

# Of Marriage, Labor, and the Small Peasant Family:

## A Morphological and Feminist Study of Cowherd and Weaving Maid Folktales

Eric K.W. Yu

### I. Introduction

The marriage of star-deities Qianniu 牽牛 (the bull or cowherd) and Zhinu 織女 (the weaving maid) is one of the best-known stories in ancient Chinese mythology.[1] The myth emerged probably during the Later Han Dynasty (25-220 A.D.) and has been transmitted, gradually, to neighboring countries such as Korea, Japan, Vietnam and Thailand.[2] One of the earliest versions reads:

To the east of the celestial river lived Weaving Maid, daughter of the Emperor of Heaven. Year after year she worked at the loom, weaving ethereal brocade with patterns of clouds. The Emperor took pity on her loneliness and married her to a young man called Qianniu who lived to the west of the river. After marriage, she abandoned her work of weaving. Angered, the Emperor reproached her and ordered her to return to the east of the river. But the couple were allowed to cross the river and meet once a year, on the seventh day of the seven moon. (Tale c; my translation)[3]

Oblivious to the issues of labor and oppression, Classical Chinese poetry often alludes to Qianniu and Zhinu's forced separation and annual reunion, treating it as a motif of sentimental love.[4] In another line of development, instead of the celestial Qianniu, Confucian exemplary tales have Weaving Maid married Dong Yong 董永, the archetypal filial son who sold himself into servitude so as to bury his father properly.[5] Popular in folk drama, the Dong Yong legend fantasizes about a virtuous lowly mortal marrying a celestial maiden by the heavenly decree, and mourns for their inevitable separation.[6] In folktales collected in the twentieth century, the so-called "swan maiden" episode is added.[7] Cowherd, now an earthly peasant like Dong Yong but also an orphan, marries Weaving Maid by theft of her magic garment on his ox's advice. Older motifs such as the celebrated annual meeting across the Milky Way, the bridge of magpies or ravens, and Weaving Maid's role as a superb weaver are still found in modern folktales, making such tales distinct from others about marriage to some anonymous supernatural wives. Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales from Han sources are found, in my preliminary survey, in at least eleven provinces mainly in eastern China; they are also available from non-Han sources including the Korean in Heilongjiang 黑龍江, the Xibe 錫伯 in Xinjiang 新疆, the Miao 苗 in Hunan 湖南 and Guizhou 貴州, and the Wa and the Lisu in Yunnan 雲南.[8]

That the Qianniu and Zhinu myth is so famous and that modern folktale versions are widely distributed does not mean that the task of interpretation is easy. The reason why Weaving Maid gives up her work for the Emperor, for example, is not given in the myth quoted above. It remains for modern narrators and critics to decide whether to preserve this motif, and if so, how to represent or interpret it. During the late 1950s, there was a heated debate in Mainland China over the interpretation of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales.[9] Despite their difference in emphasis, all the disputants seem to agree on the "anti-feudal" theme of the struggle for freedom of love and marriage. Weaving Maid's own parent, the Emperor of Heaven or the Queen Mother of Western Heaven, is seen as the arch-villain. A critic even claims that Cowherd's struggle against Weaving Maid's parent represents the "class struggle" of peasantry against the feudal lords.[10] But why is it that the "class enemy" is Weaving Maid's own kindred rather than some outsiders as in other folktales? How are we to reconcile the contradiction between marriage by capture implied by the swan maiden motif and the theme of struggle for freedom? In fact, in these tales sometimes Weaving Maid herself chooses to leave, like many other swan maidens in world folktales. More than six decades and a half have elapsed since Zhong Jingwen 鍾敬文 first analyzed Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales in the light of E. S. Hartland's and Nishimura Shinji's works on the swan maiden.[11] Regrettably, with respect to the interpretation of these tales, relatively little progress has been made when compared with the impressive quantity of folktale collection in general during recent years.[12] Given that the swan maiden story was first recorded in China in the fourth century (tale a) and that variants have been found in more than twenty Chinese ethnic groups, no wonder the swan maiden is such a prominent topic in Chinese folklore studies.[13] Not all Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales, however, contain the swan maiden episode, and its significance within this particular tale group has yet to be closely examined. Besides, the morphological features of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales as a distinctive tale type has not been properly defined. In a recent article on the classification of swan maiden stories, Chen Jianxian 陳建憲 proposes a sub-type of "Difficult Tasks in Wooing" (nanti qiuhun xing 難題求婚) with

reference to a tale called “Tianniulang pei fuqi” 天牛郎配夫妻 [Heavenly Cowherd’s marriage] (HC 6), names it “Cowherd and Weaving Maid Sub-Type,” and adds in parenthesis that it belongs to the Han (43, 47). Nevertheless, this tale, collected in Inner Mongolia in 1954, is in fact an exceptional case with regard to its ending, for most Han versions in our present study conclude with submission to a very curious marital settlement, that is, annual reunion. In Liu Shouhua’s 劉守華 historical scheme, this tale is considered a specimen of the “third generation” of Chinese swan maiden stories.[14] Quoting Frederick Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Liu argues that these tales reflect “the transition from the pairing family to monogamy,” and that the narrative interest has shifted to “the husband’s arduous pursuit for the wife, and happy love won by courage and wisdom” (393, 391). And yet for Engels, the emergence of monogamy in patriarchy, even in the advanced bourgeois mode, does not bring about true love as long as “economic considerations... still exert such a powerful influence on the choice of a marriage partner” (144). More importantly, concerning the women’s question:

The overthrow of mother right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. (129-30)

If we were to read, with Marxist critics, Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales in terms of the desire for a self-sufficient small family in an agrarian society, we could hardly overlook the problem of women’s subjugation within the family. The plot hinges, one may say, on the temporary fulfillment of this desire, its subsequent frustration and final, usually limited, compensation. But is this desire primarily a male desire? Is “love,” so often talked about by Chinese critics, possible in a patriarchal family? How far are Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales resistant to sentimental reading? What social forces do Weaving Maid’s parents represent in disrupting her conjugal family, and to whose interest? In cases where Weaving Maid takes the initiative to leave, is she a disillusioned Nora who slams the door? What role do the children play in Cowherd’s “family romance”? Is Cowherd’s pursuit after his wife a proof of masculinity? Does his ultimate failure to win back Weaving Maid, like Orpheus in Barbara Leavy’s reading, “also reveal[s] the weaknesses of patriarchal culture”? (253) All of our Han variants are collected ‘in silk-producing provinces during and after the 1920s, when the industrialization of the Chinese silk industry has already been underway and dependent on a world imperialist economy. The 1881 Nanhai 南海 Weavers’ Riot in Guangdong 廣東 province may be viewed, as a historian puts it, “as the first of the few instances of Luddism in late nineteenth century China and thus a concrete case of conflict between modern industry and traditional handicrafts” (Eng 2-3). In the early twentieth century, the import of cotton yam and cloth is “widely thought to have threatened the livelihood of Chinese peasant families” (Li 197). In the mid-1930s, despite the formation of rural weavers’ cooperatives, the competition with synthetic fibers and the world depression further led to the collapse of the Chinese peasant economy.[15] After the Communist Revolution (1949), profound changes occurred with respect to rural relations of production, as “the party organization represented by cadres took over the control and direction of farms” and “the Commune and later the production teams replaced the family as the basic social unit of farming” (Zhou 2). Collectivism was weakened when Premier Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 turned to “the household production responsibility system” and increased rural productivity by recognizing “the farmers’ family autonomy in managing their economic lives” (Zhou 4-5). Even though the setting of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales is always a rarified pre-industrial agrarian society untouched by ‘industrialization, imperialism or communism, it is unlikely that the modern narrators, rewriters and audiences are entirely ignorant of all these enormous social changes in rural China during the twentieth century. Do the evasion and simplification of certain aspects of social life in these tales and the very anachronism reflect a Utopian impulse? Could these tales serve as implicit critique of contemporary social conditions? These are among the questions Chinese folklorists have never raised. But before we venture to explore some of these issues, a morphological study of the tales concerned is in order. Section 2 of the present paper will define Cowherd and Weaving folktales as a distinct tale type with reference to Han versions, while Section 3 will compare them with non-Han variants to highlight the ma’ in differences. In the rest of the paper we shall engage with more controversial aspects of interpretation. The advantage of comparing different versions of the same folktale type is that one may explore, within a basic narrative frame, different emphases, alternative possibilities, and even contradictory logics.

## II. Defining the Modern Han Tradition

There are different kinds of folktales involving Cowherd or Weaving Maid.[16] Some are local legends. Some are short etiological tales. Some deal only with Weaving Maid as the goddess of weaving, embroidery and needlework. In this study I limit myself to those tales with a well-defined plot centered on Cowherd and Weaving Maid’s marriage and her subsequent departure.[17] The foci of interpretation in the

second half of this paper will be on Cowherd and Weaving Maid's marriage, the disruption of the conjugal family, and the problem of labor and division of labor within the household. In folktale studies, usually a tale type is defined with reference to the general plot structure. This kind of definition, however, is at once too broad and too narrow for Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales. The late Ting Nai-Tung's 丁乃通 A Type Index of Chinese Folktales (1978) puts them mainly under Type 400 A "The Disappearance of the Immortal Spouse," a new variant of Aarne-Thompson's Type 400 "The Man on a Quest for his Lost Wife." [18] Taking no heed of their distinctness, this only standard Aarne-Thompson catalogue of Chinese folktales renders Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales invisible among many other tales involving marriage with a fairy, her departure and the husband's pursuit. On the other hand, if we adhere strictly to a narrow plot definition, we cannot accommodate some variants which diverge significantly from the typical plot and yet exhibiting some kind of "family resemblances" to those classified as Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales proper. [19] For a compromise, we shall define the type in terms of the typical plot structure with reference to the relatively homogeneous group of Han folktales, which will be called the "Modern Han Tradition." Exceptional Han versions and non-Han variants can be seen as modifications of or deviation from the Modern Han Tradition. The plot will not be the sole consideration. Where the general structure is recognized, we shall see if the hero is a lowly cowherd and if the heroine is identified as Weaving Maid, or at least one of the celestial sisters from heaven. [20] Among the "dramatis personae," the main or only animal helper is typically an ox. At the end of this section I will explain that the ox's role 'in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales is quite unique. Where the plot diverges from the typical one, we may look for other characteristic motifs of Cowherd and Weaving Maid stories, such as the annual reunion on the seventh day of the seventh moon, and the birds' bridge. If enough "family resemblances" are found, the tale concerned will be considered a Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktale 'in our study.

Readers are reminded that most, but not all, Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales contain the swan maiden motif, and exactly when it was first introduced into this tale group is still unknown. To elaborate on the morphology of the Modern Han Tradition, we can rework Zhong Jingwen's classification of Chinese swan maiden stories. In Zhong's pioneering study, three types of Chinese swan maiden stories are identified. Type I and Type 3 are useful to our purpose.

