

The three Dong tribes

Dong villages are surrounded by rice terraces, clinging to the mountainsides, close to rivers, and shaded by immense banyan trees. The total Dong population is two and a half million, concentrated along the border region between the three provinces of Hunan, Guizhou and Guangxi. They call themselves Gaml (pronounced gum).

According to Dong history, several branches have existed, descended from three major tribes: the Gamlao, Gamjiao, Gamdan. Each branch has its own dialect, costumes and customs. Marriages between different branches are rare. Their territory is clearly separated from each other, and according to tradition, they arrived in the distant past in the Hunan, Guizhou and Guangxi regions at different times and via different routes.

The Gamlao branch

According to oral tradition, their ancestors, the Luo Yue, one of the "Bai Yue" (hundred Yue) living in south-east China came from the eastern seaboard and made their way first up the Pearl River, then up the Duliujiang and settled in the Rongshui, Sanjiang, Liping and Rongjiang regions. This branch has preserved the most ancient customs. The women wear their hair in a chignon coiled to the front or to the side of the head. They are excellent singers, play the pipa, (a 4 stringed banjo), and a flute made out of buffalo bone. During the wedding ceremony, two children, a boy and a girl, accompany the bride to her husband's house, as a symbol of the birth of a boy and a girl, and of good fortune.

In the Sanjiang region weddings take place immediately after the New Year, and several hundred weddings may take place at the same time. The bride is escorted to the house of her husband with gifts. When the bride returns to her parents' home, the husband's family sends several dozen young men and women carrying presents slung on poles over their shoulders (sticky rice cakes or baba, half a pig painted red, baskets of rice, jars of rice wine etc...) to accompany them halfway then the presents are handed over to another team of young men and women sent by the bride's family. The village is criss-crossed by these processions, all with people carrying presents on poles over their shoulders, sometimes with five or six children in front, as a symbol of fertility, who let off fire crackers. When their daughter has returned, the parents offer a banquet of baba (sticky rice cakes) for the escort party. After the wedding the bride does not live with her husband immediately. She stays with her parents, and only goes to help out at her husband's home at festival time or when there is a funeral. So she will move back and forth several times until she becomes pregnant and then goes to live with her husband permanently.

The banquet of one hundred families

The Dong are a warm and hospitable people, always offering their guests food and rice wine. When a neighbour receives guests, one should bring a dish to contribute to the feast, a custom called "helping with a dish". If the guest is particularly

important, a banquet is organised in their honour. It is known as "the banquet of one hundred families". Tables are set out on a terrace and all the guests bring along one or two dishes. According to custom each guest should empty a glass with each of the other participants.

The Gamjiao branch

This branch of the Dong live more widely dispersed, mainly in the north of the Dong region. In Guangxi, to the north of Sanjiang district, in Hunan in Tongdao, and in Guizhou in Tianzhu. They originally came from the east coast, migrated towards Lake Dongjing, travelled up the Yuanjiang River and settled in Guizhou and Hunan. The first tribes to settle concluded a system of tribal alliances, known as "kuan", to manage the Dong territory and operate a subsistence farming system. The Chinese empire levied taxes and imposed forced labour. During the Tang dynasty this powerful "kuan" system helped to unite all the tribes from Qingzhou to Liuzhou.

The traditional Dong drum towers and wind and rain bridges, originated within the kuan system. They are to be found mainly on Gamjiao territory. In Sanjiang, Liping, Congjiang and Rongjiang districts there are more than 300 wind and rain bridges and 108 drum towers.

Wind and Rain Bridges, are covered with elegant curved roof pavilions. They are to be found near the villages which vie with each other to build the most beautiful bridge. They are most impressive, built on high stone pillars, with a structure of eight massive beams made of fir timber. Inside they are decorated with naïf paintings. The role of these covered bridges is primarily sacred. It is where the spirits of wind and rain are honoured. These spirits protect the village and ensure good fengshui. They are a place where travellers can find rest and shelter from the elements. They are also a place for celebrations, and for lusheng competitions together with singing and dancing.

There are at least 100, more often up to 400 or 500 families, in a village. Each village has its own Drum Tower which is both a meeting place and a place for celebrations.

The Drum Tower is a symbol of unity, and good fortune for the clan. It performs a political, social and cultural role. It belongs to the clan and sometimes to the whole village. If there are several clans in the village, each one has its own drum tower. It is built without a single nail, according to a time-honoured tradition, with a square foundation and wooden pillars. It may have up to ten stories and reach a height of 20 m. The roof consists of a series of eaves, one on top of the other, with no separation between them, from 3 to 13, tapering towards the summit, and with representations of dragons, lions, fish, cranes and other characters at each

extremity. Inside is a drum carved out of a tree trunk, with a buffalo hide skin. In the past, only the "village elder", someone respected by all, could sound the drum and only on important occasions in order to alert the villagers. The drum would be sounded to summon all the villagers to discuss an important problem, or in the event of an emergency (fire, theft, war). Nowadays, young people hold song contests there and on winter evenings the old men of the village gather around a fire under the tower to tell stories and play cards and smoke their long bamboo pipe. Every drum tower has a small theatre beside it where Dong operas are performed.

