



Recovering the Sun

Han People – China (and half of the world)

In a time, almost beyond the reach of memory, there was a young couple who lived in a small village. The man was called Liuchun, and he ploughed the land, while the woman, Huiniang, wove clothes on her loom. Their life, while not easy, allowed them to subsist on everything they could possibly need, up to the time when they were expecting the birth of a child.

One morning Liuchun hitched his ox to the plough and left home with the intention of ploughing the fields for the next harvest, while Huiniang stayed at home weaving blankets for a family in a nearby village. Liuchun had barely started ploughing the field when his ox suddenly stopped abruptly. Liuchun yanked him to keep going, but the ox kept looking up at the sky with wide-open eyes. Then, suddenly, a cold wind rose from the east and clouds as black as the night rose in the sky and, a few moments later, they covered the Sun and made its light completely disappear.

Night fell across the region, and people did not understand what could be happening.

Almost groping to find his way, Liuchun returned with his ox to his humble home and found Huiniang extremely alarmed. 'What could have possibly happened?' they wondered. Soon after, they joined the rest of their neighbours in the village. No one knew what had happened, or understood why it had happened. So, after sharing their worries and waiting for the rest of the day to see if the Sun would rise again, they finally decided to go home to sleep.

Days went by and the Sun did not return. The sky remained dark, and it got colder and colder. The leaves on the trees began to lose their colour, while the flowers in the fields curled towards the ground and fell dead. People could not work in the fields and, even if they could, it would do them no good: without sunshine, there would be no harvest. And, little by little, people began to feel that their souls were getting darker and darker, and that their dreams were becoming populated by demons and monsters.

What could have happened to the Sun?

The answer came from a 180-year-old man who lived in a cave halfway between the village and the town. The old man had told anyone who would listen that the Sun was at the bottom of the Eastern Sea and that a dark lord, leading an army of demons and monsters, had snatched it away and hidden it in order to impose his rule over all lands. This was because the Sun prevented his army from acting as long as its light shone on the land.

The news crushed the villagers' spirit, but Liuchun was not giving up. Every day he went to visit his neighbours with the aim of cheering them up, but they were increasingly plagued by dark thoughts and expectations, and demons and monsters were seemingly appearing to them in their dreams.

'It is getting colder and colder and, without crops and food, we'll soon perish,' some told him.

'Do you really think it's worth living like this? Without the Sun we are lost,' others told him.

Liuchun suffered a lot when he heard them say that and went home with his head hung low.

'What's wrong with you?' Huiniang asked.

'Poverty is spreading throughout the region, perhaps throughout the world, and our neighbours are not likely to last long in these conditions,' replied Liuchun. 'No matter how much you and I keep hope burning, and do not give up in the face of misfortune, we'd hardly be able to survive without them. Without the Sun, what fate awaits our son, and our son's children?'

Then, looking at Huiniang with a look of resolution, he added:

‘I have to recover the Sun and bring it back.’

Huiniang stroked her belly and looked down at her already bulging tummy. Then she raised her eyes and said to Liuchun:

‘Do what you have to do. I’ll not be the one to stop you. And don’t worry about me,’ she added, ‘Our neighbours will help me, with the hope they’ll nourish in the knowledge that someone has gone to recover the Sun.’

The next day, Huiniang cut off a lock of her hair, wove it with hemp thread and, from it, made a pair of boots for Liuchun. She also wove a thick cotton coat to protect him from the cold.

On the day of his departure, on leaving home, they saw a glow in the sky, which gradually took the shape of a golden phoenix. The bird, upon reaching them, perched on Liuchun’s shoulder.

As he stroked the phoenix on his neck Liuchun said:

‘My dear golden phoenix, come with me to recover the Sun!’

The phoenix seemed to nod and then Liuchun, taking Huiniang by the hand, said:

‘I’ll not return until I recover the Sun. And if I should die in this endeavour, speak of me to our son and tell him that the brightest star in the sky is his father. I’ll become that star to show the way to the next seeker of the Sun.’

