



When Oxen Were Wild

Mulao People – China

There was a time when oxen were wild and our ancestors ploughed the land with hoes. It was hard work: digging furrows and raising endless ridges of earth, only to start another furrow and another ridge from the beginning... and they always twisted halfway through!

But then, a man of the Mulao People called Luo Yi appeared among the human beings, and observing the wild oxen in the mountains, he thought:

‘From their looks, they seem gentle animals. But they are really powerful! Maybe we could become friends ... and they could help us plough the fields, while we provide them with a roof, where they can shelter from the monsoons, and we can care for them, when they get sick.’

And the man began to approach the wild oxen to get them used to human presence, with the intention of befriending them. But he left the work half done, because he died suddenly not long after. Shortly before he departed this life, on his deathbed, he asked his daughter, Luo Ying, to finish the work he had started so that future generations would have an easier time making a living. His daughter, in tears, promised him that she would get an ox to plough their fields, and that she would look after the ox.

Luo Ying was very young at the time, and although she had been instructed by her mother in the many tasks that were unfairly assigned to women in those days, she did not know where to start in the mission her father had given her. She did not know how to hunt, nor did she know

how she could catch an animal as big as an ox. But she could sing, and sang very well! And one day, while she was singing, she was surprised to see an ox approaching her, attracted by her melodious song.

Finally, using her sweet voice and her wit, she managed to confine an ox inside a fence. But the ox tore off the boards of the fence with his horns and escaped. On another occasion she successfully tied a rope around the horns of another ox, and tried to pull him into the field. But the ox gave a tug with his neck and broke the rope. One time, she even managed to attach the plough to an ox, but the ox seemed to go mad when he felt trapped by the strange object and ran away. Luo Ying never found the plough.

What could she do with those huge animals? They seemed kind and docile, but how could she get them to cooperate and help her with the hard work in the fields?

One afternoon, as the days were getting colder, Luo Ying was trying to talk some sense into a female ox so that she would drag Luo's new plough. But when she was about to fasten the device with a rope, the animal, feeling in danger, bellowed like a trumpet and kicked the plough away, immediately running off towards the mountains.

Luo Ying set off after the ox cow, not so much to bring her back to the field as out of fear that, wandering in the mountains, some predator might snatch her life and devour her. However, she soon lost sight of the ox. Following in her footsteps, Luo wandered into the ravines and up the slopes overlooking the valleys, until she came to some sharp rocky crags, which tore the soles of her shoes. But Luo Ying did not stop: she continued to track the cow through forests and thickets, even though the brambles tore her clothes. She would not let up because, from time to time, she seemed to hear the animal's mooing in the distance.

'What if she is in trouble?' thought Luo Ying. 'I wouldn't want something bad to happen because she was scared of me.'

Finally, it began to get dark and, seeing that she would not have time to return home, she thought of sleeping under a rocky shelter which served as a footing for a wild plum tree. It was then that, in the distance, she heard the desperate mooing of the cow, and Luo Ying rushed in the direction from which the bellowing came.

She found her by a large boulder at the foot of a steep slope. The animal had thrust one of her hind legs into a crevice between the rocks and had become trapped. And she was moaning in a pitiful, anguished manner! Luo Ying was heartbroken to hear her.

In the dim light of twilight, the young woman tried to discover what was preventing the animal from pulling her foot out, and saw that, as the cow had pushed her hoof through the hole, two other rocks further down had closed over it, making it impossible for the ox to get out. Luo Ying tried to move one of the rocks, and then the other, with all her might, but was unable to loosen them in the slightest. After a while, sweaty and exhausted, she had to surrender to the evidence that she alone would not be able to free the animal.

‘Tomorrow I will go to the village and come back with help,’ she thought, ‘but I will spend the night with her so that she will not be lonely ... and to scare off anyone who might come near to devour her.’

And, with that bold idea in her mind, Luo gathered some wood to light a fire. This would keep them a little warmer, and she would have some burning sticks to scare off any predators who might approach.

After making a good fire, Luo Ying thought that perhaps the cow was hungry, so she gathered some grass from around the rocky area and brought it to the animal.

