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Cover Page Footnote

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Magpies, Bridge and Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols and Rediscovering the Lost Goddess in Chinese Qiqiao Festival

Juan Wu¹

Abstract: The Qiqiao Festival, also known as the Qixi Festival, or Chinese valentine's day, is a festival celebrating the annual meeting of the Cowherd and Weaver Maid in mythology. The most influential version focuses on the romance or love theme; however, it ignores its underlying historical context, gender tension and mythical belief. This paper takes the texts, rituals and materials related to the Qiqiao festival to investigate its origin and evolution. First, it takes the anthological case of the Qiqiao festival in Xihe county to explore its core image of the holy bridge and Goddess Qiao. Second, it traces the bridge image in the Qiqiao festival to the archeological evidence of the oracle Hong and Jade Huang to explore the interaction of the rainbow bridge and goddess in the Qiqiao festival. Third, it presents multiple textual evidence to explore the mythic image of the magpie bridge in the Qiqiao festival to reveal the connection between bird worship and Goddess Worship. It proposes a possible mode of evolution of the Qiqiao festival: first originated from the initial sacrifices to Goddess Qiao, to pray for the holy bridge or pray to Goddess for the craft, then to the romance of the Cowherd and Weaver Maid. This paper extends from the aesthetic narrative of the Qiqiao Festival to its mythological context, highlighting its underlying ideology and gender tension. The Qiqiao festival is not only about romance; it reveals the profound tradition of the Goddess, bridge and bird mythology before the patriarchal society. The evolution of the Qiqiao festival demonstrates the tension between man and woman, fictional imagination and mythical worship, aesthetic autonomy and embedded ideology.

Key Words: Qiqiao Festival, Goddess, Gender, Magpies, Bridge

The Qiqiao Festival, also known as Chinese valentine's day, Double Seventh Festival, or Magpie Festival, is a festival celebrating the annual meeting of the Cowherd and Weaver Maid in mythology. The festival is celebrated on the seventh day of the seventh lunisolar month on the Chinese calendar. The Qiqiao festival is seen as a date to celebrate the romance or love theme; however, it ignores its underlying historical context, gender tension and mythical belief. This paper takes the texts, rituals and materials related to the Qiqiao festival to investigate the mythic image of bridge magpies and Weaver Maid and to unveil the underlying profound tradition of goddess worship in the Qiqiao festival. First, I will examine the folklore and rituals of the Qiqiao Festival in Xihe county, Longnan, Gansu Province, to reveal its core image of the holy bridge and Goddess Qiao; and to identify the initial intention of the Qiqiao festival is to offer sacrifices to the Goddess Qiao. Second, I will trace the bridge image in the Qiqiao festival to the oracle character "Hong" and unearthed archeological evidence of Jade Huang to explore the mythical motif of the bridge and archetype of Goddess mythology in the Qiqiao festival. Third, I will explore the core image of the magpie bridge in the Qiqiao festival to reveal the connection between bird worship and Goddess Worship. This paper contributes to the study of the Qiqiao festival by extending from its aesthetic narrative to its mythical discoveries, gender tension and social realities. It offers a new way of looking at the constants and variables of the Qiqiao festival in the social structure, particularly

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women's roles across different Chinese historical periods.

I. **Qiqiao Festival, The Cowherd and the Weaver Maid**

The Qiqiao Festival, or Qixi Festival, is a Chinese festival celebrating the annual meeting of the Cowherd and Weaver, which symbolises the Altair or Aquila (Brown 72). Though the story has many variations, the earliest reference to the myth dates back to a poem from the *Classic of Poetry* (Shi Jing) 2600 years ago (Schomn 89). The Cowherd was an orphan ill-treated by his elder brother and sister-in-law. They drove him out of the house and gave him only an old ox. One day, the old ox suddenly spoke in human language, telling him that some maidens were coming from heaven and would bathe in a pool on earth. The maiden would stay if he took the garments. The Cowherd did as the ox said and hid the clothes of one of the maids. When the others put on their clothes after bathing and flew back to heaven, this one could not do so and agreed to marry the Cowherd. The lady is Weaver Maid, the daughter of the Emperor of Heaven (The Jade Emperor) and the Queen Mother of the West. Years passed, and the couple lived contentedly and had a son and a daughter. Eventually, her father located her and sent guards to escort her back to heaven. When she was taken away, the Cowherd decided to follow her. However, the Queen Mother of the West drew a silver river in the sky and blocked his way. Thus, the lovers were banished to opposite sides of the sacred river (Lai 191). The love between the Cowherd and Weaver Maid touches the magpies, which forming a bridge over the Silver River for the lovers to meet. Thus, the couple were allowed to reunite once a year on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month.

