysis of a Living Sky-Myth

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Abstract. This paper examines the elements that comprise the ancient Chinese legend of *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*, a mythic tale that is played out against a cosmic background, and whose narrative has its basis in the astronomical cycle of the stars, Altair and Vega. The descent of the myth's characters and subsequent ascent into the skies sets up a cosmic interplay, creating interaction between the mythic and the mortal, the heavens and the earth, the divine and the human. This paper will also discuss the cosmological symbolism of textile production at the centre of the myth's storyline, whereby weaving is a means of manufacturing the cosmos and colouring the heavens. The legend can be considered living myth, in that it gives rise to contemporary festivals in several cultures in East Asia, which are inspired by folklore and traditional customs. Themes that are central to the myth's narrative, such as love, weaving, and the movement of the stars, are acknowledged and celebrated in these festivals, themselves survivors of an earlier lunar calendar system. The paper goes on to assess the relevance and cultural interaction of both the myth and the festival amongst a small group of selected volunteer respondents, selected from the Chinese and Japanese communities residing in the UK.

There is a strong tradition of interpreting the stars through mythological storytelling. This paper present just such a myth, and argues that it continues to flourish as a legitimate example of a living sky-myth. The ancient Chinese legend, *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*, has all the credentials for an authentic sky-myth. It is a love story, wherein the cosmos serves as both its setting and its storyline, with astral figures as the main characters and with a narrative that is contingent upon the celestial

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56 Altair and Vega, *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*,
an Analysis of a Living Sky-Myth

positions of the stars, Altair and Vega.¹ The rationale for the epithet 'living', however, is the connection that the myth has with the world of today as a result of cultural festivals that spring directly from the legend, which can be found throughout East Asia. This paper will place its focus upon contemporary Chinese and Japanese festivals, respectively the Qixi Festival in China and the Tanabata Star Festival in Japan.

The story's narrative demonstrates how the congruence of stars and the craft of weaving is integral to the myth. The sky princess, Zhih Nu, the Weaver Girl of the title, is engaged in weaving the heavens. Descending to earth from the sky she falls in love with a mortal, the cowherd; they both duly neglect their tasks, the punishment for which is exile into the sky. They are transformed into two stars Vega and Altair, kept apart and separated by the Milky Way, described in the myth as the silver river.

One of the principal objectives of this study is an assessment of the contemporary resonance of both legend and festival in present-day cultures. To supplement current evidence found on the internet, a small-scale case study amongst Chinese and Japanese communities in the UK has been conducted to find out first-hand to what extent the legend survives. Two main areas are highlighted, a festival devoted to star-gazing as an everyday manifestation of cultural astronomy, and, with cosmological weaving at the core of the myth, to examine the nature of the relationship between the star-themed festivals and the creation of textiles, alongside any mythological symbolism that might underpin the activities.

The cosmology within weaving

Zhih Nü, the Weaver Girl, is just one of many mythological female figures defined by their weaving skills. Spinning and weaving consistently feature in the sky mythology of many world cultures seemingly independently. This might suggest that these activities go beyond their primary function of generating fibre and textiles to encompass the entire process of creation, even that of the cosmos. The spider woman myths in the Native American tradition speak of a cosmogony achieved by means of sacred weaving,² whereby weaving implements have become transmogrified as cosmic entities, with warp sticks made out of sun-rays, and heddles composed of

¹ Roberto Soria and Yasuyo Ohtsuka, *Tanabata (七夕) Star Festival – is it 7 July or 2 August 2014* (2). British Library, Asian and African studies blog, 31st July 2014, p.1.

² Anna Birgitta Rooth, *The Creation Myths of the North American Indians*, Anthropos, Bd. 52, H. ¾. (1957), p.503.

rock crystal or sheet lightning,³ lightning being the meteorological event that most vividly epitomises the connection between earth and heaven.