‘There you are, ox cow,’ she said to her. ‘I suppose you’re hungry. I’m going to stay here with you so you won’t be lonely. Is that all right?’

And the cow mooed softly, which Luo Ying understood as a moo of thanks.

When the moon rose over the mountain, as she warmed her hands by the fire, Luo Ying saw that the cow was getting impatient at having to stay in that position for so long without being able to lie down to rest. So the young woman approached her again and caressed her between the eyes.

‘You seem restless,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Do you want me to sing you a song?’

And after a brief silence in which their gazes met under the moonlight, Luo Ying sang thus:

The moon lights up the mountainside
And inspires me a song for you, ox cow.
The tree leaves accompany my song with their rustling,
While the spring makes the strings ring.
Dear wild ox
Do not worry;
I am here by your side to keep you company.

I sing a song to the cow,
And she listens gratefully to my melody.
The fields at the foot of the mountain are filled with flowers,
With which the earth gives us its fragrance.
Dear wild ox,
Please help us to plough the land,
For the grain is even more fragrant than the flowers.

Sharp stones tore the soles of my shoes,
And the thorns of the brambles ripped my clothes.
But I feed the cow with green grass,
And I sing to show her my affection.
Dear wild ox,
Don't be afraid of me;
Be good and help me in my work.

And with Luo Ying's melodious singing, the flowers opened their petals again in the night, the moon shone in the firmament as if the sky was new, trees and bushes stood up to listen to her ... and the ox cow calmed down, mooed softly and licked Luo Ying's hands.

Then, in an unexpected miracle, the rocks that imprisoned the animal's foot shifted as they listened to the girl singing. When the young girl noticed this, she slapped the cow on her buttock and pulled her hoof out of the hole.

The cow did not leave Luo Ying's side, so grateful was she for having saved her life and kept her company in her most distressing moments.

She followed Luo, who continued to sing her sweet song, back to the village.

From then on, the wild ox meekly accepted whatever Luo Ying did and asked of her, acquiescing gently to being held by ropes and powerfully dragging the plough across the fields, quickly learning whatever task the young woman taught her.

The following year, again in the days when the nights were beginning to become colder, the cow gave birth to twelve calves. And when they grew up, Luo Ying asked the mother's permission to distribute them among her neighbours in the village, so that everyone could enjoy the animals' help in their hard days in the fields.

The ox cow died one day when Luo Ying had taken her to graze on a hillside with a beautiful view. She buried her there, thinking that she would enjoy the scenery, and not long after, a spring welled up at the grave. The spring would always give clear water, even after floods, and would never stop flowing, even in times of drought. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda and Xueping Luo (2025).

Under license Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.



Comments

This story of the Mulao People was recorded by LUO Daichao and edited by LIANG Ruiguang, YIN Yingmei and BAO Yutang, and was previously published in 1988 (Yao, 2014).

The Mulao People celebrate annually, on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, the Ox Birth Festival, a festivity in which they recall the legend we have just narrated. On this day, the Mulaos pray to the god of the oxen, thoroughly clean the pens, let the animals rest and feed them with top-quality fodder and cooked black polished glutinous rice. They do all this as a sign of gratitude to the animals that provide them with so much for their livelihood (Science Museums of China, 2008).

Sources

- Science Museums of China (2008 Nov 22). *Ox Birth Festival – April 8th. Nationalities in Middle and Southeast China.*
<http://www.kepu.net.cn/english/nationalitymse/mul/200312240045.html>
- Yao, B. (ed.). (2014). *中国各民族神话 (Myths from Chinese Ethnic Groups)*. Shuhai Publishing House.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 14b: Promote the contribution of the arts and humanities as well as the sciences in sustainability education.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

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

Principle 1b: Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity.

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

Principle 4a: Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.

Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

Principle 15a: Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering.

Principle 15b: Protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged, or avoidable suffering.

The Way Forward: The arts, sciences, religions, educational institutions, media, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and governments are all called to offer creative leadership. The partnership of government, civil society, and business is essential for effective governance.

