

The Xibe Ethnic Group

It was said that, when Xibe people passed through the Daxinganling Mountains, they came up against great difficulties due to the high mountains and deep valleys, then appeared an saint animal that was horse-shaped and bull-sounded, tottering rapidly and knowing what human beings meant. It was called “the animal of luck”, which was developed to be Horse Spirit, “Hai’er Kan Mafa”. The Xibes love horses. They think that horses are emotional and able to communicate with people, and that horses know what is good and are ready to pay a credit of gratitude. The image of white horse, white as snow, handsome and auspicious, symbolizes the ethnic spirit of the Xibes: faithful in love, hardworking for a better life, peaceful and friendly, and unselfish sacrifices.



The environment and population

The Xibes, with a population of 188 824, are mainly distributed in Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang and Xinjiang. Qapqal Xibe Autonomous County in Xinjiang Autonomous Region is the biggest compact community of the Xibe People. Besides, there are Xinglongtai Autonomous Township and Huangjia Autonomous Township nearby Shenyang, Liaoning Province and Yichegashan Autonomous Township in Huocheng, Xinjiang Autonomous Region.

The Xibes in northern three provinces live mainly in the Plain of Liaohe River and the Plain of Songhuajiang River and Nenjiang River. And the Xibes in Xinjiang also live in the Yili River valley. These areas with fertile soil and sufficient water supply are suitable for farming and husbandry, and even fishery. In 1808 A.D., the Xibe army stationed in Xinjiang successfully cut the “qapqal” canal; the Xibes bring water from Yili River for irrigation, and has made the place a granary as its name.

The ethnic origin and the history

“Xibe” is a term the Xibe People call themselves. Because of the different pronunciation of Chinese language, there were different spellings in Chinese historical writings since the East Han Dynasty, as Xianbei, Shibi, Shiwei, Shibe, and Xibe. In 386 A.D., Tuoba Gui, Chief of the Xianbei People, founded the North Wei Regime, reunited the Yellow River area. When Tuoba Gui headed south with his army, he kept part of the Xianbei People to watch over Gaxiandong Cave, his home in northeast. And these rear personnel of the Xianbei People became the forefather of the Xibe People.

In the Qing Dynasty, the Xibe People experienced 4 major migrations, which resulted in the dispersed pattern of the Xibe People. In 1764 A.D., the Qing Regime sent a Xibe army

and their families, together 4 030 people, to be stationed in Yili, Xinjiang. They left Shengjing (today's Shengyang, capital of Liaoning Province). After one year and seven months of hardship on the way, they completed the great migration as to move ten thousands miles west. They stationed there and cultivated the land, and became the Xibe people in today's Xinjiang.



The language

The Xibe language belongs to the Manchu Branch, the Manchu-Tungusic Group of the Atlantic Language Family. They once used “Hutumum” characters in history, which is similar to Mongolian. And they turned to use Manchu characters. The Xibes in Xinjiang are still using their own ethnic language and characters. The Xibe characters now used are formed in 1947, based on Manchu characters slightly changed. The Xibes in other areas speak Chinese and use Chinese characters, while those in Xinjiang also speak Uygur and Kazak.

The featured housing—“The adobe garrison walls” and “Huokang”

There are usually 100 to 200 households in each Xibe village. Each household has courtyard walls. And all the houses are well organized along wide and clean streets. In the past, there were adobe garrison walls around villages to protect them from war. As historical relics, garrison walls in Xibe villages of Qapqal, Xinjiang Region are well preserved up to now.

In the northeast area, it rains a lot. So houses are generally built with bricks, with an A-shaped sloping roof. In Xinjiang, it is dry and houses are mostly built with adobe, with grading roof. In the past few years, there are more and more houses with bricks and tiles as a result of improvements of living standard. A Xibe house



usually consists of 3 major rooms facing south, and supplementary rooms like barns on the two sides. Inside a room, there is a huokang(adobe bed) with good heating quality, and also furniture like deck on huokang, clothing cabinet, and table, etc. Waterproofing paper pasted on the windows with wood grids was considered one of “three strange things in the Northeast”. Now, window paper has already replaced by glass.



