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Profile of China

China, or PRC (People's Republic of China), is the 1.3 billion-people country famed for its fast-growing economy and not-so-fast expanding human rights.

In terms of ethnic groups, the Han Chinese (91.6% of the population) preside in number over 435 ethnic minorities¹, which settled mostly in the North and West part of the territory in the provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou and can also be found in the 'autonomous' regions of Tibet, Mongolia and Uyghur.

Note that Chinese authorities arbitrarily reclassified ethnic minorities after the inauguration of the PRC and as such, most ethnic minorities do not form homogeneous groups, but loose groupings based on similar religious, cultural or linguistic patterns².

Over the centuries, many ethnic groups migrated south and crossed borders into Thailand, then-Burma, Laos and Vietnam, to escape the Chinese authorities' iron fist and drive for standardization and also, keep the opium trade in their midst.

China's largest ethnic minority is the Zhuang with 16 million individuals. Despite their own customs, they are largely assimilated with the Han, and live mainly in the Guangxi area.

Ethnic Groups in China

Introduction

Among the recognized ethnic groups, the ones that count more than 1 million in population are: the Zhuang (sixteen millions), Manchu (ten millions), Hui (nine millions), Miao (eight millions), Uyghur (seven millions), Yi (seven millions), Tujia (nearly six millions), Mongolian (five millions), Tibetan (five millions), Buyi (three millions), Korean (two millions), Bai, Hani, Li, Kazak and Dai.

1 The Chinese government only recognize 56 "national minorities". It also counts a minority group from Taiwan as the 56th Chinese ethnic minority, a decision that is rather controversial, as Taiwan does not recognize Peking's authorities. The Chinese government does not officially acknowledge a few minorities, such as the Kami, so here again it is important to retain a critical eye when considering ethnic minorities on the Chinese territory.

2 When describing ethnic minorities in the PRC, we will strive to give an exhaustive account of their traditions but we might not go into sub-groups of the minorities. You should bear in mind that sub-groups often have some customs and living patterns completely different from that of the group they are attached to.



Ethnic groups with a population of between 100,000 to one million people are: the She, Lisu, Gelo, Lahu, Dongxiang, Va, Shui, Naxi, Qiang, Tu, Xibe, Mulam, Kirgiz, Daur and Jingpo.

Finally, among the ethnic groups with population of less than 100,000 are the Salar, Blang, Maonan, Tajik, Pumi, Achang, Nu, Ewenki, Jing, Jino, Deang, Ozbek, Russian, Yugur, Bonan, Moinba, Oroqen, Drung, Tatar, Hezhen, Gaoshan and Lhoba.

These minorities are scattered throughout China but have mostly settled in the border provinces of North, North east, North west and South west China.

We will only explore a few of these ethnic groups at present.

A Few of These Ethnic Groups

The Yi

Introduction

The Yi are China's fourth largest ethnic minority (seven millions).

Yi is the general term used to describe 25 sub-ethnic groups. It is also a Chinese name meaning 'barbarian'; the Yi were so called because of their initial resistance to the Chinese authorities and their efforts to preserve their identity. They mainly settled in Yunnan and Sichuan provinces.

Historically, the Yi formed a four classes society based on slavery, until the Communists forced the system out. The 'Black Bones' Yi were the top caste, owning land and people. The 'White Bones' Yi were free but had to work for the top caste and pay taxes, whereas the two lower castes were considered to be slaves and traded as commodities.

The Yi Origins and Their Language

The Yi language is part of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. It is divided in six dialects, which in turn have great variations in vocabulary.

The Yi call themselves *Nuosu*, i.e. Black People, as a reference to the 'Black Bones' Yi.

They have an ancient syllabic script intelligible only to their ritual experts (*Bimaw*). In the second half of the twentieth century, Yi standardized their alphabet so that it could be taught to Yi children (mainly boys) and easily passed down from generations to generations. As a result, Yi-language books have been readily available in the last few decades.

Yi Villages

The structure of a traditional Yi house depends on the village location, whether in mountains or hills.

The Yi houses are traditionally quadrangular in shape. Their foundations are traditionally made of stone, whereas the walls are of mud brick. The roofs are often flat, even though one part is sometimes surmounted, and serve the purpose of drying crops or laundry.

At the centre of the house is an open courtyard. The reception room is behind the courtyard, and the kitchen to one side. Sleeping rooms are traditionally on the upper floor.

The village is under the authority of a group of leaders, elected by the whole village.

Yi Household

The typical Yi household consists of a nuclear family. Men and women share responsibilities in the fields, but women and female children take care of all the household chores and raising domestic animals.

Men are mainly responsible for transporting, buying and/or selling livestock, and as a consequence keep most of the household income in their hands. Men also have wider access to education than women.

Shamanism

Although strongly repressed for centuries and forcefully influenced by other religions, Yi religion remains strong. It is grounded in ancestor worship, a belief in gods and shamanism practice.

Shamans have a leading position as religious figures. Their powers are called upon to remove evil spirits from the sick and prevent disasters.

