

Sex and the City in the Festivals:

A Preliminary Study on Women and Festivals in Late Imperial China

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Abstract:

The daily life of the silent majority of the Chinese populace is usually stereotyped as quiet and monotonous: “start work at daybreak and retire at sunset.” Yet in fact ordinary people were fully capable of making tumultuous noises and finding excitement—on those occasions they had the chance to release their repressed energy. The polyphonic spree in their clamorous celebrations of various traditional festivals, lasting through the night, was resounding proof of their bustling vigor and elan. Arguably among the popular noises that filled festivals, the most pronounced was the sound of women. Based upon critical unearthing of the human voices and the accompanying sounds of drums and gongs during the festivals, this paper reexamines the festival rhythms and special events that punctuated the lives of women, who were normally silent, or at least denied a voice in the written records.

Women also used the festivals to release their daily repressed energy. On the other hand, the festivals used women to enrich their jubilating celebration. Women and festivals in late imperial China were indispensable for each other. The freedoms of the festivals were open to all, but women were the major beneficiaries of these temporary relaxations of behavioral norms, since their movements were normally so restricted in traditional society. Whether out of a sincere belief that festival practices would ward off diseases or merely as a pretext, women would make use of this occasion to dress themselves in their best finery and vie with each other to publicly display their beauty and glamour. They were not merely bystanders observing the festival events, but performers themselves, often attracting more attention than the dazzling lanterns, the dragon-boats, or the shining full moon. Arguably, the “female” was the main theme in these carnivalesque celebrations. They became both actors and spectators with the splendid lantern lights above, or the varicolored dragon-boats alongside.

Keywords:

Warding off the hundred diseases, passing over (three) bridges, stealing greens, fetching the autumn, carnival