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Folk Song “*Hua’er*” in Northwest China: “Younger Sisters” and the Gender Relationship

By Ma Rui¹

Abstract

Chinese folk songs remain largely unheard-of outside China. The broad purpose of this essay is to bring one peculiar form of folk songs that is commonly circulated in Northwest China—*Hua’er*—into the spotlight. The essay attempts to reveal four types of female images as observed in romantic *Hua’er*, which is followed by an analysis of the gender relationship mirrored from the images and characterized by male-dominated hierarchy. Additionally, two ideas are offered as interpretation on the construction of the gender hierarchy. One is the impacts of Islam and Tibetan Buddhism which are two principal religions in Northwest China; the other is the joint force generated when they are each combined with Chinese Confucianism. Though *Hua’er* has been listed into the Intangible Culture Heritage of UNESCO for more than a decade, the scholarship on it remains limited and new perspectives have yet to be explored. I believe this article makes a contribution in this regard by taking the gender perspective which is presently rare in *Hua’er* study.

Keywords: *Hua’er*, Folk song, Females, Images, Gender, Religion, Confucianism

Introduction

Hua’er (translated literally as “flower”) or *Shaonian* (translated literally as “young boy”) is an old form of folk songs circulated in Northwest China, mainly the provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia. According to the Intangible Culture Heritage of UNESCO, the music tradition of *Hua’er* is shared by people of nine different groups, most of whom are believers of either Islamism or Tibetan Buddhism, including *hui*, *baoan*, *dongxiang*, *yugu*, *salar*, *tu*, *zang*, *menggu*, and Chinese *han*. Having inhabited the land of Northwest China since at least *Qing* dynasty, they share similar geographical and cultural customs and sing *Hua’er* in Chinese despite that some of them have languages of their own.

As pointed out first by *Zhang Yaxiong* (1910-1990), the name *Hua’er* refers to *men’s beloved young ladies*. In some places, male singers prefer the name *Shaonian*. Instead of highlighting the stunning beauty of a young girl, the use of this name places emphasis on the ceaseless passion of a man in pursuit of love at his golden age (*Zhang* 1986: 55). Presently, scholars have agreed that the name “*Hua’er*” is something bordering on a nickname for the girl a man is in love with and intends to pursue. These folk songs sung by people working in the fields or in the mountains are characterized by such a high-pitched resounding voice that the sound reverberates in valleys and can allegedly be heard miles away. Hence, *Hua’er* falls into the subcategory of folksong-mountain song.

The Origin of Hua’er

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Where the music tradition of *Hua'er* comes from remains presumptive up to this day for lack of historical records. Popular speculations all date it back to the music of ancient Chinese ethnic groups such as *Qiang* or foreign groups coming from the East like early Islamists (Zhao 1989: 75). Chinese scholar *Wang Hongming* identified seven origins of *Hua'er* music that are all connected with either ancient musical dance or folk song singing of ancient Chinese ethnic groups. For example, the *Hua'er* circulated in *Qinghai* province is believed to have originated from the folk song form *la yi* of *Zang* nationality (2011: 14). In spite of all the efforts in searching for the answer, the origin of *Hua'er* remains too complicated and disputable an issue to settle down in the short run. It requires not only the knowledge and experience in folklore studies, but also expertise in multiple disciplines including but not limited to ethnography, anthropology, and musicology.

For the same reason, no consensus has been reached on the time period when *Hua'er* appeared. But previous studies confirmed at least one fact that it appeared no later than the Qing dynasty (AD1636-1912). The evidence is a poem about homesickness written by a man named *Wu Zhen* in the Qing dynasty in which he explicitly referred to the folk song of his hometown as *Hua'er* (Wu 2008: 9). It is so far the first historical evidence allegedly discovered by *Zhang Yaxiong* that unmistakably records the existence of *Hua'er* and shows that *Hua'er* was sung by people in Northwest China at least 200 years ago.

