Festivals of Chinese Ethnic Groups

Li Ethnic Group: Singing and Dancing on the Third Day of the Third Month

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In ancient times, the world was once flooded. Only a boy named Nanyin and a girl named Tianfei of the Li people survived. They held two big gourds and drifted away on water. They had no idea how long they had drifted until they reached the foot of a mountain. The mountain looked like five fingers of a hand from the distance. It was Mt. Wuzhishan (five fingers) in Hainan Province.

One day, the sun finally rose and the flood water receded. Flowers blossomed at the foot of the mountain and swallows flew about. Tianfei asked a swallow, “What’s the date today? ”

The swallow replied, “It’s the third day of the third month. It’s spring. It’s the best time now.”

So Nanyin and Tianfei decided to stay in the place where the swallow flew about on the good day of the third day of the third month. They named the place Swallow Nest Ridge and lived in a cave they dug. They then raised a bullock to plough the field.

But they were worried because they had no seeds to sow.

At that moment, a golden light flashed in the sky and a bird with golden wings flew over. The bird said, “Diligent couple, don’t worry. I have brought seeds to you.”

The golden-winged bird began to sing, “Coo, coo, chirp, chirp...” As the bird sang, lots of seeds fell from its mouth. There were seeds of rice, beans, sesame...

The couple began to sow the seeds. But how could the two of them sow all the lands?

Wild geese flew in the sky. Seeing them flying into the distance, Nanyin and Tianfei started to miss their families.

They decided to look for their families separately and agreed to come back to Swallow Nest Ridge in Mt. Wuzhishan on the third day of the third month of the following year, whether they found their families or not.

Nanyin climbed over ninety-nine mountains and crossed ninety-nine rivers to look for his families...

Tianfei also climbed ninety-nine mountains and crossed ninety-nine rivers to look for her families...

The third day of the third month came! Nanyin and Tianfei reunited at Swallow Nest Ridge as agreed.

“A-ge (nickname for beloved man), have you found your families? ”

“A-mei (nickname for beloved woman), I didn’t hear a sound of human being.”

“A-mei, don’t be sad. The dress you found glitters like a star at Swallow Nest Ridge. How did you find it? ”

Then Tianfei told the story of her adventure.

One day, she walked deep into the mountain and saw a green monster. The monster said, “Lovely girl, stay here and I will provide you with everything you want. If you don’t stay, I will catch you and lock you in the cave.”

Tianfei said bravely, “I will not stay here. I will return to Mt. Wuzhishan and I’m not afraid of you.”

The monster was very angry. He gasped and panted and tried to catch Tianfei. Just then a fairy, who was passing by, puffed and brought Tianfei to her boat-shaped house.

The fairy was very fond of the brave Tianfei and gave her a wrap skirt and a kerchief to wrap up her hair. The fairy said, “This beautiful outfit will scare off the monster and endure sunshine and wind. You can dress it and easily walk, cut wood and work in the fields.”

As expected, the monster came back at midnight and brought with him a big iron chain to catch Tianfei.

But when the chain touched the wrap skirt and the kerchief, it turned into a silver necklace.

The monster thought the chain would bring Tianfei towards him, so he pulled and pulled but he got nothing and fell into the valley.

After Tianfei told her story, Nanyin said gladly, “A-mei, you are very brave! You can wear this outfit to walk in the mountain, as well as fly into the clouds.”

Tianfei said, “A-ge, I notice you also have two new objects with you. How did you get them? ”

So Nanyin told his story. Nanyin kept walking until he arrived at the end of the earth. Facing the great ocean, he took out a flute and played beautiful tunes and imitated the singing of birds.

Suddenly, the shrimp soldiers and the crab generals emerged from the sea. They said, “Ah, young man playing the flute. Our dragon king loves flute and we are here to invite you to the palace.”

Nanyin brought the beautiful tunes of flute to the undersea world. The dragon king was very pleased and said, “Please teach the prince to play the flute.” Before long, Nanyin taught the dragon prince to play the flute and planned to leave and return to Mt. Wuzhishan.

The dragon king wanted to thank Nanyin and let him choose whatever treasure he liked from his chamber of treasures under the sea. The chamber was full of pearls, extraordinary conches and precious shells, with bamboo baskets of various sizes and coir raincoats of different lengths hung in the middle of the room.

“Choose whatever you like, and as many as you want.” the dragon king said generously.

But Nanyin only chose a bamboo basket to carry at the belt and a coir raincoat to wear. The dragon king was curious, “Why do you choose worthless things? ”

Nanyin laughed and said, “Jewels and pearls will be used up, but bamboo baskets can carry fish, shrimps and seeds and with coir raincoats I can catch fish and work in the fields in the rain.”

After Tianfei listened to Nanyin’s story, she said, “A-ge, you have chosen the best two gifts to pass on to our descendants so that they will not starve!”

The lychee flowers blossomed and coconut trees bore fruits year after year. The third day of the third month was the occasion for reunion every year, but Nanyin and Tianfei had not found their families!

What about Tianfei! There were grey strands in her jet-black hair, and wrinkles emerged on her forehead.

Tianfei and Nanyin thought if there were no people living in the world, the land would be abandoned, the wrap skirt and kerchief would turn into dust, the flute and arrow would turn into soil, dragon’s home would be on fire and the sun’s hometown would freeze.

How could there be no people in the world?

Two swallows flew by in the spring, and they said, “Nanyin, marry Tianfei and there will be long lasting happiness in the world!”

Nanyin thought, Tianfei was not afraid of the monster and didn’t choose to live with the monster to enjoy an easy life. She was brave and kind and would be a good wife.

Tianfei thought, Nanyin could play beautiful music and he was not greedy for treasures. He was smart and diligent and would be a good husband.

When it was the third day of the third month again, they got married. Fairy Chang’e and the Jade Rabbit in the moon came to give their blessings. The golden-winged bird brought more seeds for them to sow and start a new life.

They had lots of children and taught them to catch fish and plough the fields. They lived in peace and happiness and that was how the Li people prospered ever since.

On the third day of the third month each year, the Li people lit bonfires at the bottom of Mt. Wuzhishan, played the flute, sang and dance to embrace the sowing season of spring.

Then Nanyin and Tianfei became very old and turned into two stone statues in the cave and the third day of the third month became a sacred festival of the Li people.

Today, the March 3rd Festival of the Li people attracts people from near and far to join the celebration. People sing and dance together till dawn in memory of Nanyin and Tianfei, as well as in celebration for the coming spring to sow the seeds.