Type 1, or the "Cowherd Type," is defined by the following plot summary:

1. Two brothers; the younger one is ill-treated.
2. The household is divided; the younger brother obtains an ox (or plus a few other things).
3. The ox tells the younger brother how to get a wife.
4. The younger brother follows the ox's instructions and captures a bathing celestial maiden as his wife.
5. The celestial maiden gives birth to a few children.
6. Getting back the (magic) garment, the celestial maiden departs. The husband pursues her up to heaven but is obstructed.
7. Thereafter, they see each other once a year. (59; my translation)

In view of our new data, the first revision we have to make is to treat the mistreatment episode (sequences I and 2) as a popular but optional introduction. Over half of our Han versions contain this episode, and yet its presence does not make any significant difference to what happens subsequently in the story. Zhong that its inclusion might well be fortuitous, for it can be derived from another popular folktale type known as "The Two Brothers" or "The Dog Plows Farms," Type 503E in Ting's index. Both "The Two Brothers" and our Modern Han Tradition of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales include mistreatment and unequal division of the household, the functions of the episode in the two tale types, however, are not quite the same. In our case, the elder brother and his wife cease to appear in the story after the unequal division. The main function of this introduction seems merely to dramatize the hero's poverty and to foreground his dependence on the helpful ox. One curious feature of modern Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales not much noticed by critics is that the hero is very often an orphan. Even if his orphanage is not overtly stated, his parents almost never appear in the story. The motif of an ox helping an orphan boy reminds us of AT 510A "Cinderella," where the animal helping the orphan girl is sometimes a cow. [21] From ethnic minorities in China, there are also folktales about an orphan marrying a fairy, such as "The Star Maiden" in the Li 黎 and "The Orphan and the Fair" in the Wa. [22] As to sequence 5 of Zhong's definition, "The celestial maiden gives birth to a few children," we can add that often a son and a daughter are born. In other words, the hero's family in its prime is a nuclear family of four members. Two more important revisions concern how the hero obtains the wife and how she leaves. In a few Han versions devoid of the swan maiden motif, Weaving Maid takes the initiative and willingly becomes his wife. The motif of a female deity presenting herself to a man is very old. In "Gaotang fu" 高唐賦, a famous prose-poem by Song Yu 宋玉, (c. 290 B.C. - 223 B.C.), the Goddess of Mount Wu 巫 comes to the king of Chu 楚 and sleeps with him. Similarly, a literati fantasy has Weaving Maid introducing herself to a scholar who is an orphan. [23]

As for the motif of a lowly mortal marrying a fairy or goddess, we may turn to the Dong Yong legend, where Weaving Maid comes to the hero and marries him, though by the order of the Emperor of Heaven rather than at her own choice. To sequences 3 and 4 of Type I we should add the alternative: the hero possesses some kind of virtue or talent, a goddess or fairy falls in love with him and comes voluntarily to become his wife or elopes with him. In the Modern Han Tradition, whether the maiden comes at her own will or is captured, she may leave willingly, by means of the magic garment, or she may be grabbed back by her kindred. To sequence 6 of Type 1 "Getting back the (magic) garment, the celestial maiden departs" we have to add the alternative of forced departure. Part of our modification may be borrowed from Type 3 in Zhong's classification, which is defined as what follows:

### Type 3

1. A man possesses a certain virtue.
2. With the help of an animal or a god, he obtains a wife who possesses supernatural power
3. Having given birth to a child or children, the wife leaves at her own will or is forced to go.
4. The wife's parent plots to harm or kill the man.
5. With the wife's help, he survives.
6. The wife's parent forgives them, or the parent himself or herself is punished. (61-62; my translation)

Sequences 1 and 3 here can be incorporated in Type 1 to make it more comprehensive. As Cowherd and Weaving Maid have got married without Weaving Maid's heavenly parents' consent, there is always the danger of her kindred coming to claim her back. The main difference the swan maiden episode makes is that Weaving Maid can choose to leave like other swan maidens who put on their magic garment and forsake their husbands. Sequences 4 to 6 of Type 3 concern the father-in-law's test and his attempt to kill the hero, which are already treated in Ting's Type 313A1. Since only one of our Han versions (HC 6) ends with AT 313A1, we may discuss this later along with non-Han variants. The Modern Han Tradition typically concludes with a unique motif which comes from the ancient myth, that is, annual reunion on the seventh day of the seventh moon. An etiological tail sometimes follows: Cowherd turns into the star Altair while Weaving Maid turns into Vega, and their two children become the two stars beside Altair.[24] Another motif more often found at the end is the renowned birds' bridge: the birds, usually magpies or ravens, fly up to the sky on the eve of Cowherd and Weaving Maid's reunion, forming a bridge so that the couple can cross the Milky Way.[25] Sometimes the birds are said to be punished because of misconveying the Emperor of Heaven's decree, so that instead of his original intention to allow the couple to meet every seven days, they now can only meet on the double seventh each year. The raindrops 'in the next morning are the couple's sad tears of departure.

In the Modern Han Tradition, Cowherd typically chases after Weaving Maid when she departs and is obstructed by a magic hairpin which creates the Milky Way as a river blocking his way. But in "The Ballad of Dong Yong" (Tale d) from the Dunhuang 敦煌 manuscripts, the hero does not pursue after his wife; instead, it is their son who later looks for the mother. The motif of the son's quest is also found 'in another Dunhuang story known as "Tian Kunlun" 田崑崙 (Tale e).[26] These tales are classified in Zhong's study as Type 2 of Chinese swan maiden stories. Here I shall not elaborate on the morphology of these tales with the son's quest for two reasons. First, in our corpus of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales, only a variant from the Lisu contains the son's pursuit. Besides, even there the first half of the plot does follow the general pattern of the Modern Han Tradition. From a historico-geographical perspective, nonetheless, the two Dunhuang stories, "The Ballad of Dong Yong" and "Tian Kunlun" are important.

The Dong Yong legend is closely related to Cowherd and Weaving Maid stories because, like Cowherd in folktales, Dong Yong is a peasant and his fairy wife is identified as Weaving Maid. In the Dunhuang version, as in other Dong Yong versions, the celestial maiden is sent to the hero to become his wife, but the son's quest for the mother there verges on the swan maiden motif No theft of clothes is involved; the son follows a wise man's instructions and finds his mother who is bathing in a lake with two other women. In "Tian Kunlun," on the other hand, the son's pursuit does not involve the swan maiden motif at all, but his father did marry his mother, who is a crane maiden, by stealing her robe, as is typical in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales. Given that the two stories are known from more or less the same source and that they are similar in the plot, by interchange of motifs or by simple confusion, the motif of capturing a bride by theft of clothes 'in "Tian Kunlun" could have replaced the usual motif of marriage by heavenly decree in the Dong Yong legend.[27] Besides, the motif of the helpful ox which teaches Cowherd how to marry Weaving Maid in folktales could have derived from the wise men who help the sons in these two stories. Geographically, Dunhuang is an important pass on the famous Silk Route of foreign trade. These stories might have been transmitted to other countries and to non-Han peoples.[28]

<http://www.ndhu.edu.tw/~lkchan/Notes/cowherd.htm>

To summarize the plot of the Modem Han Tradition, an eclectic combination of V. Propp's approach and the usual Aarne-Thompson plot description is adopted in what follows. The plot is divided into six main episodes (from I. Introduction to VI. Ending), and each episode is further sub-divided into a number of segments (eg 1. Orphanage). Like Proppian "functions," each of these segments is optional, but unlike Proppian "functions," no strict order of occurrence is required.[29] In other words, in each particular version, some of the segments may be missing, while those present roughly follow the numerical order of occurrence.

#### The Modem Han Tradition of Cowherd and Weaving Maid Folktales:

##### I. Introduction

1. Orphanage: (a) The hero's parents die early. He is poor, and his job is often herding and plowing. (b) He lives alone. - or (c) he lives with his elder brother and sister-in-law.
2. Mistreatment: (a) The hero is ill-treated by his sister-in-law, or by both his elder brother and sister-in-law. (b) In some cases, his elder brother and/or sister-in-law even try/tires to poison him.
3. Interaction with Helper: (a) The helper is usually an ox. The hero has developed a good relationship with it. (b) In some cases the ox teaches the hero tricks to escape hard work and return home while the sister-in-law is serving a good meal. (c) In cases where the elder brother &/or sister-in-law try/tries to poison the hero, the ox forewarns the hero and thus saves his life.
4. Unfair Division: (a) Family property is divided, with the consequence that the hero gets very little (almost always an ox, perhaps plus a few items of little value). - or (b) In some cases he is simply expelled from home.

##### II. From Encounter to Marriage

\* Two alternative paths: either 5, 6 or 5', 6'

###### A. The Man is Active [The "Swan Maiden" Motif]

5. Instruction: The ox gives the hero instructions on how to get a wife.
  6. Theft of Clothes: The hero steals the maiden's magic clothes, without which the maiden is unable to return home.
- ###### B. The Woman is Active
- 5'. Attraction: The maiden falls in love with the hero, usually because the hero possesses some kind of virtue or talent. Or both of them fall in love, and some form of courtship may follow.
  - 6'. Self-Presentation or Elopement: (a). The maiden introduces herself to the hero - or (b) She elopes with the hero.
  7. Proposal: (a) The hero either woos the maiden or forces her to marry him. or - (b) The maiden asks to become the hero's wife.
  8. Wedding: The hero and the maiden are wedded, without the maiden's parents' permission

##### III. Married Life

9. Conjugal Life: The hero starts his new family life living with the wife. Their relationship is usually depicted as a happy one; often the hero continues his work as a peasant while the wife weaves.
10. Reproduction: Usually the wife gives birth to two children, a boy and a girl.

##### IV. The Wife's Departure

\* Two alternative paths: either 11 or 11'

11. Forced Departure: (a) By the order of her parent(s), the wife is taken back by force to her original family - or (b) She is summoned home and she complies, though somewhat reluctantly. \*An exception: in HC 14 the couple are both taken to the wife's heavenly home.

11'. Willing Departure: (a) The wife asks for her magic clothes and her request is granted. - or (b) The clothes is not hidden. (c) Putting on the magic clothes, she flies back home, leaving the children behind. \*An exception: in HC 1, the husband goes with the wife to visit the mother-in-law.

##### V. The Husband's Pursuit

12. Pursuit: (a) The husband chases after his wife. Often, magical objects for transference (most often a magic cowhide) come from the dead body of the ox.

13. Obstruction: When the husband is reaching the wife, he is blocked by a river (the Milky Way) created by a magic hairpin. Usually the person who uses the magic is either the wife herself, or the Queen Mother of Western Heaven.

#### VI. Ending

14. Periodic Meeting: The couple is allowed to meet once a year on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. In cases where they have children, their children reside with the hero and see their mother only once a year.

To define the Cowherd and Weaving Maid story as a distinct folktale type we cannot restrict ourselves to the plot as outlined above; other features such as the nature of the “*dramatis personae*” must also be considered as contributing to “family resemblances” of the type. The animal helper is a case in point. In the Modern Han Tradition it is typically a “niu” 牛. In Chinese “niu” can mean a bull, a cow or an ox. Most likely, as an animal working in the field, “niu” is an ox. Its main function is to help the hero get a bride, and, after her departure, to help him go to heaven in search of her. In the Xibe version and in two Korean versions, the ox is replaced by a deer, which is grateful because the hero saves its life. At first sight, the nature of the helper does not seem to matter. However, in view of the development of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales from early Han mythology, that the helper is an ox rather than other animals is not arbitrary. Originally, the star-deity Qianniu is probably an agrarian god in the form of a bull, whose (seasonal) sacrifice brings prosperity to mankind. Later, when the myth about the marriage of the star-deities Qianniu and Zhinu (Weaving Maid) emerged, Qianniu had become a man named “Qianniu lang,” or the cowherd. In Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales, the figure of “niu” reappears as Cowherd’s draught animal. It is not a mere “animal helper,” for it is often identified as a star-deity sent to earth as a punishment for some offences against the Emperor of Heaven. Qianniu, in a sense, is split into two figures, one mundane and the other divine. While the adventure of the former is more relevant to the daily life of the folk, the later brings in supernatural elements which enrich the plot. As a god on exile, the ox acts as an apt mediator between heaven and earth, the divine and the mundane. It knows about where celestial maidens bathe and even knows of Weaving Maid’s hidden sexual desire. As a Wise Old Man figure, it replaces the wizard or scholar in earlier stories about the son’s quest for the mother (Tales d and e). As a “fallen” deity, it abets Cowherd’s capture of a celestial maiden and violates against her parents’ absolute rights over her. Already punished, the ox reveals divine secrets and fears no further punishment. The old mythical significance of sacrifice reappears in a radically different form, for the ox in folktales often has to die, too, and its death is no longer for the good of the entire agrarian society, but only to benefit Cowherd the orphan. The magic objects necessary for Cowherd’s journey to heaven come from the dead ox. Most often, the cowhide serves as a means of magic conveyance. Only a Han version (HC 10) allows the ox to live on. Of course, the ox’s death does not necessarily mean the death of the star deity, for he may simply forsake the animal form and return to heaven, as explained in HC 19. Given its peculiar identity, we may not do the ox justice in categorizing some Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales, as in Ting Nai-Tung’s ‘index, under Type511A “The Little Red Ox” along with other tales involving oxen helpers. In Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales, where the ox is absent, the motif of sacrifice is also absent, and other means of reaching the wife’s heavenly home must be imagined. In the Xibe version (EM 2) the deer directs the hero to a ladder to heaven. In two Korean versions (EM 1 and NC 1) the deer teaches the hero to hide ‘in a barrel or a gourd with which the celestial maidens fetch water from a lake. In the Japanese version (NC 5) the wife leaves instructions so that the hero plants a bamboo tree with which he climbs up to the sky.

