

The Achang Ethnic Group



The Achangs believe in Hinayana (Little Vehicle Buddhism). In the classics of Buddhism the white elephant represents the Buddha, symbolizing good luck. There was a folk tale of how the white elephant was born and brought good luck to the people. And the one-hundred-elephant dance is very popular among the people, meaning that the white elephants bring good luck and happiness to the people. The image of a white elephant carrying a pavilion on its back and the flowers cast by the crowd stands for prosperity, luck, peace and quietness.

The population and the environment

There are 33 936 Achangs in China, who live in Yunnan Province, to be specific, in the Husa Township, Longchuan County as well as the Nangsong Township and Jiubao Township, Langhe County of the Dehong Dai-Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture. In order to fulfill the Achangs' right to be the masters of their own affairs, the Chinese government approved these three townships as ethnic autonomous township in 1988.

The Achang inhabit in the intersection areas between mountains and plains in west Yunnan province, which is also known as "Half Mountain Areas". The climate is a typical Southern Sub-tropical monsoon, mild and rainy. There is a rich resource of plants and animals. The fields there are fit for irrigating, producing mainly rice, corn and potato. In recent 20 years, the Achang along the Lianghe River have been growing sugar canes and tea, which have now taken some scale.



The ethnic origin and history

The Achang originated from the ancient Di-Qiang people, very close to the "Xun Chuan Man" in the time of Nanzhao and Dai Kingdom. The Achangs' ancestors once lived in the Jinsha, Lancang and Nijiang river valleys in northwestern Yunnan. Some of them moved west of Nujiang River, where they settled down on the Husa Plain in Longchuan; and another group moved along Yunlong, Baoshan, Tengchong, and finally settled down at Lianghe areas.

The ethnic names and manguage

The Achang living in different areas have different names for themselves. Those living in Husa call themselves “Mengsa”, “Mengsachan”, “Daisa”; and those in Lianghe “Hansa”, “Echang”. The history books written in Chinese in Yuan Dynasty began to use the term “Achang”(also written as “Echang”) to Refer to the Achangs’ ancestors, and this term was gradually fixed, which proves that the ethnic characteristics of the Achangs basically took shape in Yuan Dynasty. After the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, according to the will of the Achang people, “the Achang” was recognized as the general name of this group.

The Achangs do not have their own written language; instead they all use Mandarin. The Achang language, undefined in terms of Language Branch, belongs to the Tibetan-Burmese Language Group, Chinese-Tibetan Language Family. There are three different dialects such as Longchuan, Lianghe, and Luxi. There is little difference in grammar among the dialects, but much difference in pronunciation and vocabulary makes it difficult for oral communication. The Achang also speak Thai language and Mandarin, and they turn to Mandarin or Dai language when communicating between dialects or with other ethnic groups.

The featured housing—Wooden-and-adobe built quadrangle

Principal rooms and two rows plus a screen wall make a typical Achang “Quadrangle”. Principal rooms normally have three rooms, with the middle one having inside it a fireplace and a shrine. Normally having no doors, this room is where people dine, get warm, and entertain guests and even offer sacrifices to ancestors. On the left are the bedroom of the senior people, and the youngsters’ on the right side. The upstairs of the wing rooms are either bedrooms or for stocks, and the rooms below are usually for raising domestic animals and fowls. All the houses are mainly built with wood and adobe, all the walls formed by adobe, and the roof with tiles, girders and pillars with wood, inner wall with wooden plates.



The costumes and ornaments—Favor on blue, white and black

Traditionally, the Achang men like wearing blue, white or black jackets with buttons down the front, wide black trousers. Unmarried young men often wear white scarves, the married black scarves. They would normally take a self-weaved bag called “Tongpa” and an Achang knife. Unmarried women wear white or bluish dark colored jackets with buttons down the front and trousers, and some women in Husa area also like tying an apron around their waists. Married women usually wear narrow long-sleeved coat and black knee-deep pail form skirts,

puttees, and black or blue scarves. Married Achang women in the Lianghe area have special headgears-some of the black scarves they wear are as high as 30cms. And they also dye teeth by chewing betel nuts, wear silver necklace and earrings.

