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“Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival:”
Folktales as a Medium for Eclecticism

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Abstract:
This article examines an array of folktales, mantras, and ballads pertaining to a traditional Chinese festival — “Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival.” On the eighth day of the fourth month in the Chinese lunar calendar, people in multiple areas of South and Southwest China expel caterpillars out of their crop fields and their residences by invoking different powers such as Taoist deities, the Buddha, and animistic spirits. Through examination of a myriad of mantras, folktales, ballads, and folk customs, this article draws the conclusion that “Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival” as live performance and practice is celebrated as a Buddhist festival. Additionally, Buddhist versions of this festival dominate multiple genres of folk literature and circulate as the master narrative. However, although dwarfed and marginalized, Taoist, and animistic mantras and folktales on this traditional festival have survived in the realm of folklore. The study demonstrates that folklore as a medium displays the complex interplay among different cultural and religious traditions, highlighting eclecticism and hybridity. It argues that folklore is characterized as trans-cultural and trans-religious, preserving and providing visibility for the marginalized cultural traditions. This article breaks new ground in that it is the first study that brings together the diverse folklore traditions and folklife in relation to this time-tested festival.

Keywords: Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival, religious festivity, banishment of pests, eclecticism, cultural hybridity

Introduction
This article examines an array of folktales, mantras, ballads, and folk customs pertaining to a traditional Chinese festival — “Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival.” On the eighth day of the fourth month in the Chinese lunar calendar, people expel caterpillars out of their crop fields and their residences through the invocation of different divine powers such as Taoist deities, the Buddha, and animistic spirits. The article begins with a folktale titled “Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival” circulating in Zou Ma Town, Chongqing of Southwest China. After an analysis of its invocation of the Taoist deity Lu Ban, this article calls attention to the peripheral position of this Taoist interpretation concerning the genesis of this Festival. This leads to an examination of the dominant Buddhist mantra pertinent to this Festival and the grafting of “Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival” with “Showering the Buddha Festival,” a Buddhist celebration of Gautama’s birthday. Next, this article explores
the tradition of employing mantras to send away pests. In spite of the Buddhist mantra’s predominance, both Buddhist and Taoist mantras fall into this “marrying off” category due to these two religions’ beliefs in benevolence and their repulsion of killing. Following, this article probes into animistic incantations that summon the power of animist spirits to call for the eradication of caterpillars.

Although the Buddhist mantra occupies a dominant position in the celebration and oral circulation of “Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival,” the existence of the Daoist and animistic mantras, ballads, and folktales testifies the vitality of various marginalized religious and folk beliefs. When a major religion dominates the public representation of a long-held folk belief such as in the forms of festival celebrations and rituals, folklore serves as a medium featured as trans-cultural and trans-religious. Furthermore, it preserves and provides visibility for the marginalized traditions. In this process, folklore provides a space that displays the complex interplay among different cultural and religious traditions, highlighting eclecticism and hybridity.

Marginalized Taoist Folktale and Mantra of Co-Existence

Zou Ma Town (走马镇) of Chongqing Municipality in Southwest China is a beautiful hilly town that possesses a rich cultural heritage: it is one of the few places in China that still has a live and vibrant folklore tradition. This invaluable heritage is tied closely with Zou Ma’s location and history. As Zou Ma Town connects with Bi Shan Town on the west and Jiang Jing Town in the south, it has been known as “One Footsteps on Three Towns” (一脚踏三县) since the Ming Dynasty. Thanks to its location, Zou Ma Town became an important transportation hub on the horse-drawn courier roads connecting the two urban metropolises, Chongqing and Chengdu, of Southwest China. Starting their journey from Chongqing and going across the treacherous mountain roads, the travelers and horses would be exhausted by the time they reached Zou Ma, where they had to take lodging. At the hostels and tea houses in Zou Ma, travelers would sit together over a bowl of hot tea and share what they saw, heard, and experienced on the roads. The locals called storytelling “Bai Long Men Zhen” (摆龙门阵), which means telling tall tales. The travelers came and went, but the stories and ballads became imprinted in the memories of the Zou Ma people.

