

# The Line Connecting Heaven and Earth: Study on the Textile Goddess in Longdong, Longnan and Longzhong, Gansu

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## ABSTRACT

There are myths about the textile goddess in Longdong, Longnan and Longzhong areas of Gansu Province. The core plot of these myths is that the textile goddess flies to the holy mountain to become an immortal by virtue of the twisted hemp thread since childhood. In some local myths, there is an additional plot. When the textile goddess runs to the immortal site with a ball of thread, the hemp thread runs out, so she resolutely pulls out her intestines from her belly button and continues to connect them to the hemp thread, and finally she can ascend to heaven. In many myths in the world, ropes and lines have the function of connecting heaven and earth, and are tools to realize the communication between human beings and gods. In the legend of Gansu Textile Goddess, the plot of "pulling the gut and continuing the thread" is particularly unique, which not only shows the sacred function of hemp thread to connect heaven and earth, but also shows the powerful appeal of a peasant woman who sacrificed her body to pursue spiritual freedom.

**Keywords:** *Empress Hemp Thread, Pulling the gut and continuing the thread, Hemp thread, ascending to heaven and becoming immortal.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gansu is the birthplace of the Chinese civilization, which lies in the interlaced zone between the Chinese civilization and nomadic civilization. There are many myths and legends spread here, including the well-known myth of Fuxi Nvwa, the ancestor of Chinese culture, and the myth of the highest Taoist goddess, Queen Mother of the West. There is a legend about Empress Qiao in Xihe County, Longnan County, Gansu Province. Empress Qiao was the honorific title of the Weaver Maid when she was in mortal life. She and Empress Hemp Thread taught the females in the surrounding villages the skills of brocade and hemp spinning. In addition to the legends of these dazzling gods, there are also many myths and legends about the textile goddess in Pingliang, Tianshui, Dingxi, Linxia, Lanzhou and other places in Gansu.

## 2. TWO KINDS OF LEGENDS OF GANSU TEXTILE GODDESS

In Longdong, Gansu Province, especially in Jingchuan County, there are many legends about goddesses. The belief in goddesses in Jingchuan presents a multi goddess belief state dominated by the belief in the Queen Mother of the West. Through the interview and investigation of Jingchuan folk custom researchers for 9 years (2002-2010), it is known that there are 231 goddess temples left in Jingchuan County, and 298 goddesses are worshipped. Among them, there are 11 Queen Mother palaces (ancestral halls, palaces and caves), 11 Queen Mother palaces being worshiped, 37 Holy Mother palaces and 37 goddesses being worshiped.<sup>1</sup> The belief of the Queen Mother of the West and the belief of the Holy Mother of the Ninth Heavens are the most representative and influential parts of the Jingchuan

1. See Zhang Xuejun's *Jingchuan Goddess*, pp 14-15. This book has not been officially published.

Goddess belief system, which are still closely related to the lifestyle of local residents. In Jingchuan, there is also a very important myth, that is, the "bald girl story", which is closely related to the belief in the Holy Mother of the Ninth Heaven. In legend, the bald woman is the Holy Mother of the Ninth Heaven.

According to Wu Xinfeng's research, the story of the bald woman is spread in more than 30 villages in Jingchuan County, and basically exists among the local people by word of mouth. The bald woman was born in Horse Stronghold, Changwu. Her head was covered with yellow scabs and coagulated with her hair. Her parents died early and were abused by her brother and sister-in-law at home. When the elder brother and sister-in-law found that the bald woman was the Holy Mother of the Ninth Heaven, the bald woman tied the twisted thread to the threshing wheel of the sheepfold and left home with it. On the way to Phoenix Mountain, there were many holy signs, and finally became the Holy Mother of the Ninth Heaven. In this legend, the wool ball is the key for a bald woman to become a glorious goddess from an ordinary and humble rural girl.