The dietetic features—“Guo Shou Rice Noodle”

The Achangs feed on rice, with pork, chicken, fish and several types of vegetable and fruits as usual food. They like sour and spicy-flavored food, especially the dried pickles. They brew rice wine for house consumption or entertaining guests. Tea is the most common drink, which is mainly self-produced.

“Guo Shou Rice Noodle” is the featuring delicacy of the Achang in Husa. It is made of the local-grown soft rice, delicious, soft yet very tenacious. It is seasoned by baked ground pork mixed with vinegar, garlic and ginger paste, roasted ground peanuts and cooked ground peas. It is also has a unique way to eat. First, wash your hands; and use chopsticks to get some rice noodles on your palm, then put the seasonings on to the rice noodles, roll the rice noodles to wrap the seasoning. Now put it in your mouth and enjoy it. That is why it is called “Guo Shou”.

The songs and dances—“Wo Luo” and “Deng Wo Luo”

“The Achang are singing whenever they are not crying”. The Achangs have a very rich variety of folk songs and for different occasions they have the proper type of music that goes with it. “Wo Luo” is the traditional type of music, which is named so because there always is a verse “woluo” at the beginning of each stanza. It has a clear and strong beat, goes well with dances.

“Deng Wo Luo” is the kind of dance that combines singing and dancing. It is held on almost every festival. They set up a “Wo Luo Platform”, and they follow a leading dancer called “Shangan” circling around the “Wo Luo Platform”, dancing and singing. “Deng Wo Luo” has a complete system of dancing steps and gestures, such as “Two Phoenixes Heading East”, “Two Dragons Walking”, “The Sun Holding Umbrella”, “The Moon Wearing Hat”, “Golden Dragon Rotating Lanterns”. All the dancing steps come from the imitation of animals’ gestures, simple with clear rhythm. It can be repeated over and over throughout the whole night.

The religion—Hinayana (Little Vehicle) and Animism

The Achang’s religions are quite complicated. The Longchuan Achangs mainly believe in Hinayana (Little Vehicle Buddhism), with the co-existence of Mahayana (Big Vehicle Buddhism), Taoism, and animism. Every village has its own Buddhism temple, but most of them have no monks, neither do they have any fixed rules on becoming monks. Every lunar Mid-July through Mid-October is the “Jin Wa” (Close Door Festival) and “Chu Wa” (Open Door Festival). During this period, there are many religious activities and stricter

taboos. The Lianghe Achangs has a relatively simpler religion, with animism as the dominant religion and Taoism as one element. There used to be temples and “Sai”(god) in villages to worship ghosts and spirits, and to offer sacrifices three times a year.

The festivals and customs—“Wo Luo” festival

Apart from some festivals that they share in common with the Han People, such as, Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival and Moon Festival. The Achangs also have its own traditional festival. The Husa Achangs celebrate festivals on a more frequent basis. They have “Gan Bai Festival”, “Water Sprinkling Festival”, “Jin Wa Festival”, “Chu Wa Festival”, “Watering Flowers Festival”, etc., which all have something to do with Little Vehicle Buddhism. “Wo Luo” festival, celebrated on every Lunar January 4th, is the most important one. A Wo Luo Platform is set up on the Wo Luo ground before the festival. On that day, the Achangs assemble on the Wo Luo ground. They listen to senior singers singing the great achievements by Zhepama and Zhemima, the ancient ancestors of the Achangs; then they join the Wo Luo Dance circling around the Wo Luo Platform, with many other activities going on at the same time, like antiphonal songs, “Lighting up the Spring Lanterns” and “Achang Knife Dance”, etc.

The ethnic handicraft—Husa knife

Husa area represents the most outstanding achievements in handicraft. The paintings and sculptures for architectural decoration are vivid and living; the images of the Twelve Animals on knives, and the decorations on the knife scabbards are extremely marvelous and lifelike. Husa knives are very well known handicrafts



that have a 600-year history. The products range from sabers, choppers, broadswords, daggers and swords, very much popular among the Achangs, the Jingpos and the Dais.