Nevertheless, scholars in the field provided a few other possibilities which all traced back to even earlier times in Chinese history. Of them, four time periods win much approval. They are the *Zhou* dynasty (BC 1046-256), *Tang* dynasty (AD6 18-907), *Song* dynasty (AD960-1279), and *Ming* dynasty (AD 1368-1644). I tend to take the viewpoint of Chinese scholar *Zhu Ziqing* when he talked about mountain songs, a subcategory of Chinese folk songs, in that “it should not appear earlier than *Tang* dynasty” (2004:90). The idea is applicable to *Hua'er* as well. One piece of evidence is the abundant use of a mixed language attributable to the intermingle between Chinese and Arabic-Persian languages, or the languages of Islam, and the languages of other ethnic groups. And it has been certified that Islam did not even come into ancient China until the middle of seventh century during the reign of *Tang* dynasty. The idea makes more sense if we consider two facts. One is that certain place names and concepts in *Hua'er* were not in use until the *Ming* dynasty, for example, *Xining* (the provincial capital of *Qinghai* province today) and *shisan sheng* (the thirteen administrative areas). Another is that a couple of household Chinese stories which were transmitted predominantly by word of mouth and found their way into narrative *Hua'er*, such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West* and *Water Margin*, were all based on story scripts of *Song* and *Yuan* dynasties (Wu 2008:13). Most importantly, the basic literary forms of *Hua'er* are very close to the Chinese traditional poetry, especially the metrical verses of *Tang* dynasty known as *jueju* or poems of four lines, which is also one of the important features of *Hua'er* as a written text.

Dominant Features of Hua'er: The Form and the Oral Formula

Approximating *Tang* metrical poetry, *jueju*, the majority of *Hua'er* (here refers to those short ones known as “*duan ge*”) takes the four-line form. Each line contains basically the same number of characters ranging from six to nine, all neatly arranged with diverse rhyming forms. Apart from the content, the major difference is that the former were composed in refined language by Chinese literati, yet the latter are essentially impromptu filled with vernacular or everyday words that are easy to be

passed on and remembered by ordinary people, especially farmers.

As with most oral traditions, the improvisation of a *Hua’er* requires some oral formulaic patterns. The most salient and significant ones include the formulaic “*bi-xing*”, a typical rhetorical device used in Chinese traditional poetry. The Chinese character “*bi*” comes very close to metaphor. The Chinese scholar *Zhu Xi* of *Song* Dynasty (AD 1131-1200) defined it more accurately as “talking about something by comparing it to something else”. For example, peony is a frequently used “*bi*” formula to refer to a beautiful lady in *Hua’er*. And “*xing*” was explained as “start by talking about something else so as to induce the point one really intends to make”.

The Content

As a form of folk song, the content of *Hua’er* is drawn from everyday life of ordinary people, ranging from farm work, house chores, personal emotions, seasonal and festival activities to local anecdotes and events as well as advice on marriage and life in general. Representative of the vernacular, rustic, everyday existence and surroundings indispensable in the Northwest rural areas, these songs constitute a repertoire of local customs and particular modes of life, providing a lens for folklorists and ethnographers to examine and describe aspects of local culture and ethnic minority groups. As *Wu Yulin* has noted, *Hua’er* reflect the history and reality of these ethnic minority groups in such a truthful way that they can be credited as an encyclopedia of folk customs, history, and culture of Northwest China (2008:339). For example, the narrative *Hua’er* known as *mawu ge he gadou mei* (Brother *Mawu* and Sister *Gadou*) is a representative piece in this respect in that it displays the religious customs and way of living of a *Hui* Muslim group as the story unfolds.

But the overwhelming majority of *Hua’er* revolves around romantic love. As has been surveyed, 90 percent of the traditional *Hua’er* songs collected in Northwest China are love songs (*Wu* 2008:153). Similar to the development of a romantic relationship, these songs can be further divided into songs of making acquaintance, songs of falling in love, songs of unrequited love, and songs of the distressed longing of a woman or man, covering basically every stage of emotional experience one could have in a relationship.

Unique Music Style

Farming and animal husbandry are the major modes of production in Northwest China. The semiarid to arid climate, big mountains, deep valleys, vulnerable ecological environment, and the relatively backward economic situation all caused a great deal of hardships to natives’ lives. They are all embodied in some way in the traditional *Hua’er* songs that were predominantly created and sung by laboring people such as farmers, herdsman, *jiaohu* (men who earned their living by trading goods which were carried on mules or donkeys while they usually walked all the way to the destinations) and raftsmen. They had very little schooling and sang what they saw and felt without polishing their language which normally creates the impression of being vulgar and rustic.

The music style therefore radically differs from the folk songs in regions south of the Yangtze River which are invariably known as regions of rivers, or a land of fish and rice—a land of plenty. Songs in these regions usually strike one’s ears as mild, indirect, and exquisite, even if they are mostly created by laboring people as well. *Hua’er*, in contrast, with its jumping rhythm and high-pitched tone, changes now and then from the tune of cheerful and lighthearted to lonely and bleak and to miserable and pathetic. An extra tint of tragedy is distinctly sensed in the resounding voice of the

songs. Some researchers believe what prompted the emergence of *Hua'er* in the poor land of Northwest China and how it got spread are tragic in themselves. It was produced as if not through singing out but through crying out. Conceivably these songs serve the toiling people well in providing them a vehicle for transmitting their inner voices to the outside world, thus unloading at least some of their stress under a difficult life.

