

Delving a Little Deeper: 'Chinese Valentine's Day' Explained

One of the major traditional festivals in China, the Qixi Festival—because of its traditional date being the 7th day of the 7th lunar month often called Double Seventh Festival in English—will be celebrated on August 9th this year.

Because of its romantic symbolism, the Qixi Festival is often dubbed 'Chinese Valentine's Day' and many lovers especially in China's cities use this special occasion to exchange gifts and celebrate their affection.

Quick Facts

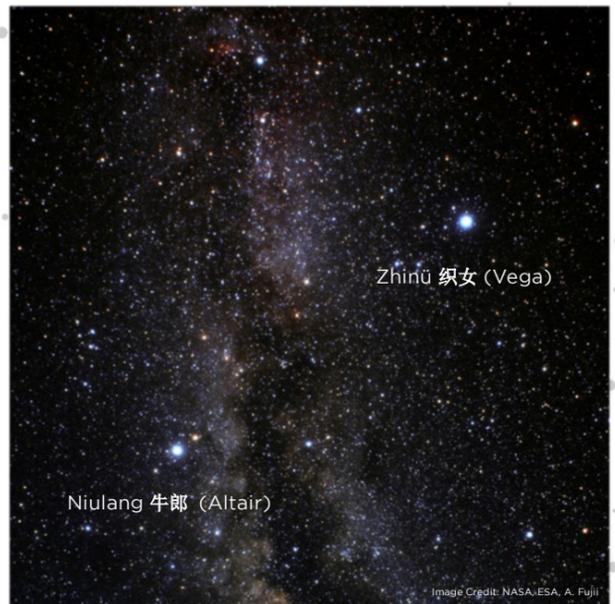
Name	七夕节 <small>chee-shee-jeah</small> qixijie	Traditional Meaning of the Festival	unmarried women asking the heavens for good fortune and handicraft skills
Date	7 th day of 7 th lunar month, typically a day in August	Traditional Customs of the Festival	needle-threading and other 'asking for skills' competitions

Origins

Across the world, people have always been mesmerised by the starry night sky.

Way back when the ancient Greeks first looked at the night sky in summer, they saw musical instruments, swans and eagles, and made up stories of legendary musicians and godly pets.

The ancient Chinese looked at the same stars, but their stories were different. Inspired by two very bright stars against the milky way, they imagined tales of Zhinü 织女 (lit. 'weaver') and Niulang 牛郎 (lit. 'cowherd') on opposite sides of a silver river, the earliest written references to which are about 2600 years old.



Moulting magpies

The Folktale

The story with its many variations has a strong romantic connotation:

The affection between Niulang and Zhinü was forbidden, so they were separated by the Silver River. However, once every year, on the 7th day of the 7th lunar month, a flock of magpies would form a bridge across the Silver River to reunite the two for one day.

Why the 7th? The number 7 has great symbolic significance in Chinese mythology, one of the reasons being the notion that the creator-goddess Nüwa 女娲, after having made chickens, dogs, pigs, sheep, cattle and horses, created humans on the seventh day.

Why magpies? Magpies naturally lose some of their feathers around the time of the Qixi festival to grow thicker ones in preparation for winter. Written records from the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) suggest that people believed magpies were 'going bald' because of Niulang and Zhinü walking over them to meet, making magpies the fortunate messengers and go-betweens they are still believed to be.

Qixi Festival Then

Traditionally, Qixi was a festival for women. Early written references suggest that Zhinü and Niulang did not have a strong romantic connotation at first; they represented traditional roles of men and women in China's pre-modern rural society.

On Qixi, women would ask their 'patron' Zhinü for good marital fortune and handicraft skills as these were very important, not only in terms of marriage but also for the rural economy.

Over time, Qixi became a widely celebrated festival and by the time of the Song dynasty (960-1279 AD), special Qixi merchandise was sold on dedicated markets.

Traditionally, women would hold 'asking for skills' competitions like needle-threading and the most skilful was believed to receive the best marital fortune from the heavens.



Traditional painting depicting women celebrating Qixi



Traditional needle-threading competition held today



Kissing contest held in Shanxi province



Advert offering discounts on Qixi gifts

Qixi Festival Now

Beginning in the early 20th century, the significance of Qixi and other traditions slowly began to fade, coinciding with the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, which made it more difficult to keep track of lunar festivals like Qixi.

In 2006 the Chinese government defined Qixi and other traditional festivals as intangible cultural heritage in need of protection.

Today, traditional Qixi with its original customs may still be celebrated in some places, but many put much heavier emphasis on the romantic symbolism, reimagining and recreating Qixi as 'Chinese Valentine's Day' for both women and men, especially in China's cities, where kissing contests, speed dating, and other events are marketed towards young generations of urban dwellers in love and those still looking to find it.