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To promote interdisciplinary studies in the fields of Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences and provide a reliable academically trusted and approved venue of publishing Language and culture research.

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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 lunar calendar, people in multiple areas of South and Southwest China expel caterpillars from their crop fields and their residences by invoking different powers such as Taoist deities, the Buddha, and animistic spirits. Although Buddhist versions of this festival dominate multiple genres of folk literature and circulate as the master narrative, Taoist and animistic mantras and folktales have also survived in the realm of folklore—albeit dwarfed and marginalized. The study demonstrates that folklore as a medium displays a complex interplay among different cultural and religious traditions, highlighting eclecticism and hybridity. It argues that folklore is characterized as transcultural and transreligious, preserving and providing visibility for 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

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On the eighth day of the fourth month in the Chinese lunar calendar, people expel caterpillars from their crop fields and their residences through the invocation of different divine powers, namely Taoist deities, the Buddha, and animistic spirits. The folkloristic roots of this practice may take three primary forms. One is the folktale known as “Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival,” in which a Taoist deity known as Lu Ban possesses the magic power to expel the caterpillars. Another is the belief that the Buddha’s birthday on the eighth day of the fourth month is the source of power that drives the caterpillars from the crop fields to their rightful place in the woods. A third comes in the form of folklore that underscores the confrontation between human beings and caterpillars, which summons the power of animist spirits to eradicate the caterpillars.

This article analyzes these three folkloric forms. Although Buddhist mantras occupy a dominant position in the celebration and oral circulation of “Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival,” the existence of the Taoist and animistic mantras, ballads, and folktales underscores 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 characterized as transcultural and transreligious. 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.

## 2. MARGINALIZED TAOIST FOLKTALE AND MANTRA OF CO-EXISTENCE

Zou Ma Town of Chongqing Municipality in Southwest China is a beautiful, hilly town that is known for its storytelling heritage. For hundreds of years, Zou Ma was an important post on the mountainous horse-drawn courier roads connecting Chongqing and Chengdu, two large urban centers of Southwest China. The main street of Zou Ma was a bustling center with shops, teahouses, and hostels. When travelers took rest at their teahouses or hostels, Zou Ma people were eager to listen to their stories of traveling. The Zou Ma people appreciated the creativity associated with storytelling. They called it “Bai Long Men Zhen” (摆龙门阵), which means telling tall tales. Gradually, Zou Ma became a hub of storytelling. After 1949, performative storytelling was banned as it was deemed at variance with the government’s new socialist rural policies. However, Zou Ma people’s love of storytelling did not cease; they just found more creative and secretive ways to enjoy storytelling.<sup>1</sup>

With the initiation of the Reform and Open Door Policy (1978), the country’s perspectives on storytelling changed from prohibition to rediscovery. In 1984, several ministries and associations of the Chinese government took the leadership to start the over-a-decade-long “Three Series Collections,” which was a national effort to collect and categorize folk tales, folk songs, proverbs, allegorical sayings, and slang terms. When folklorists came to Zou Ma as part of this national endeavor, they hit a gold mine. Over the years, folklorists and their local helpers collected over 10,000 folk tales in Zou Ma. They also recorded more than 3,000 folk songs, 4,000 proverbs, and 4,000 allegorical sayings and slang terms.<sup>2</sup>

Xiande Wei (1923-2009) emerged as the best-known storyteller of Zou Ma. Xiande Wei started to follow his uncle as a traveling storyteller in 1937 when he was fourteen years old. By the age of twenty-two, he could tell over 5,000 stories. After 1949, Xiande Wei returned to Zou Ma and went back to farming.<sup>3</sup> In 1998, in a study on China’s oral and intangible cultural heritages conducted by UNESCO, Xiande Wei and nine other storytellers from different parts of China were recognized as “The Top Ten Chinese Storytellers.” Xiande Wei’s younger brother, Xianfa Wei, could also tell over one thousand folktales. These two brothers were titled “the Grimm Brothers of China.”<sup>4</sup> In 1990, Weijin Peng and Zishuo Li, two tireless collectors of Zou Ma folktales, edited folktales told and retold by Xiande Wei and published them through the Chongqing Publishing Press as *Xiande Wei Folktales Collection*—now unfortunately out of print.