In the 1980s, folklorists began surveying and collecting folk tales, folk songs, and proverbs from Zou Ma Town as part of a nationwide endeavor known as “Three Series Collections.” In Zou Ma Town, the folklorists and their local helpers collected 10,915 folk tales among which 9,714 were recorded in completion. They also recorded more than 3,000 folk songs, 4,000 proverbs, and 4,000 allegorical sayings and slang terms. During the survey, 316 storytellers from Zou Ma gained recognition. During this survey, Xiande Wei emerged as the best-known storyteller of Zou Ma Town. Xiande started to follow his father as a traveling storyteller when he was fourteen years old. By the age of twenty-two, he could tell over 5000 stories. After 1949, as travelling storytelling was banned as it was deemed at variance with the government’s new socialist rural policies. Xiande Wei returned to his hometown and went back to farming. At this time, he organized 1500 stories that best represented the characteristics of Southwest China’s oral traditions. In 1998, in a study on China’s oral and intangible cultural heritages, UNESCO recognized Xiande Wei as one of the best cultural heritage bearers.

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Xiaoyong Wei’s younger brother, Xianfa Wei could also tell over one thousand folktales. These two brothers were titled “the Grimm Brothers of China.” In 1990, Weijin Peng and Zishuo Li, two Chongqing folklorists and tireless collectors of Zou Ma folktales, edited Xiande Wei’s folktales and published them through the Chongqing Publishing Press under the title Xiande Wei Folktales Collection (1-8).

A good number of Xiande Wei’s stories are on the origins of customs, celebrations, and religious rituals in Southwest China. One such folktale is “The Festival of Marrying off the Caterpillars on the Eighth of the Fourth Month of the Lunar Calendar.” The authors of this article transliterated this rare story as follows:

A long time ago, caterpillars only stayed below the terraces to eat the leaves of the bean plants. They never went up to the mountains to eat tree leaves. Later, why did they go up to the mountains? The reason had something to do with Master Lu Ban.

It is said that an old man once planted a large area of beans on a terraced slope. Seeing how the beans were lush and green, he was happy with his labor. After a few days, however, when he returned to weed the fields, all he could see were stems and twigs: the leaves were all gone. At first, he thought he was not seeing clearly due to his old age. Hastily, he rubbed his eyes and looked more carefully. Ah, his bean plants were covered with black caterpillars! He used his hands to catch them, but his hands became swollen from the stings. Then, he picked up a stick to beat the caterpillars, but the stick beat down the bean plants as well. He did not know what to do and began to cry. At this point, Master Lu Ban happened to walk past him and asked him, “Mister, why are you crying?”

“Why am I crying? All the beanstalks that I planted and attended have been eaten by caterpillars. I tried to catch the caterpillars, but they stung my hands. I tried to beat them with a stick, but I killed the beanstalks as well. What shall I do?”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. I have a solution. You can marry the caterpillars off.”

“How do I marry them off?”

Lu Ban told him the method, and the old man followed Lu Ban’s instructions. That day was the eighth day of the fourth month in the Chinese lunar calendar. As soon as the old man got home, he cut out two strips of red paper. He then pasted them across each other to form a cross, with the center protruding outward. On each line of the cross, he respectively wrote, “Late spring on the eighth of the fourth month, caterpillars wiggling everywhere, marry into the deep mountains, never ever return home.” Before long, the caterpillars on the beanstalks had all crawled away, and beans began to grow again. The old man smiled so hard that his mouth could not close, and he told everyone about it. People began to follow the old man’s suit, and the practice became widespread. Thus, the custom of marrying off the caterpillars on the eighth of the fourth month was passed down. Later, some people wrote, “Caterpillars black and ugly, walk wiggly giggly. Today marry off and off, forever die out and out” (106-108).
In this folktale, Lu Ban is the hero that had the magic power to solve a crisis for a peasant in distress. Lu Ban was a real historical figure who was later sanctified into a Taoist deity. Living approximately from 507 to 444 BC, Lu Ban was born into a family of carpenters and artisans. According to legends, famous for his craftsmanship, Lu Ban’s work was in great demand, which compelled him to invent or renovate a number of carpenter’s tools such as the saw, the square, the drill, and the shovel. It is said that in his early forties, Lu Ban went to Li Mountain in Jinan City of Shandong Province, where he lived in seclusion as a Taoist ascetic until his death at the age of sixty-three. After his death, Lu Ban gradually gained sainthood among his followers. Today, he is revered as the god of carpentry and masonry in the greater China cultural sphere. He is sometimes counted among the Five Kings of the Water Immortals, who are Taoist water gods often invoked by sailors for protection. With the sanctification of Lu Ban, Lu Ban’s family members, especially his wife and sister, were also credited with extraordinary innovations. For example, in Xiande Wei Folktales Collection, there is a story of how Lu Ban’s sister urged Wang Qiao, Lu Ban’s best-known apprentice, to invent the dehuller, a piece of equipment used to shred husks from the rice grain. There is also a tale of Lu Ban’s wife inventing the umbrella so that Lu Ban could continue his work in a downpour. The worshipers of Lu Ban compiled a Taoist scripture titled Full Collections of Lu Ban that lists hundreds of mantras, praying to Lu Ban, his wife, his sister, and his twelve disciples for protection and solutions to their difficulties. Many of these mantras are related to construction, such as mantras sung for installing the beam and doors, but there are also more generic mantras for curtailing evil spirits and bringing order to chaotic situations.