Research Goal and Methods

Instead of following the latest trends in folk song studies, such as interpreting the folk customs and the specificity of the regional color, explicating the ethnic minority culture mirrored in *Hua'er* and probing ways of translating *Hua'er* so as to disseminate the regional culture as part of an effort of protecting and inheriting this ICH item, this article explores the female images as observed in *Hua'er* songs. The purpose is to reveal in some degree one of the significant dimensions that constitute the societal and life reality of Northwest China-gender relationship, which would otherwise be marginalized in the normal studies of folk songs, or at best, taken for granted at large. Furthermore, attempts are made to offer interpretations on the construction of the gender relationship.

The method I employed for the research is predominantly qualitative data analysis, in particular, content analysis and discourse analysis. All the analyses are necessarily built upon a large number of sample songs which I gathered from authoritative *Hua'er* song collections.

The samples were handled on two levels. On the descriptive level, which is concerned with the exploration of female images, I began with describing what the songs are about by annotating (additionally by providing my English translations for the samples below), mainly to sort out under what circumstances or at which stages of a typical romantic relationship the songs are so produced. Then I zoomed in on how the two sexes interact in these situations through a series of close readings for striking language features and images, which furthered the data assortment process indispensable for me to categorize the female images I have observed so far. To sum up, the four types of female images as presented below resulted from a synthesis of a more macroscopic consideration of occasions when the songs were produced and a relatively microscopic examination of specific speech act or verbal behavior of speech makers in the songs. However, on account of limited space for the article, a large portion of sample songs had no chance of being introduced in English to represent the four types of female images, for enough room had to be saved for subsequent analysis which will bring out my essential viewpoints regarding gender construction in Northwest China.

On the interpretative level, I focused on what is meant by each classification of female images in light of gender relationships and how the relationship relates to the social, religious, and historical context largely through discourse analysis and by citing relevant examples and studies to reinforce my points.

It is worth mentioning at this point that this article only targets *duan ge* (short songs ranging from three to eight lines) as its object of study because a great many of them belong to the romantic *Hua'er* which most visibly contain what the article sets out to explore. Certainly a few longer *Hua'er* songs also fall into the broad category of romantic *Hua'er*, but they are more suitable to serve as data in exploring the folk customs and practices. For example, *duichang ge* (dialogic songs between a man and a woman) like *zheng shi xinghua eryue tian* (February is Exactly the Time for Apricot Blossoms) and *shier yue nian qing* (Song of Twelve Months) are valuable in presenting the typical seasonal festivals of Chinese farming areas and traditional folk customs,

such as celebrating the birth of *wang mu niangniang* (the Queen Mother of the West, who is in charge of immortality in Chinese Taoist mythology and holds the Festival of Immortal Peach on the third day of March each lunar calendar year).

On the other hand I find romantic songs are far more relevant than the other ones as manifestations of gender relationships. Even though the other songs sometimes involve gender elements and gender interaction as well, if sought closely enough, they are invariably intended to describe everyday life experiences of men and women and cannot be justified as solid facts for the argument the article puts forward. At other times, some of them are simply sung for fun as shown by many *wenda ge* or songs which start with questions followed by smart answers.

And it is also essential to clarify here that all the English renditions of the following *Hua’er* songs are translated by me in order to maintain consistency in style. The only English collection of selected *Hua’er* songs that was found by the time the article is written contains 130 *Hua’er* songs which, however, are translated by several different translators.

Literature Review

Chinese Scholarship on Hua’er

A large amount of literature on *Hua’er* is in Chinese. In 1925, *Yuan Fuli* published 30 *Hua’er* songs he had collected as well as an article introducing *Hua’er*, which made more people outside Northwest China get to know about the folk song for the very first time. However, the first monograph on *Hua’er* didn’t come out until 1940 by *Zhang Yaxiong* who introduced it in a systematic way and provided dozens of selected *Hua’er* songs as supplement. The founding of People’s Republic of China brought more important foundation-laying works in public with the overall cultural environment becoming more liberal and more scholars diverting their attention to the broad field of Chinese indigenous folk songs and folk culture, such as professor *Xi Huimin’s xibei Hua’er xue (The Study of Hua’er in Northwest China)*, *Zhao Zongfu’s Hua’er tonglun (A General Introduction to Hua’er)* and *Hua’er meilun (An Introduction to the Beauty of Hua’er)* by *Qu Wenkun*.

