Love songs and temple festivals in northwest China

In the mountains of northwest China, crowds of people gather at remote temples every summer. The normally grim and deserted landscapes become a backdrop for elaborate feasting, chanting and sacrificing. While the mood is festive, the meetings take place in a region which has seen centuries of violent conflict between Muslims and Buddhists. Inter-ethnic relationships remain uneasy, but during the temple festivals people from different backgrounds accept the challenge of competing with one another on a very different kind of battlefield: that of love.

Frank Kouwenhoven

The rough and high-pitched seductive chants of northwest China, known as *hua'er* (youth songs) are famous all over China. One needs to hear them only once to remember them: the piercing falsetto sounds and whistling ornaments immediately strike the ear. Many Chinese know the name of a mountain of near-mythical fame, Lianhuashan, where some 400,000 pilgrims meet to sing, pray and flirt every summer. The outdoor gatherings in southern Gansu and eastern Qinghai are usually carnisvalque, with people indulging freely in outdoor life, drinking, singing, and flirting.

In China, extramarital courtship and youthful love affairs are normally viewed as licentious, but the rural temple festivals take place under the approving eye of the gods. Lianhuashan and other outdoor areas (at a safe distance from the civilized world of the villages) are temporarily turned into sacred arenas: for a few days, people are allowed to fall in love with strangers and to give vent to their feelings in public. In the nearby temples, elderly people sacrifice food, money and other gifts to divine ancestors. A straw effigy of a spirit is drowned in one of the local rivers to fend off evil spirits. A straw effigy of a spirit is drowned in one of the local rivers to fend off evil spirits.

Numerous taboos rest on the singing of *hua'er*. From our perspective, the songs may sound, the backdrop of these festivals and react in disbelief or even indignation when confronted with the rural practices. Official government attitudes towards ethnical and religious and religion show similar uneasiness. Most Chinese academic research on *hua'er* underplays or ignores the roles of sex and religion. Temple festivals are frequently referred to as ‘hua’er’ festivals’ and the singing is described as entertainment. Ethnic diversity among the singers is acknowledged, but is interpreted mainly as a sign of China’s growing unification: don’t these minorities mix happily with Han, isn’t their singing of *hua’er* in Chinese evidence of their acceptance of Han Chinese superiority? With such a bland approach to *hua’er*, many aspects of the tradition are misinterpreted or overlooked. What does it actually mean for people to sing love songs together if they belong to ethnically different and still hostile groups?

Where do *hua’er* originally come from? How do *hua’er* work in the context of Islam, with its suppression of women? How does the process of musical courtship in *hua’er* actually unfold? Is there an ‘erotic’ component in the music? Can one ‘hear’ and ‘see’ courtship in action? These are the questions we address in our fieldwork.

Ethnic groups at Lianhuashan

With its steep rock cliffs (some reaching up to 3,800 m) and forested flanks which host numerous temples, Lianhuashan, or ‘Lotus Mountain’, is an attraction of thousands of tourists every year. Thronging climb to the (multiple) tops for a few days, people are allowed to fall in love with strangers.

Lianhuashan every summer to burn incense at sacred sites. Many are tourists. The more traditional visitors to the festival include singers, beggars, monks, soothsayers, mendicant Buddhist priests, jugglers, blind musicians, peddlers, dancing madmen, instant comedians, gamblers and the occasional transvestite.

The mountain and the surrounding region were originally Tibetan (pas-toralists’ and farmers’) territory. The influx of Han-Chinese from the 14th century onwards reached new heights in the 16th century, and the Tibetans were gradually pushed out of the area. At this time the impact of Han-Chinese Buddhism altered the face of Lianhuashan. In addition to a small number of Daoist temples which Chinese worshippers had already built in pre-Ming times, hundreds of new temples appeared on the mountain. Not far from Lianhuashan, a wall was built to separate Tibetan from Han-Chinese communities. Eventually Chinese restrictions on the mobility of Tibetans were lifted, and the wall fell to ruins.

Tibetans have maintained a strong presence at Lianhuashan. The entire area is a baffling hodge-podge of different cultures, not only Tibetans. Many groups raise ‘sinicized’ tunes and can speak Chinese, or have even adopted it as their first language. The Dongxiang, a Muslim people of Mongolian descent, live in one of the poorest mountain landscapes of Gansu, just south of Lanzhou. Hui, Bao’an, Salar, and various Mongol groups occupy other territories, which they usually share with local Han. All these groups meet in the *hua’er* arena. Their tunes and lyrics are partly similar, suggesting inter-cultural contact over a long period of time. But *hua’er* are not a monolithic cultural phenomenon different (differently rooted) local festival and courtship traditions must have merged in the course of history. Remnants of local traditions remain in many places, and need to be studied on their own terms.

Courtship in action

One fine summer day in 2003, we descend a spacious valley as impressive as the Grand Canyon. From time to time, there are mine explosions on opposite mountain flanks: they are seen first, in the shape of silent puff of white clouds, and then heard, since sounds are delayed for several seconds. A long and colourful procession of tiny figures walks down the trail leading to the temple. Many people have travelled for days to get here. Old women walk with difficulty, on bound feet, or ride on donkeys. Young girls are dressed colourfully, in pink, red or light blue jackets. Near the temple, the human stream splits: the elegant women rest more to an open space where the *hua’er* singing takes place. Girls take the lead and sing the first songs. The men at first seem reluctant to join in. They prefer to shout pop songs in defiance of the *hua’er* game, and hum around at the foot of the mountain with their hands in their pockets. Yet while a while they shyly begin to sing some replies. One young male singer – with cheeks as red as a lobster – shields his face from female glances with a big parasol. But singers rarely look at each other. All communication takes place via sound. After a while, the hills and cliffs resound with song, in a splendid chaos of voices. The lyrics are rife with erotic hints and strange metaphors:

> I put the horsewhip / on the bower in the temple / I put my sweetheart towards me / And fed her mouth with my tongue

The power of *hua’er* as a protective shield against natural disasters and death, and their usage as a public vehicle for illicit passions and wild outbursts secures the public’s fascination with this culture. Ultimately, the songs are musical laughter in the face of adversity – a bold laughter that celebrates love, defies death, and challenges the gods to respond.

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