In Chengguan District, Qilihe District, Xigu District, Yongjing County, Linxia Prefecture, Lintao County, Dingxi City and other places in Gansu Province, the story of the Jinhua Fairy spreads. Jinhua is a white fairy beside the Queen Mother. Seeing the continuous drought in Longshan, she came down to earth and gave birth to a family named Jin in Jing'er Street, Lanzhou. Since childhood, Jinhua has been able to spin hemp yarn, sweep and wash, and become civilized in the countryside. The only thing that worried my parents was that Jinhua was born without hair and was still unmarried until she was 16 years old. Later, the family found a husband for her. Unexpectedly, Jinhua was not born without a common heart, so on the day of marriage, she tied one end of the twisted string to the shrine of Empress Zao, took the string and went straight to Bami Mountain, where she became an immortal. Although the protagonist and place name in the legend of Jinhua are different from those in the legend of Jingchuan bald woman, the plot is much the same, and the characters have a key feature, namely baldness, and the legend takes place in the surrounding areas of Longshan. For the convenience of research and memory, let's call these two stories class A fairy legends of Gansu textile goddess legends.

In Yongdeng County, Lanzhou City, Wushan County, Gangu County, Qin'an County, Tianshui City, Lintao County, Weiyuan County, Dingxi City, Jingning County, Pingliang City and other places, there are also legends similar to the Empress Hemp Thread. The researchers call these legends class B fairy tales. The plots of fairy tales of class B and class A are similar, and they may have the same origin. The biggest difference between them is that there is a very special story in the legend of Class B Fairy, that is, the Fairy tied one end of the twisted thread ball in the kitchen, and then flew to the immortal mountain with the thread ball. However, as soon as she arrived at the place, the hemp thread was used up, so she resolutely pulled the intestines out of the belly button, continued to connect them to the hemp thread, and finally managed to reach the immortal cave, and finally became the immortal.

It can be seen that the biggest difference between the two kinds of legends is the plot of "pulling the gut and continuing the thread". It is this inconspicuous "hemp thread continues the intestines" plot that is the core of the whole Gansu textile goddess legend. This plot shows that the hemp thread plays an irreplaceable role in the process of fairy becoming immortal. It is a tool connecting heaven and earth, and a tool for fairy becoming immortal. At the end of the story, the hemp thread is not enough. The only thing that can replace the hemp thread is her own intestines, that is, she sacrificed her own body to complete the act of becoming immortal.

### **3. THE LINE THAT CONNECTS HEAVEN, EARTH, PEOPLE AND GODS**

Since ancient times, Gansu has been a place where Chinese culture and Tibetan and Qiang cultures have been exchanged and integrated. Wool thread plays an important role in the customs of Qiang people. It is a sacred object in the adult ceremony for men. It is a token given by the gods to mortals. Those who hold this token are blessed by the gods. According to the ancient Tibetan legend, the Seven Heavenly Red Kings are gods who fall from the heaven and return to the heaven after death. The sky rope on their heads is their tool to go through the earth and heaven.

Part of Gansu is one of the important places for the ancient Qiang people. Until now, people can still see the ancient Qiang customs from the customs here. Qiang people call themselves "sheep sons" and believe that they are descendants of God.

At the coronation ceremony for the adults of Qiang people at the age of 15, the priest "Xu" will put a five color cloth strip tied with white male wool thread, a gift from the gods, around the neck of the crowned person as a amulet, and then kneel down with the crowned person to pray for the first ancestor's shade, hoping that he will live with heaven and earth, and live together in the sun and the moon. At the mountain sacrificing ceremony, the priest "Xu" would tie a wool thread to the chest of the young man who participated in the mountain sacrificing ceremony for the first time, and smear old lard on his forehead, which meant that he would be blessed by the gods and have a destiny.

In the annual Spring Festival social fire performance in Yongdeng County, Gansu Province, the first person to perform is the "hard lion". This lion is very big, and it must be carried by strong villagers in two villages. Its hair is made of colored hemp thread. During the performance, the actors need to have a short rest because of the heavy weight of the props. The lion will stop in the center of the field. At this time, villagers will scramble to get under the lion. They will also pull some hair from the lion, simply twist it into a fine twine, and tie it on the button, which means to bless the peace of the year.

