Eurasian
Research Unit
Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka

Love, Duty, and Moral Order Across Cultures: An Anthropological Comparison of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl and Selected Sri Lankan Narratives

Jayarathne, S. D. Y.

Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya, Ragama, Sri Lanka.

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received : 14 September 2026
Revised : 07 October 2026
Published : 23 October 2026

Keywords:

Folklore, Chinese Mythology, Gender Roles, Symbolic Anthropology, Structuralism, Myth and Ritual, Cultural Comparison

***Corresponding Author**

Email: yeshani.jayarathna@gmail.com

DOI: *10.68283/neijh.v1.i2.a09*

How to cite: *Jayarathne, S. D. Y. (2026) 'Love, Duty, and Moral Order Across Cultures: An Anthropological Comparison of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl and Selected Sri Lankan Narratives', Nile - Eurasian International Journal of Humanities, 1(2), pp. 129 – 144. https://doi.org/10.68283/neijh.v1.i2.a09*

ABSTRACT

Folklore provides an important anthropological lens for examining how societies construct, transmit, and reinterpret cultural meanings concerning social relationships, morality, gender, and cosmological order. This study presents a qualitative narrative review of the Chinese Cowherd and Weaver Girl (Niulang and Zhinu) narrative in focused comparison with two selected Sri Lankan traditions: the story of Prince Saliya and Asokamala and the Pattini tradition. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology and Geertz's symbolic anthropology, the study examines five interconnected dimensions: narrative oppositions and social order; gender and labour; love, social hierarchy, and moral discipline; cosmology and environmental meaning; and ritual and cultural expression. Relevant literature was identified through Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus, supplemented by backward and forward citation tracking, and was analysed thematically. The comparison demonstrates that the selected narratives address recurring concerns involving individual desire, social obligation, gender expectations, moral order, and relationships between human life and wider cosmological or religious systems. However, these concerns are organized and resolved differently. The Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative places personal love within a celestial and ritual framework, while Saliya and Asokamala foreground the relationship between personal attachment and social hierarchy. The Pattini tradition provides a contrasting framework centred on gendered virtue, moral authority, religious symbolism, and ritual practice. The study argues that these narratives should not be treated as culturally equivalent versions of the same story; rather, their comparison reveals how comparable social concerns acquire culturally specific meanings. The study contributes to comparative folklore and anthropology by demonstrating the value of combining structural and symbolic approaches to examine both recurring thematic tensions and culturally distinctive forms of interpretation.

1. Introduction

Folklore constitutes a vital domain through which societies encode, transmit, and reinterpret cultural values, social norms, and cosmological understandings across generations. Within anthropology, myths and other forms of folklore are not merely narrative artifacts but symbolic systems through which communities organize understandings of human relationships, morality, social order, and the natural and supernatural worlds (Bascom, 1965; Geertz, 1973). The study of mythology therefore provides an important means of examining how cultural meanings are produced, maintained, and transformed across generations. Comparative approaches are particularly valuable because they allow anthropologists to distinguish between recurring human concerns and culturally specific ways of interpreting those concerns.

One of the enduring narratives within Chinese mythology is the legend of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl (Niulang and Zhinu). The story describes the relationship between a mortal cowherd and a celestial weaver whose love results in their separation across the Milky Way and whose reunion is permitted once each year. Associated with the Qixi Festival, the narrative has been interpreted in relation to love, gendered labour, moral obligation, cosmological order, and seasonal and astronomical symbolism (Eberhard, 2002; Ebrey, 1993; Krupp, 1991; Yang et al., 2005). From an anthropological perspective, the significance of the legend extends beyond its romantic dimension because its characters, actions, and ritual associations provide symbolic representations of social responsibilities, gender expectations, and relationships between human experience and cosmic order.

The present study places the Cowherd and Weaver Girl legend in comparison with two selected Sri Lankan narrative traditions: the story of Prince Saliya and Asokamala and the Pattini tradition. The story of Saliya and Asokamala provides a particularly relevant comparative case because it centres on the tension between romantic attachment and social hierarchy. In the narrative tradition, Prince Saliya, the son of King Dutugemunu, chooses Asokamala, a woman of lower social status, despite the implications of this relationship for his royal position. The narrative has therefore been interpreted as a story in which personal love challenges established expectations concerning status, marriage, and royal succession. The Pattini tradition provides a different but complementary comparative case. Rather than functioning primarily as a romantic love narrative, Pattini represents a complex religious and cultural tradition in which ideas of womanhood, marital virtue, morality, social order, ritual practice, and divine power are interconnected. Obeyesekere's anthropological study demonstrates the extensive ritual and social dimensions of the Pattini cult in Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere, 1984).

These narratives have been selected not because they represent Sri Lankan folklore as a whole, but because they provide analytically relevant cases through which different dimensions of the Chinese narrative can be examined. The Saliya–Asokamala story offers a basis for examining the relationship between love, social status, duty, and individual choice, whereas the Pattini tradition provides a basis for examining gendered virtue, moral discipline, ritual practice, and the relationship between myth and religious life. The comparison therefore focuses on shared analytical themes rather than presumed cultural equivalence. In particular, the study examines how love and desire are negotiated in relation to social obligations, how gendered expectations are represented, how moral order is constructed, and how mythological narratives are connected to cosmological and ritual frameworks.

From a structuralist perspective, the comparison is informed by Lévi-Strauss's argument that myths organize human experience through oppositional structures (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). The Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative, for example, can be examined through oppositions such as heaven and earth, duty and desire, and separation and reunion. The Saliya–Asokamala narrative similarly presents a tension between personal attachment and social hierarchy, although the resolution differs from that of the Chinese narrative. A symbolic anthropological perspective, informed by Geertz (1973), further enables examination of how characters, occupations, ritual practices, and moral actions acquire culturally specific meanings. From this perspective, the comparison does not assume that similar narrative themes have identical meanings in different societies; instead, it asks how comparable human concerns are symbolically organized and culturally interpreted.

Although previous scholarship has examined the Cowherd and Weaver Girl tradition in relation to Chinese mythology, gender, cosmology, ritual, and social values, and Sri Lankan scholarship has separately examined narratives and traditions such as Saliya and Asokamala and Pattini, comparatively focused anthropological analysis bringing these selected traditions into dialogue remains limited. The present study addresses this gap by examining the two Sri Lankan cases alongside the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative through structuralist and symbolic-anthropological perspectives. Rather than attempting to generalize about Chinese or Sri Lankan cultures as homogeneous entities, the study seeks to identify both convergent thematic structures and culturally specific interpretations of love, duty, gender, moral order, cosmology, and ritual.

Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) examine the structural and symbolic dimensions of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl legend; (2) explore representations of gendered social relations and labour within the selected narratives; (3) examine the relationship between mythology, cosmology, ritual practice,

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

and moral order; and (4) comparatively analyze the Cowherd and Weaver Girl legend, the Saliya–Asokamala narrative, and the Pattini tradition in order to identify similarities, differences, and culturally specific ways in which love, social obligation, gender, and moral values are represented.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Cowherd and Weaver Girl in Chinese Mythological Scholarship

The legend of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl (Niulang and Zhinu) occupy an important position within Chinese mythology and folklore and has been interpreted from historical, literary, cosmological, and cultural perspectives. The narrative centres on the relationship between Niulang, a mortal cowherd, and Zhinu, a celestial weaving maiden. Their relationship is disrupted by the separation between the human and celestial realms, represented symbolically by the Milky Way, while their annual reunion is associated with the Qixi Festival. Yang et al. (2005) situate the narrative within the wider corpus of Chinese mythology, demonstrating the relationship between mythological figures, cosmological ideas, and traditional cultural practices. Eberhard (2002) similarly highlights the importance of symbolic meanings in Chinese traditions, suggesting that mythological narratives can communicate culturally embedded understandings that extend beyond the literal events of a story.

