



Winter 2003. I was shivering under two layers of blanket in freezing temperature. Ill, lonely, and helpless, I watched my breath vaporizing in the cold air. The fever began to blur my vision. However, I never in my mind lost sight of my mission. I was excited, for I had never gotten so close to the long-horn tribe I had long wanted to see.

A day before, a rickety bus arrived in the bustling bazaar in the commune of Suoga, after an arduous three-hour journey from town. Before it came to a full stop, my eyes had already locked onto the long wooden horns worn by the women amid the market goers. Ever since I first heard about the tribe through anecdotes, I had tried every way to make this discovery journey.

"Where is the *Bowuguan*, please?" A backpack on my back, I hustled against the human flow, asking the same question in Mandarin to everyone bumped in front of me.

Bowuguan stands for museum in Chinese. In the mid-1990s, the late Norwegian anthropologist John Gjestrum and his Chinese colleagues proposed an eco-museum in Guizhou province, the first of the kind in China. Gjestrum was particularly interested in a small branch of ethnic Miao living deep in the mountains west of the province. Although Miao is one of the largest groups in China's official list of fifty-six ethnic minorities, and spreads over the entire southwest of China, many of its tribes maintain a distinctive folk costume,

tradition, social structure and spiritual life. The buffalo-like horns spanning more than half a meter on the heads, for example, are the very unique characteristics of this long-horn tribe, numbered around 4,000, inhabiting in twelve villages at the elevation of 2,000 meters.

I was greeted with shaking heads and confused eyes. Apparently, none of the locals comprehended the meaning of *Bowuguan*, until a motor rickshaw driver seemingly recognised the visitor's intent. Fifteen minutes later, I stood in front of

the museum's gate, unmistakably featuring a horn on each side.

The Norwegian government provided initial funding of this eco-museum. King Olaf V of Norway and the Chinese presi-

dent Jiang Zemin attended the signing ceremony of the development agreement, and the opening day of the museum had attracted provincial and regional officials. But the days of fanfare had long gone. The museum sat forgotten next to a plot of corn field in Longga, the only one accessible by road among the twelve villages. Behind the gate, a few thatch houses served as office, archival room, staff living quarter and small exhibition hall showing a handful of artefacts of the local tribe. Outside in the courtyard, a tiny tree commemorating Dr Gjestrum grew stubbornly on the droughty soil.

The rickshaw driver handed me to Mr Fu, a friendly museum keeper in his late 20s. After a tea, Mr Fu led me

LIFE OF THE LONG HORN TRIBE

Photographs and Text by J.-L. Gao



to the guestroom with mouldy smell filled my nostril. The beds were unmade, cigarette butts filled the ash-tray, tea dried in the cup. The flushing toilet and sink had no water, the 25" TV displayed only snow flakes. A newspaper in the room indicated that the last visitor came from Shanghai last June.

"No one actually knows the origin of this tribe," said Mr Fu, as we sat by the fire stove in the dim museum kitchen during the dinner time. "But according to the narratives of the tribal elders, it is generally believed that they might have moved into this isolated mountainous area some two hundred years ago to escape from war".

Today, even in a country where party and government maintain absolute rule, the tribe is still run by a troika system which consists of an elder, a chief and an exorcist. While the elder is the eldest person playing a role of symbolic head as well as moral leader, the chief is the CEO or prime minister with administrative and managerial experience, dealing with the village's routine affairs. On the other hand, matters between human beings and deities, between the lives and deaths, are handled by the exorcist, who is equally indispensable especially in occasions like birth, death and marriage, and often doubled the roles as doctor and shaman. There is no need for a democratic election. The indisputable authorities of these figures form natu-

(Left): The gate of the eco-museum in Suoga, the first of the kind in China. Years after its initial establishment by the Chinese and Norwegian government, the museum now lacks maintenance. A small tree in the courtyard is commemorating the founder John Gjestrum. (Below): Women villagers making tofu outside their homes. Staple for the tribe includes millet, buckwheat, taros and sweet potatoes. Rice is considered to be rare and precious.



rally over time. Even the government has no choice but to appoint the chief as the official head of the village.

Researchers today are still puzzled by the origin the horns. One theory asserts the necessity of the horns as camouflage for hunting, others point to aesthetic purpose, or that in commemorating one of their ancient clan leaders. It is only certain that the wooden horns today were once real buffalo horns worn by both men and women. As time went by, fewer and fewer men carried on the tradition, and the buffalo horns were eventually replaced by wood.

Two days later, my fever had subsided. I wasted no time to set out my exploration. Started from the gate of the museum, a steep trail led to the Longga village set in a sparse forest. It was the middle of winter. Most





leaves had fallen, revealing a rough landscape where houses, huts, haystacks, tree branches, livestock, fowls spread randomly on the bald mountain slope.

On the trail, I came face to face with a woman, who was dwarfed by the enormous water bucket on her back. Since the early settlement, the lifeline of the entire village has relied on the shallow well at the foothill

some hundred feet below. Generations after generations, it has been the women's task to carry out water lifting. Their petite physical statures bear the evidence of such heavy burden. The woman was in a long linen pleated skirt with black and colour stripes. Under her blouse of intricate blue wax dye motif was a standard sweater of pink stripes. A brass ring encircled her neck, and a practical as well as decorative black sack hung low in her front. All these are standard attire of a longhorn woman.