Zhih Nü, like many other mythological beings, is essentially engaged in weaving the heavens. This notion is twofold, implying both agency and cosmic transformation. In the first instance, spinning and weaving can be the instrument of the formation of natural phenomena, such as spinning the clouds or weaving a rainbow.⁴ Another manifestation of cosmological weaving involves utilising the cosmos as raw material, for example spinning cosmic yarn from the rays of the sun for celestial garments for the gods. Indeed, both aspects need not exist independently; the Indian deity, Ushas is said to weave the light of dawn into glorious fabric, and by wearing it she creates ‘light for all the world of life.’⁵ It follows that, with this capacity to weave the world into being, cosmological weaving would appear to be a divine prerogative. Indeed, Ushas is referred to as ‘the daughter of the sky’,⁶ and Zhih Nü herself is called ‘the daughter of heaven’.⁷

A list of goddesses worldwide, whose status and divinity are partially defined by weaving, serves to illustrate the pre-eminent position in mythology that the craft holds. Table 1 presents a brief selection which illustrates that the sheer profusion of spinning and weaving goddesses cross-culturally is testament to the richness of the tradition. That these activities are consistently raised to such an elevated status suggests that the crafts themselves have an intimate association with divinity. Indeed, the Japanese solar goddess, Amaterasu, revered as ‘Heaven Shining’,⁸ was the founder of a sacred weaving tradition that is still honoured today.⁹ Her cosmic connection is further augmented by Yoshino Hiroko’s hypothesis

³ In Gladys Reichard, *Spider Woman, A Story of Navaho Weavers and Chanters* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997 (Original publication: New York: MacMillan, 1934), frontispiece.

⁴ Josepha Sherman, *Storytelling: an Encyclopedia of Mythology and Folklore* (London and New York: Routledge 2015), p.178.

⁵ *Rig Veda*, I.92.8., trans. Wendy O’Flaherty (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1981), p.180.

⁶ W. J. Wilkins, *Hindu Gods and Goddesses* (1882; Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2003), p.48.

⁷ Anthony Christie, *Chinese Mythology* (Newnes Books, 1983), pp.67–68.

⁸ O No Yasumaru, *Kojiki, an Account of Ancient Matters*, trans. Gustav Heldt (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2014), p.22

⁹ Alan L. Miller, *Ame No Miso-Ori Me (The Heavenly Weaving Maiden): The Cosmic Weaver in Early Shinto Myth and Ritual, History of Religions* 24, no.1 (August 1984): pp.27–48. Published by University of Chicago Press, p.43.

58 Altair and Vega, *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*,
an Analysis of a Living Sky-Myth

that Amaterasu, as well as being associated with the sun and cosmic weaving, was also identified with the Pole Star.¹⁰

Place	Name	Goddess	Role and Activity
China	Zhih Nü	Weaver Girl, daughter of god in heaven	<i>weaving the stars, banished to the heavens</i>
Norse Mythology	<i>Frigga</i>	Norse goddess - knows the fate of all men	<i>spins the clouds, Orion known as Frigga's distaff</i>
Greece	<i>Athena</i>	goddess of wisdom, weaving and war	<i>Olympian weaving contest with Arachne</i>
Ancient Egypt	<i>Neith</i>	goddess of weaving, war and hunting	<i>strung up her loom and wove the world</i>
Ancient Egypt	<i>Tayet</i>	goddess of weaving	<i>wove funerary shrouds, threshold between worlds</i>
Meso-America	<i>Cihuacoatl</i>	Aztec snake goddess	<i>patroness of weaving and midwifery, depicted with weaving batten and shield</i>
Baltic	<i>Saule</i>	solstice goddess	<i>spinning and weaving, creating light each day</i>
Finland	<i>Päivätär</i>	Sun goddess	<i>weaving the golden light of day</i>
India	<i>Ushas</i>	Vedic goddess	<i>weaves the dawn</i>
Japan	<i>Amaterasu</i>	Shinto solar goddess	<i>known as Heaven Shining, founder of a sacred weaving tradition</i>

Table 1: A selection of weaving goddesses from different world mythologies

Zhih Nü and Chinese Mythology

Scholars of comparative mythology, such as Justine Snow, have sought to associate Weaver Girl, Zhih Nü, with Nordic and Indo-European weaving

¹⁰ See Mark Teeuwen, 'The Imperial Shrines of Ise, an Ancient Star Cult?', *Culture and Cosmos*.10, no.1 and 2 (2006): p.82.

goddesses, suggesting that they can be traced back to a common origin in Neolithic Russia.¹¹ Indeed for Andrew Collins, the legend of the Weaver Girl could be evidence for Chinese astronomy in the late Paleolithic.¹² Certainly, the origin of the tale is obscure, manifestly pre-existing the first written reference to it in the *Shih Chih (The Classic of Poetry)*, dating from between 900 and 600 BCE.¹³ Delving deeper to find the core of the story only reveals its complexity due to the remarkable multiplicity of narrative detail resulting from many different versions of the same tale.