Previous scholarship also demonstrates that the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative cannot be understood exclusively as a romantic tale. The occupational identities of its protagonists are significant to its symbolic construction. Zhinu's association with weaving connects femininity, skill, productivity, and social responsibility, while Niulang's identity as a cowherd links him to agricultural labour and the human world. Ebrey (1993) provides a broader historical context for understanding gendered expectations surrounding women's work, marriage, and domestic responsibilities in Chinese society. Although such historical scholarship does not focus exclusively on the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative, it provides an important contextual framework for interpreting the gendered symbolism associated with Zhinu and her role as a celestial weaver.

The astronomical dimensions of the narrative have also attracted attention. Krupp (1991) discusses the cultural meanings attached to celestial bodies and mythological interpretations of the stars, providing a basis for understanding the relationship between the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative and observations of the night sky. The association of Zhinu and Niulang with Vega and Altair, separated by the Milky Way, illustrates how astronomical phenomena can become incorporated into cultural narratives and seasonal traditions. The Qixi Festival consequently represents an important example of the interaction between mythology, calendrical time, ritual practice, and social meaning.

From an anthropological perspective, these interpretations indicate that the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative operates simultaneously at several levels. It functions as a story of romantic attachment, a representation of gendered labour, an explanation of celestial relationships, and a symbolic account of the tension between individual desire and social or cosmic order. However, much of the existing literature approaches these dimensions separately through mythology, symbolism, gender, astronomy, or ritual. A comparative anthropological analysis can therefore contribute by bringing these dimensions together and examining how the narrative's meanings become more visible when placed alongside culturally different traditions.

2.2 Sri Lankan Folklore and the Saliya–Asokamala Narrative

Sri Lankan folklore contains a diverse range of narratives through which social relationships, morality, religious values, status, gender, and cultural ideals have been represented and transmitted. Folklore scholarship has emphasized the importance of such narratives in understanding the beliefs and cultural values embedded within Sri Lankan society (Claus & Korom, 2003; Ihalagama, 2019; Ratnapāla, 1991). Within this broader tradition, the story of Prince Saliya and Asokamala provides a particularly relevant case for comparison with the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative because it places romantic attachment in tension with social status and expected obligations.

The Saliya–Asokamala narrative concerns Prince Saliya, the son of King Dutugemunu, and Asokamala, a woman described in the tradition as belonging to a socially marginalized group. The narrative is significant because Saliya chooses his relationship with Asokamala despite the consequences of this choice for his position within the royal succession. The Mahāvaṃsa tradition records Saliya's renunciation of the throne in connection with his relationship with Asokamala, making the narrative particularly relevant to questions concerning love, social hierarchy, duty, and personal choice.

For the purposes of the present study, the importance of the Saliya–Asokamala narrative does not depend on treating it simply as a historical account. Rather, it is examined as a culturally transmitted narrative through which tensions between individual attachment and social expectations are represented. This makes it analytically comparable with the Cowherd and Weaver Girl legend, where romantic attachment similarly conflicts with an established social and cosmological order. The two narratives, however, differ significantly in their resolutions. In the Chinese legend, the lovers are separated and their reunion is restricted to a particular temporal occasion, whereas the Saliya–Asokamala tradition is associated with the

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

prince's rejection of succession in favour of his relationship.

This difference is particularly important from an anthropological perspective. The comparison does not suggest that Chinese and Sri Lankan societies share an identical understanding of love or social order. Instead, it allows examination of how a broadly comparable tension between personal desire and institutional obligation can be narratively resolved according to different cultural frameworks. The Saliya–Asokamala narrative therefore provides an appropriate case for examining the relationship between love, social hierarchy, and individual agency within the comparative framework of this study.

Table 1. Comparative Anthropological Analysis of the Selected Chinese and Sri Lankan Narratives

Analytical Dimension	Cowherd and Weaver Girl (China)	Saliya and Asokamala (Sri Lanka)	Pattini Tradition (Sri Lanka)
Central narrative concern	Love, separation, reunion, and the tension between personal desire and cosmic/social order	Personal attachment, social status, hierarchy, and social expectations	Virtue, suffering, moral conduct, justice, and religious authority
Principal structural tension	Love vs. duty; individual desire vs. cosmic order; union vs. separation	Personal choice vs. social hierarchy and obligation	Virtue vs. transgression; suffering vs. justice; individual experience vs. moral order
Gender and social expectations	Gendered identities are associated with weaving and cowherding, linking relationships with labour and social responsibility	Gender and intimate relationships are connected with expectations concerning status, marriage, and social position	Female virtue, fidelity, moral authority, and religious significance are central to the tradition
Social order	Social and cosmic order regulates the relationship between the protagonists	Social hierarchy and status influence the meaning of personal relationships	Moral and religious principles provide a framework for evaluating conduct and social order
Cosmological / symbolic dimension	Strong celestial symbolism; the protagonists are associated with astronomical bodies	Primarily associated with social and cultural memory rather than an equivalent celestial framework	Strong religious and symbolic associations connected with the Pattini tradition
Ritual / cultural expression	Associated with Qixi and recurring ritual and cultural practices	Primarily maintained through narrative and cultural memory	Embedded within religious and ritual practices associated with Pattini worship
Resolution of tension	Separation is incorporated into a cyclical pattern of reunion within a wider cosmic order	The narrative negotiates personal attachment in relation to social hierarchy and expectations	Suffering and moral conflict are transformed into religious and moral authority
Anthropological significance	Demonstrates how romantic attachment can symbolize duty, social regulation, and cosmological order	Illustrates the relationship between intimate relationships and social hierarchy	Demonstrates how gender, morality, suffering, and religious symbolism can become interconnected
Key analytical perspective	Structural oppositions and symbolic cosmology	Social hierarchy, relationship, and cultural memory	Gender, morality, religious symbolism, and ritual
Principal supporting sources	Eberhard (2002); Ebrey (1993); Krupp (1991); Yang et al. (2005)	Claus and Korom (2003); Ihalagama (2019);	Obeyesekere (1984)

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

Analytical Dimension	Cowherd and Weaver Girl (China)	Saliya and Asokamala (Sri Lanka)	Pattini Tradition (Sri Lanka)
		Ratnapāla (1991)	

2.3 The Pattini Tradition, Gender, Morality, and Ritual

A second Sri Lankan comparative tradition considered in this study is the Pattini tradition. Unlike the Saliya–Asokamala narrative, the Pattini tradition is not treated here primarily as a romantic love story. Instead, it provides an important comparative context for examining gender, moral virtue, social expectations, myth, and ritual practice. Obeyesekere's (1984) anthropological study of the Pattini cult demonstrates the complexity of Pattini as a religious and cultural figure, whose representations encompass womanhood, marriage, motherhood, morality, ritual, and divine power. His extensive ethnographic and historical analysis demonstrates that Pattini mythology cannot be separated from the ritual practices through which the tradition is reproduced and interpreted.