Yi Festivals

The Torch Festival

The Torch Festival is the biggest festival of the Yi calendar held on the 24th and 25th of the sixth lunar month (i.e. end of July or early August) every year.

This festival celebrates the Yi getting rid of the locusts sent by the gods as a punishment for not paying their grain tax.

During daytime, the Yi dance, sing, play traditional instruments (moon-shaped instrument, three-stringed guitar and reed flute), and watch wrestling, horse races or bullfights as part of the festivities.

At night, every festival goer lights his/her two-meter long torch before running out to the forest and

fields, chasing away insects and evil, and praying for a good harvest. Eventually, all torches are laid together to make a bonfire, a theatre of dance and music lasting until the next morning.

The Torch Festival is also the occasion for young women to find their Brother *Ahei* and for young men their *Ashima*³.

Men and women dance facing each other with men playing traditional instruments and women clapping rhythmically. Women adorn their headdress with a triangular piece of material on either side to attract attention. Young men should not touch this ornament or otherwise, according to the tradition, they would have to work for the girl's household for three years.

When a man picks the woman of his choice, he 'steals' her embroidered belt. If the woman is interested in her suitor, she will accept his courting, otherwise she will put on another belt around her waist. When getting married, the woman will remove the triangles adorning her headdress and lay them flat on top of her head to represent marital happiness.

The Tiger Festival or Luoma

The Tiger Festival or *Luoma* (sacrifice in Yi language) is another big event of the Yi calendar occurring from the eighth to the fifteenth day of the first lunar month every year.

This festival is thought to have originated from the fact that dense forests populated by wild animals surrounded Yi villages in the Shuangbai area. The villagers thought of displaying their tiger-like strength and guard the village to avoid getting hurt.

The ceremony starts with all the male villagers gathering outside the village to make offerings to gods. The Shaman then elects eight men that will adorn a tiger costume (a felt with tiger stripes and tiger-like make up on their face, hands and feet) during the festival.

Under the lead of the 'Black Tiger King', these men then perform dances representing Yi's procreation and everyday life in the village and go to every house to rid them of evil spirits, an act called *Luoma Naihong*.

After the first day, an extra tiger joins the procession every day, so that on the last day of the festival, the tiger procession counts fifteen tigers.

Ikebana Festival

Ikebana Festival is held on the eighth day of the second month of the lunar calendar.

The origins of this festival are recounted in the legend of Mi Yilu: a young girl who sacrificed her life to a local tyrant by drinking a glass laced with azalea to spare the lives of other Yi girls.

Since then, Yi people organise the Ikebana festival around the time the azalea blossoms to express their gratitude towards Mi Yilu.

During this festival, the Yi express their wishes of prosperity and happiness by adorning their villages, fields and livestock with flowers. People also give their blessings to fellow villagers by adorning their headdress or clothing with flowers.

3 The Brother Ahei is a hero of a Yi folk epic. Ashima is the heroine of a Yi folk epic. Ashima means 'a girl as beautiful as gold' in Yi language.

Yi Clothing

Yi people have a rich variety of dresses; so much that they hold a Costume Festival: a contest during which up to 27 Yi villages displays their festive costumes cheered on by the crowd.

In terms of clothing, we can identify thirteen different sub-groups among the Yi, and therefore we will only give a rough description of the common clothing features for all of these.

Yi men often wear a black turban-like headdress, wide-legged trousers, black or indigo capes made of wool.

Yi women wear ankle-length skirts and wide-brimmed hats. On festival days, they adorn a colourful skirt, embroidered vest, colourful headscarf with pompoms and a belt with wide loose ends falling behind.

A Yi girl will take sometimes up to one year to make up her festival costume.

The Miao

Introduction

The Miao count eight million individuals in China.

They mainly settled in the south west provinces of Guizhou, Yunnan, Hunan and Sichuan. They can also be found on Hainan Island.

Such geographical distribution resulted in wide differences among Miao people in terms of dialects, clothing and arts.

The main Miao sub-groups are classified by the Han Chinese as the Black, Red, White, Blue, Long-Horned, Big and Small Flowery and Tall-Pointed Had Miao.

The Miao have been in China for thousand of years. However, their refusal to submit to the Chinese nationalist movement and preserve their identity and opium trade saw them migrated southbound into Laos in the nineteenth century and later into Thailand and Vietnam where they are known as Hmong (see Ethnic Groups & Country Profile_Thailand).

The Miao Origins and Language

The Miao are thought to have originated from Tibet, Siberia and Mongolia. However, their origins can only be precisely traced to China where they have been living for thousands of years.

The Miao language is part of the Miao-Yao branch of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. There are three main dialects in use in China: one is spoken in West Hunan, the other is used in East Guizhou, while the last is common in Sichuan, Yunnan and some parts of Guizhou provinces. It is also common to come across Miao sub-groups who use another language, or heavily borrow vocabulary from other ethnic dialects or Mandarin itself.

The Miao Village

The Village: Structure and Settlement

The spirit of independence prevails in Miao culture and they tend to live in clans separately from other ethnic groups.

Each clan is characterized by a patrilineal name where a son's name precedes a father's.

