

Christmas by the Mekong

By Dr Tan Lai Yong

The Mekong River is the longest in South East Asia. When my family and I moved to Xishuangbanna in 1996, our home was just a five-minute walk from this huge river. And standing by its banks was the church where the local Dai people go. The Dai people of Xishuangbanna in Yunnan Province are related to the Thai people in north Thailand and the Shan people of Myanmar. They are characterised by their gentle ways, colourful costumes and lively communal dances. On Christmas Day, the Dai Christians would bring out their traditional gongs and drums; they form a procession, sing and dance all the way from their villages to their church building by the Mekong. Our first Christmas in Yunnan was spent here.

On Christmas Eve, hundreds came to this little church building. Some were from the town area but many had travelled a long way from outlying villages. Some families carried vegetables, freshly plucked from their own garden plots at home. Others carried small sacks of rice. The Christmas service would be followed by a huge Christmas lunch for some 800 people. (There are no caterers or fast



We never knew corn grew on trees!

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An Ahka lady carrying her own stool to church.

food by the Mekong.) Several wooden buckets were used to steam some of the 85 kg of rice that would be consumed. Vegetables and meat were stirred-fried in a huge one-metre wide cast iron wok. A team of ten ladies busily chopped vegetables while another team cleaned the tilapia fish. By the side of the main church building, the choir was getting ready with their vocal warm-ups. A cheer rose from the cooking area as several people from an Ahka village arrived, each with a stack of firewood on his or her shoulder. One Ahka lady laughingly rescued her stool from the cook – it was not part of the firewood. Churches in Yunnan get to be very crowded and many villagers bring their own stools or chairs. The services go on for a good three or four hours.

The annual concert was also held on Christmas Eve. It started at 7pm and lasted till past midnight. Each village came up with a song item, a dance performance, a solo and a poetry recital, but nobody seemed to mind the long programme in spite of an extremely crowded church hall. It was fascinating to hear "Silent Night" sung in Chinese, Yunnanese, Dai, Ahka and a bit of English all in the same

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night. At the end of the concert, those who had no pre-arranged accommodation slept in the pews. Some preferred it this way as this meant they would get their seats for the morning service the next day.

On Christmas Day, after the church service, several Dai men took four thick bamboos (the diameter was about 20 cm each) and stuck them vertically into the ground. The bamboos stood upright, half as high as the cross on the roof of the church. The stability of each bamboo was tested by shoving and shaking it. Grease was applied onto the bamboo. Then, the men took out the Dai drums and started a rhythmic beat. Tied to the top of the 20-metre high bamboo poles were “hong baos” with some 200 RMB in them, and four teams of eager boys worked to get to the top of the poles for the prize money. Armed with rags and bits of cloth, they climbed up the bamboo inch by inch, painstakingly wiping off the grease along the way, and then slid back down exhausted, for the next boy to get up. The boys worked on the greased bamboos late into the afternoon. Down at the foot of the bamboo, the elders beat on the drums and talked about the good old times when they would be up at the top in less than half the time the present kids took. “Too much TV and too few trees to climb,” one of them commented. “And we climbed for a few RMB, not 200!”



Dr Tan and family amongst handmade Dai Christmas trees.

In the church hall, people posed for pictures by the scores of “Christmas trees”. These were handmade in traditional Dai style. The women folk used paper cuttings and flowers to make small trees, and clipped crisp new RMB notes onto the branches. These were their Christmas trees and were brought to the church as part of their Christmas offerings.

Dinner was another delicious meal cooked in huge woks over wood fires. This was followed by another concert, with more carols in different dialects and tribal languages. At intervals, someone would set off fireworks in the open space next to the church building or shoot off some sparkling “rockets” into the Mekong. Loud cheers rose from the kids as the starry sky lit up.

People started to pack up and leave for home on Boxing Day. As the wood fires were still giving enough heat, some noodles were warmed up before the long journey home. One of the church members took out her scissors and offered free haircuts. Five minutes was all she needed to give each man a tidy head of hair. As I took pictures, she waved at me and said: “Don’t take my picture. I am just doing what the preacher said; that after the worship and singing, the service begins.” As some men with neat haircuts walked out of the gate, they shouted gratefully: “Thanks for cutting our hair. See you at Easter!” ■



The Dai Christmas tree is made from paper cuttings and flowers, and comes with crisp new RMB notes!