The Chinese mythologist, Yu-an K'o, claims that this multiplicity is characteristic of Chinese mythology, proposing three possible reasons as to why this might be. In China, he argues, there was no early literary recounting of myth; consequently, the collection of mythological material occurred in a somewhat haphazard fashion, 'collated as mythological material only fairly late, if at all'. He goes on to suggest that ancient Chinese writing was 'unwieldy and ideographic', and unable to systemise complex mythologies. Finally, Yu-an K'o speaks of the resistance of Confucian scholars; myths, it would seem, were deemed unworthy of being preserved in writing.¹⁴

Subsequent reliance upon oral retelling of the tale, enriched by local variations, could be said to have ensured the myths' cultural currency, thereby contributing to its longevity. Attempts to create authorised versions of such legends by the Chinese Folklore Movement in the early 20th century have been lamented by Sinologist, Wilt Idema. *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl* was one of four designated Chinese national myths, with a single official version replacing many local variants, thereby cutting it off from its folkloric roots and, for Idema, significantly impoverishing the entire folklore tradition.¹⁵

¹¹ Justine T. Snow, *The Spider's Web: Evidence for the Indo-European Origin of Two Ancient Chinese Deities*, *Sino-Platonic Papers* 118 (Jun 2002), University of Pennsylvania, www.sino-platonic.org, p.3.

¹² Andrew Collins, *The Cygnus Mystery* (London: Watkins, 2006), p.202.

¹³ Arthur Waley, *The Book of Songs* (1937; London and New York: Routledge, 2005), no.203 (284 in Waley's numbering).

¹⁴ Yuan K'o in Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: an Introduction* (Baltimore, MD, and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), p.xi.

¹⁵ Wilt L. Idema, 'Old Tales for New Times: Some Comments on the Cultural Translation of China's Four Great Folktales in the Twentieth Century', *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no.1 (Issue 17) (June 2012): pp.25-46.

60 Altair and Vega, *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*,
an Analysis of a Living Sky-Myth

The Chinese legend had reached Japan by the start of the Heian period (794–1185 CE), where it became established amongst the imperial elite.¹⁶ The continental import became intertwined with the existing Japanese mythological character Tanabatatsume, a goddess who wove heavenly textiles for the gods.¹⁷ As is the case of its Chinese original, the Japanese myth has not been crystallized into an authorised version. Weaver Girl herself has an assortment of names; known variously in Japan as the star or thread-weaving princess, she is most frequently referred to as Ori-hime, the weaving princess.

A structural analysis of the storyline

The initial challenge in tackling any analysis of the legend's storyline lies in the numerous forms and disparate elements apparent in the narrative thread of each version. Although these differ quite substantially in the matter of narrative detail, in its overall structural make-up, the myth conforms to a relatively clear ternary framework of beginning, middle and end, of sky, earth and return. This tripartite form is one that is quite commonly found in fairy tale and myth.¹⁸ Consequently, the following comparative analysis will be divided into these three distinct stages.

A basic outline of the narrative sees Weaver Girl employed in weaving the heavens. She falls in love with a mortal and neglects her tasks. The stars grow dim, and the lovers, exiled into the sky, become two stars, Vega and Altair, divided by the silver river, the Milky Way, reunited only once a year. There are versions, however, in which the narrative occurs purely in the heavens. That is certainly the case in this early version by Lo Yuan (1136-84 CE) in the *Ts'ung-shu chi-ch'eng*, translated by Anne Birrell:

East of Sky River is Weaver Maid, Daughter of God in
Heaven. Year by year she toils and slaves with loom and
shuttle till she finishes weaving a celestial robe of cloudy silk.
God in Heaven pitied her living alone, and allowed her to
marry Draught Ox west of the river. After they married she

¹⁶ Steven L. Renshaw, and Saori Ihara, *A Cultural History of Astronomy in Japan*, in H. Selin, ed., *Astronomy across Cultures: The History of Non-Western Astronomy* (Great Britain: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), p.398.

¹⁷ Katherine Rupp, *Gift Giving in Japan: cash, connections and cosmologies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.139.

