

Wild Goose Lake
Submitted by Lucia Mello
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who has performed it as a marionette play.

This version was adapted by the editor from a tale in Folk Tales of China (1965), edited by Wolfram Eberhard. The story is not, in fact, "Chinese," but comes from a minority group living in southwest China, the I tribes of Yun-nan. However, the Dragon King is frequently found in Chinese tales, and the importance given to folksinging is typical of many groups in southern and western China.

Long ago in China, a young girl lived in a small village at the foot of Horse Ear Mountain. Her name was Sea Girl and she lived with her father, a hardworking farmer.

No rain had fallen for many months; the crops hung limp and brown, dying for want of water. It seemed there could be no harvest, and food was already scarce. So each day Sea Girl went up to Horse Ear Mountain and cut bamboo to make brooms to sell.

One day when Sea Girl had climbed higher on the mountain than ever before in her search for bamboo, she saw a large blue lake gleaming in the sun. The water of the lake was clear and still. Not a single fallen leaf marred its surface, for whenever a leaf fell from the trees surrounding the lake, a large wild goose flew down and carried it away. This was the Wild Goose Lake, which Sea Girl had heard the elders speak of in the village tales.

Sea Girl carried her bamboo home, thinking of the clean blue water of the lake and how badly the people needed water for their crops.

The next day she took her axe to cut bamboo and again climbed high in the mountain. She hoped she could make an outlet from Wild Goose Lake. The village harvest would be saved if the lake trickled down the mountain in a gentle stream to the farms below.

She began to walk around the lake, following the narrow sandy shore. But the lake was surrounded by jagged rocks, high cliffs, and dense forest. There seemed to be no place to make an outlet for a stream.

Then, late in the day she came upon a thick stone gate. Her axe was of no help, and although she used all her strength, the gate could not be moved. Wearily she dropped her pile of bamboo cuttings and sat down next to the gate. All was still, and the lake was a mirror reflecting the dark green pines. A wild goose swooped high in the sky, then glided down to stand on the ground nearby. "Sea Girl," said the Wild Goose, "you will need the Golden Key to open the gate."

Before she could ask where she could find the Golden Key, the wild goose spread her wings and soared away over the lake. Then Sea Girl noticed a small keyhole in the stone gate, but there was no key.

Sea Girl walked on along the shore of the lake, searching for the Golden Key. She came to a forest of cypress trees and sitting on a cypress branch was a brilliant parrot of scarlet and green. "Parrot," she called, "do you know where I can find the Golden Key that will open the stone gate?"

The parrot answered, "You must first find the third daughter of the Dragon King, for the Dragon King guards the Golden Key to Wild Goose Lake." With a quick whirring of wings the parrot flew off into the forest.

Sea Girl walked on searching for the Dragon King's third daughter. In a pine grove close to the lake, she saw a peacock sitting on a low branch. "Peacock, peacock," she called, "where can I find the Dragon King's third daughter?"

"The Dragon King's third daughter loves songs. If you sing the songs your village people sing, she will come forth from the lake." The peacock dropped a feather at her feet and flew away.

Sea Girl picked up the feather and began to sing. Her voice was clear, and as fresh as a lark's song. At first she sang about the snowflakes drifting on the mountains, but the Dragon King's third daughter did not appear. She sang of green reeds bending in the wind. Still the third daughter did not come; the lake lay clear and still. Then Sea Girl sang of pale blossoming flowers on the hills.

Near the shore the water broke into a glittering spray, and the third daughter came up out of the lake to stand before Sea Girl. "Deep in the lake I heard your songs," she said. "They are so strange and beautiful that I could not resist them. My father does not allow us to meet humans, but I have come to you secretly. I, too, love songs, and your songs are finer than mine."

Sea Girl asked, "Are you the third daughter of the Dragon King?" "Yes, I am Third Daughter. My father and his people guard Wild Goose Lake. Who are you? Why do you sing your songs here?"

"I am Sea Girl. I live in a village at the foot of Horse Ear Mountain, and I have come all this long way to find the Golden Key which opens the stone gate of the lake. The people in my village are hungry and need water to save their harvest."

Third Daughter hesitated, then she said, "I would like to help you. The Golden Key is kept in my father's treasure room, deep in a rock cave. Outside on the cliff a huge eagle guards it, and he would tear to pieces anyone who tried to enter." She pointed to a rock cliff a little distance off. On the cliff perched an eagle nodding in the sun.

Sea Girl asked, "Would your father give us the Golden Key?" "He will not help humans," sighed Third Daughter. "That is why he had the stone gate made to keep in the lake water. You must wait until my father leaves his palace and goes off. Then perhaps we can lure the eagle away from the treasure room." So Sea Girl made a bed of soft pine branches under the trees and Third Daughter brought her fresh fish to eat.

A few days later she said to Sea Girl, "My father has left his palace. Now is the time to search for the key, but I don't know how you will slip past the eagle."

"We will sing to him," said Sea Girl. The two girls moved lightly and quietly closer to where the eagle perched high on the rock cliff. Third Daughter pointed out the entrance to the cave below. Tall ferns and reeds hid the girls from sight, and they began to sing. Each took turns singing the loveliest and most enchanting songs they knew.

At first the eagle just peered around curiously. Then, drawn by the strange haunting sounds, he moved down from the cliff in search of the source. Third Daughter crept quietly further and further away, and the eagle followed the enchanting sound of her voice.

Sea Girl slipped into the treasure cave to search for the Golden Key. At first her eyes were dazzled, for the room was filled on all sides with gold, silver, and sparkling jewels. But Sea Girl did not touch the treasure. She searched only for the Golden Key.

Just as she was about to give up in despair, she saw a small plain wooden box sitting on a shelf in the corner. Quickly she opened it and peered in. There lay the gleaming Golden Key!

Sea Girl took the key and returned to where Third Daughter waited. When the delicate soaring melody of song ceased, the eagle shook himself, spread his wings, and sailed back to his cliff.

Then Sea Girl and Third Daughter hastened back to the stone gate. The Golden Key fit perfectly into the keyhole, and the gate swung open. At once the water rushed out in a leaping cascade, down the mountainside to the village. In a very short time all the canals and ditches of the farms were full and overflowing with water.

Third Daughter saw that the village would soon be flooded and she called out, "Sea Girl, Sea Girl, there is too much water. The crops will be washed away and lost!" Sea Girl quickly threw in piles of bamboo she had left earlier at the stone gate. But that slowed the water only a little. Then the two girls rolled boulders and large rocks into the stream until the water slowed down to a small bubbling brook. Now they knew the village would always have a steady supply of water.

When the Dragon King returned and found the Golden Key was gone, he was very angry. He banished Third Daughter from the palace. But Third Daughter went to live very happily with Sea Girl, and they sang their songs together as they worked.

So beautiful were their songs that each year ever after, on the twenty-second day of the seventh moon, all the women of the surrounding villages came together to sing the songs they knew and to celebrate the heroic deed of Sea Girl.