In the meantime, a great number of articles were written and published, most of which focus on discussing the literary and artistic features of *Hua’er*, its musicality and acoustic characteristics, the colorful folk customs as observed in *Hua’er* songs and ways to translating and disseminating *Hua’er* outside China.

English Scholarship on Hua’er

There is little English literature on *Hua’er*. At the time of writing this, only 14 documents (including two conference papers, three doctoral dissertations, one master’s thesis and eight journal articles) on the subject can be retrieved. Among them, *Sue Tuohy’s* doctoral dissertation is the first publication in the field of *Hua’er* study. She explores the processes of how *Hua’er* became part of the Chinese tradition and explains how *Hua’er* is “an expression of the spirit of the Great Northwest, and an integral and valuable part of the Chinese cultural heritage” (1988: vii). The latest article published in 2020 illustrates how *Hua’er* turned from a taboo song to an important component of Chinese folk culture by taking advantage of the impact of ICH policies and the opportunities hence obtained (Yang 2020:215).

Four documents examine *Hua’er* from musicological aspects. The rest all approach *Hua’er* from different angles, such as music education, protecting *Hua’er* as a living intangible culture and *Hua’er* festivals, among which I found three are particularly interesting. One article by *Yang Mu* discusses the questions concerning the

sexual customs in some areas of Northwest China and how economic, technological and political changes influenced the *Hua'er* song culture and its research (1994: 100). Arianne M. Dwyer introduces a variant of *Hua'er-yur* or salar love song and its unique features (2007). *Feng Lide* and Kevin Stuart suggest the sexuality of *Hua'er* as a taboo and the social as well as personal function *Hua'er* will continue to serve in the countryside (1994). The only research from the gender perspective is made by Frank Kouwenhoven and Antoinet Schimmelpenninck who studied how women learn and sing these taboo songs and argued that this form of folk song plays a positive role in improving women's social status (2013).

Exploration of the Female Images

Voiceless Females: Data Analysis

Most romantic *Hua'er* songs adopt male perspectives. In other words, these *Hua'er* mostly have males as addressers, thereby making females the natural addressees. No specific number of these songs can be ascertained in this regard because for an art of oral tradition, there could always be some pieces left in the memory of the last generations or spread only within certain circles that remain to be discovered. In any event, I will attempt to present the fact visually by taking two important collections of *Hua'er* as sample sources and calculating the number of *Hua'er* songs with male addressers and female addressers: *aiqing Hua'er* (*Romantic Hua'er*) and *xibei Hua'er jingxuan* (*A Selected Collection of Northwest Hua'er*).

For this purpose, I used two ways to identify the two sexes. One major way is looking for certain words that are used only by the other sex, for example, *gamei* (meaning "younger sister") is a common address used by a man and frequently appear in *Hua'er* texts; whereas *age* (meaning "elder brother") is normally used by a female. Another way is reading for words with gender-loaded meaning, for instance, feminine words such as "peony" and "water" are frequently used by men to refer to women they are in love with, while men generally describe themselves as "bee" or "tiger", mostly masculine words.

Figure 1. Number of Female Addressers and Male Addressers

	total number of romantic <i>Hua'er</i>	female addressers	male addressers
<i>aiqing Hua'er</i>	1026	214	603
<i>xibei Hua'er jingxuan</i>	484	76	302

That the overwhelming majority of romantic *Hua'er* has females as addressees shows that these "gamei" or "younger sisters" are invariably on the listening end, silent and voiceless, leaving their genuine thoughts and emotions to speculation. A question that arises here is, do they always choose to be addressees or are they frequently *made* to be the passive recipients of the wooing message?

Figure 2. *Hua'er* song: *When exactly will you be mine?*

大河沿上细叶柳， 抓住妹妹绵绵手； 有心坐者没心走， 好比葡萄糯米酒； 多会得到哥的手， 热腾腾儿吻几回。	Along the river bank of narrow-leaved willow, I held my sweetheart's soft hand, reluctant to move away even a second. My sister really is like sweet rice wine. When exactly would come the moment that you are mine? I must give you my fiery kiss till then.
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Figure 3 Hua’er song: *My heart and soul are all on you*

月亮上来一张，	The moon climbs up looking like a bow,
郎弹弦子妹来听；	I prefer to play strings under for my girl;
隔山听着弦子响，	When hearing the liveliness across the hill,
一片心在妹身上。（Xue 2012: 44）	You’ll be certain of my heart and soul.