The Miao tend to settle in hilly or mountainous areas drained by rivers for the easy cultivation of rice and with access to transportation. In the past, opium was a prime produce for the Miao, but they have now turned to more traditional crops such as maize, potatoes, soybeans, peanuts, tobacco, sugar cane and cotton, etc.

The Village Houses and Households

Miao always ensure that family ancestors accept the emplacement of their house. All houses built in mountainous areas face down the slope and are built on stilts.

A traditional Miao house consists in a large room, a kitchen and living area, at the centre of which lies the fireplace. The sleeping areas, one for the children and one for the parents, are demarcated from the main room with bamboo mats or wooden sticks.

The household is made of an extended family living under the authority of a patriarch. Miao respect for age is deeply rooted, and practised at all levels of the clan.

The father-son relationship is central to the Miao culture. Traditionally, the youngest son continues to live in his father's home, even after getting married, to take care of his ageing parents.

Marriage

Miao people tend to be monogamous.

The prime courting time for young Miao is the New Year Festival, when youth dressed in their finest clothes assemble to sing love songs.

Fathers must agree on the choice of their children's future spouse. Once agreed, the young man can take his future bride to live with him in the house. The boy's family has to pay a bride price and also the wedding festivities. The boy's father and the girl's will decide upon a wedding date.

In some areas of Yunnan Province, the Miao used to 'kidnap' brides', a theatrical custom during which a young man would 'kidnap' his prospective spouse away from her parents house.

Marriage can bring sadness for a young girl who is marrying away from her village, as while she "gains" a husband, she must leave the clan to which she was attached all her life.

Miao Festivals

Miao clans celebrate many different festivals (up to a hundred!).

Even though some festivals are common to different Miao sub-groups, they might not be held on the same day. A few of them are detailed below.

Huashan Festival or Flower Mountain Festival

This festival is held on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month every year (the day might change depending on the location of the Miao sub-group).

According to a Miao legend, Miao ancestors had to flee their homes after being defeated by enemies. One year, on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month, a manifestation of the ancestors gave the Miao the strength to sing, dance and play lusheng (a traditional Miao flute) in a circle around a tree. In this tree, a heavenly flower blossomed and on that year, the harvest was good. Since then, Miao have been celebrating by adorning their best clothes and plant a flower tree on a mountain every year.

The festivities include a Climbing-the-Pole competition; the Lion dance, playing Lusheng, and antiphonal singing.

Sisters' Meal Festival

This Festival is held on the 15th day of the third lunar month (2-22 April 2008) when unmarried Miao women gather by the river to celebrate the “coming of age”, spring and a good harvest.

The women bring along dyed rice balls (each colour representing a season: blue for spring, pink for summer, yellow for autumn and white for winter), which they roll in a piece of cloth, while young men come to court them with their singing.

Each young man singles out the woman he would like to marry, and she in turn gives him some rice wine and food.

The way the rice ball is prepared is in itself the young woman’s answer to the man’s courting: if the rice ball contains a pepper, it means ‘no’; if it contains a chopstick (or similar item) it means ‘no-thank you’, if it contains a piece of grass, it means that he must first give her a needle and thread. Finally, if it contains two chopsticks, it means that she returns his loving favours.

The Sisters Festival is also the occasion for married Miao women to visit their parents and family. It is also the only time in the year for them to sit with their sisters, as per Miao custom, a wife must spend her married life with her husband’s family clan.

New Rice Tasting Festival

This festival is held to celebrate the rice harvest.

On the festival day, the village gathers behind the chief who walks to the field, cuts three ears of rice and gives them to the shaman for performing sacrifices.

The Miao pay respect to the ancestral spirits and give offerings to the land spirit. Each family of the village will dine on new rice, fish and meat. Bullfighting, antiphonal singing and dancing are all part of the festivities.

The Fertility Festival

This is one of the most important festivals of the Miao culture, only celebrated periodically (the next one will be in 2018) for three to seven days.

It celebrates the spirits of the Miao ancestors, the fertility of the land and that of the villagers and the prosperity of the village.

The Fertility Festival starts with festival leaders and the village shaman climbing up a mountain to 'take' the dragon soul (for luck). When they come back with it, a sacrificial pig is offered to the ancestors' spirits before being shared among the entire village. During the festival period, villagers are prohibited from working and spend days (and nights) eating, singing and dancing.

Miao Clothing

Miao women are highly skilled at needlework and all their clothes are finely embroidered.

The traditional Miao festival dress is a delight for the eyes. Silver jewellery is a trademark of the Miao accessorizing.

For instance, the Long Horns women wear an impressive silver headdress culminating in the shape of a horn with peaks, and heavy silver necklaces ornamented with dangles.

Their vests are also adorned with silver buttons.

In everyday life, women replace their impressive headdress by a towel.

The Hui

Introduction

There are approximately nine million Hui people in China.

Hui can be found all over China; many of them have settled in Ningxia, Gansu, Henan, Shandong, Yunnan, Qinghai and Hebei provinces.