The use of incantations to expel pests is not uncommon. One of the best-known stories is probably disciple John’s admonition of the bed bugs when he stayed in an inn at Ephesus. In the Apocryphal Acts of John, troubled by bed bugs, John chanted, “I say unto you, O bugs, behave yourself one and all, and leave your abode for this night and remain quiet in one place, and keep your distance from the servants of God.” After this incantation, the bugs became quiet and John was able to sleep (James, 353). In Babylonian rituals, field pests, including locusts, grasshoppers, insect larvae, weevils, and other vermin, are referred to as the “great dogs of Ninkilim.” The god Ninkilim is well attested as a deity with special responsibility for wildlife in general and vermin in particular. Incantations and rituals, such as “To Seize the Locust-Tooth,” are performed as a precautionary measure during the winter months of the barley-growing season to counter the destruction of field pests. The incantation begins with praise of a certain deity, offering of “a libation of sweet wine worthy of your divine personage” and then pleads to “Show goodwill towards this plot of farmland” and expel the great dogs of Ninkilim, “whose mouth are the Deluge” (George et al. 148-179). In the Apocryphal Acts of St John, it is understood that the apostle’s power over the bed bugs came through his special relationship with God. Likewise, the Babylonians understood that to work effective magic they have to enlist the aid of the appropriate divine powers, in words as well as deeds. In the case of expelling caterpillars, the invocation of divine powers is evident as well. In fact, one of the foci of this paper is to analyze what types of divine powers have been invoked to drive out the caterpillars from crop fields and human dwellings.

Dominant Buddhist Mantra of Co-Existence

It is worth noting that Xiande Wei’s tale on the origin of Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival is an unconventional version. In actuality, it exists as the only Taoist version in print.

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In Xiande Wei’s tale, the deity Lu Ban gave the peasant a Taoist mantra to drive the caterpillars away. Conversely, in places where the Festival has been and is still being celebrated, it is Buddha whose power is behind the mantra to “marry off” the caterpillars. In this master narrative, Buddha’s birthday, the eighth of the fourth month, is the source of power that drives the caterpillars from the crop fields to their “rightful place” up in the woods. The most circulated Buddhist mantra goes as follows:

The Buddha was born on the eighth of April,  
caterpillars will get married on this day.  
Married into the mountains,  
ever ever return home.

There are other similar versions of the mantra that also invoke the power of Gautama Buddha. For example, one states, “The Buddha was born on April’s eighth day, the caterpillars and ants will be married off, married into the mountains, never ever to return home.”

While largely nonexistent in Northern China, for centuries, “Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival” was a religious holiday practiced in parts of South and Southwest China. The Han, Tu Jia, Tu, Hmong, Buyi, Dong, Yao, Zhuang, Yi, Ke Jia, and Qi Lao were the ethnic groups that honored and practiced this festival. Compared with North China, South and Southwest China has more mountainous territories that have heavy foliage coverage. The quantity of caterpillars live in South and Southwest China is much larger than that in north China. Its multitude means the threat it poses to humans is more severe. The eighth day of the fourth month in the Chinese lunar calendar falls anywhere between early May to early June in the Gregorian calendar. This is the beginning of summer. Around this time, insects, worms, and ants begin to appear in large numbers and begin to mate and reproduce. Caterpillars can not only wreak havoc on crops but also cause physical injuries to people. Traditional buildings are usually made of wood, and caterpillars living inside the roof begin to wiggle around. It is common for them to fall from the roofs onto people. The stings from fallen caterpillars cause acute pain and swelling. Performing rituals and turning to divine powers was one way to mitigate the threat posed by this pest.

