

The Miao Ethnic Group

There are many branches in the Miao people, three principal dialectic regions of which worship Chiyou and play an ancient musical instrument lusheng, which is a symbol of the Miao culture. People play lusheng melody and dance lusheng dance in the great festivals. In the Miao myth maple tree is one of the totems. It is said that Chiyou was defeated and killed by Huangdi, while the fetters and manacles deserted were made of maple tree. By now maple tree is still used as guardian-tree in some villages. In the Miao legends there was also story of “butterfly mom”. Bull-like dragon and kylin are frequently used as the decoration design in the Miao embroidering.



The environment and population

At present, the Miao ethnic group in China has a population of 8,940, 116. They are mainly distributed in the following nine provincial districts south of the Yangtze River: Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, chongqing, Guangxi, Hubei, Sichuan, Guangdong and Hainan, and 48.1% of the population live in Guizhou province. To guarantee the autonomy of the Miao people, the Chinese government has, over time, set up a number of autonomous divisions at different levels in compact Miao communities, among which there are 6 autonomous prefectures, 19 united autonomous counties, 5 homogeneous ethnic autonomous counties and 229 ethnic townships.

Living mainly on the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau and the remote mountainous areas, the Miao people belong to mountainous ethnic groups. The Miao area ranges from 400 to 2000 meters above sea level with the geographical and climatic features varying a great deal. The area is rich in natural resources: fir is the most important timber resource and there are abundant reserves of tungsten, stibium and tin ores.

The ethnic origin, the name and the language

It is generally regarded that the Miao ethnic group originated in the ancient three Miaos in the Dongting and Poyang lake regions. The principal part of the present-day Miaos took shape during the Tang and Song period.

There are regional differences in the ways the Miaos call themselves: the Miaos in west Hunan province call themselves “Guoxiong”, those in east Guizhou generally call themselves “Mu” or “Damu”, and those in the Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan dialectal regions give themselves the name “Meng”. “Miao” is the name that is most widely agreed upon by other ethnic groups. After the People’s Republic of China was founded, the Chinese government took Miao as the Unified name of the ethnic group.

The Miaos have their own spoken language but no written script. Their language belongs to the Miao-Yao branch of the Chinese-Tibetan language family. It has three main dialects, seven sub-dialects and eighteen other local dialects in China. Four schemes were put forward for the standardization of the Miao language: the southeast Guizhou Miao dialect, the Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan Miao dialect, west Hunan Miao dialect and northeast Yunnan Miao Dialect. In 1957, the Central Committee of Ethnic Affairs approved them schemes.

The architecture characteristics—the houses on pillars

Most of the Miaos live in tightly knit communities ranging from scores of households to up to one thousand. The house on pillars is the popular housing style among residents in west Hunan, west Hubei, east Guizhou

and north Guangxi. The house has a wooden structure and the roof is covered with tiles or fir barks. The house is spacious and dainty in fitment. Being in the mountainous area with steep slopes, the stone foundations of the houses usually reach quite a few meters in height. It seems that the pillars that support the house are suspended in the air and that is why the house is called the house on pillars. In the areas of west Guizhou, northeast Yunnan, south Sichuan and west Guangxi, the houses are generally bungalows in wooden structure and are built with clay.

The characteristics of clothing and personal adornment—the pleated skirts and silver jewelry



There is a great variety in Miao clothing, in which woman's dresses account for more than 160 kinds. The variation of clothing and personal adornment mainly lies in length, color, collaring, buttoning, the kind of silver jewelry and the hairstyle. Miao skirts fall roughly into 3 types. First of all, "pleated skirts" varying in length are most common, among which skirts longer than one's knees are most popular. The skirts can be embroidered, in batik, patched up with colored cloth or simply plain and neat in design. In north Guangxi and Southeast Guizhou, woman's dresses are usually dark blue or dark purple in color with peach flowers and embroidery in bright colors round the collar, sleeves and on the lap. The Miao women wear various kinds of silver jewelry on the head, hand and bosom as adornment to go with their pleated skirts. When dressed in her holiday best, a Miao woman may wear as much silvery jewelry as ten kilograms. The second type is characterized by garments buttoned to the left, jackets with colorful designs rimed round the collar, lap and long trousers on the

bottom. This type is mainly seen in Hunan, Guizhou and Sichuan area. The third type has no distinctive features from the Hans' clothing due to national assimilation.

The traditional food—sour peppery dishes and Double Ninth Wine

The Miaos eat rice and maize as staple foods. Sweet potatoes, maize and millet make up the coarse cereals in the dietetic customs. Fish cultivation in rice field is popular with Miaos; in some areas wide fruit collection, fishing, and hunting also play a role in the daily life. Most of the food is boiled, braized or fried. Oil tea is widely favored. The flavor of sour and pepper is one main character of Miao cooking. Another feature of Miao cooking is making some sour-flavored vegetables by packing them tightly into jars; over twenty dishes are made in this way, such as salty sour, grainy pepper and sour peppery noodles. The Miaos are fond of drinking, and have the tradition of drinking, and have the tradition of drinking homemade wines. Sticky rice wines taste sweet and pure, one kind of which is the "Double Ninth" wine, the jewelry of Miao wines. It goes the name because it is made in the day of "double Ninth Festival" and kept airproof till the Spring Festival for feasts and guest entertainment. With the jar open, the aroma of the light-yellow wine penetrates every corner.