The Pattini tradition is particularly relevant to the present study because it illustrates how gendered ideals can become embedded within religious narratives and ritual practices. Pattini's representation as a woman associated with marital fidelity, virtue, suffering, and divine authority provides a different cultural configuration of gender and moral order from that represented by Zhinu in the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative. In the Chinese narrative, Zhinu's identity as a weaver is connected with feminine productivity and responsibility, while her relationship with Niulang creates a conflict between personal desire and her prescribed obligations. In the Pattini tradition, female virtue is similarly connected with moral and social expectations, but these meanings are expressed through a broader religious and ritual system (Obeyesekere, 1984).

The anthropological significance of Pattini also lies in the relationship between narrative and lived cultural practice. Obeyesekere (1984) demonstrates that the Pattini cult incorporates myths, ritual performances, worship, healing practices, and local variations. This provides an important contrast with the Qixi tradition associated with the Cowherd and Weaver Girl. While both traditions demonstrate the transformation of narrative meanings into ritual practice, they do so within different religious and cultural frameworks. The comparison therefore allows the study to examine not only what myths say about gender and morality but also how mythological meanings may be reproduced through ritual action.

Other anthropological studies of Sri Lankan ritual traditions similarly demonstrate the importance of examining mythology within its social and performative contexts. Kapferer (1983), for example, emphasizes the relationship between myth, ritual performance, social organization, and conceptions of cosmic order in Sri Lankan religious practices. Such scholarship supports a broader anthropological understanding in which myths are not isolated stories but components of systems of meaning enacted through social and ritual practices.

2.4 Anthropological Approaches to Myth: Structuralism and Symbolic Anthropology

The anthropological interpretation of myth has been strongly influenced by structuralist and symbolic approaches. Lévi-Strauss (1963) proposed that myths can be examined as systems of relationships organized through fundamental oppositions. From this perspective, the significance of a myth lies not only in its individual characters or events but also in the relationships established between contrasting categories. The Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative provides several potentially significant oppositions, including heaven and earth, celestial and human, duty and desire, and separation and reunion. The Saliya–Asokamala narrative similarly presents tensions between love and social hierarchy, although its narrative resolution differs. Structural analysis therefore provides a framework for identifying comparable patterns without assuming that their meanings are identical.

Symbolic anthropology provides a complementary approach. Geertz (1973) conceptualizes culture as a system of meanings expressed through symbols, practices, and shared interpretations. From this perspective, the occupations, characters, ritual practices, and moral actions represented in myths can be examined as culturally meaningful symbols. The Weaver Girl, for example, can be interpreted not simply as an individual character but as a symbolic representation through which ideas concerning feminine skill, labour, discipline, and social responsibility are communicated. Similarly, Pattini's representation as a morally powerful female figure provides a culturally specific symbolic configuration of femininity, virtue, suffering, and religious authority (Geertz, 1973; Obeyesekere, 1984).

A combination of structural and symbolic approaches is therefore particularly useful for the present study. Structuralism facilitates comparison of recurring oppositional relationships, while symbolic anthropology helps explain why similar themes may acquire different meanings within particular cultural contexts. The two approaches consequently allow the analysis to move beyond identifying superficial similarities between narratives and instead examine how cultural systems organize and interpret themes such as love, duty, gender, morality, cosmology, and ritual.

2.5 Comparative Perspective and Research Gap

Existing scholarship provides substantial insight into the Cowherd and Weaver Girl tradition, particularly in relation to

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

Chinese mythology, cosmology, gendered labour, astronomy, and ritual (Eberhard, 2002; Ebrey, 1993; Krupp, 1991; Yang et al., 2005). Similarly, scholarship on Sri Lankan folklore and religious traditions has examined narratives, ritual systems, gendered morality, and the cultural significance of figures such as Pattini (Claus & Korom, 2003; Obeyesekere, 1984; Ratnapāla, 1991). The Saliya–Asokamala narrative also provides an important Sri Lankan example through which relationships between romantic attachment, social status, and personal choice can be examined.

However, these bodies of scholarship have largely developed within their respective cultural and disciplinary contexts. The literature reviewed here indicates a need for a more focused comparative examination of how similar themes are structured and interpreted across the selected Chinese and Sri Lankan narratives. In particular, limited attention has been given to bringing the Cowherd and Weaver Girl legend into direct dialogue with the Saliya–Asokamala narrative and the Pattini tradition through a combined structuralist and symbolic-anthropological framework.

The present study addresses this gap through a focused rather than comprehensive cross-cultural comparison. It does not attempt to represent either Chinese or Sri Lankan folklore as culturally homogeneous, nor does it claim that the selected narratives are equivalent. Instead, the comparison examines five analytical dimensions: (1) structural oppositions and social order, (2) gender and labour, (3) love, social hierarchy and moral discipline, (4) cosmology and environmental meaning, and (5) ritual practice. By examining these dimensions across the selected narratives, the study seeks to distinguish between recurring thematic concerns and culturally specific ways of interpreting and resolving them. This approach contributes to anthropological understandings of myth by demonstrating how comparative analysis can reveal both shared human concerns and the culturally distinctive systems of meaning through which those concerns are organized.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative literature review to examine the anthropological meanings of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl (Niulang and Zhinu) legend and to compare these meanings with selected Sri Lankan narrative traditions. A narrative review was considered appropriate because the study seeks to interpret cultural meanings, symbols, social values, and narrative structures across interdisciplinary sources rather than to estimate the effect of a specific intervention or produce a statistical synthesis. Narrative approaches allow researchers to bring together scholarship from different disciplinary traditions and develop an interpretive understanding of complex cultural phenomena (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). In the present study, the approach enabled the integration of literature from folklore studies, anthropology, mythology, gender studies, religious studies, and cultural history.

The study was guided by two complementary anthropological perspectives. Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach was used to examine oppositional relationships embedded within the narratives, while Clifford Geertz's symbolic anthropology was used to interpret the cultural meanings attached to characters, occupations, ritual practices, moral values, and cosmological representations (Geertz, 1973; Lévi-Strauss, 1963). A comparative analytical perspective was subsequently applied to examine similarities and differences between the Chinese and selected Sri Lankan narratives.

3.2 Literature Search and Source Selection

Relevant literature was identified through searches of Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus, supplemented by backward and forward citation tracking from relevant publications. The search strategy used combinations of keywords relating to the study's principal themes, including “Cowherd and Weaver Girl,” “Niulang Zhinu,” “Chinese folklore,” “Qixi Festival,” “Sri Lankan folklore,” “Saliya and Asokamala,” “Pattini,” “anthropology of myth,” “myth and ritual,” “gender and folklore,” and “symbolic anthropology.” The search was designed to identify literature addressing the narratives themselves as well as their wider social, cultural, gendered, cosmological, and ritual meanings.

Sources were selected according to their relevance to the research questions and analytical themes. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, established academic publications, and authoritative works on Chinese mythology, Sri Lankan folklore, anthropology, religion, gender, and ritual. Sources were included when they provided substantive discussion of the selected narratives or addressed theoretical and contextual issues relevant to their comparative interpretation. Additional relevant sources were identified through the reference lists of key publications and through citation tracking.

The review did not seek to establish a statistically exhaustive corpus of all publications on Chinese or Sri Lankan folklore. Instead, source selection was guided by analytical relevance and scholarly authority, consistent with the interpretive purpose of a narrative review.

