

The Bai Ethnic Group



Dali, where the Bai people inhabited, is well known in the world for the three pagodas at the Chongsheng Temple and beautiful butterflies in the Butterfly Spring. The Chongsheng Temple, built during the Tang Dynasty, is the representation of mixture of Bai culture and Buddhism. Butterfly, frequently used as a decoration design in the traditional architecture, dressing and crafts, along with the legend of the Butterfly Spring, is a symbol of beauty and kindness. The whole design symbolizes that the Bai people have a long history and bright future and

they have temperament of industry, fairness and goodness.

The environment and population distribution

Of the 1,858,063 Bai people, 80 per cent live in concentrated communities in the Dali Bai autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province, southwest China. The rest are scattered in both sides of Nujiang River, Lancang River, and Xichang in Sichuan province, Bijie in Guizhou province and Sangzhi in Hunan Province respectively.

Situated in the northwest part of the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, Dali areas have the monsoon climate of low-latitude plateau so that four seasons of the year are all like a spring. Dali is also well known for hometown of golden flowers because of the film ‘The Five Golden Flowers’, where there is Mt. Diancang with snow all year round, Lake Erhai in endless waves, Dali ancient city that has experienced great changes in the world, the three pagodas with superb workmanships excelling nature and the Butterfly Spring in the beautiful legend. “The wind down the pass, the flower up the pass, the snow in Mt. Diancang, the moon in the Lake Erhai” is a real portraiture of the poetic sightseeing in Dali areas.

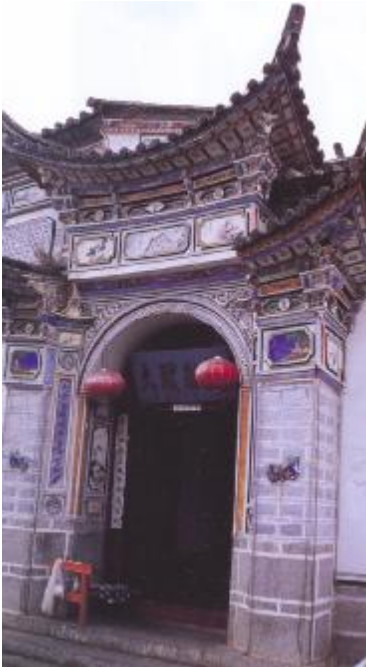
The historical origin

The forefathers of the Bais had a close relation with the ancient Qiang people. They moved around the Dianchi and Erhai areas in Yunnan as early as the Neolithic Age and Bronze Age. The historical materials of the Han Dynasty show that the Bais were called Dianbo (Bo of Yunnan), Kunming in Han Dynasty, Soren in the period of the Three Kingdoms and the Jin Dynasty, Baiman in the Tang and Song Dynasty, Bairen in the Yuan Dynasty, Minjia after the Ming and Qing Dynasty. In the Tang Dynasty, the Bais and the forefathers of Yi established the Nanzhao regime of the Yis and Bais that rule the region for 250 years. In the Song Dynasty the Kingdom of Dali was established, during which period, the Bai Community was formed officially.

The ethnic branch and language

The Bais call themselves Baizi, Baina, Baihuo, meaning Bai people. They have about sixty other names. For instance, the Han people call the Bais in Dali areas Minjia and the Lisu people call the Bais in Nujiang areas Nama, while Naxi people call the Bais in Lancang River areas Lemo. Minjia, Nama and Lemo are also the names of tree branches of Bais. In 1956 the State Department confirmed that the Bais had the united appellation of the Bai ethnic minority.

The Bais' language belongs to the Tibetan-Myanmese group of the Chinese-Tibetan language family. The language is divided into Dali, Jianchuan and Bijiang dialectal areas. Due to the Bais' close economical and cultural contact with the majority Chinese ethnic group-Han people, about 60% of the vocabulary in colloquialism of the language are borrowed from Chinese language. In the Tang and Song dynasty, the Bais created the ancient language, Bowen, in virtue of Chinese characters. The word-formation is like that of Japanese language. The project to reform the language in Latin characters was designed in 1957 and revised in 1993. At the present it is in the process of tryout.



The characteristics of inhabitation—a pattern of three directions with a screen wall facing the gate of the house

A pattern of three directions with a screen wall facing the gate of the house is the characteristics of architecture art of the Bai people, as represented by the inhabitations in Xizhou county of Dali. Its a courtyard composed of three houses with three rooms and a screen wall facing the gate with bounding wall. The houses are built in a structure of brick and wood, in the middle of which there is the principal room with side rooms on both sides. Facing the principal room there is a screen wall. The gate of the yard is opened on the side of the screen wall, which, together with an arch over the gateway, is built with brick and stone. White wall and black tile look dazzling. And the rich and solid designs made of clay sculpture, woodcarving, colored drawing, stone inscription, marble screen and repousse dark brick look exquisite and elegant.