The Qixi Festival has many variations in Asia, such as the Tanabata festival in Japan, the Chilseok festival in Korea, and the Thất Tịch festival in Vietnam (Hearn 1). In Southeast Asia, the story has been derived from a Jataka tale of Manohara, the youngest of seven daughters of the Kinnara King. He lives on Mount Kailash and falls in love with Prince Sudhana (Jaini 297). In Korea, the story recounts Jingnyeo, a weaver girl who falls in love with Gyeonu, a herder. In Japan, the story revolves around the romance between Orihime and Hikoboshi. In Vietnam, the story is known as Ngưu Lang Chức Nữ and revolves around the story of Chức Nữ, the weaver, and Ngưu Lang, the herder of buffalos. The Vietnamese version is also titled *The Weaver Fairy and the Buffalo Boy* (Vuong 54). Chinese folklorist Ting Nai-tung classified the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl under the Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index ATU 400, "The Quest for the Lost Wife" (Ting 1978). The tale also holds similarities with widespread stories of the swan maiden (Haase 198). The festival's popularity strengthens the belief that the festival was set to celebrate romance; however, as Wilt Idema notes, this romantic version might neglect the festival's original version (Idema 26). Thus, we need to explore the authentic intention, mythical message and historical context of the Qiqiao festival.

Many ancient Chinese poems and verses strengthen the belief that the Qiqiao festival was set to celebrate the romance between the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid. These artistic works left a

rich legacy that helps us to understand the contents and customs of the Qiqiao Festival. Such as "An Autumn Night" by Du Mu in Tang Dynasty: "A candle flame flickers against a dull painted screen on a cool autumn night,/ She holds a small silk fan to flap away dashing fireflies./ Above her hang celestial bodies as frigid as deep water,/ She sat there watching Altair of Aquila and Vega of Lyra pining for each other in the sky". This poem describes the Weaving Maid's torture by the separation from her beloved. Another example is the poem "The Heavenly River" (Tian He) written by Du Fu (712–770) of the Tang dynasty: "Most of the time it may be hidden or fully visible, / but when autumn comes, it gets immediately bright. /Even if covered over by faint clouds, / in the long run, it can be clear through the long night./ Full of stars, it stirs by paired palace gates, / moon's companion, it sinks by a frontier fort. / Oxherd and Weaver cross it yearly, / When have storms ever arisen?" (Owen 168). This poem describes the separation between the couple by the heavenly river. Another famous poem is the "*Song of Eternal Sorrow*" (Chang Heng Ge), written by Bai Juyi of the Tang Dynasty. The poem consists of four lines: "On the seventh of the seventh moon, / alone they had whispered to each other at midnight. / In heaven, we shall see birds flying side by side. / On earth flowering sprigs on the same branch!" This poem describes the annual meeting of the couple by the Magpie bridge. These poems strengthened poetic charm to the romance between the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid.

Due to the artistic works in China and many variations in Asia, the romance theme of the Qiqiao Festival has become the most popular and influential version widely accepted. However, the romantic version ignores the original intention and chronological evolution of the Qiqiao Festival and underestimates the women's role and goddess worship in the ancient world. In the romance version, the Weaving Maid was described as a woman adept at spinning and weaving, and the Cowherd was a farmer living by aerial farming. The mode of men tilling and women weaving have been described as the ideal mode in the Chinese agricultural civilization. However, modern archaeological discoveries reveal a prehistoric era when women attended to both the tilling and weaving before the latter labour division of tilling men and weaving women. In other words, when male members engaged in hunting, the women stayed at home and acquired the knowledge and skill of agricultural cultivation. Even after inventing agriculture, women were involved in agricultural production until men gave up hunting and took turns in agricultural production. In the prehistoric era of women tilling and weaving, the predominant ideology is the Goddess religion and myths before that of God. The Eurasian continents' archaeological discoveries demonstrate that a ubiquitous goddess civilization prevailed from 20,000 B.C. to 5,000 B.C. These new approaches and archeological findings provided new sources to reveal the original intent and cultural connotation of the Qiqiao Festival.

II. **Feminism Mythology and Goddess Rediscovery**

Modern feminism mythology has produced much fruitful achievement on gender politics and

Goddess rediscovery and may reveal the significance and evolution of goddesses in the Qiqiao Festival. Modern feminism mythology in the middle of the 20th century is distinguished by its distinctive feminist perspective and new archaeological materials. Feminist theory unfolds that most of the society in the world is patriarchal and depreciates the value and rights of women. In literature, this kind of gender inequality can be seen in distorted female images and twisted female discourse. Thus, many feminists strive to reveal the gender politics behind these distorted female images and to reconstruct the actual female images. Modern feminist mythology interweaves comparative mythology, early historical sources, linguistics, ethnography, and folklore to demonstrate that Goddess worship is at the root of Western civilization.