3.3 Selection of the Comparative Narratives

The comparative analysis focused on one Chinese narrative tradition and two selected Sri Lankan traditions. The principal Chinese case was the Cowherd and Weaver Girl (Niulang and Zhinu) legend, including scholarly discussions of its associated Qixi Festival, cosmological symbolism, gendered labour, and moral meanings. The Chinese literature examined in the study includes established scholarly works addressing Chinese mythology, symbolism, gender, astronomy, and cultural practice

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

(Eberhard, 2002; Ebrey, 1993; Krupp, 1991; Yang et al., 2005).

Two Sri Lankan narrative traditions were selected for comparative purposes: the story of Prince Saliya and Asokamala and the Pattini tradition. The Saliya–Asokamala narrative was selected because it provides a culturally specific example through which the relationship between romantic attachment, social status, personal choice, and social obligation can be examined. The Pattini tradition was selected because it provides a different but complementary context for examining gendered virtue, moral discipline, symbolic femininity, religious meaning, and ritual practice (Obeyesekere, 1984; Ratnapāla, 1991).

These narratives were selected as analytical cases rather than as representative samples of Chinese or Sri Lankan folklore as a whole. The purpose of their selection was to provide sufficiently distinct cultural contexts through which comparable themes could be examined. Consequently, the study does not assume that the narratives have equivalent origins, functions, or meanings. Instead, the comparison focuses on specific dimensions that are relevant to anthropological analysis, particularly love and duty, gender and labour, social hierarchy, moral order, cosmology, and ritual practice.

3.4 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The analysis was guided primarily by structuralist anthropology and symbolic anthropology. Lévi-Strauss's structuralist perspective was used to identify binary oppositions and relational structures within the narratives. Particular attention was given to oppositions such as heaven and earth, human and celestial, duty and desire, separation and reunion, and individual choice and social obligation (Lévi-Strauss, 1963).

Geertz's (1973) symbolic-anthropological perspective was used to examine how culturally meaningful symbols communicate and reproduce social values. Under this framework, characters, occupations, ritual practices, gendered activities, cosmological elements, and moral actions were interpreted as components of wider systems of cultural meaning. For example, the occupation of weaving in the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative was considered not merely as a description of work but as a symbolic representation connected with gender, skill, productivity, and social responsibility.

The two theoretical approaches were used in combination. Structural analysis facilitated the identification of patterns of opposition and comparison, while symbolic analysis provided a basis for interpreting the culturally specific meanings associated with those patterns. This combination allowed the study to distinguish between thematic similarities and differences in the cultural interpretation of those themes.

3.5 Comparative Thematic Analysis

Following the identification and selection of relevant literature, the material was examined thematically. The analysis proceeded through repeated reading of the selected sources and identification of recurring concepts, narrative structures, symbols, social values, and ritual associations. These observations were organized into five principal analytical themes:

1. Structural oppositions and social order

2. Gender and labour

3. Love, social hierarchy, and moral discipline

4. Cosmology and environmental meaning

5. Ritual practice and lived cultural expression

For each theme, the Chinese narrative was first examined in relation to the relevant literature, followed by examination of the corresponding dimensions within the Saliya–Asokamala narrative and the Pattini tradition. The findings were then compared to identify convergences, divergences, and culturally specific interpretations.

The comparison was therefore not based on the assumption that similar narrative elements necessarily have identical meanings. Instead, the analysis asked how a particular theme was represented within each cultural context, what social or moral meanings were attached to it, and how the narrative resolved or negotiated the tension involved. For example, the relationship between love and social obligation was examined in the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative through the opposition between personal desire and celestial duty, while the Saliya–Asokamala narrative was examined in relation to personal attachment and social hierarchy. The Pattini tradition was considered particularly in relation to gendered virtue, moral order, and the transformation of mythological meaning into ritual practice.

This thematic comparison provided the basis for identifying both recurring human concerns and culturally specific narrative resolutions, while avoiding generalization from the selected cases to Chinese or Sri Lankan culture as a whole.

3.6 Analytical Process and Interpretation

The analytical process involved four interconnected stages.

First, the selected literature was reviewed to establish the narrative and cultural context of each case. Second, relevant textual and conceptual material was organized according to the five analytical themes. Third, the themes were examined comparatively using structuralist and symbolic-anthropological perspectives. Finally, similarities and differences were interpreted in relation to existing anthropological and folklore scholarship.

Particular attention was given to the relationship between narrative representation and social meaning. Rather than treating

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

myths simply as reflections of social life, the analysis considered how narratives may participate in communicating and reinforcing ideas concerning gender, morality, duty, social hierarchy, and ritual practice. At the same time, the analysis recognized that narratives can contain competing meanings and may provide opportunities for cultural reinterpretation. This approach is consistent with the understanding of culture as a system of meanings communicated through symbols and social practices (Geertz, 1973).

3.7 Limitations of the Methodology

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies exclusively on secondary literature and does not include original ethnographic interviews, participant observation, or contemporary field-based documentation. Consequently, the findings primarily reflect the ways in which the selected narratives have been represented and interpreted in existing scholarship rather than the contemporary interpretations of specific communities.

Second, the availability of scholarly literature in English on particular aspects of Sri Lankan folklore is more limited than the literature available for some Chinese mythological traditions. This may influence the range of interpretations accessible through the selected sources. Third, because the study adopts a narrative rather than systematic-review methodology, the search and selection process is interpretive and may not be fully replicable in the manner of a systematic review.

The Saliya–Asokamala narrative and Pattini tradition were selected as comparative cases and should not be regarded as representative of the entire diversity of Sri Lankan folklore. Similarly, the Cowherd and Weaver Girl legend represents one tradition within the much broader corpus of Chinese mythology. The conclusions therefore concern the selected narratives and the analytical themes examined rather than Chinese or Sri Lankan cultures in their entirety.

