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## The Red Yao of Guilin

*Change is inevitable but Xiao Zhai, a remote ethnic village in Longji famous for its vertical rice terraces bathed in mist and charming mountain scenery, wants it at its own gentle pace*

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Red Yao women preparing for the traditional hair coiling ceremony.



Quaint Ping An village and its beautiful rice terraces.



The village chief is oldest man in Xiao Zhai.



A shy girl enjoys her ice-cream.



This dress takes several months to sew.

As China marches towards the 2008 Olympic Games, it is not just Beijing that is receiving a facelift. The rest of the country is following suit at a relentless pace, with glitzy hotels, skyscrapers, and new roads being pushed into every nook and cranny of her massive landscape, from Shanghai to Lhasa.

While the building boom has poured money into certain coffers, and

while the spanking new tarmacs and plush air-con buses have made convenient travel to far flung places all the more feasible, many of China's ethnic minority villages are losing their souls to the spirit of commercialism, and thus it is a real surprise when a traveller can still find a place like Xiao Zhai, a peaceful and traditional Red Yao village tucked into the misty mountains of Guilin.

Xiao Zhai is part of an area known as Longji, located about 100 kilometres north of Guilin city. The area, made up of small hamlets inhabited by Yao and Zhong minority groups, is famed for its vertical rice terraces that spill down from the mountains more than 500 metres. Intensively crafted by the Yao and Zhong for hundreds of years, the terraces, often bathed in mist and cloud, have now become one of the star attractions on the Guilin sightseeing tour route, with foreign visitors and thousands of Chinese tourists coming in from the eastern seaboard for weekend escapes.

The Longji terraces are indeed breathtaking, elaborately sculptured wonders that glow a surreal green or gold in the spring and fall, or are even covered with snow or shimmering with water in the winter dry season. However, most of the once quiet minority villages on its slopes are now endless construction zones, with new guesthouses and lodges going up daily, along with Internet cafes, T-shirt stalls, and souvenir shops lining the small footpaths that lead into the mountains.

Yao women congregate in every bend along the paths, offering to pose for pictures in exchange for filling their pockets with Chinese yuan, or trying to hawk their services as guides, lodge owners, purveyors of gems, or other, all in the name of making some quick cash.



A traditional Zhong minority house in the Longji region.

Stuart, my Chinese guide, first came across Xiao Zhai while walking through the local mountains looking for new trails. Stuart works for a local travel agency called Wild China, specialising in off the beaten track and alternative travel, and frequently receives photographers, trekkers, and other foreigners looking for a more authentic and remote experience in China than they might be able to find on their own or with a foreign guidebook.

Stuart was wandering around in the hills of Longji, lamenting the changes that had befallen most of the villages, when he met Aja, a pretty Red Yao woman of 24 who lives in Xiao Zhai. She was out gathering flowers when Stuart wandered by, and in the traditional Yao

spirit of hospitality, she asked him if he had eaten and invited him to her family home for lunch.

Getting to know Aja a bit better, Stuart discovered that she had travelled to Shenzhen, China's dynamic economic zone for a year, to work in a factory and help her family make ends meet. She knew about life in the big city, was quite smart, and yet unlike her Yao sisters just down the road, didn't seem too interested in seeing the visiting tourists as just walking ATMs.

As Xiao Zhai lay on the other side of the valley, and as it did not have a paved road running into it, relatively few tourists had ever made it into the small hamlet. Stuart asked Aja if she wouldn't mind his bringing a few foreign visitors to see a traditional Red Yao village, and Aja, who had seen foreigners in Shenzhen and was interested in trading cultural experiences, replied that she and her family would be all too happy to show off their traditional ways.

The Red Yao of Guilin are the most colourful and noted ethnic group of the area. The women are famed for having the longest hair in the world, and have been featured in the Guinness Book of World Records for their mighty manes.

Actually, it is a bit of a misnomer. The Red Yao women do indeed have long hair, but it is what they add to their coifs that make them so spectacular. The Yao believe that hair is sacred, and thus the women during their lives reputedly never let a single hair be lost if they can help it.

All hair that falls out is collected and over time made into long thick ropes, which are then woven in to the woman's original hair each day during a combing and coiling ritual. The hair is then coiled up into a bun and, for married women, worn under a turban.



The black turban means she is married.