Feminist mythology is distinguished by its feminist standing to review goddess tradition and woman figures. It produced much influential research on Goddesses across global cultures. In 1992, *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, edited by C. Larrinton, invited 19 female scholars to review the mythical legacy of the goddess, to rewrite the female figures in the Near East, Europe, Asia, Oceania and America, and Goddess in the twentieth century. Larrinton introduced the significance of myth legacy and our way of identifying ourselves and living in society: “our interpretation of our mythological heritage conditions how we think about ourselves. Myth has been appropriated by politicians, psychiatrists and artists, among others, to tell us what we are and where we have come from...painters, composers, sculptors and writers deliberately or unconsciously imitate the mythical patterns of the past” (Larrinton ix). Many books investigate why women were put in an inferior position in the myth system. In *Women in Myth*, Bettina Knapp explores the role played by women in ancient societies through an analysis of specific myths from nine different lands (Knapp 1966). Bettina picked up nine famous female images from world mythology: Isis of Ancient Egypt, Tiama of Babylon, Iphigenie of ancient Greek, Sita of India, Nyu Wa of Chinese and others. She analyzes and identifies their social value, abilities and public outlooks, including narratives of their battle, leading army, finding states and ruling lands, and overcoming the gender challenges and identity crisis.

Feminist mythology stresses anthropological and archaeological materials to discover the lost civilization of the goddess. The development of archaeology has revealed ancient Goddesses from the late Paleolithic period to the Neolithic period ten thousand years ago and to the Bronze Age five thousand years ago. Besides, many female sculptures of stone, pottery and stone materials were founded in prehistoric altars, temples and settlement sites. The rediscovery of the Goddess movement challenges the conventional religious history and origin of culture. Among them, with their literary masterpieces, outstanding authors like Marija Gimbutas, Raine Eisler, and W. D. O’Flaherty have achieved eminent status matching that of male mythologists. In *The Language of the Goddess*, Gimbutas used the signs, symbols, and images of divinities concerning the Old European Great Goddess to reconstruct the religious context of the messages and prehistoric scene and to describe the influences and relics of Goddess myths on major European countries. (Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess 2*). *The Living Goddess*, edited by Miriam Robbins

Dexter, includes Marija Gimbutas's studies, her earlier work on "Old European" religion and later new insights on the gender roles in ancient matrilineal cultures. The book integrates the Goddesses' beliefs discovered in archaeological relics and its fragmented relics in the patriarchal society to construct the language of the goddess, which was depressed by the modern language and knowledge system (Gimbutas, *The Living Goddess* 1).

The rediscovery of the Goddess mythology enjoys great academic significance and sheds light on the dignity and living of modern women. *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece* by Charlene Spretnak explores the Goddess myth before the Olympian myth. This book reconstructs 11 Goddesses myths in the pre-Olympian era, recovering their original images by removing the distortion imposed by male-centred society. The author proposes that the Goddess myth had existed thousands of years before the classical myths written by Homer and Hesiod. From 2500 B.C. to 1000 B.C., at least three batches of foreign invaders entered Greece, bringing a patriarchal social system and male Thor Zeus, giving rise to sharp conflicts with the local prevailing Goddess worship. With the development of the patriarchy, the peaceful and merciful prehistoric Goddesses were gradually replaced by militant and aggressive Olympia Gods. The remaining Goddesses were described as the partner of Gods or distorted into opposing characters. Such as Hera was described as a jealous wife of Zeus, Athena was described as an indifferent and masculinized goddess, and Pandora degenerated into the origin of human disaster (Spretnak, 18). Spretnak's reconstruction of the goddess helps us to have a deeper understanding of Western religion and mythology.

Chinese mythology was influenced deeply by western mythology; however, some distinguished scholars have proposed novel theories and approaches to studying Chinese myths. The new Chinese mythology school was led by Xiao Bing and Ye Shuxian, who applied mythology, anthropology and archaeological findings to the rediscovery and reconstruction of Chinese mythology. Different from the previous scholars of mythology, such as Mao Dun and Yuan Ke, the new Chinese mythology highlights the political function or social construction of myths. The leading Chinese mythologist, Ye Shuxian, stresses the mythology is a cross-disciplinary concept tool, integrating related disciplines of philosophy, history, literature, classics and religion. Ye takes the myth to explore the origin of Confucian classics and Chinese civilization in general (Ye and Tan 211). Ye proposed some concepts of mythology: "mythical image", "mythical history", and "Mythological China". The "mythical image" stresses the power of visual prototype and material narrative and the tension between image narrative and textual narrative. The "mythical history" highlights the function of myth in decoding the prototype within the Chinese ancient classics and history. The "Mythological China" proposes myth is Chinese civilisation's origin and cultural genes. Regarding the methodology, Ye presents the theory of "Quadruple Evidence", the four pieces of evidence of literary texts, the material, the unearthed archeology, and anthropology. This methodology integrates sources of canonical texts, excavated documents, and material culture and cultural heritage (Ye, *Object Narratives* 8). There are two

main features of Ye's "Quadruple Evidence". In terms of scope, Ye's methodology theoretically surpasses previous scholars' practices, such as Wang Guowei's "Dual Evidence" (canonical texts and excavated documents) and Rao Zongyi's "Triple Evidence" (canonical texts, unearthed documents and material objects). Ye's theory is deeply rooted in early Chinese philosophy, history, etymology, and archaeology, such as Chinese ritual bronzes, oracle bones and bamboo slips.