Most Hui are closely identified with Han Chinese culturally and physically. However, they distinguish themselves by their religion: Hui are followers of Sunni Islam. (See Religion section).

Chinese authorities assimilated some small ethnic groups, such as the Utsuls, to the Hui only on the ground of their affiliation to Islam.

The Hui Origins

Hui is originally an abbreviation of 'Huihui', a term used to describe the Huihe people, or Ouigurs, who had been living in the Anxi area –today's Xinjiang province- since the seventh century. These people are actually the ancestors of the Uygurs but the word was kept in use to describe the Hui minority because of both groups' religious similarities.

The fact that the Chinese term, *Huijiao*, meaning "the religion of the Hui", is used for Islam, tells a lot about the fact that the Hui's identity is mainly defined through its religious beliefs, and indirectly the culture deriving from them.

The Muslim migration into China happened in different waves.

The first wave of migration occurred in the middle of the seventh century when Persians and Arabs traders settled in cities such as Guanzhou, Quanzhou etc. They were referred to as *fanke* - "guests from bordering regions"- and quickly integrated themselves through intermarriage and interactions with the Han majority.

These migrants became assimilated to the Huihui during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) as an increasing number of Islamic people migrated from Middle Asia, Persia and the Arabian Gulf. Although original settlers had already built places of worship and established themselves in China, the Huihui culture developed mainly from that point in time. The Hui upper class exerted its influence on Yuan Dynasty in the political, economic and military fields.

The Huihui really emerged as an ethnic group during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and further integrated into Han culture to avoid persecution.

The Hui Language

Initially, the Huihui used Arab, Persian and Han languages. However, as they dispersed throughout China and more Hans converted to Islam, Huihuis adopted Han language (today's Mandarin) as their own and only used Arab and Persian for certain idioms.

Yisilan Religion

Hui culture and way of life is strongly identified with the practice of Islam.

Huis do not eat pork, dog, horse, and other meat types, which Chinese Han culture considers as delicacies. They observe the Ramadan fast, pay a religious tax and owe to make a pilgrimage to Mecca during their lifetime.

Besides, the Huis have been allowed to have more than one child per family: an exception to the Chinese authorities' one-child policy.

The *Ahung*, i.e. imam, gives the newborn his/her Huihui name, and presides over every wedding ceremonies and burials. Ahungs accumulated considerable power through centuries as most Huis lived by a religious and economic community system, *Jiaofang*. According to this system, an imam was not only invited to head the Mosque and the religious affairs of the community tied to it, but also take decisions over the economic aspects of the group such as collecting taxes etc.

As mosques have often been used as a social forum by Huis' communities otherwise isolated, they enabled the Hui to develop as closely-knit economic and social entities under the authority of their local imams.

Although persecuted for many centuries, the Huis now benefit from subsidies to build mosques, and Islamic literature is authorized for publication on Chinese soil.

From Trading to Farming

Historically, most Hui were traders (see Origins section). It is their interest in business that led the Hui to be dispersed all over China.

Today, most Hui have turned to farming, although a minority still engages in small-scale businesses, handicrafts' making, etc.

Hui Clothing

As Hui is an umbrella group and tends to be spread out geographically, their clothing may vary from one region to another.

Men usually wear white or black brimless hats, while women wear black, white or green turban on their heads, particularly at prayers.

The Naxi

Introduction

The Naxi people have a population of about 300,000, most of which has settled in Yunnan, particularly in the Lijiang area, and also in Sichuan provinces.

A minority of Naxi still live in the Mangkang area of Tibet, and some possibly live in Myanmar.



Please note that the Chinese authorities classify the Mosuo as part of the Naxi group, but although they share similar Tibetan origins and geographical distribution, their culture is distinctive.

The Naxi Origins

The Naxi people are descendants of Tibetan nomads.

They migrated from the high plains of Tibet to the Lijiang area in the first century A.D. Until the end of the thirteenth century, the Naxi disputed the control of the area with the Pu people, who were assimilated to the Naxi ethnic group after their defeat.

During the Mongol conquests, the Naxi joined the army of Kublai Khan to victoriously fight against the regime of Dali.

From the Yuan Dynasty until the early twentieth century, the Naxi 'stronghold' of Lijiang strengthened its relationship with the imperial court and central power. Naxi prospered on the basis of a feudal economy, latter supplanted in some Naxi areas by a manorial economy.

It is also interesting to have a look at the mythical origins of the Naxi through the Dongba's "genesis".

According to it, only a couple survived a mighty flood. The celestial nymph gave birth to triplets who were not able to speak for three years. However, once able to, they each spoke a different

language: the elder spoke Tibetan, the second spoke Naxi and the youngest spoke Bai.
Each child settled in different areas: the first in the high lands, the second in the middle areas and the youngest in the low lands!

Revival of the the Naxi Culture

As for most minorities, the Naxi culture greatly suffered from the Cultural Revolution. However, they were further penalised by the fact that they strongly relied on complex scriptures as much as oral tradition for passing on their culture from generation to generation.

Although there is now a famous Naxi Orchestra in the city of Lijiang, Naxi music was banned during the Cultural Revolution and instruments hidden.

