



Above: A local woman carries some vegetables back home in Shangyunjue Village in the estimated 800-year-old town of Menglian, capital of the Menglian Dai, Lahu and Wa Autonomous County in Southwest China's Yunnan Province. Right: Ai Luo (left) plays instruments with his friends Ai Sannong (centre) and Ai Shuaijiao at Tusi Palace in Menglian.



A day immersed in Dai hospitality

Local music, costumes and legends conjure up feast for the senses

By YU NAN
China Daily staff

A sudden breaking sound and a harsh horn woke me on a rainy afternoon last month after a seven-hour ride in an Iveco from Simao to Menglian, in Southwest China's Yunnan Province.

But the fresh, warm air with the fragrance of the earth floating in through the window and the bright leaves on the trees lining the roads — both of which are rare in the wintry North China where I am from — immediately sobered me up and compensated for the sleep distraction.

Nestled in the southwestern corner of Yunnan Province and bordering Myanmar, the tranquil small town with picturesque landscapes and agreeable weather is so far not a hot tourism destination compared with its bustling neighbour — Xishuangbanna, about 100 kilometres away.

Fountain of music

The rain had stopped. The mini-bus parked at the entrance of a dark blue stone path that zigzagged to the top of a hill, from where faint music originated.

Tracing the melody, I quickly climbed to the hilltop and found a fantastic ancient structure.

Looking through its impressive gate, I caught sight of a grandiose palace with a triple-layer black roof, tall red pillars, golden floor and a two-storey building hidden behind a small but beautiful garden.

Along the spacious corridor, I finally found the source of the

music — three old men were playing instruments I'd never seen before.

Several young women, sitting beside the old players, were busy painting small drums in yellow and red.

Just before I was ready to step onto the stairway to discover more surprises on the upper floor, a clear voice stopped me: "Please take off your shoes before you enter the house."

With the polite warning, a beautiful woman among the painters stood up and volunteered to be my guide.

According to the woman, Zheng Ling, the buildings called Tusi Palace by locals, were first built in 1406 in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). They were used as an administration centre for Tusi, a hereditary post appointed by the central governments in the Yuan (1271-1368), Ming and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

Altogether 28 generations of Tusi, all of them Dai people, had lived and governed there.

The palace covering over 10,000 square metres included a hall for discussing official business, several rooms for the headman and his three wives, a few offices for high-rank officials, a big granary, kitchen, small jail and cottages for servants.

Tusi Palace in Menglian was one of the best reserved among the 18 in the province and was turned into a museum in 1985.

Only then did I discover the graceful woman in her 40s was the curator of the museum and it was no wonder her insight was so deep. She had been working there for more than 10 years.

The town of Menglian, which is about 800-years-old, is now

the county seat of the Menglian Dai, Lahu and Wa Autonomous County.

It was a political, business and cultural centre for Dai people over the years.

Its old name was Nayun, which means "an inner city" to the Dai people.

"Taking off shoes before entering the house is a long tradition of the Dai people," Zheng explained.

The ancient town is ignored by tourism but attracts many cultural and ethnic experts because of its well-preserved overall layout, records of the Tusi governmental system and many original ethnic buildings of the Dai, Lahu and Wa people, she said.

"Although a lot of methods have been used to preserve ethnic cultural relics after recognizing their precious value, some arts are still gradually dying," Zheng said.

She again led me to the three old musicians.

Zheng said they were from a Meng'an village in the county, from which villagers had been playing music exclusively for the Tusi families for centuries. The instruments they played only had Dai names and few people in the village could now play them.

Ai Luo, already 62, who was playing one of the instruments, told me in *putonghua* (Mandarin Chinese) that the three men had been playing together since childhood. But they had to stop to learn how to plant crops after 1949.

Now, invited by Zheng, they have the chance to perform in the palace and each of them is paid 200 yuan (US\$24) per month.

Zheng ended the invitation as sound some ancient music seemed to be disappearing.

She was the museum to be a platform where visitors can get to know the precious folk music and arts in a bid to better protect it.

"But it is of the time we are the only place since the visitors and artists are still rare in the corner," Zheng said.

"You are the only visitor today."

But thick of numbers does not deter musicians.