To further clarify the logical sequence of "Quadruple Evidence", Ye borrowed a pair of western anthropological terms: the "Little Tradition" (the folk/unlettered) and the "Great Tradition" (the elites/literate), which were coined by Milton Singer and Robert Redfield when they studied the orthogenesis of Indian Civilization in Madras city. Ye redefined the "Little Tradition" as the cultural tradition marked by language characters or written system and the "Great Tradition" as the cultural tradition before the appearance of characters and formation of states (Ye, *Object Narratives* 8). Based on a redefinition of the "Little Tradition" and the "Great Tradition" tradition, Ye proposes a practical diachronic theory of Chinese cultural semantics. The multiple pieces of evidence were arranged according to chronological sequence. The first level includes the unearthed archeological and anthropological material evidence before the invention of words, which reveals cultural archetypes and mythical information. The second level refers to the Chinese character and calligraphy. The third level refers to literary texts or classics. The multi-level refers to cultural recreation in the contemporary to modern era (Ye, "N-Level Coding Theory" 2). The diachronic theory offers us the framework to reveal the hidden Goddess behind the textual representation and discursive institution of the Qiqiao Festival.

III. Anthropological Case: Goddess Qiao in Xihe Qiqiao Festival

Modern feminist mythology stresses the utility of anthropological materials to discover the prehistoric Goddess civilization. The current Qiqiao Festival has detached from the religious context and evolved into a secular celebration of romance. However, the folklores and rituals of the Qiqiao (Begging for Craft) festival in Xihe county, Longnan area of Gusu province, offer resources to decode the initial intention and underlying prototype of the Qiqiao festival. The Qiqiao festival of Xihe is "Qi", which means begging or praying; "Qiao" represents crafts, talents or skills. The female plays a prominent role in the Qiqiao Festival since many rituals and practices are set on the festival to pray for the Goddess for an ideal partner, harmonious marriage or excellent crafts. Unlike the romance-oriented practices, the Qiqiao festival was heavily tainted with female characteristics: first, the object of worship was the Goddess Qiao instead of gods; second, the prominent participants in the festival were female rather than male. The female participants pray to the Goddess Qiao to acquire high skills in needlecraft or hope to find satisfactory husbands.

The Qiqiao festival in Xihe lasts seven days and eight nights, starting on 30 June and ending on 7 July. The ceremony in the Qiqiao Festival of Xihe demonstrates that the Qiqiao festival might have originated from the rituals of worshipping Goddess Qiao. All the rituals were constructed

around a central image of the Goddess Qiao descending to the earth. The first one of the “lyrics for praying and sacrificing” of Qiqiao Songs collected by Yang Kedong, a folklorist in Xihe county, is the “Bridge Making Song” as follows: “Three yellow paper and one pile of paper, / I made a litter for Goddess Qiao. / Three piles of yellow paper and a couple of candles, / The hand-looped red lope constructed the bridge. / Goddess Qiao with embroidered shoes, / Came from the end of the bridge. / Goddess Qiao with high-heel shoes, / Wandered from the end of the bridge. / Goddess Qiao with satin shoes, / The fairy accompanied you. / Goddess Qiao with cloud-figure shoes, / Walked in the air from the sky. / Goddess Qiao with bar leaf, I invited Goddess Qiao to descend from heaven” (Yang 55). In this “Bridge Making Song”, the image of the bridge, such as paper litter and a “hand-looped red lope”, all serve as a vehicle to invite Goddess Qiao to descend to the earth from heaven.

Another example is the fourth song in the “Zuoshen Yingqiao” (Welcoming the Goddess Qiao) of the Qiqiao Festival in Xihe county: “Three piles of yellow paper and one pair of candles, / I hand looped the bridge. / Goddess Qiao with embroidered shoes, / Walked from the end of the river, / A pair of ducks and a pair of geese, / I picked Goddess Qiao up crossing the river. / A wax, two waxes, / I sent Goddess Qiao to the village” (Zhao 94). In this song, we can see that people use the hand-looping bridge to welcome the descending Goddess Qiao in the welcome ritual. Thus, the hand-looping serves as the structural framework of the festival. In Xihe, girls wore flower hand loops of five-colour silk yarn on their wrists during the Qiqiao festival. After the ending rituals of farewell to the Goddess Qiao, the girls took off their hand loops and knotted together across the river, making a symbolic holy bridge (Zhao 96). It shows that the bridge with a hand loop plays a crucial part in the Qiqiao Festival. Here, the bridge symbolizes the medium of human-god communication, and the Goddess Gao was the central image in the Qiqiao festival.