The Chinese authorities also discouraged Naxi from using their language and even destroyed



manuscripts in the 1960s.

The 1980s saw a cultural revival and despite setbacks from the government, recent efforts have increased awareness of Naxi –and other minorities’- cultural heritage.

Language: a Wealth of Scripts

The Naxi language is part of the Yi branch of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. Naxi people are the only ethnic minority in the world whose culture has been preserved in scripts with pictograms still in use.

Naxi has been written with the use of three different scripts.

The Dongba (or Tomba) Script

It is the oldest script and the world’s only pictographic script still in existence today. Dongba is actually the name for the shamans/priests of Naxi’s native religion and by extension, of the scripts and culture associated with them.



The Dongbas or “wise men” conducted rites honouring Heaven, forces of nature, etc. (see Naxi Religion) .

The rituals were all conveyed into manuals using pictograms created more than 1,000 years ago, the so-called Dongba characters. These manuals do not only keep record of these ancient rituals but also of the myths, legends and history of the Naxi: a cultural treasure!

The Dongba script is so complex that it can take up to fifteen years to master it!
Today only a handful of “wise men” are still alive and as the old generation of specialists passes away, part of the Naxi culture might be lost unless the young generation takes on learning from them.

The Geba Script

The Geba script is similar in structure to Mandarin and combines symbols inspired from Chinese characters, new symbols, with simplified Dongba pictographs.



Written in horizontal lines from left to right, the phonetic values of Geba symbols are changeable according to their users (usually a Dongba).

Few instances of Geba texts are in existence and as a result little is known about this script.

Latin Alphabet

In the 1980s a newspaper aimed at increasing the literacy level in Naxi language among this ethnic group was published. It was printed using both the Dongba script and the Latin alphabet.

Naxi’s matriarchal structure has a strong influence on the language.

The word “female” associated with a noun gives it strength in meaning whereas “male” weakens it.

The Naxi Religion

Little is actually known of the Naxi's original native religion led by the *Lli-bu* –female shamans who practised exorcism and other divination rituals- as the strong influence of *Bön* and the *Dongbas* (priests literate in Dongba religious manuscripts) gathered followers and took over.



The Dongba manuscripts give us a unique insight into Naxi's religious beliefs.

The Dongba religion is based on the ancient Bön tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Ceremonial clothing is strongly Tibetan-inspired, and Bön gods adorn their conical-shaped headgear. Emphasis is placed on the relationship between man and nature.

According to the Dongba mythology, “Nature” and “Man” are half-brothers born from the same father.

As a result, the Naxi were traditionally highly respectful of nature and its gods.

Villagers would not cut trees in excess, wash dirty things in the forest by fear of crossing the gods and bringing bad luck on themselves. The village elders supervised any activity linked to nature and a traditional custom of regulating logging and firewood was in place.

Until the communists came to power in 1949, Naxi people were very keen on the preservation of their natural habitat and organised in that respect.

Although Dongba rituals make up the core of Naxi's traditional religion, Naxi are polytheists and combine different religious practices and influences, each serving a particular purpose.

Tibetan Buddhism strongly influenced funeral rites, prayers for the dead and rituals linked to nature.

Taoism exerted a lesser influence on Naxi religious beliefs from tenth century onwards. It had mainly an aesthetic purpose, and encouraged the worshipping of ancestors.

Confucianism, of Han influence, was used to maintain the relationship with the departed.

Animism helped Naxi deal with the powers of nature, and shamanism provided protection from the evil spirits for both the living and the dead.

Dongba culture exerted an influence beyond Naxi religion and Naxi's art, music and architecture is a tribute to its legacy.

Naxi Household

The Naxi lived until recently according to a matriarchal rule.

Although the local village leaders were male, the microstructure of the Naxi society is based on female leadership.



As much as Naxi women inherited all property and female elders presided over disputes, this system of female leadership came with compromising and sacrifices attached to it. Naxi women had flexible arrangements in relationships, allowing them and their partners not only to live under separate roofs (the *axhu* or 'friend' system), but also authorizing male partners to sever all ties and delegate children support to the sole responsibility of women once the relationship was over. Indeed, according to Naxi tradition, all children born to a couple belonged to the woman, as the head of household.

Naxi women are also extremely hard working. Under the matriarchal system, they represented the main workforce behind the Naxi household.

Hence, the respect for female figures in the Naxi society and language (see Language section).

Naxi Clothing

The attire consists of a blue cap, wide-sleeved blue blouse and long trousers covered by a blue or dark-coloured apron tied at the waist by a richly decorated belt. Sometimes a sheepskin is worn over the shoulder.

There are some regional variations in traditional clothing though. For instance, in Ninglang County, the attire consists of a short jacket and floor-length skirt.

Naxi women's hard working patterns are reflected in their most noticeable dress feature: the T-shaped cape.

The cape represents heaven and is adorned by seven embroidered circles symbolizing stars. The

meaning of the cape is supposedly that Naxi women work until nightfalls, when stars rise, seven days of the week.