The relation between Cowherd and the ox is deeply problematic. Originally a heavenly god, the ox works under the lowly orphan; as a draft animal, the ox suddenly reverses the master-slave relation, revealing its superior status and turning into the master’s guide and benefactor. Sometimes it appears that the ox is grateful because Cowherd has treated it kindly like a friend or a relative. In cases involving the elder brother’s mistreatment, it seems that Cowherd and the ox are workmates on the same boat, equally enslaved, and that is why the ox teaches Cowherd how they can both idle for a while. But then after Cowherd’s marriage, the ox sometimes still continues its hard work, now entirely for Cowherd, like a faithful servant. Its supernatural power does not rid them of mundane necessity of labor. As to why the ox helps the hero, unlike the cases involving a helpful deer, the simple logic of repaying a debt of gratitude does not always apply.[30] In HC 6 and HC 19, Cowherd in fact calls the ox his “enren” 恩人 (benefactor), rather than the other way round. To call someone a “benefactor” would imply that he or she is seen as an outsider of the family. In other versions, on the contrary, the ox appears to be rather more like a member of the family. In HC 10 and HC 19, the ox and Cowherd’s children are very intimate. In some versions Cowherd cries vehemently for the ox’s death. In HC 5, Cowherd can hardly sleep on the eve of its birthday, and his wife suggests to the children that maybe he is thinking about their deceased grandparents. In HC 16, when the ox dies it causes “great grief in the family, and is buried like a father” (74). In selecting a bride and arranging for the orphan’s marriage, the ox indeed plays the role of a foster

father, an uncle or an elder brother, or in short, the senior male member of the family. While in some orphan tales from Chinese ethnic minorities, the orphan laments for his miserable lonely life, suggesting his desire for a wife, in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales the hero himself often seems to be unaware of such a need. The ox is thus required as a guide in his male initiation by awakening his desire. Where Cowherd is too shy or passive, as in HC 14, HC 19, and EM 3, the ox directly helps him to woo or capture the maiden. Sometimes it serves as a match-maker, rendering their marriage more proper ritually.

In some Cinderella stories under Type 510 or 510A, the helpful cow is the reincarnation of the orphan girl's mother. But nowhere in the Modern Han Tradition do we find any suggestion that the ox or cow is related to the hero's dead parents. In an exceptional version from the Wa (EM 5), the helpful bull is identified as the hero's elder brother, who has transformed himself so that they can survive by working as partners. Explaining for the almost total absence of Cinderella in most parts of Han China, Ting Nai-Tung suggests:

The motif of mother-as-cow could not have thrived in [traditional] China because it runs counter to the Chinese Buddhist concept of Karma... To become a cow or water buffalo usually meant that the party in question had wronged somebody else or failed to repay a debt of gratitude, and consequently had to do hard labor for his creditor in his next life. (The Cinderella Cycle 36-37)

This may also account for the lack of connection between the animal helper and the hero's parents in the Modern Han Tradition of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales.

### III. Exceptional Han Versions and Non-Han Variants

Exceptional Han versions and non-Han variants differ from the Modern Han Tradition mainly in three respects. The first has to do with how the hero marries the celestial maiden. In the Modern Han Tradition, the hero often gets his bride by theft of clothes (Segments 5, 6, 7a, 8), or, in fewer instances, the maiden comes voluntarily (Segments 5', 6', 7b, 8). In neither cases do they marry with parental consent on the maiden's side. In the Vietnamese and the Thai versions (NC 4, NC5) and in a Korean version (NC 1), the motif of arranged marriage by the Emperor of Heaven in the classical myth (Tale d) is preserved. And as in the myth, these dm versions do not contain Episode 5 "The Husband's Pursuit," which is always found in the Modern Han Tradition. The term "swan maiden," unfortunately, has bow used rather carelessly in folktale studies. Given the popularity of this motif in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales, some clarification must be given. Most "swan maiden" stories do not actually require the presence of a swan, nor any bird tons. For William A. Lessa, oceanic folktales involving a porpoise girl who transforms into a human by removing her tail are seen as swan maiden stories (120). Barbara F. Leavy's *In Search of the Swan Maiden* deals with seal maidens and other animal brides along with swan maidens. Even nightmare, or the ghostly woman who "slips through the keyhole" and appears in her beloved's dream, is categorized as a kind of swan maiden in Hartland's *The Science of Fairy Tales*. Lessa identifies four motifs usually found in swan maiden stories.[31] The first is D361.1 "Swan Maiden": "A swan transforms herself at will into a maiden. She resumes her swan form by putting on her swan coat." Strictly speaking, only our Lisu version (EM 6) involves the swan, but her transformation needs no swan coat. In a Miao version (EM 3), a sparrow is the form which the celestial maiden assumes, while in HC 6 it is a dove. The Yibe version has nothing to do with birds; the celestial maiden turns from a colorful cloud into a woman. The second swan maiden motif is D721.2 "Disenchantment by hiding skin (covering). When the enchanted person has temporarily removed the covering, it is stolen and the victim remains disenchanted until it is found." This description does apply to the Tibetan swan maiden story from a Dunhuang manuscript, where the woman is originally a human and the peacock is only her enchanted form.[32] But none of our Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales involve an enchanted form. The image of a bird or a cloud is assumed temporarily, and only for the sake of magic flying. The third motif is F302.4.2: "Fairy comes into man's power when he steals her wings. She leaves when she finds them." None of our versions involve stealing of wings. Most have to do with the fourth motif, K 1335: "Seduction (or wooing) by stealing clothes of bathing girl." Of course, the bathing girl in our case is a fairy, not an ordinary girl. Besides, "seduction" and "wooing" are perhaps too euphemistic because the hero may in fact "capture" her and "force" her into marriage. In Han versions her magic garment is probably a robe, though the general expression "yifu" 衣服 (clothing) is often used. In a Miao version (EM 4), the magic garment is a feathery fan; in another Miao version (EM 8) the fan is further said to be made of swan feathers. In the Lisu version (EM 6) a girdle is needed for the maiden's transformation into a swan. In none of our cases is the maiden's beastliness mentioned; all these supernatural wives are fairies in a broad sense.[33] While in many world swan maiden stories the wife leaves because the husband has violated some taboos she imposed, no such taboos are found here.[34] One thing in common regarding the swan maiden motif in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales is that: the hero steals a fairy's magic garment, usually at the ox's advice, and marries her, for without the magic garment she cannot fly back home. As far as the means of marriage is concerned, whether the

swan form is involved does not matter, but marriage by capture is almost always implied. A marked variation is found in the Wa version (EM 5), where the bathing maidens take the initiative to invite the hero to bathe with them and then play hide and seek with him. With the help of the bull, the hero wins and selects the most beautiful maiden as his bride. In a Miao version (EM 4), the hero, having hidden the maiden's clothes, woos her with an eloquent love song. Both cases involve no explicit male violence in capturing the bride.

The second major difference between the Modern Han Tradition and other variants has to do with children. In the classical myth (Tale d) and in classical Chinese poetry, no child is mentioned. The same holds true for the three versions preserving the classical plot (NC 1, NC 2, NC 3). In the Han versions involving the swan maiden motif, the wife often directly asks the husband to let her have her magic clothes back. In two Miao versions and in the Japanese version, she discovers it with the help of the children.[35] Concerning the wife's departure, the most marked difference is that in all Han versions, she leaves the children behind, while in many non-Han versions she brings with her two or three children when she leaves.

With respect to the plot, the greatest difference between most Han versions and other versions is the ending. Typically, the Han versions conclude with the classical motif of annual reunion, which is settled by an absolute authority, the Emperor of Heaven or the Queen Mother of Western Heaven, who are usually parents or grand parents of the heroine. One modification is found in a Shandong version, where Cowherd is still trying to empty the heavenly water with a gourd. Now the Milky Way is less bright, because, according to this version, it is running out of water due to Cowherd's ceaseless labor. The Xibe version, on the other hand, is deliberately open-ended: "Some people say that millions of magpies come everyday to form a bridge for Cowherd and the seventh celestial maiden's meeting. Others say that the couple will not be able to see each other again" (135). The greatest deviation from the typical Modern Han Tradition, however, is the addition of lengthy depiction of the husband's struggle against the wife's kindred, especially her father. The famous Han version collected in Inner Mongolia (HC 6), many versions from Chinese ethnic minorities, and the Japanese version contain the parent-in-law's villainy, or imposition of difficult tasks as depicted in Type 313A1 in Ting's type index. Only the Wa version has the hero struggling against an official, which is akin to those stories involving the hero's struggle against outside forces such as a king, a prince, a magnate, the headman and the like, classified in Ting Nai-Tung's type index under AT 465 "The Man Persecuted Because of his Beautiful Wife" or its variants, AT 465A and AT 465A1.

Of the son-in-law tasks, the weakest form is competition. In HC 6, the father-in-law forces the hero to play hide and seek with him. If the hero fails, he will be eaten up. With the wife's help, the hero wins three times. Then the father-in-law races with the hero. Just as the father-in-law is catching up, the hero tries to stop him by his wife's magic hairpin, only to use it in the wrong direction. The Milky Way is thus created, and as usual, separating the husband and wife. More often the difficult tasks are seemingly impossible to perform. But with the help of the wife, and sometimes also of other, usually animal helpers, the hero often succeeds. In the Japanese version, the father-in-law asks the hero to "go to the mountains and clear one thousand chobu [about 2,500 acres] of land in one day" (67), to "spade up the whole field in one day" (68), and then to plant winter melons in the entire field. With the help of his wife's magical power, he finishes all the impossible tasks. Afterward, following the father-in-law's instruction against the wife's warning, the hero cuts three melons lengthwise and unwittingly creates a great flood, which becomes the Milky Way. Thereafter the couple is separated, only to see each other on the seventh day of the seventh moon. In the Korean version told by the famous raconteur Jin Deshun 金德順 (EM 1), the wife's father, the Emperor of Heaven, asks the hero to go to the kingdom of mice and get back a hundred pieces of human skin and three pecks of testes (such obscenity is hardly found in Han versions).

Often, the father-in-law imposes a difficult task with the intention to kill the hero indirectly. In this case the heavenly mice are as big as cats and love devouring mortals. But it turns out that the king of the mice used to be nicely treated by the hero, and thus it helps the hero gratefully. In the Xibe version, the mother-in-law asks the hero to get a precious stone guarded by three poisonous serpents, a peony guarded by evil bees and a drum guarded by ferocious monkeys. In two Miao versions, the task is to steal a heavenly drum (EM 3, EM 4). Sometimes the father-in-law orders the hero to accompany him at work and tries to kill the hero, for example, by kicking him off a cliff, setting a fire, or leaving him on top of a tall tree. In a Miao version (EM 4), the hero is poisoned after he has successfully completed the difficult tasks. Compared with non-Han versions, the Modern Han Tradition seems to be much more conservative because it ends typically with the couple's submission to the final settlement of annual reunion. In contrast, the hero's son in a Miao version (EM 4) blinds his grandfather, whereas in another Miao version (EM 3) the magic drum kills both the hero's father-in-law and his grandfather-in-law. In Jin Deshun's version the father-in-law is simply subdued, allowing the couple to leave. In all these three cases, happy reunion is envisioned, replacing the classical Han motif of annual meeting. If the hero's struggle against his wife's kindred is a test of masculinity, it would seem that Cowherd in Han versions utterly

fails to prove his manhood. Often he chases after Weaving Maid with the magic help offered by the ox. He may start off in a fit of anger, but he shows no outstanding courage, patience nor wit. Very soon he is intercepted and his defiance dies out. Silently, he surrenders to the heavenly authority.

