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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 landscape becomes 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, Han-Chinese and Tibetans. 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* (flower songs) or *shaonian* (youth songs) are famous all over China. One needs to hear them only once to remember them: the piercing falsetto sounds and whirling ornaments immediately strike the ear. Many Chinese know the name of a mountain of near-mythical fame, Lianhuashan, where some 40,000 pilgrims meet to sing, pray and flirt every summer. The outdoor gatherings in southern Gansu and eastern Qinghai are usually carnivalesque, 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.

These acts are aimed at preventing retribution from gods and ghosts. Religion in China, no less than in Christian culture, blooms and flourishes in the face of sin. But there is an intriguing practical side to the musical courting: furtive love affairs during festivals sometimes result in the birth of extramarital children, a welcome gift to women whose marriages have not been consummated.

Fertility

Surely, the teasing songs of northwest China are great entertainment, but they have other functions as well. From our fieldwork begun in 1997, we infer that intimate relationships which arise from *hua'er* are mostly extra-marital – are indeed *expected* to take place between people who already have marital partners. Women who get pregnant at a temple fair can incorporate the baby into their existing marriage without questions about the father's identity. Obviously no such 'cover-up' is available in the case of unmarried women, who are formally expected to refrain from singing at (or going to) festivals.

In reality, *hua'er* are sung by people of all ages, and the stakes are high for everyone who joins. Aged people may not sing for sex – although their flashy repartee often hints at sublimated passion – but their performances still take place under the eye of large crowds of

people. Moreover, no matter how spirited the songs may sound, the backdrop to this tradition is dark, connected to more than teasing, flirting or having children.

The areas of rural Gansu and Qinghai where *hua'er* thrive are mostly barren and dry. People have lived here for hundreds of years to a disheartening rhythm of floods and droughts, famines and warfare, with death an over-familiar visitor. In this context *hua'er* not only function as major distractions or platforms for furtive sexual encounters, but as powerful tools in the struggle for godly favours. *Hua'er* tunes are sometimes sung in temples to pray for offspring, to beg for the curing of illnesses or pending death. In such cases, the applied formulae and metaphors may still derive from love songs, but the poems change direction when sung in temples: passionate imploring or 'flirting' is now directed towards the gods, begging for life, for rain, for protection of the crop, for fertility of the women. Temples have been erected in honour of *Hua'er niang-niang*, the goddess of *Hua'er* and fertility; some are adorned with visions of young children sprawling on mountain flanks.

While the musical flirting does not result in sexual contact for most singers, it can still be viewed as a form of sexual education. Umbrellas are carried around to provide shelter against the afternoon heat, but also, if necessary, to hide one's embarrassment if song lyrics become too bold.

Wild atmosphere

Numerous taboos rest on the singing of *hua'er*, but during festivals most restric-

tions are temporarily lifted under the protective care of the gods. Married men often do not want their wives to participate in the temple festivals and may attempt to stop them from going. But for many Chinese women, festivals are the only outlets they have, rare occasions to meet kindred spirits and let off steam after long periods of domestic seclusion. As a festival proceeds, the atmosphere can become quite wild. Within the temple walls, women are sometimes seen to dance, to fall into trance or to behave in theatrical fashion, as we witnessed in some festivals. The singing of *hua'er* outside the temples is a natural continuation of this process of self-release and the lifting of normal social restraints.

Han Chinese in cities like Lanzhou or Xining are mostly unaware of the existence of these festivals and react in disbelief or even indignation when con-

fronted with the rural practices. Official government attitudes towards ethnicity and rural religion show similar uneasiness. Most Chinese academic research on *hua'er* underplays or ignores the roles of sex and religion. Temple festivals are often 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*,

Ethnic groups at Lianhuashan

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 courting 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.

for a few days, people are allowed to fall in love with strangers

With its steep rock cliffs (some reaching up to 3,800 m) and forested flanks which host numerous temples, Lianhuashan, or 'Lotus Mountain', attracts tens of thousands of visitors every year. Throngs climb to the (multiple) tops of

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 Daoist priests, jugglers, blind musicians, peddlers, dancing madmen, instant comedians, gamblers and the occasional transvestite.

The mountain and the surrounding region were originally Tibetan (pastoralists' 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 are 'sinified', meaning that they 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 driest and poorest mountain landscapes of Gansu, just south of Lanzhou. Hui, Bao'an, Salar, and various Mongguor 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 genre; many 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 puffs 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 elderly enter the temple, the rest move 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 bum around at the foot of the mountain with their hands in their pockets. Yet after 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 bookcase in the temple
I pull my sweetheart towards me
And feed 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 outings 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. ◀

Frank Kouwenhoven and his partner Antoinet Schimmelpenninck have been collecting folk songs in China since 1986. In 1990 they initiated CHIME, the European Foundation for Chinese Music Research (<http://home.wxs.nl/~chime>). Kouwenhoven is the editor of a forthcoming book on music and seduction in different cultures. chime@wxs.nl



Singing under a parasol, in a typical *hua'er* posture, with one's hand raised near one's ear.

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