The men's traditional costume does not differ much from that of the Han Chinese.

Nowadays, younger generations tend to wear the traditional dress only on ceremonial occasions such as weddings, cremations or festivals.

Naxi Festivals

Naxi people celebrate a number of festivals, on the basis of the lunar calendar.

Many of those such as the Spring Festival, the Dragon-boat Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival and Firebrand Festival, etc. result from the influence of the Han culture.

Other festivals are Naxi in essence.

The 'Worship of Heaven' in January, the 'God of the Rain Festival' in March and the 'Mule and Horse Fair' in July are instances of these unique cultural events.

The most important traditional festival of the Naxi calendar is the Sanduo Festival. It is celebrated on the eighth day of the second month of the lunar calendar.

The festival pays homage to *Sanduo*, a Naxi god of war, protector of the Naxi people and their lands.

According to Naxi legend, a hunter found a stone on Jade Dragon Mountain and decided to take it home. On the way, he took a rest and laid the stone on the floor. When the moment came to go back on the road, to his surprise, he could no longer lift the stone. Many as a result thought that this stone was a god's reincarnation. The Naxi later build a temple, the Beiyue Temple, to honour this deity and named it *Sanduo*. His avatar is a "knight" riding a white horse.

Traditionally, the Naxi call upon *Sanduo* to protect them in the face of adversities.

The Tibetan

Why Including Tibetans as one of the Ethnic Groups in China?

Our decision to include Tibetans in China might be controversial. Therefore, we would like to clarify our position on this matter.

Our aim is not to defend Chinese authorities' contestable views on political hegemony and the abuse they have committed in Tibet, but to acknowledge the present struggle of the Tibetan people and most importantly to give you an introduction of a cultural and religious identity threatened by extinction.

Also, as much as Tibetans' non-violent fight for freedom has been widely reported by the media, their struggle is only the tip of the iceberg as hundreds of ethnic groups around Asia and the world lost their land, are about to lose their land or/and are being oppressed.

Tibet: a History of Oppression

After the Communist Party took power in 1949, it began exerting its 'liberation' stance on Tibet. By 1950, the Liberation Army had invaded Tibet and redefined its original borders (Tibet then comprised the Tibetan provinces of U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo –today's province of Qinghai- and areas which are now part of Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan provinces).

In May that year, the Tibetan government had to sign a treaty recognising Chinese rule over Tibet but allowing itself to retain autonomy and precedence over internal affairs.

As Chinese authorities exerted more and more control over Tibet and ridiculed the treaty, Tibetans' open resistance gathered momentum. The resistance operations stepped up and lead to the National Uprising in 1959.

In March 1959, following a near-miss bombing of the Norbulingka (the traditional summer residence of the successive Dalai Lama from the 1780s until the PRC too over in the 1950's), the Dalai Lama, Tibet' spiritual leader and head of state, decided to escape to Northern India, where he was granted asylum.

A number of Tibetans also fled Chinese oppression and settled in India, Buthan, Nepal and Western countries such as the USA.

The international community called upon China to cease its oppressive rule and respect Tibet's right to self-determination but never intervened beyond the U.N. assembly's resolutions and threat of sanctions.

From 1959 to 1979, Tibet witnessed further destruction of its culture and oppression of its people: over 6,000 Tibetan monasteries, and other religious, cultural and historical landmarks were destroyed.

It is estimated that 1.2 million Tibetans died as a result of Chinese brutal rule. Over 6,000 Tibetan monasteries, and other religious, cultural and historical landmarks were destroyed.

The Tibet-China Dialogue was renewed between 1979 and 1984 but talks remained fruitless and the Dalai Lama refused to return from exile as long as the future of its people would not be protected from further violations.

In 1987, the once again deteriorating political situation, growing and largely unofficial influx of

Han Chinese into Tibet, led to public demonstrations in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa and throughout Tibet.

The increasing Chinese Han presence is a passive threat to the Tibetan people as China not only exerts military and political control but also imposes its cultural and religious through a civilian “colonization”.

In 1989, the Dalai Lama’s peaceful efforts towards a self-determined Tibet awarded him the Nobel Peace Prize, and considerably raised Tibet’s profile internationally.

The situation in Tibet has since remained tense. Although China has opened Tibet to tourism in the 1990s, there has been no significant political outbreak.

Tibet Today

At present, the Tibetan have a population of about 4,593,000 in China, (down from a population of 6,330,567 estimated in a 1959 census) most of which live in the so-called “Tibet Autonomous Region”.

A few Tibetan communities live in Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces.

The 14th Dalai Lama still presides over the Tibetan government in exile from its base in Dharamasala, India.

The Tibetan Origins

The Tibetans are actually not one hegemonic group but a grouping of related ethnic groups.

Although these groups, such as the Changri, Nachan, Hor, etc, share cultural features, they each have a distinctive identity.

There are two main ethnic groups in today’s Tibet -apart from the recent Han Chinese migrants.

The Central Tibetans who live around Lhasa and U-Tsang share a strong Mongolian element in their ancestry.

