

The Zhuang Ethnic Group



Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region is honored as “the hometown of bronze drum”, which is the traditional cultural relic of Zhuang ethnic group. Bronze drum was originally used as ritual implement and musical instrument, and later on was developed into a symbol of power. Bronze drum is drawn in the patterns of sun like, feather-shaped person, aigrette, water wave, circles and elephant-eye lines as well as the patterns of frogs and teals, etc. The Zhuang people regard frog as the “son of the thunder king in the heaven” and there was a legend of “the frog up in the palace”. They have the “Frog Festival”. The frogs decorated on the surface of Bronze drum are the Zhuang’s symbol of totem and worship.

The population and environment

The Zhuang ethnic group is the largest ethnic minority group of China. Its present population reaches 16,178,811, 88% of which live in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and most of which are concentrated in four compact areas of Nanning, Baise, Hechi and Liuzhou. The rest settle in Wenshan Zhuang-Miao autonomous prefecture in Yunnan province, Lianshan Zhuang-Yao autonomous County in Guangdong province, Qian Southeast Miao-Tong Autonomous prefecture, etc.

Lying in Zhuang regions, the chains of mountains run undulating, the rivers crisscross, and the limestone is widely distributed. Through a long time of water erosion, the stone forest, grottoes and subterranean rivers spread all over in the Zhuang area which is historically known around the world by its landscape and vagarious karst topography. The Zhuang area enjoys a mild and humid subtropical climate, which is suitable for the plants to grow. The main crops there include rice, peanut, corn, and roots of lotus, potato and vegetables. There are many subtropical fruits such as litchi, longan, mango, banana, sugarcane, pineapple, watermelon and muskmelon, etc. The area also produces precious timber, herb and abundant nonferrous metal resources.

The ethnic origin and history

According to the recorded archaeological discovery, the Zhuang is one of the aboriginal ethnic groups in the Lingnan area (the area south to the Qinling Mountain), which was developed from one branch of the ancient Chinese Yue people. It has a close kinship relationship with the Xi’ou, Luoyue people in Chinese Zhou-Qin period, the Liao, Li and Wuhu people in the Han and Tang Dynasties as well as the Zhuang, Liang and Tu people after Song Dynasty.

The First Emperor of Qin established three prefectures there after he unified the Lingnan area in 214 B.C. The emperor also had the Lingqu Canal built to connect the Xiang and Li rivers. He then started a project to move a large number of Hans to live together with the ancestors of the Zhuang people, which served as the beginning of a closer communication between the Zhuang area and the central part of China. Most of the dynasties after Han followed the “Jixi” and Tusi systems by which the Zhuangs are ruled by their own customs.

The appellation and language

The Zhuangs used to call themselves by at least 20 other names. Such as Buzhuang, Butu, Buyang, Buban, Bunan, etc. In the historical books of the Hans, it was called Liao, Li, Liang, Zhuang, etc. After the People’s Republic of China was founded, the name :Zhuang” was generally adopted and the Character was changed to

its present day form under the approval of the State Council of china in 1965.

The zhuang language belongs to the zhuang-Dai sub-branch of the Zhuang-Dong branch of the Chinese-Tibetan language family which is divided into the south and north dialects. However, Chinese is sometimes used together with the Zhuang language. During the South Song Dynasty, “Tusu” script, also called square zhuang script, was created on the basis of the Chinese characters, which was mainly used in folk bonds and for recording folk songs, etc but not to be popularized. As a result, the Chinese Charaters are widely adopted. In 1955, a latin alphabet based Zhuang script was established and advocated.

The architecture characteristics—the wooden house on pillars

The Zhuang house was traditionally wooden house on pillars, which has two storied, with the upper story serving as living quarters and the lower as stables and storerooms. This kind of house is, in most cases, built in the slanting areas or near to water, by stretching out the roof of the house down the slope and the additional part is hung behind the main room. Some poles are fixed underneath for support. This housing style has a long history of one or two thousand years because it suits the mountainous terrain and the humid climate and can not only enlarge the living space but also avoid the humidity on the ground. Therefore, it is still in use today



in the remote areas in the southwest and north west of Guangxi. In other places, due to different geographical features and the long-term influence by the Hans, the houses there are usually bungalows built with clay or bricks and tiles, which have the same structure as those of the Hans.