Without further ado, he set off eastwards with the phoenix on his shoulder and wearing the hemp and hair boots that Huiniang had made for him.

Every day, Huiniang climbed Baoshi Hill to scan the horizon, to see if she could catch a glimpse of Liuchun coming back. But the nights passed and Liuchun did not return. Occasionally, a neighbour would accompany her in her vigil, until eventually everyone thought that Liuchun would never return, and Huiniang would be left alone on the hill.

Finally, in the middle of one of those nights, Huiniang saw a very bright star rise in the sky to the east, and her heart shrank at the thought that perhaps Liuchun had died. But it was not until the next day that she confirmed that, when she saw the golden phoenix arriving. The golden phoenix, alighting at her feet, lowered his head in deep grief, as Huiniang collapsed in a swoon.

When Huiniang regained consciousness, her baby had already been born. She named him Baoshu, and made up her mind that, with the Sun or without the Sun, she would survive and care for Baoshu until he became a man worthy of his father's memory. She did not have to wait long for that as, by some strange and singular design of the Heavens, Baoshu grew conspicuously every time the wind blew.

On the first night when the wind blew, Baoshu began to talk and, by the second night, he could run. A few nights and winds later, she saw Baoshu grow into a brave and courageous man. By then Huiniang had already told him about his father and had shown him the star over the horizon to the east. Not long after, Baoshu said to Huiniang:

‘Mother, let me go to recover the Sun.’

Huiniang thought her heart would break. She loved him so much! She looked at him, her eyes brimming with tears, and, for a moment, shook her head ... but then she stopped. All the villages and towns in the region had been plunged into poverty. Everyone in the region was suffering, and there were even those who said that the Sun had disappeared not just in the whole country but in the whole world. ‘How much suffering, how much pain,’ thought Huiniang. Perhaps the strange fate that had made Baoshu grow up so fast was because the Heavens had chosen him to find the Sun and bring it back, she reflected as she brushed away her tears.

‘All right, go recover the Sun,’ she heard herself say in a whisper. Baoshu smiled and hugged her tenderly.

Huiniang again wove a lock of her hair with hemp yarn and again made boots and, once more, wove a very thick cotton coat to protect Baoshu from the cold. And as they left the house to say goodbye, the

golden phoenix once again appeared in the sky and perched on Baoshu's shoulder.

'Dear son,' said Huiniang, 'when your father left to recover the Sun, this golden phoenix came and perched on his shoulder. It accompanied him on his journey and, when he died, the phoenix came back here to tell me the news. Go with him, for he'll show you the way, as will the star that is your father now. Follow him till the end and you'll find the Eastern Sea, and at the bottom of it the Sun.'

Baoshu nodded and said:

'Mother, however long my journey, please don't weep for me. If I'm still alive, you'll make my heart beat faster and I'll faint.'

Huiniang nodded, promising to respect his wish.

Baoshu set off in an eastward direction, with the golden phoenix perched on his shoulder and with the confidence that he would find the Sun and bring it back to the world. He climbed and descended mountains, crossed rivers and forests until the thorns began to tear at the cotton coat which had been made by his mother. It got colder and colder, and the cold made more and more holes in his coat which seeped through it and froze his skin.

One night Baoshu reached a village, and the people asked him where he was going.

'I'm going to get the Sun back,' he replied.

The villagers were filled with joy and hope and seeing that his coat was in tatters, and that in the poverty in which they now lived they could not give him anything, they made him a new coat. This was done by joining up the corners of the coats of all the villagers.

'This is the coat of our hundred families,' they told him when they had finished making it. 'It will warm you, not only with its fabric, but also by our hearts which will accompany you on your journey.'

Baoshu continued his journey, wrapped in the endearing coat, until he came to the banks of a river so wide that not even the phoenix

could fly across it. But this did not deter Baoshu, who, without a second thought, threw himself into the water and swam and swam, struggling against the current. But, just as he was about to reach the other riverbank, an icy wind blew from the east and the river froze, leaving Baoshu trapped in the ice, while the phoenix fell off his shoulder as he lost his senses due to the cold.