The two songs are representative of a male standpoint, indicating that since the men have already given their “heart and soul”, it would only be natural as well as appropriate for the “sister” and the “girl” to comply with their desire to be their lovers. But the absent females give no response to it. During the study of these song lyrics I find myself frequently asking the question: could it be sheer nonchalance, antipathy, or straight refusal? Whichever case it is, apparently, it is men who play a leading role in courtship. It is always *he* who frequently takes the initiative and articulates the wooing messages, while it could only be *she* who receives them in silence.

Objectified Females

With males’ voices filling the *Hua’er* texts, the females are frequently likened to things that are usually regarded as delicate, gentle and fragile, as opposed to the males’ self-proclaimed images linked always with power, strength and adamancy.

Figure 4. Hua’er song: *I am a butterfly whirling round and round*

青枝绿叶莲花山，	When trees and greenery covered the Lianhua mountain,
尕妹活象白牡丹；	You are almost like a pure white peony that day.
我象蝴蝶一转旋，	I am nothing but a butterfly, with a whirl of flutter,
端往牡丹心里钻。（Xue 2012: 42）	rushing headlong into the heart of that flower.

Figure 5. Hua’er song: *Let’s see you’d come out of the nest or not*

阳婆照亮魁星阁，	The Sun shines upon the Kuixin Pavilion brightly,
妹是红雀不出窝；	yet my sister shy as the linnets staying always in the nest.
变个黄鹰把你捉，	I’d rather become an eagle to come and catch you.
看你出窝不出窝。（Xue 2012: 43）	Let’s see you’d come out of your nest or not.

Figure 6. Hua’er song *My sister is the lantern, I am the candle*

大红的灯笼寺门上挂，	High on the temple gate hangs a red, red lantern,
再点上一对儿洋蜡；	To make it brighter a pair of candles lightened.
尕妹是宫灯阿哥是蜡，	My sister is the lantern, I am the candle.
蜡点上红灯里照下。（Xue 2012: 122）	With me burning inside you’d be even brighter.

Most of these comparisons fall into one of the following categories: Plant *Hua’er* and Animal *Hua’er*, as represented respectively by Figure 4 and Figure 5. *Mudan* (peony)

and *nen baicai* (fresh cabbage) are most frequently used in plant *Hua'er* texts, suggesting the youth and beauty of the women a man desires. It is actually not uncommon for men of letters in China to refer to females by making use of the imagery of flowers. The poetic lines from the Chinese classic *shijing* (*Book of Songs*), “*tao zhi yao yao, zhuo zhuo qi hua*”, translated as “The peach tree beams so red, how brilliant are its flowers” (Xu 2015: 8), make use of peach blossoms as a reference for the newly-married bride. One of the four classics, *honglou meng* (*A Dream of Red Mansions*), employs abundant flower imagery to allude to different females in the two clans². The peony flower employed in *Hua'er*, together with other types of flowers, are particularly conspicuous for their sexual implications. A flower is the reproductive organ and associated mostly with femininity, naturally people tend to connect flowers with female genitals. This association also seems pervasive beyond Chinese culture, as Simone de Beauvoir noted that “‘taking a woman’s flower’ means destroying her virginity, giving the origin of the word ‘deflowering’” (2009: 227). Thus, the cognitive chain runs as: flowers = red = blood = life = females. Finally, flowers = females (A 2007:143). Moreover, *mifeng* or *hudie caihua* (meaning bee or butterfly collects pollen)—an imagery common in *Hua'er* as is shown in figure 4, implies that men make sexual moves toward women. This type of sexual and eroticized relationship finds its expression in other imageries as well, such as “tiger-water”, “sick man—musk and velvet antler pills”, “candle-palace lantern”, “fish-water”, and “lock-key”.

Females in these relationships are, without exception, objectified by the male discourse, demonstrating that the women are easily controlled and played with by men who enjoy employing their imagination to construct female images as they desire. A woman is not so much what she thinks she is as what male sexual desire shapes her to be—an object of appreciation and the vehicle of men’s ideals. Fundamentally she is everything but herself. Men imposed their requirements on women, prevented them from voicing their opinions, and denied them their genuine identities (Zhang 2001: 204).

The females depicted in these texts are projections of men’s fantasies. Their images are shaped so as to live up to the male gaze, and furthermore to gratify themselves in thinking that they have conquered these beautiful women by objectifying them into entities that are inherently fragile, feminine, meek, and always seeking male protection. Laura Mulvey has summarized this phenomenon perfectly, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness”. He condenses this relationship as “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” (1989: 19).

