

The Tajik Ethnic Group



The Tajik regard eagles as the head of all birds, symbolizing loyalty, kindness, courage, firmness and justice. In the folk dances of the Tajiks there are lots of imitations of eagles flying and circling in the sky. And there is also a musical instrument called eagle is associated with heroes and those who are kind, broad-minded, amiable and ready to help others are often compared to eagles. For the Tajiks live in Pamir Plateau, so they are called the “eagle of the high mountain”.

The environment and population

The Tajik ethnic group has a population of 41 028 with most of which living in the Taxkorgan Tajik Autonomous County in Xinjiang and a small number scattering in counties like Shache, Zepu, Yecheng and Pishan, etc., where ethnic townships has been built up.



The Taxkogan Tajik Autonomous County, which is the main area where the Tajiks live in compact communities, is located in the southeast of Xinjiang, with its southeast bordering on Pakistan and Afghanistan and its west part adjacent to the Republic of Tajikistan. The towering and precipitous mountains, which are perennially snow-capped, roll continuously in the country, looking vigorous and glorious. The Yerqiang river runs through the east and north part of the county. On both banks of the river valley, there are many natural pasturelands, grasslands and arable lands which can be used for farming and animal husbandry. The climate in this mountainous area is dry and temperate to cold, with a rather long winter season and no summer time, a long forest season and a great daily

temperature difference. Most of the Tajiks in Shache, Zepu, Yecheng and Pishan live in remote areas, where, in a flat terrain, the weather is temperate and dry, and the people are mainly engaged in farming.

The ethnic origin

The origin of the Tajik ethnic group can be traced to tribes speaking Iranian who had settled in the eastern part of the Pamirs many centuries ago. Those tribes had long been living in areas in South Xinjiang, among which the Sai people and the Sute people mixed together in a history of thousands of years and became the ancestor of the present highland Tajik ethnic group in Pamirs.

Starting from the 16th century, some of the Tajik people in Shikenan and Wahan in the west and south of Pamirs could not bear the oppression of the local rulers and moved eastwards to the Taxkogan, Yecheng and Pishan area. The migration lasted all the way to the 19th century. Because the newly settled Tajiks and the local ones shared similar language and customs, they soon merged into one. At the same time, a small number of Uygurs and Kirgizs also mixed into the Tajiks.

The appellation of the ethnic group and the language

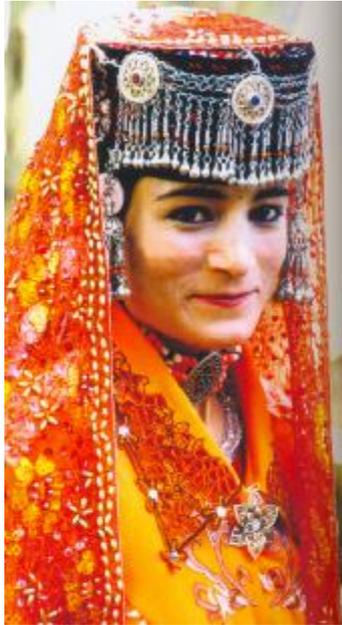
“Tajik” is the way the ethnic group calls themselves in Tajik language. It means in Tajik language “the one who wear a crown”. Due to the difference in language and geographical features, the Tajiks are divided into the plain Tajiks and the highland Tajiks. Belonging to the latter, the Tajiks in China are recorded in Chinese history as Serik Kul Tajiks, meaning “mountain” Tajiks and “plateau” Tajiks.

The architecture characteristics—Flat-roof with a louver in the center

Traditional Tajik houses are square and flat-roofed structures of stone plastered with clay mixed with straw. Doors face east and there is a louver in the center of the roof for light and ventilation. The roof can be used as balcony. The middle of the roof is slightly arched so that it will not hold rainwater. There are stables for the livestock, kitchen, and sometimes also guest rooms and storehouses in the courtyard. The Tajik herdsmen usually live in felt tents or mud huts in herding season of summer. Their felt tents are built with a vaulted roof like those of Kazaks and Kirgizs.