The folk songs and rituals in the Qiqiao Festival of Xihe share a mythical image of the Goddess Qiao. The Qiqiao Festival rituals in Xihe county are constructed around a mythical figure: Goddess Qiao. The festival consists of twelve rituals: bridge making by hand-looping, welcoming Goddess Qiao, worshipping Goddess Qiao, singing for Goddess Qiao, dancing for Goddess Qiao, bowing for Goddess Qiao, praying and inviting the water God, sewing match for Goddess Qiao, having meals for Goddess Qiao, presenting tributes, fortune-telling with Goddess Qiao, farewell for Goddess Qiao (Yang 15). In terms of the number, there are eight out of twelve rituals with Goddess Qiao in their name, which indicates the core of this ritual is “Qiao”. The rituals reveal the festival was designed to worship the Goddess Qiao. In terms of narrative structure, the rituals demonstrate a circular structure of descending the Goddess to the earth and ascending back to heaven. Goddess Qiao, with the holy bridge, was incorporated into the circular frame and almost every festival ritual. In terms of the narrative structure, the festival shows a circular structure, starting with welcoming Goddess Qiao with a bridge made by “hand-looping” on the first day and ending with the last farewell ritual for Goddess Qiao on the seventh day. The traditional food at Qiqiao Festival is Qiao Guo, made in flour, oil, honey, sesame, peanuts, kernels, roses and other ingredients. The

rituals and ceremonies strengthen the prominence of Goddess Qiao and the people's worship of Goddess Qiao. The Qiqiao festival was participated exclusively by female members, who wished the Goddess Qiao to have dexterous embroidery and an ideal marriage. The unmarried girls participated in the embroidery or needle-threading competition to display their agile talents or gathered toiletries to honour the Goddess Qiao. The newlywed woman prays for marital happiness. There are no gods or male members involved in the festival. The Qiqiao festival of Xihe, with goddess worship and female participants, belongs to the remains of pre-patriarchal religion and rituals and evinces the prehistoric Goddess civilization.

From the songs and rites of the Qiqiao festival in Xihe, we can deduce a possible connection between Goddess Qiao, the holy bridge ("Qiao"), and "Craft" ("Qiao") based on the homonym principle. All three words share the same pronunciation in Chinese; however, they have different connotations. Goddess Qiao is to whom people pay worship and pray; "Qiao" (bridge) refers to the holy bridge, which helps the Goddess to descend to the earth and come back to heaven; and "Qiao" (craft) refers to the craft that the people pray or made a wish for. In the Qiqiao festival, people prayed to the Goddess Qiao to descend to the earth via the holy bridge and to offer them crafts. I propose a possible evolution from "Begging for Goddess Qiao" to "Begging for Bridge (Qiao)", then "Begging for Craft (Qiao)" based on the homonym principle of the three Chinese characters. At the outset, the Qiqiao festival refers to "Begging for Goddess Qiao", in which people pray to the Goddess Qiao to descend to the earth via a holy bridge. Gradually, it turns into "Begging for Bridge (Qiao)", highlighting the sacred bridge, which makes the Goddess' descend to earth and ascend to heaven. Then, it transforms from the "Begging for the bridge (Qiao)" into the "Begging for Craft (Qiao)"; namely, women pray for domestic craft, living wisdom and skills. The evolution is derived from the homonym principle of Chinese characters. The transformation of Qiao, from the initial Goddess to bridge and the derivative craft, demonstrates the emphasis has shifted from goddess to humanity, in which the role of Goddess is diminished, and the human craft is prominent. The Qiqiao Festival in Xihe county reveals that the subject of the worship rituals was female, and the object of their worship was the Goddess Qiao. Neither the male members nor God was involved in the ceremony. In contrast to the prominence of the Weaving maid, the cowherd was merely a peripheral character. However, the original gender hierarchy was undermined and reconstructed in the patriarchal society. The narrative was changed to prioritize of the Cowherd, and the Goddess Qiao degenerated into Weaving Maid and partner of the Coward.

IV. Archeological Evidence: Rainbow Bridge, Hong Oracle and Jade Huang

In the myths of the Weaving Maid and the Cowherd, the magpie bridge connects the river separating the Weaving Maid from the Cowherd. In the anthropological case of the Qiqiao festival in Xihe, we can see that the holy bridge offers the vehicle for the Goddess to descend to the earth and ascend back to heaven. There was much treatment of the rainbow in myth, ranging such

diverse cultures as Babylonian, Chinese, and aboriginal. In many cultures, the rainbow was a sign of a covenant or bridge between the gods and terrestrial beings. Archaeological evidence, such as Oracle “Huang” character and Jade Huang, provided us with sources to access the concrete image of the bridge and primitive men’s desire to communicate with a supernatural being.