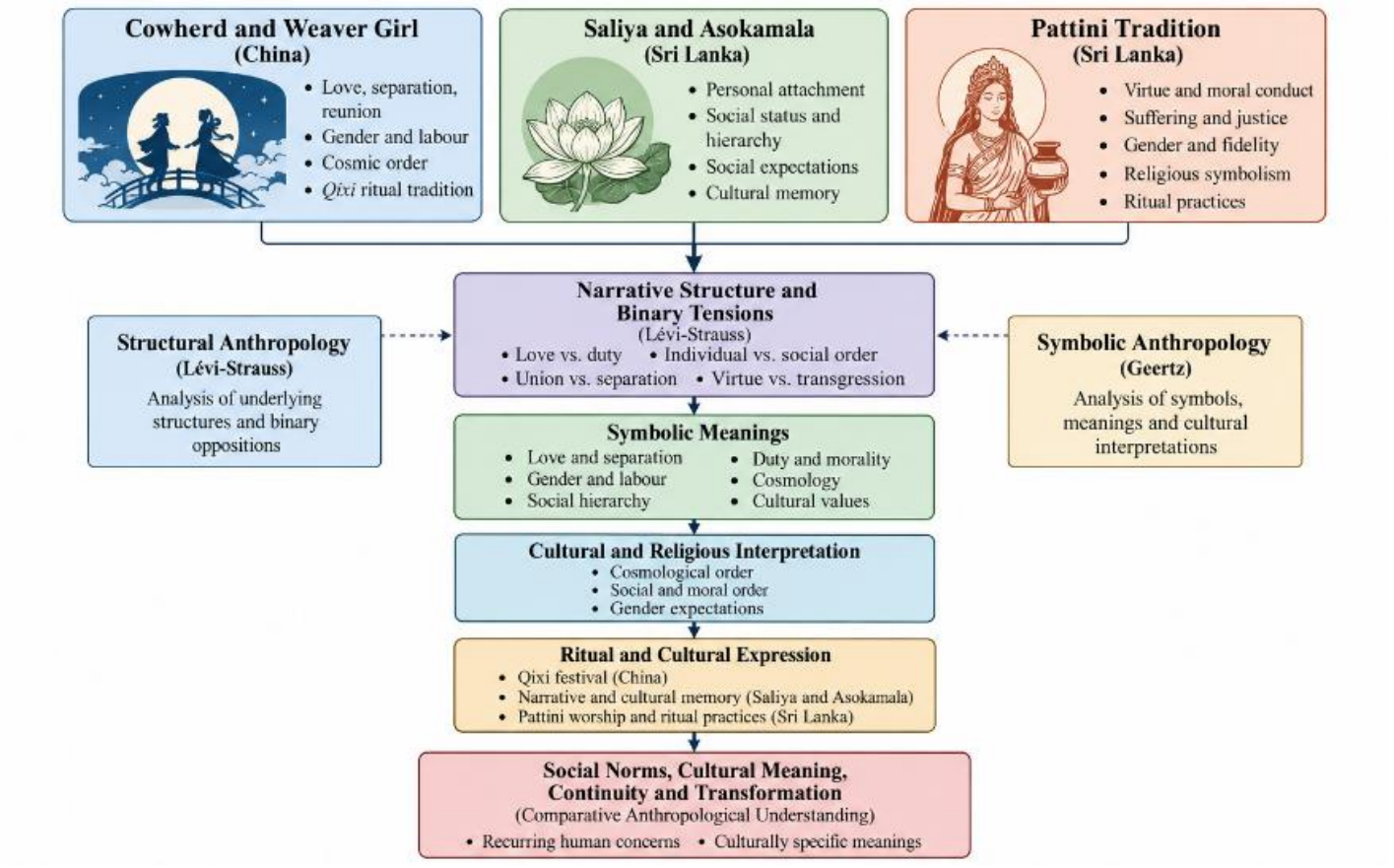


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the comparative anthropological analysis of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl, Saliya and Asokamala, and Pattini traditions

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Structural Oppositions and Social Order

The comparative analysis identified duty and desire, social hierarchy and personal choice, separation and reunion, and human and supernatural realms as recurring structural tensions across the selected narratives. In the Cowherd and Weaver Girl legend, the central opposition is between the celestial and human realms, represented by Zhinu and Niulang. Zhinu's celestial identity places her within an ordered cosmological system, while Niulang's identity as a mortal cowherd locates

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

him within the human and agrarian world. Their relationship crosses this boundary and consequently creates a conflict between personal attachment and the established order. The separation of the lovers across the Milky Way restores the distinction between the two realms, while their annual reunion provides a controlled form of reconciliation (Eberhard, 2002; Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Yang et al., 2005).

A related tension between personal desire and social obligation emerges in the story of Prince Saliya and Asokamala. However, the social boundary in this narrative is primarily associated with status and hierarchy rather than a division between celestial and human realms. Saliya's relationship with Asokamala challenges expectations associated with royal status and succession. The narrative therefore presents personal attachment as a force capable of challenging established social structures. In contrast to the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative, where the lovers' relationship ultimately results in enforced separation, the Saliya–Asokamala narrative is associated with the prioritization of personal choice over royal succession.

The Pattini tradition presents a different configuration of moral and social order. Here, the opposition is less directly concerned with romantic union and separation and more strongly associated with virtue and transgression, suffering and moral authority, and human experience and religious power. Pattini's symbolic representation as a morally virtuous female figure demonstrates how gendered conduct can become incorporated into a wider religious and ritual system (Obeyesekere, 1984). The comparison therefore indicates that although oppositional structures occur across the selected narratives, the specific categories being opposed and the ways in which conflicts are resolved differ according to cultural context.

Overall, the findings indicate that the selected narratives organize social experience through contrasting categories, but they do not resolve those contrasts in identical ways. The Chinese narrative emphasizes restoration of cosmic boundaries, the Saliya–Asokamala narrative foregrounds individual choice in relation to social hierarchy, and the Pattini tradition connects moral order with religious and ritual authority.

4.2 Gender, Labour, and Social Expectations

The comparison therefore reveals that gender roles are embedded within all three traditions but take different forms. The Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative emphasizes gendered labour and productivity, Saliya and Asokamala foreground gender, marriage and social hierarchy, while the Pattini tradition emphasizes female virtue, moral authority and ritual significance. These differences suggest that gender should not be treated as a uniform category across the narratives; rather, its meaning is shaped by the wider social, religious, and cosmological systems in which each narrative is situated.

The analysis also identified significant connections between gender, productive activity, moral expectations, and social responsibility. In the Cowherd and Weaver Girl legend, the occupations of the two protagonists carry symbolic meanings beyond their economic functions. Zhinu's identity as a weaver connects female labour with skill, productivity, discipline, and responsibility, while Niulang's occupation as a cowherd associates masculinity with agricultural labour and material provision. The narrative consequently presents a gendered division of labour in which the proper performance of occupational responsibilities contributes to social and cosmic order (Ebrey, 1993; Geertz, 1973).

Zhinu's temporary withdrawal from her prescribed responsibilities following her relationship with Niulang creates a conflict between personal desire and socially defined obligation. Her punishment can therefore be interpreted as a narrative mechanism through which the importance of fulfilling gendered responsibilities is reinforced. The finding is consistent with symbolic approaches to culture, in which occupations and social roles can function as symbols through which culturally valued forms of behaviour are communicated (Geertz, 1973).

The selected Sri Lankan traditions present gender in somewhat different ways. In the Saliya–Asokamala narrative, the central gendered issue is less directly related to occupational labour and more strongly connected to marriage, social status, and expectations surrounding royal identity. The narrative places a woman of lower social status in a relationship with a male member of the royal family, thereby making social hierarchy an important dimension of the representation of gender and marriage.

The Pattini tradition provides a stronger connection between gender and moral virtue. Pattini is represented through qualities including chastity, fidelity, moral strength, and religious significance. Her transformation from a female figure associated with marital suffering into a powerful religious figure demonstrates that gendered ideals can operate simultaneously as social expectations and sources of symbolic authority (Obeyesekere, 1984).

4.3 Love, Social Hierarchy, and Moral Discipline

Love represents another major comparative theme, but the analysis demonstrates that the meaning and social consequences of love differ considerably between the selected traditions. In the Cowherd and Weaver Girl legend, romantic attachment creates a conflict with established cosmic and social responsibilities. The relationship between Zhinu and Niulang is therefore simultaneously represented as emotionally meaningful and socially disruptive. Their enforced separation establishes a boundary between personal desire and broader obligations, while the annual reunion permits emotional

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

attachment to continue within controlled temporal limits (Eberhard, 2002; Yang et al., 2005).

The Saliya–Asokamala narrative provides a contrasting resolution. Here, romantic attachment challenges social hierarchy because Saliya's relationship with Asokamala conflicts with expectations associated with his royal status. Rather than the relationship being resolved through the physical separation of the lovers, the narrative associates Saliya's personal choice with the abandonment of his claim to the throne. Love therefore becomes a means through which established social expectations can be challenged.

