

The cow, however, was a former god who had violated imperial rules and was sent to earth in bovine form.

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One day the cow led Niulang to a lake where fairies took a bath on earth. Among them was Zhinu, the most beautiful fairy and a skilled seamstress.

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The two fell in love at first sight and were soon married. They had a son and daughter.

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Yet in the eyes of the Jade Emperor, the Supreme Deity in Taoism, marriage between a mortal and fairy was strictly forbidden. He ordered the heaven troop to catch Zhinu back.

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Niulang grew desperate when he discovered Zhinu had been taken back to heaven. Driven by Niulang's misery, the cow told him to turn its hide into a pair of shoes after it died.

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The magic shoes whisked Niulang off on a chase after the empress.

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The pursuit enraged the empress, who took her hairpin and slashed it across the sky creating the Milky Way which separated husband from wife.

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But magpies, moved by their love, formed a bridge across the Milky Way to reunite the family.

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Even the Jade Emperor was touched, and allowed Niulang and Zhinu to meet once a year on the seventh night of the seventh month.

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This is how Qixi came to be. The festival can be traced back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220).

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Customs

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In bygone days, Qixi was not only a special day for lovers, but also for girls. It is also known as the "Begging for Skills Festival" or "Daughters' Festival."

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In this day, girls will throw a sewing needle into a bowl full of water on the night of Qixi as a test of embroidery skills. If the needle floats on top of the water instead of sinking, it proves the girl is a skilled embroiders.

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Single women also pray for finding a good husband in the future. And the newly married women pray to become pregnant quickly.

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Tradition transformed

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The love story of Niulang and Zhinu, and the Qixi Festival have been handed down for generations. Yet these ancient traditions and customs are slowly dying out.

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Many modern Chinese, particularly youngsters, seem to know more about St Valentine's Day on February 14.

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Even Qixi is nowadays referred to as the "Chinese Valentine's Day." More and more young Chinese people begin to celebrate this day in a very similar way as that in western countries.

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Few young women will mark the festival with their boyfriends, or take part in traditional activities to pray for cleverness.

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