

The Yao Ethnic Group



The long drum culture has a long history. According to the legends, Panhu, the ancestor of the Yaos, was knocked under a cliff by an antelope and died while hunting on a mountain. Therefore her sons and daughters made a long drum with the drum-body made of paulownia and the drum face made of antelope skin. An they beat a drum and dance for panking's funeral. That legacy is still with the Yaos today. With two-thirds of the Yaos around the country using long drums, it has become the favorite traditional activity of culture.

The population ad the environment

The Yaos in China have a population of 2,637,421 and 55.8% of them dwell in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and also, there are considerable Yao settlements in Hunan, Guangdong and Yunnan provinces.

Since 1950's, in order to ensure Yao people's right of being the masters of their own, the Chinese government set up many autonomous prefectures in areas where the Yaos live comparatively in compact communities, among which more than ten are single-ethnic-group autonomous counties, three multi-ethnic-group autonomous counties and one hundred and eleven ethnic-group township.

The Yaos distribute among the rivers and streams of the Zhujiang and Honghe river systems and so many Yao people live in mountains that they are known as "wherever there are mountains of the South Mountain Range, there are Yao people." The regions inhabited by the Yaos belong to subtropical zone and temperate zone where it's rather warm and rainy and there are clear distinctions for the seasons. What's more, the area is rich in biological and mineral resources in addition to be famous for producing wood and medicinal materials.

The ethnic origin, the appellation, and the language

Generally speaking, the Yaos originated from "savage Wuling tribes in Changsha", which was recorded a lot in the historical document of the Han and Jin Dynasty, dan dwelled in the reaches of Xiangjiang, Zishui and Ruanjiang and littoral areas of the Dongting lake today.

The Yaos call themselves in twenty eight different ways. And those similar to Mian or Yu in pronunciation are the most popular, with a proportion of over 70%. And also, they call themselves "Bunu", "Bingduoyou", "Naogelao", "Lajia", etc. Among tens of names that others use to call the Yaos, "Yao" or other names same to Yao in pronunciation is the most popular. After the founding of the People's Republic, the name "Yao" was officially adopted.

The Yaos have language without written form. And Yao language containing three kinds of languages, ten kinds of dialects and ten kinds of local languages, basically belongs to Miao-yao group of the Chinese-Tibetan language family. As a result of close contacts with the nationalities around, Yao men always use both Chinese and Zhuang language.

The dwelling characteristics—single-story-house style and banister-style

The Yaos inhabit at the foot of mountains or beside a streams and live in large community of one hundred families also or small community of more than ten families. And their housing style is classified into two types,

single-story-house style and banister-style. The former contains basically three types: (1)brick-wall, wood-frame and tile-roof; (2)earth-wall, roof covered with tile, bamboo or China fir bark; (3) wood form, fence, roof covered with China fir bark, hay or bamboo. Generally, the Yao people divide their house into storehouse, hall, kitchen room, bedroom and livestock shed according to different functions, some leaving storehouse and livestock shed next to the house. Structures of the Yaos living in the Yue-city Range area are banister-style. Being particular about the geomantic configuration, Yao people always ask a wizard or geomancer from another nationalities to practice divination.

The costume features—a diversity and Yao-pattern cloth

It's unique for Yao people to express the group's memories through costumes. And costumes for women are traditional and distinctive. The Chashan Yaos and Hualan Yaos in Guangxi like white color, which is prohibited by the Pan Yaos, Ao Yaos and Shanzi Yaos there.

The women of Pan Yao and Shanzi Yao fancy long trousers and they wrap legs while laboring, while those of Hualan Yao and Ao Yao wear short trousers. People of different clans are used to having their hair worn in a bun and wearing clogs, and they fancy silver ornaments such as silver hairpins and bracelets. As for the Yaos in Hunan province, they wear knee-length jackets with buttons in the front middle and wrap legs with black belts, and women fancy heavy earrings. And the Yaos in Shiwanda mountain are wear instep-length jackets with the back part long and the front part short along with short trousers. And women there fancy such silver ornaments as necklets, rings, earrings, bracelets, etc.



