The Chinese Version Of Cinderella

The tale of Cinderella is well known around the world, telling the story of a young woman suffering unjust treatment, whose circumstances are suddenly changed to incredible fortune. However, from its origin around two thousand years ago to now, there have been countless variations on the popular folk tale, each with their own intricacies resulting from social and cultural influences of the world it was set in at the time.

One of the earliest versions of the Cinderella tale known today is believed to have originated from China, during the Tang dynasty (616-907 CE), and was first published in an anthology of stories titled Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang. The tale of Ye Xian bears many similarities to the modern version of Cinderella, featuring the themes of a poor hard working girl who was forced to live with her mean family, a magical helper, a precious lost slipper and royalty seeking a wife. However, there are many differences as well, due to the cultural and social differences of the time and place it was published. Ye Xian, the Cinderella of the tale, had a father who was a cave chief. Cave dwellings were common in rural China during the Tang dynasty, and are even still prevalent in today's world, with over 30 million people still living in cave dwellings in China. It is believed that cave dwellings were mainly developed during the Han dynasty, with construction techniques progressively improving during the Sui and Tang dynasties. The tale was likely often told within these communities, and then recorded later on. The tale continues with Ye Xian finding a golden fish that she fed and nurtured which eventually grew too big, so she had to move it into a pond. During the Tang dynasty, people began to hold carp in ponds and keep them as pets. Some carp had a genetic mutation which caused them to be coloured gold.

The golden variety was bred due to the resemblance to the precious metal, a fact amplified by how fish were regarded as a symbol for prosperity due to the similar sounds of the Chinese characters. Ye Xian's actions were most likely inspired by this practice, as it was a common part of Chinese culture. Unfortunately, the fish was killed after being tricked by Ye Xian's evil stepmother. An old man told her that when she needed to, she could pray to the bones and have her wish come true. The worship of magical fish was common in some areas of China, as many people who lived near the coast had to depend on fishing for food. Furthermore, there are several Chinese myths describing the transformation of carp into dragons, which occurs when they jump through a 'dragon gate'. This is presumably the inspiration for the magical bones. As in all versions of the tale, she prayed for clothes and attended the festival, but then lost her shoe. The shoe was found by a merchant and later sold to a king, who, fascinated by the small size of the shoe, issued a search to find the maiden whose foot fit the shoe and proclaimed he would marry her. The king's fascination with the size of the shoe may have stemmed from cultural reasons in China at the time. Women with very small feet were highly valued, tying in with the practice of foot binding, which was first carried out on girls during the Tang dynasty to restrict normal growth and make feet as small as possible. The tale ends with the marriage between the king and Ye Xian, another common theme in versions of the tale. The tale bears many similarities to other versions of Cinderella, yet is undeniably distinctive due to differences stemming from cultural and social influences.