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Still a Song to Sing? — Modernization and Guizhou's Ethnic Minority Traditions —

RONGJIANG COUNTY, Guizhou, China

April 1999

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Dear Peter,

Since a fire roared through mountainous Xiao Huang Village several months ago, torching one-third of the community's wooden homes, none of the people have been in the mood to sing. At least that's what two teenage girls from the village, both surnamed Wu, recently told me.

Singing is the lifeblood of this Dong ethnic village, located in southeastern Guizhou Province's Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture — the heartland of Dong traditional culture.

Before the young ladies can remember, their parents and grandparents sang Dong melodies to them. As toddlers, they heard tunes that imitate the sparrow's *twitter*, the brook's *gurgle* and the cicada's *whir*.

As youngsters, the village song master leads groups of them after dinner each night, memorizing the richness of Dong culture through song. Safe under the covering of the village drum tower, the children are taught to sing their people's history, customs and emotions. What they learn in the dark, they perfect during the day as they skip along mountainsides, herding water buffaloes or cutting weeds for the family animals.

"Thinking of You"

Lad sings:

*I thought of you in the middle of the night,
I awoke and lit my lamp;
Thought I saw you standing next to the door,
I reached for the figure
but it turned out to be my shadow.*

Lassie sings:

*Moonlight spills on to my porch,
I sit weaving straw sandals;
I have already finished several pairs,
Why are you so long in coming?*

Adults sing as well. They sing in community groups; they sing by



A singing people. The Dong people tell stories, communicate their emotions and preserve their history through song.



Miao embroidery. The Hua Miao (Flowery Miao) people are quite different from the Dong: they express themselves through needle and thread. Meticulously embroidered sections of cloth, worn on the sleeve, lapel and back, tell the stories of their people.

themselves. You name the occasion, there's a song for it: songs to congratulate, for working in the fields, to use when matchmaking, for sacrificing ritual offerings, when receiving guests and seeing them off. And of course for funerals. "The dead," according to a Dong saying, "cannot hear any language unless it is sung."

The Dong also have tunes for times of calamity, traditionally sung when driven from their homes by drought or violence in search of food. Even so, the teenage cousins who described their village's sadness in the wake of the devastating fire said they were not in the mood to sing the "rice-begging songs."

"Bitterness"

*Listen quietly as I sing a song of bitterness;
Everyone listen, everyone consider.
The tragic thing happened a number of years ago;
A terrible disaster struck the Dong people.
Heaven brought a drought so severe the rice fields
cracked from dryness;
Pests ate up all the rice seedlings.
Family rice barrels empty,
Everyone wept with the simple desire to eat.
How to get by with such empty stomachs?
Men and women lead their sons and daughters out begging.
We head out in the morning, rain or shine.*



These days there's another force sweeping through Guizhou's ethnic-minority communities — Dong and otherwise — as destructive as fire and ravaging the traditional cultures of village after village. Call it the power of prosperity, the attraction of Han-led urban modernization.¹

RONGJIANG ABUZZ

After six long hours on the public bus, traveling over packed-gravel mountain roads and past stunningly steep terraced fields and poor hovels, we finally begin our descent. Traveling with me is Sheila Melvin, a graduate-school friend now Shanghai representative of the U.S.-China Business Council. The bus winds through forests into a gentle valley. A river flows through it.

We step off the bus in Rongjiang County's county-town, population 10,000. Though separated from prefecture-capital Kaili by 200 kilometers and by desperately poor Leishan County, Rongjiang is bright and active: food stalls sizzle, people walk with purpose, bright banners stretch across the road, street-side boutiques overflow with basic but colorful consumer goods, karaoke bars howl and three-wheeled taxis and

pedicabs shuttle up and down the main street.