The Pattini tradition presents love and marital relationships within a moral and religious framework. Pattini's association with fidelity, virtue, suffering, and moral authority places personal relationships within a broader system of ethical and religious values. The emphasis is therefore not simply on romantic desire but on the moral qualities expected within intimate and social relationships (Obeyesekere, 1984).

These findings demonstrate that the selected narratives do not present love as a culturally neutral or universally defined category. Instead, love is positioned differently in relation to social order: the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative regulates love through cosmic separation, the Saliya–Asokamala narrative presents love as capable of challenging social hierarchy, and the Pattini tradition embeds intimate relationships within a framework of moral and religious virtue.

4.4 Cosmology and Environmental Meaning

The analysis identified an important difference in the ways cosmology and the environment are incorporated into the selected narratives. The Cowherd and Weaver Girl legend is strongly associated with celestial cosmology. The identities of the protagonists are connected with astronomical bodies, particularly Vega and Altair, while the Milky Way functions as the symbolic boundary separating them. The annual reunion associated with Qixi also connects the narrative with seasonal and calendrical cycles (Krupp, 1991; Yang et al., 2005).

The celestial setting is therefore not simply a decorative element of the story. It provides a framework through which human relationships are connected to astronomical observation and cyclical time. The narrative consequently integrates Pattini mythology has been incorporated into religious practices, ritual performances, and forms of worship, demonstrating how a mythological figure can become embedded within an ongoing religious system (Obeyesekere, 1984). In this context, myth is not simply remembered as a narrative but is reproduced through ritual actions and collective participation.

The comparison demonstrates that both traditions provide emotional experience with a wider conception of cosmic order.

The selected Sri Lankan traditions demonstrate different relationships between narrative, religious meaning, and the environment. The Saliya–Asokamala narrative is primarily concerned with human relationships and social hierarchy rather than celestial symbolism. Its significance within the present comparison therefore lies more strongly in the social organization of love and status than in astronomical cosmology.

The Pattini tradition, by contrast, demonstrates the importance of terrestrial sacred spaces and ritual environments within Sri Lankan religious practice. Pattini worship is embedded in ritual contexts through which religious meanings are enacted within particular communities and places (Obeyesekere, 1984). This creates an important contrast with the Cowherd and Weaver Girl tradition, where astronomical space is central to the narrative's symbolic organization.

The comparison therefore indicates two different modes through which mythology can connect human experience with the wider world. The Chinese narrative strongly emphasizes celestial and astronomical relationships, while the Pattini tradition demonstrates a stronger emphasis on religious, terrestrial, and ritual environments. These differences demonstrate the importance of interpreting environmental and cosmological symbolism within specific cultural contexts rather than assuming that similar mythological functions necessarily have identical meanings.

4.5 Ritual Practice and Lived Cultural Expression

The final major theme identified through the analysis was the relationship between myth and ritual practice. In the Cowherd and Weaver Girl tradition, the Qixi Festival provides a significant example of how a mythological narrative is transformed into a recurring cultural practice. The annual commemoration of the lovers' reunion connects the narrative with calendrical time and provides opportunities for the cultural meanings associated with Zhinu, weaving, marriage, and feminine skill to be reproduced through ritual activity (Ebrey, 1993; Yang et al., 2005).

The Pattini tradition provides a different but significant example of the relationship between narrative and ritual.

mechanisms through which mythological meanings can be maintained beyond the narrative itself. However, the temporal and social organization of these practices differs. The Qixi tradition is associated with a particular annual calendrical occasion, whereas Pattini-related practices form part of a broader and more varied religious and ritual system.

The findings therefore support an understanding of myth as an active cultural process rather than a static body of stories. In

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

both cases, narrative meanings can be expressed through social practices, but the specific forms of ritualization reflect different cultural and religious contexts.

4.6 Comparative Summary of Findings

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the three selected traditions share several broad analytical themes while differing significantly in their cultural organization and resolution.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl, Saliya–Asokamala, and Pattini traditions

Analytical theme	Cowherd and weaver girl	Saliya–asokamala	Pattini tradition
Central tension	Love and desire versus cosmic/social duty	Love and personal choice versus social hierarchy	Virtue, suffering and moral order
Social order	Celestial order and prescribed responsibility	Royal status and social hierarchy	Religious and moral order
Gender	Gendered labour: weaving and cowherding	Gender and marriage within status hierarchy	Female virtue, fidelity and moral authority
Cosmology	Celestial/astronomical symbolism	Primarily social and cultural	Religious and sacred/ritual contexts
Ritual dimension	Qixi festival	Primarily narrative/cultural memory	Pattini worship and ritual practices
Resolution	Separation with controlled annual reunion	Personal choice associated with renunciation of succession	Transformation of moral virtue into religious authority
Primary analytical significance	Relationship between love, duty and cosmic order	Relationship between love, status and individual choice	Relationship between gender, morality, myth and ritual

5. Discussion

The comparison of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative with the selected Sri Lankan narratives of Saliya and Asokamala and Pattini demonstrates that stories concerning love, social obligation, gender, and moral order cannot be understood solely as romantic narratives. Rather, these narratives operate as cultural systems through which relationships between individuals, social institutions, gender expectations, and cosmological or religious orders are represented and interpreted. At the same time, the comparison indicates that similarities between the narratives should not be interpreted as evidence of a common cultural origin or as proof that Chinese and Sri Lankan traditions organize social experience in identical ways. Instead, the value of the comparison lies in identifying recurring human concerns while examining how those concerns are culturally structured and given different meanings.

5.1 Structural oppositions and the organization of social order

From a structuralist perspective, the narratives examined in this study contain oppositional relationships that help organize their underlying meanings. Lévi-Strauss (1963) argued that myths frequently express fundamental oppositions through narrative structures, allowing contradictions within social life to be symbolically represented. The Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative provides a particularly clear example through the tension between love and duty, human desire and cosmic regulation, and union and separation. The relationship between the two protagonists is meaningful precisely because it is constrained by a larger social and cosmological order.

The Saliya–Asokamala narrative similarly presents a tension between personal attachment and socially established status distinctions. In this case, however, the conflict is primarily organized through social hierarchy rather than celestial separation. The existing manuscript identifies the narrative as particularly relevant to questions of social status, personal choice, and social obligation. SDY Paper -neijh This difference is analytically important. Although both narratives involve relationships that encounter forces beyond individual desire, the nature of those forces is different. In the Chinese narrative, the principal constraint is embedded within a cosmological order, whereas in the Saliya–Asokamala narrative the tension is more directly connected to social hierarchy.

The Pattini tradition introduces another form of structural opposition. Rather than centering primarily on romantic separation, it provides a framework for considering virtue and transgression, suffering and justice, and human conduct and moral authority. The manuscript's discussion of Pattini emphasizes gendered virtue, moral discipline, and the transformation of an individual female figure into a source of

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

wider religious and ritual significance. SDY Paper -neijh Thus, the three cases demonstrate that structurally comparable tensions may be organized through different cultural institutions: cosmic order in the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative, social hierarchy in Saliya and Asokamala, and moral-religious order in the Pattini tradition.

This finding supports the usefulness of Lévi-Strauss's approach while also demonstrating the limitations of treating mythological structures as universally identical. The comparative evidence suggests that structural analysis is most productive when it identifies relationships between contrasting concepts without assuming that their cultural meanings are equivalent.