The traditional way of celebrating Marrying off the Caterpillar Festival goes as follows: On the dawn of the eighth day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar, people walk out of their homes to collect dew from the grass, crops, and trees. They carefully put these dewdrops into their inkstones and mix them with the inkstick to make ink. Once the ink is ready, they cut two pieces of red paper and ask a respected elder to write a Buddhist mantra on them. This mantra is written from the two ends of the red paper, leaving the middle part blank. On one piece of paper, the elder writes: “The Buddha was born on the eighth of the fourth month, the worms will get married on this day.” On the other piece, he writes, “Married into the mountains, never ever return home.” When pasting the mantra couplet, people cross the two pieces of paper into the shape of a cross. They then paste the four ends of the couplet, leaving the crossed section of the papers protruding, which makes the couplet look like a wiggled-up caterpillar. The exact locations to display the mantra vary for different ethnic groups. The Tu Jia ethnic group, who have two pillars in their living rooms, paste the red couplet on the left pillar. The Han people paste the mantra in several places in their living rooms, such as on the beams, right under the ceiling, or on the walls. In Sichuan province,
people paste multiple couplets on their doors and windows. This custom has been practiced for at least several centuries. In the Xian Feng era (1851-1861) of the Qing Dynasty, *Yun Yang Town Gazettes* recorded this custom: “the eighth, popularly regarded as the birthday of the Buddha. The authorities of Sichuan forbid any slaughter on the eighth of the fourth month. The people follow a custom of marrying off the caterpillars. On the early morning of this day, after burning incense to worship the Buddha, they write on paper: ‘the Buddha was born on the eighth of the fourth month, the caterpillars get married on this day; marry deep into the mountains, never return home.’ Pasted over doors and windows, the caterpillars don’t dare to enter. Quite effective.” This entry in the gazette clearly states that it was Buddha’s birthday that commands the marrying off the caterpillars.

In today’s world of urbanization, “Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival” has lost much of its functionality as a religious ritual except in remote and rural areas where people still follow the traditional practice. Rather, “Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival” has metamorphized into a component of cultural tourism. On the eighth day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar, tourist towns and cities in Sichuan, Guizhou, northern Guangxi, and western Hunan provinces put on elaborate parades. The Buddhist mantra serves as the theme song of rehearsed group singing and dances. At these public performances, the presentation of the Buddhist mantra, rather than a religious rite, is part of public entertainment catering to the tourists’ interest in local folk traditions.

The dominance of the Buddhist mantra among incantations to marry off the caterpillars has much to do with “Showering the Buddha Festival.” In China and Korea, the commemoration of Siddhartha Gautama’s birth is on the eighth day of the fourth month of their lunar calendars. According to myth, Prince Siddhartha of the royal Shakya clan, who would come to be known as Gautama Buddha, could walk as soon as he was born, and under each of his feet, he stood upon a lotus flower. With one hand pointing to the sky and the other to the earth, Prince Siddhartha claimed, “From the sky to the earth, I am the only one.” Upon his birth, nine dragons poured fragrant water over the newborn to purify him. On the anniversary of this day, Buddhist followers gather at temples and worship the statue of the newborn Prince. In some temples, the monks use a small brass ladle and take turns to pour fragrant water over the Prince’s statue. After the ceremonies, the followers bring some of this fragrant water home and add it to their hot bath as the fragrant water is deemed to have the sacred power of protecting the followers from illness.

The popularity of the Buddhist mantra highlights Buddhism’s gaining of power in the rivalry between Buddhism and Taoism. The following tale circulating in the Han ethnic group, collected from Yaojiawan, Baode Town of Shanxi Province in Northwest China, recounts this ascendance of Buddhism and weakening of Taoism in folk belief:

Once upon a time, there was a young married woman in Yaojiawan. Every morning, she went to the river to fetch water, and she would hear “let us out, let us out!” from inside the cliff across from the Floral Buddha Pagoda. Every day as she went by, she heard the call. Eventually, the woman told her mother-in-law about it. The mother-in-law said, “If they cry again, you should say, ‘if you want to come out, then come out.’” On the eighth day of the fourth month in the lunar calendar, this young woman went to fetch water again. Hearing cries of “let us out, let us out!” She
responded without much thinking, “If you want to come out, then come out!” As soon as she said this, the cliff collapsed, and many stone Buddha statues of various sizes fell out. Among them, there was also a stone statue of Lu Ban. Unfortunately, the young woman was buried under the fallen rocks. To commemorate her, people built a temple to worship her and honored her as Buddha Mother (Fo Zu Niang Niang).

