



## Red River and Tengtiao River

*Hani People – China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam*

Grandfather Sun rose above the horizon to behold the proud ridges and forests of Mount Ailao, between the Yungui Plateau and the Hengduan Mountains. But he was disappointed to find that many of the forests and valleys were shrouded in mist. However, that had never been a problem for Grandfather Sun who, casting his warm glow on the white blanket, dissolved it as salt melts in water. It was then that he saw, at the bottom of the valley, the Red River Girl, lying asleep.

‘Wake up, girl, wake up!’ Grandfather Sun said to the girl, as he shone on her waters. ‘The day has come, and I guess you have some unfinished business.’

‘Oh, yes, yes!’ exclaimed the Red River Girl as she woke with a jolt. ‘It’s already morning and I didn’t notice! I have to go to the market!’

But Grandfather Sun knew that it was not exactly to the market that the Red River Girl had to go. Grandfather Sun, who sees everything from above, knew that the girl was in love, and he knew that she had to arranged to meet her love, Young Tengtiao River, who lived in a nearby valley.

But Young Tengtiao River was still sleeping. Not only that: he was snoring, and his snoring could be heard all over the valley.

That, however, was not known to Red River Girl, who, jumping up, began to hurriedly dress herself. With a delicate movement of her waters, she put on her most beautiful garment, the green dress of the trees of Mount Ailao and, on her head she adorned herself with a scarf consisting

of the clouds of the mountain top. She washed her face in the forest waterfalls, perfumed herself with the flowers of the valley meadows and, for earrings, adorned her earlobes with the red flowers of the *tuodimayi*.<sup>1</sup>

Looking into the mirror of her waters, the Red River Girl remembered the place where she was born, in the heart of Dewei on Lake Erhai. She had been the youngest daughter of the Dragon King, so she had been spoilt in her childhood. That had made her a little lazy, hence she did not like to go into the mountains or down steep valleys. She liked to be among the peaks of Mount Ailao, and entertain herself in the markets of the towns and villages of the region.

One day, while she was passing through one of these markets, she was spellbound by a strong, good-looking young river. He was the Young Tengtiao River, who, on discovering her and beholding her beauty, could do nothing but go and meet her. They met, fell in love and arranged to meet at the Hekou market.

That is where the Red River Girl was going. She was feeling blissful under the warm embrace of the breeze, knowing that she was going to meet her love.

She arrived at Hekou and started to wait for Young River Tengtiao. She did not know that he was still sleeping and, when he failed to arrive, she became restless.

‘Perhaps he has repented,’ she said to herself, ‘or perhaps he has met another girl and prefers her to me.’

Finally, she decided to wander around the market, trying to put those sad thoughts out of her mind.

But Grandfather Sun did not let this fact pass unnoticed and thought it would be a good idea to wake up Young Tengtiao River, lest he miss his date. So, throwing a powerful ray of light through the gaps left by the clouds, he managed to hit the young river’s face, saying to him:

‘Young Tengtiao River, you’d better wake up, don’t keep such a lovely young lady waiting, the same girl who captured your heart a few days ago.’

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<sup>1</sup> *Rhododendron delavayi*.

Just then, Young Tengtiao River opened his eyelids drowsily, not understanding where he was and then, suddenly, his eyes opened like two bowls of rice, remembering that he had a date with Red River Girl in Hekou. Quickly he sprang to his feet, clad himself with the bare rocks of his cliffs, and, seizing a long knife, set off with the fuss of a turbulent young river.

Seeing that he was going to be late, he chose to take the short cut through the mountains. Drawing his knife from its sheath, he began to slash the rocks on the slopes, opening up gorges in front of him so that his water flowed turbulently in search of the valleys. That is why there are so many precipices around Ailao Mountain. And the rushing of the Young Tengtiao River in order to keep Red River Girl from waiting explains why, even today, he descends tumultuously from the heights where he rises.

Meanwhile, the Red River Girl was still waiting in Hekou. There were many people in the market, such as Nanxi River Girl, who had come from Mengzi, the girls from Xiaochaodi, as well as many other girls from other valleys and mountains. They had all gathered there dressed in their best clothes. They were all paired with their beloveds, holding each other's arms, creating a beautiful sight.

The Red River Girl felt bad about not having her beloved with her, as did the rest of the girls.

'Where has this man gone?' she wondered.

Then, suddenly, she saw him among the crowd, his back turned. She went towards him with the most beautiful smile and tapped him twice on the back. But when the young man turned around, it was not Young Tengtiao River. Red River Girl blushed a deep red with shame.

Excusing herself, she sought a quiet spot where she could remain unnoticed, and withdrew into her disappointment and sadness. Grandfather Sun was already descending towards the horizon, and all her sisters were beginning to depart Hekou, leaving Red River Girl alone.

Then a girl dressed in white, the Xiaochao River Girl, arrived and said to her:

'Sister Red River, why are you so sad?'

Red River Girl refused to open her heart.

‘My sister, it’ll soon be night. Won’t you come to my house? I live near here. I’m sure your beloved will be able to find you in my house.’

Red River Girl thought twice and finally decided to accept Young Xiaochao River Girl’s invitation.

When Young Tengtiao River finally reached Hekou, Grandfather Sun had already sunk.

‘I’m such a fool!’ he said for himself, ‘I’ve left Red River Girl alone on our first date! This is unforgivable!’

Without wasting a moment he started to look for her everywhere.

Meanwhile, in the Xiaochao Basin, the Red River Girl was playing the *xiangmie*<sup>2</sup> in the middle of the bamboo forest. She was still waiting for her beloved, even though night had fallen. And then, from the other side of the basin came the sound of a *bawu*,<sup>3</sup> and the Red River Girl knew at once that it was the Young Tengtiao River.

Upon arriving at the basin, he asked Xiaochao River Girl:

‘Forgive me for disturbing you, kind young lady, but did you see a young woman wearing a green dress and a white headscarf?’

But, just at that moment, Young Tengtiao River thought he saw the beautiful forms of his beloved in the bamboo forest and, an instant later, the moonlight triggered two bright flashes from her eyes, convincing the young river that his beloved was there.

Not waiting for Xiaochao River Girl’s reply, the young man hurried to find his beloved and to apologise for his lateness.

And so, the Red River Girl and the Young Tengtiao River said goodbye to Xiaochao River Girl and set off together on their loving journey to the ocean, where they had a family and where they continue to live happily to this day. □

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<sup>2</sup> The *xiangmie* is a wind musical instrument made of bamboo.

<sup>3</sup> The *bawu* is another wind musical instrument made of reed with a sound similar to that of the clarinet.



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

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## Comments

From a speciesist point of view, we might question the idea of anthropomorphising animals or trees, or even, as in this case, rivers. However, we have to admit that it is a simple, and close to the human heart, way of recognising a soul in the beings or elements of nature that make up our lives and even our identities. This could lead us, if we go one step further, to stop seeing these natural beings or entities as devoid of consciousness or even life – as according to the modernist and materialist worldview – but rather, start to see them as a part of Mother Earth’s body with which, perhaps, we could communicate in our imagination.

After all, the beautiful images in this story come to us from the imagination; and, as the analytical psychologist James Hillman pointed out, ‘the mind is in the imagination, rather than the imagination in the mind’ (Hillman, 1985, p.7).

Ninety per cent of the Hani people live in the People's Republic of China, although they appear to originate from the ancient Qiang tribe of Tibet. They are estimated to have migrated south from there around the 3rd century C.E. However, Hani oral traditions do not go back that far. They date back 50 generations – around 1,150 years – and they claim Hain People to be a splinter of the Yi people.

The Hani people have been one of the poorest and most disadvantaged ethnic groups in southern China and northern Southeast Asia. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the massive influx of Han people from the north into their region led to inter-ethnic tensions. Harassment of the Hani by other ethnic groups in the area, in addition to the Han, led to the Hani fleeing *en masse* to Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand and Laos.

The communist revolution in 1949 seemed to bring some relief to tensions, but this relief was short-lived. Between 1958 and 1961, the Hani suffered severe repression of their religious beliefs, and saw their sacred forests destroyed and their rituals and offerings banned, including the

altars to their ancestors, in their homes. The repression waxed and waned over the following years until, in 1979, the Hani were able to resume their beliefs and offerings openly (Hays, 2015).

## Sources

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## *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 12d: Protect and restore outstanding places of cultural and spiritual significance.