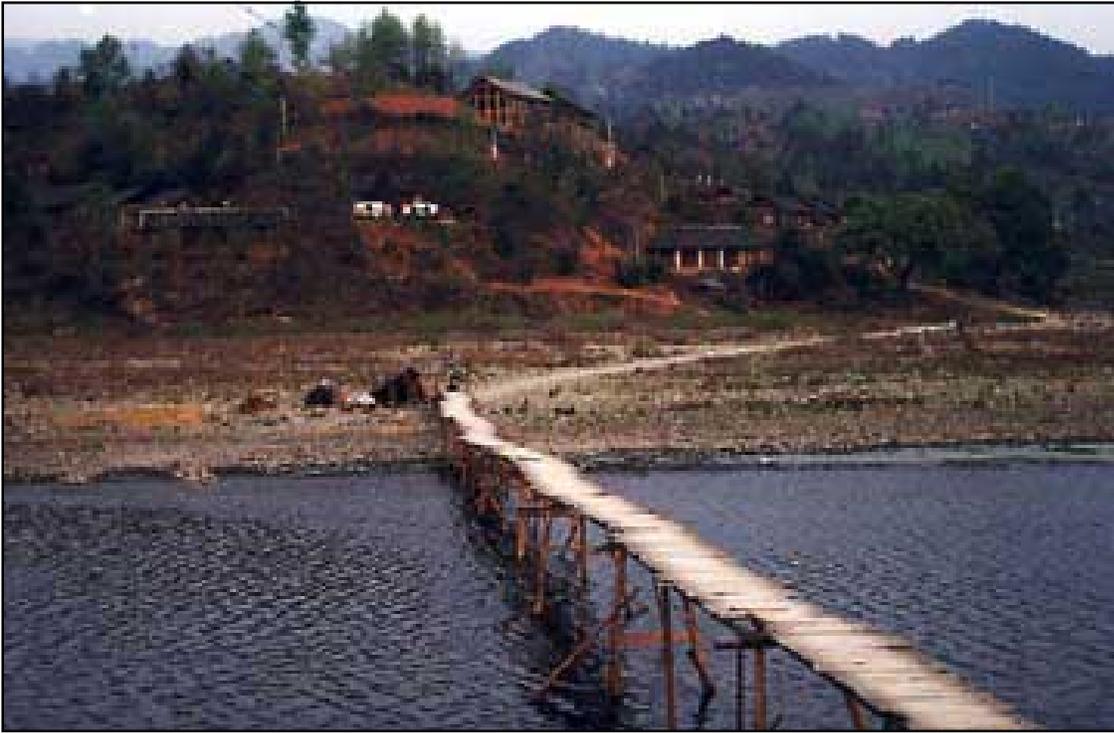
The town moves with an activity that defies its surroundings. Though no industry besides a small timber trade and some basic processing is evident, it is clear that, like many of the county-towns throughout China's hinterland, Rongjiang has become an engine of modest economic growth for its surrounding towns, townships and villages — at least for those linked to it by roads.² As a market center, the county-town draws in resources from surrounding rural areas and gives back through commodities and services. Small-town development is a key component of a strategy to spur growth in China's backward hinterland. Rongjiang appears to be getting it right.

But we were in search of Dong tradition, so we walk along a paved road that traces the gentle contours of the river toward smaller Dong villages five kilometers to the east.

Entrepreneurship continues to fill the air. On the outskirts of town, a man has built a footbridge, spanning the shallow river. Sitting in a lawn chair at one end of the flimsy bridge, he collects five *miao* (six cents) from each person who prefers to pay rather than walk the additional

¹ China has 56 ethnic nationality groupings. Han make up 95 percent of the population; the 55 other "ethnic-minority nationalities" comprise the remaining five percent of the population. China's ethnic minority nationalities live predominantly in the country's northwest, southwest and northeast. Guizhou Province is one of China's most colorful and ethnically diverse provinces.

² Relative economy vitality fills only the areas where transportation is convenient. On another day, we climbed a steep but simple mountain one hour from the county-town to discover a Miao village mired in poverty and at least 20 years behind the county-town.



Life in the easy chair. This entrepreneur sits in his lawn chair on the far side of his homemade footbridge, charging a small fee for the shortcut.

15 minutes to and over the regular, cement overpass.

Alongside the road, a group of men hammer out quarter-sized plugs from fir tree trunks, then fill the pits with packed fungus spores. Even grandmother joins in the chore of stuffing the holes. The young men stack the pock-

marked logs, hose them down with water and cover them with plastic sheets. Humidity and a few months' time will produce mushrooms. They plan to sell their delicacy to folk in the county-town.

A few hundred meters down the same road, swarms



Money growing on trees? Almost. These men have developed an alternative way to earn cash. And the best thing about it, once the logs are prepared, they just have to wait for the mushrooms to appear.