There is a legend about the "Seven Heavenly Red Kings" with white light on their heads in Tibetan areas. It is recorded in the "Annals of the Kings of Tibet" that at the top of the mountain, Miechizhanbao was pulled up by the God of Heaven with a rope to lead the heaven. When the time was ripe, the God of Heaven lowered him to the top of the mountain with a rope. The herdsman asked where Miechizhanbao came from? Miechizhanbao pointed the emptiness with fingers, which means that he fell from the sky. People said, "This is the Son of Heaven who came down from the sky and should be regarded as the king of our generation." After Miechizhanbao, there were six kings, collectively called the seven kings of Tianchi. "It is said that when their sons learned how to ride, their fathers climbed up the heaven rope, and went high into the void like a rainbow. The tomb of the Seven Heavenly Kings was built in the void world. The body of the gods is scattered like a rainbow without any corpses." [1] When the princes were able to ride skillfully, their father climbed the rope to return to the void and disappeared like a rainbow. They came from the heaven, and their graves were built in the heaven. It comes from the void and disappears in the void. There are no corpses left in the world.

The heaven rope on the head of the Seven Heavenly Red Kings is the tool to connect heaven and earth, and also the only tool for them to go to heaven and earth. The seventh king Gongchizhanpu's prince was Zhigongzhanpu, and he also had a white light called "heaven rope" on his head, which could make him rise to the heaven after his death. However, in an archery competition with the minister, the king cut off the heaven rope above his head and was shot to death by the minister, leaving his body in the world. Since then, the connection between Zhanpu and the gods has been cut off together.[2] Also, when Tibetan witches practice, they should wrap five colored ribbons around their bodies to symbolize the rainbow. Red and yellow ribbons are hung on both sides of the Thangka statue, which means that the gods can fly up to the heaven with a rainbow, or the gods can descend to the world with a rainbow bridge.

Eliade believed that, like the ladder, the symbolic meaning of the rope must indicate the communication between heaven and earth. It is through a rope or a ladder (also through a vine, a bridge, a cluster of arrows, etc.) that the gods fall from the heaven to the earth, and humans rise into the heaven.[3] In many places, people think that the rainbow is a bridge between the cowherd and the weaver. In the "Welcome to Qiqiao" ceremony of the Xihe Qiqiao Festival in Gansu Province, the girls will greet Empress Qiao (Weaver Girl) with string, and then send her to the heaven with string.

#### **4. THE ORIGIN OF THE WEST QUEEN MOTHER AND THE WEAVER GIRL AS THE TEXTILE GODDESSES IN GANSU**

The custom of begging for cleverness in Xihe County, Longnan Prefecture, is mainly distributed in the Yangshui River and the upper reaches of the West Han Water. The Qiqiao Festival starts in the evening of June 30 (the 29th day of the lunar month) and ends at midnight on the seventh day of July (the Qixi). It lasted seven days and eight nights. The whole activity of Qiqiao Festival was carried out around Empress Qiao. It was composed of preparatory work (site selection, liaison, fund-raising, singing and dancing, costumes, sprouting, making, and inviting), and activities such as welcoming Qiao, offering Qiao, singing Qiao, sister vaulting horse, worshiping Qiao, welcoming water, cooking dinner, predicting Qiao as the petals show, and sending Qiaoqiao.

"Bridging" is a ceremony to follow Empress Qiao from the sky: the welcoming team took out the string prepared in advance by the water urinal bridge of the West Han Water which is about five or six meters long, and was subsequently formed by unscrewing the red bracelet that girls wore on their wrists on the Fifth Dragon Boat Festival in early May. The two girls stood on both banks of the West Han River, pulling the red rope with their hands across the river. Others began to light wax, burn incense, burn watches, and fire artillery. They knelt down to worship. Then they lined up, held hands, and waved fans to sing the "Bridge Building Song" together: "On June 30, when the heaven door opened, I invited Qiaoniang to come down to earth. Three incense sticks and a pair of wax sticks were used to build the bridge with a red rope. The cloud shoes that Empress Qiao wore came from the sky. The high-heeled shoes that Qiaoniang wore swam (walked) across the overpass. The satin shoes that Empress Qiao wore came from the top of the mountain." At the end of the song, they roll up the red rope of the hand loop for use in case of "sending Qiao".[4]

On the day approaching Qixi, the girls reluctantly packed up the items for the ceremony and prepared to bid farewell to Empress Qiao. The girls stood on both sides of the divine table and sang the "Song of Sending Qiao". The song was full of sad feelings of parting, which made people cry. "On July 7th, the festival is over, and Empress Qiao doesn't care about me. The figure of Empress Qiao leaves the door, and the stone is heavy on my heart. It is intentional to leave Empress Qiao for one day. However, after all, people and gods are different, so Empress Qiao finally has to go back to heaven: the sisters' hand loops are all untied and connected one by one. They take the bridge across the river. Empress Qiao and I will never see each other again." [5]

