Capturing the Brilliance in Chinese Cultures through Traditional Stories

Xueping Luo was born into a Hakka family in a Cantonese village in Guangdong in southern China. She has lived in Shanghai (east central) and Beijing (northern) and has travelled extensively in China and overseas, primarily as an interpreter and translator. Xueping has master’s degrees in Responsible Management and Sustainable Economic Development from University for Peace in Costa Rica, and in Applied Linguistics from Beijing Foreign Studies University. In addition to working on projects, especially technical assistance projects, promoting the UN Sustainable Development Goals internationally, she is researching, collecting, and translating the fascinating folktales from the fifty-six ethnic groups in China and is a contributor and advisor to The Earth Stories Collection.
The Earth Stories Collection is a repository of myths, legends, fables, and folktales from cultures around the planet; these stories are capable of transmitting a complex-systems worldview and of illustrating the principles and values of the Earth Charter. I am honoured to be part of the team and am responsible for collecting stories from Chinese cultures. In this article, I share how I work with the enthralling stories, how I feel along the way, and how storytellers respond to one of them.

To people outside of China, Chinese culture appears to be singular. However, in actuality, there are 56 ethnic groups across China, with Han as the majority accounting for 91% of the Chinese population. Each of these ethnic groups, though associated collectively as Chinese, has its unique culture where we can draw inspiration to live a greater life on this precious planet Earth.

My deep dive into the diverse Chinese cultures for the Earth Stories Collection began in October 2021. I was fortunate to find in a library a set of fifteen books containing traditional Chinese stories, sorted by ethnic identity. In the preface, the editor-in-chief, Yao Baoxuan, reveals that he was already 60 when the books were published in 2014, and the original idea dates back to 1982 when he was dispatched to Xinjiang upon graduation at the age of 28. He studied Xinjiang literature throughout history, fell in love with the place and its stories, and started to reflect on how the culture, literature and history of all Chinese ethnic groups in ancient times had played a part in the China and even the world. Almost four decades later, I am continuing the research and polish these gems, so they shine brighter to illuminate more minds on Earth.

Under the guidance of Grian A. Cutanda, founder and Executive Director of The Earth Stories Collection, I, as a volunteer in the project, read the stories, screen those that best illustrate the principles and values of the Earth Charter, summarise them for Grian’s review and translate the selected stories completely from Chinese to English for the team’s adaptation and proofreading. For the stories to be published in a book, The Earth Stories Collection (Vol. 2): Earth Stories in Action! [published in January 2023], I also review the adaptation and the comments for discussion following each story and carry out further research when necessary. Within a year, I read a total of 559 stories from 31 ethnic groups and shortlisted 73 stories for Grian’s selection. Among the 50 he had read, 23 were selected, and 9 were included in Volume 2 of the collection. We expect that the next volume will feature eight more stories from Chinese cultures. Overall, the collection offers a significant opportunity, not only to expose Chinese cultures to other parts of the world through traditional stories, but also to find commonalities in traditional stories among different cultures.

In this latest volume of the Earth Stories, “Meibang Meiliu, the Mother Butterfly” from the Miao People, exemplifies the truth that we are one human family and one Earth community. “Mangye Sets Off in Search of Grain” from the Bouyei People demonstrates our common responsibility to one another, and “The Fire Bird” from the
Gaoshan People reveals the environment as a common concern, all of which correspond to segments in the Preamble of the Earth Charter. For Section I of the Earth Charter, Respect and Care for the Community of Life, “The Legend of Ali and the Fairy Maidens” from the Gaoshan People proves faith in the dignity and spiritual potential of humanity, and “The Siblings Constellation” from the Hlai People steers a way towards a secure and meaningful livelihood. Under Section III, Social and Economic Justice, “Recovering the Sun” from the Han People prompts an ethical, social, and environmental imperative. “Payahadu the Disabled” from the Dai People reminds us to recognise the ignored, and “Red River and Tengtiao River” from the Hani People turns our attention to outstanding places of cultural significance. For Section IV, Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace, “The Goddess of Hunting” from the Nu People encourages us to protect wild animals from extreme, prolonged, and avoidable suffering.

These stories provide a glimpse into the fascinating treasure trove of Chinese cultures. Among the small number I have been fortunate to read, I have found all principles and values of the Earth Charter represented in them. The top three are “Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations” (Principle 9c in Section III), “Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world” (Preamble), and “Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love” (Principle 2 in Section I).

All of the stories amaze me with their thorough beauty, as well as the ingenuity of the people who created them. There is significant imagination in all of them. In one story, the big dipper is transformed into seven brothers who sacrifice themselves to save their fellow fishermen from a demon and then continue to help guide fishermen. In other, four dragon kings, one in each sea, protect the waters. Finally, in another story, two rivers flowing in the valley are actually a pretty girl and an innocent boy who try to date each other.