Weak and Helpless Females

A very small number of *Hua'er* songs are indeed created from the female

² In *A Dream of Red Mansions* the major female characters correspond to certain types of flowers. The most famous females are “*Jinling shi er chai*”, referring to the twelve remarkable ladies in *Jinling* (the old name for *Nanjing*), each of whom is represented by a particular flower. For instance, hibiscus is symbolic of *Lin Daiyu*, peony *Xue baochai* and poppy *Wang Xifeng*. The flower images have been endowed with significant meanings in the book because they signify both the delicacy and stunning beauty of these females, as well as their inescapable fate of fleeting life of flowers and then being forgotten in the feudal patriarchal society.

perspective, with most of them falling into the category of *guiyuan Hua’er* (boudoir-plaint *Hua’er*). Very similar to Chinese *guiyuan shi*, the content of this type *Hua’er* is predominantly about the sorrows, lovesickness, and missing feelings of a woman, or “young sister”, who were left behind all alone at her chamber or boudoir. These “young sisters” are always described as urgently hoping to reunite with their *age* (elder brother) and are afflicted with longing to such an extent that they are not even able to eat, drink, and sleep properly. With this my attention is drawn to the dubious identity of these females. A legitimate question will be “Are they truly songs by the females, or are they merely songs created by men assuming female tones?”

Figure 7. *Hua’er* song: *Thinking about You Kept Me Wide Awake at Night*

一天想了难做活， 黑夜想的睡不着； 想下哥的哥不信， 擦眼手巾是铁证。（Xue 2012: 49）	Longing for you hindered me from the routine work by day, and also kept me wide awake at night. If you wouldn’t believe how much I missed you, Then the tear-drying handkerchief is the hard evidence.
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Figure 8. *Hua’er* song: *Wide Awake All Night to Think about My Brother*

月亮上来一面锣， 一夜想郎睡不着； 脑壳担在炕沿上， 眼泪淌的象江河。（Xue 2012:52）	The moon climbed up round like a gong, I was wide awake the whole night thinking about my brother. Having my head supported on the edge of the kang, I couldn’t help but let tears run uncontrollably like a river.
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One possible answer to this question should be sought in the tradition of Chinese *guiyuan shi*, a great number of which are actually authored by male poets. Famous poets such as *Wang Changlin*, *Liu Yong*, and *Li Bai* imitated the tone of deserted wives, maids in the imperial palaces or wives of merchants, imagined their inner world and gave expression for them. Since this type of poetry has been practiced for hundreds of years and the majority of them have literally been on everybody’s lips from generation to generation and been regarded as an essential part of Chinese classical poetry, the possibility should not be ruled out that men would simply follow suit and speak for their “young sisters”.

Perhaps our understanding will be facilitated if we connect it with the previous two points, i.e., voiceless females and objectified females. Since the females in Northwest China are not entitled to the same right of speech as the males do, the females do not get to decide how they are portrayed. It becomes practically “natural” that their voices are taken away and substituted by male ones. Again, this is a rather familiar situation, as in the case of voiceless females, where no clues are given to figure out the genuine mentality and emotion of these women under the circumstances of separation from their *age*. In any event, a sharp question will be: Could this all just be men’ wishful thinking?

For men, *Hua’er* songs help create a universe, one they have constructed with their language and where females are all delicate, passive, submissive, and expect to be saved from their lonely existence. How the ancient Chinese *guiyuan shi* has been criticized, therefore, is applicable to *guiyuan Hua’er*, “The poets fabricate their (females’) wishes and disappointments so that the poetic texts all turned into the ‘*zemeng zhou*’ (a small boat shaped like a grasshopper) which could absolutely not bear so much distress and sorrow. Truth is, these women were not speaking for themselves, but were spoken all the time. The poets, disguised as females, not only stole from

females their expressions, but wiped off their voices as well” (Ma 1996: 128).

From “Angel” to “Monster”

While the majority of *Hua'er* portrays women as charming and lovely, they indeed reveal to some degree the situation of women living in Northwest rural regions. Their roles in families are quite immobilized-as obedient daughters and compliant wives, a perfect embodiment of the so-called “angel in the house”. They are bound up with their families and economically dependent on their fathers or husbands for lack of schooling and means of making a living on their own. Their personal contacts and range of activities are rarely beyond the familiar home villages. The matters they could truly have a say in or take charge of are no more than the daily chores. Self-consciousness and subjectivity hardly come to the fore in their life. And striving for an expression of individuality, powerful identity, and moreover, their own discourse space is almost inconceivable. Men could therefore portray the “angels” as they wish and pin their aesthetic ideals on these *objet d'art*, or saints.

