
CULTURE / ORIGINS

The thread that never breaks

More than a thousand years ago, someone told for the first time the story of an invisible thread binding two people destined to meet.

The legend crossed dynasties, crossed the sea to Japan, and today appears in animated film, on celebrity bracelets, and in temples where couples still go to tie a real thread. This is its story, told on its own terms.

THE ORIGIN, IN THE TANG DYNASTY

The oldest known written record of the legend appears between 827 and 836 AD, in the book *Xu You Guai Lu* (續幽怪錄), a collection of supernatural tales compiled by the writer Li Fuyan during the Tang dynasty. The central story is that of a young man named Wei Gu.

One night, Wei Gu comes upon an old man sitting in the moonlight, leafing through a thick book and holding a sack of red cords. The old man introduces himself as Yue Lao — “the Old Man Under the Moon” — and explains that the book holds everyone’s marriage destiny, and that the red cords, tied around the ankles of two people, guarantee that one day they will meet, no matter the distance nor how long it takes.

Curious, Wei Gu asks who the woman destined for him is. Yue Lao points to a poor girl, the daughter of a vegetable seller, crossing the square. Unsettled by the answer, Wei Gu throws a stone in the girl’s direction and walks away, not believing — or not wanting to believe — what he has just heard.

Years later, now an adult, Wei Gu marries. On his wedding night, lifting the bride’s veil, he finds a beautiful woman with a small scar on her eyebrow. He asks where the mark came from. She tells him: as a child, an unknown boy threw a stone at her, in the square, for no reason at all. It was the same girl. The thread, tied decades earlier by an old man under the moon, had been doing its work the whole time.

WHAT THE THREAD STANDS FOR

The legend is not only a love story — it is a way of explaining why certain encounters feel inevitable, even when nothing at the time seemed to point towards them. The thread can stretch across whole continents. It can stay tangled through years of wrong choices, arguments, distance. **But it never breaks.** That is the legend's guarantee: the meeting will happen, even if the road there makes no sense at all while it is being lived.

In the original Chinese tradition, the thread binds the ankle. When the story spread to Japan over the following centuries, through trade routes and cultural exchange that intensified during the Tang dynasty itself, the image was adapted — and in the Japanese imagination the *akai ito* (赤い糸), the red thread, came to bind the little finger.

WHERE IT LIVES TODAY

The legend never stopped being told, and it is still being retold at full strength in the present.

The Japanese filmmaker Makoto Shinkai used the red thread as the central symbol of *Your Name* (*Kimi no Na wa*), one of the most-watched animated films in Japan's history, about two protagonists bound by a connection that crosses time and space in a way neither of them can explain rationally — the same promise of Yue Lao, told again, for a new generation.

The film *Crazy Rich Asians* took a scene inside a Yue Lao temple to screens worldwide, introducing the god and the tradition to an audience that may never have heard of him. Today, temples dedicated to Yue Lao still receive visitors who come to tie a real red thread, asking the “Old Man Under the Moon” for help finding whoever their own threads already point to.

A LEGEND STILL BEING WRITTEN

What makes this story so resistant to time is not only the poetry of the image — it is the idea behind it: that there is a connection between things, even when nobody is looking, even when the road there seems confusing, late, senseless while it is happening.

Twelve hundred years after Li Fuyan first wrote the story of Wei Gu, someone, somewhere, is tying a real red thread, or watching Shinkai's film for the first time, or simply telling this story to a child before bed. The thread, as the legend promises, keeps stretching — and never breaks.

BOX — THE LEGEND, IN NUMBERS AND DATES

618–907 AD	Tang dynasty, the period the legend originates in
827–836 AD	Oldest known written record, in <i>Xu You Guai Lu</i> , by Li Fuyan
China	The thread binds the ankle — the original tradition
Japan	<i>Akai ito</i> (赤い糸) — the thread binds the little finger, in the Japanese adaptation
2016	<i>Your Name</i> , by Makoto Shinkai, one of the most-watched animated films in Japan's history
2018	<i>Crazy Rich Asians</i> takes a Yue Lao temple scene to screens worldwide

ABOUT ZTHEX

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