The folk songs and rituals in the Qiqiao Festival of Xihe share another important mythical image of the holy bridge. The bridge in the songs and rituals has a dual function: first, to make the Weaving Maid cross the sacred river to meet the Cowherd annually; second, to offer the vehicle for the Goddess to descend to the earth. In other words, to establish communication between people on earth and Goddess in heaven. The songs and rituals of the Qiqiao Festival in Xihe started and ended with a core symbol of a holy bridge. Despite diverse content in festival songs, they have a standard mode of ending: either: "Goddess Qiao, descending from the sky, I invite Goddess Qiao down to the earth." Or: "Goddess Qiao, ascending to the sky, I see Goddess Qiao off up to the sky." The binary opposition of descending and ascending corresponds with the religious rituals of first inviting the Goddess and eventually seeing the Goddess off. The descending and ascending of Goddess Qiao involve the mythical vehicle of the holy bridge. The rituals of the Qiqiao festival start with welcoming Goddess Qiao with a hand-looping bridge and finish with a farewell to Goddess Qiao. In this circular pattern of practices, the Goddess Qiao descended and ascended back to heaven through the bridge. On the first day of the Qiqiao festival, women gather together, build a four-meter-long bridge with big incense sticks, and decorate them with colourful flowers. On the last day, they burn the bridge at night and wish to bring happiness to life.

Suppose we deduce the ritual of the hand-loops bridge in the Xihe Qiqiao Festival to the oracle of the Shang Dynasty. The hand loops in Qiqiao Festival and the oracle “Hong” (rainbow) share a similar mythic image of the bridge. In China, an oracle is considered to provide counsel or prophetic predictions inspired by deities. The oracle bones were used for divination in the late Shang dynasty (c. 1600-1046 BC). Diviners applied heat to these bones, usually ox scapulae or tortoise plastrons, and interpreted the resulting cracks. Around the late 9th century BC, the divination system was recorded in the "Book of Changes" (Yi Jing), a collection of linear signs used as oracles. The primitive men portray the oracle “Hong” (rainbow) as a bridge with a two-headed dragon descending from heaven to the earth for water (see figure 1). The oracle “Hong” formation might be the product of the mythological imagination of primitive men. The primitive men observed that a rainbow appeared after rain; thus, they assumed there must be a large amount of celestial water pouring from heaven to earth. Therefore the gods or goddesses in heaven required water; therefore, the thirsty gods or goddesses transformed into a two-headed dragon descending to the planet to drink water. That is why the oracle “Hong” is portrayed as a rainbow with a two-headed dragon wide open its mouth for water. Thus, the colourful silk yarn for the hand loop of the Qiqiao festival can be seen as a mimetic rainbow or a symbolic holy bridge that offers a way for the supernatural being to descend to the earth and ascend back to heaven.



Figure1: Oracle of Hong (Rainbow)

Source: "File:虹-oracle.svg." Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository. 7 Mar 2019, 10:59 UTC. 30 Nov 2022, 00:50 <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:%E8%99%B9-oracle.svg&oldid=341821489>>.

The hand-loops bridge in the Qiqiao Festival of Xihe and the oracle “Hong” share a typical mythical image of a bridge. Then, if we trace the oracle “Hong” with the image of the two-headed dragon back to the jade Huang (Yu Huang) in the pre-oracle era, we will find that they also share the same image of a bridge. A Jade Huang is a Chinese arc-shaped artifact used as a pendant. Huang arcs were utilised in a Jade Pei ornament set, which would be worn from the belt. The amount in a cluster may have indicated the person's social status. At the ends of a Huang, there were often abstract heads of animals carved into the jade. During the Eastern Zhou period, block-shaped tiger-like lots were often used in the Jade Huang, but these would develop into more abstract patterns. Ye Shuxian detailed the interaction between the dragon, rainbow and Huang to explain the connection between the jade myth and Chinese cultural identity (Ye, “Reconstruct Chinese Heritage” 21). Ye stated that Jade Huang was curved with interlocked dragon design, with an analogy of the rainbow to the holy bridge. The Jade Huang was discovered in the 7200-year-old Xinglongwa Culture and the 7200-year-old Humudu Culture in the Yuyao county of Zhejiang province. The earliest Jade Huang with a two-headed dragon was found in the sacrificial altar of 6000-year-old Hongshan Culture in Dongshanzui, Jianping county of Liaoning province (Ye, “Reconstruct Chinese Heritage” 21). In the Shanghai museum, we could see the Jade Huang, curved with interlocked dragon design in the Western Zhou period and the Huang with two dragon heads in the Warring States period (see figure 2).