A Red Yao woman works the loom.



Xiao Zhai's village chief gives blessings in a greeting ceremony for visitors.

The Yao women are also elaborate weavers, and will spend six to nine

months stitching intricate embroidered dresses, for themselves and their daughters. The Yao men no longer dress traditionally, except for festivals and special occasions, but Stuart's return to the village with me seemed to qualify as a just cause for a celebration, and the village's eldest man and chief, a wizened yet lively 84-year-old with one tooth and a constant cackling smile, came out to do a greeting ceremony welcoming us into the village wearing satin pants and a red cape, looking much like a mystical wizard.

In addition to the chief's greeting, our welcome included the entire village traipsing out to meet us, led by a group of women singing of how happy they were to be blessed by our arrival, followed by a sharing of toasts consisting of the local rice wine, which we were assured would guarantee us all a "big happiness." The women then did a hair coiling demonstration for us, and we were led with much fanfare to Aja's simple home, where her family had lunch ready for us.

The Red Yao eat rice and accompanying dishes not too different from the local cuisine of Guilin, but one delicious specialty they have is cured bacon, in which the meat has been smoked and hung over the open fire area in the family kitchen, kept over a year, and aromatically flavoured.

Over more glasses of wine, we asked Aja about local tourism, wondering why Xiao Zhai had chosen not to build guesthouses and tourist shops, nor try to get their road improved so the sightseeing buses could come in.

She replied that while in Shenzhen, she and some of the other village girls who had gone there had seen just how fast life moved in the cities, and how it seemed out of rhythm with the easy pace of life her village offered.

Aja noted that in the nearby villages of Ping An and Da Zhai, the Yao and Zhong had stopped working their phenomenal rice terraces, as they were making more money running guesthouses without having to do any labour.

The terraces were now being farmed by other minorities whom they brought in, paying them daily wages to do the manual work.

Seeming far older than her 24 years, Aja asked us what would happen to the next generation of the Yao if they grew up no longer knowing how to even plant rice, which was the basis of their whole existence.

She explained that the Yao of Xiao Zhai were happy to receive visitors, and of course visitors were welcome to buy handicrafts or contribute some money if they wanted to stay in a local home or use the services of a local person as a guide, but this was just seen as something extra, not as the main focus of a way of life and traditions that have gone on for hundreds of years.

The area surrounding Guilin is one of China's premier tourist attractions. The Li River flows languidly through an amazing landscape

of limestone karst formations, thousands of jungle clad peaks that rise from a usually misty landscape, appearing right out of a Chinese landscape painting.

Yet the river is packed with cruise boats sailing one after another, and trinket shops now dot the riverbanks, where boats stop in for shopping sprees, and locals don farmer costumes and ride water buffalo to try to get tourists to take photos in exchange for money.

The situation reminded of the area of Lijiang and Dali in Yunnan Province, where the old wooden homes of the Naxi and Bai cultures had been replaced by ugly replicas, and the whole culture had undergone a "Disneyfication," which even included the locals moving out, and the Chinese moving in donning ethnic costumes to play the part of the new inhabitants.

Change is an inevitable part of life, and with countries like China gaining a huge middle class with more money and leisure time, tourism is guaranteed to grow. Progress everywhere is welcomed, and people rush headlong into the new, for the most part without any critical thoughts as to the future. Fortunately, in places like Xiao Zhai, the changes still come slowly and sweetly.

## **MORE INFO**

Guilin is serviced by Bangkok Airways, which has direct flights from Bangkok several times a week. Guilin is a major city, and has all services and amenities for the international traveller.

Hotels range from 5 star luxury palaces, such as the Waterfall Hotel, which boasts the longest waterfall coming off of a building in the world (show every night at 7:30pm) to budget accommodations for about 500 baht a night.

For an extensive list of hotels, restaurants, and other information the website of the Guilin Tourist Office has detailed information: <http://www.guilintourist.com>.

The Longji Rice Terraces National Scenic Area can be reached via tour from Guilin, arranged by any travel agencies, or by public bus from the Guilin Bus Station (three hours, 135 baht). There are guesthouses in Ping An and Da Zhai, as well as other villages along the route. To visit Xiao Zhai, contact Wild China, <http://www.wildchina.com>, 86-773-282-2881, 86-106-465-6602.