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Called *Qixi* in Chinese, or *Chilseok* in Korea, it sees many young lovers march to the nearest matchmakers, or have their fortunes read to check their marriage prospects.

It also sees restaurants booked up and flower prices double — as is the case with Western Valentine's Day in February, which has taken a commercial foothold on the mainland in tandem with the economic reforms of the past several decades.

This year is particularly special in the eyes of superstitious Chinese as the *Qixi* festival falls on Monday, at the end of three days of comet showers and unusual planetary sightings in the skies above the city.

Altar and Vega are seen as the celestial incarnations of a young cow herder and the goddess he married. Vega's mother, who was distraught at the prospect of her daughter marrying a mortal, subsequently dragged her back to the heavens and created the Milky Way as a means of keeping them apart.

According to Chinese folklore, sympathetic magpies built a bridge across the sky to let them meet for one day, and this legend continues to be celebrated by young couples to this day.

Not that there are many magpies in Shanghai, nor inside the Expo Garden, which saw 34 couples tie the knot at the France Pavilion in May. Now it is Korea's turn to flash its cultural and romantic credentials on the world stage.

Cao, who was invited to join the proceedings after her love story caught the attention of those vetting the application forms, believes it was destiny that brought her and 28-year-old legal consultant Kim Hun-jong together.

They first met in 2006 at a university in Busan, Korea, when Cao was taking an optional course to find out how Koreans teach their students Chinese. She forgot her textbook and Kim lent her one of his. Things progressed, and three years later they were married.

It took a while to adjust to some of the cultural differences, said Cao, especially dressing and acting more conservatively in the company of her parents-in-law, or wearing socks in the sweltering heat of summer.

"Korean rules of behavior and etiquette were totally alien to me at first," she said. "But my husband was very patient in explaining to me how and why I should do these things, so I didn't have any objections to learning."

"After all, I married a Korean guy, so I'm obliged to fit into their



The Expo Garden has become a popular venue for wedding photos.

YONG KAI / CHINA DAILY

culture."

Other couples are settling for having their wedding photos taken in the Expo Garden, despite being already married. Wedding photography is a huge industry in China, with couples often traveling across the country with groups of strangers to get snapped in exotic locales, such as frolicking on the beach or framed against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains.

Roxy Li, a 27-year-old woman from northeast China, and Aha Fang, from Hunan province, will have their photos taken at the New Zealand Pavilion, as it represents the country of their dreams.

"We've been in love with New Zealand for a long time and even more so after we watched the (movie) *Lord of the Rings* (which was partially filmed there)," said Aha, who proposed to his wife in May.

After the pavilion's managing board approved his idea, staff launched an online vote on July 29 asking visitors to suggest the best locations for the photos.

"But I've got my heart set on the rooftop garden," said Aha. "It looks like a beautiful oil painting."

The mayor of the city of Hastings is scheduled to greet the couple on Monday.



The Shaanxi Pavilion is holding a series of events for the *Qixi* festival.

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A couple hug in the Korea Corporate Pavilion during a romantic event.

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