Meanwhile, the physical features –sharper, taller- of the Drokpa of the Tibetan plateau (also called Hbrog-pa in Tibetan or “steppe-dwellers”) and the Khambas in the Kham area have anthropologists suggest they are of Scythian descent ⁴.

The Tibetans from Western Tibet, in particular those from the region neighbouring Kashmir, bear more resemblance to the people of Indo-Aryan descent.

According to a Tibetan myth, Tibetans originated in the union of a monkey and a mountain ogress. The monkey is actually an avatar of the bodhisattva *Chenrezig* (supreme enlightened being according to Tibetan Buddhism), and the ogress that of Tara (also called *Jetsun Dolma*, a Buddha of compassion and action in Tibetan Buddhism).

4 A group of Iranian nomadic people who in ancient times inhabited an area in Eurasia called Scythia.

The Tibetan Language

Tibetan is a Sino-Tibetan language, which is not only spoken in Tibet but also in Buthan, India and Nepal.

Until relatively recently, Tibetan was also taught in Mongolia where it is considered to be the classic language of Buddhism.

There are three major dialects: Weizang, Kangba and Ando.

The Tibetan script consists in four vowels and thirty consonants. It is derived from the ancient Brahmi script, hence similarities with the Indian alphabets, in particular Sanskrit.

Religions of Tibet

Most Tibetans believe in Lamaism, often referred to as Tibetan Buddhism, and the indigenous shamanistic religion known as *Bön* (whose influences can also be felt in Lamaism itself).

Buddhism is not native to Tibet and was only introduced in the thirteenth Century.

Tibetan lamas –Buddhist and Bön- are major figures in deeply religious Tibet. They conduct religious ceremonies and in the case of the Bön religion, act as shamans as well as guardians of monasteries and other religious sites.

Religious Practices

Mani Stones

Mani stones are part of the Tibetan landscape.

Manis are carved/painted prayer stones often piled into cairns, i.e. mounds, sometimes decorated with sheep and yak horns.

They usually bear the mantra inscription “oM ma Ni padme hUM” or other religious excerpts on one side and the all-seeing eyes of the Buddha or images of deities on the other side. The eyes of the Buddha remind the devotees to stay on the Dharma path (the path of progress for all living beings) and that all living creatures are worthy of compassion.

“Om mani padme hum” has no direct translation into English but metaphorically means that 'one's impure body, speech and mind can be purified to become the pure body, speech and mind of a Buddha'.

Mani literally means, 'jewel' and symbolizes the efforts towards enlightenment.

Padme means 'lotus', a symbol of wisdom.

Finally, *hum* symbolizes 'purity', that which can be achieved through efforts and wisdom.

Tibetans believe that viewing, writing and reciting this sacred mantra, the mantra of Chenrezig (also known as *Avalokiteshvara* in Sanskrit, the Buddha of compassion), gives one protection from evil and danger.

Prayer Flags

Tibetan sacred grounds such as mountain passes, are often adorned with prayer flags: white, blue, yellow, green and red cotton squares adorned with Buddhist symbols and mantras.

They are of two kinds: the Tibetan call the vertical flags, *Darchor* and the horizontal ones, more in use, *Lungta*.

Tibetans believe that through prayer flags, their prayers are blown towards heaven as offerings and will in return bring protection and good fortune to the one who hangs them and his/her surroundings.

The astrological date is a very decisive factor in the ritual of flag hanging. The Tibetan New Year is one occasion when Tibetans will replace old flags or hang new ones.

Chokhor or the "Prayer Wheel"

Chokhor or the "prayer wheel" in Tibetan, is a common ritualistic object in Tibet.

It consists of a handle or base (depending on its size) topped by a metal or wooden cylinder to which a light weight is chained. The *Om mani Padme Hum* mantra (or *Om patri muye sale du* in the Bön cult) is printed or carved on the cylinder.

Every rotation of a prayer wheel embodies one utterance of the mantra, and brings the devotee good fortune and protection against evil.

Lamaists turn the wheel clockwise, while adepts of Bön turn it the other way round.

Tibetans use the prayer wheels to spread their blessings to all living beings and call on good karma in their next life.

Reincarnation is indeed a strong component of Tibetans' beliefs.

Tibetan Religious Symbols

The religious signs are used as sacred ornaments. The most prevalent are the Eight Auspicious Signs, which represent the progress that one devotee, makes along the Dharma path of enlightenment.

Below is a brief description of the most widespread religious symbols:

- The White Umbrella: a symbol of loyalty and protection.
- The Golden Fish: a symbol of happiness and protection from suffering.
- The Vase contains the nectar of immortality and as such represents all hidden riches.
- The Lotus is a symbol of purity.
- The Conch Shell symbolizes the spoken word of the enlightened.
- The Knot of Eternity stands for the illusion of time and the unity of all living beings.
- The Victory Standard is a cylinder symbolizing the victory of Buddhism over ignorance.