¹⁸ Chris Knight, 'Decoding Fairy Tales', *Radical Anthropology Group* (2011) University of East London, p.3.

neglected her weaving work. God in Heaven grew angry and punished her by ordering her to return to the east of the river, letting her make one crossing each year to be with Draught Ox.¹⁹

This simple narrative framework contains the essential elements of the plot. Where the versions diverge is in the narrative detail, often conflicting, attributable perhaps to embellishments added, Idema suggests, from other folktales.²⁰



Fig. 1: *The Reunion of the Weaver Girl and the Cowherd on the Bridge of Magpies* / artwork in the Long Corridor of the Summer Palace, Beijing (public domain)

Stage 1. The Sky

Weaver Girl is variously a weaving goddess or a star goddess, especially in the Japanese retelling; she is also known as the daughter, or indeed granddaughter, of heaven.²¹ In several folklore traditions, she is the youngest of seven daughters of the Queen Mother of the West, said to be the ‘heavenly ruler of all female immortals’.²² The occupation that defines her, and indeed gives her her name, is the activity of weaving, and

¹⁹ Lo Yuan (1136-84), in the *Ts'ung-shu chi-ch'eng, from the Material appended to the 'Erh Ya' Dictionary 13.147*, in Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: an Introduction* (Baltimore, MD, and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), p.166.

²⁰ Wilt L. Idema, *Filial Piety and its Divine Rewards: the Legend of Dong Yong and Weaving Maiden with Related Texts* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), p.82.

²¹ Christie, *Chinese Mythology*, p.67-8.

²² Idema, *Filial Piety*, p.xvi.

62 Altair and Vega, *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*,
an Analysis of a Living Sky-Myth

depending on the particular storyline, she is engaged in weaving the stars, the clouds,²³ or even 'gay garments for the gods'.²⁴

Oh bright so bright, the maiden at the river!
Oh slender, so slender, are her white hands,
As click-clack she works loom and shuttle.²⁵

In some versions, the Sky (or Jade) Emperor permits Weaver Girl's acquaintance with the cowherd, but in others it is the Heavenly Empress or the Queen Mother of the West who sanctions her descent to earth. The myth's ternary structure is apparent in Zhih Nü's initial loneliness, which parallels the misery she experiences on her heavenly return.

Stage 2. The Earth

The identity of the cowherd is both layered and complex. He is referred to as Niu Lang in many Chinese versions, but his provenance is defined differently according to the particular narrative. In certain accounts he is the Ox star; in others, it is his ox that is in fact the Golden Ox star, which on earth proves to be his source of magic.²⁶ In most cases, however, the cowherd himself is a mortal.

Weaver Girl in some accounts is the seventh of seven fairies granted permission from the Celestial Mother to bathe in Earth's Lake Li Bain. Seen by the cowherd before re-dressing, the seventh fairy must now marry him.²⁷ Most narratives stress their years of conjugal happiness and the birth of two children. However, as her weaving tasks are subsequently neglected, this immodest behaviour and earthly procreation is antithetical to her purer heavenly ways, rendering her offence doubly culpable to god in heaven.

This neglect is crucial to the plot, emphasising the curious equation in which happiness and non-weaving contrast with her unhappiness whilst engaged in celestial weaving. Yet there are various adaptations that have

²³ Jan and Yvonne Walls, eds and trans, *Classical Chinese Myths* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1984), p.78.

²⁴ Grace James, *The Green Willow and other Japanese Fairy Tales* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1910), p.65.

²⁵ in Yuan and Zhou 1985. 113 cited by Idema *Filial Piety*, p.81.

²⁶ www.cultureofchina.com/traditions/folklore, 26/8/2009 narrated by Kenneth Mun.

²⁷ Jan and Yvonne Walls, *Classical Chinese Myths*, pp.77–79.

borrowed large passages of the story from another Chinese folktale, *Don Yong*, in which, while on earth, Zhih Nü weaves beautiful silk cloth magically through the night.²⁸ So in this retelling, the neglect is underemphasised in favour of stressing the enchanted nature of her weaving.

Stage 3. The Return: exile and reunion

In many versions the Jade Emperor commands his sky soldiers to descend to earth in order to kidnap Weaver Girl and bring her back to the heavens. In some, the cowherd dons the magic ox skin, and flies after them into the sky along with their offspring, and is only thwarted by the silver river, the Milky Way.²⁹ In other accounts, the Sky Empress scores a deep gash with her hand, a hairpin, or indeed a weaving shuttle, gouging out an impassable river to separate the couple.³⁰

The harsh penalty for such disobedience is the same in almost all the versions, exile and separation. The retribution handed out by her father, god in heaven, is nominally for the neglect of her tasks, but there is also a sense that it is a reaction against her love for a mortal. Weaver Girl is thus denied continuous love for and from another being. She is reconnected to her role within the cosmos, to weave the heavens continuously, engaged in a creative activity contingent upon her isolation, distance and endeavour. Thus, restored to the sky, Weaver Girl is transformed into the star Vega, forbidden to see the cowherd, himself stellified as the star Altair, together with their two children. Now, left weeping on the other side of the silver river, Zhih Nü is doomed to weave for eternity. Birrell makes the point that in ancient Chinese mythology, stars may have had malefic overtones in comparison with the stellar associations, the ‘star quality’, found in many other cultures.³¹ However, in folklore the consequence of liaisons of supernaturals or immortals with humans is often the loss of their immortality, so in this case, exile and stellification means that the Weaver Girl subsequently retains her eternal status.

