

Tuan and the Giant Snail: A Chinese Folktale

Hsieh Tuan had failed many times in his search for a bride. He was a handsome man of 18 who worked as a clerk for the local magistrate. All who knew him respected him for his diligence and honesty. He lived in a small house where he tended a small strip of rice plants and beans each evening.

Eventually, Tuan hired a matchmaker to find a wife for him. She suggested Miss Ch'en, the pretty daughter of a farmer on the outskirts of town. Unfortunately, Miss Ch'en was born in the year of the Cat while Tuan was born in the year of the Dog. Of course, a Cat and a Dog could never live together in peace.

Next, the matchmaker suggested a young woman whose name meant "wood." Tuan means "earth." Since wooden plows were used to turn the earth in a field, Tuan reasoned that he would never be master of his house if he married her.

Match after match was rejected because the omens and signs were not right or, if they were compatible, the parents thought he was too poor to marry their daughter. Tuan began to lose hope of ever finding a wife.

One night as Tuan was walking home from tending his field, he sat down to look at the full moon. As he was looking at the countryside bathed in the light of the moon, he noticed a rock he had not seen before. He bent down for a closer look. It was not a rock at all. It was the largest snail he had ever seen. This giant snail was the size of a bucket!

Tuan believed his sighting of the snail to be a sign of good luck. Carefully, Tuan lifted the snail and carried it home. He gently placed it and some tasty leaves in a large storage jar. In the morning, he was pleased to see that the snail had eaten well. He was still rejoicing at his good fortune when he went to work that morning.

After Tuan finished his work, he hurried home to check on his snail. When he entered his little house, he found the floor swept and a large washing bowl filled with hot water ready for his use. He also found that the table was set with his bowl and chopsticks. Steam was gently rising from a dish of rice and vegetables.

"How kind my neighbors are," said Tuan. "I wonder if it was my matchmaker, or perhaps Mrs. Wang down the road?"

Tuan quickly washed and sat down to a delicious meal. He determined that he must thank whoever was responsible for this pleasant surprise. However, when he inquired of both Mrs. Wang and his matchmaker, neither had any knowledge of the incident.

The next evening, Tuan came home to an even more delightful meal than the night before. Again, no one had any knowledge of who had favored him in this way.

At last, Tuan decided to discover his benefactor in order to thank him or her properly. He left his house at the usual time in the morning but hid by the fence where he could watch the house. At first everything was still. Then Tuan saw a glimpse of movement. A beautiful girl dressed in a silk robe slowly emerged from the snail's storage jar. She moved gracefully around the house, cleaning as she went.

Tuan rose from his hiding place and walked back to his house. He rushed to the storage jar and found that the giant snail was missing; only an empty shell remained. He found the girl cowering in a corner.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Why are you caring for my house?"

The girl remained silent and tried to run back to the storage jar. Tuan quickly stepped in front of the jar. "Who are you?" repeated Tuan.

"I am a magical fairy," she said. "My name is White Wave. The Lord of Heaven took pity on you because you are honest, polite, and hardworking, and yet still live alone. He sent me to look after you. I was to stay with you for 10 years while you grew rich and found a wife. Then I was free to return to my home. But you have done what no mortal should do: You have seen me in my true form. I must leave you now."

"Why must you leave? I meant you no harm. I only wished to thank you for your kindness," said Tuan. "Please stay."

"I cannot," said White Wave. "It is forbidden for any fairy to remain if she has been discovered. But I will give you some advice. Continue to work hard and cultivate your land. I will leave you the snail shell. Keep it in the jar until famine strikes. Then reach into the shell and you will find it filled with rice. Each morning there will be enough rice to sustain you until the crops improve." Suddenly, a great wind appeared. White Wave ran gracefully out the door and spread her arms wide. The wind carried her up to the heavens. Then, as quickly as it began, the wind stopped.

Tuan built a small shrine to the fairy and did not forget to sacrifice there on the feast days. He never became wealthy, but he had enough to eat. And he eventually found a young woman who made him a very good wife. Whenever he looked at the storage jar, he was reminded of his good fortune.