It was then that the coat of the hundred families showed its loving power, holding Baoshu's body heat which, little by little, melted the ice surrounding him. As soon as he released his arms, he grabbed the phoenix and pulled it into the coat, finally breaking the ice all the way down the river. He and the phoenix eventually reached the shore safely.

A few nights later, Baoshu arrived in another village, and the villagers gathered around him. A light of hope flickered in their hearts when they heard the young man say that he was going to recover the Sun. Yes, maybe he could make it, they thought as they saw him so brave and resolute. Before he left, a village elder came up to him and said:

'Son, we'd have liked to give you provisions for your journey, since you are making such a great effort for so many people, including us. But since the Sun disappeared, we're barely surviving, and we have small children to feed. Nevertheless, we thought that each of us could give you a handful of our land. On it the sweat of our ancestors has fallen. Perhaps they can help you at some point.'

The old man took a bag and each of the villagers placed a handful of soil in it. Finally, the old man closed the bag and handed it to Baoshu, who, after clasping his hands together and bowing his head in thanks, set off again in the direction of his father's shining star.

Baoshu climbed 99 mountains and crossed 99 more rivers, until he came to a crossroads and did not know which way to go. Two of the paths led eastwards, but which one would lead him first to the Eastern Sea? On the other hand, the golden phoenix had been having fun with other birds in a nearby forest, and was not there to show him the path his father had taken. But, at that moment, a stern-looking man appeared and asked him:

'Where are you going, son?'

'I'm going to get the Sun back,' he replied.

‘It’s still a long way off,’ said the man, shaking his head. ‘I’d go home if I were you, for your adventure may cost you your life.’

But Baoshu smiled and dismissed the advice.

‘I don’t care how far away it is, or how hard it is to get,’ he replied. ‘I’ll find the Sun, and I’ll not go home until it’s shining in the sky again.’

‘Well, then, follow this road,’ said the man, pointing to the road on the right. ‘You’ll come to a village, a little further on, where you can rest before continuing your journey’.

But at that very moment the phoenix flew up and, swooped down on the man in a strange way, grabbing him by the hair, pecking him and beating him with his wings.

Baoshu, with a sudden movement, slapped the phoenix away, thinking perhaps, that the bird had thought he was under attack. He then apologised to the man and, thanking him, continued on his way in the direction that the man had indicated.

Leaving the man at the crossroads, the phoenix flew ahead of Baoshu, as if trying to stop him, but Baoshu thought that the phoenix was annoyed with him for having so abruptly taken him away from the man, and paid no more attention.

Suddenly, the road became more bearable, the path began to flatten out, there were no precipices or raging rivers to cross and the thorns were no longer growing. All this was a little strange, but Baoshu walked on until he came to the village the man at the crossroads had told him about.

He was struck by the extraordinary height of the houses, and also by the fact that all the men were fat, while all the women were very thin.

When he said he was going in search of the Sun, everyone in the village seemed to burst out in jubilation, as they led him to the central square and set up a large table of food, hurriedly brought by the villagers from their homes in order to provide a feast for him.

Baoshu found it odd that, while the rest of the other villages were living with scarcity and in hardship, in this village people had food and drink like the food which had been served to him. But he was thirsty, so

the first thing he did was to take a bowl of water that he had been given in order to quench his thirst. Then, just as his lips were about to come in contact with the water, the phoenix flew over him and threw a boot into the bowl, which immediately began to burn with what had seemed to him to be water.

At first, Baoshu failed to understand what was happening, but suddenly he realised that the boot looked exactly like the ones his mother had made for him before he left.

‘It's one of my father's boots!’ he finally understood.

With a burst of fury, Baoshu threw the bowl in the face of the false peasants and, pushing his way through the crowd, fled from the village along the same path that had brought him there. Reaching the crossroads again, he took the path which had not been indicated by the stern man.