Zhih Nü and Niu Lang, thus marooned as the stars, Vega and Altair, either side of the silver river, are permitted to see one another just once a year, reunited only on the seventh day of the seventh moon. On that evening a flock of magpies make a bridge for the lovers to cross the silver

²⁸ Nargiz Koshoibekova, *The Legend of Don Yong and the Seventh Fairy*, *The World of Chinese*, digital issue, 4 March 2016.

²⁹ www.cultureofchina.com/traditions/folklore, Mun K., (2009).

³⁰ Christie, *Chinese Mythology*, p.68.

³¹ Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, p.101.

64 Altair and Vega, *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*,
an Analysis of a Living Sky-Myth

river. In other versions, notably of Japanese provenance, the half-moon acts as a boat to carry Weaver Girl across the river to be reunited with her husband.³² If it rains on that evening, the silver river is swollen and the boatman cannot cross, and it is said that her resulting tears start the monsoon.

In a classical spin-off to the myth from the Tang dynasty, *Guo Han* by Zhang Jian (744-804 CE), Weaver Girl explains that mortals are not able to see or comprehend the heavenly world; they see only stars where in fact ‘there are palaces and houses where the immortals roam.’³³ This appears to encapsulate what underlies not only this myth, but perhaps sky mythology in general, namely the presence of an alternative, more elevated reality located in the celestial spheres denied to mere mortals which they can perceive only as stars.

The astronomy underpinning the *Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*

In Chinese astronomy, Weaver Girl’s star is known by her name, being the principal star in the Chinese asterism known as Zhinü, the Weaving Girl.³⁴ Likewise, in Japan it is known as Orihime Boshi, the Weaving Princess star.³⁵ Vega, the star’s equivalent in Western astronomy, is a significant celestial body in the night sky, being the second brightest star in the Northern Hemisphere. It is the main star of Lyra the Harp, a constellation listed by Ptolemy in the 2nd century.³⁶ Before 12000 BCE, it was considered the pole star, and will become so again in a further 12000 years.³⁷

Bernadette Brady has shown that before 5000 BCE, Vega was a circumpolar star, but since then behaves in the manner of a star of curtailed passage,³⁸ that is to say, it descends below the horizon only to rise again in the same night, a pattern that perfectly mirrors the Weaver Girl’s stellar descent and subsequent return to the sky. Brady has also shown that Vega’s

³² Renshaw and Ihara, *Astronomy in Japan*, p.398.

³³ Zhang Jian, *Guo Han*, in Idema, *Filial Piety*, p.84.

³⁴ Soria and Ohtsuka, *Tanabata* (2), p.3.

³⁵ Renshaw and Ihara, *Astronomy in Japan*, p.398.

³⁶ Top Astronomer, Lyra, www.topastronomer.com/StarCharts/Constellations/Lyra [accessed 24 June 2017].

³⁷ Elizabeth Howell, *Vega, The Once and Future North Star*, 25 June 2013.

<http://www.Space.com>.

³⁸ Bernadette Brady, *Star phases: the Naked-eye Astronomy of the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts*, in Fabio Silva and Nicholas Campion, eds, *Skyscapes: the Role and Importance of the Sky in Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2015), p.79.

cyclical pattern involves an increase in altitude, from early May acting as a circumpolar star constantly visible in the night sky.³⁹ Accordingly, with these co-relations between the myth and the astronomy it is perhaps inevitable to speculate that the astronomical actualities may have given rise to aspects of the myth's narrative.