<http://www.ndhu.edu.tw/~lkchan/Notes/cowherd2.htm>

#### IV. Capture, Departure and the Heavenly Kindred ?

The “kernels” of the plot in the Modern Han Tradition are the marriage by capture, the wife’s departure (willing or forced), the husband’s pursuit, and the final settlement by the wife’s heavenly kindred.[36] If we put Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales in the wider context of folktales about an orphan marrying a fairy, we will see that there are actually many other ways by which the hero can obtain a supernatural wife. She may come voluntarily, either sent by a god or at her own free will. She may fall ‘in love with him at first sight or on hearing his virtuous deeds. She may have pity on him. She may be grateful for his help. She may approach him directly or first appear as a mysterious housekeeper. Why, then, is the motif of marriage by theft of magic garment so popular in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales? One obvious reason is that this motif arouses male fantasy and makes the tale more “spicy” Hartland claims that the swan maiden story is “one of the most beautiful... stories ever evolved from the mind of man” (255); feminists will certainly disagree. The swan maiden episode almost always involves voyeurism, for the hero usually hides himself and watches the maidens remove their clothes and bathe in the water. Stealing the clothes of the one who is usually the youngest and most beautiful of them all adds another erotic element. Capturing her at her most vulnerable moment, left alone, naked and helpless, concerns also the fantasy of male power. The celestial maiden may shyly comply or angrily defend herself, but the outcome is always the same. She is “conquered” by the hero and obliged to become his bride. The hierarchy of the divine over the mortal is subverted. More precisely, a goddess or fairy is subdued and captured by a lowly mortal man with the help of a god. But capturing a divine woman, even with the help of a masculine divine power, renders the story morally suspect. Indeed, this episode is not always given emphasis. It may be softened, rationalized, if not mentioned in brief. Confucianism possibly plays a role ‘in suppressing fuller treatment of the episode, yet it must be remembered that in the classical literary genre known as the “zhiguai” 志怪 (records of anomalies), far more extravagant fantasies of romancing with supernatural beauties abound. In the earlier Han versions collected during the Republican years, the bathing scene, details of the hero’s advances and the maiden’s reaction are all omitted. But versions from ethnic minorities and more recent Han versions are less laconic in depicting the couple’s first encounter. From the Miao in Guizhou, where the youths enjoy much greater freedom of courtship than traditional Han youths, the rhetoric of love seems to be more appropriate than the use of force. Hence the hero in EM 4 woos the maiden with a moving love song:

Isn’t love the most precious gift in heaven and on earth?

Love brings people new life and happiness.

Dear maiden, I fell because of my love for you.

Having got up, I fell down again.

Will you be so cruel as to deny the lover’s deepest sincerity?

So long as we love each other,

Who cares about the thousand miles which separate heaven and earth?

(23-24; my translation)

Despite the eloquent lover’s discourse, one must note, voyeurism and the theft of clothes are still there. Some recent Han versions, on the other hand, try to soften Cowherd’s role as a captor by portraying him as kind-hearted and shy. A Hebei version (HC 20) offers the following picture:

Hearing the seventh heavenly maiden’s crying, Cowherd’s heart was touched. He wanted to return her clothes, but feared that, being naked, she would be embarrassed by his unexpected appearance. So he coughed lightly. Noticing that someone coughed, the maiden jumped into the water to cover her body, like a frightened frog. Sobbing, she begged: “Nice man, please return my clothes. Without it I cannot leave the water and go home.....

At this moment Cowherd walked slowly from behind the b' tree, her clothes in his 19 hands, saying timidly: "Miss, its all my fault. I'm so sorry! Here's your clothes. I'll leave it on this rock. When I've left, you may come out and put it on and return home." As the seventh maiden was about to come out, the old ox approached at the right pace. It stood on the green rock on which the clothes was placed, and said: "Seventh heavenly maiden, Cowherd is assiduous and kind-hearted. It's hard to find such a man whether on earth or in heaven. I know that you long for the human world, and that you two are predestined to be a couple. Let me be your match-maker under the moon?." Having heard that, she consented. (31; my translation)

The ox here acts as a mediator as well as a higher power. Pleading for Cowherd, it diverts our attention from Cowherd's own desire for capturing the bride; appealing to predestination, it helps obscure the presence of male power. In an English translation (HC 21) probably rewritten to adapt to the Western taste, Cowherd patiently explains to Weaving Maid that he merely follows the animal helper's strange instructions innocently "But I could not bear to watch you trembling in the cold," he adds (Chin et al 119). How Weaving Maid feels and comes to her decision is clearly depicted:

Weaving Maid was secretly pleased when Cowherd proposed marriage. This handsome, mild-mannered young man had aroused her tender feelings. The idea of remaining on earth as his wife appealed to her. Yet she had some lingering misgivings. Would her fairy grandmother agree to such a match. Familiar only with the ways of heaven, adapting to life on earth might be difficult for her. But Weaving Maid had fallen in love with Cowherd, and she made her decision. She lowered her eyes and her words were soft and sweet.

"Yes, I will be your wife," she said. (119)

Cowherd responds with an appropriate courtly love rhetoric: "I will care for you always. To make you happy will be my only desire" (119). In HC 18 and HC 19, Weaving Maid is not forced or persuaded into marriage right away. Instead, as she is unable to return to heaven, Cowherd invites her home as if out of mere courtesy. Yet from a feminist perspective, "sentiment is but a veneer to conceal the devices by which men win power over their women" (Leavy 211). An orphan marrying a fairy may be mere fantasy, but forcing a woman into marriage without her own consent and without the consent of her kindred used to be a social reality. Among some Chinese ethnic minorities, ceremonial capture is still a part of the rites of marriage.[37] One symbolic significance of marriage by capture is female subservience.[38] The exhibition, not necessarily violent use, of a man's power over his bride at their very first encounter implies female vulnerability, though it does not always guarantee wifely submission after marriage. No overt violence is done in all versions of our study, but humiliation and irresponsible deflowering are always worse potential threats. From a male perspective, the celestial maiden is obliged, not unlike animal maidens spared by hunters in other folktales, to be thankful to Cowherd's sincere marriage proposal. To shift the focus from male power to women's desire, some Cowherd folktales, notably those from non-Han sources, stress not just Cowherd's industry and reliability but also his physical attraction and other talents. The Xibe version, for instance, depicts him as "having a well-proportioned body, dignified manners and amiability" (123). Some versions, on the other hand, stress the maiden's heavenly existence as some sort of unhappy confinement and her longing for the mundane world, and may even allude to her hidden sexuality. In a Sichuan version (HC 13), Weaving Maid finds Cowherd "strongly built" and considers marrying him an escape from "Miserable lonely life in the heavenly palace" (10). It is not surprising that a Chinese critic puts forth the following interpretation:

The fairy clothes is ... a device which suppresses the fairies' sexuality. Mortal men work magic on them by touching their undergarment, according to Fraser's principle of contagious magic. The sexually uninitiated fairies are then awakened, and they become filled with desire like Cowherd... (Wan Jianzhong 105)

In a broader context of the swan maiden story, two other Chinese critics relate the theft of clothes to the rite of passage in female initiation, claiming that the swan maiden typically "falls in love at first sight" with the man who steals her clothes. "Even though she does not have much choice, she happily complies with his wishes" (Wang Xiaobing and Zhang Mingyuan 18). As the swan maiden's surrender is naturalized as willing acceptance 'in terms of sexual initiation, the issues of male violence and gender politics are thus evaded. In Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales, how the captured bride feels is seldom represented. In five out of the six Han versions collected between the 1920s and 1954, Weaving Maid does ask for her magic garment and departs once she gets it back. To see her reluctant, or at most ambivalent, submission as happy complicity reminds us how easily male fantasy may creep into critical discourse.

A few versions of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales invite an alternative reading. Instead of see' them as sentimental love story, we may follow Barbara Leavy's approach to world swan maiden stories and read 'in terms of "a fierce marital struggle" and of the wife's running away from "a tedious domestic existence"(11,33). The Zhejlang version (HC3) is the most typical case, where the ox warns that Weaving Maid will escape after its

death. Escape she does, and Cowherd follows her with the help of the magic boots made of cowhide. To obstruct him, Weaving Maid herself uses a magic hairpin to create the celestial river separating them. Across the river, Cowherd throws a yoke at her and she returns with her shuttles. Eventually, the Emperor of Heaven has to settle their dispute, commanding them to see each other only periodically. A Jiangsu version (HC 2) is similar, in which Weaving Maid always asks for her magic garment but Cowherd never tells her the truth until one day she “moves him with sweet words” (50). Getting back her garment, she flees at once. The end is more or less the same. A more recent Jiangsu version (HC 12) contains an even more exciting scene of struggle. When Cowherd is getting close, Weaving Maid draws her magic hairpin nine times to create nine rivers. Cowherd quickly fills them up one by one with magic soil. Desperately, Weaving Maid creates nine more rivers. Cowherd is to fill them up with nine magic cow ribs. But ‘in a hurry he puts two ribs into the first river, thus leaving the last river unfilled. Again, they fight across the river: Cowherd throws an ox ring at Weaving Maid, and she throws back a shuttle. In a Shandong version (HC 5), the runaway Weaving Maid does not possess magic power herself As Cowherd is reaching her, she cries for help and it is her mother, the Queen Mother of Western Heaven, who creates the celestial river to block Cowherd’s way Sometimes Cowherd is enraged by Weaving Maid’s escape. In HC 5, he shouts: “Ungrateful thing! Where are you going? Just run away after giving birth to two children?” (64) In HC 12, he abuses her: “What a heartless woman! You may pay no heed to my blind love for you, but how could you abandon this pair of kids?” (19) However angry Cowherd may get, he always submits to the final arrangement of annual meeting and has to take care of the children. What Cowherd appeals to is Weaving Maid’s domestic duties. Running away makes Weaving Maid a bad wife and a betrayer. Depicting this particular form of la femme fatale, these tales may in fact be misogynist rather than affirming women’s rights against domestic confinement. HC 12, entitled “Zhinu bianxin” 織女變心 [Weaving Maid ceases to be faithful], renders her into “the most notorious gluttonous and lazy woman in the village” (18), who stops weaving and does not even tend her own children.

Other versions, however, are more ambivalent and open to feminist rereading. HC 15, a Hebei version entitled “Niulang zhinu jie yuanchou” 牛郎織女結冤仇 [The feud between Cowherd and Weaving Maid], is the only version in our corpus which depicts a discontented husband. In this story Cowherd moves into Weaving Maid’s maternal home in heaven. Unaccustomed to celestial life, he becomes irritable and frequently quarrels with her. On the seventh day of the seventh month they have a fight. The Queen Mother intervenes, separating them and allowing them to meet only once a year. In traditional Han society, patrilocality is the norm and those who live with the wife’s family are despised. Hong Shuling 洪淑苓 suggests that this story reflects the plight of such husbands. In this connection we may cite HC 5 for comparison. Toward the end of that Shandong version, the Queen Mother asks Weaving Maid whether she would like to spend more days living in her maternal home or in her husband’s home. Weaving Maid prefers to stay with her mother more and therefore the annual reunion with her husband is settled. Familiar with Morganian evolutionism, Chinese critics have paid attention to the issue of matrilocality versus patrilocality in swan maiden stories. Liu Shouhua, for example, suggests:

The [swan maiden] leaves once she finds her feathery robe implies women’s nostalgic longing for matriarchal family life... Until recently, some Southwestern ethnic minorities still retain the ancient practice of matrilocality after marriage. (389)

But to see matrilocality, in an antiquarian perspective, as a remnant of the past, refraction of the savage imagination,” is not quite the same as to see it, in a feminist perspective, as subversive of patriarchy. The disruption of the conjugal family with Weaving Maid’s departure also brings in further questions of labor and division of labor in the household. And labor and the women’s question, as Engels nightly sees, are closely related. In the best-known early Cowherd and Weaving Maid myth, quoted in the first page of this paper, the couple is forcibly separated because Weaving Maid abandons her work for heaven after marriage. A most Romantic picture is painted ‘in the Vietnamese folktale version (NC 2), where the “heavenly landscape offered its dreamlike Promenades endlessly to young lovers,” and the young couple, “in the midst of their shared delights and new-found happiness... completely neglected their former tasks”(41). In other words, the conflict here is between indulgent love ‘and productive work, and the role of the Emperor Of Heaven is not so much that of a father but that of the absolute authority who upholds a stringent work ethic. A Thai version, on the other hand, reminds us that “as the wife of a lowly cowherd, [Weaving Maid’s] duties were many”: “Each day, she must care for the house, the farm, the cows, and her new husband” (MacDonald 106). But why should a daughter who has married out still work for the father? This question cannot be adequately answered in terms of usual Chinese Patriarchal Practice, for once a woman is married, her parents will not normally require her to keep on contributing to her original family in traditional Han society, as Hsiao-Tung Fel (Fei Xiaotong) 費孝通 explains: “When [a married woman] goes back after marriage, she is a guest” (65). Besides, she “loses her membership of her father’s Tsu [zu 族, or clan] when she is married in the sense that she will not join the

offerings of sacrifice to ancestors on the father's side and will not be offered sacrifices by them after her death" (86).

