

The Dong Ethnic Group

There are many drum-towers in Dong villages, usually each village or each clan who shares the same surname has once drum-tower. Some meaning is implied in the structure of the drum-tower. For some drum-towers, one pillar represents a family or a branch of a family; and for others, one pillar means a season or a month, as a symbol of eternity. Drum-tower is the miniature of the Dongs' life, where people welcome guests or friends, talk about the old time and the modern events, practice martial art and singing, compete to play the Sheng (a Chinese wind musical instrument), get together to discuss big issues or reward the good and punish the evil. Drum-tower is magnificent and richly ornamented, symbolizing national unity, prosperity, progress and up-warding.



The population and environment

The Dong people have a population of 2,960,293, mainly distributed in the mountainous areas between the four provinces of Guizhou, Hunan, Guangxi and Hubei. The major residences for the Dong people are Qiandongnan (southeastern Guizhou) Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Yuping Dong Autonomous County, and Wanshan Social Area in Guizhou Province; Xinhuang, Tongdao, Zhijiang Dong Autonomous County and Jingzhou Miao Autonomous County in Hunan Province; and Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County and Longsheng Ethnic Autonomous County in Guangxi.

The Dongs reside in hilly country around eastern Miao-ling Mountain, Qing-shui River and the Yuan-shui river region, 1000-1500 meters higher above the sea level. The mountains here are overlapped and precipitous, ravines and rivers are densely spread. The warm and humid semi-tropical climate is very suitable for the growth of many agricultural crops such as rice, watermelon and sugarcane, which makes the Dongs become one of the important irrigative rice-raising groups in China. Besides, the Dongs are rich in forests and mineral resources and have one of the important secondary forests in China.

The ethnic origin, the appellation and the language

The Dongs originated from "Bai Yue" group in ancient China. According to the historical document in the Han Dynasty, the ancestors of the Dongs were called "Qian Zhong Man" in the Qin Dynasty, "Wu Ling Man" or "Wu Xi Man" in the Han Dynasty, "Liao Hu" or "Wu Hu" in the Wujin Southern and Northern dynasties, and "Dong Man" during the Tang Dynasty. The name "Geling" came out in the Song Dynasty from their own people according to the pronunciation in their own language. The other names of "Dong Ren", "Dong Liao", "Dong Man", "Dong Miao" etc. ever appeared in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The Dongs called themselves "Gan". Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, they have been called "the Dong People". Another name of "the Dongjia" is called among the folk people.

The Dong language, belonging to Dong-shui Language Branch of the Zhuang-Dong Language Group of the Chinese-Tibetan language Family, is divided into the northern and southern dialect system; with each one has three dialects respectively. There used to be no script of their own but Chinese character. A Dong written language on the basis of Latin alphabet was created in 1958.

The featured housing—the wooden building on pillars

The Dong villages are mostly located near streams and mountains. The size of the villages varies from thirty or fifty to five or six hundred households. Besides the main surname, there are other family names in each village. The traditional houses are wooden buildings, with a six-columned and five-pillared structure. The wooden buildings are usually about four meters high with two or three stories. The roof is covered with straw, fir bark or tiles. The upper stories are used as main hall and bedrooms. The bedrooms lie beside or behind the main hall. All the passages are circled with caved railings. The ground floor is reserved for keeping domestic animals and storages. The wing houses on the flank of the storey make the roof oblique, which is aesthetic. The tenons, without a signal nail, joint the whole building.



The costumes and ornaments—the green, blue, purple and white favored and the silver ornaments



The Dong's traditional costume is mostly made of the self-woven and self-dyed cloth. Green, blue, purple, and white color is popular. The young men's clothing is not very different from the local Han's. The elderly men and remote mountainous localities wear short jackets buttoned in the middle of the front and long pants as well as short collarless coats with buttons on the right and turbans. Women's clothing has apparent regional features, which has panted-clothing and garment clothing. Some panted clothing is trimmed with hems on the shoulder and silver buttons with braided hairstyle while some is trimmed with embroidered borders at the foot. They wear hair in a coin. For the garments, there is open-front style, waist belted style, legging with a side-coil style as well as wide-sleeved clothing embroidered patterns and garments long enough down to the knee. Women love wearing silver ornaments. People believe that the more the ornaments are, the more beautiful the woman will be and the heavier, the more precious it will be.

The dietetic customs—the sour food, soybean tea and Zhuanzhuan Wine

A typical Dong diet consists mainly of rice. In the mountainous areas glutinous rice is eaten with peppers and pickled food. There is a saying, "The Dongs cannot live without pickled food. "Pickled fish, pickled meat and pickled vegetables are the daily dishes. "Chi Dou Cha", serving soybean tea with the ingredients of fried popcorn, corn, soybean and green tea, etc, is the traditional way to receive guests. People eat green bean tea on festival, red bean tea on weddings, and white bean tea on funerals.

