

The De'ang Ethnic Group

The De'angs have folk legend of "sun father and green dragon mother". It was said that the sun "simudawashana" and the green dragon and thus take them as the symbolic design of the ethnic group. The pagoda of sun and dragon, which was built in Hunong Township of Longchuan County in Dehong Dai-jingpo Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan, symbolizes the dauntless and courageous spirit and pursuit of brightness and happiness.



The population

De'ang is the name the De'ang people address themselves, in which the former part is the honorific prefix and the latter part means grotto. The name bears the De'ang people's memory of their forefathers' troglodytism as well their respect and commemoration for them.

With a current population of 17 935, the De'ang people in China spread around in Yunnan Province over more than 30 000 square kilometers, mainly in Luxi City and Zhenkang County and with a small number scattered in Ruili city, Yingjiang, Longchuan, Lianghe, Baoshan and Gengma counties. At present, Santaishan De'ang Ethnic Township has been set up in Lusi city.

The ethnic origin

The De'ang ethnic originated in the ancient "Pu people" and was closely related with the Blang and Va ethnic groups. Yongchang Prefecture was set up in the De'ang people inhabited southwest Yunnan area in the Han Dynasty, which made a hinge for the "southeast silk way". In the Yuan Dynasty, the forefathers of the De'angs had once founded the Jinchi Kingdom, which was very powerful and influential at the time. However, during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the whole ethnic group moved southward for quite a few times to flee from wars. Till today, the ancient De'ang villages, roads and temples can be seen in many places.

As a united ethnic group, the name De'ang first appeared in the book Donghua Stories during emperor Qianlong's time and Yongchang Stories during Guangxu's time in the Qing Dynasty. It was then called "Benglong". In September of 1985, upon the request of the ethnic group, the government approved the name De'ang.

The branch of the ethnic group and their language

De'ang ethnic group has complicated branches. In China, there are basically three,

namely, “Beilie”, “Rumai” and “Rubo”, which are also called “Red De’ang”, “Black De’ang” and “Mix-colored De’ang”. The three branches got their names mainly according to the characteristics of women’s clothing, which is usually long and tight skirt: women of Red De’ang are dressed in long and tight skirt with a wide horizontal strip in bright red close to its lower rim, Mix-colored De’ang in skirt with horizontal strips evenly alternated with blue and red, and Black De’ang in skirt with a dark blue grounding decorated with fine red, green and white lines. The difference is fairly distinct and easily told.

The De’ang language belongs to the Va-De’ang branch of the South Asian language family and has three dialects: Bulei, Rumai and Liang. The three dialects are hardly intelligible to one another.



**The resident features—
The bamboo house with
four eaves for draining
rainwater**

Most of the De’ang villages, which are surrounded by dragon bamboo and covered with huge green trees, are built halfway the mountain slopes from 700 to 1500 meters above sea level. Shadowed in green leaves, the thatched bamboo houses shimmering in the mist of rain are the particular feature of the De’ang villages.

Like most of the southern ethnic groups, the De’ang are fond of bamboo houses. The houses are framed with wood and fabricated with bamboo branches. Traditionally, they have two storeies. The upper storey is surrounded with thin bamboo strips or wooden boards and has a balcony close to the stairways; the lower part is supported with dozens of wooden pillars which had good ventilation and serve as stable or storehouse. There are usually two fire pits, one in the living room and the other in the girl’s room. The former is for receiving guests and the latter for young men who come to court the girl in the family. The roof of the house is thatched or covered with blue tiles with four eaves to release rainwater, which looks like Zhuge Kongming’s hat in the period of Three Kingdoms. The girders and pillars are joined together through axe work, which demonstrate excellent architecture craft.



**The costume and adornment—Girls wearing rattan
waistbands**

Traditional De’ang clothing is basically dark in color.