Bees cluster on the hive as this Dong beekeeper checks one of his boxes. Though tiring, raising bees has increased this family's standard of living. This Dong family has joined China's army of migrant beekeepers.

of bees cloud around their boxes, busily coming and going from surrounding fields. It's rapeseed season; there's much nectar to be found in the nearby canary-yellow blossoms.

Four years ago, this Dong family purchased 90 bee boxes (10,000 bees in each box) from a Han couple who had traveled all the way from coastal Zhejiang Province with their bees.³

The Zhejiang beekeepers lived with and trained the Dong family for six months. Now this middle-aged couple, parents of two, spends more than half of the year on the road, chasing blossoming flowers around the country. Meanwhile, elderly grandparents look after the primary-school-aged children. It is tiring work, they all admit, but smiles and a sense of drive communicate handsome profit.

The visible activity is just part of the surprising story of Rongjiang. Like bees gone to other fields, large groups of young people from the area, including Dong and other ethnic minority youth, have left Rongjiang for China's coast and nearby cities — like prefecture-capital Kaili and Guiyang — in search of nectar of another kind: cash.

And like honeybees, they'll return home. Indeed, the human pollination factor has meant more than just cash

for Rongjiang; it has led to more openness to and acceptance of new ideas, in turn generating further development and progress.

Progress? I suppose it depends on whom you speak with. Certainly, from many perspectives, it was not that long ago when Rongjiang County was slow, gray and somber. The area was closed off and poverty immobilized the destitute economy.

But then again, Dong songs and customs have existed for centuries. And they are anything but dull, drab and gloomy.

TRADITION!

We hit it big at the Dong villages. Without realizing it, we arrive the day before one of their biggest holidays of the year, *Cai Ge Tang*, a festival that commemorates the Dong's ancestral heroine, *Xing Ni*, or *Sasui* [grandmother], as everyone calls her.

We hear distant *lusheng* pipes and popping firecrackers before we actually see the procession. Then, far off, they appear: led by minstrel-like pipe players and village elders, a long, single-file line of women, all wearing the same traditional costume, parades behind an older woman carrying an opened umbrella. We stand there in awe as the line passes, ... 10, 20, 50, ... at least 1,500

³ China has more than 100,000 beekeepers who have followed seasonal migratory trails around the country for centuries. The Ministry of Agriculture encourages the migrant beekeepers because their bees contribute to increased crop yields through pollination. For the full story, see Sheila Melvin, "Nomads: China's Itinerant Honey Farmers," *Asia Wall Street Journal*, 4 July 1997.



The Dong procession files by in silence, memorializing their heroine's sacrifice for their freedom.

women filed by in silence. The only sound is the organ-like *lusheng* and occasional sputter of firecrackers.

The morning-long procession, which threads in, out and around the three participating villages, memorializes a long, arduous march *Xing Ni* made over 1,000 years ago, during which she led her people to settle along the banks of southeast Guizhou's rivers.

Xing Ni eventually died in her struggle for her people's

freedom. When she was killed, legend states, each village sent people to collect rocks from the battleground. These memorial stones were piled in their own villages. Their heroine now deified, these rock collections became the center of each village's *Sasui* temple. Each pile is topped off with an open umbrella, symbolizing grandmother's protection.

The half-day, single-file procession reaches its climax when the line parades into a large open area — the



The procession, which had marched single-file all morning, coils in circles, expressing unity

middle-school courtyard — coiling into ever-tighter circles, eventually four rows deep. Now, all 1,000-plus women, circle around the village elders and *lusheng* players, walking slowly, hand in hand, round and round. Sections of the women (singing teams) spontaneously break out in song.

Then it's over. Everyone goes home for lunch.

CULTURE CLASH

It fascinated me to see how even the entrepreneurial Dong outside Rongjiang's county-town resurrected their traditions during the holiday. The riverside village was transformed from one emphasis to another: from economic activity to rich tradition.