A 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 Day of the Fourth Month of the Lunar Calendar.” The authors of this article transliterated this story as follows:

A long time ago, caterpillars stayed only 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 bean plants 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: the leaves of the bean plants 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. So, he picked up a stick to beat the caterpillars, but the stick beat down the beanstalks 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, “Elder 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 should 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 day of the fourth month, caterpillars wiggling everywhere, marry into the deep mountains, never ever return home.” Before long, the caterpillars on the beanstalks all crawled away, and bean leaves 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 day 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” (Peng and Li 106-08).<sup>6</sup>

In this folktale, Lu Ban is the hero who had the magic power to solve a crisis for a peasant in distress. Lu Ban was a Taoist deity who was born into a family of carpenters and artisans. According to popular legend, thanks to his extraordinary craftsmanship, Lu Ban’s work was in great demand, which compelled him to invent or renovate a number of carpenter’s tools. The folktale that Lu Ban invented the saw based on the serrated edges of grass leaves is so popular that it is included in the Chinese textbook for elementary schools. In popular legend, Lu Ban later lived at Li Mountain<sup>7</sup> as a Taoist ascetic until his death. After his death, Lu Ban gradually gained sainthood among his followers. Today, he is revered as the god of carpentry and masonry and there are many temples to worship him in the greater China cultural sphere. With the sanctification of Lu Ban, Lu Ban’s family members, especially his wife and sister, were also credited with inventions or innovations of tools. According to legend, the worshipers of Lu Ban compiled a Taoist scripture that lists hundreds of mantras, praying to Lu Ban, his wife, his sister, and his disciples for protection and solutions to their difficulties.

Many of these mantras are related to construction, but there are also more generic mantras for curtailing evil spirits and bringing order to chaotic situations.<sup>8</sup>

The use of incantations to expel pests is not uncommon. As A. R. George points out, one of the best-known stories is probably disciple John's admonition of the bed bugs when he stayed in an inn at Ephesus (148-79). 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" (James 353). After this incantation, the bugs became quiet and John was able to sleep (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. 148-79). 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 (George et al. 148-79). 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.

### 3. DOMINANT BUDDHIST MANTRA OF CO-EXISTENCE

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. 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 day 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 day of fourth month,  
caterpillars will get married on this day.  
Married into the mountains,  
never 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 the eighth day of the fourth month, the caterpillars and ants will be married off, married into the mountains, never ever to return home" (Huanyue Liu).

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.

Compared with North China, South and Southwest China have more mountainous territories with heavy foliage coverage. The quantity of caterpillars 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. Around this time, insects, worms, and ants begin to appear in large numbers and to mate and reproduce. Caterpillars may not only wreak havoc on crops but also cause physical injuries to people. The stings from 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 and plants. They carefully put the dewdrops collected 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 day 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.<sup>9</sup> The exact locations to display the mantra vary for different ethnic groups. 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.<sup>10</sup> The Tu Jia ethnic group, who have two pillars in their living rooms, paste the red couplet on the left pillar.<sup>11</sup>

This custom has been practiced for at least several centuries. In the Xian Feng era (1851-1861) of the Qing Dynasty, *Yun Yang Town Gazette* recorded this custom: “the eighth day, popularly regarded as the birthday of the Buddha. The authorities of Sichuan forbid any slaughter on the eighth day 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 day 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.”<sup>12</sup> This entry in a town gazette clearly states that it was Buddha’s birthday that commands 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 South and Southwest China 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 legend, 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 his birthday, 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.<sup>13</sup>

The popularity of the Buddhist mantra highlights Buddhism’s gaining of power in the rivalry between Buddhism and Taoism. The following tale titled “Baode’s Eighth Day of the Fourth Month Festival” circulating in Yangjiawan, 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 Yangjiawan. 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 (Fo Hua Ta). 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. (“Baode’s Eighth Day of the Fourth Month Festival”)

Essentially a folktale to explain the origin of the Eighth Day 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. Conversely, 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 Day 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” (141-45). 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 (141-45). 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 often an essential link of a healthy and dynamic ecological system. As Skip Davis points out in his article “Benefits of Caterpillars,” people and animals such as birds and small mammals hunt for caterpillars as a food source in the spring and summer. Species of wildlife feed on caterpillars as part of their diets. These include bears, hedgehogs, and rodents as well as passerine birds such as woodpeckers and songbirds (Davis). In late autumn and wintertime, caterpillars wrap themselves in cocoons and start the metamorphosis process to become butterflies. When they emerge as butterflies from their cocoons, they continue helping the environment by pollinating flowers (Davis). What is more, caterpillars are an important food intake for many African countries.<sup>14</sup>