Figure 2: Huang with two dragon heads, Warring States period, housed in the Shanghai Museum

Source: Huang. (2020, September 27). In Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huang_\(jade\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huang_(jade))

From the shape and pattern of Jade Huang unearthed in prehistoric cultural sites, we could deduce Jade Huang could be the prototype of the oracle “Hong” and the most original representation of the bridge myth. In chronological sequence, the jade ritual objects, such as Jade Huang, are before the Chinese characters. Our ancestors' mythological conception of the holy bridge in the prehistorical era has been passed down as jade articles for thousands of years. The 2700-year-old Marquis Jin grave of the West Zhou Dynasty unearthed a Jade Pei ornament set of 200 Huang and two jade geese. We can deduce that in the Jade Pei ornament set, the Jade Huang might be seen as a holy bridge connecting heaven and earth; and the jade goose might be taken as a divine bird transcending the soul of the man to heaven. Ye Shuxian observes that the holy bridge and holy geese in the Jade Pei set are identical to the in the fourth Ode song in the “Welcoming the Goddess Qiao” of Qiqiao Festival in Xihe county: “Three piles of yellow paper and one pair of candles, / I hand looped the bridge. / Goddess Qiao with embroidered shoes, / Walked from the end of the river, / A pair of ducks and a pair of geese” (Zhao 94). The Qiqiao festival song, the oracle word “Hong”, and the Jade Huang all share a critical mythical image: bridge. The bridge serves a dual function: first, to offer the vehicle for the Goddess to descend to the earth and ascend back to heaven; second, to provide a way for the people to communicate with supernatural power.

V. Textual Representation: Magpie Bridge and Goddess Worship

I will explore the mythic image of the magpie bridge in the Qiqiao Festival to examine the birds' worship and Goddess civilization in the pre-patriarchal society. In many cultures, birds were taken as an attribute of sages and saints, since flight has made birds seem close to heaven. Mircea Eliade proposes that the ‘ability to turn into a bird is the common property of all kinds of shamanism, not only the Turko-Mongol but also the Arctic, American, Indian, and Oceanian” (Eliade 98). In Greece and Rome, man took birds as messengers between gods and human beings. In Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, angels have assumed the same role as prophetic birds. In the Qiqiao festival, the magpie bridge was also seen as a holy animal communicating with heaven and the earth.

The magpie bridge has been widely alluded to in ancient Chinese literary works. For instance, the poem “Meeting across the magpie bridge” (Que Qiao Xian) by Qin Guan (1049–1100) during the Song dynasty: “Through the varying shapes of the delicate clouds, / the sad message of the shooting stars, / a silent journey across the Milky Way. / One meeting of the Cowherd and Weaver amidst the golden autumn wind and jade-glistening dew, / eclipses the countless meetings in the mundane world. / The feelings soft as water, / the ecstatic moment unreal as a dream, / how can one have the heart to go back on the bridge made of magpies? / If the two hearts are united forever,

/ why do the two persons need to stay together—day after day, night after night” (Qiu 133). This poem describes the couple's reunion with the help of the magpie bridge. The earliest known narrative concerning the bridge of magpies is the 26th chapter of Suishi Guangji from *Huannanzi*: “The black magpies interlinked with each other for the bridge to make the weaving maid cross the river.” *Feng Su Tong Yi* of the late Han Dynasty also mentioned: “The weaving maid wanted to cross the river at Qixi and had the magpies bridge the river.” The two versions of the magpie bridge are different in that the former refers to a black magpie who voluntarily bridges the river. At the same time, the latter indicates that the weaving maid had the magpies to bridge the river. However, the two versions demonstrate that the magpie's bridge is exclusively related to the weaving maid rather than the cowherd. Even the name of the Cowherd was not mentioned in the documents. The Weaving Maid's prominence and the Cowherd's ignorance reveal an important mythological message and historical information. When we speak of the Cowherd and Weaving Maid, we take it for granted that the Cowherd should be placed in front of the Weaving Maid. Ironically, the protagonist of the legend is the Weaving Maid rather than the Cowherd.

There are two potential reasons why magpies can bridge the Milky Way and help the Weaving Maid meet her lover. One possible explanation is that the magpie bridge is not merely mythical imagination but is based on the natural phenomena of bird migration. The man took birds to interpret the change of season and secrets of nature; as Mircea Eliade argued, “All over the world learning the language of animals, especially birds, is equivalent to knowing the secrets of nature and being able to prophesy” (Eliade 98). In China, many birds enjoy significant symbolism. For example, the swallows from their migrations are symbols of spring harbinger. Ducks are taken as symbols of faithful, married love. Quails are seen as stable, peaceful couples. Pheasants represent royal magnificence and sophistication. Magpies were associated with joy because they form a bridge every year that unites the Weaving Maiden and the Cowherd, separated in opposite parts of the sky. In the agricultural society, humans had a heavy dependence on the weather since the crops on which they lived could easily be destroyed by intense storms. Thus, humans paid attention to the skies and birds, which, through their migration and return, signalled phases of the agricultural year. Many narratives recorded the function of predicting the change of weather. For example, the verse “black magpies fly to the south” reveals that the immigration of the animals is an indication of seasonal change. The poems “Cuckoo sings for the spring” and “Duck knows the approaching of spring through the warm water” suggest that the ancient people identify the season change from the signals of the cuckoo and duck. The wild geese and other fowl flying to the south indicate autumn's approach. It could also be applied in the Qiqiao festival, where the milking river and black magpies are taken as the signs of autumn.