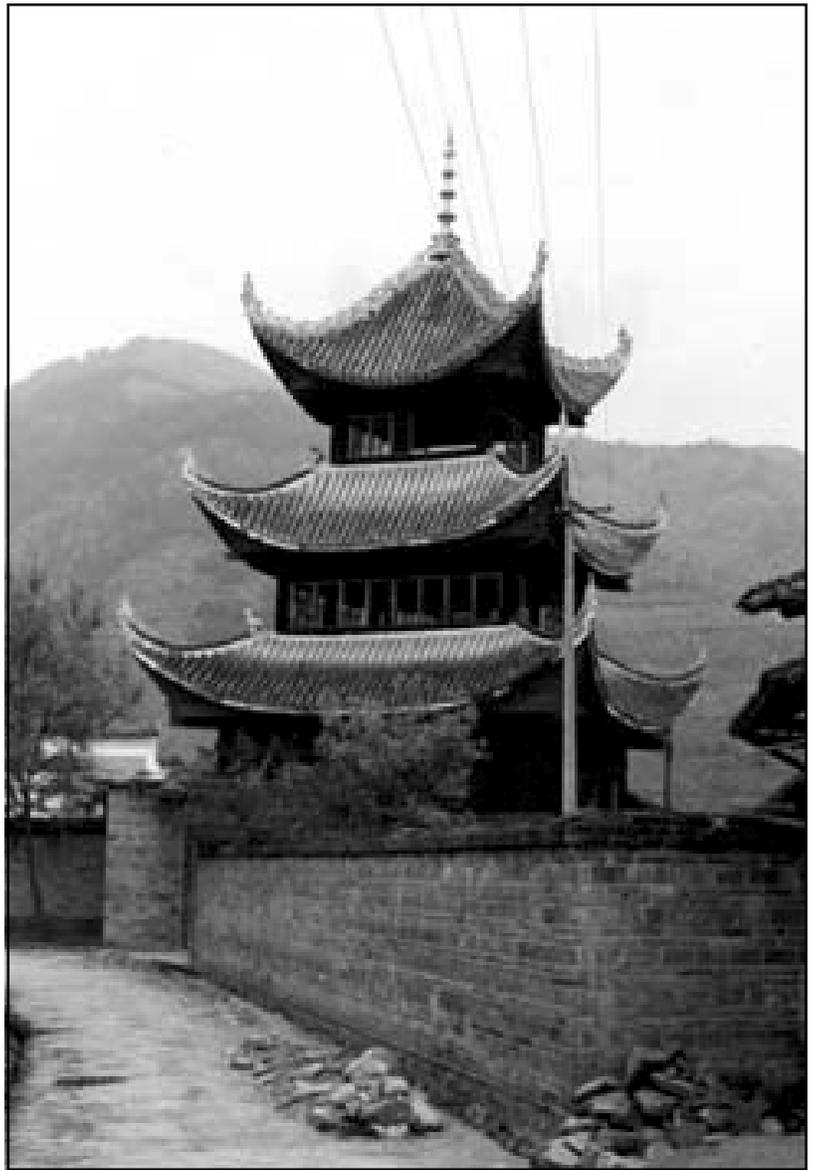
Even so, symbols of collision between tradition and modernization kept appearing, demonstrating that though tradition is still alive, customs and beliefs of the past are under siege.

During a quiet moment in the village, I strolled through the narrow lanes that separate densely placed wooden homes, peering into people's living spaces as I walked along (most of the doors are left open). What I saw in one villager's living room stopped me in my tracks. There, pasted to the wall just next to the ancestral family alter was a poster of Los Angeles Laker seven-foot-plus superstar, Shaquille O'Neal. If only Shaq knew he had become a god in Dongland!

More telling, however, was the state of one of the village drum towers [*gulou*]. These large wooden structures form the traditional center of Dong villages. If singing is the lifeblood of the Dong, the drum tower forms their corporate heart. Each community has one.

For centuries, villagers had met under the drum tower's protection to settle disputes. Elders deliberated, stories were told and children gathered with their song master to sing. The tower's drum was beaten when the village came under danger of attack. Rallied by the sound, villagers would gather around the clan leader at the tower. Unified strength helped to repel the invader.

But not lately, not at the drum tower in the village we visited. Some young fellow had to ride off on his bike to find the key for the padlock on the iron gate that kept the drum tower off-limits to most. The 15-meter-tall tower looked



Drum towers are a symbol of the Dong people. Traditionally, the drum towers served as the village's community center. Today, the drum tower shown above is locked up, used only for occasional meetings of the village committee and for karaoke singing.

more like a dusty museum than the village's pulsating heart.