Men are usually dressed in blue or black garment with a big front together with loose and short trousers. They also wear black or white turbans with colored velvet balls. Women tend to wear black or dark blue garment with paralleled front and hand-woven long and tight skirt as well as personal ornaments like silver necklace, earrings, and red velvet balls.

One particular feature of De'ang lies in their waistbands which can be several or even up to dozens. The waistbands are woven with rattans of one or two cm width. The rattan waistbands are made in varied colors. Some are carved with flower patterns and wrapped with their silver threads. It is said that in ancient times, the De'ang women could fly around villages at night while the men stayed at home weaving bamboo baskets. In order to tie down their wives, the husbands began to make waistbands with thin bamboo strips to fasten the waist of them. Nowadays in De'ang People's mind, the more and finer are the waistbands woven, the cleverer and more industrious are the women. Boys usually make delicate waistbands and give them to their beloved girls as love tokens.



The dietetic customs—Sour bamboo shoot, the chewing of tobacco and tea as gift

Due to the hot weather, the De'angs fancy sour, spicy and bitter food, which can stimulate their appetite, remove the heat and toxin. The sour food mainly includes sour pickles, sour bamboo shoot, sour pawpaw and sour lobster sauce, among which the sour bamboo shoot is indispensable in De'angs' diet. Fish, chicken and beef cooked

with sour bamboo shoot are famed De'angs' dished.

The De'angs like chewing tobacco. They put tobacco leaves, betelnut, reed rhizome and quick lime in their month and chew they until there is red froth, which, it is said, can protect their teeth. Lasting and constant chewing of the mixture leave the De'angs black teeth and red lips. That is probably why their ancestors were called "red-lipped Pu" or "black teeth".

The De'ang people have a long history of tea planting and have got the name of "ancient tea farmers". Every village and household grows tea bushes and all De'ang people enjoy drinking tea. In addition, tea is actually an important medium of social communication. Tea is a necessity for marriage and funeral ceremonies, sending invitation letters, visiting relatives and friends, receiving and entertaining guests and even resolving conflicts. In a word, tea is associated with every single public occasion or activity, for the De'ang believe

wherever there is tea, there is courtesy.

The marriage customs—Singing to the Lusheng and courting girls

Young people have the freedom to choose their own partners. Boys visit and court girls individually or in groups. Those in charge of the courting, either boys or girls, are called “fire hat”. When taking a fancy to a girl, the boy can go to the backyard of the girl’s home at dusk, blowing Lusheng or singing gently. The girl then lights the fire and boil water to prepare tea for receiving the boy. The two chat and sing together until midnight or dawn. If the two fall in love with each other, the boy will send a pack of tea and a pack of candy. The girl usually hangs the tea, the love token, over her bed on the wall, signaling that she has been engaged.

Religion—Buddhist monks and temple

The De’angs are Hinayana Buddhists and every village has a temple. Hinayama Buddhism is further divided into four sects: “Run”, “Baizhuang”, “Duoli” and “Zuoli” has extremely strict canon that livestock raising or killing is not allowed. People’s daily life is closely associated with Buddhism. In earlier times, the Buddhists monk gave names of newly born children and boys became monks as soon as they were 10 years old. The “big sacrifice” is known as the grandest religious fete, which is to pray for cleanness, safety and is to drive away the evil. However, with the development of science and technology, the De’ang people are getting more and more indifferent with religion.

The De’ang also believe in primitive religions and used to hold ceremonies to offer sacrifice for god and to drive out evil spirits, among which “ceremony for the commemoration of lady paddy” particularly bears their folk culture and customs and represents the farmers’ keen expectation for good harvest.

The festival customs—The pleasant Water Splashing Festival

Affected by Buddhism, the traditional festivals of De’ang people are rather similar to those of the Dais, among which Water Splashing Festival is best celebrated in both ethnic groups. On the festival, people clean the Buddhist sculptures with “water dragon” and splash water onto each other to celebrate the New Year. Some other festivals are Closing-door Festival, Opening-door Festival and White-firewood-burning Festival etc.