The “Yao-pattern cloth” has been popular since the Song Dynasty. The Yao people dyed delicate designs on white cloth with indigo and beeswax. In the Ming and Qing Dynasty, Yao people developed their embroidery skills and they were able to “embroider flowers with five-color thread”. As a result, the products :balck or red, with flowers and grass designs, named Yao brocade”, were very popular at one time.

The dietetic customs—“No feast without liquor” and the taboo of dog meat eating

Rice and corn make up the Yao people's staple food and pachyrhizus, tapioca, taro, etc make up food grains. Gnenrally, they boil food. And they have meat or vegetables salted or smoked in order to store them. Savory foods include oily tea, glutinous rice cake, sweat rice wine, etc.

The Yao men fancy liquor and nearly every family make liquor with various grains. And liquor is necessary to the spring festival and other festivals and feasts. While drinking liquor, people enjoy antiphonal singing, finger-guessing game and drinking cup-to-cup and shouting wine.

There are many dietetic taboos for the Yao people. For example, Hualan Yao females are prohibited to have a meal together with his father-in-law and females of other clans are not allowed to have a meal with guests; offspring are not allowed to take the seat of honor in the feast if their parents die recently. Most of the Yaos are prohibited to eat dog meat.

The religious belief—the belief of panhu and Dujie



The beliefs in nature, ancestors and ghosts and spirits, which have been handed down from primitive time, are very popular till now. and the belief of Panhu is the most popular and typical type of totem beliefs. The beliefs of ghosts and spirits exist and it's deemed among the Yao people that ghosts are classified to two kinds: the good and the evil. And the good can bless and protect family members safe and the domestic animals triving, while the evil do evil and harm people as well as domestic animals.

Since the Ming and Qing Dynasty, under the influence of the Zhengyi sect of the Taoism, which featured stressing figures and incantations, there are Taoist men in nearly every village; people place the memorial tablets of the samqing god and the founder of Taoism among the tablets of ancestors; Dujie, a religious ceremony, must be performed when a boy entered manhood. If not, he will suffer discrimination from society; it's necessary to beg food from door to door and redeem souls for the dead, or the souls of the dead will

become lost souls; and something like that. At the end of the qing dynasty, the Catholicism religion even went into some Yao villages in the mountainous area.

The Yaos festivals—panking Festival, Danu Festival and Shewang Festival

The most solemn traditional festivals of the Yaos are Pan-king Festival, Danu Festival and Shewang Festival. The Pan-king Festival is on 15th or 16th Octover of the lunar calendar and the Danu festival on 29th May of the lunar calendar, which is originally a religious festival, involves various ceremonies and activities of offering sacrifices to ancestors and praying for a bumper harvest. The Pan-king Festival, with cultural, economic and political function, has been determined to be a festival for the Yaos. The Shewang Festival is held to offer sacrifices to the Shewang in the second month and the eighth month of the lunar calendar. But in fact, it is a kind of agronomic meeting. At that time, a certain elderly person will make a speech to reaffirm the intrinsic unwritten law and ensure the success of spring ploughing, summer growing, autumn harvest and winter storage.

The ethnic art—the bronze drum dance and the long drum dance

Yao folk dances dance, the bronze dance and the among which the dance and bronze traditional folk



Dancers of the long four males beating females (one old singing the accompanied on and suona. And the labor of the Yao people, such as reclaiming wasterland, planting, lumbering and building houses.

include the long drum drum dance, the sticks dance for ancestors, age0old long drum drum dance are dances of the Yaos.

drum dance consist of and dancing, and four and three young) Panwang song gong, leather drum dance expresses the

The bronze drum, popular in some areas in Guangxi, is an important activity on the danu festival. While dancing, two males beat a couple of bronze drums (one with low voice is male and the other with high voice is female); another two males shake rain caps around the two males mentioned above; another two males and two females dance lightly according to the music. The bronze drum, with religious significance, means yearning for ancestors and praying for bumper harvest.