



The Birds of Axing

Shui People - China

Axing was a *xiannü*, an immortal woman, a resident of Heaven, who was in charge of the care of the multicoloured celestial birds.

One day, following the trail of one of her birds, which she had not seen for days, she descended to earth and came upon the bird on a stony road. The bird was eating peacefully in the middle of the road, for, surprisingly to Axing, there were many scattered seeds on it.

Suddenly she was startled by the screeching of cart wheels. Turning around, she found a young man with a pleasant countenance standing on a cart loaded with grain and drawn by two horses.

The young man pulled on the reins and, raising his voice, ordered the horses to stop. When he saw her at close quarters, he realised at once that he had before him a fairy, a woman from Heaven. Her beauty ...

'How is it that there are so many seeds scattered on the ground on the road?' She asked without even giving the young man time to introduce himself.

'Well ...' he said hesitatingly, for he did not expect to start a conversation with a denizen of Heaven in this way, 'well ... the wooden planks across the wagon-box ... don't fit perfectly ... so that seeds are always getting lost through the gaps ... when we pass along the roads with the grain of the harvest.'

Listening to him speak, Axing realised that she liked the young mortal.

‘So,’ she continued, now a little embarrassed by her sudden feelings, ‘it’s a pity that these seeds should be wasted ... don’t you think so?’

The young man shrugged and smiled, feeling, he too, an invisible force drawing him to her.

‘Well ... yes,’ he said, a little disturbed by the situation. ‘I suppose so ... yes.’

‘I am just thinking ...’ she continued, frowning ...

What she said next will be understood right now. What is important in closing this part of the story is that they both knew at that moment that their fate was sealed.

A few days later, Axing began to bring all the birds in her charge down from Heaven to feed on the scattered seeds that would otherwise have gone to waste. And each of her journeys between Heaven and Earth she took the opportunity to see the young peasant, with the excuse of explaining to him the singularities of those birds, in case one day a mishap might arise and she would not be present.

Eventually, the young peasant and the beautiful immortal confessed their feelings to each other and, despite the gulf between their origins and their future in life, they decided to marry and live on Earth.

For their part, as the months went by, the birds of Axing made themselves at home on Earth. They had plenty of food and trees to roost in at night, which they did not have in Heaven, and the villagers did not bother them. On the contrary, they watched them with delight as they passed with their mules and carts along the roads, where they came to pick up the falling grain. They were so fascinated by the birds that finally a committee of villagers came to Axing with a request: that she share her beautiful birds with them, promising to take care of them.

‘Yes, I will share them with you,’ she replied with a heavenly smile, ‘but on one condition: that you do not lock them in cages or confine them in henhouses or within four walls. They must always be free.’

And the villagers agreed.

And so, Axing went from house to house handing out pairs of cocks and hens, ducks, geese and all kinds of birds of all shapes and colours. While handing them out, she explained to the villagers the care they should give to the celestial birds, even though it was not necessary to give them food, since it was available everywhere.

The birds roosted in the trees near the villagers' houses. During the day they would scatter across the roads and fields in search of grain and earthworms, and at sunset they would return to the trees. And as the weeks went by, they grew in size and beauty, with their magnificent coloured feathers and exuberant morning songs.

Not long afterwards they began to lay eggs. But as they did not live in cages or henhouses, they laid their eggs in the trees, where, by some strange device, they clung to the branches. Eventually, the villagers began to see that the prodigious eggs also acquired beautiful colours. Some, which were originally white, turned red; and others, which were originally green, turned yellow, or purple.

One day, one of the villagers approached the strange eggs and smelled an intoxicating fragrance – they smelled like fruit! And, without a second thought, he took one of the eggs from the tree and bit into it.

Indeed, it was a delicious fruit, the likes of which he had never tasted before!

Word spread, and the villagers began to eat Axing's birds' eggs, for they had never eaten anything so crispy and so sweet. And, without stopping to think about the consequences of their decisions – not only for themselves, but also for their children and their children's children for up to seven generations – they ended up making Axing's bird's egg-fruits the staple of their diet.

When the sowing season came, many villagers decided not to sow their fields – why, when the eggs of Axing's fowls were enough to sustain them, and were better than the food their fields produced? And, little by little, the fields became overgrown with weeds and thistles, and the grain lost by the wagons became scarce on the roads, as, one after another, all the peasants stopped sowing, tending the fields and harvesting the crops.

