



The Naxi Ethnic Group

Dongba script is an important carrier of the ancient civilization of Naxi people and is still maintaining up to today, being taken as the only living pictograph. In the Naxi women's sheepskin cape is embroidered the pattern of sun, moon and the Big Dipper, called "under the canopy of the moon and stars", implying good luck. The design composed of "Naxi" in Dongba script and the sheepskin cape symbolize intelligence and diligence of Naxi people and the old and brilliant culture.

The environment and population

The Naxi ethnic minority has a population of 308 839, the 2/3 of who live in concentrated communities in the Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County in Yunnan Province, the rest being scattered in Muli, Yanyuan, Yanbian and Batang counties in Sichuan Province and a small number in the Mangkang and Chayu Counties of Tibet Autonomous Region.

The Naxi inhabited areas, a place where Yunnan, Sichuan and Tibet meet, are traversed by the winding Jinsha, Lancang and Yalong Rivers, which form countless natural enchantment of mountains. There are cold mountainous areas, uplands, averaging 2 700 meters above sea level. For instance, in the so-called "first river bend of Yangtze River", which abruptly turns over 100 degrees, there is Tiger-jumping Gorge in the narrowest place of 30 meters. The Yulong and Haba snow mountains, delicate and exquisite, point to the sky. All these attract a large number of tourists at home and abroad. In the Old City of Lijiang, there are stony narrow streets, secluded and subtle, with crystal streams flowing on both sides over every home with weeping willows. It was listed as "the World's Cultural Heritage" for its intact appearance and profound cultural essence in December of 1997, becoming the well-known scenic spot for tourism in the northeast of Yunnan.

The ethnic origin

Naxi people were formed by the combination of ancient Qiang people and local aboriginals. The forefathers of the Naxi people were closely related to a tribe called "Maoniui Yi" in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D.220), "Miao Yi" in the Jin Dynasty (265-420) and "Moxie Yi" in the Tang Dynasty (618-907). As recorded in "Huayang Annuals of the Kingdom", in the last years of the East Han Dynasty (about the second century A.D.), the forefathers of the Naxi people, "Moshu Yi" moved around Lijiang areas. In the Tang Dynasty, the leader of Moxie Zhao once established Yuexi Zhao slave-owning regime in today's Binchuan county in Yunnan, becoming one of the six Zhaos at the same time. In the middle of the 13th century, the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368) established Lijiang Prefecture representing the imperial court in Yunnan Province and appointed the leaders of Naxi tribes as national minority hereditary headmen. Under the support of the central government, the hereditary chieftain of Lijiang in the Ming Dynasty, named Mude, was really prosperous then. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), hereditary local chieftains in the Lijiang area began to be replaced by court officials in the Lijiang area began to be replaced by court officials and the Naxi areas gradually grew into a feudal manorial lord caste, which conducted a closer communication with the inner-land.

The name of the ethnic group and the language—"the living pictography"

For the names of the Naxi people there are “Na”, “Naxi”, “Nari”, “Naru”. The people who inhabited around Lugu Lake in Linglang County near the boundary of Sichuan and Yunnan are also called “Mosuo”, who were regarded as Naxi in 1954.



The Naxi language belongs to the Chinese-Tibetan language family. It might be parted into the west local language represented by Lijiang and east local language represented by Ninglang and Yongning with Jinsha River as the division.

More than 1 000 years ago, the Naxi people had already created pictographic characters called “Dongba” script writing known as the “Geba” script, which have been intact by now and called “the only living pictography in the world”. A program of Naxi language in Latin letters was designed in 1957. But Naxi people use Chinese language now because of close connection with Han people.

The architecture characteristic

—A crystallization of multiple cultures of different ethnic groups

The architecture of Naxi people, while influenced by these of Han, Bai and Tibetan, has his own local characteristics. The houses in Lijiang areas are mostly tile-roofed with a structure of soil and wood or soil and stone, presenting a pattern of three directions with a screen wall facing the gate of the house or of a compound with houses around a



square courtyard, upon the roof of which a window is open. The yard is composed of principal rooms and wing rooms on both sides with a screen wall facing the gate of the principal rooms, quiet and spacious, forming a body of its own. The doors and windows are carved with flowers and grass, birds and animals. Some symbolic designs with folk-custom characteristics are paved in the yard with tiles and cobbles, around which are planted some flowers and grass, unfolding beauty and comfort.

