

Gaoding: Baijiu Strikes Back

I decided to head off the beaten track to the little visited area around Dudong a beautifully scenic area dotted with Dong villages amidst rice terraces and tea plantations. It's a place you have to want to get to since its two hours down a less than stellar dead end road from the nearest sizable town of Sanjiang, in an already little visited region of China. It's also not mentioned at all in the Lonely Planet Guidebook which is guaranteed to keep the number of visitors to a minimum. Dudong is not really the destination it's a nice enough place and there are a large number of Dong style homes but a few too many concrete and white-tile-blue-window monstrosities which the Chinese love put up all over the country especially in otherwise scenic locations. I think the late Chairman Mao had a nephew who flunked out of architecture school but was still given the contract to design every building in China from 1960-2000. Getting back the point, the real attraction is the beautifully traditional Dong village of Gaoding a 2 hour hike further down the valley. Set in a steep sided valley the village is nearly all traditional wooden buildings with six drum towers. For the Dong the drum tower was like the town hall but each family clan within the city has one. It's a place where you often see old men hanging out playing cards, dominos, or just sleeping the afternoon away. I

walked around the village for a while and then was invited in for a dinner at about 3:00 pm, an interesting time for a meal, in one of the Drum towers. It was apparently a meal for a bunch of laborers who were working on something for the village. A bunch of men arrived and we ate and drank the request baijiu (pronounced by-joe) this if you don't remember from past episodes is the Chinese "brand" of the home brewed rice alcohol. I had a few drinks with the men and a couple "ganbei" (finish your



Tea plantations near Dudong.



View of the village of Gaoding.

drink). Everything would have been fine if I continued on my present plan of walking back to Dudong after the meal. But as I walked past another house I was motioned to come in for a drink and what turned out to be a second dinner, among the dishes, a few mystery meats and snake. Actually the second time I've had snake the first time in the Mekong delta there wasn't much meat mainly bones and scales. This time there was a little more meat, and, yes, it tastes like chicken. So a quick aside on the new "meats" I've eaten on this trip from least to most repulsive. I only list the ones I know for sure I heard rat meat is popular in this area so I may have eaten it on one of the meals and had know idea so it doesn't count.

5. Snake (I got to put this one last because it really wasn't that hard for me)
4. Fertilized duck egg (something about eating a fetus is just kind of wrong, plus it wasn't very good tasting)
3. Frog (this was tougher especially the torso with all the organs showing)
2. Snail (strangely this was one of the toughest for me, something about stick a pin in pulling a steamed snail, which looks just like a live snail, out of its shell and eating it)



Piece of snake, Gaoding.

1. Dog (In my defense before the hate mail starts rolling in, I didn't know it at the time and found out afterwards. It gets the top slot because I wouldn't have eaten it had I known. I had it from a barbeque vendor in Meo Vac northern Vietnam, tasted pretty good actually, on a skewer with some nice spices. Then the couple I was traveling with told me I should go have some of the barbeque from the woman on the coroner, I said, "really, I just had some" and then they informed me it was dog. Being Jewish they didn't eat pork so they always check to see what kind of meat it is unlike myself. They didn't have any so I guess dog is also out for them as well as pork.)

Now that you are thoroughly repulsed, back to the story. So I was partaking in this meal of snake and mystery meats and with every meal there is always more baijiu. And when you can't communicate verbally it seems drinking is universal and one of the few words and phrases I do know is "ganbei" meaning cheers/finish. There was a few of those for sure. But I was still being careful to pace myself knowing I had to walk back and not wanting to get sloshed when I'm on my own. I thanked my hosts and left. I hiked up one of the hills near town taking what turned out to be my best pictures of the town in the late afternoon light. As I started to head back to Dudong something hit me really hard and I got kind of ill and out of it. An expat in Vietnam described a similar experience when he had gotten a bad batch of rice wine. Since I really didn't have that much I think they may have not gotten all of the methanol out this last batch of baijiu. In any case a farmer coming back from the rice field decided I wasn't going to make it back to Dudong and took me back to his house. So I got a authentic home stay in a Dong house hold. Complete with a bucket toilet, literally a bucket, beneath the house with the chickens and pigs. My host served a huge breakfast the next morning, which because I was still not