Grian often shares his findings in these stories with such emotion that echoes my
awe of the beauty I find in them, as well as
the ingenuity of the people who created
these stories. Take the last story for
example, “Red River and Tengtiao River” -
it impressed us with how subtle and
delicate the Hani People’s storytelling
gives consciousness, soul and life to the
features of the landscape. Thus, it
stimulates respect and love for the rivers
and all the surrounding geographic
elements. Grian pointed out that the soul-
giving is one of the deep features of the
complex-systems worldview, which leads us
to panpsychism (https://iep.utm.edu/panpsych_), a theory
which is being increasingly supported by
scientists so important as Sir Roger
Penrose. (see: https://www.nbcnews.com/mach/science/
universe-conscious-ncna772956 )

Exploring, discovering, and reflecting upon
the traditional stories of Chinese cultures
gave me utter pleasure throughout this
research. Personally, I may have stretched
the stories a bit far to relate them to the
Earth Charter principles and values, and I
am grateful to have Grian and the team’s
review to keep my impulse in check.

When a story is genuinely too good to
omit, despite a few elements on it that
may contradict the Earth Charter, we
consider adapting it. For instance, “The
Mother and Daughter Gave Birth to
Everything” from the Hani People is
incredibly original and creative, and it
echoes the call in the Earth Charter to
“Affirm gender equality and equity as
prerequisites to sustainable development
and ensure universal access to education,
health care, and economic opportunity.”
However, in its final paragraph the story
goes, “When all beings grew up, they all
wanted to be the master of the land. They
had a match to decide on that, and human
beings won, thus becoming the master of
the land.” This statement is clearly
anthropocentric; therefore, it cannot be
selected to be included in this collection
of stories unless modified.

The team adapted the story to current
times in a way acceptable to the Hani
People. Instead of “masters”, we imagined
the human beings wanted to be the
“caretakers” of all lives and the land.
Alternatively, we thought of consulting a
Hani storyteller for his or her adaptation
incorporating ethnic insights. Although this
story is not included in Volume 2 of The
Earth Stories Collection, we may publish it
in a future collection after we find a
solution satisfactory for everyone without
losing the connection to the Earth Charter.

Going through all the stories, I feel how
connected different cultures actually are.
There are so many similar stories among
various ethnic groups in China, and stories
from the Chinese cultures may also
identify similar versions in other cultures.
Upon research, we found that “Red River
and Tengtiao River” told by the Hani
People is shared by people in Myanmar,
Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Another story
in The Earth Stories Collection is recounted
in Myanmar, Thailand, Iran, and Armenia,
which is an even longer stretch of land. To
me, it is heartwarming to see that these
shared stories transcend national borders
and also “cultural borders” within a country.
[e.g., “borders” between/among the 56 ethnic groups or cultures within China], demonstrating that, we are after all, one human community sharing the experience on our one home, the planet Earth.

I was privileged to have the opportunity of exchange with storytellers, scholars, readers, and audience across the world in the webinar, “Turning the Story Upside Down” held on 12 October 2021. This webinar was part of The Scottish International Storytelling Festival (15th to 31st October) leading up to COP 26, the most critical Climate Change meeting ever held, in Glasgow. At this event, I shared the following story from the Jing culture in China accompanied by the traditional Jing music in the background.

Once upon a time, it was chaotic in the sea. Whales and sharks swallowed the weak at will. Those lacking resistance were going to die out. The Sea Dragon King was so worried about the situation that he decided to resume order in the Sea Kingdom.

He took his seat in the Crystal Palace. He ordered all aquatic animals to gather in the palace before sunset for a meeting. As more and more generals and soldiers arrived, the Sea Dragon King in his throne was staring at them and stroking his beard. He spoke solemnly, “In such a majestic sea kingdom, why do we have so many generals and so few soldiers?” The sharks and whales standing there, were shaking all over. They dared not to speak. Suddenly, all the weak aquatic animals including the octopuses, squids, crabs, prawns, horseshoe crabs knelt before the king. They told their stories of suffering, crying. A squid wigging its soft and white body reported to the king, “We the weak aquatic animals are swallowed by the angry sharks and evil whales. We are dying out. We beg your majesty to grant us justice.” “Is it true?” The Sea Dragon King punched the table angrily. “It’s my order that from now on, whoever swallows up any aquatic citizens shall be executed.” The whales and sharks were scared and silent. The
You may attack your enemies with them, or simply run with these legs.”

Finally, the Sea Dragon King advised all the weak aquatic animals, “All the weapons I granted you shall be your heirlooms. Keep them safe, and you must pass them on, from generation to generation.”

Responding to the story as a storyteller, Donald Smith, Director of the Scottish Storytelling Centre and also Founder and Director of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival, acknowledged the principles of diversity and ecological balance as the underlying themes. As someone who lives and works in Scotland, a nation of the sea, he also articulated how the story resonated with his culture which is thousands of miles away from China and the Jing ethnic group. He explained that dragons appear elementally earthy and fiery in European traditions in contrast to Asian cultures. The next speaker, Judith Black, an American professional storyteller, remarked with wonder on how the dragon was demonised in one culture but venerated in another. Indeed, as human cultures on Earth impart knowledge through storytelling, both similar and various interpretations blaze new paths towards the future. When directed by the Earth Charter, a common set of values agreed upon by innumerable cultures and traditions, I truly believe we shall achieve a sustainable future for the community of life on Earth.
References


Earth Collection Stories Website https://theearthstoriescollection.org/en/home/

Source of Image 1 Tengtiao River: https://www.meipian.cn/1uuebyxt

Source of Image 2 Joy of Fish by Lin Zhenming: https://www.sohu.com/a/276986424_201909

Stories from China