The Naxi people in Lugu Lake areas still live in a special house, in which the walls are built up by pieces of woods and roof is made of wood-tile. The architecture pattern poses as “four rooms and a yard”, that is, a yard with principal rooms, a corridor, two-storey houses and a pen. There is a fire-pot in the principal room, which is the activity center of the whole family. There are some small rooms on the second floor, a place for “Axia” lovers to stay over night.

The characteristics of clothing and personal adornment—“Under the canopy of the moon and stars”

The men’s clothing is fundamentally the same with that of the Han people, while the women’s keep the



traditional characteristics. The women in Lijiang areas wear a rimed gown with loose waist and long sleeves and a black sleeveless jacket and pleated skirt with long trousers and boat-shaped embroidered shoes. The solely special is the sheepskin cape, on which are sewed seven round cloth-ring and seven pairs of tassels embroidered elaborately with color threads in a design of moon and stars. The forefathers of Naxi people once led nomadic life with a history that both men and women wore sheepskin. The women in Lugu Lake wear short upper garment and pleated skirt with color belt round the waist and sheepskin cape on the back. They also wear a wig, which is woven with hairs from yak tails, some dark blue silk threads are wound outward, hanging down the waist, looking natural and at ease.

The traditional food—“A course composed of three kinds of containers” and “make pork shaped like a plucked string instrument”

The foods of Naxi people taste pungent and hot as the characteristics. Wheat, rice and corn are the main foods in the embankment areas, while in the mountainous areas they eat some buckwheat and potatoes in addition. The most famous traditional foods are “Lijiang baba”, “make pork shaped like a plucked string instrument” and “a course composed of three kinds of containers”, which is to be presented for the distinguished guests and is named as this just because there are three kinds of containers presented in the course. Though the menu might be different, there must be several famous dishes of delicacies from land. “Make pork shaped like a plucked string instrument” is a make whole pig and it is named after plucked string instrument just because its shape is like it.

The peculiar custom of marriage—A county of girls and “Axia” marriage

The monogamous marriage was put into practice long ago in the Naxis in Lijiang areas. Generally speaking marriage must go through engagement, entertainment of guest and wedding. There was a custom that the marriage between the children of a brother and sister had the priority before. Divorce is considered notorious, so marriage is stable.

The Naxis (Mosuo) living around Lugu Lake had the peculiar custom of marriage of Axia. “Axia” means “lover”, who call each other Axia. The characteristics of the marriage are that man and woman are not married, but the man goes to the lover’s home to stay over night and leaves next morning. They do not organize a family.

The kind of marriage of getting together at night and departing in the morning is based on a matriarchal family structure and there is an aged woman as a chief in every family, which is composed of the directly related female members and their brothers and sisters. The pedigree of the family was traced back through the maternal line and the property was passed to the children through the mother, or to the nephews through the mother’s brothers. Nowadays there are more and more monogamous families, but in some of the villages there still exist integrated matriarchal families and Axia marriage.

The mysterious culture—The “Dongba Scripture”, “Dongba Painting” and Naxi ancient music

In the long history, Naxi people created the splendid Dongba culture. The well-known epic “Genesis” describes the beginning of the history of the forefathers. The “Dongba Scripture” written in the pictographic script has over 20 thousand volumes and is an encyclopedia for the various aspects of life of the Naxi people in ancient times. “Dongba Painting” is divided into four categories: wood painting, bamboo painting, paper painting and roller painting. The flowers, grass, insects and fish together with the demons and images of human beings are described extremely lifelike. Among all these the “Saint path”, which is 15 meters long, can be regarded as rare treasure in the world. The classical “Baishaxiyue”, the great music handed down from Yuan Dynasty, is honored as the most ancient symphony, which is often played up to now.



The colorful festivals—“Jisanduo” and “Zhuanshan festival”

The Naxi people have a lot of traditional festivals, such as Jitian (offering a sacrifice to Heaven), “Jisanduo” (offering a sacrifice for Sanduo, the guardian of the people), Baisha temple fair, Zhuanshan festival, Torch festival, and so on. The most peculiar one is Jisanduo, held on 8th of February of the lunar calendar. At this day people offer a sacrifice for Sanduo, the guardian of the people, and meanwhile they have picnic and excursion. The Naxis in Lugu Lake areas have their Zhuanshan festival on 25th of July of the lunar calendar, in which they offer a sacrifice to Ganmu goddess, praying to be blessed with many children and an abundant harvest of all food crops. Meanwhile the young people talk love, have a picnic and horse race.