The characteristics of clothing—the favorite color navy blue

Contemporary Zhuang’s clothing is mostly the same to the wear of the han people. But zhuang’s characteristics on dresses remain on their own in some places, the colors of which are principally conventional navy blue. The clothing is different because of their different branches. Men in northwest Guangxi usually wear jackets with buttons down the front, pantalettes (trousers), square kerchieves, waistbands and shoes made of cloth. While women principally like wearing collarless piped jackets buttoned to the left, a lace turnup, embroidered and trimmed short skirts, embroidered aprons and embroidered shoes made of cloth. They fancy silver ornaments, too. Convention of tattoo and cutting and polishing teeth evolves to become an important part of clothing and appearance in some places.

The Zhuang brocade that owns a consummate handicraft is widely used to make bed blanket, quilt covers, aprons, waist braces, scarves, etc. Zhuang brocade is one kind of indispensable fold decorations.

The dietetic customs—the five-colored eggs and the five-colored glutinous rice

Rice and corn make up the Zhuangs’ staple food. Drinking oil tea and quenching wine are the traditionally

dietetic customs. Chewing betelnuts is a habit still popular in some places, while in other places it remains the taboos against eating meat of frogs, beeves and meat of dogs.

The five-colored egg is to have cooked eggs of hens, ducks and geese respectively dyed the colors of black, yellow, purple, red and green. Whereas the five-colored rice is made by having the selected abluent glutinous rice of high quality soaked or marinated respectively in black, yellow, blue, red and green liquids from five edible wild plants, and then getting it dried and cooked. After that, different colors of glutinous rice are made into round shape to braise. The five-colored egg and the five-colored rice are not only of fresh color, but also of mellow scent. Accordingly, once each festival or occasion for merriment is met, they will be made for sacrificing, eating and presenting as a gift.



The arts of singing and dancing—Zhuang's songs and dramas

The Zhuangs are good at singing and dancing all through the ages. It is of the custom that they always enjoy singing songs, compete with each other by singing songs as a drama, and choose their spouses or lovers through songs. Fairy of songs, called Third Sister Liu, is known around the world thereof. Songs of Zhuangs' show particular forms and a great diversity of types: e.g. the narrative songs, the farming or agronomic songs, the complaining songs and love songs, etc. The songs, five or seven words contained in each line, comprise two, four, six, eight or twelve in lines with long and short sentence variations, which can be sung solo, in ensemble or chorally. Held mainly in spring and in winter, the song fests are given venues are the Zhuangs' traditional grand gatherings of songs and are places where young folks expose their talent and go into social activities.

Divided into two factions of "north-line Zhuang drama" and "south-line Zhuang drama", the Zhuang traditional dramas are deeply loved by the Zhuangs. The subject matters of it mainly reflect their working as well as daily life.

The festivals and customs—the 3rd of March Festival

Besides sharing the same festivals such as The Spring Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival etc with the Hans, the Zhuangs have the festivals and customs of their own, e.g. during the Spring Festival, the play of "snatching the colorful firecrackers" which is held in everywhere goes like this: the each village selects their young men as their representative groups to contend, which is quite a spectacle.

The third of March Festival is the most ceremonious festival of the Zhuangs', which falls on the 4rd of March of the lunar calendar. It is said that the festival was established to commemorate Third Sister Liu. So it is also called "Festival of Fairy of Songs". On that day, people will eat the five-colored eggs and the five-colored glutinous rice in the hope of preventing the bad luck and illness. And people will build huts to hold song meetings and display their singing talent. It is popular for the young men and women to seek their lovers through singing contests, bumping the five-colored eggs, throwing out embroidered ball etc. "The 3rd of march Festival of Folk songs", which has attracted lots of excellent folk singers from home



and abroad, is held once a year in Guangxi.

The casting and painting arts—bronze drum and frescoes on the precipices

Bronze drum and frescoes on the precipices of the Zhuangs have a long history. Bronze drums are widely distributed in the Zhuang areas, which have a great diversity in both types and sizes. The largest has a diameter of more than one meter and the heaviest weighs in excess of one ton. The tops and sides of the drums are decorated with flower veins and designs. The drums also serve to symbolize their folk music and religious rites as well as power and wealth.

Frescoes can be seen at more than 170 spots on the precipices hanging over along the Zuojiang river within 200 kilometers' distance. The most spectacular one is Huashan situated in Ningming County which is 44 meters long and 135 meters wide, featuring 1,300 figures and bronze drums, bronze gongs and animal designs which were drawn in rugged and vigorous lines, and were primitive in style.