Another early version provides a clue for a better explanation: Cowherd has borrowed money from the Emperor of Heaven in order to pay Weaving Maid's bride worth; unable to repay his debt, he is banished.[39] In that case, however, it is unlikely that the Emperor is Cowherd's father-law. A Chinese critic suggests in that the Emperor of Heaven in Cowherd and Weaving Maid stories is actually a feudal lord while the couple are poor peasants. Their forced separation might well be due to their inability to pay rents or debts, and their struggle makes them "hero and heroine fighting for the freedom of marriage" (Luo yonglun 113). But the puzzling fact is that in many Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales, the conjugal family is disrupted because the wife's own parent, not an outside oppressor, forces her to leave her husband and to return home. Could her kindred's intervention somehow represents her own hidden desire for returning to the maternal home? Does it also imply her dissatisfaction with mundane family life as a housewife? In most folktale versions collected after the 1950s, Weaving Maid's discontent with domestic duties is seldom mentioned. An exceptional Hong Kong version (HC 16) ends with this ironic tail:

Cowherd accumulates all the bowls and chopsticks after every meal and brings them to Weaving Maid for washing on the seventh of July every year. Each time, when Weaving Maid finishes up washing it is almost daybreak [and they have to separate]. (55; my translation)

A Taiwanese version reads:

For a whole year [Cowherd] does not wash the dishes in the sink, leaving them for [Weaving Maid] to wash when she comes on her annual visit. A rainfall on this night means that [she] is crying at the sight of all the dishes, for she must spend the, [whole] night cleaning them. (MacDonald 386)

Another Taiwanese version (HC 18) develops this theme of domestic drudgery and unfair division of labor even further. Cowherd becomes very lazy after marriage because Weaving Maid is such an able wife. Disappointed and homesick, and considering that the children are no longer babies, she resolves to return home, leaving her husband and children behind. Her father, the Emperor of Heaven, allows the couple to meet annually on condition that Cowherd washes all the bowls and dishes he used in the past year. In order to see his wife, he is obliged to clean up the "full house of dirty bowls and dishes" (239), a most "unmanly" job for men in a patriarchal household and a sharp contrast with his hot pursuit after Weaving Maid up to heaven.

Female bonding cherished by feminist critics, whether 'in the form of mother-daughter relationship or of sisterhood, is underdeveloped in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales. Only a few versions (notably HC I and EM 4) mention that Weaving Maid misses her mother or her sisters. In those versions involving the swan maiden episode, her sisters simply leave her behind to face her captor alone. Only HC 5 suggests that returning to the mother is an alternative to domestic confinement as a housewife. In most Han versions Weaving Maid's mother or grandmother, the Queen Mother of Western Heaven, is as tyrannical as the Emperor of Heaven. When both parents are present, though, the mother is often kinder than the father. Still, Weaving Maid's original home is no paradise, for there she often has to work as hard as, if not harder than, in her conjugal family. Nor is the notion of "matrilocality" makes much sense, for her original family is often ruled by an absolute power much stronger than her husband, that is, the Emperor of Heaven. Whether she lives in heaven with her kindred or on earth with her lowly husband, she is confined to a patriarchal household. Two interesting Miao versions (EM 3, EM 4) shed light on the relation of the division of labor between husband and wife and the disruption of the patriarchal conjugal family. In EM 3, the couple "love each other very much and share all the work" (271). One day, the wife asks the husband to stay at home to take care of the children so that she can go out to pick vegetables for the pigs. When the younger child cries, the husband tries different ways to comfort him but fails. Eventually, he takes out his wife's magic garment, and the child is consoled. The next day the same thing happens. In the third day, the husband complains that he gets impatient tending children and goes out to work. The wife laughs: "You've only taken care of the kids for two days and become so impatient. I've been doing this year after year and I never complain" (272). After his departure, the wife asks the older child if his brother cried in the previous day, and eventually finds out where her garment is hidden. In EM 4, one day Weaving Maid exchanges her role with Cowherd because she wants to relieve him of his hard work in the field. But "how can a father take care of a young child?" (25) The crying child can only be comforted by his mother's feathery fan. After a few days, when Cowherd goes out as usual, the child points to the place where Weaving Maid's fan is hidden. In both cases, having found the magic garment or fan the wife leaves. While one can argue that the child's desire for the magical object may represent the mother's repressed desire for return home, one can also contend that both stories imply that reversal of the "natural" gender division of labor leads to a familial crisis. The division of labor by sex, Alice Schlegel believes, "is fundamental to the process by which sexual stratification arises" (25).

Historically, what kind of work a husband and a wife should do have to do with adaptation to the natural environment and to the mode of production. Even in primitive foraging societies with more flexible division of labor, there are still considerations of energy, mobility, and the protection of women from unnecessary danger. Women are generally assigned to home-based activities, particularly taking care of children and other caretaker activities such as “preparation of family meals and caring for sick, disabled, or aged individuals within the household” (Bonvillain 4), while men engage in more physically demanding, more dangerous activities, including activities further away from home. Gender division of labor within the household is ‘indeed necessary. Problems arise only when such a division become inflexible, when men refuse to help with domestic labor, and when domestic labor, along with women actively participating in it, is devaluated, making man the master in the home. Many Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales recognize the necessity of work ‘in the small conjugal family: Cowherd must work in the field and Weaving Maid must attend to her loom and their children, despite her supernatural origin. Yet very few versions question their division of labor and offers us an alternative vision. What is often denied in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales may be found ‘in social history. During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, women in the Pearl Delta of Guangdong did enjoy considerable freedom. Due to job opportunities offered by the blooming silk trade and due to the fact that some men, originally heads of families, had already emigrated to foreign countries, the new “Weaving Maids” asserted their independence by refusing to get married or by renouncing earlier marriage settlements. Living in all-women households called “gupowu” 姑婆屋 they demonstrated solidarity of females in reconstructing the familial structure.[40]

In those Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales ending with the son-in-law tasks, we face again with the problem of interpreting what social forces the wife’s heavenly kindred represent. The “villain” is almost always the hero’s father-in-law and he does not only want to test the hero but to kill him. Lu Yilu 鹿憶鹿 suggests that these stories are related to “ancient mythology and ancient rituals” (8). For Zhang Shudong 張樹棟 and Li Xiuling 李秀領, on the other hand, they reflect “the conflict between marriage according to one’s own choice and arranged marriage [by parents], and the father’s demand for compensation for losing the daughter” (45). In actual social practice, such compensation may not even be tangible or material, as we see in lengthy negotiation of marriage settlement in traditional Han peasant society:

It is far from correct to regard the bargaining as a kind of economic transaction. It is not a compensation to the girl’s parents. All the gifts, except that offered to the girl’s relatives, will be returned to the boy’s Chia [family] as the dowry, to which the girl’s parents will add nearly as much as the marriage gift... The keen bargaining, hotly carried on... is a psychological expression of the conflict between mother-love and patrilineal descent. As the people put it, “We cannot let them have our girls without making a fuss.” (Fei 43)

We may in fact replace “mother-love” ‘in Fel Xiaotong’s passage with “father’s right.” In a sense, the father and the (prospective) husband are rivals over the ownership of the woman. Most Han versions of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales do not contain the son-in-law tasks. In HC 6 and some variants from the ethnic minorities, the hero usually succeeds ‘in performing the difficult tasks imposed by the father-in-law. Still, the father-in-law will try to kill him, or at least to separate him from his wife. The aim of the test, therefore, is not just a matter of judging whether the hero deserves the daughter by proving his power or manhood.[41] In the most extreme case (EM 3), the hero has to kill his wife’s father and grandfather ‘in order to regain his wife. Often, whether in the Modern Han tradition or in versions containing the son-in-law tasks, the wife’s parents object to their marriage not only because it has happened without parental consent but because the heavenly kindred find the woman’s marrying down shameful. The hero’s lowly social status is sometimes very effectively symbolized by his nasty earthly smell. In EM 4, the Emperor of Heaven complains to his wife: “Our Weaving Maid has certainly gone mad. What husband has she found? He knows only how to work the whole day and he stinks. We’ve got to think of a way to kick him out!” (27) Social discrimination is unmistakable because their marriage is a mesalliance. But courtship between a lowly peasant and a woman of a higher-class family, even if not inconceivable in the ethnic minorities, is certainly impossible in traditional Han society, where “respectable” women were carefully guarded, as reflected in the saying that ladies should remain within three steps from the door of their boudoir, or, “sanbu buchu guimen” 三 步 不 出 閨 門.

This brings us back to the problem of interpreting Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales in terms of the struggle for the freedom of marriage against the age-old feudal practice of parental arrangement. Weaving Maid’s forced departure and son-in-law tasks for Cowherd, we must note, come after their marriage as a fait accompli, when the couple could have developed some kind of emotional bonding due to their married life and having children. The prevalent swan maiden episode akin to the barbarian practice of marriage by capture, in fact, deprives the heroine of her own “freedom of marriage.” As a swan maiden, Weaving Maid may resolve to desert her husband, as in HC 2. She may also be more ambivalent, departing but at the same time leaving

instructions so that her husband knows how to find her, as in the Japanese version. But in most versions, the disruptive force comes from Weaving Maid's kindred. She is often forced to return to her original home. Related to the theme of unequal marriage is the folktale type "Magic Ring" (AT 560). In some Russian versions, the wife, often a princess, is a betrayer.[42] She wants to leave the lowly hero because she is unhappy about their mesalliance. She colludes with her aristocratic lover and may even try to murder her husband. All these tales suggest that the fantasy of marrying up may well be ridden with anxiety. But unlike the Magic Ring, Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales are not really about upward social mobility, which is, as Eberhard shows us, rather inaccessible to farmers in traditional China.[43] In fact, Cowherd's story is remarkable in its insistence that even after marriage with a supernatural being, the small family must be sustained not by magic but by what is best captured in the Chinese expression "nangeng nuzhi" 男耕女織, or the man plows and the woman weaves. In Han literati fantasies, an affair or marriage with a fairy may bring enviable sexual gratification and even immortality. In comparison, what Cowherd gets from his supernatural wife is incredibly modest. Only a few versions depict her supernatural power, where the most Cowherd gains from her magic is a big house and many utensils.

When it comes to the household as a unit of production and reproduction, Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales are remarkably realistic. Whether Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales are best understood as expressing a desire for an ideal peasant family, as the Marxists have it, will be discussed in the next section.