But the road became hard again, and Baoshu realised that all the mishaps he had encountered along his journey had been caused by the monsters and demons of that evil lord of the Eastern Sea. Knowing that Baoshu had set out to recover the Sun, monsters and demons had transformed themselves into mountains and rivers to hinder his journey. They had tried to freeze him in the mighty river and had attempted to trap him in that village from which he had escaped alive, thanks to the intervention of the golden phoenix.

‘Oh, poor phoenix!’ He said to himself as he reached over his shoulder to stroke the phoenix's breast. ‘I thought he was angry with me, when he was trying to warn me!’

In the meantime, the demons and monsters had not stood idly by. Fearing the young Baoshu more than ever, they went in search of Huiniang, pretending to be neighbours from a distant village, to tell her that Baoshu had fallen down a cliff and died. But Huiniang, remembering her son's words, clenched her fists and jaws and refused to cry. The wicked did their best to make Huiniang cry for they knew that, if she did, Baoshu would lose his prodigious strength. But Huiniang stood firm, without shedding a single tear, until she began to suspect that these so-called foreign villagers were in fact demons.

When, defeated, they finally left her alone, Huiniang climbed up to the terrace she had built on the hilltop to scan the horizon for any sign of the sunlight returning, for that would be the sign that Baoshu was on his way back. Over the weeks and months since Baoshu had left, Huiniang had been piling up large stones, day by day, in order to get higher and higher and to see further and further into the horizon. Finally, she had made what almost looked like an artificial terrace of rocks.

So Huiniang scanned the horizon again from her vantage point but there was still no sign of the Sun's return.

However, Baoshu was not far from his goal. After climbing another 99 mountains and crossing another 99 rivers, he had finally reached a beach on the Eastern Sea. Here his father's star was shining. But where could the Sun be in such a vast, dark ocean? And, even more daunting, how to reach it?

Then he remembered the bag of soil that those kind villagers had given him. He opened the bag with the earth from that village, and the sweat of his ancestors, and emptied it into the water on the seashore. And, suddenly, a mighty gale blew and a chain of islands and islets emerged from the ocean.

With wide eyes, overwhelmed by what he had just seen, Baoshu swam from island to island, while the phoenix followed him from above. When he reached the last of the islands, he guessed that the Sun must be right there in the depths of the sea, so he dived in. Soon after, found the entrance to a large cave with a bright glow emerging from it. He had found the Sun!

However, the dark lord and his host of demons and monsters were waiting for him, and a fierce battle was soon to ensue. It rose from the bottom of the ocean and raged on the beach of the last island. Perhaps, stirred by the heat of battle, the ocean rose as it had never risen before, sending up waves that swept many of the demons away and swallowed up the monsters to the bottom of the sea. As well as battling each other, everyone was forced to fight against the waves which were decimating the dark lord's hosts with each new onslaught.

Finally, seeing that the dark lord was running out of breath, the golden phoenix swooped down on him and began to peck him hard in the

face, until a wave, catching him unawares, carried him to the depths of the sea forever.

At first, Baoshu thought he had lost his friend, but soon after he saw him rising from behind a wave, feathers dripping, but ready to soar back into the sky. Meanwhile, the few remaining demons and monsters, seeing that their leader had fallen for good, fled, leaving Baoshu and the phoenix victorious.

After that, the ocean calmed down, and Baoshu decided that he must not waste a second, even though he was badly wounded and battered by the battle. He dived back into the Eastern Sea, entered the cave where the Sun was held captive and tugged it out of the cave. Then, once out, he pushed with all his remaining strength until he pulled it above the surface of the sea. However, at that moment, his strength finally left him and Baoshu sank hopelessly into the depths of the Eastern Sea.

The phoenix, seeing that Baoshu had died, rushed below the Sun in order to hold it on his back, and then, with all the strength of his wings and his heart, he lifted it, little by little, above the ocean until it was high in the heavens.