However, the females are not always presented as angelic as we may all assume at this point. The male addressers do, though inadvertently, reveal their aversive and repelling attitude towards those females who even dare to dismiss or disobey their wooing, or even worse, change their minds. This unusual type of *Hua'er*, though occupying only a tiny fraction of the total number, constitutes the exact opposite of angel women—the “monster women”, to use the words of Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert. In these songs men are offended by these “monster women” in such a way that they feel their masculinity and male charm are greatly thwarted. Consequently, these men resort to revealing the brutal reality as retaliation—that for men, the value of women lies in nothing but their fleeting youth and transient beauty—a sheer malicious and despicable move to handle the awkward situation these men find themselves in.

Figure 9. *Hua'er* song: *You Should Get Married While Still Young*

大河坝里石板响，	Slates make sounds in the river dike,
我给妹妹说比方；	an analogy to my girl I'd love to make;
年轻不把人维下，	Like the fragrance of sweet flowers lasting not long,
桂花能有几时香？	(Xue 2012: 42) you should really get married off while still young.

Figure 10. *Hua'er* song: *You Wouldn't Be as Young and Delicate Forever*

老鸦飞在磨沿里，	The crow will surely hit the millstone someday,
把你新鲜几年哩，	you wouldn't be as young and delicate one day.
磨子老了可碓哩，	Millstones can be ground when found to be dull,
把你老了谁缠哩。	(Xue 2012: 42) To whom would you appeal when you grow old?

Gender Relationship and Analysis

How exactly do females and males in Northwest China behave toward each other beyond the surface level of who says what to whom and how it is said? The four images actually manifest the gender relationship underlying the romantic *Hua'er*. Precisely the voiceless female image reflects male's discourse authority; the objectified image male's sexual dominance; the weak and helpless image male's spiritual control over female; and the preference of angel women to “monster women” male's moral discipline on females. In a nutshell, the gender relationship is a male-dominated hierarchical relationship with females being subordinate and inferior to males. But how

is it constructed? While I fully realize the complexity of the question, I would adventure two ideas below.

To start with, with Islamism and Tibetan Buddhism being two principal religions practiced in Northwest China, the influence they have exerted on the gender relationship should be examined first. Ethnic minority groups including *hui*, *baonan*, *dongxiang* and Salar people live by the principles and interpretations of Islam. What matters here are who gets to interpret the religious scripture and how it is interpreted. As male *ahong* (religious professionals) has the monopoly over the interpretation of tenets and religious laws in these regions, which has been a well-established fact among Muslims, they exert great influences on all aspects of the daily life of Muslim men and women who frequently turn to *ahong* for authoritative guidance on matters big and small.

Restrictions on women are in the meanwhile legitimized by patriarchal interpretations of the Holy Scriptures in the name of Allah. As has been repeatedly demonstrated by my experience of being a Muslim female, who has gone through many depressing occasions in spite of being raised in a relatively liberal family, that Muslim women are not entitled to the same rights as men. A childhood memory resurfaces over the years is the time when I was asked to kneel outside the prayer hall in December in the yard of a mosque with a crowd of Muslim women to listen to the *ahong*'s teachings. I was informed later that women are forbidden to enter mosques because they are deemed as *bujie* (unclean). And whenever *ahong* was invited to my house to give prayers, my sister and I were asked to wear hijabs while staying inside the bedroom until *ahong* and other male guests left, unless we were summoned by our father into the living room, because it is considered inappropriate for a female to show up in front of *ahong* or approach *ahong*. Take another example, women in *Dongxiang Hui Autonomous County* (southwest of *Gansu* province) will be arranged to get married at a young age (a few years younger than the minimum age of twenty prescribed by Chinese law and which is mirrored in the character *Gadou* in the aforementioned story *mawu ge he gadou mei*). And the vast majority of girls have only a few years, if at all, of schooling which could cease anytime once they are matched with men. It is also customary that females are confined to their home and housework, and daughters are supposed to stay at home to attend to their young siblings and domestic chores instead of attending school (Mackerras, 2003). The only form of proper knowledge they should gain and pass on is about Islam wisdom and codes of behavior which in turn consolidate the virtue of submissiveness as a feminine ideal.

