

## **A Taste of China in Karabakh**

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Three Chinese cooks enliven life in a small Karabakhi village.

Local people in Karabakh have given them names that are easier to memorise: Juan Jui San turned into Jivan, Juan Go became Gurgen, and Juan Kai Ti was called Anna.

The three Chinese cooks are far from home. They have settled in the remote territory in the South Caucasus and not even in the Karabakhi capital Stepanakert but in the northern village of Vank in the Martakert district. And surprisingly, they not only speak the Karabakh Armenian dialect, but have a marked Martakert accent too.

Jivan, 28, and Gurgen and Anna, both 25, work in a Chinese restaurant at the Eklektika Hotel in Vank.

Karabakh's only Chinese residents, they certainly stand out. According to the official census conducted in 2005, the internationally unrecognised Nagorny Karabakh republic has 137,737 inhabitants of whom Armenians make up 99.7 of the population.

The Chinese cooks came to Karabakh on the invitation of the hotel owner, Russian-based businessman and patron Levon Hairapetian who was born in Vank. Hairapetian found them through a friend, an Armenian businessman living in China. The three came on a year's contract but hope to extend their stay in Karabakh.

The Chinese say they had no idea how they would communicate when they arrived

"But within three months we started talking Karabakhi little by little," said Gurgen in the local language.

Karabakh Armenian is very different from the Armenian language spoken in Armenia. The three talk with difficulty but are able to get by in everyday conversation.

Vank, which is also home to the famous medieval church of Gandzasar, is the focus of a regeneration project, mainly thanks to the efforts of Hairapetian and is already far more prosperous than other rural communities in Karabakh. Although it suffered badly in the 1991-4 war, there are very few traces of battle damage left.

A construction boom is underway with hotels, recreation centres, a new school and even a zoo being built. The only disco, open-air cinema and public swimming pool in Karabakh are all located in Vank. There is even a local radio station called Radio Vank.

The village hosts what has now become a celebrated annual event, a donkey race, whose high-profile attendees have included Karabakh-born Armenian president Robert Kocharian.

The Karabakhis have been nicknamed “donkeys” because of their reputation for stubbornness. The locals take pride in the stereotype and there are several statues of donkeys in the village.

This diversity makes it less surprising that Vank is also home to a Chinese restaurant staffed by three Chinese expatriates.

Gurgen reveals to IWPR that he plans to stay because he has found the love of his life here, a 10th-grade high school student from Vank, whose name he declines to reveal in case her parents learn about their love affair which is still a secret. He says he dreams of getting married and staying in Karabakh.

Jivan and Anna are husband and wife, who have left their three-year-old son behind in Guangxi. Jivan says he likes Vank because the locals want to see more children born, not less, unlike his homeland and he and his wife hope to have more children. Every time a baby is born in Vank, Hairapetian presents the family with 500 US dollars.

“It's a pity China is not like that - they prohibit having more than one child there,” he said.

Anna is struck by the way within a short time everyone in the village knew her and said hello. “You’re one of a million in China; even your neighbour does not know you by sight,” she said.

The trio have adapted well. They now drink the famous local tutovka mulberry vodka and know how to propose toasts and play backgammon.

They did not want to talk about politics and seemed to know little about the unresolved Nagorny Karabakh conflict.

Some of the locals are delighted that the three foreigners are bringing a taste of another world to remote Karabakh.

Svetlana Lazarian, who has become a close friend of the Chinese, says that the villagers have grown fond of them and that they are confounding expectations.

“Once Jivan went to a market in Stepanakert to buy some food,” she said with a laugh. “The shop assistant thought he was a tourist, wrote the total price, 6,700 Armenian drams on a piece of paper and handed it to Jivan. Jivan looked at the paper and read out loud the sum in Armenian. That scared the shop assistant a lot - a Chinese speaking in Karabakh Armenian!”

Tourists at the hotel witnessed our conversation and were interested in hearing the Chinese speak the Karabakh Armenian dialect. They have become minor celebrities for that reason.

“But we have not come to Vank to amuse people, we’ve come to establish Chinese cuisine here. Of course, sometimes we are not able to find the food here,” said Jivan, registering a small complaint about living in such a far-away spot

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