The dressing characteristics

The Bais are in favor of white color. In the past the men wear white jacket with buttons down the front, black collar coat and dark loose shorts. The women wear white dress, sleeveless jacket of red, blue or black color, embroidered belt, loose trousers, embroidered shoes of white cloth, bracelet and eardrops made of gold or silver. The headgears for the women of different areas are quite different. The bachelor girls in Dali wear a single pigtail on the top of head, while married women roll the hair, Little girls in Jianchuan wear Guding cap, Fish tail cap and Chicken-shaped cap; the married ones roll the hair and pack it with black cloth. Girls in Lujiang wear Yubei on the top of head, on which are sewed several pieces of boulder with pieces of cloth drooping, looking unique.



The dietetic habit—The tea of three courses and fish cooked in sand-boiler

The Bais in the dam areas take rice and wheat as staple food, while those in the mountain areas mainly eat corn and buckwheat. They like flavors of acerbity and peppery as well as flavored mince.

The like drinking tea and are skilled in grilling it. The way of grilling tea is to grill a small galipot and then put some tea in it and wobble it until it emits some flavor before putting some water in it and tasting slowly. The most famous is the tea of three course, of which the first course is bitter strong tea; the second is added walnut meat, popcorn, orange and brown sugar; the third is added honey and Chinese

prickly ash. Every course has different taste, implying the philosophy of life that “bitter te first, sweet the second and aftertaste the third.”

In the menu of the Bais the most well known is the fish cooked in sand-boiler, for which the fish in Erhai is the main material cooked with about 20 flavorings. The fresh flesh and delicious soup have lasting aftertaste. And the Rushan in Eryuan, made of fresh milk fermented, thin as a piece of paper and shaped like a fan, is fragrant, sweet and crisp when fried. It is well known both at home and abroad.



The festivals and customs—the March Fair and “Moving round three temples”

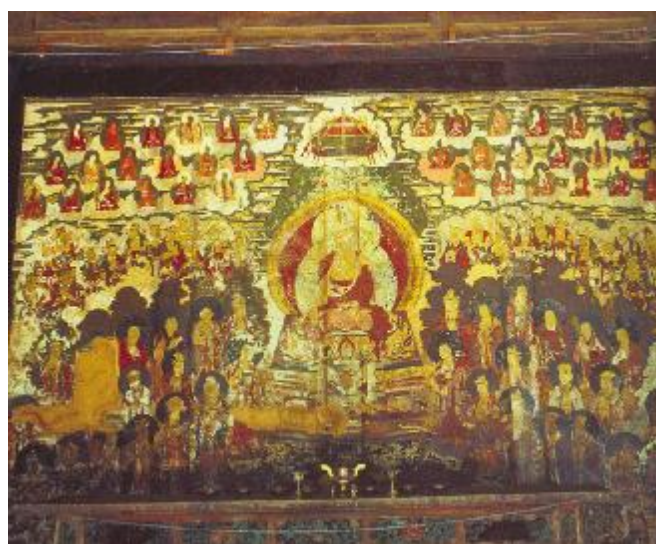
Besides the Spring Festival and other traditional festivals, the Bais have many of their own festivals, such as the march Fair, Torch Festival and “Moving round three temples”. The most ceremonious one is the March Fair, in which People enjoy dances, horse racing and other games, except for the commodity exchanges in large scale.

The March fair was started from the Tang Dynasty on and has never been changed. The folk dance “The overlord’s lash”, a close combination of sports and dance, tempering toughness with softness, is, characteristically, the central program in the celebration of festivals. From April 23 to 25 of the lunar calendar, the Bais in Erhai areas have the festival of “Moving round three temples”, which is an ancient custom from the Tang Dynasty. Originally a ritual in the religious ceremony, it is now transformed to be an activity for excursion and love talking, in which people blow tree leaves, play a musical instrument with tree lines, sing and dance while walking round three temples. In the past young people could find “jjani” (intimate partner) during the festival period, maintaining some relic that people can indulge for three days. The custom is gradually changed nowadays.

The religious beliefs—worship of the Benzhu wish and multiple worships

The religious beliefs of Bais are complex and multiple. Some people believe in Daoism, Christianity of Catholicism ,but most people believe in the Benzhu Wish and Buddhism. Some others believe in ghosts and gods, koradji and witchcraft. With the spreading of scientific knowledge the phenomena gradually diminish.

The worship of the Benzhu wish is a particular religious belief of Bai people, existing in Tang Dynasty. The Benzhu wish is considered as the guardian of village. Generally speaking one village consecrates one Benzhu and there is also the case that several villages consecrated one Benzhu. The objects of their worships are complex, including nature and heroes who get rid off bullies and bring peace to good people; the famous historical figures



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and common people who are loyal to love. The worship is closely connected with the life of people, forming a particular Benzhu Culture. Any time when there is an important activity they must offer a sacrifice for the Benzhu to be blessed by the divinity. Every year all villages have two temple fairs, one in January of lunar calendar, the other on the birthday or anniversary of the death of the Benzhu. Then the rituals of inviting, offering sacrifice to, and entertaining the Benzhu are held, so are a variety of cultural and sport activities.