#### **4. MARGINALIZED ANIMIST BALLADS AND FOLKTALES OF EXTERMINATION**

In Xiande Wei’s folktale “Marrying the Caterpillars on the Eighth Day of the Fourth Month 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.” Xiande Wei’s folktale is not the only one that incorporates two mantras. According to *Yi Long Town Traditional Folk Cultural Series: Ke Jia Culture*, on the eighth day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar, people in Yi Long Town write two mantras on red papers. One of them is the dominant Buddhist mantra “The Buddha was born on the eighth day of the fourth month, caterpillars will get married on this day. Married into the mountains, never ever return home” (175). The other one goes as follows: “Caterpillars, Caterpillars, Black and Hairy, Black and Hairy. Married into the mountains, die out, die out” (175).

Unlike the Taoist and Buddhist mantras, these latter ones not only urge the caterpillars to leave human habitat and find their own in the mountains, but also call for the extinction of caterpillars, which are formidable pests in terms of volume and extent of damages.

Accordingly, 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 fifteenth day is the Lantern Day. On this day, the children of villages or small towns 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 valleys 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.<sup>15</sup>

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 visual, dental, nasal, and acoustical aspects.

Although overshadowed by the Buddhist and Taoist incantations that highlight co-existence, mantras that wish for the annihilation of caterpillars are 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 Ningdu Town of Jiangxi Province, farmers followed the tradition of “Sending Away the Caterpillar Mother.” On their doors, they pasted the mantra “The eighth day 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。”) (cixiangyiren). King Wen refers to King Chang Ji of the Zhou Dynasty. In Chinese myths, he developed the Sixty-Four Hexagrams and wrote *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。”) (cixingyiren). In Yongding Town, Fu Jian province, when celebrating “The Eighth Day of Fourth Month Festival,” people chanted “On the Eighth Day 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。”) (JiangHao5749). “Dong Bin” in this ballad refers to Lü Dongbin. He is one of the Eight Immortals,<sup>16</sup> who are popular deities in both Taoism and folk religions. In folk religions, like Lu Ban in the Zou Ma story, Lü Dongbin often appears to pass by or take 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. There was also the ballad “Eighth day of the fourth month, marry out the Caterpillar Mother, west wind blow [her] away, never returns back to her hometown.” (“四月初八嫁毛娘，西风吹去永不回乡。”)<sup>17</sup> It is evident that these animist mantras are in fragmentary existence, which highlights their marginalized position.

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 on the origin of the eighth day of the fourth month festival that underscores the confrontation between human beings and caterpillars.

A long time ago, there was a plague of black spiky caterpillars in Maoping. 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. Among the residents of Maoping, 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 of age. While the father doted on her, she was a dutiful daughter.

One night in the fourth month, 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? 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 follow what I am going to tell you, 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 of the fourth month, 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* cocoon.<sup>18</sup> 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. I have to take a bath.” The king heard this and agreed. The bride asked the accompanying villagers to boil the hot water for her. 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. It was almost the crack of dawn, the daughter started to run away. However, a caterpillar caught up to her and bit her on the foot.

After the Caterpillar King was killed, the villagers poured boiling water into the nests of caterpillars big and small, 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 commemoration 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 every year.<sup>19</sup>

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 in human psyche.

Similar to the Maoping folktale, the Bai ethnic group’s creation myth is one where 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 who 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 through god's blessings that humans gain this preferred status. Moreover, the hierarchy among the animal tribes is based on the likeness of these animals to humans. For instance, the bear, who marries 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 (Tao and Zhong).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Through studying the array of mantras, ballads, and 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 print and multimedia retelling. 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 may 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 rather 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.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This general history of Zou Ma Town is a summary based on introduction of the town made by Mr. Shouwei Zhong, leading cultural officer of Zou Ma Town, when Dr. Geng interviewed him in May 2017. Zou Ma residents interviewed also gave a very similar account of Zou Ma's history. This is also the official history of Zou Ma in the media. We were not able to locate a physical copy of Zou Ma's gazetteer on a research visit.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Shouwei Zhong, leading cultural officer of Zou Ma Town provided these figures when interviewed in May 2017. These numbers are the official numbers from Zou Ma's cultural office. These numbers appear in introductions of Zou Ma storytelling tradition in either written or digital forms such as on [www.baidu.com](http://www.baidu.com).