Essentially a folktale to explain the origin of the Eighth of the Fourth Month Festival, this story reflects Buddhism's rise and Taoism's decline. The young wife’s response to the plea of “letting us out” enabled the coming forth of a number of stone Buddha statues. However, only one statue of Lu Ban, a Taoist deity, came into our worldly realm. At the end of the story, the young wife was considered an inadvertent sacrifice. As her death helped to expand the influence of Buddhism, she was rewarded sainthood. Symbiotically, the celebration of the Eighth of the Fourth Month Festival and the temple built on her behalf greatly enhanced Buddhism's presence in the region. Throughout Chinese history, Buddhism and Taoism have developed a complicated and intertwined relationship that goes beyond the dichotomy of mutual borrowing or confrontation. Nonetheless, the strand of rivalry was distinctive and persistent in their entanglement. According to T. H. Barrett, Buddhism in China jostled for cultural space with Taoism from the start. By the early sixth century, the Buddhists had begun to articulate a relationship that clearly involved the subordination of Taoism. Taoist scriptures were relegated to “this-worldly” teaching while Buddhism was elevated to “beyond this world” (141-145). Taoism’s resistance to this downgrading played an important role in the persecution of Buddhism, such as the movements to abolish Buddhism in 446 CE under the Northern Wei, in 574 CE under the Northern Zhou, and in 845 CE under the Tang. When the Buddhists, with the support of the Mongol Khubilai Khan in 1281, finally had their chance for a counterattack, they burned all texts and woodblocks in the Taoist canon save those for Dao De Jing. Still, this rivalry stimulated not religious isolation, but constant, mutual interaction (141-145). The diverse narratives on the origin of the Marrying Off the Caterpillars Festival represent the complex relationships of these two major religious traditions in China.

In the Taoist and Buddhist mantras, although the relocation to the mountains is involuntary, the purpose is not to eradicate the caterpillars. Like married daughters, once the caterpillars are “married out,” they are expected to live away from their natal homes. Of course, unlike married daughters, these caterpillars are not welcome to come back and visit their natal homes as guests of honor. Once married out, they are told to “never ever return home.” Nonetheless, the essence of both Taoist and Buddhist mantras is one of coexistence. This is in alignment with Taoist and Buddhist teachings on no-harming and compassion, as both religions deem the killing of living beings as sinning. In reality, this “marrying off” message that emphasizes co-existence is an ecologically sounder message because caterpillars are an essential link of a healthy and dynamic ecological system. People and animals such as birds and small mammals hunt for caterpillars in the spring and summer, before caterpillars develop cocoons. Caterpillars are an important food intake for many in central Africa in countries such as the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Botswana. Species of the wildlife feed on caterpillars as part of their diets. Bears, hedgehogs, and rodents have an appetite for caterpillars, while passerine birds such as woodpeckers and songbirds hunt for caterpillars. During the late autumn and winter, caterpillars wrap themselves in a cocoon and begin the metamorphosis into a butterfly. When butterflies emerge from their cocoon, they continue aiding the environment by pollinating flowers.

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Marginalized Animist Ballads and Folktales of Extermination

It is noteworthy that in Xiande Wei’s folktale “Marrying the Caterpillars on the Lunar April 8th Festival,” there are actually two mantras. One is the aforementioned mantra that evokes the power of Taoist deity Lu Ban, the other one is brought up at the very end of the folktale: “Caterpillars black and ugly, walk wiggly giggly. Today marry out and out, forever die out and out.” Unlike the Taoist and Buddhist mantras, this latter one does not urge the caterpillars to leave man’s habitat and find their own in the mountains. Instead, it calls for the extinction of the caterpillars. A formidable pest in terms of volume and extend of damages, it is not surprising to find direct confrontations between humans and pests reflected in oral traditions. For example, during the multiple-week celebration of the Chinese New Year Festival, the 15th day is the Lantern Day. On this day, the children from the neighborhood gather together, carrying in their little hands lanterns lit with burning candles, either homemade or bought from the bazaar. The children walk together through the alleys and lanes to “illuminate the caterpillars.” It is believed that wherever the lanterns shine, there won’t be caterpillars in the new year. Holding their shining lanterns, the children sing:

Shine, shine, shine on the caterpillars,
so shiny that the caterpillars’ butts hurt.
Pierced by an awl, sewed up with yarn,
see if you hurt or not!
Shine, shine, shine on the caterpillars,
shine on the eyes, my eyes become clearer,
shine on the teeth, my teeth have no ache,
shine on the nose, I have no running nose,
shine on the ears, my ears won’t become deaf.

It is evident that this ballad portrays humans and caterpillars in an antagonistic relationship. Availing themselves of the power of light and fire, humans strongly desire to cause physical harm to the caterpillars, as revenge for past damages and prevention of future losses. Tools such as lanterns, awls, and yarn all become instruments of prosecution and punishment. Additionally, the shining on caterpillars is accompanied by concrete benefits in enhancing important human senses in the vision, dental, nasal, and acoustic aspects.

Although overshadowed by the Buddhist and Taoist incantations that highlight co-existence, mantras that wish for the annihilation of caterpillars were in scattered existence. In some of these annihilation mantras, people beseech natural forces, such as the wind or the rain, to exterminate this stinging pest. In others, people summon celestial forces such as deities in folk religions to annihilate the caterpillars. For instance, in Yongding Town of Shanxi Province, farmers followed the tradition of “Sending Away the Caterpillar Mother.” On their doors, they pasted the mantra “The eighth of the fourth month, a great auspicious day, King Wen dispatched his soldiers to send away the Caterpillar Mother; Caterpillar Mother sent deep into the mountains, swept away by the blowing wind and falling rain.” (“四月八, 大吉昌, 文王发军送毛娘; 毛娘送到深山去, 风吹雨打一扫光。”) King Wen refers to King Chang Ji of the Zhou Dynasty. In Chinese myths, he developed the Sixty-Four Hexagrams and authored *The Book of Change* when he was detained by the last King Zhou of
the Shang Dynasty who was known for his cruelty. Others chant the mantra “The eighth day of the fourth month, caterpillars will be killed, west wind will blow, never ever appear.” (“四月八，毛虫杀，西风吹，永不发。”) In Guidong, Hunan Province, people sang the ballad “Eighth of April, marry out the Caterpillar Mother, west wind blow (her) away, never return back to her hometown.” (“四月初八嫁毛娘，西风吹去永不回乡。”) In Yongding Town, Fu Jian province, when celebrating “The Eighth of Fourth Month Festival,” people chanted “On the Eighth of the Fourth Month Festival, Dong Bin stopped by to rest. He blew a celestial breath, caterpillars all died out.” (“四月八日节，洞宾来借歇。仙风吹一口，毛虫尽皆灭。”) “Dong Bin” in this ballad refers to Lü Dongbin. He is one of the Eight Immortals, who are popular deities in both Taoism and folk religions. In Taoism, Lü Dongbin is often referred to as Lü the Progenitor as he was deemed to be the originator of the Quan Zhen School of Taoism. In folk religions, like Lu Ban in the Zou Ma story, Lü Dongbin often appears to pass by or taking a rest on his journey when people from the margins of society such as a destitute peasant, a fragile elderly, or a young child, runs into difficulties.

The life-and-death clash between humans and the caterpillars also plays out in folk literature. In the Tu ethnic group of Maoping, Sichuan province, there is a folktale relating to the origin of the eighth of the fourth month festival that underscores the confrontation between these two species:

A long time ago, there was a plague of black spiky caterpillars. The caterpillars ate up all the crops for miles. Everything, from the grass on the ground to the leaves on the mountains, was eaten. A large-scale disaster was looming.

Maoping did not have many households. Later, it had more residents. Among them, there was one such household that only had a father and a daughter. People did not know their names; they only knew they came with the Hunan and Guangdong immigrants to fill up Sichuan. This daughter was beautiful, and about seventeen or eighteen years old. The father was old and only had this daughter. While the father doted on her, she was a dutiful daughter.