The drum tower is still used, they say, but only for meetings of the village government and karaoke parties — and from what I could gather there's a cover charge for the latter.

Though it was evident that traditions in the Dong villages we visited are under siege, for a magical half day — in honor of grandmother — all of tradition came to life.

* * * * *

Besides the trip to Dongland, the ICWA fellowship has provided frequent opportunity to meet and get to know people other than Han. In fact, we live among non-Han Chinese. Our home city, Duyun, is the capital of one of

the three autonomous prefectures in Guizhou Province, meaning the combined minority population surpasses 50 per cent of the total.⁴ Getting to know these ethnic minority peoples — farmers and urbanites, uneducated and well-schooled, migrant laborer and government elite, from a variety of backgrounds such as Miao, Buyi and Shui — has provided a rich opportunity to observe the state of play of ethnic-minority traditions in the face of rapid, Han-led modernization.

With few exceptions, the more the people are exposed to a “modern,” urban lifestyle, the less they reflect the traditions of their respective group. In poorer regions of China like Guizhou, it often comes down to how far these people live from the nearest road. The more remote they are, the more poor and the more traditional — in that order.

However, as ethnic tradition meets the modern, urban Han population, it all changes. As they say, the person becomes Han-ized [*Han huale*]. They begin to dress Han, talk Han and value things Han.

But what is Han? Confucius was a Han, but he would roll over in his grave if he got a peek at pop-Han culture in 1999.

I tried to pin down a definition of current Han culture in a long conversation with a Han television executive in Guizhou’s capital, Guiyang. Having been pulled and hauled first by Soviet-style Communism and now by the frantic pursuit of individual prosperity. Han culture is now focused on the pursuit of an urban and materially advanced lifestyle, undergirded by the undefined but gene-deep values of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism.

However one tries to describe current Han culture, one thing is sure: it is the most materially advanced of all contemporary Chinese cultures. It is also the greatest (95 percent of China’s population is Han) numerically. So it attracts and dominates.

Even so, the blind chase of things Han is certainly not because ethnic-minority cultures lack sophistication. The artwork and life-philosophies of all the ethnic traditions I have encountered are stunning. But exquisite antiphonies and fine batik do not produce concrete houses, running water, gas stoves, hot baths, refrigeration, color television — and karaoke bars. So they are easily rejected.

Since I am a distant observer who can float in and out

of Guizhou’s mountain communities without truly experiencing poverty’s grind — destitution that most of us cannot even dream about — it is hard for me to relate to the disparity between the realities of mountainous minorities and the attraction of the convenient Han. Passing through, visitors tend to see only the delicate embroidery and hear only the pleasant mountain melodies; we cannot relate to the sweat and hunger of many of the ethnic minority peoples of China’s interior.

From deep in the mountains, concrete-and-file Han urban areas look quite different. Subsistence living changes the way people view the role and value of their traditions.

The result is a psychology of inferiority in which the baby of ethnic identity is readily cast aside with the bathwater of rural backwardness, even if that bathwater holds the essence of what it means to be Dong, Shui or Miao.

There are refreshing exceptions; there always are. There is the 30-year-old Song & Dance Ensemble leader in Qiandongnan Prefecture, whose father is Miao and mother is Shui, and who is a standout *lusheng* player. He’s proud of his tradition. The young man designed a *lusheng* that can play half-notes — the first of its kind, he says. He designed it, his father crafted it. The expert musician complained to me how most ethnic minorities he knows “blindly chase things Han.” But even he keeps an electric guitar in his closet.

After listening to Dong choruses at the “grandmother’s day” celebration in Rongjiang and observing the relative dynamism of the county-town’s economy, as well as considering the identities of other ethnic minority peoples I know in Guizhou, I cannot but wonder — or wish — that there must be some way to combine the substance of tradition with the advances of modernism. But that’s the age-old question isn’t it: How to keep the finest of the past from being washed away the the flood-tide of the present?

It would be a shame if the best of Dong culture ended up in a museum. Certainly, there still must be a song to sing.

Sincerely,



⁴ From a policy perspective, the “autonomous” category provides affirmative-action-like measures for the area, such as the requirement that a certain percentage of government positions are filled with by ethnic-minority representatives. The designation also results in preferential treatment in government aid and taxes.

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INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

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