5.2 Gender, labour, and culturally defined expectations

The comparison also highlights the importance of gender in the organization of mythological narratives. In the Cowherd and Weaver Girl story, the identities of the protagonists are closely associated with productive roles: Zhinu is represented through weaving, while Niulang is associated with cowherding. Their relationship therefore exists within a narrative framework in which gender, labour, and social responsibility are interconnected. Previous scholarship on Chinese mythology has similarly demonstrated the importance of social and cultural values in shaping representations of gender and family relationships (Eberhard, 2002; Ebrey, 1993; Yang et al., 2005).

The Sri Lankan cases reveal different configurations of gendered expectations. The Saliya–Asokamala narrative provides a context for examining the relationship between personal attachment, marriage, social position, and expectations concerning appropriate relationships. The Pattini tradition, by contrast, places greater emphasis on female virtue, moral authority, fidelity, and religious significance. Obeyesekere's (1984) analysis of Pattini is particularly important because it demonstrates that female figures in Sri Lankan religious traditions can acquire meanings that extend beyond their roles within individual narratives.

These differences indicate that gender should not be treated as a single cross-cultural category with identical meanings. Instead, gender roles are embedded within particular systems of kinship, social hierarchy, labour, morality, and religious belief. The comparison therefore extends the interpretation of the narratives beyond the simple identification of "male" and "female" roles. It shows how gender becomes meaningful through wider systems of social expectation.

The findings also suggest that the apparent similarity between the Chinese and Sri Lankan cases should be interpreted cautiously. Both traditions can be examined in relation to gendered expectations, but the specific expectations represented in each narrative emerge from different historical and cultural contexts. Consequently, the comparison demonstrates analytical comparability rather than cultural equivalence.

5.3 Love, social hierarchy, and moral discipline

One of the most significant findings of the comparison is that love is rarely presented as an entirely private or autonomous relationship. In the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative, the lovers' relationship is constrained by a larger cosmic and social order. Their separation and periodic reunion transform romantic attachment into a broader reflection on duty, social regulation, and the limits placed on individual desire.

The Saliya–Asokamala narrative provides a contrasting social configuration in which personal attachment can be considered alongside questions of status and social expectation. The significance of this comparison is not that the two stories tell the same story, but that both allow individual desire to be examined against forces that regulate socially acceptable relationships. The Sri Lankan case therefore provides a useful counterpoint to the Chinese narrative by demonstrating how similar questions concerning love and social order can be located within a different social structure.

The Pattini tradition further complicates the category of "love myth." It should not be treated simply as a Sri Lankan equivalent of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl story. Rather, it provides a comparative case through which the relationship between intimate relationships, gendered virtue, moral conduct, suffering, and religious authority can be examined. This distinction is important because the reviewer specifically requested that the Sri Lankan narratives be clearly identified and that the comparison be justified rather than presenting broad references to "Sri Lankan folklore."

Taken together, the cases suggest that narratives of love can perform broader social functions. They may provide symbolic ways of thinking about the boundaries of individual choice, acceptable relationships, social hierarchy, and moral conduct. This interpretation is consistent with the broader anthropological understanding of myth as a mechanism through which social meanings are communicated and reproduced (Bascom, 1965; Lévi-Strauss, 1963).

5.4 Cosmology, symbolism, and ritual practice

The comparison becomes particularly revealing when examined through Geertz's (1973) concept of culture as a system of symbols through which people interpret and organize their social world. The Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative is strongly connected to celestial symbolism, with the identities of the protagonists associated with astronomical bodies and the narrative linked to the Qixi festival. The story therefore connects interpersonal relationships with a wider symbolic

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

landscape.

The Sri Lankan cases demonstrate different relationships between narrative, symbolism, and cultural practice. In the Pattini tradition, the symbolic significance of the female figure extends into religious and ritual contexts, while the Saliya–Asokamala narrative is more strongly associated with cultural memory and social relationships than with a comparable annual ritual system. The manuscript's existing discussion of ritual similarly distinguishes the institutionalized Qixi practices from the broader religious and ritual significance associated with Sri Lankan traditions.

This difference is important because it demonstrates that myths do not have to perform identical cultural functions to be meaningfully compared. The comparison instead reveals different pathways through which narratives become culturally significant. The Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative connects romance with celestial symbolism and recurring ritual practice, while Pattini demonstrates how narrative can become incorporated into a religious and ritual system. Saliya and Asokamala, meanwhile, illustrate how a narrative can remain significant through cultural memory and representations of social relationships.

Thus, Geertz's symbolic approach complements structural analysis. Whereas Lévi-Strauss helps identify the relational oppositions within the narratives, Geertz allows attention to be directed toward the meanings attached to symbols and their relationship to lived cultural practices.

5.5 Similarities, differences, and alternative explanations

The similarities identified in this study should not be interpreted as evidence that the Chinese and Sri Lankan narratives developed from a shared narrative tradition. The present study is based on secondary literature and does not provide historical evidence of direct transmission between the traditions. Therefore, an explanation based on cultural diffusion cannot be established from the available evidence.

A second possibility is that similarities arise because narratives frequently address widely experienced human concerns, including attachment, separation, social expectations, gender relations, morality, and the tension between individual desire and collective obligations. However, this interpretation should also be treated cautiously. The presence of comparable themes does not demonstrate a universal psychological structure, particularly when the meanings and narrative resolutions differ substantially across cultural settings.

A more appropriate interpretation is that the narratives provide culturally specific responses to recurring social and existential concerns. This position avoids both extremes: treating the traditions as completely unrelated and treating them as manifestations of a single universal structure. The comparison instead shows that similar questions can be formulated differently according to particular religious systems, social hierarchies, gender expectations, and cosmological frameworks.

This distinction is especially important for anthropological comparative research. Cross-cultural comparison is most useful when similarities and differences are considered together. In the present cases, the similarity lies principally in the presence of tensions involving desire, obligation, social order, gender, and morality. The difference lies in the cultural mechanisms through which those tensions are represented and resolved.

5.6 Theoretical and anthropological contribution

The principal contribution of this study is therefore its focused anthropological comparison of one Chinese narrative with two specifically identified Sri Lankan cases. Existing scholarship has examined Chinese mythology, Sri Lankan folklore, Buddhist narratives, and Pattini traditions separately, but the present analysis brings these materials into a common comparative framework using structural and symbolic anthropology.

The study also demonstrates the value of combining Lévi-Straussian structuralism with Geertzian symbolic interpretation. Structural analysis identifies recurring relational tensions, while symbolic anthropology helps explain why particular symbols, rituals, and cultural practices acquire meaning within specific contexts. Using the two approaches together reduces the risk of either treating myths as abstract structures detached from culture or interpreting individual symbols without considering their relationships within broader narrative systems.

The comparison further contributes to the anthropology of folklore by demonstrating that comparison does not require cultural equivalence. Saliya and Asokamala and Pattini are not presented as Sri Lankan versions of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative. Instead, they function as analytically selected cases through which different configurations of love, gender, hierarchy, morality, cosmology, and ritual can be examined. This approach responds directly to the need for greater specificity in identifying the Sri Lankan material and clarifying the rationale for its inclusion

At the same time, the findings should not be generalized to “Sri Lankan culture” or “Chinese culture” as homogeneous entities. Both societies contain diverse historical, regional, religious, and social traditions. The conclusions of this study therefore apply specifically to the selected narratives and the secondary literature examined rather than to entire cultural populations.