However, without stray grain on the roads and in the fields, the birds of Axing began to starve ... and stopped laying eggs! Eventually,

even, many birds began to leave the houses to forage for food and create new nests in the mountains, thus becoming wild birds. And slowly, but insidiously, the villagers also began to starve.

When Axing heard what was happening, she was very sad. How had they not realised that if they stopped cultivating the fields, the birds would no longer have anything to eat? And furthermore, if people ate all the eggs, how would the birds, that she had so generously shared with mortals, breed?

She discussed this with her beloved mortal and they considered together what they could do. Finally, they decided to go and visit all the villagers in their homes, door to door, to convince them that they should replant the fields and should return to a diet based on cereals, vegetables and legumes, and on the fish they gathered from the rivers, lakes and ponds. And so they did.

‘Go back to the fields and plant rice,’ they said with worried faces. ‘For, without grain in the fields and on the roads, the birds will have nothing to eat, they will stop laying eggs, and eventually they will disappear and you will be left empty-handed. Birds have to hatch eggs to reproduce, and you should not abuse them, but eat them only on special occasions, not as a staple of your diet.’

Slowly, the people, at first reluctant to listen, came to understand that what they were saying made sense, and they resumed their work in the fields and on the farms. And shortly before winter, after harvesting the second crop, Axing spoke to her birds and told them that they should come down from the trees to live with humans, that they would feed them and take care of them. And so they did.

Not long after, once again fed on the seeds, the birds began to lay eggs again. But now, not clinging to the branches of the trees, they no longer had the nature of fruit.

Since then, the villagers have to boil the eggs first in order to eat them. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda and Xueping Luo (2023).

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Comments

This folktale was narrated by MENG Jiankang and PAN Yousheng, and was recorded and edited by ZU Dainian and CAI Zhongyun in the 1980's.

According to an ancient tradition, the Shui are the descendants of the Luoyue and Lingnan (Baiyue) tribes, who lived along the south-eastern coast of China 1,700 years ago. Tradition has it that around the end of the Han Empire (220 CE) these tribes were forced to move northwards. They travelled almost a thousand kilometres in a north-westerly direction, settling in the valleys of Guizhou province, in the upper reaches of the Longjiang and Duliu rivers, south of the Miaoling Mountains. The truth is that their language is very different from those of the other peoples in the region, and even many aspects of their way of life are very similar to those of the coastal peoples. Interestingly, they adopted their present name, Shui, meaning 'water', towards the end of the Ming Dynasty (c. 1640 CE), not least because of their predilection for living by rivers, lakes and ponds, but also because almost all their customs, worship and folklore revolve around water.

Shui People number around half a million, have their own language and a writing system more than 2,000 years old, based on pictographs and symbols similar to Chinese characters, but used only for ritual purposes, so that most of the population does not know how to write the language they speak.

As the story of 'The Birds of Axing' might suggest, they do not seem to be particularly fond of agriculture, although they grow rice and other cereals, and prefer to devote their subsistence efforts to fishing and raising poultry, pigs and cows, with rice and fish being their staple diet. In fact, fish has a symbolic value for them that may reflect unconscious remembrances of their coastal past, as for the Shui it symbolises their ancestors, as well as the prosperity of the community.

The Shui function socially according to a clan hierarchy, where everyone obeys the rules of the group. In addition, they live a reality mediated by shamanic rituals to ingratiate or placate hundreds of good or evil spirits, and by ancestor worship, which acquires an unusual power for them. In fact, attempts by Christian missionaries to spread their

beliefs among the Shui ended in failure time and again, as the Shui always refused to accept new beliefs at the mere thought of disappointing their ancestors.

The Shui People boast a great legacy of poetry, as well as traditional stories, legends, fables and fairy tales, one of which we have offered above.

Sources

Facts & Details (2019). Shui minority. Available on
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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 5a: Adopt at all levels sustainable development plans and regulations that make environmental conservation and rehabilitation integral to all development initiatives.

Other passages that this story illustrates

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 5c: Promote the recovery of endangered species and ecosystems.

Principle 6b: Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, and make the responsible parties liable for environmental harm.

Principle 6c: Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.

Principle 7: Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

Principle 7f: Adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world.

