

Ethnic Cultures of China

THE MARRIAGE CUSTOMS AMONG CHINA'S ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS

By Jia Zhongyi



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Preface

For any social or ethnic group, rites and marriage customs are invariably an essential expression of their unique character. This book will introduce you the colorful marriage customs prevalent among China's ethnic minority groups.

The abundance and diversity of these customs, which vary from region to region and from people to people, is quite amazing. The ethnic groups living on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and its surroundings in northwest China and in Inner Mongolia are all heavily influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and Islam. Understandably therefore their marriage customs are ceremonies and beliefs infused with a strong religious flavor. In the northeast, the southwest, the Central Plains, and the southeast, the marriage customs show much less religious influence, although such elements are still present in varying degrees. Among the many ethnic groups of the south like the Miao, Yao, Zhuang, and Dong, one custom is especially prevalent: married women remain living at their parents' homes until they fall pregnant or in some cases have actually given birth to a baby. In the north, such a custom is very seldom found.

The diverse range of marriage customs is intimately related to the social forms, economic structures, religious belief, and systems of marriage which prevail among respective ethnic groups. They are not ossified and unchanging but rather have clearly evolved and changed with the development of society and the vicissitudes of cultural exchange. To fully appreciate the diversity of the marriage customs of Chinese minorities, a basic understanding of the essential characteristics of such groups is essential.

China is a united multiethnic country. The vast majority of the population belong to the Han ethnic group, while the other ethnic groups, account for a much smaller population (somewhere in the region of 10 percent or so), and are customarily referred to as "ethnic minorities." At present, there are 55 ethnic groups that have been identified and confirmed by the Central Government as unique ethnic groups. However there are still some 734,000 people who have not yet been officially classified as to ethnicity. According to the fifth national population census carried out in 2000, a total of 1.26583 billion people live in the 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities of China, of which the Han ethnic group accounts for 1.15940 billion people (91.59 percent of the total). The remaining 106.43 million people belong to ethnic minorities, accounting for some 8.41 percent of the total population. Even among the 55 ethnic minorities, there are great disparities in

terms of population. 18 ethnic groups account for over 100 million of the total non-Han population. They are the Mongolian, Hui, Tibetan, Uygur, Miao, Yi, Zhuang, Bouyei, Korean, Manchu, Dong, Yao, Bai, Tujia, Hani, Dai, Kazak and Li, of which the Zhuang ethnic group has the largest population, numbering some 16 million people. 15 ethnic groups have populations ranging from 100,000 to 1 million, namely, the Lisu, Va, She, Lahu, Sui, Dongxiang, Naxi, Jingpo, Kirgiz, Tu, Daur, Mulam, Qiang, Gelao, and Xibe. Finally the least populous 22 ethnic groups have populations of somewhere between less than 10,000 and 100,000. They are the Blang, Salar, Maonan, Achang, Primi, Tajik, Nu, Ozbek, Russian, Ewenki, Deang, Bonan, Yugur, Jing, Jino, Monba, Oroqen, Derung, Tatar, Hezhen, Gaoshan and Lhoba, of which the Monba, Oroqen, Derung, Tatar, Hezhen, Gaoshan and Lhoba ethnic groups have populations of less than 10,000 people.

China's ethnic minority groups are to be found distributed widely all over the country. Some are scattered and dispersed across huge territories while others live together in tightly knit communities in distinct areas. Ethnic autonomous areas where the people of certain ethnic minorities live together in communities are organized into three levels: namely autonomous region, autonomous prefecture and autonomous county (banner). Ethnic autonomous regions account for over 60 percent of the total. According to the 2000 census, there are 29 ethnic minorities distributed across the 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities while 11 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities have people from all 56 ethnic groups. In spite of the wide distribution of ethnic minorities, the majority live in the western and border areas of China. In 2000, the total ethnic minority population of Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou and Xinjiang accounted for over 50 percent of the total. Taken together with provinces and regions with relatively large ethnic minority populations like Liaoning, Hunan, Inner Mongolia, Sichuan, Hebei, Hubei, Tibet, Jilin, Qinghai, Gansu, Chongqing and Ningxia, the percentage reaches 91.32 percent.

The geographic environments and the availability of natural resources in the areas in which ethnic groups live vary greatly from region to region. Geographic environments range from the vast campaigns of the snow-crested Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau to the meadows of the Songpan Plateau to the deserts and oases of the northwest to the Mongolian grasslands to the snowy forests of the northeast. Mountains, rivers and lakes dominate the landscapes around the Hengduan, Jiuwandashan Shiwandashan, Miao and Wuyi Mountains as well as the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. Minorities are also found living along great rivers like the Yellow River, the Yangtze River, the Pearl River, the Lancang River, the Nu River, the Brahmaputra River as well as among innumerable hills, basins, and terraces scattered around these rivers and mountains. For countless generations, the

ethnic minorities of the lands of China have lived and worked in all of these diverse environments. By utilizing local natural resources, they have developed different ways of life. And from such ways of organizing life and existence have emerged diverse patterns of distribution, social structures, customs and conventions, modes of production and ideologies and beliefs. Differences not only exist between different ethnic groups living in different areas, but also between different clans of the same ethnic group. Most ethnic minorities, on a regional level, have close interconnections born of historical migration and interaction; on an ethno-cultural level, assimilation and differentiation have both occurred. Eventually, what was a vast multiplicity of ethnic identity has evolved into the large group of ethnic peoples we have today. The natural and cultural environment in which people live and have lived for generations has naturally exerted a profound influence on the marriage customs of ethnic minorities. Nature, history and society have all played a part in the evolution of the kaleidoscope of colorful conventions that are the marriage customs of Chinese ethnic minorities.

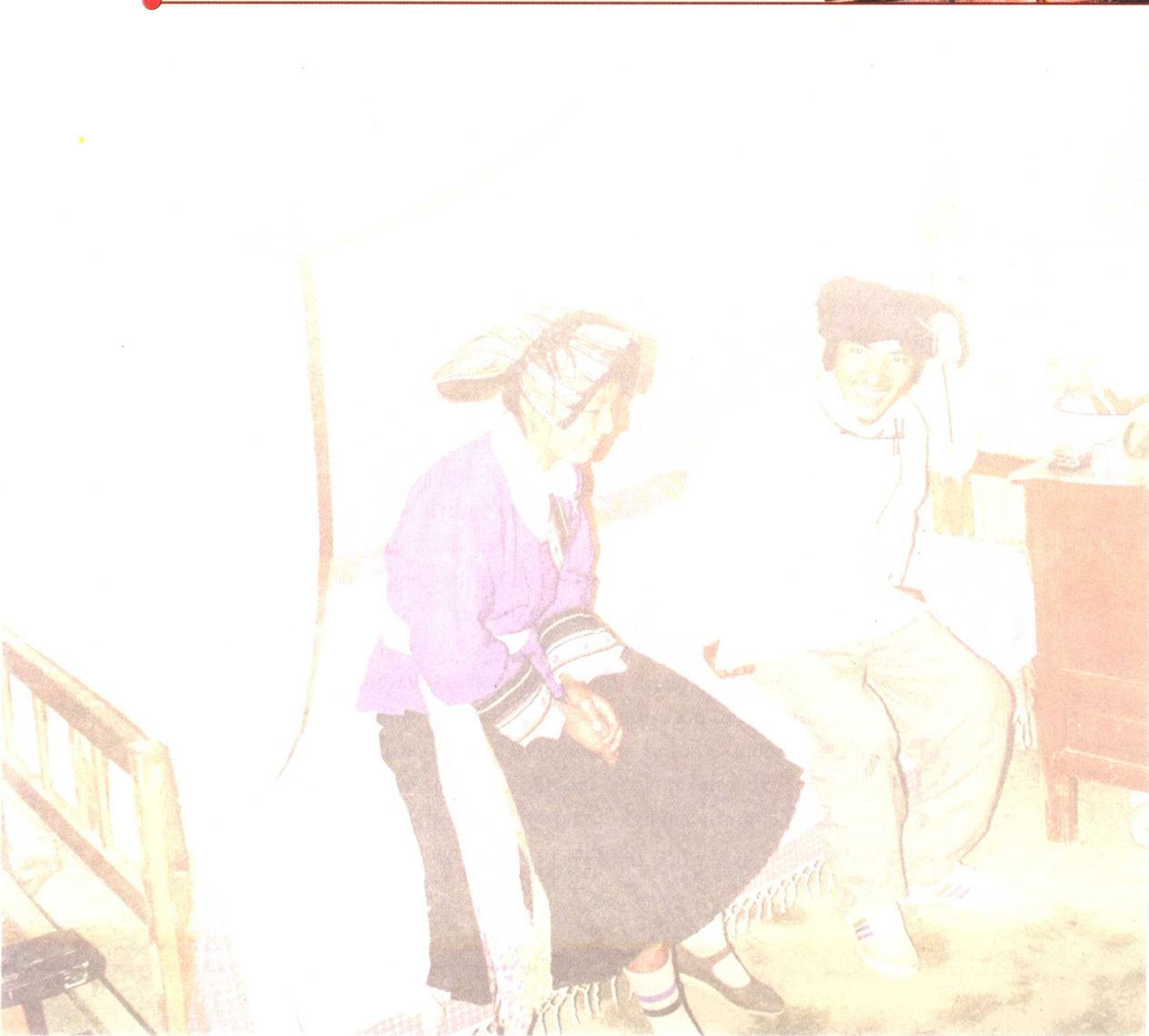
Generally speaking, the marriage customs of Chinese ethnic minorities have changed very little in form and substance from what they were centuries ago. The basic content of many customs can be traced back hundreds of years or in some cases even longer. They constitute one of the most vibrant and enduring manifestations of Chinese traditional culture. The durability of these customs is due to a number of factors. Traditionally Chinese ethnic minorities have been self-sufficient agricultural communities thus greatly facilitating and preserving the geographic unity of a particular community. There was therefore less motivation or necessity to engage with the outside world. This is not only true for different ethnic groups but also among different clans of the same ethnic group. For this reason, social change among these ethnic minorities was something that happened extremely slowly. On a politico-historical level, the governments of all Chinese imperial dynasties adopted a two-sided policy of “controlling ethnic groups by playing them off against each” and “ruling the ethnic groups in accordance with their customs”. This exerted a positive and far-reaching influence on the durability and continuity of the traditional culture of the respective ethnic groups. Since the foundation of the PRC, Chinese society has witnessed enormous change. However, because of the implementation of central government’s policy of regional ethnic self-government in areas where ethnic minorities predominate, these people have been granted the freedom to preserve and develop their own respective cultures. This has been a crucially important factor in the preservation of ethnic traditional culture. At the same time, because of the way in which the Chinese economy and society have developed, the ethnic groups have come to

be concentrated in the western areas of the country. The degree of industrialization, urbanization, and education is relatively low among ethnic groups. Over 80 percent still live in rural areas, all of which also contributes towards the strong social foundations of Chinese ethnic traditional culture.

Change may indeed have come slowly on the whole; but it has occurred nevertheless. After the foundation of the PRC, especially after the implementation of the reform and opening up policy in 1978, traditional and modern features have become intermingled among ethnic customs, evidenced in areas such as social intercourse before marriage, the scope and style of choosing a mate, the making of engagements, the rites of weddings, issues like separation and remarriage etc. Of them, the fastest, greatest, and deepest changes have taken place among ethnic minorities who have migrated to cities in central and eastern areas of China; to a lesser degree people living in large or medium-sized cities or suburbs in the west of the country have also been affected as indeed have groups that live and work in the communities of the towns where ethnic minorities still live in relative seclusion. No group has remained untouched by the modern world. In the vast rural and pastoral areas, some changes have undoubtedly taken place but life mostly is still lived much as it has been for generations. Unsurprisingly, the remoter the area, the purer the marriage customs.

The book seeks to introduce some of the typical marriage customs of ethnic minorities as well as some that still prevail in the vast rural and pastoral areas.

**THE CUSTOMS OF SOCIAL
INTERCOURSES BEFORE
CHAPTER I MARRIAGE**



I. Coming of Age

Usually among all Chinese ethnic groups, marriage is the preserve of adults. However for different ethnic groups, their understanding of “being an adult” and the customs that are observed based on that understanding varies. Some ethnic minorities celebrate a “coming of age” ritual: whenever a young person comes of age, his/her parents or the community he/she lives in will mark the occasion; then in a real sense he/she is an adult and can thus enjoy all the rights of adults, such as courting the opposite sex and even getting married. Before we look into the actual details of marriage customs it is therefore instructive to investigate some of these coming of age rituals.

For the Moso people (a clan of the Naxi ethnic group) who live in Yongning County in Yunnan Province, if you are less than thirteen years old you are not seen as a formal member of society; you would be considered to have no soul if you were unfortunate enough to die. So the age of thirteen is an important turning point in one's life. Every first day of the first lunar month, the families with children who are about to turn thirteen hold, either individually or collectively, a coming of age ceremony. The ceremony involves rituals to honor ancestors and the changing of clothes. Children change out of their flaxen sleeveless jackets; the boys put on a hat, gown and trousers while girls wear a wrap and a pleated skirt. These important symbolic rites are rather prosaically referred to as “putting on trousers” and “putting on the pleated skirt” respectively. With these ceremonies the youngsters officially enter society, joining the ranks of adults. It is at this time that they begin to have contact and social intercourse with friends of the opposite sex.

When the girls of the Blang ethnic group reach the age of twelve or thirteen (for boys it is fifteen or sixteen), they become adults. Parents give them special gifts to mark this special occasion, such as a set of new clothes, a little bamboo basket, a little bamboo stool or an iron plate of a pot used to dye teeth for the girls. For the boys the presents can include a long broadsword, a piece of felt, a wallet, and, if the family happens to be well off, a silver or bronze casket used to hold areca, tobacco or lime. In order to attract members of the opposite sex,

the girls start to learn to dress and use make up, and to sing love songs. The boys also learn to play the trichord. When all preparations have been completed, great festivities are organized to celebrate the youngsters' passing from childhood to adulthood. On the appointed night a family gathering is held, in which the young people sit around the fire pot, chatting away while dying the teeth of the opposite sex dark with the soot from the iron plate heated by the burning branches of the rambutan trees. Awakening to the first feelings of love and desire, these boys and girls because they are now officially adults can enjoy the freedom of associating with the opposite sex.

The boys of the Jino ethnic group who are about to become adults undergo a baptism to mark their coming of age. When a boy reaches the age of fifteen or sixteen, the whole village choose a day when one family is moving to a new home to celebrate the boy's coming of age. On this day, several of the village lads arrange to lay an ambush for the boy around his home or beside the road he usually takes. When he approaches, they rush forward, grab him and bring him to the porch of the new house where the village people are drinking together. The village leader gives him three pieces of beef wrapped up in banana leaves; the others who come to join the celebrations toast him one after another; and the elders offer him the benefit of their wisdom and experience, hoping to imbue him with the character necessary to become a good and useful member of the adult community. The next day the boy's parents give him a set of tools, indicating that he has become a workman in a real sense. At the same time they present him with a new suit of clothes, a scarf, a piece of cloth used for wrapping around the legs, an embroidered purse and a special bronze or bamboo casket used for storing areca and lime. By contrast, a girl's coming of age conventions are relatively straightforward. As long as the community of young females accepts her as a member or invites her to participate in the social activities where girls can make the acquaintance of members of the opposite sex, she is seen to be 'of age'. Generally, female adults wear their hair in a single braid and put on bright-colored costumes. They also receive a set of tools appropriate for females and a new set of new clothes so they can look their best on this most important occasions.

The Yao people are greatly influenced by Taoism. When coming of age, the young men of the Yao invite a holy man to hold a grand ceremony called

"Dujie" for them. Dujie is effectively a ceremony to recruit followers. Dujie is seen not only as a necessary step in the young men's growth and development but also as a basic condition of their soul's going to heaven. When a boy is between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, his parents arrange this kind of ceremony for him. The celebrations usually take place during the season when grain is abundant and the people have plenty of spare time. The ceremonies can last for as long as seven days and nights; and can be held either for an individual or collectively. During the rite, the young adults fast, and endure a series of challenging, sometimes dangerous, tests, such as climbing a knife-ladder, and jumping down from the "cloud platform".

In addition, those undergoing these trials must consult with an elder about the religious and traditional knowledge of the ethnic group. After the rites have been observed, the young people are officially recognized as adults. Association with the opposite sex is thus at this time socially sanctioned.

However, many other ethnic groups or clans don't observe any coming of age ceremonies. Unmarried young people of some ethnic groups enjoy pretty much unrestricted freedom of social intercourse. When boys reach the age of fifteen and girls the age of thirteen or fourteen, they can have social contact with the opposite sex. To be sure, if the parents feel their children are not yet ready even if they are old enough, they can take measures to protect them, especially girls. For example, among the Miao and Dong peoples living in the southeast part of Guizhou and the northern part of Guangxi, parents will turn away a visiting boy who wishes to spend time with their daughter, if they consider her not yet mature enough for such contact. On the other hand, if they believe their children to be sufficiently mature, they encourage them to engage in various social activities. The young people who are shy in associating with the opposite sex will be not only admonished by their parents but will also be mocked by other members of the community.

II. Social Intercourse Before Marriage

Social activities engaged in by unmarried couples among ethnic minorities in China are numerous and various. Such activities are known by a plethora of local names. The courting and wooing that takes place between members of the opposite sex during the slack farming season, is called “Xingge Zuoyue” (literally, “Going singing and sitting under the moon”) by the Dong ethnic group; “Youfang” (“Strolling about in the field”) in the north of Guangxi and the southeast of Guizhou, “Tiaoyue” or “Caiyue” (“Dancing under the moon”) in Yunnan and northwest Guizhou, “Hui Guniang” (“Dating girls”) in western Hunan, by the Miao; “Zoupo” by the Mulam, “Langxiao” by the Bouyei, “Tiaoge” by the Yi, “Fangliao” by the Li, “Wanbiao” by the Baiku Yao (a clan of the Yao ethnic minority), “Going Upstairs” by the Chashan Yao (another clan of the Yao), and the “Flower Fair” by the Baonan, Dongxiang, Salar, and Hui ethnic groups.

These courting activities, generally speaking, involve the young man making a date with the young lady. This usually takes place in the girl’s home or in the gardens or woods near the village. For this reason these activities are known by the general term, “Visiting the girl”. Throughout the year, young men will pay special attention to the families with unmarried girls of a similar age to themselves; they will note the character and looks of the girl; as well as the situation and status of her family. If “visiting the girl” in other villages, the boys firstly consult their relatives and friends, seeking details of the girl’s family. Initially the visits often take place in groups: a group of young men visiting a group of young women. The girl receives the visitors either singly or collectively in the company of some of her sisters, cousins or good friends. If the couple hit it off, the boy will pay more visits to the girl and stay for longer periods of time at the girl’s home. Their words will with the passing days become more and more intimate until at last they declare to each other their desire to love each other for a lifetime. They express their devotion by singing sweet and affectionate folk and traditional songs, including some improvised

compositions. The process is all under the supervision of the girl's parents. When lads visit, the parents retreat to another room to "have a rest" and give the prospective lovers some privacy. However as the couple no doubt are aware even walls have ears! If anything improper were to take place, the parents can return from their "rest" very quickly indeed. If the parents approve of the lad but their girl is unimpressed, they will constantly nag the daughter to entertain the guest, to make sure he receives full hospitality.

Group activity is very important among the young people of the De'ang ethnic group. According to tradition, the young boys and girls who reach the age of fourteen are entitled to take part in social activities and join the association of young people of their own village. A young man and a woman are respectively selected as the heads of the two associations. They are considered to be prominent people either in appearance or in ability, and are usually those judged best suited to take some part in public affairs. Their main responsibility is to organize and oversee the social activities in which unmarried lads and girls can meet and interact. Such occasions include religious ceremonies, festivals, wedding and funeral ceremonies. The place where the young people assemble is decided by the head. Usually this means the village hall or other public space. Once any of the two heads gets married, another young person will be chosen to replace him/her. Public festivals or weddings are seen by unmarried members of the De'ang community as excellent opportunities for social intercourse and meeting members of the opposite sex. Antiphonal songs are sung and the magic of wooing begins. If a lad takes a fancy to a girl, he will go to the girl's bamboo building in the still of night, carrying his gourd pipe or mouth organ. Then he will call the girl with his melodious tones and soft songs. If the girl is touched by such declarations of interest, she will get up, kindle the fire, boil a cup of tea and open the gate to invite the lad in to chat with her around the fire pot. She pours tea and hands him cigarettes. On seeing this scene, the other family members just go into their bedrooms, giving the young people the space and privacy to whisper their sweet words of love.

For some ethnic groups, there are certain places where unmarried men and women can meet and interact socially, such as the "Public Hall" of the Axi tribe of the Yi ethnic group in Yunnan Province and the "Liao House" of the Li people in Hainan Province. The "Public Halls" of the Axi tribe are usually

located on the central square of the village. The “Public Halls” for lads are called “Amuli Nuoyide” while those for the girls are known as “Chuli Nuoyide”. The “Amuli Nuoyide” is located opposite the “Chuli Nuoyide”. After dinner, the lads and girls all gather in their respective “Nuoyides”, chatting and having fun. At night, the lads go together to another village to date girls there; meanwhile the girls of the village eagerly await the visit of lads from another village in their “Chuli Nuoyide”.

Some ethnic groups set up some simple meeting or recreation places for young people coming of age to give them a place where they can interact and get to know one another. Examples include the “Yao E” of the Nu people and the “Nuomaxige” of the Talu tribe of the Yi ethnic group. In the villages of Gongshan and Fugong of Yunnan Province, one can still see such special buildings. After the young people of the Nu come to the age where contact with the opposite sex can begin, they, like all peoples all over the world, gradually identify the boy or girl they like and relationships are established. Such couples are then regarded as a “sleeping pair”. This means that this particular young man and woman stay with each other, sleeping fully clothed all through the night after the evening celebrations involving numerous relatives and friends. “Sleeping pairs” are forbidden to have sex. Falling pregnant before marriage is severely frowned upon by social convention. Thus sleeping together is seen as the next step to, and an intensification of, the initial courtship phase of the relationship. No matter whether the couple eventually marry or not, it’s a proud emotional experience for both man and woman to have such a sleeping companion. Those who lack a companion are seen as somehow deficient, and are typically looked down upon.

Activities held during public festivals are other significant occasions when young people of these ethnic groups can show and express their feelings for members of the opposite sex; for example the Lusheng & Caitang of the Miao, the “Tossing Embroidered Balls” of the Zhuang, the “Pitching Patterned Purses” of the Dai and the Yao, the Horse Racing of the Mongolian and Tibetan peoples, the New Year “Girls Chasing After Boys” of the Kazak and the Kirgiz. Although all members of the community, man and women, young and old, participate in these activities, undoubtedly unmarried young people play the leading roles.

The Miao people in the southeast of Guizhou Province celebrate the Lusheng (reed pipe, a musical instrument) & Caitang (a dance) festival during the winter rest time, often during the Miao New Year. They usually choose some open place like the village square or terraced field or mountainside where tens of thousands of people can congregate. When the caitang is being danced, young men in the center of the congregation play the lusheng, while girls in richly decorated costume dance elegantly around. At first, the people of the same village form a ring; and as the performance reaches a climax, the lusheng players from all the participating villages will converge; and the girls, form more than ten circles around the musicians. These circles can consist of hundreds of or even over a thousand people. This is a spectacular scene featuring floating banners, shining silver decorations, and the sweet melodies of the lusheng. On such festive occasions, the girls put on beautiful costumes and wear pendants that show off their delicate handiwork while the lads concentrate on producing the most wondrous and passionate notes from their lusheng. The young people who are reaching puberty scan the crowd seeking a special somebody who can set their hearts a-flutter. At the same time, all enjoy the charming spectacle with parents paying particular attention to identifying an appropriate partner for their own offspring. When the festivities end, the lad seeks out the address of the lady who has captured his heart. At night, in company of several of his good friends he will go to meet the girl in her home, and explain to her with word and gesture the extent of his passion and ardor. Many marriages and life long unions begin in just this way.

The Kazak and the Kirgiz people, who lead a nomadic life, often hold contests of horsemanship to celebrate their courage and skill during their festivals. Of them, "Girls Chasing After Boys" is an activity whose purpose is to allow young people to express their feelings of love to members of the opposite sex. The race proceeds between a lad and a girl. Each time they go to the race ground together and return home afterwards. The couple is usually two who have known each other for some time and are fond of each other, but it can also be two strangers who have not met before. When the race begins, the lad rides neck and neck with the girl and spontaneously offers to talk with her, sometimes amusing her and sometimes expressing his love, but never with any coarseness or impoliteness — that would be very much frowned upon. As