The characteristics of clothing and personal adornment—“Embroidered cotton-padded hats” and “long pointed sheepskin boots with soft soles”

The Tajik people lives in the highland of Pamirs where it is cold and the four seasons are indistinct. Thus, they mainly wear cotton-padded, leather and lined dresses. Men wear tall lambskin hats lined with black velvet and the hats the youngsters wear are usually white. Men’s shirt collar and belt are often decorated with lines of embroidery. Most of the farmers and herdsmen wear collarless long jackets with belts, on top of which they add



sheepskin overcoats in cold weather.

Women wear domed embroidered cotton-padded hats with back flaps to cover their ears and back parts of their heads. Women usually tie a white square towel on top of their hats when they go out, but brides like red ones and girls prefer yellow ones. They all wear dresses with tight waistcoats. Married women often wear colored black aprons and add overseas in cold weather. Both men and women wear felt or woolen stockings and black or red long pointed sheepskin boots with soft soles. Women in splendid attire add a tiny silver chain on the brim of their hats and wear big earrings as well as several pearl necklaces. The end of brides' braids is decorated with silk fringes and the young married women embellish their braids by white buttons.

The traditional food—“Stewed lamb meat without soy sauce” and “baked cakes cooked with milk”

The dietetic habits of the Tajik people are closely related to their stockbreeding-based economic life. Their everyday food includes dairy products, meat and pastry. They seldom eat vegetables. Most of their food is boiled, among which the stewed lamb meat without soy sauce, rice cooked with milk are the most well known. The dairy products include butter, sour milk, milk tea, etc. For religious reason, it is a taboo for the Tajiks to eat pork, dog meat, meat of donkey and horse as well as the flesh of the dead animals that are not slaughtered.

Music and dancing—“The eagle dance” and “the eagle flute”

The Tajiks like dancing, especially the circle dancing, in which all the participants form a big circle and the dancing is usually accompanied by hand drum and eagle flute playing. People whistles, hand clap and cheer from time to time, making the atmosphere very exciting. Since the Tajiks regard eagles as symbol of heroes, the most splendid posture in men's dancing is to imitate the circling and sailing of eagles. Women usually turn gently and vigorously their hands inwards and outwards over their heads while dancing. The favorite musical instrument of the Tajik people is “eagle flute” and “repupu” (a six-stringed plucked musical instrument). The “eagle flute” is made of the wing bone of eagles, which can produce clear, sonorous and resounding sound.

Festivals and customs—“The Lantern Festival” and “the Nawruz Festival”

Tajik festivals fall into two categories: the religious festivals and the traditional festivals. The religious festivals refer to the Corban Festival, Roza Heit Festival, which are celebrated in a way basically the same as other Islam ethnic groups.

The Lantern Festival is the grandest festival for the Tajik people. The festival falls on the first two days of the fourth month of the Islamic calendar. Prior to the festival, every family will make torches coated with butter. At dusk before the festival, the family members will get together in a circle. Inside the room is prepared a sand dune. The head of the family will have a roll call and each one called will light two torches and plug them into the sand. At last the whole family will say their prayers. At night, every household will light a big torch tied to a long pole and planted on the roof, symbolizing brightness and happiness. The next day, the whole family, bringing torches and food with them, pays a visit to the graveyard.

The Nawruz Festival is another important occasion for the Tajiks. The words in the Tajik language have the meaning of "cleaning up the smoke and dust". Prior to the festival, every household will move their furniture outside and paint beautiful patterns on the walls as a symbol of happiness and clearness. Early on the morning of the festival, a child in the family will lead a yak into the main room of the house, give it some pancake and spray some flour on it, symbolizing that both men and their livestock are to flourish in the coming year. After that, the families will exchange visits and festival greetings. During the festival, the young sing and dance a lot and there are some other entertaining activities like horse racing, wrestling and holding sheep in mouth.

The religion—Islam and Ishan

The Tajik people believe in Islam, the Ismailia sect. The sect is the same as other sects in religious doctrines but has its own characteristics in terms of religious rituals. They have less religious activities, fewer mosques and no Ramadan or pilgrimage. Except that some old people worship one or times a day, the ordinary people only worship on the festivals. The religious head is called Ishan. Each household believes in a certain Ishan and later on his hereditary heir.