The second idea is the joint force of Islam doctrines and Chinese Confucianism. It is perhaps attributed to one of the inescapable consequences of the movement of sinicizing the Islam towards the end of the *Ming* Dynasty and at the beginning of *Qing* Dynasty.³ Confronted with the deep-seated and powerful mainstream culture, some *Hui* Muslim scholars sought to fuse Islamic norms with Confucianism in order for Islam to survive in Chinese soil by finding out commonalities between the two. It was

³ The movement in China is known as *yi ru quan jing*, which means using Confucian ideas and viewpoints to interpret the Islamic scripture. Headed by famous Muslim scholars such as *Liu Zhi*, *Wang Daiyu*, *Ma Dexin*, and *Ma Zhu*, the movement aimed primarily at clarifying Islam in light of mainstream Confucian thoughts to make the religion understandable for the Chinese public. Another purpose is to dispel their general doubts and hostility towards Islamism by taking advantage of their indigenous culture, as was the case with Buddhism in its early stage in China. This movement is regarded now as part of the efforts of Islamic sinicization, which makes Chinese Islam different from Islam in any other places around the world.

successful. For Confucianism only *daru* (great male scholars who mostly held a position with traditional Chinese government) had the power to interpret Confucian gender roles through the patriarchal lens. Their gender prescriptions for women with those for Muslim women mentioned above mutually reinforce female subjugation, establish and institutionalize the patriarchal norms and power. For instance, by Confucian gender codes, a girl was not supposed to be sent to *sishu* (private school for men) and get her hands on classical books. Instead, she was taught the skills of *nühong* (needlework) as part of the so-called *nüde jiaoyu* (meaning women's education, advocating that a woman without talent is virtuous). And she was not supposed to step outside her house without her parents' permission, as Jaschok and Shui pointed out "Both Confucianism and Islam required gender segregation, sheltering women from the public arena and the male gaze" (2012: 157). Similar to Muslim females' compliance to their fathers and husbands, Confucianism required women to abide by "*sancong side*" (three wifely submissions and four virtues, indicating obediences to one's father, husband and son; virtues of fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech and efficiency in needle work). The two ideologies, once they joined hands, put females into the gender cage forged in the name of both religion and tradition.

The specific restrictions on females within Tibetan Buddhist minority groups—including the *Zang*, *Tu*, *Yugu*, and the *Menggu* people—may vary in some degrees from that of Muslim females. But the general attitudes toward females are, on the whole, unfavorable. Female birth is, apart from everything else, considered unfortunate. The idea is so deep-rooted that the word "woman" means "born low" in Tibetan language. It suggests female low social status within the community: "woman is not as capable as a man, she cannot enter into new areas of development; her place is in the house; she lacks a man's intellectual capacity; she is unable to initiate new things; and finally, she cannot become a Bodhisattva until she is reborn as a man" (Gross, 1993: 81).

Like early Islam in China, Buddhism as a foreign ideology underwent a period of remolding its original religious thoughts according to ideas of Chinese Confucianism and Taoism so that it could be accepted by the ruling class first and then well-spread among the ordinary people. Their negative attitudes toward women and the expected roles and norms for women intersect with those of Confucianism, which in the long process of mutual adaptation consolidated, and again, like the fusion of Islam and Confucianism, entrenched female inferiority and gender hierarchy.

Conclusion

Serving as a looking glass, the four types of female images as observed in romantic *Hua'er* reflect the gender relationship in Northwest China: an essentially male-dominated hierarchy with females being subordinate and inferior to males. As Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet noted, that "gender is constructed in a complex array of social practices within communities, practices that in many cases connect to personal attributes and to power relations but they do so in varied, subtle, and changing ways", I do fully recognize the complexity of probing into the construction of gender relationships (1992:84). It's a topic definitely worth specialized articles and books. Nonetheless I venture to propose two ideas in this article as interpretation of the gender hierarchy. One is from the perspective of the two principal religions in Northwest China. Both Islam and Tibetan Buddhism put females under the patriarchal domination, expecting females to conform to the gender norms and roles prescribed for them by male superiors. The other is the joint force of Confucianism with Islam and with Tibetan Buddhism. As heterogeneous ideologies, both Islam and Tibetan Buddhism sought to adjust to the mainstream Chinese culture, predominantly

Confucianism, so as to hold a sustainable religious status. The result is the mutual reinforcement of the gender prescription for women, legitimization, and entrenchment of gender hierarchy in the name of both religion and tradition.

It has been more than a decade since *Hua’er* had been recognized as an element of China’s and UNESCO’s ICH, however, the scholarship on *Hua’er* has not been fruitful. Breakthroughs from new perspectives have yet to be made. The study of *Hua’er* needs to be infused with new ideas. I believe this article makes a contribution in this regard to the existing studies of *Hua’er* by taking the gender perspective which is presently rare. And it is my sincere hope that future studies can be carried out to fill the gap of *Hua’er* research in this respect.

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