Zhuanzhuan Wine is another traditional custom to welcome guests and friends. At table, people around the table drink their neighbor's wine in clockwise and counterclockwise directions changeably. Usually at the first time the wine cups are passed from left to right and the second time from right to left, which is called "reunion cup", symbolizing the unity and close relationship among them.

The ethnic arts of singing and dancing—Da Ge (big song)

There is a proverb among the Dongs, “Just as rice is the food of the body, so singing is the food for the soul.” No matter young or old, male or female, everyone is good at singing. The songs have special rhyme with a sweet melody. There are “Li Su Ge” (songs while drinking) and love songs, etc. Among them, “Da Ge” is a famous at home and abroad for singing in its many-voiced chorus. Almost each village at the borders of Hunan and Guizhou provinces has the traditional singing group as a unit according to the family name. Their main task is to sing “D age” on festivals or while receiving guests. While singing, people follow the leading singer of chorus to sing in high or low pitches. Usually this is held in the drum tower or on the square in front of the drum tower with a ceremonious and warm atmosphere.

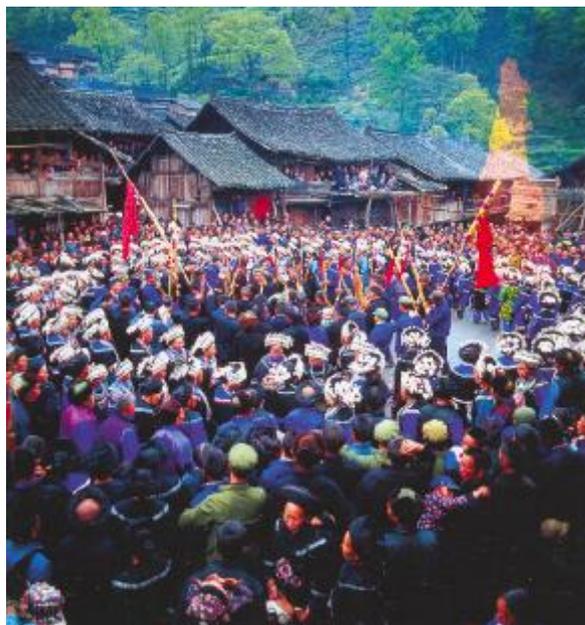


The religion—Female ancestors Worship

The Dongs practice ancestor worship and revere many gods and spirits. Valleys, rivers, mountains, old trees and rocks, bridges and wells, are all of spiritual significance to the Dongs. Among these gods, most are females such as the “Sa Dui” who protects the mountains, “Sa Gao Qiao” who guards bridges and beds; “Sa—bin” who makes wine and songs. Among them, “Sa-Sui” is respected widely. People believe “Sa-Sui” is the primogenitor grandmother who established all the villages and is almighty to control everything. In every village the altar or “alter to Sa” is the special place for sacrifice.

The customs and the festival—the Dong’s New Year

Besides Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Day, the Dongs have their own New year’s Day, and Bull-Fighting Festivals, April the Eighth, June the sixth and the Day of eating fresh rice, etc. The time of these festivals differs from place to place, ranging from November the First to December the First of Lunar Calendar. The activities on festival generally includes: offering sacrifices, having reunion meal, entertaining guests, visiting friends, dancing together, playing the Sheng (a Chinese wind musical instrument) and bull fighting etc.



The architecture—Drum Towers and Wind and Rain Bridge

The Dong people are good at building houses of wood and stone. The Drum Tower and Wind and Rain Bridge are the typical manifestation of the Dong’s folk arts in architecture. The whole wood structure is mortised together with tenons without a single nail or clinch bolt, very unique and strong. Drum tower vary from three stories, five stories to fifteen stories, with umbrella-shaped top or four-cornered, six cornered and octagonal top. In the middle are layered stories narrowing from the top to the bottom. There are ladders between stories and the eave’s tips rise high and up warping. Mostly the bottom is square. The beams and rafters in drum towers are carved with various auspicious patterns. The whole drum tower, very magnificent and grant with its outward appearance like a polygonal pagoda, is the symbol of Dong villages as well as the place for meetings



or get-together to discuss issues. Generally speaking, the Wind and Rain Bridges are built above the streams near villages. Stone piers in the ground support the leveled pavilions and passages made of wood. Roofed with tiles engraved with calabash and crane auspicious patterns, the tower and pavilions have covered walkway with railings and benches. Among them, the Chengyang Wind and Rain Bridge in Sanjiang County of Guangxi Autonomous Region is the most famous one.