Xihe had an instrument named "Sister Ma Dance" at the begging ceremony. First, it is necessary to choose a girl of Sister Ma Dance. During the ceremony, the girl was gradually possessed by God and became crazy. All people immediately knelt. The host of the ceremony burned the yellow watch and prayed. Others asked Sister Ma for an oracle. Zhao Kuifu believed that Sister Ma should be the goddess of Jima and linen weaving according to the analysis of local folklore.[6] Sister Ma, who was once entrusted with dreams by the Weaver Maid, has become an intermediary between gods and people, that is, to sacrifice to gods on behalf of people, and to convey

divine instructions to people on behalf of gods. Therefore, Sister Ma's prototype is a sacrifice or wizard.

The custom of begging for skills in Longnan is a legacy of the early Qin culture. The formation of the worship of weaving girls can be traced back to the ancestor of the Qin people who are famous for weaving. The Fifth Chronicle of the Qin Dynasty in Historical Records records: Before the Qin Dynasty, the Miao descendant grandson of Emperor Zhuangxiu called Nvxu. Nvxu weaves, a black bird that dropped its eggs, and Nvxu eats the egg, and then she was born in Daye.[7] Female Xiu, the female ancestor of Qin people, has been handed down the year before last, and the word "weave" has been left as the key word of her identity, which shows that she has a close relationship with textile. Qin people called her "Weaver Girl" because of her great contribution to textile.[8]

According to "The Classic of Mountains and Seas · The Classic of Western Mountains", the Queen Mother of the West looks like a human being. She is good at howling with leopard's tail and tiger's teeth, and wears her hair with Sheng. She is the fierce force of Sitian.[9] According to "The Classic of Mountains and Seas · the Great Wilderness West Sutra", there is a person wearing Sheng, with tiger teeth, a leopard tail, and in a cave, named the Queen Mother of the West.[10] "The Classic of Mountains and Seas · Northern Classic of Hainei" recorded that the West Queen Mother was wearing a Sheng stick on the ladder, and there were three green birds in the south, feeding for the Queen Mother of the West.[11] It can be seen from the above text that "Dai Sheng" is the most striking feature of the Queen Mother of the West. "Sheng", Guo Pu annotated that it is a tool or rolling threads. Japanese scholar Ichiro Kokuro believes that the shape of "Jinsheng" in Kaiyuan Zhanjing and Taiping Yulan is described as "Zhisheng". "Sheng" is something that has something to do with weaving. "Sheng" should refer to the "sheng" on the horizontal axis of the loom used to roll the warp thread, as stated in Guo Baojun's "New Annotation of Ancient Jade". On many occasions, the family members of the gods and their clothes often symbolically indicate their divine function, so the clothes of the Queen Mother of the West show that she is related to sericulture and weaving. In the work of weaving, the characters of the Queen Mother of the West and the Weaver Maid in mythology overlap.[12] Xing Li believes that the goddess belief in Sifang Village is an important part of the West Queen Mother belief in Jingchuan,

which provides a living context for the West Queen Mother belief in Jingchuan. The large-scale West Queen Mother Palace and Queen Mother Palace temple fairs restored in Jingchuan both in history and now provide a basis for the girls' belief in the village. The goddess belief in the village is like brilliant stars, which protect and set off the bright moon in Jingchuan's Queen Mother's Palace.<sup>2</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the fairy maidens in the fairy tales and legends of Longdong, Longzhong and Longnan in Gansu Province were good at twisting, hardworking and capable, and twisting became the most important activity and psychological sustenance in their lives. Their life has some misfortunes, big or small. Finally, they can become immortals by relying on the twisted thread. It can be seen that they are not only good at weaving, but also the things they spin have become their tools for ascension. The myth of the Queen Mother of the West and the Weaver Maid has been spread in many places in Gansu Province. As the textile goddess, they have great influence. Therefore, the worship of the goddess, especially the textile goddess, has naturally formed here. And because of people's worship, many similar myths about the textile goddess have born. In this land, they are worshipped and believed in, bringing psychological and spiritual comfort to people living here.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Yuyun Xue.

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2. See Zhang Xuejun's *Jingchuan Goddess*, page 4. This book has not been officially published.