

MAGPIES AND THE MILKY WAY

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Project ARTIST



Background: The story of the Weaving Princess and the Shepherd (or herdsman or farmer) can be found in both Chinese and Japanese traditions. This activity includes a summary of the story. Other versions of this story are found in Tom Birdseye's *A Song of Stars* (1990) and Jeanne Lee's *Legend of the Milky Way* (1982), a Reading Rainbow Book which tells the Chinese version of the legend.

Vega, the star represented by the Weaving Princess, is a prominent star in the constellation Lyra (the harp). Altair, the star represented by the Shepherd, is a prominent star in the constellation Aquila (the eagle). In the summer these two stars can be seen separated by the Milky Way. Vega and Altair are part of an *asterism* — a prominent group of stars, but not one of the 88 designated constellations — called the Summer Triangle. The third star in the triangle is Deneb, located in the constellation Cygnus (the swan), or the Northern Cross. Another common asterism is the Big Dipper, seven prominent stars within the constellation Ursa Major (the Great Bear).

Objectives: The students will learn about an Asian legend and festival, will practice an Asian art form, and will learn about three constellations, an asterism, and the Milky Way Galaxy.

Materials:

Patterns for Weaving Princess and Shepherd
Oak tag or poster board
Glue, tape, and crayons or markers
Origami square (5" x 5" or larger)
Origami bird pattern

Procedure:

1. Share one or more of the stories about the Milky Way and the magpies with the class. The website below contains some information on the Japanese Tanabata festival, which is associated with the story of the Weaving Princess. A Google search on Tanabata will link you to many different sites.
2. Mount the figures of the Weaving Princess and the Shepherd on oak tag or thin poster board. Cut them out, fold, and affix the stands with tape. Option: decorate the figures with crayons or markers.
3. Show the students how to make origami birds. A sample pattern is included; use any bird patterns of your choice. Make enough magpies to form a river between the figures.
4. The science portion of the lesson can center on constellations and asterisms; unfortunately, the stars in the story are best visible in summer, but the Summer Triangle is still visible in the western sky through most of the fall. Option: An observing night with an amateur astronomer or a trip to a planetarium.

5. The science portion of the lesson can center on the Milky Way Galaxy and our own location in the Universe. *My Place in Space* by Robin and Sally Hirst details our universal “address” from street, city, country, etc. through the Solar System, Galaxy, Supercluster, and beyond, giving students an expanding sense of “neighborhood” from the familiar to the universal.
6. Option: Compare other cultures’ view of the Milky Way. There are several Native American variations in *North American Indian Stories, Star Tales*, by G. W. Mayo, 1990, and *They Dance in the Sky, Native American Star Myths*, by J. G. Monroe and R. A. Williamson, 1987.



“Tanabata, also known as the "star festival", takes place on the 7th day of the 7th month of the year, when, according to a Chinese legend, the two stars Altair and Vega, which are usually separated from each other by the Milky Way, are able to meet.

Because the 7th month of the year roughly coincides with August rather than July according to the formerly used lunar calendar, Tanabata is still celebrated on August 7th in some regions of Japan, while it is celebrated on July 7th in other regions.

One popular Tanabata custom is to write one's wishes on a piece of paper, and hang that piece of paper on a specially erected bamboo tree, in the hope that the wishes come true.

Colorful Tanabata festivals are held across Japan in early July and August. Among the biggest and most famous ones are the Tanabata Festivals of Sendai in August and Hiratsuka near Tokyo in July.” (<http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2283.html>)

STORY SUMMARY

Magpies and the Milky Way

Long ago there was a beautiful princess, the daughter of the Sky God. She was the most skillful weaver in the land, weaving beautiful cloth at her loom every day. One day she looked up from her loom and saw a herdsman at work. She fell in love with him at once. When the herdsman saw the princess at her window, he also fell in love.