While Vega has always been associated with the Weaver Girl, the cowherd's astral allegiance is a little more complex. Roberto Soria and Yasuyo Ohtsuka suggest that the cowherd's original star was known in China as the First Star of the Ox, now known as Beta Capricorni, and is fifteen times weaker than Vega.⁴⁰ Later, as the story became more embedded in the folklore, the choice fell upon Altair, separated from Vega by the Milky Way, and around half its brightness.⁴¹ Known as Niu Lang in Chinese and Kengyu in Japanese, Altair is the brightest star in the constellation Aquila the Eagle.⁴² The two smaller stars that flank it, Beta and Gamma Aquilae, are considered to be the couple's two children. Both Vega and Altair achieve their highest point in the night sky at the same time during the summer months. Indeed, they form two thirds of the asterism known as the Summer Triangle along with Deneb, the brightest star in the constellation Cygnus the Swan.⁴³ Deneb has been interpreted as guarding the crossing point of the Milky Way, the silver river of the legend – in other words the location of the magpie bridge.⁴⁴

The festivals and the lunar calendar

The astronomical context of the myth is closely tied up with the issue of the calendar. The date of the reunion of the lovers, the seventh evening of the seventh month, subsequently gives rise to festivals that spring from the story, the Qixi festival in China, and the Tanabata star festival in Japan.⁴⁵

³⁹ Bernadette Brady, *The Egyptian ascension mythology of the Old Kingdom*, in Abd El Gawad et al., eds, *Current Research in Egyptology 2011* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2012), p.45.

⁴⁰ Soria and Ohtsuka, *Tanabata* (2), p.3.

⁴¹ Soria and Ohtsuka, *Tanabata* (2), p.3.

⁴² Soria and Ohtsuka, *Tanabata* (2), p.3.

⁴³ 'Vega', *Constellations: a Guide to the Night Sky*, 15 June 2014. www.constellation-guide.com, [accessed 15 June 2017].

⁴⁴ Top Astronomer, Lyra, www.topastronomer.com/StarCharts/Constellations/Cygnus [accessed 25 June 2017].

⁴⁵ Huiling Chen and Wei Tao, 'The revival and restructuring of a traditional folk festival: Cultural landscape and memory in Guangzhou, South China', *Sustainability* 9, no. 10 (2017): p.1767, mdpi.com, p.7. Also Steven L. Renshaw,

66 Altair and Vega, *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*,
an Analysis of a Living Sky-Myth

Indeed, the Qixi festival is also commonly known by the date of its setting, the double seventh festival. In Japan, with the adoption of the solar calendar in 1873 the seventh evening of the seventh month was interpreted as 7 July, rather than the seventh evening of the seventh moon, which would occur roughly a month later and would change each year.⁴⁶ For Soria and Ohtsuka, the original lunar date is more scientifically coherent. They argue that Vega and Altair reach their highest point in the sky later in the night on the earlier date, at a time that is less conducive to star-gazing. Also, crucially, the moon will always be at the first quarter on the traditional date, and the stars will appear brighter.⁴⁷

Not only does the adoption of the solar calendar compromise the astronomical roots of the legend, it undermines the seasonal origin of the festival as well. The seventh day of the seventh month was considered the first day of autumn in the traditional Chinese calendar.⁴⁸ Similarly, Steven Renshaw has suggested that Tanabata in Japan may have derived from earlier agricultural festivals marking the end of summer, so fixing the present-day festival in July divorces it from the agricultural cycle.⁴⁹ While Tanabata is predominately celebrated on 7 July, there are many areas, especially Sendai, that celebrate the festival a month later, on 6-8 August, aligning it to the seasonality that Renshaw mentions, but still disassociating it from the lunar cycle. In fact, in 2017, the Sendai festival fell during the period of the full moon, less promising for star-gazing.

‘Celebration of seasonally based holidays in Japan: a study in cultural adaptation’, in Clive L.N. Ruggles, ed., *Oxford IX International Symposium on Archaeoastronomy Proceedings IAU Symposium 278* (2011: p.315.

⁴⁶ Roberto Soria and Yasuyo Ohtsuka, *Tanabata (七夕) Star Festival – is it 7 July or 2 August 2014* (1). British Library, Asian and African studies blog, 31st July 2014, p.1.

⁴⁷ Soria and Ohtsuka, *Tanabata* (2), p.3.

⁴⁸ Idema, *Filial Piety*, p.81.

⁴⁹ Renshaw, ‘Celebration of seasonally based holidays in Japan’, p.315.



Fig. 2 *Prosperity throughout the City during the Tanabata Festival (1856-58), One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, Utagawa Hiroshige, State Hermitage, St. Petersburg.*

Cultural traditions associated with the festivals

China

The Qixi festival governed by the lunar calendar, and consequently changes date every year; in 2017, it took place on the 28 August. The romantic angle of the story tends now to pre-dominate the celebrations, being interpreted primarily as the Chinese parallel to Valentine's Day. But originally, textiles could be considered at the very core of the festival, with the notion of pleading for improved skills. In a custom known as *baixian*, or celestial worship, young women and girls would offer handcrafted articles to Zhih Nü to ask for greater mastery of their sewing and weaving skills.⁵⁰ This became inextricably entwined with asking for help in finding

⁵⁰ Poon Shuk Wah, 'Refashioning Festivals in Republican Guangzhou', *Modern China*.30, no. 2 (April 2004): p.205.

68 Altair and Vega, *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*,
an Analysis of a Living Sky-Myth

a good husband.⁵¹ While such traditional folkloric practices are regarded to be in decline,⁵² there is contemporary evidence that they live on in certain regions. In Zhu Cun, for example, in Guangdong Province, re-enactments and dances are still performed to aid Weaver Girl on her heavenly journey, accompanied by exhibitions of locally made craft.⁵³

Japan

Tanabata is anecdotally understood as meaning the evening of the seventh, but Renshaw suggests that it can be translated as ‘weaving with the loom (*bata*) placed on the shelf (*tana*)’.⁵⁴ Representations of Tanabata not only feature in the textiles used for summer kimonos, but also in the ritual patterns created for domestic and ceremonial use. Katherine Rupp has suggested that when Tanabata originally spread to Japan from China, young women at the imperial court would offer prayers to Orihime for help in their weaving, needlework and calligraphy.⁵⁵ Originally the ceremonies involved lanterns and haiku poems written on mulberry leaves;⁵⁶ the young women’s counterparts today write *kami* wishes on *tanzaku* paper and make *origami* decorations, which they hang on bamboo trees. In some parts of Japan, the proximity of Tanabata to the Japanese Buddhist festival, Bon, honouring the spirit of the ancestors, can infuse the festival with a sense of purification, and rain on Tanabata is considered auspicious because of its cleansing properties.⁵⁷ In China it is considered unlucky, as Weaver Girl may become marooned across the silver river.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Ju and John Brown, *China, Japan, Korea, Culture and Customs* (North Charleston, SC: BookSurge, 2006), p.72.

⁵² Virginia Schomp, *The Ancient Chinese* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), p.70.

⁵³ Fercility Jiang, ‘Qixi Festival - How to Celebrate Chinese Valentine’s Day’, Updated Apr. 19, 2022, <http://www.chinahighlights.com/festivals/double-seventh-festival.htm> [accessed 24 June 2017].

⁵⁴ Renshaw, *Cultural Adaptation*, p.311.

⁵⁵ Rupp, *Gift Giving*, pp.139–40.

⁵⁶ Renshaw and Ihara, *Astronomy in Japan*, p.399.

⁵⁷ Rupp, *Gift Giving*, p.140.

⁵⁸ Edward T.C. Werner, *Myths and Legends of China*, 1922, p.190, <https://www.sacred-texts.com/>.



Fig 3. *Tanabata*, Bertha Lumm (1869–1954), Library of Congress

The Living Myth

To be a living sky-myth, the legend needs to be alive for people living today, and it has been one of the aims of this study to assess the contemporary resonance of both the legend and the festivals in present-day cultures. A fruitful source of evidence for this can be found through information about cultural events connected to both the Qixi and Tanabata festivals accessed online, it being a quantifiable barometer of the legend's place in everyday culture.

What is apparent in the online material is that engagement with the festivals directly promotes interaction with cultural astronomy. In China, for example, good locations for clear visibility are available as online listings so that lovers can experience the night sky on the evening of the double seventh.⁵⁹ A representation of the Milky Way appears as an interactive lightshow along the Kyoto riverbank (see figure 4), and websites offer online 'Tanabata star-gazing nights' to monitor the stars' reunion.⁶⁰ I

⁵⁹ 'ZUJI Passport: Top 5 Romantic Places to Go Stargazing With your Partner', 16 January 2017. <http://www.zuji.com.sg/>, [accessed 26 June 2017].

⁶⁰ www.slooh.com. See Japanese Star Festival 2015,



Fig 4. A representation of the Milky Way appears as an interactive lightshow along the Kyoto riverbank.