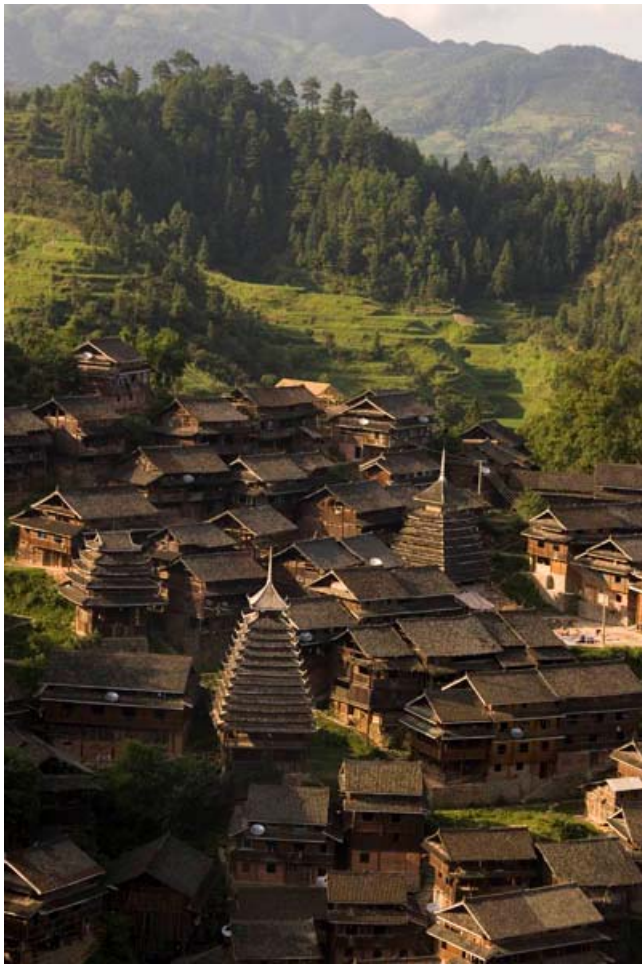
feeling well could not do justice to. He also broke out the baijiu, yes, at breakfast, to which I politely declined to join him.



Eating in the Drum Tower in Gaoding.



Drinking baijiu apparently this is the way to drink to make sure you don't cheat and take too small a sip.



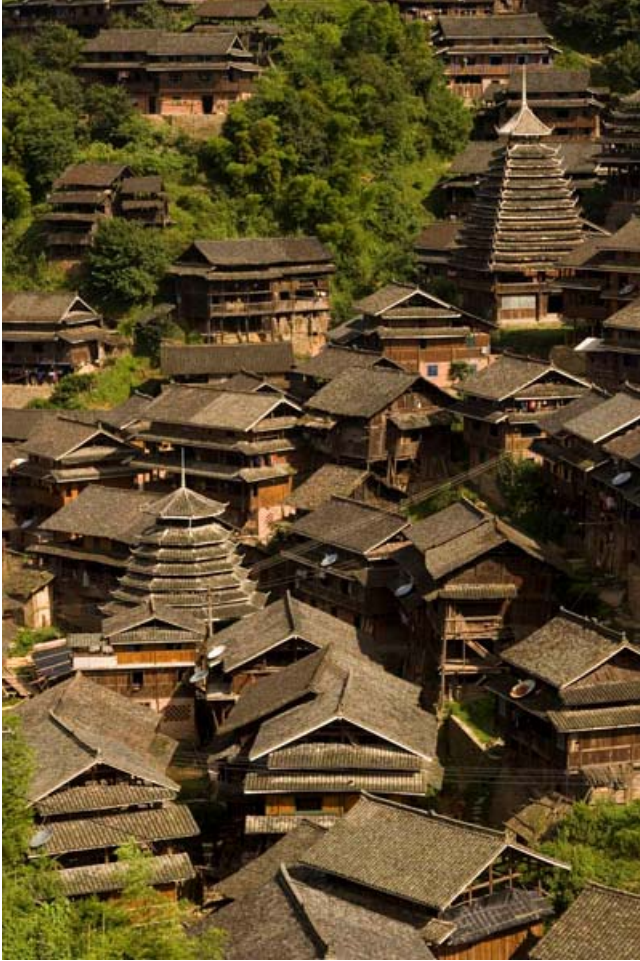
View of Gaoding.



Man resting in one of the Drum Towers in Gaoding.



Family whose house I stayed at in Gaoding.



View of Gaoding.