"The performance itself is enough to take us happy," Ai said.

Dai dress

Intoxicated in their music, I didn't notice dusk had fallen.

Standing in the second floor, I had a bird's eye view of the whole town which is enclosed by a lush forest.

Tinged with the sunset and reflecting from a river nearby, the town looked spectacular and peaceful.

Three using sections were clearly observed in the centre of the town. The area nearest to Tusi Palace was called "upper city" and had been exclusively reserved for the large families of the Tusi. The remaining area, located further away, was for local officials, pointing at the river.

The river was called Nanlei by locals, which means "chasing husband" and rambles through the town. It is regarded as a mother river by Dai people for the blessing of pregnancy.

Not far from the bottom of the hill, a large village caught my eye. Zheng said it was the best-pre-

served Dai areas and the best Dai food was served there.

That was enough for me and my rumbling stomach. After bidding farewell to Zheng I walked towards the village, following the kitchen smoke as it curled into the sky.

The hunger subsided, however, once I was standing in front of the amazing village.

There were so many wonderful Dai houses that were all in an integrated style — two storeys, black roofs and walls, little windows and a tiny veranda. They looked breath-taking as a whole.

I met a woman dressed in a purple Dai frock on a village path and asked whether I could take a picture of her.

The woman waved her hands and giggled at me, saying she could only do it if I was also dressed in Dai clothes.

It was agreed and I eventually got changed into a green Dai suit, a half-sleeve tight-fitting jacket and a long skirt with a silver band around the waist.

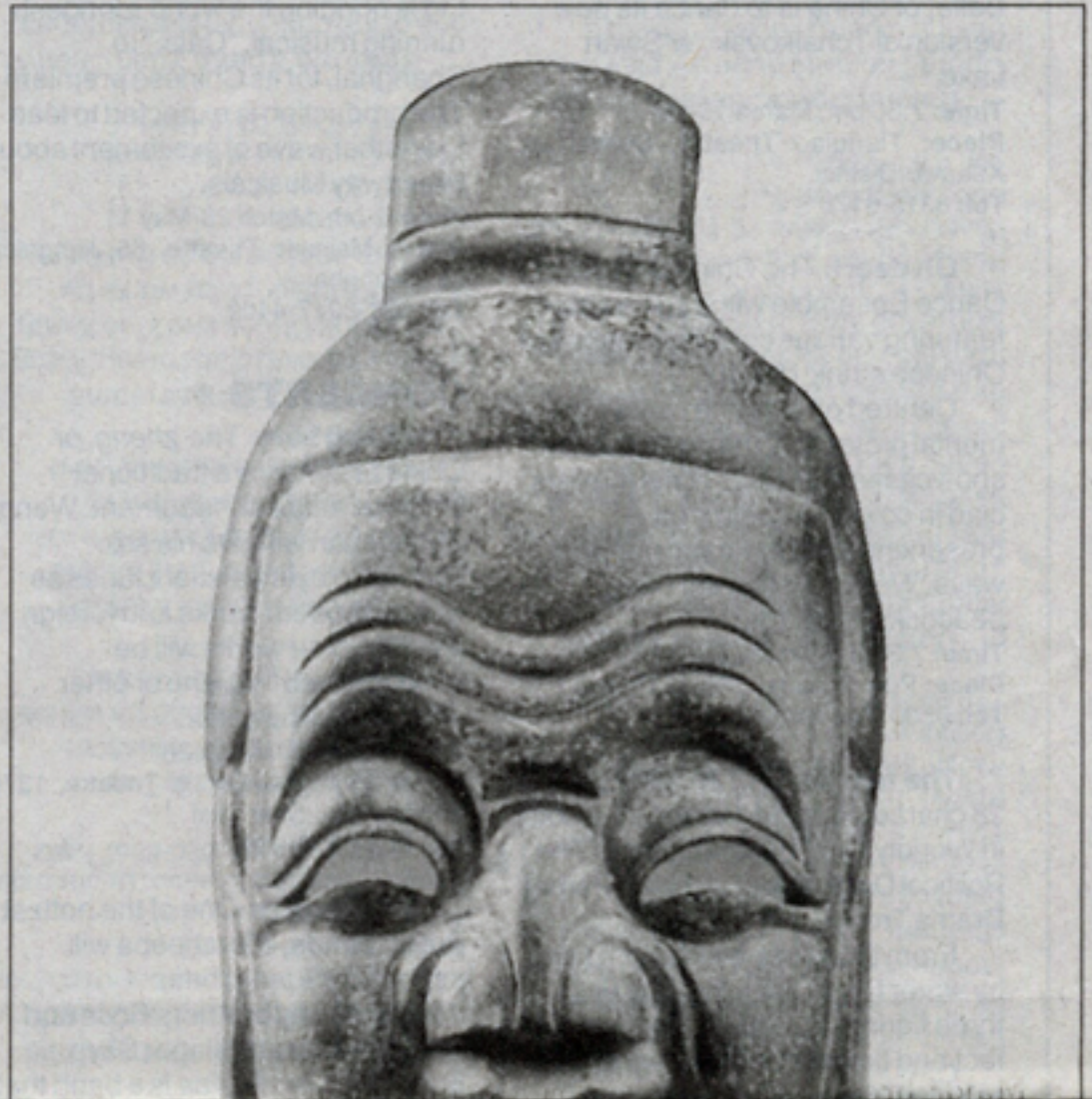
While talking, the woman told me her name was Miye Hanbao and she was 42. She had two children, both in their 20s.

