

Guilin offers not only spectacular views but also an interesting ethnic history for visitors

BANGKOK (The Bangkok Post) - About three hours' drive from Guilin in China's Guangxi province is Ping An, a Zhuang village famous for its beautiful terraced rice fields and millennia-old culture.

"At Ping An village, all the residents are Zhuang and have the family name Liao. There are more than 800 people and 200 families here. They live in stilt houses, none of which are made of bricks," Liao Su Jong, a young Zhuang woman who is a village guide, said.

Recently, Orathai Pholdi, director of Kasetsart University's Office of Agricultural Museum and Culture, led a trip to Ping An village to find out cultural similarities between the lifestyle, culture and language of the Zhuang and those of the Tai, an ethnic group in Southeast Asia.

The ethnic Tai are a group of indigenous people of Southeast Asia whose town units are said to date back 5,000 years.

At present, some 90 million ethnic Tai people live across the region and can be divided into 80 groups. They speak various forms of the Tai language.

Orathai believes the Zhuang are descendants of people from the times of the "Liujiang Man" about 50,000 years ago. The skeleton of the Liujiang man was unearthed in a cave in Liujiang district, Guangxi province, in 1966. Also in Guangxi, there are 17 sites with the evidence of Stone Age settlers.

"The Zhuang have a long history. They have been living in Guangxi since ancient times. We should study how they have conserved ancient traditions and culture. They never adopted the Pali, Sanskrit or Khmer languages but their language is partly influenced by the Chinese Han language," Orathai noted.

There are about 17 million Zhuang people in China. Most live in Guangxi and the rest in Yunnan, Guangdong and Hunan.



At Ping An, Orathai and royal scholar Prof Prasert Na Nagara talked to a few Zhuang people, including guide Liao Su Jong and some elders, for about two hours and noticed certain similarities between the Zhuang and Thai languages.

For example, the Zhuang count the numbers two, three, five, seven, eight, 10, 11 and 20 like Thais do as song, sam, ha, jed, paed, sib, sib-ed, and yi-sib. Certain Zhuang words contain the same meanings as Thai words, such as pai (go), ma (come), ja (will), normai (bamboo), gai (chicken), mueng (you), goo (I), khao (rice), glai (far), mai (no/not) and geb (pick).

Some other Zhuang words have similar meanings to certain Tai languages, such as kluen (meaning eat in Tai but swallow in Thai), ngai (breakfast or lunch) and yai (elderly). Some others can be associated with certain Thai words, such as nung (sit in Thai) meaning a chair, chong (hole in Thai) meaning a window, song (maintain balance in Thai) meaning to stand, tuen (shallow in Thai) meaning near, sarui (similar to suay in Thai) meaning beautiful and kward larn (cleaning the ground in Thailand) meaning cleaning a house.

Like the Tai people, the Zhuang have no word for the fourth finger or the ring finger probably because these are not important in their culture, Prof Prasert noted.

Orathai believes the Zhuang language is the oldest Tai language since the Zhuang have long been living there while other groups of the Tai in China, including those believed to be the Thai people's predecessors, had migrated south.

She cited Prof Terrien de la Couperie of the University of London who wrote *The Cradle Of The Shan Race* (1885) in which he proposed that the Tai founded the Ta Mung Empire in Sichuan, China, about 5,000 years ago. They later migrated south and a number of them later established the Kingdom of Lanna.

To Orathai, the Zhuang conserve their ancient traditions better than other Tai ethnic groups in China. They still worship ghosts and have the Devil Festival on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month. They organise the Ox Soul Festival every April after ploughing begins to show their love and respect to the oxen and wish for a good harvest. However, the Zhuang do not celebrate Buddhist festivals because they are animists.

The Zhuang still don their traditional costumes both in daily life and on special occasions. Many men wear their long hair tied in a bun and wear traditional jackets with wide sleeves. Women in northwest Guangxi have collarless, embroidered and trimmed left-buttoned jackets, pleated skirts or loose trousers, embroidered belts, shoes and silver ornaments. Women in southwest Guangxi prefer collarless and left-buttoned jackets, square kerchiefs and baggy trousers, all in black.

In addition, the Zhuang in Guangxi have preserved the body tattoo tradition while another tribe of the Zhuang called Jeng Jia, who also live in this province, is known for their facial tattoos.

Orathai believes that the Zhuang might have been one of the Tai ethnic groups because the Tai beat bronze drums as part of rain-making ceremonies and more than 600 ancient bronze drums and many stone moulds were unearthed in Guangxi.

A visit to Ping An village is a good opportunity for travellers to experience the Zhuang's lifestyle and culture and cherish the stunning views of the rice terraces.

Two highlights are the "Nine Dragons and Five Tigers" and the "Seven Stars with the Moon". The nine dragon-like terraces stretch from the mountain top down to the Jinjiang River (the Golden River) while five hillsides opposite the Nine Dragons represent five tigers guarding the land. The Seven Stars with the Moon means the seven-tiered hillsides which glitter like stars amid the water field. Ping An Terraces are part of the Long Sheng Rice Terrace which looks like a dragon and dates to the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). Most of the terraces were built during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

After exploring Zhuang culture, visitors should not miss the opportunity to visit the Reed Flute Cave and the scenic spots of the 437km Li River, or the Li Jiang River, which is a lifeline for people in Guilin and boasts China's largest and most beautiful scenic area.

The river snakes from its watershed in Mao'er Mountain in Guilin's Xin'an county through Guilin, Yangshuo, Pingle and Zhaoping and joins the Xi River in Wulin.

Situated in Guangming Mountain in northwest Guilin, the 240m-long Reed Flute Cave is full of stalactites, lit up with colour. Legend has it that the reed trees by the mouth of the cave could be turned into flutes.

A cruise along parts of the Li River, which has been described as "a green silk ribbon with jade hairpin-like hills" is a must.

Along the way, you will enjoy the stunning panoramic views of limestone mountains, bamboo

and willow forests, riverside villages and men fishing on boats and bamboo rafts.

In all, Guilin, with a population of more than 1.2 million people, has both natural wonders and cultural knowledge for tourists to cherish.