## V. Conclusion: Folktales and the Politics of Reading

From May 1956 to the early 1957, Chinese intellectuals enjoyed a period of freedom of expression after Chairman Mao Zedong 毛澤東 declared: "Let hundred flowers blossom; let hundred schools contend!" During this period, in the field of folktale studies there was a noticeable debate between Liu Shouhua and Li Yuenan 李岳南 on the interpretation and rewriting of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales. It began with an article in *Minjian wenxue* 民間文學 [Folk literature] by Liu which questions the value of a rewritten version of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktale in a literature textbook for junior high school students. Liu contends that the use of literary skills in the rewrite, especially the meticulous portrayal of thoughts and feelings 'in the characters and the use of flashback, is incompatible with the authentic style of folktales. Li defends by appealing to the priority of political correctness in the theme, emphasizing that the chief aim of the story must be "extolling [Cowherd and Weaving Maid's] anti-feudal, rebellious spirit in their struggle for the freedom of marriage" (26). To "reflect the lives and ideals of the people" by "clear, vivid and typical" depiction, for Li, is far more important than the matter of style (27). Other late comers to the debate either take side with Liu or with Li, but they all agree that the main theme of the Cowherd and Weaving Maid story is some sort of "anti-feudalism." If we see this debate in the wider context of Chinese folklorist discourse on the nature and political function of folk literature 'in the late 1950s, we will detect a deep anxiety underneath. Despite the "Romantic" conviction of the supreme value of folk literature, the discussants also seem to be keenly aware that there is something unruly about it. Symptomatically, Wu Ruishu's slogan "zhongshi de jilu, shenzhong de zhengli" 忠實地紀，慎重地整理 [be faithful in recording and careful when editing] precisely captures the hidden contradiction. As "treasure of the masses" folk literature must be essentially good, hence collectors should be faithful in recording it. In the dominant Maoist view, folk literature "vividly reflects the essence of class relations in the feudal age," that is, the conflict between peasants and landlords, and "expresses directly the thoughts, emotions and desire of the oppressed" (Zhu 54). But as far as folktale collection is concerned, actual field work may bring us different "authentic" variants, which are often at odds with the narrowly defined notion of "political correctness," hence the editor or rewriter is burdened with the task of selection and interpretation. He or she must be very careful to "restore," as it were, "the real face of the tale."

The conflict between authenticity and political correctness was further exacerbated 'in the wake of the anti-rightist campaign ushered in the 1957, with increasing political control. Folk literature, too, must be policed. An article by Zhu Zeji 朱澤吉 in the July issue of *Minjian wenxue* tries hard to narrow down the scope of folk literature by distinguishing it from the decadent or vulgar portion of urban oral literature created by "the oppressive class and its parasites" (55). European and American scholars, Zhu claims, exaggerate the formal features of folk literature in order to admit "various kinds of reactionary forgeries," with the purpose of "obscuring or distort' the real content and the social and historical essence of folk creation, and denying the historical role of the masses" (53). But what we have seen with respect to Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales is that what the "essence" of a folktale is can be much more elusive than the Marxist critics are willing to admit. We do not even need the poststructuralist notion of indeterminacy to appreciate the ambivalence, ambiguity, and multivalence of the Cowherd and Weaving Maid story as a folktale type. Even within the general interpretive grid of "anti-feudalism," very different conclusions can be drawn, as we shall see.

Luo Yonglun 羅永麟 claims that Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales foreground rural people's wish for an ideal small family in a peasant economy (110-11). Although this interpretation does not apply to some earlier versions (including HC 1 to HC 5), more recent versions, including those from non-Han sources, do often describe the couple's family as a happy, self-reliant one based on the division of labor of "the man plows while the woman weaves." The rewritten version in the literature textbook mentioned above offers the following picture:

From then on Cowherd worked in the field, while Weaving Maid spun at home. Sometimes, Weaving Maid helped Cowherd with his work in the field. Both worked hard and were frugal... They lived very happily together. (Quoted in Wu 27; my translation)

Similarly, a recent English translation (HC 21) reads:

[Cowherd] and Weaving Maid loved each other very much, and they set up a household together, [Cowherd] farming the fields with his faithful buffalo, and Weaving Maid weaving in their little thatched cottage. Soon ... Weaving Maid gave birth to a son, and then to a daughter. (80)

Li Yuenan reports that 'in his experience folk narrators often vividly describe how the couple give birth to a pair of children and how happy their family life is. "Only then," Li remarks, "will audiences be moved" and identify with the couple (26). To emphasize the desirability of Weaving Maid's conjugal life and to underplay the swan maiden motif, often her life in heaven is described as a laborious one, or at least as some sort of wretched confinement. In comparison, her mundane life is idyllic, as explained by the textbook version:

Although her heavenly abode is majestic, there was no freedom. She didn't like it. She preferred human life. She loved working with her husband. She loved playing with her son and daughter. She loved [to watch] water vivaciously passing the brook in front of their door. She loved to hear the morning breeze and evening breeze caressing the woods. (Quoted in Wu 27; my translation)

This rosy picture contrasts sharply with what the Thai version depicts: "as the wife of a lowly cowherd, [Weaving Maid's] duties were many" (106), including farm work and household duties. In the previous section we have already raised the question of gender division of labor in a patriarchal family. Let us now turn to the problem of interpreting the simplified social relations in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales. The happy nuclear family in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales is a socioeconomic fantasy of idealized agrarian society, where taxes, labor services, landlords and usury are non-existent, and economic crises and exploitation unknown. There is also no depiction of problems arisen out of the imperialist economy, or out of collectivism under the communist rule. The family is not exactly self-sufficient for it is sometimes said that Weaving Maid sells her cloth in a market in order to contribute to the family income. Other than that, there is almost no interaction at all between the family and the people outside the family. The "privatization" of Weaving Maid's original mythic and "communal" role as the goddess of women's handicrafts is, indeed, hardly "progressive" in a Marxist perspective. An exceptional version is found in Shandong (HC 9), where the role of Weaving Maid is not a mere dutiful wife of Cowherd, for she is also the benefactor of the entire rural society. She teaches young women how to weave; in return, they trust her and treat her as a confidant. Besides, she is a good physician, having restored the sight and hearing of many elders. Contrasted with this version, most Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales seem to be unmistakably individualistic in vision.

Social relations in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales are further simplified within the family. When people talk about traditional Chinese society, they often think of big families like the Jia's 賈 in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, where three generations, and, within the same generation, different "fang" 房 or branches, live together in a large house, served by numerous servants and slaves. This view, nevertheless, is only an ideal, realized only for some prosperous feudal landlords or scholar-officials. According to statistics, the number of persons in the Chinese family from the Han dynasty all the way down to the founding of the People's Republic fluctuates around the figure five.[44] Due to high mortality rate, infant death and economic difficulties, lower-class family tends to be small. In the beginning of over half of Cowherd folktales in our study, the protagonist lives with his elder brother who has got married. If they remain together, after Cowherd's marriage they will make an extended family consisting of two nuclear families. But in the middle of almost all Cowherd folktales, before his marriage, Cowherd is or has become independent. After marriage, Weaving Maid typically gives birth to a son and a daughter. This nuclear family of four members is often described as a happy, harmonious one. Conflicts found in bigger families, especially the two notorious form of female rivalry, between mother and wife and between wife and concubine(s), are evaded.[45] In some other folktales about the marriage with a supernatural wife, we must note, the heroine causes disharmony and conflicts in the family by interacting with

other members of the family. In a Li tale called “Star Maiden,” the hero’s elder brother murders him in order to possess his beautiful celestial wife. In “Pine Tree Maiden,” a tale from the Daganer 達幹爾, the heroine kills the hero’s maternal uncle and is thus expelled by her mother-in-law.[46]

Whether Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales are “anti-feudal” in spirit in its simplification of social relations is further complicated by the prevalent mistreatment episode (Segments 2 to 4 in my plot definition). In its divergence from Confucian didacticism in the Dong Yong legend which propagates excessive filial piety in order to discipline subjects of the empire, Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales react against feudal morals. Though Cowherd is still recognized as a decent man, often a diligent and honest peasant not unlike Dong Yong, the theme of heavenly reward for filial piety is erased or obscured, if not problematized. In tales containing the captured bride motif, the narrative logic is no longer a clear case of virtue rewarded, as exemplified by the Dong Yong legend, where the Emperor of Heaven rewards the hero’s filial piety by sending Weaving Maid to become his wife and to help him clear his debt. Unlike Dong Yong, Cowherd cannot demonstrate his filial piety because his parents almost never appear in his story. But anyone familiar with traditional Chinese exemplary tales knows that there are still other ways for orphans to show their filial piety. Ding Lan 丁蘭, one of the famous twenty four filial children, treats wooden figures of his parents with great respect and love as if they were alive. He even abandons his wife, who offended the wooden figures.[47] As Cowherd’s parents are dead, according to Confucianism, his only elder brother, now the head of the family, should be respected much like his father. But the brother and his wife mistreat Cowherd, and their relation with him terminates after the unequal division of family property, and then they are literally “exiled” from the plot. Although Cowherd used to obey them and tolerate their mistreatment, if he were an exemplary filial son or a ideal “brotherly” brother he could have done more. Many traditional Chinese didactic tales tell of filial sons’ self-sacrifice. For example, Wang Xiang 王祥 lies naked on the ice in order to catch fish to satisfy the whim of his malicious step-mother. The mistreatment episode in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales, by contrast, merely highlights Cowherd’s misery, not his blind obedience and self-sacrifice. In those cases involving how he plays tricks in order to idle and enjoy a good meal, there is even a touch of rebellion. In this respect, Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales seem to be rather skeptic about harmonious family relations idealized in Confucianism. But it will be foolish to see any questioning of or deviance from certain beliefs or ideals cherished in the past as necessarily “progressive.” For example, one can hardly follow Zhu Zeji to claim that pornography in urban folk literature does play a positive role in subverting “feudal morality by strong protest and destruction” (57). In a similar way, it will be rather perverse to reason that the “spicy” swan maiden episode in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales is only an effective manifestation of Cowherd and Weaving Maid’s “anti-feudal” “courageous love” (Luo 118), or a reflection of “people’s desire for wonderful love” (Man Jianzhong 107).

Another problem Chinese folklorists have not yet tackled is the context of performance. With the translation of Ting Nai-Tung’s Aarne-Thompson type index of Chinese folktales and efforts by such erudite scholars as Liu Shouhua, morphological and historico-geographical kinds of folktale studies are already well established in China. But the Chinese practice of folktales recording is still limited to the story per se, paying no attention to the particular circumstances of the story’s production. What I have in mind is not the kind of “performance-based” study of folklore and “ethnography of speak” “influenced by Dell Hymes, but the more political-oriented kind of study as exemplified by Margaret A. Mills’ Rhetoric and Politics in Afghan Traditional Storytelling.[48] Mills has shown us how traditional oral narrators “can fashion complex, oblique, and implicit commentaries about actors and actions in the social world around them out of narratives drawn from a large body of communally familiar material” (341). Interacting with the audiences, they can express veiled social protest with seemingly innocuous story telling. Besides, there could be “a mismatch of interpretations” with respect to different parties involved. In this light, the ideal peasant family recounted in Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales can indeed be used, potentially, as a critique of feudal social relations, Western imperialism, industrialization, collectivism of rural production, or as an expression of nostalgia for something indigenous and “folksy,” as a flight from the modernized and Westernized urban way of life. As far as folk narratives are concerned, one can no longer talk of some unchangeable “essence,” and least to yoke it under any restrictive conception of “political correctness.” Tradition, after all, is the active fashioning of the past in terms of contemporary and future concerns, open to rivaling interpretations, as our study of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales has demonstrated.

<http://www.ndhu.edu.tw/~lkchan/Notes/cowherd3.htm>

## NOTES

[1] For etymological information of “qianniu,” see Hong Shuling 23-24. For mythological significance of the two deities, see Wang Xiaolian, particularly 194 and 201, and Yao Baoxuan 19-20.

[2] For imprint information of some Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales from these countries, see the appendix. “Qixi”??, the seventh day of the seventh moon, the very day of the heavenly couple’s reunion, is a festival in traditional China, Korea and Japan. See MacDonald 385-88.

[3] For imprint information see the appendix.

[4] The most famous examples are “Tiaotiao qianniuxing” ????? [Far far away the Qianniu star] of the “nineteen ancient poems” of the Han Dynasty, and Qin Guan’s ?? (1049-1100) lyric entitled “Queqiao xian” ??? [Immortals on the bridge of magpies.]

[5] Although the Dong Yong legend probably emerged during the Han dynasty based on a historical figure who lived in present-day Shangdong ?? province, the first reliable record (tale b) is found in Shoushen ji by Gan Bao’s ?? of the Jin ? Dynasty (265-420 A.D.)

[6] For the kinship between the Dong Yong legend and Cowherd and Weaving Maid stories, see Hong Shuling 113 - 22.

[7] For the definition of the “swan maiden” motif, see Section 3 of the this paper.

[8] For imprint information of the entire corpus of Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktales covered by the present study, see the appendix, where the codes “HC” stands for “Han Chinese,” “EM” for “ethnic minorities in China,” and “NC” for “neighboring countries.”

[9] For details of the debate, see Section 5 of the this paper.