Her daughter was working in Thailand and her son was planting crops with his father in the village.

After taking pictures, I changed back into my clothes and waited for her to charge a fee for the use of the Dai clothes — which I have encountered dozens of times at other places.

But she didn't ask and when I mentioned paying she waved her hands again.

I insisted on getting her address so I could send her some of the pictures, the only way I could repay her hospitality.



Grinning granny: Folk opera among the Tujia ethnic people, who mainly live in Central China, has various masks such as this smiling granny with the surname Tang.

Ethnic arts shine at exhibition

By GUO ZI
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A culture and arts exhibition featuring the country's ethnic cultural heritage made its debut at the China Millennium Altar exhibition hall in Beijing at last weekend.

The exhibition, which will run until March 20, is divided into five parts: calligraphy and paintings, costumes, music instruments, masks and relic archives.

More than 100 paintings and calligraphy works are being shown and among them is a calligraphy piece by the late Kuomintang general Zhang Xueliang (1898-2001).

The four characters *tian you zhong hua* (Heaven bless the Chinese nation) display Zhang's longing for the unification and invigoration of the motherland.

The second and most colourful section shows costumes of ethnic groups. Renowned for fine craftsmanship, appealing colours and unique styles, the costumes provide a window to the aesthetics, ethics and religious characteristics of different ethnic groups.

There are about 1,000 costumes on display, which were selected from collections of the Nationalities Culture Palace in Beijing.

There are also 500 musical instruments widely used during ethnic people's daily lives and on social occasions.

Those on show include stringed instruments played by northern ethnic people like

the *matou qin* — a bow instrument with a scroll carved like a horse's head, belonging to the Mongolian people — and percussion and wind instruments from the south.

Masks are another attraction in the exhibition.

Originating in the pre-historical period, masks were used by people to transform their personalities and communicate with the forces of nature, which they believed were supreme beings. They still exist in the life of nearly 40 ethnic groups in about 20 provinces and regions.

Relics and archives shown during the exhibition include a map displaying the three routes that Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) officials took to Tibet, an imperial edict to Dalai by Emperor Qianlong (reigned 1711-99) and Qing Dynasty imperial documents recording the images of different ethnic groups.

The Nationalities Culture Palace, Academy of Ethnic Arts, Chinese People's Military Museum and several other institutions have contributed to the event.

"Every piece shown here is selected with care, demonstrating the richness and uniqueness of Chinese culture," said Yong Jirong, vice-curator of the Nationalities Culture Palace.

Guo Zhengying, another deputy curator at the museum, said the exhibition was a crystallization of national strength as six institutions from the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan were sponsoring the event.



Tusi home: Tusi Palace has been well preserved over about 600 years, during which time it has hosted 28 generations of Tusi, a hereditary post appointed by the central governments in the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties (1271-1911).



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