One night, the Earth Deity appeared in the father’s dream and told him, “The Caterpillar King wants a wife. If someone marries his daughter to the King, he will cease making trouble.” The next day, the father woke up and told the villagers about his dream. But whose daughter would want to marry a Caterpillar King? After another three days, on the seventh day of the fourth month, the Earth Deity appeared in the father’s dream again and said, “You shall marry your daughter to him. If you prepare these few things as the dowry, she will return home safely.” The father told his daughter about his dream. To save the villagers, the daughter agreed to marry the Caterpillar King. The two busied themselves throughout the night and got the dowry ready.

On the eighth day, the villagers carried the daughter in a sedan chair up the mountain. They finally stopped on the side of the road and waited for the Caterpillar King to receive her.
Countless caterpillars, big or small, were clustering around a five chi vi cocoon. The bigger ones were two chi, even the smaller ones were six or seven cun vii. A small caterpillar saw the sedan chair and went into the cocoon to report to the King. A gigantic caterpillar with a human face and a caterpillar body emerged from the cocoon. He inquired, “What dowry are you carrying?” “Your majesty,” the bride replied, “nothing but bedding and a rack for the basin that holds hot water.” The King said, “In that case, come quickly and get married!” The bride answered, “Wait a minute. Please let the caterpillars leave for a short while, I have to take a bath.” The king heard this and asked all the caterpillars to leave. The bride asked the villagers to carry over the hot water. However, the firewood was not good enough to boil the water. The Caterpillar King urged, “Are you done with bathing?” The bride said, “Not yet.” The Caterpillar King waited and waited and fell asleep in his cocoon. The villagers moved the iron cross-shaped rack onto the cocoon and poured hot water into it. The Caterpillar King was scorched to death. The daughter saw the daybreak, and she started to run. However, a caterpillar caught up to her and bit her on the foot.

After the Caterpillar King was killed, the caterpillars big and small were still in their nests. The villagers poured boiling water into their nests, scorching them to death as well. From then on, the area had a bountiful harvest every year. Unfortunately, the daughter died years later from the toxic bite. In memory of this dutiful daughter, the villagers would write “worm worm, wiggle wiggle. Marry out marry out, die out die out” on the eighth day of the fourth month of every year.viii

This folktale recounts the violent confrontation between humans and pests. Marriage, which could have been a symbolic unification between the human and pest realms, turns out to be a setup for obliterating the caterpillars. The heroine of the folktale fits into the folkloristic motif of courageous, brave female warriors against formidable beastly foes. For instance, the heroine Li Ji in Kan Bao’s legend “Li Ji Slays the Serpent” shares many similarities with the dutiful daughter in this folktale. Li Ji was to marry a giant serpent who threatened the survival of her fellow countrymen. Like Li Ji, the daughter in this Maoping folktale chose to risk her life to save her fellow villagers from the looming disaster threatened by the Caterpillar King. However, Li Ji and the Maoping daughter met different endings. Li Ji’s bravery was rewarded with a marriage proposal from the king and munificent gifts to her whole family. The daughter in the Mao Ping story instead died from the injury inflicted by a minor caterpillar. This divergence in endings may be an attestation of caterpillars’ daunting presence humans’ psyche. It may also reflect that fact that

Similar to the Maoping folktale, the Bai ethnic group’s creation myth is one where which the marital alliance between a woman and the king of the caterpillars brought the mass destruction of the caterpillars. In this creation myth of the Bai people of South China, a brother, and his younger sister, named A Bu Tie and A Yue Tie, survived a great flood by hiding in a giant gourd. To continue the seeds of humanity, they asked the gods’ blessings to get married and their wish was granted. However, A Yue Tie gave birth to five daughters and no sons. This couple had to marry off their daughters for the continuity of humanity. The elder daughters married a bear, a tiger, a snake, and a flying rat respectively, and were able to start new tribes bearing these animals as their totems. The fifth and youngest daughter fell in love and married a caterpillar king, who built a beautiful bed of vines in the woods for his
bride. When night approached, the caterpillar told this fifth daughter to sleep and don’t look upward. However, alone in her bed, the young bride looked upward and saw thousands and thousands of caterpillars clinging to the leaves of the trees. She was so scared that she began to cry. Her shrill cries caused the caterpillars to fall to their death and she died from fright herself. In the morning, A Bu Tie found his dead daughter, buried under the bodies of caterpillars. The grief ridden A Bu Tie put a curse on the caterpillars so that they could never establish their own tribe. (Tao and Zhong)