Another possible reason is that the magpie is not merely an ordinary bird; instead, it is regarded as an attribute of the Goddess. Much textual evidence reveals the connection between magpie worship and goddess civilization. In the 31st chapter of *Shuo Fu*, the author narrated a story about magpie as the embodiment of the goddess: “Yuan Bowen went to Gaotang on 6 July

and stayed overnight at the village due to heavy rain. In the evening, he dreamed about a beautiful woman who called herself Goddess. Bowen wanted her to stay, but she said: 'I will make the bridge for the Weaving Maid, and I will be punished if I fail to complete the work.' Bowen suddenly woke up; the day was almost breaking. He opened the window, seeing a group of magpies fly east. A smaller one flew from inside. Thus, the magpie was named the Goddess" (Yuan and Zhou 117) Song Yu wrote a legend about the transformation of a goddess into a magpie, and King Chu Huai dreamed about the Goddess through Gao Tang Fu. Ye Shuxian proposed that Gaotang Goddess is the goddess of Eros, like the Aphrodite goddess (Venus) in Greek myths, and is in charge of human love and desires (Ye, Gaotang and Venus 314). Gaotang Goddess is a mystery agency to match the man and woman in love. The mythological transformation from a Gaotang goddess to a magpie is not accidental but follows the profound tradition of Goddess religious belief, especially that of the bird Goddess (Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses* 14). In Greek mythology, the symbol of the Aphrodite Goddess is a pigeon. In the archaeological relics of early civilizations and prehistoric cultures in west Asia, India and the Mediterranean, we found many Goddesses curved with the pigeon or bird head and the human body. Some scholars on Goddesses have traced this bird-human image of goddess back to the Goddess religion of the Neolithic Period.

The magpie bridge is crucial in bridging the milking river in the Cowherd and the Weaving maid legend. The magpie bridge matters whether the cowherd can meet the weaving maid. However, this mysterious function of bridging the milking river should come from some supernatural power. In the prehistoric era of Goddess belief, the Goddess is the source of this magical power. In patriarchal society, the mythological imagination of the Goddess has changed into a narrative, such as the Gaotang Dream, in which the Goddess transforms into the magpie and makes the reunion of the weaving maid meet the cowherd. The real identity of the Goddess fades; what remains is the sign of the Goddess: the magpie. The mythological image of the magpie bridge has been handed down through generations, while the Goddess behind the magpie was ignored and forgotten.

Conclusion

The romantic theme of the Cowherd and the Weaver Maid enjoys excellent popularity; however, it understates the Goddess tradition and women's role in the Qiqiao festival. Thanks to the textual reference, anthropological practice and archeology evidence, we have a chance to reveal the underlying Goddess worship, rainbow bridge and magpie divination, which were ignored, forgotten or twisted. This paper proposes a possible evolution of the Qiqiao Festival. It transformed from the first begging for the Goddess to descend to the earth via the holy bridge, then to pray for the Goddess for the craft, and finally became the celebration of love between Cowherd and the Weaving Maid. Behind the transformation of the Qiqiao Festival, there is a gender conflict between the patriarchy and the matriarchy ideology.

The Qiqiao Festival has undergone three steps from the initial Goddess civilization to the last characters and narratives in the patriarchal society. First, in the matriarchal society, the Weaving Maid was a combination of Goddess worship, female ancestor worship and bird worship in the prehistoric era. Second, in the patriarchal society, the goddess-oriented Qiqiao myth evolved into a cultural reconstruction of begging for the craft from the Weaving Maid or goddess. Third, after the patriarchal ideology has been established, the worship of a Goddess or Weaving Maid evolved into a love romance between the weaving maid and cowherd. Behind the transformation of the Qiqiao Festival, there is a gender conflict between the patriarchal and the matriarchal ideology. The evolution of the Qiqiao festival reveals that the Goddess is the most powerful and persistent feature of the festival or even the ancient world. A goddess is seen as a symbol of the unity of life in nature, a personification of sacred power and natural energy, and a sign of female domination. The rediscovery of the goddess is recognition and admission of the legitimacy of female power. And the magpie bridge in the Qiqiao festival not only offers a way for the Goddess to descend to the earth, and it provides a way for humans to communicate with the goddess. This paper demonstrates the tension between man and woman, fictional imagination and mythical worship, aesthetic autonomy and embedded ideology in the Qiqiao festival. The rediscovery of the hidden goddess and reconstruction of Weaving Maid helps decode the origin and evolution of the Qiqiao festival and shed light on women's current status in modern society.

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Figures

Fig. 1. "File:虹-oracle.svg." Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository. 7 Mar 2019, 10:59 UTC. 30 Nov 2022, 01:13 <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:%E8%99%B9-oracle.svg&oldid=341821489>>.

Fig. 2. Huang. (2020, September 27). In Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huang_\(jade\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huang_(jade))