[10] See Luo Yonglun 110-12.

[11] Zhong Jingwen’s pioneering study is first published in 1932.

[12] According to Zhong Jingwen, between 1984 and 1990, some 1, 830, 000 folktale versions have been recorded in China . Cited in Chen Jianxian 36.

[13] See Chen Jianxian 36.

[14] See Liu Shouhua 391-94.

[15] The plight of the peasants is most dramatically treated in Mao Dun’s ?? (1896-1981) famous short story “Chuncan” ?? [Spring silkworm] written in 1932.

[16] See Hong Shuling 150-71.

[17] Excluded are tales about two lovers who cannot get married because of parental objection, and who later pine away and turn into the stars Qianniu and Zhinu after death, Akin to traditional fiction of sentimental love, these stories also differ structurally from the typical form of our corpus.

[18] Some are also put under AT 511 A “The Little Red Ox.”

[19] Reflecting on the nature of games, Wittgenstein remarks that ... “ ‘games’ form a family.” “Family resemblances” do not necessarily require the presence of some common factors, for a “family” may be related by “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing” (49). Similarly, one may argue that a distinct folktale type may consist of variants which do not even have to share the same basic plot. The notion of “family resemblances” problematizes the structuralist effort to define a type by formulating a clear narrative logic, as proposed by Alan Dundes (see his article “From Etic to Emic Units in the Structural Study of Folktales”).

[20] Usually Weaving Maid is identified as the youngest of seven or nine celestial maidens.

[21] See Ting Nai-Tung, The Cinderella Cycle in China and Indo-China.

[22] The Li story is found in Guan Han and Wei Xuan 346-5 1. The Wa story is found in Shang Zhonghao 72-78.

[23] See the story of Guo Han ?? in Li Fang 420-21.

[24] There are variations. For instance, the two stars beside Altair are an ox ring and a weaving shuttle in HC 2.

[25] For further details, see Sun Xu-en 30-32.

[26] For imprint information of the two Dunhuang stories, see the appendix.

[27] A similar view is held by Ban Youshu.

[28] For two very different theories of the transmission of Chinese swan maiden stories, see Liu Shuoha 386-418 and Liu Dan. Both differ from an earlier theory about the emergence and transmission of world swan maiden story offered by Hatto.

[29] The naming of sequences in my scheme differs greatly from Propp's 31 "functions of dramatis personae" (see Propp 25-65). For Propp's own corpus (randomly selected from Russian folktales belonging to "fairy tales" (AT 300 to AT 749), "the sequence of functions is always identical" (22). But greater flexibility in ordering must be allowed for my corpus. Besides, Proppian functions typically refer to actions having a more or less well-defined beginning and end. "Orphanage" and "conjugal life" (Segments I and 9 respectively) would be treated as "situations" in Propp because they refer to states, which cannot be clearly defined along the time axis. And yet clear distinction between action and situation, even if feasible, may become too cumbersome as far as simplicity of representation is concerned. In fact, the usual description offered by Thompson for a complicated tale is to divide the plot into a few main episodes, while within each episode, motifs involved are listed and no clear distinction between action and situation is made. An effort to integrate the Aarne-Thompson approach to a folktale type and the structural approach is found in Steven S. Jones' "The Structure of 'Snow White.'" "But the emphasis on the interrelationship between functions there seems to be too restrictive for our purpose. Besides, Jones' insistence on "deduc[ing] the essential paradigm of action common to these narratives" is problematized by Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances" in a game (see Note 19 above).

[30] Karl Kao sees "bao" ? (repaying a debt of gratitude and revenge for mistreatment) as "an important underlying principle 'in the structuring of events and actions'"(121). The logic of "bao" is not limited to traditional Chinese fiction; it is indeed often applicable to world folktales.

[31] The standard motif codes which follow come from Thompson's Motif-Index.

[32] See Thomas 31.

[33] Similar to the case of fox wife or paramour popular in classical Chinese literature, who is, as Ting Nai-Tung puts it, "a fairy in the broader sense of the word" because of the lack of reference to "the real animal nature of the fox, such as the fur, the tail, or the smell" (A Comparative Study 42).

[34] In some cases the ox does warn Cowherd not to let Weaving Maid have her magic garment back.

[35] To be discussed in greater detail in Section 4.

[36] Kernels, according to Seymour Chatman, "are narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths." (53)

[37] See Zhang Shudong and Li Xiuling 35-37.

[38] William Fielding suggests that "the captured wife must have been a source of satisfaction to the ego of primitive man, as she was a tangible evidence of his prowess and might. She was in effect a trophy, attesting to his valor 'in warfare, and to his resourcefulness and strength in carrying her off' (282).

[39] Quoted in Hong Shuling 45.

[40] See Zhang Shudong and Li Xiuling 239-42.

[41] There are folktales in which the father-in-law simply wants to test if the hero is worthy of his daughter. "The Sun Maiden and the Orphan" from the Jingpo ??, in Yunnan province is an example. See Ou Kunbo 125-27.

[42] For example, "The Enchanted Ring" and "The Magic Shirt," see Afanasyev 31-37, 110-13.

[43] See Eberhard 219-36.

[44] See Zhao Shunxi 205.

[45] Rivalry between women in a polygynous Chinese family is noted by Marina Warner in her discussion of Cinderella stories (203), but perhaps the more notorious kind of female rivalry in traditional China is between the mother and the daughter-in-law.

[46] The Li story is found in Guan Han and Wei Xuan 346-51. The Daganer story is found in Meng Zhidong 141-48.

[47] See Qu Zhongrong 22-23.

[48] For a brief introduction to "performance" and to "ethnography of speaking" respectively, see and Bauman and Sherzer.

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For easier reference, imprint information for each of the Cowherd and Weaving Maid folktale covered by this study and of the few important related tales is given in the appendix instead.

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## Appendix

### I. Important Tales Related to the Present Study from Classical Han Chinese Sources

a. “Maoyi nu” 毛衣女 in Gan Bao 干寶 (fl. 4th Century A.D.), *Shoushen ji 搜神記* English

translation as “The Bird Maidens” ‘in Kenneth J. DeWoskin and J.I. Crump, Jr. trans, *In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996, 167. The world’s first swan maiden story on record.

b. “Dong Yong 董永” entry in Gan Bao, *Shoushen ji*; English translation as “Tung Yung and

the Weaving Maid” ‘in *In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record* 14. One of the earliest Dong Yong legends.

c. A short Cowherd and Weaving Maid story from Zong Lin 宗慄 of the Liang Dynasty (502-557 AD), *Jingchu suishi ji 荆楚歲時記*. One of the earliest form containing the motifs of marriage as well as the annual reunion on the seventh of July. The story is not found in extant versions of the book but it is cited in the “qianniu” [cowherd] entry in *Peiwen yunfu*, an official dictionary compiled in the early eighteenth century. See Wang Yunwu 1319.

d. “Dong Yong bianwen” 董永變文 from Dunhuang 敦煌 (Tun-Huang) manuscripts copied in the tenth century but probably composed during the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.); English translation as “The Ballad of Tung Yung” in Arthur Waley tr, *Ballads and Stories from Tun-Huang: An Anthology*. London : Allen and Unwin, 1960, 155-62. “Bianwen” is a kind of narrative song interspersed with prose. The manuscripts were discovered in 1900 in a cave of Dunhuang (in Gansu province), an important passage on the famous Silk Route.

e. “Tian Kunlun” 田崑崙 from Dunhuang manuscripts; English translation as “T’ien K’un-lun” in Waley 149-55. A summary is found in A.T. Hatto’s article “The Swan Maiden: A Folk-Tale of North Eurasian Origin?” There one finds a not unimportant mistake: the bird maiden does not “fetch” back her son; actually it is the son himself who follows the instructions of the helper Tong Zhong 董仲 to seek his mother.

## II. Versions of Cowherd and Weaving Maid Folktales Covered by the Present Study

All of the following are taken from written sources published in the twentieth century. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but only the result of my preliminary research.

### A. Han Chinese:

#### Group 1. Collected during the Republican Years, Mid-1920s to ca 1948

Time of collection unknown. Most of these tales are taken from Zhong Jingwen's 鍾敬文 article, "Zhongguo de tian-e chunu gushi," first published in 1932, in Zhong Jingwen et al. eds, *Minjian wenxue zhuanhao* 民間文學專號 [Essays on Folk Literature]. Reprinted in Taipei by Oriental Cultural Service, 1970, 36-81. The tales are usually short. One wonders if some of them have been trimmed off by Zhong. The period of collection is estimated to fall between the mid-1920s and 1932. However, the present writer has not been able to trace the original sources for confirmation.

HC 1. Liaoning 遼寧 province, "Niulang" 牛郎 collected by Hong Zhenzhou 洪振周, quoted in Zhong Jingwen 48-49.

HC 2. Jiangsu 江蘇 province, "Tianhe an" 天河岸 [Banks of the celestial stream], collected by Sun Jiaxun 孫佳訊, quoted in Zhong Jingwen 50-51; English translation in Wolfram Eberhard ed. *Folktales of China*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1965, 43-44.

HC 3. Zhejiang province, no title, collected by Zheng Shizhao 鄭仕朝, quoted in Zhong Jingwen 49-50.

HC 4. Area of collection not specified, probably from North China, "Niulang" 牛郎 [Cowherd], collected by Zhao Jingshen 趙景深 and Zhao Kezhang 趙克章, quoted in Zhong Jingwen 47-48.

HC 5. Shandong 山東 province, "Qianniulang" 牽牛郎 [The Cowherd], collected by Zhao Qiwen, in Wang Tung-chao (Wang Tongzhao 王統照) ed, *Shandong wenjian gushi* 山東民間故事 [Folktales from Shandong], first published in Shanghai by Shanghai ertong chubanshe 上海兒童出版社 1948. Reprinted in Taipei by Oriental Cultural Service, 1972, 54-65.

#### Group 2. Collected after the Founding of the People's Republic, 1954- ca 1985

Most, except the first three entries, are taken from a special issue of *Minjian wenxue* 民間文學 [Folk literature] published in 1985. The time of collection is not specified, possibly ranging from the late 1970s to 1985, when there was the revival of interest in folk literature after the Cultural Revolution.

HC 6. Inner Mongolia, "Tianniulang pei fuqi" 天牛郎配夫妻 [Heavenly Cowherd's marriage], collected by Sun Jianbing 孫劍冰 in 1954. In Guzhi 賈芝 and Sun Jianbing eds. *Zhongguo minjian gushixuan* 中國民間故事選 [An anthology of Chinese folktales]. Vol. I Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe 人民文學出版社, 1962, 96-105.

HC 7. Henan 河南 province, "Qixi hui" 七夕會 [The meeting on the night of the seventh of July], collected by Xiqu 西去, in the Chinese Department of Henan University ed, *Henan minjian gushiji* 河南民間故事集. Beijing: Zhongguo minjian wenyi chubanshe 中國民間文藝出版社 1985, 543-46.

HC 8. Hebei 河北 province, "Sun Shouyi he wuxiannu" 孫守義和五仙女 [Sun Shouyi and the Fifth Heavenly Maiden], collected by Wang Qiang 王強, in *Minjian wenxue* 187 (1985): 5-8.

HC 9. Shandong province, "Tianhe weishemo bian mohu le" 天河為什麼變模糊了 [Why does the Milky Way become blurred?], collected by Wu Qinjian 吳勤建, in *Minjian wenxue* 187 (1985): 4-5.

HC 10. Shandong province, "Qiyue chuqi weishemo xiayu" 七月初七為什麼下雨 [Why does it rain on the seventh of July?], collected by Liu Sizhi 劉思志, in *Minjian wenxue* 187 (1985): 16-17.

HC 11. Henan province, "Niulang yisheng" 牛郎醫生 [Doctor Cowherd], collected by Yang Zhuze 楊主澤, in *Minjian wenxue* 187 (1985): 13-14.

HC 12. Jiangsu province, “Zhinu bianxin” 織女變心 [Weaving Maid ceases to be faithful], collected by Ben Liu 奔流, in *Minjian wenxue* 187 (1985): 18-20.

HC 13. Sichuan 四川 province, “Qianniuhua de laili” 牽牛花的來歷 [The origin of morning glory], collected by Qu Ye 曲野, in *Minjian wenxue* 187 (1985): 9-11.