Like the folktale from Maoping, this Bai ethnic tale portrays the union of a human’s daughter and a caterpillar king as unacceptable and disastrous. In the end, not only the caterpillar king but his whole kingdom collapsed due to this marriage arrangement. In both stories, the reluctant brides met their demise in the end. This genesis myth depicts a hierarchical worldview. The union of humans, blessed by god, produced daughters that were desired by the royals of the animal kingdom. The unions between human and animal species and the propagation of their offspring signify the genesis of new tribes. In the Bai myth, it is evident that caterpillars are not only lower than humans but also lower than other beasts such as the bear, tiger, snake, and rat. The elevation of humans above animals is in alignment with Buddhism’s theory of the Six Realms of Existence where the human realm positions itself above the realms of the animals, the hungry ghosts, and the hells. In this Bai creation myth, it is god’s blessings that human gains this preferred status. What is more, the hierarchy among the animal tribes is based on the likeness of these animals to humans. For instance, the bear, who married to the eldest daughter, could shapeshift to a handsome young man, propose to A Bu Tie’s eldest daughter, and help his father-in-law tending the crops in human form. Conversely, the caterpillar king could only assume human likeness to a much less degree. In the evenings, the caterpillar king appeared as a good-looking young man to meet the fifth daughter but he had to turn back to his worm form under the sun.

Conclusion

Through studying the array of mantras, ballads, folktales pertinent to the “Marrying Off the Caterpillars Festival,” we have uncovered the diverse and rich traditions and religious beliefs embedded in this seemingly simple festival. Facing the challenge of a pest as formidable as caterpillars, some ballads invoke the power of nature, such as the west wind and the rain to eradicate the caterpillars; others call on the power of Taoist deities such as Lu Ban to marry off the caterpillars; others call on the might of Buddha to expel the caterpillars. It is noteworthy that this traditional festival provides sufficient space for diverse responses to co-exist. In terms of live practice, the Buddhist mantra is predominant. However, the dominance of the Buddhist mantra does not prevent the persistent existence of animist and Taoist beliefs in various forms such as mantras, ballads, and folktales. These marginalized versions not only have survived but some of them were popular enough to find their way into prints and multimedia re-telling. Hereby, folklore creates a space of cultural diversity that includes the marginalized, the other, and the peripheral narratives.

The study of the “Marrying Off the Caterpillars Festival” sheds light on folklore’s elastic and resilient nature to provide a space where cultural diversity can be preserved and communicated. Folklore gives voice to different messages, preserving diversity in terms of folk beliefs, customs, and practices. Its representations are not homogenizing but
characterized by eclecticism and hybridity. Folklore serves as a transcultural and trans-religious medium that provides visibility for marginalized traditions and cultural otherness. This function—as a space of cultural diversity and inclusion for the marginalized—is an important factor in folklore’s persistence and resilience facing the challenges brought on by temporal, spatial, and social changes.

Works Cited


End Notes

i “Three Series Collections” is a national effort to collect and categorize folk tales, folk songs, proverbs, allegorical sayings, and slang terms. It started in 1984 under the leadership of several ministries and associations of the Chinese government and continued for over a decade.

ii Mr. Shouwei Zhong, leading staff of cultural affairs at Zou Ma Town provided these figures during the author’s interview with him in May 2017. These numbers are also in Zou Ma’s pamphlets and internal publications.

iii The Chinese lunar calendar is based on the phases of the moon. It is about 20 to 50 days behind the Gregorian calendar.

iv For further reading on caterpillars’ contributions to a healthy ecosystem, please refer to research on this topic by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation, such as this one: http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2004/51409/index.html.

v The eight immortals are eight Taoist deities: Han Zhongli, Zhang Guolao, Han Xiangzi, Lü Dongbin, Lan Caihe, Li Tieguai, Cao Guojiu and He Xiangu. They are also popular figures in folk beliefs.

vi Chi, a Chinese measure unit. It is approximately 1.09 feet.

vii Cun, a Chinese measure unit. It is about 1.31 inches.

viii This story was collected from Maoping area of Sichuan Province and translated from its Chinese original to English by the author of this article.