Long isolation from the outside world has undermined the tribe's communication skill with outsiders. As I greeted the woman in Mandarin, her confused and suspicious face burst into a bright smile. As the ice was broken, I followed her to the heart of the village, attracting a few curious eyes.

Most houses in Longga village are single storied, thatch-roofed with either stone or wooden walls. The main chamber at the centre often serves as a storage and living room, where weaving, grinding and other productive activities take place. For the side rooms, kitchen is usually on the left, and bedroom on the right. Outside the house are stables for livestock and a primitive hut for

toilet.

The woman led me to her home. Her husband was facing fire on the bumpy earth floor in the bedroom. He introduced himself as Wang (Chinese rarely introduce themselves by their first names). I felt as if I had entered a cave, for its ceiling a few inches above my head was blackened by the smoke. A plastic sheet of wind-stopper further weakens the winter daylight from the tiny window. Like many other families, they had not wired power to their home, either not sensing the necessity, or unable to pay the electric bill. All belongings were piled up on the bed, as no other furniture could be found in the bedroom, except a dusty age-old wardrobe standing at a corner.

Mrs Wang carefully opened the wardrobe, revealing the most precious family jewel passed on by generations of ancestors. With the dim light by the fire, I saw a gigantic bundle of headgear - a mix of more than ten pounds of human hair and threads of linen and cotton. Obviously, the weight and size of such big 'crown' is too impractical for daily use. But during the holidays or market days, it symbolises a woman's honour, beauty and family pride.

In front of their house, Mrs Wang and her mother-in-law demonstrated the hair-making as the visitor watched on. The process was slow, painstaking, nevertheless detail. Nearly an hour later, Mrs Wang



stood proudly with her dearest possession lumped on her head. The hair-do reminded me Napoleon's bicorne hat, but enlarged in many folds. Its sheer size and weigh gave the woman no choice but maintaining a upright and elegant gesture at all time.

Even by Chinese rural standard, the long-horn tribe is living in a life of impoverishment. This is partly because of the low productivity resulted from long isolation, partly because of the lack of water in this barren highland. The main staple of the tribe is corn, supplemented by tarots, sweet potatoes, buckwheat and wheat. Non-staple includes soybeans, green beans, radishes, cabbage, often pickled. Rice and meat are rarities reserved for holidays and occasions.

One morning several days before the Chinese New Year, burning smoke and auspicious atmosphere filled the air of Longga. At an open plot near the foothill, a dozen of young men struggled to subdue two large hogs. North wind fanned up the bonfire, boiling water in the big wok stood ready for the slaughter. On the high ground, I noticed that the village chief was accompanying attentively with a group of peo-



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ple who are watching the process.

Just as I was wondering their background, one of its young men saluted me, and brought me to a smiling middle-age official. "Comrade Gao is our county's party secretary", said the young man. In China, it is habitual

that party officials pay their visits to the poor areas in their jurisdictions near the holidays, as a gesture of goodwill and attention. Today, Secretary Gao and his entourage had brought not only goodwill but also two big hogs and sacks of rice labelled with the yellow stars of European Union.

The pigs were slaughtered. Their meat was sliced. The village chief was busy weighing and affixing a red paper on each meat slice. Not every family in Longga

was lucky to share the meat. Only the names of the poorest families would appear on the red papers. Yet the whole village seemed to enjoy this one of the biggest events in the year. Women and children had gathered. Crowd began to build.

When all preparations were set, it was time for two minutes of lecture by the chief, followed by speech by the secretary: "Dear fellow villagers, new year has come again. May I represent the party and bring greetings to you! In this holiday season, the party has never forgotten you. Today, the party trusts me to bring some gifts of goodwill to our poorest families..." The party boss' gentle and warm-hearted speech was greeted with silence. Cheering or applauding was perhaps not part the long-horn culture, I thought. Fortunately, the uncanny village chief smoothed the embarrassment by ordering applause in tribal dialect.

One by one, the names were called, the meat was handed over personally by the party boss. Those too timid to come out in public would be getting their share at home. After the folks dispersed, I was invited to join the welcoming party for the secretary and his entourage, took place in the home of the village chief. Oddly, I was given a noble treatment like the party boss just because we share the same surname. Sooner I found, however, that being a noble guest could be a



challenging position. I was poured with endless homemade wine by the enthusiastic long-horn girls, who sang a jolly folk song during each round of toasting. In the household, other women were carrying buckets of rice on the backs. In the tribe's tradition, it was the host's honour to constantly and forcefully stuff their guests' bowls even if they were full. Eventually, the party developed into a cat-and-mouse game, when most guests could no longer accept more food from the hosts.

Deep in my heart behind my smiling face, I suddenly felt a sense of guilt, for such lavish consumption of the tribe's best food by a visitor, or those who sup-

posed to bring aids to the village. Fortunately, this feeling was eased the delight of my ultimate discovery the open, cheerful and extroversive side of this long-horn tribe. The people I met in the past few days no longer exhibited indifference, confusion and suspicion. Like all we outsiders, they laughed, they sang, they cheered, they celebrated. The bridge was connected, the trust was built. My relationship to the tribe had been certainly much closer than it was few days before.