That day, Huiniang had climbed as usual to the top of the hill, but this time she was not alone. Her neighbours, having heard that the demons and monsters had tried to defeat Baoshu by making her cry, had come to defend her from them. As they stood there on the rocks of the terrace that Huiniang had built over the months, a beam of light opened up the eastern sky and, a second later, a blinding radiance illuminated the entire heavenly vault, firing golden beams from the clouds and restoring the blue to the infinite space behind them.

The Sun had risen!

The phoenix, although exhausted, did not take long to arrive. He began to dance in flight above the hill, in jubilation for the sake of all beings in the world, but with tears in his eyes for the death of Baoshu. When he finished his dance, he flew down and perched on Huiniang's shoulder. It was then that she saw the tears in his eyes and realised that she would never see her son again. However, true to her word, she decided to hold back her tears, once more in memory of Baoshu's

Since then, the Sun rises in the east and sets in the west every day and humans and all the community of living things that populate the world live in the assurance that the sun will give them light, life and warmth day after day.

And, to this day, when the Sun rises in the east, a very bright star can be seen in the sky. This is the star that Liuchun became, the star that heralds the morning. And the golden glow that surrounds the Sun as it emerges from the sea, is none other than the golden phoenix which, with outstretched wings, envelops and sustains it.

To commemorate Baoshu's deed, all the people of the region joined forces to build a pagoda on the hill where Huiniang awaited the return of his son, Baoshi Shan, and they also built a pavilion on the spot where the phoenix had danced in triumph and grief.

Today you can still visit the Baoshu Pagoda (*Baoshu Ta*, 保淑塔), as well as the Return of the Phoenix Pavilion (*Lai Feng Ting*, 来凤亭), while the platform built by Huiniang on top of the hill is still the place from which the sunrise can be seen. It is called the Platform of the First Sun (*Chuyang Tai*, 初阳台). □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda and Xueping Luo (2022).

Under license Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA. 

Comments

This story comes from the Han ethnic group, which comprises approximately 18% of the world's population, making it, arguably, the largest ethnic group in the world. In fact, they make up 92% of the population of the People's Republic of China and 75% of the population of the Republic of Singapore. Within the People's Republic of China, they constitute the majority population in all but two provincial-level administrative units: Xinjiang, where the majority is 61% (in 2010) ethnic Uighur, and Tibet, where the majority is 92% (in 2014) ethnic Tibetan (Han Chinese, 2022).

The Han name comes from the Han dynasty, China's second imperial dynasty, which lasted from 206 BCE to 220 CE and marked the golden age of Chinese history, bequeathing a cultural heritage that has survived to this day. However, the origins of the Han people go back much further to the Neolithic period, to the Huaxia confederacy, an alliance of farming tribes which thrived around the banks of the Yellow River in northern China.

Over the course of two millennia, these tribes, which would eventually become known as the Han, expanded into southern China, absorbing many other ethnic groups along the way.

Ultimately, the fact that the majority of the population in the People's Republic of China is of Han origin has led to Chinese identity being equated with the identity and culture of the Han majority, as is often the case in countries where there is an overwhelming ethnic majority. However, this hegemonic narrative has long been state-driven. This has, for a long time, generated inter-ethnic problems and tensions that, if not addressed through the adoption of a more inclusive national identity, could lead to significant ethnic instabilities in the long term (Irgengioro, 2018).

We are greatly indebted to Xueping Luo, a Master's student at the United Nations University for Peace, for her impressive work in compiling and translating into English this, and many other, stories of the 56 ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China.

Sources

Han Chinese (12 July 2022). In *Wikipedia*.

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Han_Chinese&oldid=1097802516

Irgengioro, J. (2018). China's national identity and the root causes of China's ethnic tensions. *East Asia*, 35: 317-346.

Yao, B. (ed.). (2014). 中国各民族神话 (*Myths of Chinese Ethnic Groups*). Shuhai Publishing House.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 9: Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Preamble: Earth, Our Home.- The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air.

Preamble: The Challenges Ahead.- The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 3b: 3b. Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.

Principle 4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

Principle 5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.

Principle 9a. Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.

Principle 9c. Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