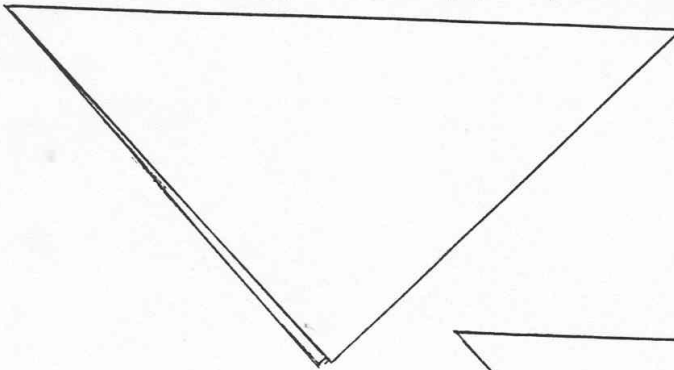
The Weaving Princess begged her father to allow her to marry the poor herdsman. The Sky God agreed, and the two were very happy together. They were so happy that they each neglected their work. The princess forgot to weave her beautiful cloth, and the herdsman neglected his animals. The Sky God decided to punish them.

The Sky God placed the princess in the sky in one place, and the herdsman in the sky in another place. She was called Orihime Boshi (Weaving Princess Star) and he was called Hiko Boshi (Puller of Cow Star). Between them the Sky God put a river of stars. They could see each other, but could not cross the river. The princess and herdsman returned to their work with great sadness.

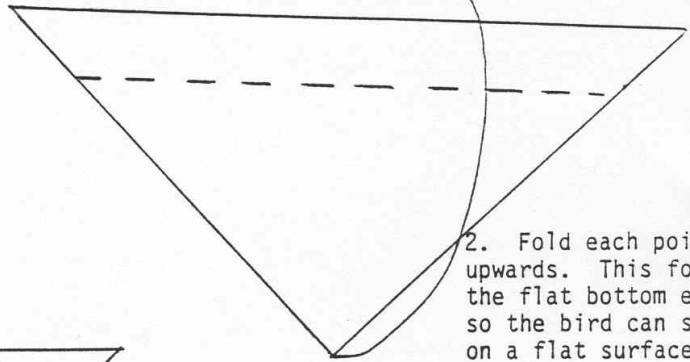
The Sky God took pity on them and decided that if they worked hard at their tasks, he would allow the princess and the herdsman to meet one night each year. Toward the end of summer, a great flock of magpies flew to the river of the stars. They settled onto the water and formed a bridge for the princess and herdsman to cross. The next night the magpies were gone, and the princess and herdsman returned to their work for another year.

SUPER-SIMPLE ORIGAMI BIRD

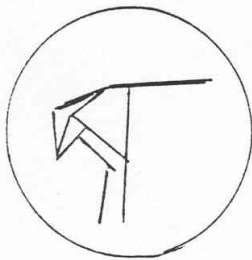
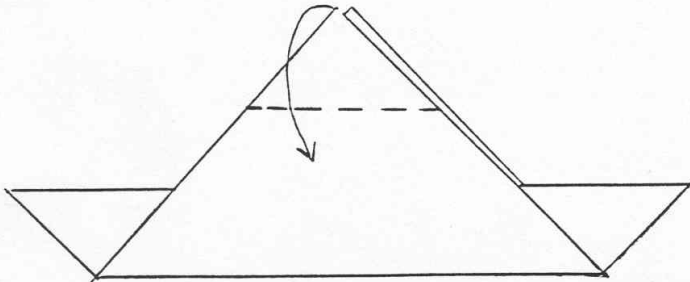
1. Fold the paper square in half, point to point. If the paper has a colored or designed side, this side should be on the outside after you fold. Make a firm crease.



2. Fold each point upwards. This forms the flat bottom edge so the bird can sit on a flat surface. It also forms the wings.



3. Fold each wing tip downwards. If you are using two-sided paper, most of the wing will be white; the tip will show the color or design.



4. Optional beak: Insert your thumb between the two sides of the paper forming the point (circled). Press down on the fold with your forefinger. Pinch the sides of the head together to form a beak.