The costumes and ornaments—“Long robe and short gown” and “round top hat”

The traditional Xibe clothing is a close fitting long robe reaching to the instep, with trousers around the ankle. Xibe men wear long robes with low collar, buttons on the right, with plackets on both sides of the down part. They wear short gowns as coat. They tie cloth belts around loin, with articles like cigarette bag and pouch. Xibe women wear long robes with laces on the brims. And they like Kanjian(a kind of jacket). Some women also wear mandarin robe and handmade shoes. Single ladies usually have their hair braided, and changed it into pinion when married. Women like wearing earrings, rings and bracelets, and taking embroidered handkerchiefs. The old people wrap their heads with white kerchiefs in summer and round top hats in winter. Now the young

people generally wear popular clothes, while the traditional costumes only preserved among the old.

The dietetic customs—The “leek dumplings” and “whole sheep feast”

The staple in the northeast is mainly broomcorn, corn, buckwheat, and millet, while in Xinjiang is mainly wheat and rice, and then broomcorn. The Xibes in Xinjiang eat flour cake very often, which is crisp and tasty. They roll the fermented flour to thin pieces, which are usually 30cm in diameter and 1cm in thickness, then bake them in pan. The Xibes also have another delicious food “hezi”(a kind of dumpling), which is made as follows: take a piece of rolled flour, make it in the shape of semicircle, put stuffing made of leek, egg, pumpkin and meat inside, pinch it tightly, then bake it in pan.

The Xibes are good at making pickles, one of which is called “human pickle”, made of slices of leek, green pepper, red radish, and celery. It is kept in a jar, usually eaten in winter and spring. It tastes good with high protein. The Xibes consider dog meat as forbidden. “Broomcorn rich with fish soup”, “pumpkin steamed dumpling”, and “whole sheet feast” made of sheep organs are examples of delicious dishes.

Ethnic Sports—Shooting arrows in horseback

The Xibes are originally nomadic people. After they were integrated into “Eight Banner system”, they waged wars for the Qing Dynasty for a long time. To them, being good at shooting arrows is a crucial craft. The Xibes highly valued the ability of “three shots on one horse”, which means taking three shots in one hundred paces on a running horse. They are known as “good at riding horses and shooting arrows”. In the past, Xibe children learned shooting since very little, and excellent archers are highly respected. Now, the Xibes give shooting shows and contents on each festival. Some of them participated many times in national and international shooting tournaments. And they were rewarded

dozens of gold medals, which gained honor for the state.

The Festivals and the customs—“Tomb-sweeping Day”, “Smearing Black Festival” and “Westward Move Festival”

The Xibes have the custom to observe Tomb-sweeping Day. But what is interesting is that in Ili and Tacheng prefecture, Xinjiang, they observe the day twice, respectively in lunar March and July. Tomb-sweeping Day in March is called “Fish Tomb-sweeping Day”, for they sacrifice “broomcorn rice with fish soup” to their ancestors. And the day in July is called “Fruit Tomb-sweeping Day”, for they sacrifice fruits to their ancestors.

The Xibes also observe Smearing Black Festival on each lunar January 16th. In the dawn of that day, young men get up very early, smearing black on people’s face, no matter male or female, young or old, house by house with dishcloth and mortar. It is said that by doing this it can protect the crops from getting dust-brand, and also can avoid fire coming down from the sky. It is of course not a scientific explanation. Nevertheless, it has become a folk entertainment activity.

The Western Move Festival is observed every lunar April 18th. On that day 200 years ago, the Xibes who are forced to move west gathered with their fellowmen at “Peace Temple”, Xibe’s family temple in Shenyang. They slaughter pigs as sacrifices to their ancestors and say fare ware to each other with wine. Since then, the Xibes started to have memorial activities every year this day, which then was designed as the ethnic festival. On the holiday, people get together, wearing costumes fro festivals. They dance and sing, and carry sports activities like wrestling, shooting arrows, and horse race, etc.



The religions —“Xili Mama” and Shamanism

The Xibe People worships ancestors. And they believe in polytheism, and also Shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism.

The Xibes usually have a shrine of Xili Mama in the northwest corner in the west flank room, which is 6 to 7 meters long rope with little bow, little boots, cloth stripes, and galaha, etc. Galaha stands for position in the family hierarchy, little bow stands for boy, cloth strips stand for girl, which altogether is a family pedigree not in written form. Xili

Mama is kept by old ladies, and only displayed in shrine at the Spring Festival.

Shamanism is a form of primitive religion. It has powwow called shaman, but no specific

doctrines and temples. Shaman dancing, shaman songs and shaman paintings popular in Xibe areas are precious documents in regard to the study of the Xibes' history and culture.