<sup>3</sup> Mr. Shouwei Zhong, leading cultural officer of Zou Ma Town provided these figures and XiandeWei's life story when interviewed in May 2017. These numbers are the official numbers from Zou Ma's cultural office.

<sup>4</sup> Mr. Shouwei Zhong, leading cultural officer of Zou Ma Town provided Xianfa Wei's life story when interviewed in May 2017. Both Xiande Wei and Xianfa Wei had passed away when Mr. Shouwei Zhong was interviewed.

<sup>5</sup> The Chinese lunar calendar is based on the phases of the moon. It is about 20 to 50 days behind the Gregorian calendar.

<sup>6</sup> The book was out of print when we conducted research in Zou Ma. Mr. Yuanyang Liu, a national Zou Ma storytelling heritage bearer, had a photocopy of this rare story from Xiande Wei's book. The authors of this paper transliterated it to Chinese in accordance with Mr. Liu's photocopy. In general, Zou Ma Town regards its storytelling tradition communal treasure and discourages individual storyteller's claims to specific stories.

<sup>7</sup> Li Mountain is in Jinan City of Shandong Province. It is known as the place where the legendary sage emperor Shun tilled.

<sup>8</sup> Lu Ban is a popular Taoist figure; legends on him are large in numbers and widely circulated across China. The legendary scripture is supposed to be shared among Lu Ban's followers. It is not a publication open to the public. The authors of this paper have not been able to locate a copy of this scripture.

<sup>9</sup> Mr. Yuanyang Liu, Zou Ma's national cultural heritage bearer, recounted this traditional celebration of "Marrying off the Caterpillars Festival" when interviewed in May 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Mr. Yuanyang Liu recounted the locations that Si Chuan people pasted the mantra when interviewed in May 2017. His account is in alignment with fragmented mentioning of where Han people paste their mantras in blogs. In general, Han people paste their mantras more broadly and liberally around their houses.

<sup>11</sup> Information on the location that the Tu Jia Ethnic Group pasted their mantras is from [baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%AB%81%E6%AF%9B%E8%99%AB%E8%8A%82/3318281#1](http://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%AB%81%E6%AF%9B%E8%99%AB%E8%8A%82/3318281#1).

<sup>12</sup> An online dictionary provides this information. [youdict.net/hydc/d/s/%E5%AB%81%E6%AF%9B%E8%99%AB](http://youdict.net/hydc/d/s/%E5%AB%81%E6%AF%9B%E8%99%AB). The authors of this paper could not locate a physical copy of *Yun Yang Gazetteer*.

<sup>13</sup> This summary of the Showering the Buddha Festival is based on introduction of this festival at <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%B5%B4%E4%BD%9B%E8%8A%82/964994>. For further information on this festival, please refer to 韩养民[Han, Yangmin]. "丝路东传的第一个宗教节——浴佛节" ["The First Religious Festival of the Silk Road's Eastward Movement—Washing the Buddha Festival"]. *咸阳师范学院学报* [Xianyang Normal University Journal]. 31.5(2016):4.

<sup>14</sup> For caterpillars' contributions to a healthy ecosystem and its value as a food source, see research on this topic by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation: [www.fao.org/edible-insects/84802/en/](http://www.fao.org/edible-insects/84802/en/)

<sup>15</sup> Mr. Yuanyang Liu sang this song and talked about this customer when interviewed in May 2019.

<sup>16</sup> 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 belief.

<sup>17</sup> This incantation is recorded in "Chapter Thirty-Two Customs and Religions," p. 609, [www.jxsfzg.cn/resource/pdfFile/2015/111441669177187.pdf](http://www.jxsfzg.cn/resource/pdfFile/2015/111441669177187.pdf). Accessed 29 July 2021. Author of this chapter is unknown. Title of book is unknown.

<sup>18</sup> *Chi*, a Chinese measure unit, is approximately 1.09 feet.

<sup>19</sup> We collected this popular story from Maoping area of Sichuan Province and translated it into English. Many similar versions exist in Sichuan Province in both oral and written forms. For example, similar versions appear on the following two webpages: [www.bjhexieweishi.com/juzi/674437.html](http://www.bjhexieweishi.com/juzi/674437.html) and [www.fengsuwang.com/jieri/jiamaochongjie.asp](http://www.fengsuwang.com/jieri/jiamaochongjie.asp)

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