HC 14. Anhui 安徽 province, “Niulang Zhinu” 牛郎織女 [Cowherd and Weaving Maid], collected by Zhang Pingqing 張品卿, in *Minjian wenxue* 187 (1985): 34.

HC 15. Hebei 河北 province, “Niulang zhinu jie yuanchou” 牛郎織女結冤仇 [The feud between Cowherd and Weaving Maid], collected by Dong Zhanshun 董占順, in *Minjian wenxue* 187 (1985): 20.

### Group 3. Recent Sources from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Overseas

Time of collection unknown. Region of collection also unknown in most cases. They may be considered rewrites rather than faithful records based on field work.

HC 16 “Niulang zhinu” 牛郎織女 [Cowherd and Weaving Maid] in Meng Zhongren 孟仲仁, *Zhongguo minjian gushi* 華聯出版社 [Chinese folktales]. Hong Kong: Hualian chubanshe 華聯出版社, 1978, 52-55.

HC 17. “The Cowherd and the Girl Weaver” in Li Nianpei ed, *Old Tales of China Hong Kong*: Commercial Press, 1982, 73-75.

HC 18. “Niulang zhinu” 牛郎織女 [Cowherd and Weaving Maid], in Huang Dunyan 黃墩岩 *Chuanshuo zhong de minjian shenhua* 傳說中的民間神話 [Oral folk myths (sic)] Banqiao 板橋, Taiwan: Sanfeng chubanshe 三豐出版社 1982, 230-40.

HC 19. “Weaving Maid and Cowherd,” in Jan and Yvonne Walls eds, *Classical Chinese Myths*. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Company, 1984, 77-80.

HC 20. Hebei province, “Tongniu qianshui hui zhinu” 銅牛潛水會織女 [The bronze ox dives in order to see Weaving Maid], in *Zhongguo minjian gushi quanji* 中國民間故事全集 vol. 25, Teipel: Yuanliu 遠流, 1989, 28-35. Time of collection unknown, possibly from Mainland China sources collected in the late 1970s or in the 1980s.

HC 21. “Cowherd and Weaving Maid,” in Yin-lien C. Chin et al. eds, *Traditional Chinese Folktales*. New York: M.E.Sharpe, 1989, 113-25.

HC 22. “The Herdsboy and the Weaving Maid,” in Jeannette L. Faurat ed, *Asian-Pacific Folktales and Legends*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995, 78-81.

HC 23. “Qiqiao de laili” 乞巧的來歷 [The origin of the Qiqiao Festival], in Wei Jialing 蔚家麟, *Fengsu minqing xiaopin* 風俗民情小品 [Short essays on folklore]. Taipei: Zhaowenshe 昭文社, 1996, 83-88.

### B. Ethnic Minorities in China

EM 1. Korean in Heilongjiang 黑龍江 province, “Mutong he xiannu” 牧童和仙女 [The shepherd and the celestial maiden], narrated by Jin Deshun 金德順, in Pei Yongzhen 裴永鎮 ed. *Jin Deshun gushiji* Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983, 24-34.

EM 2. The Xibe 錫伯 in Xinjiang province, “Fangniuwa he xiannu” 放牛娃和仙女 [The herdsboy and the celestial maiden], in Zhong Lu 忠錄 ed, *Xibezu minjian gushixuan* 錫伯族民間故事選. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1991, 119-35.

EM 3 The Miao 苗 in the west of Hunan province, “Tiannu yu nongfu” 天女與農夫 [The heavenly maiden and the farmer]. In Lin Chunsheng 凌純聲 and Rui Yifu 芮逸夫, *Xiangxi miaozu diaocha baogao* 湘西苗族調查報告 [Study of the Miao in West Hunan: a report], vol. 2 Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1947, 269-77.

EM 4. The Miao in Guizhou province, “Niulang zhinu de gushi” 牛郎織女的故事 [The story of Cowherd and Weaving Maid], in *Minjian wenxue* 111 (1979): 21-30.

EM 5. The Wa 佯 in Yunnan province, “Niu gege” 牛哥哥 [Brother Bull], collected by Shang Zhonghao 尙仲豪 et al, in Shang Zhonghao et al eds, *Wazu minjian gushixuan 佯族民間故事選* 103-105.

EM 6. The Lisu 傈僳 in Yunnan province, “Huaniuniu yu tian’e guniang” 花牛牛和天鵝姑娘, in *Zhongguo minjian gushi quanji*. vol. 11, Taipei : Yuanliu, 1989, 248- 54.

### C. Neighboring Countries

#### Versions Similar to the Traditional Myth

NC 1. Korea : “Weaver and Herdsman Chik-Nyo and Kyun-Woo,” in James Riordan, *Korean Folk-tales*. Oxford : Oxford UP, 14-20.

NC 2. Vietnam : “The Silver River ,” in Ruth Q. Sun ed, *Land of Seagull and Fox: Folk Tales of Vietnam* . Rutland , Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1967, 39-41.

NC 3. Thailand : “The Twin Stars,” narrated by Supaporn Vathanaprida, in Margaret Read MacDonald ed, *Thai Tales: Folktales of Thailand*. Englewood , Colorado : Libraries Unlimited, 1994, 105-108.

#### Versions Similar to Cowherd and Weaving Maid Folktales

NC 4. Korea : “Me Heavenly Maiden and the Wood Cutter,” narrated by Zong Yong-Ha, in Zong In-Sob ed, *Folk Tales from Korea* . 3 rd ed. Elizabeth , New Jersey : Hollym International, 1982, 21-25.

NC 5. Japan : “The Woman Who Came Down from Heaven,” in Keigo Seki, *Folktales of Japan* . Tr. Robert J. Adams. London : Routledge, 1963, 63-69.

<http://www.ndhu.edu.tw/~lkchan/Notes/cowbiblio.htm>

[ericyu@mail.ndhu.edu.tw](mailto:ericyu@mail.ndhu.edu.tw)

Hong Shuling: *Niulang zhinu yanjiu [A study of Cowherd and Weaving Maid]*. Taipei: Students Publication, 1988.

**The Double-Seventh Day** refers to the seventh day of the seventh month on the Chinese lunar calendar. The day is not as well-known as many other Chinese festivals. But almost everyone in China, young and old, is very familiar with the story behind this festival. A long long time ago, there was a poor cowherd, Niulang. His parents died when he was young, so he lived with his elder brother. Unfortunately, both his brother and sister-in-law were mean and cruel and treated Niulang very badly. They would not give him enough food to eat, and made him work so hard that he hardly had time to sleep. Finally, they kicked him out of their home. All he had in the world were the clothes on his back and an old ox.

Niulang built a small thatched cottage on the side of a mountain. He cut and dug and sweat until he had made a vegetable garden out of the rocky soil. He was often tired and hungry, but always found time to take care of his old ox. One day, this old ox began to talk. It said that it used to be Taurus, a proud star in the night sky. But it violated the law of the Heavenly Palace by stealing some seeds of grain to give to the world of Man. As a punishment, it was banished to this world as an ox.

Not far from Niulang's cottage was a sacred pond. The old ox told its master that several young goddesses would come to this pond in a few days to bathe. One of them would be called Zhinu, the Girl Weaver. Zhinu was a granddaughter of the King of the Heavenly Kingdom. Virtuous and kind, she was the most beautiful being in the whole universe. The old ox paused for a moment, then said that if Niulang could take away her clothes while she was in the sacred pond, she would stay and be his wife.

When the day came, Niulang hid in the tall reeds by the pond and waited for the young goddesses. They soon came, just as the old ox had said they would. They took off their silk robes and jumped happily into the clear water. Niulang crept out of his hiding place, picked up Zhinu's clothes and ran away. Her companions were so frightened that they jumped out, dressed as quickly as they could and flew away. Zhinu was left alone in the

pond. Niulang returned and gave her back her clothes. He had adored her from the first moment he saw her. They looked into each other's eyes. The heavenly girl told the poor cowherd that she would be his wife.

The couple were deeply in love and got married very soon afterwards. Niulang worked hard growing crops and Zhinu raised silkworms. He made sure that they ate their fill every day. The exquisite silks and satins she wove soon became famous throughout the land. Three years later, Zhinu gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl. They named the boy Brother Gold and the girl Sister Jade. The couple were overjoyed with the new additions to their family and believed they would stay happily together for the rest of their lives.

One day, the old ox was dying. Before it closed its eyes for the last time, it told the young couple that its hide would enable a man to fly even to the heavens. It asked them to preserve it carefully.

Meanwhile, the King and Queen of Heaven found out that their granddaughter had gone to the world of Man and taken a husband. They were furious. The Queen flew down to earth with some of her soldiers.

Niulang came back from the field one day to find his two children sitting on the ground, crying. They told him that an old lady had taken their mother away. Niulang remembered what the old ox had told him. He placed the twins in wicker baskets on a pole to carry on his shoulder, put on the magic hide, and flew up, up into the sky. He had almost caught up with the Queen and his wife when the Queen heard the crying of his children. Looking back, with an angry wave of her arm, a raging torrent immediately appeared between her group and Niulang. He could not get past this wide swollen river. Heartbroken, Niulang and his children could only look and weep bitterly. The King in his Heavenly Palace was moved by the sound of their crying, and decided to allow Niulang and Zhinu to meet once a year on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month.

The poor couple of Niulang and Zhinu each became a star. Niulang is Altair and Zhinu is Vega. The wide river that keeps them apart is known as the Milky Way. On the east side of the Milky Way, Altair is the middle one of a line of three. The end ones are the twins. To the southeast are six stars in the shape of an ox. Vega is to the west of the Milky Way; the stars around her form in the shape of a loom. Every year, the two stars of Altair and Vega are closest together on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month.

This sad love story has passed down from generation to generation. It is well known that very few magpies are seen on the Double-Seventh Day. This is because most of them fly to the Milky Way, where they form a bridge so that the two lovers might come together. The next day, it is seen that many magpies are bald; this is because Niulang and Zhinu walked and stood too long on the heads of their loyal feathered friends.

In ancient times, the Double-Seventh Day was a festival specially for young women. Girls, no matter from rich or poor families, would put on their holiday best to celebrate the annual meeting of the cowherd and the Girl Weaver. Parents would place an incense burner in the courtyard and lay out some fruit as offerings. Then all the girls in the family would kowtow to Niulang and Zhinu and pray for ingenuity.

In the Tang Dynasty about 1,000 years ago, rich families in the capital city of Chang'an would set up a decorated tower in the courtyard and name it Tower of Praying for Ingenuity. They prayed for various types of ingenuity. Most girls would pray for outstanding sewing or cooking skills. In the past these were important virtues for a woman.

Girls and women would gather together in a square and look into the star-filled night sky. They would put their hands behind their backs, holding needle and thread. At the word, Start, they would try to thread the needle. The one who succeeded first would be granted her wish by Zhinu, the Girl Weaver.

The same night, the girls and women would also display carved melons and samples of their cookies and other delicacies. During the daytime, they would skillfully carve melons into all sorts of things. Some would make a gold fish. Others preferred flowers, still others would use several melons and carve them into an exquisite building. These melons were called Hua Gua or Carved Melons.

The ladies would also show off their fried cookies made in many different shapes. They would invite the Girl Weaver to judge who was the best. Of course, Zhinu would not come down to the world because she was busy talking to Niulang after a long year of separation. These activities gave the girls and women a good opportunity to show their skills and added fun to the festival.

Chinese people nowadays, especially city residents, no longer hold such activities. Most young women buy their clothes from shops and most young couples share the housework. More and more men are learning to cook, so it

is perhaps not so important for the woman to develop her cuisine skills. In fact, many men can cook better than their wives.

The Double-Seventh Day is not a public holiday in China. However, it is still a day to celebrate the annual meeting of the loving couple, the Cowherd and the Girl Weaver. Not surprisingly, many people consider the Double-seventh Day the Chinese Valentine's Day.

[http://www.chinavoc.com/festivals/double\\_seven.htm](http://www.chinavoc.com/festivals/double_seven.htm)

[http://www.chinavoc.com/festivals/double\\_seven1.htm](http://www.chinavoc.com/festivals/double_seven1.htm)