- The Dharma Wheel is a symbol of unity, and is often flanked by two deers, themselves symbols of fulfilment and emptiness. The Swastika: it symbolizes infinity and is a sign of good fortune (unfortunately blasphemed by Hitler in its twentieth century use!). Buddhists draw it clockwise, whereas Bön adepts draw it the other way round.
- The Wheel of Life is divided into six sections that represent the different realms of existence: Heaven, Semi- gods, Humans, Hell, Hungry Ghosts and Animals. The central part of the wheel represents the three 'poisons' of existence: ignorance, hate and greediness.
- The Kalacakra Seal is a symbol of supreme initiation to the occult, only mastered by a few lamas.
- The Sun and Moon are also common sights on houses as well as Chorten and represent the union of contraries⁵.

There is also a small minority of Tibetan Muslims, known as Kachee, who mainly settled in the areas of Lhasa and Shigatse⁶.

Tibetan Culture

A Treasure of Cultural Wealth

Although part of Tibetan culture has been lost or altered by successive attempts of 'hanification' by the Chinese authorities, a lot of the culture subsides through its art, drama, literature and architecture, and is deeply religious in nature.

The Tibetan art is mainly a religious art, historically influenced by different religious beliefs ranging from Mahayana Buddhism to Tantric Buddhism and Bön rites.

Tibetan culture has also benefited from foreign influences along the centuries such as Nepalese and Kashmiri paintings, elements of Indian and Chinese architecture, etc.

A typical Tibetan Buddhist art form is the *Tsatsa*: a moulded tablet featuring imaged of a deity, chorten or other religious symbols, which is dried and ritually charged to be used as a holy artefact. Tibetan Buddhist believes that making *Tsatsas* invokes good karma and the ability to make *Tsatsas* is a compulsory skill for monks in Tibet.

Tibetan Calendar: the Losar Festival

The Tibetans have their own calendar based on the phases of the moon.

The most important festival of the Tibetan calendar is *Losar*, the New Year, celebrated in February, but whose exact date depends on the lunar calendar.

Losar is a three-day festival. The first day of the celebrations is usually a family affair, whereas the second and third days are a time for visiting friends and acquaintances and exchanging gifts. This is also a time for Tibetans to visit their local monasteries and make religious offerings.

⁵ Chorten, also called Stupa in other Buddhist regions, is a religious monument consisting of three parts: a base, a cylindrical middle part and a crowning steeple or shaft.

⁶ Kachee is a Tibetan word meaning Kashmiri.

Tibetans closely associate Losar with purity and all buildings will be washed in surface and cleaned inside out in preparation for the festivities, people will only wear new clothes and special food will be made.

This festival's origins can be traced back to the Bön tradition when every winter, followers were offering vast quantities of incense to please deities and drive away evil spirits.

The Losar Festival falls on the 25th day of the tenth month of the Tibetan calendar. It was last held from 7 February 2008 onwards (Gregorian calendar date).

Tibetan Medicine

One of the most influential features of Tibetan culture is the development and practice of its own medicine. Together with astronomy, medicine is an area where Tibetans have realized tremendous achievements.

Tibetans hold medicine and astrology in such high regard that the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute, one of the most prestigious authorities on the subject, was also established in 'exile' in Dharamasala in 1961. It is widely in use in India, Tibet and is also practised as an oriental medicine around the world.

Also called *Gsoba Rig-pa* in Tibetan, the 'science of healing', Tibetan medicine has been credited in the treatment of chronic diseases such as rheumatism, arthritis, ulcers, chronic digestive problems, asthma, hepatitis, eczema, liver and sinus problems, anxiety and ailments commonly associated with an unbalanced nervous system.

Tibetan medicine is a traditional healing system, which has been in use for over 2,500 years. Its practice is based on up to 2,000 types of plants, 40 animal species and 50 minerals. According to the Institute, "95% of Tibetan medicine is based on herbs (...)."

Historically speaking, Yutok Yonten Gonpo was a major figure in its development, and produced the milestone of its teachings with the Four Medical Tantras, or *rGyud-bzhi* in the eighth century. The physician incorporated medicinal teachings not only from Tibet but also from Persia, India and China into the Tantras, a collection of 156 chapters illustrated by large scroll paintings, known as *Thangkas*.

One of Yutok Yonten Gonpo's descendant further developed his discipline by completing eighteen medical studies and adding anatomical drawings, in particular of internal organs.

At present, it takes seven years of training for a student at the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute to become a qualified 'Tibetan doctor'⁷.

The first four years are dedicated to studying the Four Medical Tantras:

- The Root Tantra gives an overview of treatments, principles and the main subjects in Tibetan medicine
- The Exegetical Tantra further studies the principles covered in the Root Tantra through eleven topics.

7 Source: <http://www.Tibet.com>

- The Instructional Tantra, also called the Oral Tradition Tantra, is concerned with the practical applications of the treatments and teachings.
- The fourth tantra, the Subsequent Tantra, goes further in- depth into the applications of techniques, and practical aspects of Tibetan medicine, such as the concoction of medicines, pulse reading, etc.

The concept behind Tibetan healing is that all diseases are the result of an imbalance between *Nyipa sum*, “the three humors”: *rlung*, *mKhris-pa* and *Bad-kan*.