The arts of singing and dancing—Lusheng song and dance



The Miao folk music consists of folk songs and Lusheng (a wind instrument) music. Ancient songs and flying songs are two famous forms of folk songs. Lusheng music is of strong Miao characteristics, which includes dance music, tunes for inquiring and for sacrificing.

Among all the Miao folk musical instruments are the most famous: Lusheng, bronze drum, and wooden drum. The Lusheng is still popular in the Miao communities except in some areas where the traditional skill in playing it



has been lost. Two kinds of Lusheng are available: those with resonance bamboo canister and those without. The performance of the former, the so-called Lusheng dance, makes a splendid scene, with the big Sheng as the axes, the rest arranged in turn from right to left. The dance begins with the first blow of the smallest Sheng, followed by all other Shengs; the players will go round and round the big Sheng, one step backward following several forward steps. Girls form a circle around the players, dancing to the music of Lushengs. Regional Lusheng dance parties are held during Miao New Year or Spring Festival. With tens of or even thousands of Lushengs bellowing together, tens of thousands of audiences gather, and the ardent atmosphere of the parties is beyond expression. The wood drum dance in west Hunan and northeast Guizhou is well known as well.

The religious beliefs—the sacrificial rites and ceremony of calling dragons

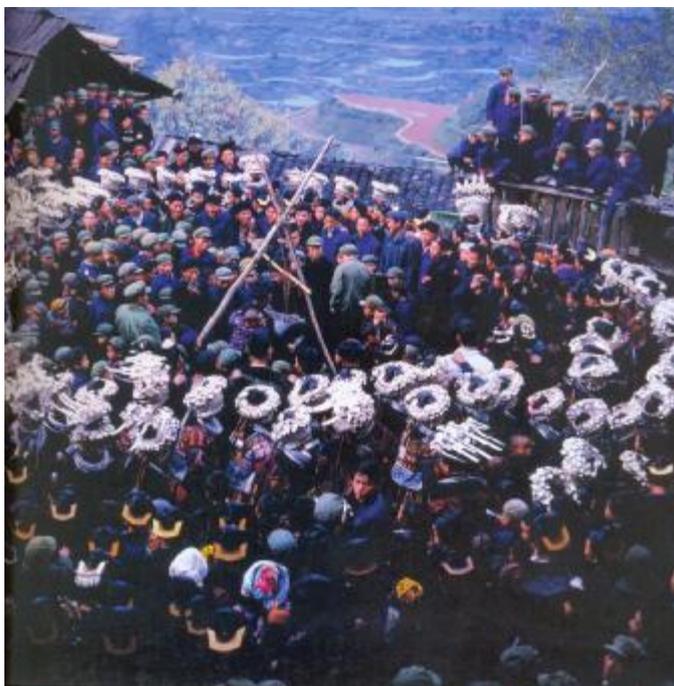
Conventionally the Miaos used to believe in ghosts and gods, and worship their ancestors; in addition, ever since the modern times, Christianity has made its way in some areas. The Miaos distinguish virtuous gods from evil ghosts, keeping in mind that the former may bring good to them and the latter only brings bad luck. To cure a queer illness falling on human or livestock, a sorcerer may be invited to perform some rituals, accompanied by the slaughter of fowls or livestock as sacrifices. Ancestor worship is prevailing among the Miaos usually practiced on various kinds of festivals with the slaughter of fowls or livestock as sacrifices. Worshipping gods is also quite common; the typical one is worship of Dragon God. Various forms of worship prevail, e.g., collectively offering sacrifices to dragon. Or calling dragon; receiving Dragon God by individual families; practicing fengshui (geomantic omen); and searching for dragon back.

The festivals and the customs—the Miao New Year and April 8 Festival

Different Miao different festivals the April 8 Festival, party. In southeast the Miao New Year is or “Ox Day” in October, according to the lunar and offering sacrifice of the year and the first of the traditional entertainment

Lusheng blowing and typical and

Pure Brightness music Bazaar”) has



communities celebrate including the Miao New Year, and Pure Brightness music Guizhou and north Guangxi, celebrated on “Rabbit Day” November and December calendar. Slaughtering pigs to ancestors on the last day of the next year are part celebration. Splendid gatherings, in the forms of peers beating, are the indispensable festivities.

party (also “Pure Brightness developed from the local

bazaar, which is now a big music party usually held on May 3 of the lunar calendar. The most famous “Pure Brightness Bazaar” is in Danqingzhai village of Jiesshou city.

April 8 of the lunar year is another festival widely celebrated in the Miao regions. The typical festivities include blowing Lusheng and eating Wufan. This day was chosen as legal holiday of all the Miao communities after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China.

The arts and crafts—embroidery and batik

The Miaos create a variety of colorful arts and crafts, including reputable embroidery, cross-stitch work, weaving, batik and silver jewelry forging. The Miao embroidery, whose trace may be easily found in history record, dates back to the Tang Dynasty. The stitch methods include flat embroidery, braid embroidery, kink embroidery, tangle embroidery, crepe embroidery, stitch sticking, drawn work, stitch piling. Auspicious symbols (such as kylin, dragon and phoenix), and ordinary insects, fishes, and flowers make up the common designs of the colorful embroidery. The batik technique has a long history as well. The technique reaches its peak in such areas as Danzhai, Anshun, Liuzhi, Puding and Huishui of Guizhou. Batik products are used for apparel in most of the Miao communities; in west Huanan the Miaos use batik to decorate their beds.