When someone dies, a taoist priest or a village elder recites prayers to accompany the soul of the deceased, who wears a traditional silk costume and cloth slippers, and is then placed in a coffin. Rice is placed in their mouth and the toes are tied together so that they will not come back to haunt the living. A procession accompanies the coffin to the burial ground, a shaman scatters paper money along the way so that the spirit of the dead person will not return, and firecrackers are set off to chase away evil spirits.

Women coil their hair in a bun on the back of their head, held in place with a silver comb and fine headscarf wound tightly around the head. Costumes for special feast days are dyed with indigo and hammered, as are the costumes worn by men who wear turbans coiled up into a "hero's topknot".

The wedding customs have their own special traditions : after the young man and women have spent several evenings together singing, and have established a romantic attachment, they exchange engagement gifts, inform their parents of their plans to marry, and set the date for the ceremony. Unlike the Gamlao, the bride does not arrive during the day, but at night. The groom arrives secretly to claim his bride in the middle of the night. When she comes to her husband's home, everyone hides, except for an old woman who stays up to receive them. Tradition has it that her presence is to avoid gossip. When the bride enters, she is given a bowl of "oil tea", makes an offering to the ancestors, and then invites the whole household, and the neighbours, grown ups and children, to come and drink the "oil tea"

« Oil tea » (youcha) is a mixture of tea and sticky rice. Whenever there is a reception for guests, or an anniversary or a celebration of some sort the Dong prepare oil tea. The sticky rice is first cooked and dried, then fried in oil, until it bursts. Soybean seeds, also fired and popped, are added, along with peanuts and sesame seeds. The ingredients are placed in a bowl, meanwhile the tea leaves are sautéed in a pan, tung oil is added, and then the mixture is boiled in water. The tea leaves are removed and the boiling liquid is poured into the bowls. The tea is first served salted, then sweet. There are infinite variations which depend on individual taste. Oil tea is considered to be an effective tonic if drunk regularly.

The more it is drunk the more it is appreciated. The tea is served in small bowls and should be enjoyed in small quantities whilst conversing with one's host. One should drink at least three bowls. If one drinks less the host will not be pleased. If one drinks more, he will be delighted !

Then the bride sleeps at her mother-in-law's house for three nights, whilst the husband sleeps alone. The bride's brothers invite people from the husband's family to accompany her back to her parents' house and throw a banquet. On the day of Qingming festival in the region of Tongle, the Gamlao go up into the mountain to celebrate the arrival of spring and thousands of young people gather in the hope of finding a partner, they sing love songs, and although the Gamjiao villages are nearby, they never take part in these festivities.

The Gamdan branch

There is a branch of the Dong scattered throughout Liping, Longsheng, Sanjiang and Tongdao districts. Their costumes, language, festivals, wedding customs are similar to those of the Gamjiao. But their distinguishing trait is dog worship, also called dragon, or dog-dragon. In the past, in Chengyang, when making *lusheng*, they would invite over Gamdan craftsmen, and on the day of their arrival dogs would be sacrificed in the belief that this would give a more powerful sound to the *lusheng*. According to tradition, the Gamdan used to offer a dog as an engagement present, and offerings to ancestors consisted of sacrificing a dog, a practice forbidden by the other branches of the Dong. It is said that in the district of Longsheng, in the municipality of Pindeng, in the village of Longping there used to be a great virgin forest. The Danren used to hunt there and one day they caught an enormous wild dog, they decided to settle there, and call it the Plain of the Dog. The name was subsequently changed to Longping, meaning Plain of the Dragon. The local inhabitants still consider themselves Gamdan.

Sanyuesan : the lovers' festival

Sanyuesan (the third day of the third month according to the lunar calendar) is celebrated by all branches of the Dong. It is held in memory of two ill-fated lovers who committed suicide to avoid having to part from each other. According to the legend, a long, long time ago a poor peasant had a beautiful daughter. When she was still a little girl she fell in love with the village orphan. They used to meet beneath a tree beside the village well. But the girl's uncle had a son, and he decided to marry him off to his cousin. The girl wept and pleaded, but all to no avail, the date of the wedding was set for the third day of the third month. On that very day the two lovers decided to run away and agreed to meet beneath the tree beside the well. Since her parents were keeping a close watch over her, she invented an excuse to leave the house. She said was going to the well to wash some onions, but in fact it was to meet her fiancé. The villagers were alerted and sent out a search party. The two young lovers did not know where to hide so they threw themselves into the well. On the day of the festival, a competition is organised for all the young people of the village. A rocket is fired into the air with a ring tied to a silk ribbon. When it falls back to earth, different teams

from the village must try to catch it, and run to an appointed place before the others can catch them. It usually turns into a free-for-all with someone finally escaping with the precious ring, who is then declared the winner.

The tale of the song tree

Once upon a time, when the ancestor of the Dong died, a tree grew on the very spot where he was buried. This tree, which was called "Solo" brought forth leaves which were covered with writing that no-one could understand. Only the Diugui bird could understand the writing and it would come and sing every day. The villagers would gather round the tree to listen. One day the bird was injured and fell into the river, but it was saved by a leaf of the tree on which it floated downstream all the way to Bawan. There it sang so sweetly that everyone rushed to save it, but they were too late, because a fish jumped up and swallowed it. The people of Bawan were furious at losing the songbird, so they made a large hook and caught and killed the fish. A boy named Sive noticed that the fish's gills were still moving and he found the bird still alive inside the fish's belly. Out of gratitude at being rescued, the bird gave all the songs to Sive who passed them on to the Dong people.