



## **STORY: THE COWHERD AND THE WEAVING MAIDEN, A TALE FROM CHINA**

Retold By Dianne de Las Casas

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Long ago, there was a young man named Cheng. Cheng was a cowherd. His cow was a fairy beast which had the power of talking. They were sitting on the grassy bank overlooking the river. Suddenly, Cheng heard laughter and splashing. He saw maidens dancing in the water.

The cow said, "Those are the seven maidens from the Heavenly Kingdom. Their beauty knows no match. But the fairest of the maidens is the Weaving Maiden. She weaves the sunset into the clouds and uses threads of silver and gold."

Cheng looked longingly at the maidens. He wished he could join them. He was lonely.

The cow said, "Cheng, I know that you are lonely. You need to take a wife. Tomorrow, return to this river. The heavenly maidens shed their robes and swim every day. Without their robes, they are unable to fly back to their kingdom."

So the next day, Cheng saw the heavenly maiden splashing in the river. He quietly stole the weaving maiden's red robe. When it was time to leave, her sisters donned their robes and flew to the sky.

The weaving maiden looked for her robe but could not find it. Cheng stepped out of the bushes with her robe. When the weaving maiden saw Cheng's kind and handsome face, she did not mind staying behind. The weaving maiden fell in love with Cheng and remained on Earth as his wife. Together they had two children and all was well for a time.

But one day, the Empress of Heaven discovered the spinning loom empty. For three years, the weaving maiden had abandoned her duties. None of the other sisters had the gift of weaving like their sister. The clouds, once shades of golden pink and silvery blue were now dull and gray. The weaving maiden had a special touch that brought the silken clouds to life. The Empress of Heaven was furious.

The Empress flew down to Earth and scooped up the Weaving Maiden. Her children cried, "Mama, mama!" but the Empress took her away, high in the sky.

When the cowherd returned from his work, he saw his children crying. He asked, “Where is your mother?” They told him about how their mother was taken to the sky.

The cowherd and his children were so sad. There was no way they could fly to the sky to see the Weaving Maiden.

The old cow spoke, “Fear not, cowherd, for I have a plan. Climb upon my back and I will take you to the Heavenly Kingdom.”

So the cowherd and his two children climbed upon the cow’s back. The cow jumped up and began flying to the Heavens.

When they arrived, the children saw their mother weaving the magical colors into the clouds. They ran into her arms and cried, “Mama! Mama!”

The cowherd hugged the Weaving Maiden and begged her to come home. She said, “I cannot. I am bound by my duties. I do not have the power to leave.”

Just then, the Empress of Heaven saw them. She cried out angrily, “How dare you enter the Heavenly Kingdom!”

She began creating a river of stars to separate Cheng and his children from the Weaving Maiden. Cheng and his children cried. Tears fell from the eyes of the Weaving Maiden and created a storm cloud that rained heavily upon the Earth. When the Empress of Heaven saw how sad the family was, she softened. She too had a soft spot in her heart for love.

She declared, “The Weaving Maiden cannot forsake her duties but I will permit her to visit her Earth family on the Seventh Day of the Seventh Moon.”

So on the Seventh Day of the Seventh Moon, the Weaving Maiden is reunited with her family. When she sees her husband, Cheng, and her two children, she wraps her arms around them and weaves a silken blanket of love.

In China, they celebrate the Double Seventh. It takes place on the Seventh Day of the Seventh Moon. It is special day in the Chinese lunar calendar, which follows the phases of the moon.

On a clear night, you can see the stars of the Weaving Maiden and the stars of the Cowherd and his children. They move closer and closer together. When they are very close, you will know that it is time to celebrate the Double Seventh.