It is not only in the festival that the myth is experienced within contemporary culture. A long tradition of the narrative's visual representation in cinema, for example, reaching back into the 1920s, is carried through to present-day television costume dramas and video games. Indeed, the Chinese film industry maximizes audience figures by releasing romantic movies to coincide with the double seventh, emphasising the legend's role in the development a Chinese Valentine's day. The myth is even present in professional astronomy. In 1997 the modules of the Japanese satellite docking system were duly entitled Orihime and Hikoboshi, the weaving princess and the cowherd.⁶¹

To supplement this analysis, I carried out a small research enquiry amongst selected English-speaking Chinese and Japanese communities mostly residing in the UK, providing a structured way of gathering information about how people may remember the myth and what elements of the festival they cherish. The sample size may have been small, numbering 36, but it included intergenerational responses from amongst both the Chinese and Japanese communities. Their observations offered a cross-section of reactions characterized by an apparent prerequisite for the

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6XZpcyO9C4> [accessed 5 June 2017].

⁶¹ Kazuya Oshida, 'Achievements in Space Robotics', *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine* (December 2009).

preservation of a cultural tradition founded upon memory. I myself attended events in London dedicated to both Qixi and Tanabata, testimony to that imperative for cultural conservation. The significance of memory in preserving and invigorating a tradition applies not just to those separated from a culture through place and time. It has also proved an essential element in the maintenance of, for example, the Qixi tradition in China. Huiling Chen and Wei Tao stress how the revitalization of traditional customs could be locally driven, activated and energised principally by grassroots memory.⁶²

Some of the respondents in the UK were aware of the festivals but not of the narrative detail of the legend behind it. The issue of translation was raised by several informants, one suggesting that ‘every time it has been retold in English it has been given a new title.’ Indeed, the main characters are known differently: another informant wrote that Niu Lang ‘didn’t appear as a cowherd – he was more like Prince Tiger.’

Respondents also contributed various alternative narrative accessories: magpies have straw sandals in some versions, herons and cranes, symbolic birds in Japanese traditional culture, also make an appearance. One respondent explained that magpies did not feature in the myth she knew, as there were no magpies in her part of Japan, a comment that highlights the local relevance adopted by the myth, whereby the geographical context seems to customize the storyline.

From the informants’ comments, it was possible to note a distinction between a knowledge of the double seventh festivals and regularly participating in them. There was a suggestion that Tanabata is primarily a children’s festival; however, several respondents actively remember taking part in performances and processions, attending the festivals in traditional summer clothing, thereby decorating not only their surroundings but also their bodies in order to partake in the festivities.

Amongst the informants, the astronomical background to the festival was widely recognized, the textile connection less so; but the festival is still known, especially in Japan, as the Star Festival and the Festival of the Weaver. Rupp talks about Tanabata being particularly special in areas where there is a strong textile heritage,⁶³ a notion that is endorsed by one of my respondents, who grew up in Fukuoka, an area with a rich weaving tradition.

⁶² Huiling Chen and Wei Tao, ‘The revival and restructuring’, p.6.

⁶³ Rupp, *Gift Giving*, p.140.

Conclusion

Huiling Chen and Wei Tao, in their paper on the revitalization of traditional Chinese festivals, cite a cultural official speaking of the revival of the aforementioned *baixian* ritual (celestial worship) as ‘not a pseudo-tradition but a development.’⁶⁴ From this, it would seem that a myth can be said to be alive for a culture if it continues to mutate, to change, expand and develop. A living sky-myth is then perhaps one that is continually re-contextualized. As the Qixi and Tanabata festivals continue to morph in order to make them relevant to each generation, in some cases the connections with the legend and the textile traditions intrinsic to the festivals may have become less pertinent, but such connections are not lost.

Interaction with the myth engages with two opposing trends, one pulling towards the conservation of the folklore and a celebration of traditional customs and practices, and, conversely, a broader trend whereby the myth acts as a catalyst for a range of tangential creative expressions and public festivities. But in both eventualities, the cowherd and the Weaver Girl’s story is still placed at the centre, and remains a constant. Themes that this paper has addressed, cosmology within weaving, applied cultural astronomy, and the contemporary relevance of this ancient myth are present within these summer festivals. Such festivals, then, could be said to offer an active manifestation of cultural astronomy and cosmological weaving. The relationship between the myth and the festivals that derive from it form a kind of virtuous circle, in that the festivals flourish because of the myth, and the myth’s authority is enhanced by its position as backstory to the festivals. Consequently, the myth is placed centrally within the public domain, and thereby continues to thrive as an example of a living sky-myth.

⁶⁴ Huiling Chen and Wei Tao, ‘The revival and restructuring’, p.10.