5.7 Implications for comparative folklore research

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

The findings have broader implications for comparative folklore and anthropological research. First, they demonstrate the importance of specifying the narrative corpus when conducting cross-cultural comparison. Broad categories such as "Sri Lankan folklore" can obscure significant differences between literary narratives, religious traditions, and ritual systems. Second, comparative research benefits from distinguishing shared thematic concerns from culturally specific meanings. Finally, the study indicates the value of combining textual analysis with ethnographic investigation. Future research could examine how contemporary communities interpret these narratives, how ritual practices change over time, and whether contemporary understandings differ from those represented in historical and scholarly sources.

Overall, the comparison demonstrates that myths concerning love and separation can simultaneously function as narratives about social order, gender expectations, morality, cosmology, and cultural identity. The Cowherd and Weaver Girl, Saliya and Asokamala, and Pattini traditions do not provide identical cultural models; rather, their comparison reveals how different societies symbolically negotiate relationships between individual desire and wider systems of obligation. The significance of the comparison therefore lies not in demonstrating that the cultures are the same, but in showing how comparable human concerns are culturally organized into distinct systems of meaning.

This interpretation provides the basis for the study's central anthropological contribution: cross-cultural comparison can reveal recurring social tensions while simultaneously demonstrating the cultural specificity of the ways in which those tensions are understood, regulated, and symbolically resolved.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative in comparison with two selected Sri Lankan traditions, the story of Saliya and Asokamala and the Pattini tradition, using perspectives from structural and symbolic anthropology. Rather than treating these narratives as culturally equivalent versions of the same story, the study examined how each represents relationships between individual desire, social obligation, gender expectations, moral order, cosmology, and ritual practice. The comparison demonstrates that narratives from different cultural settings can address comparable social and existential concerns while expressing and resolving them through culturally specific systems of meaning.

In relation to the first objective, the study identified structural and symbolic dimensions through which social order is represented. The Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative is structured around tensions between love and duty, separation and reunion, and individual desire and cosmic order. The Saliya–Asokamala narrative provides a contrasting representation in which personal attachment is associated with social status and hierarchy, while the Pattini tradition places greater emphasis on moral conduct, virtue, suffering, and religious authority. These differences demonstrate that similar structural tensions can be organized through different cultural institutions and symbolic systems.

The second objective concerned gender and social expectations. The comparison indicates that gender is closely connected with labour, social responsibility, relationships, and moral expectations. In the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative, the identities of the protagonists are associated with gendered forms of labour, while the Sri Lankan cases provide different representations of gendered social and moral expectations. The comparison therefore demonstrates that gender roles in myth cannot be interpreted independently of the wider social, religious, and cultural systems in which they are embedded.

The third objective focused on cosmology, ritual, and moral order. The findings show that the Chinese narrative connects interpersonal love with celestial symbolism and ritual practice, particularly through its relationship with the Qixi tradition. The Pattini tradition demonstrates a different relationship between narrative, religious symbolism, and ritual practice, while Saliya and Asokamala provide a stronger example of the relationship between narrative, social hierarchy, and cultural memory. These differences are important because they demonstrate that narratives acquire cultural significance through different symbolic and institutional contexts.

The fourth objective was to establish a focused comparative relationship between the Chinese narrative and selected Sri Lankan cases. The comparison shows that the most meaningful point of connection is not a direct similarity of plot or cultural origin, but the ways in which narratives negotiate tensions between personal desire and wider systems of social or moral obligation. The Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative locates this tension within a cosmological order; Saliya and Asokamala within social hierarchy and expectations; and Pattini within a moral and religious framework. Thus, the cases are comparable at the level of anthropological questions while remaining distinct in their cultural meanings.

The principal contribution of this study is therefore its demonstration that cross-cultural comparison can identify recurring social concerns without reducing culturally distinct traditions to a single universal model. By bringing the Cowherd and Weaver Girl narrative into focused comparison with Saliya and Asokamala and Pattini, the study extends the anthropological discussion beyond separate analyses of Chinese and Sri Lankan traditions. The combined use of Lévi-Straussian structuralism and Geertzian symbolic anthropology further demonstrates how narrative structures and culturally specific meanings can be examined together.

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

However, the findings should be interpreted within the limitations of the study. The analysis is based primarily on secondary literature and therefore cannot establish how contemporary communities themselves interpret these narratives. The availability of English-language scholarship on some Sri Lankan traditions also constrained the literature base. Furthermore, the selection of three narrative traditions does not represent the full diversity of Chinese or Sri Lankan folklore. Consequently, the findings should not be generalized to either culture as a whole. These limitations also indicate the need for future ethnographic and comparative research involving oral traditions, contemporary ritual practitioners, community interpretations, and regionally specific variations of the narratives.

Future research could therefore investigate how the meanings of these narratives have changed over time and how contemporary audiences understand concepts such as love, gender, duty, morality, and social hierarchy. Ethnographic research could also examine whether the symbolic meanings identified in textual sources remain influential in contemporary ritual and everyday life.

In conclusion, the comparison of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl, Saliya and Asokamala, and Pattini traditions demonstrates that myths are not merely stories of romance, sacrifice, or religious devotion. They are cultural frameworks through which societies negotiate relationships between individuals and wider systems of social, moral, and cosmological order. The narratives considered in this study share certain thematic concerns, but they organize and resolve those concerns differently. Their comparison therefore reveals both recurring human questions and culturally specific answers, providing a more nuanced anthropological understanding of love, social order, gender, morality, and cultural meaning across Chinese and Sri Lankan narrative traditions.

Acknowledgement

The preferred spelling of the word “acknowledgment” in America is without an “e” after the “g”. Avoid the stilted expression, “One of us (R. B. G.) thanks . . .” Instead, try “R. B. G. thanks”. Put sponsor acknowledgments in the unnumbered footnote on the first page.

References

1. Bascom, W. (1965) ‘The forms of folklore: Prose narratives’, The Journal of American Folklore, 78(307), pp. 3–20. https://doi:10.2307/538099

2. Baumeister, R.F. and Leary, M.R. (1997) ‘Writing narrative literature reviews’, Review of General Psychology, 1(3), pp. 311–320. https://doi:10.1037/1089-2680.1.3.311.

3. Ebrey, P.B. (1993) The inner quarters: Marriage and the lives of Chinese women in the Sung period. Berkeley: University of California Press. Available at: https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft896nb5rd (Accessed: 6 October 2026).

4. Geertz, C. (1973) The interpretation of cultures. New York: Basic Books.

5. Ihalagama, S. (2019) Folklore traditions: An analysis of the beliefs and faiths of Sri Lankan culture revealed through folklore stories. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332900780 (Accessed: 6 October 2026).

6. Krupp, E.C. (1991) Beyond the blue horizon: Myths and legends of the sun, moon, stars, and planets. New York: HarperCollins.

7. Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963) Structural anthropology. New York: Basic Books.

8. Obeyesekere, G. (1984) The cult of the goddess Pattini. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

9. Ratnapāla, N. (1991) Folklore of Sri Lanka. Colombo: State Printing Corporation.

10. Yang, L., An, D. and Turner, J. (2005) Handbook of Chinese mythology. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi10.1093/acref/9780195332632.001.0001.

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved