

Historical Origins and Festive Activities of the Westward Migration Festival of the Sibe Tribe in China

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Abstract: The Sibe people, an ancient ethnic group in China, accomplished the historical feat of moving westward to Xinjiang to settle and garrison the border in the Qianlong period, making important contributions to the defense and construction of China's western frontier. The Westward Migration Festival is the carrier of the historical memory of the westward migration of the Sibe people, which embodies the ethnic cultural characteristics of the Sibe people, inherits the spirit of westward migration, and has an important value and role in the construction of the sense of community of the Chinese ethnic in the western frontier region. This paper collects and organizes the research results related to the history and culture of the westward migration of the Sibe people, and summarizes the historical origin and ceremonial activities of the Westward Migration Festival to provide reference for further research work in the future.

Keywords: Sibe people of China; Westward Migration Festival; Festival; Historical origin

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1. Historical origin of the Westward Migration Festival

On the 18th day of the fourth lunar month in the 29th year of Qianlong's reign (1764), the Qing government selected more than a thousand elite soldiers from the Sibe people, together with more than 4,000 family members, led by Manchu officials, and moved westward to the Yili area of Xinjiang for reclamation and garrisoning. After an arduous journey of one year and five months, they arrived in Qapqal County, Xinjiang, established the Sibe Battalion, and assumed the task of garrisoning the more than 2,000-mile border between Kashgar in southern Xinjiang and Talba Hantai in northern Xinjiang. From then on, the 18th day of the fourth lunar month became the anniversary of the Sibe people's migration to the West to guard the border. This folk festival embodies the value and emotional identity of the Sibe people and has a broad public base and influence.

In the mid to late 1950s, due to various historical reasons, the "April 18th Festival" disappeared for a long time. It was not until the 1980s that the festival was reorganized by the cultural elites and publicized by the media that it was able to return to the public's attention. This time, the content of the festival changed a lot. It is

mainly based on recreational and sports activities, with each township preparing programs, and eight townships taking turns to organize ^[1]. It was also during this period that the “April 18th Festival” was renamed Westward Migration Festival. It was also during this period that the “April 18th Festival” was renamed the “Westward Expansion Festival.”

2. Rituals and celebrations of the Westward Migration Festival

In 2006, the Westward Movement Festival was approved by the Chinese State Council to be included in the first batch of the ethnic intangible cultural heritage list, and the content of the festival was re-screened. The government of Xinjiang Qapqal Sibe Autonomous County reconstructed a set of systematic and grand festival contents in 2014, which can be mainly divided into two parts: ceremonies and celebrations. Ceremonies mainly include worship of *Karun*, public worship of Tubet, and so on; while celebrations mainly include *Zhulun Hulanbi*, *Beilun* dance, archery competition, and goat-carrying competition.

2.1. Worship ceremony

2.1.1. Worshipping *Karun*

Karun is a kind of unique defense and management facility of the Qing Dynasty, which can also be understood as a border post ^[2]. During the Qianlong period, *Karun* served as a post for the Sibe people to settle and garrison the borders and fight against invasion, and it played an important role in social security, production, and the construction of border defense. Today, *Karun* no longer assumes the function of military defense and has become a symbol of the Sibe ethnic spirit.

According to the data records, the ceremony of worshipping the *Karun* is carried out according to the following process ^[3]. First, the Sibe people will light 18 smoke signal towers located outside *Karun* in sequence, and then light the 19th smoke signal in the center of *Karun*. This link also heralds the official start of the worship ceremony. Then, the leader and the eight *Bolida* (archery instructors) began to perform the eight flag and sword raising ceremony and directed the Qianyong army sacrificial team composed of 1,020 people dressed in Qing soldier uniforms. Each person fires three volleys into the sky. The 1,020-person Qianyong sacrificial team represents the 1,020 Sibe officers and soldiers who moved west from Shengjing to Ili, Xinjiang on the 18th day of the fourth lunar month in the 29th year of Qianlong’s reign (1764). The arrows fired into the sky expressed the determination of the 190,000 compatriots of all ethnic groups in Qapqal County to continue to cultivate and guard the border and move toward glory with the motherland. Finally, 8 representatives of model workers and advanced figures toasted to their ancestors, kowtowed, and paid tribute to them, remembering the achievements of their forefathers. At that time, people of various ethnicities, such as Sibe and Han Chinese, Kazakhs, Uyghurs, Hui, and so on, stood quietly in front of the *Karun*, remembering the history together and paying tribute to history.

2.1.2 Public ceremony for Tubet

Tubet is an outstanding leader of the Sibe people. When he served as governor of the Sibe camp, he personally led the soldiers to fight to solve the local Xinjiang “land pass, no field, no water” and other issues, and finally, after seven years, the Qapqal Canal was completed, allowing bountiful crop harvest year after year, thus the lives of the Sibe soldiers and people have improved greatly. Tubet died in the third year of Daoguang reign of the Qing Dynasty (1823) at the age of 69. Later, to commemorate Tubet’s historical achievements in opening canals and reclaiming wasteland, the Sibe people held a public memorial ceremony every year at the Westward Migration Festival.

The ceremony is generally divided into eight sessions^[4]. In the first session, the regional leaders recite the “Offerings to Tu Gong Wen” to express their admiration for Tu Gong; in the second session, all the people stand in silence for 19 seconds to symbolize the “190,000” ethnic groups in Qapqal County and “190,000” Sibe people at home and abroad, symbolizing the remembrance of Tubet by all the Sibe people and people of all ethnic groups; in the third session, three representatives of the water conservancy workers ring the bell seven times, corresponding to the 7 years spent on the construction of the Qapqal canal, symbolizing the hardships and difficulties of building the Qapqal canal. In the fourth link, 8 respected Sibe elders from 8 Niulu counties in Qapqal County presented flower baskets, sending the message to young people to inherit the spirit of Tugong; in the fifth session, the 7 representatives of the masses offered incense, and 7 representatives from all walks of life toasted to express their admiration for the Tubet; in the sixth session, all people bowed three times to Tubet to pay sincere tribute; in the seventh session, students of various ethnic groups, dressed in ethnic costumes, recited “Tu Gong Song” in both Sibe and Chinese languages, symbolizing the unity of all ethnic groups, mutual assistance, and harmony; in the eighth session, eight *Nulu* drummers hit the drum 69 times, symbolizing that Tubet died at the age of 69 years, to strengthen the memory of the Tubet and express the Qapqal people of all ethnic groups will always remember the great achievements of Tubet.

2.2. Celebrations

2.2.1. *Zhulun Hulanbi*

Zhulun Hulanbi refers to the folk art form of reciting and chanting in a certain tone or the Sibe language, which is similar to traditional Chinese storytelling art^[5]. After the Sibe people moved westward to Xinjiang in 1764, literati and artists translated and copied a large number of Chinese articles and romance novels in Sibe, and spread them in the form of *Zhulun Hulanbi*. Since then, novels such as “Romance of the Three Kingdoms”, “Water Margin”, and “Legend of Yue Fei” have gradually become the mainstay of Sibe storytelling in Xinjiang, and this tradition has continued.

On the day of the Westward Migration Festival, “people sit in a circle and listen to folk artists reciting literature such as Water Margin and Romance of the Three Kingdoms in Sibe, and also discussing how the ancestors migrated westward, talking about heroic figures and legendary stories^[6]. This art form, which is sung and recited by one person and shared by many people, has greatly expanded the audience and influence, and almost all the Sibe people living in the Qapqal region of Xinjiang know the stories of Chinese heroes and legends as well as the deeds of important heroes of the nation, and at the same time popularize the ideas of loyalty, filial piety, courtesy, and righteousness, which not only widely spread the traditional culture of the Chinese ethnic, but also greatly enhances the cohesion of the ethnic group.

2.2.2. *Beilun* dance

After the Sibe people moved westward to Ili, Xinjiang, both the ecological environment, production methods, and folk customs changed greatly, and their *Beilun* dance also incorporated their understanding of the new life and formed new cultural characteristics. For example, the natural environment of the Xinjiang border is very cold, so they need to drink wine to keep warm, and gradually form the unique wine culture of the Sibe people. This provided new content, atmosphere, and performance environment for the *Beilun* dance, resulting in the *Sokto Fire Beilun* (also known as the Drunken Dance), which depicts the process of the dancers’ drunkenness from drinking wine, getting slightly drunk, and getting drunk until they fall. Another example is the Salute Dance in the *Beilun* dance, which is mainly based on bowing, shrugging shoulders, bending knees, and other Xinjiang Uygur dance movements to show respect for the elders, and the music is also borrowed from the local music and art of Xinjiang, and even the performers’ facial expressions and mannerisms are very similar to those

of the Xinjiang ethnic groups, showing the characteristics of Xinjiang's customs.

During the Westward Migration Festival, the Sibe people in Xinjiang will gather in a circle and start dancing the *Beilun* dance to the accompaniment of instruments such as the *Dongbu*, flute, *Mandalin*, and others. At the same time, the Uyghur and Kazakh people also participate in the dance, bringing the joyful atmosphere to a climax. The *Beilun* dance not only inherits the *Beilun* dance culture of the Sibe ethnic group but also embodies the value and significance of the Westward Migration Festival as a modern ethnic festival that keeps pace with the times and is inclusive.

2.2.3. Archery competition

The Sibe people are an ethnic group that is good at archery. In 1764, the Sibe soldiers and civilians moved westward to Xinjiang to garrison the border and cultivate the land, and the bow and arrow became the most important weapon for guarding the country's gates with arrows. The significance of the bow and arrow for the Sibe people in Xinjiang has also risen from an ethnic habit to a level of patriotic education. The Sibe people regard it as an honor to serve the country by joining the army and regard excellent archery skills as a sign of manhood. According to records, Sibe boys will start practicing archery at the age of seven or eight ^[7]. After practicing until the age of 18, and they are skilled in archery, they will serve in the army with bows and arrows to guard the border. Under the cultivation of patriotism, the Sibe people closely linked the bow and arrow practice with the duty of reclamation and garrisoning and accomplished the sacred mission entrusted by the country.

With the change of time, the Sibe bow and arrow gradually withdrew from the military stage and became active as a competitive program among the people. During the Westward Migration Festival, the Sibe people will gather to hold archery competitions. From the process of the competition, each *Niulu* needs to select the winner through internal competition first, and then the winner will represent their *Niulu* to participate in the archery competition between the other *Niulu*. Before the start of the competition, the home team will warmly welcome the visiting team at the entrance of the village street, and then together they will worship *Guanggong*, praying for the success of the competition. When the match officially starts, the host team will allow the guest team to shoot arrows first. After the match is won or lost, the losing team will line up and beat gongs and drums, and play *Dongbuer*. In this solemn atmosphere, a large red silk is given to the winner as a reward to express congratulations to the winner and encouragement to all participants. As for the competition, they are divided into three teams: the old, young, and in-between, the distance can be long or short, and the competition has a standing shot, running shot, kneeling shot, riding shot, and other forms, with strict rules. On the day of the competition, people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang will come to watch, and the field is crowded with people, bustling with excitement, and the bow and arrow culture and patriotism of the Sibe people are also inherited in the course of this activity.

2.2.4 Goat-carrying competition

Goat-carrying on horseback is the traditional competitive sport of the Xinjiang ethnic group. After the Sibe people moved westward to Xinjiang, in the cultural exchanges with various ethnicities in Xinjiang, they were slowly influenced by the nomadic culture, so large-scale goat-carrying competitions were held at every festival. After the Westward Migration Festival was included in the first batch of the ethnic intangible cultural heritage list, the goat-carrying competition was also included in the festival content.

The goat-carrying competitions are usually held between two tribes or two groups, with the two parties checking each other, and the party that "grips" the sheep and delivers it safely to the designated place is the

winner. Before the start of the race, the goat for competition will be placed in the center of the field. At the start of the race, after the elderly host gives the order, the riders will rush to the goat like an arrow out of the string, fighting fiercely. Eventually, the goat is grabbed and thrown to the door of any of the yurts in Awulei, then the contest will be over. The winner of the race is recognized as a hero or the “bringer of happiness.” Goat-carrying is a competitive event that can cultivate the participants’ bravery, the spirit of solidarity, and cooperation, as well as their character of strength, composure, and resourcefulness. At the same time, it also shows the unity and upward spirit of the Sibe people.

3. Conclusion

The Westward Migration Festival is an ethnic festival commemorating the historical feat of the Sibe people moving westward to Xinjiang to garrison the frontier and was included in the first batch of China’s ethnic intangible cultural heritage list in 2006. Its festivals include the worship of *Karun*, the public ceremony for Tibet, the *Zhulun Hulanbi*, the *Beilun* dance, the archery competition, the goat-carrying competition, and so on. Through the investigation and compilation of the historical origins, rituals and celebrations of the Westward Migration Festival provide reference materials for further exploring the cultural value of the festival in the construction of the Chinese ethnic community in the western border areas of China.

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