

BEYOND THE ORGANIC WORLD

✪✪: *Steve Kokker*

We are about an hour out of crazy-hectic central Taipei, Taiwan's super-modern capital of Eight-million-plus. It couldn't seem further. This is truly lush, thick Nature. We drive up a steep and winding road through ever-smaller villages and into ever-thickening forest and sweet air. I'd like to imagine that the aroma comes from the tea trees I've come to see, but I can't be certain.

We get out of the car on a particularly tricky turn of this road, which has been carved through the forest and rock, and wait for Gao Ding Shi to arrive. I'd been told that he is a true proponent of a natural, wild tea farming technique dubbed "*shengtai*," or "arbor," and that to meet him would be... *an experience*.

Waiting, we look around us: there are enormous butterflies, baseball-hat-sized marvelous beauties; there are small snakes disappearing as if from nowhere into the shrubbery. When standing in the sun, the heat is uncomfortable. Today is about 38 degrees Celsius. *Again*. In the shade by the side of the road, however, the air is suddenly cooler, and the sweetened moisture from the trees provides embracing umbrage. My guides explain that Mr. Gao might take a

little while. "He likes to do things slowly, to take the time needed to do them." We wait patiently, drinking in the Nature around us. The constant, rhythmic sound of crickets sets the brain waves to alpha. One of us goes off looking for multi-colored caterpillars.

I wasn't expecting someone as young and lively as the handsome, affable man who eventually drives up to greet us. Mr. Gao has considerable presence and seems to be deeply comfortable in his skin. He looks us over, nods, smiles and suggests that my thin sandals might be good for a day at the beach but not for where we're going. He opens his car and pulls out a mud-lathered pair of thick rubber boots, knee-high, and hands them to me. "I wouldn't want a snake to snap at you."

This Is a Wild Tea Garden

His neighbors think his patches of land are ugly—unruly, unkempt, bug-ridden... and not even producing much tea at that; a waste of land.

We walk to the most accessible of his tea gardens; the others would be an hour's uphill hike. We need to push through the thicket of leaves

and bushes, be wary of our footing, be careful not to walk into spider webs the size of my torso, and keep an eye out for snakes. The tea is in the form of trees here, much taller than the meter to meter-and-a-half high bushes most of the world's tea plants are artificially kept. There are palm-sized, bright green frogs at first indistinguishable from the tea leaves on which they placidly sit. God is indeed the DJ here; the soundtrack is wall-to-wall crickets interspersed with bird-song.

This is not really a garden, nor certainly is it a plantation. It is simply a hilly area on which tea plants are growing wild, into trees, and from which Gao Ding Shi plucks and processes his fine teas. There are *Camellia sinensis* here, certainly—everywhere—but not only. Other types of foliage grow exuberantly. "Whatever belongs here is welcome," says Mr. Gao with a smile, "whatever wants to grow here, please grow!"

That philosophy doesn't end with foliage; there are worms and bugs that want to live here, too, and munch on the tea plants, and to that Mr. Gao says, "Please, let them come. If bees wish to make their hive in one of the trees, beautiful! If the worms and bugs

MASTER GAO DING SHI

are happy eating from the trees, let them eat. I also wish to drink from the tree, why shouldn't they?"

He bends close into the shrubbery, turns up a few leaves and branches before finding what he wants to show me. Turning over a leaf with one hand, he beckons me closer with the other. "Look at this." At first I make out nothing: large tea leaf with thick veins running along its underside. I squint but still don't see anything out of the ordinary... until his calm smile and focused gaze lead my eyes to one thin, unusual, vein-looking bulge, very slight, the thickness of a pin—the home of a little bright green pin-worm.

Indeed, the tea plant is favored by many bugs, some of them seemingly out of Star Trek. There's another worm that lives inside the branches, one that looks like a crawling piece of fluff, a kind of caterpillar that lives inside the vein of tea leaves, and another worm which imitates the look of a small branch. There are even tiny, scampering green bugs called jassids that are allowed to bite into the leaves, as the chemicals produced by the plant's natural defense mechanism lends a uniquely sweet aftertaste for us tea drinkers—that is the unique

case of *Dong Fang Mei Ren* (Eastern Beauty), a famous Taiwanese oolong tea. "In any case," says Mr. Gao with a shrug and grin, "that bug eats only the bud and first two leaves. That means he has good taste! And he helps me make delicious teas!"

Indeed, bugs and the tea plant have lived in symbiosis for millennia and tea has been humankind's best friend all along. Before mass-production came along, bugs were either not feared as much, or controlled using natural methods. In Mr. Gao's case, they are not such a problem that he can't process his tea; there are plenty of leaves left for him. But that leads us to another philosophical aspect of the small-scale organic tea farmer, a mind-set more environmentally friendly than any organic farming technique: enough.

Enough

It's a concept I came across several times on my recent journey to Taiwan in meeting small-scale tea farmers and their families: the desire to have just enough, not more.

Some of them lived right next to other tea farmers with much larger aspirations, who paraded garish post-

ers advertising their teas ("the best," "the rarest") outside their homes in otherwise unobtrusive, bucolic villages. Those posters bespoke a desire to redo their homes, add another car to the newly-constructed garage, perhaps get an alarm system to go with the solid electric gates they had recently installed to protect their assets. Nothing wrong, perhaps, with wanting to improve one's lot, but this striving comes with consequences: when we reorganize our priorities, the structure of our lives changes accordingly. If you're a tea farmer, you might start to make compromises in how you make and produce your tea—you will want more—not necessarily better, but more. And to get more, you need to harm the soil and the tea plants (and ultimately yourself) by using fertilizers and pesticides.

When one is instead guided by the principle of "enough," there are also consequences. You live in more harmony and cooperation with your surroundings and are not tempted to make compromises. Gao Ding Shi produces approximately 40kg of tea per year, a little more if the weather cooperates, sometimes much less if it doesn't. This is a laughably minuscule amount in the tea market,

where tons are the usual unit of measurement. The tea he makes, however, he makes with great pride, with great care, and with love. This transfers so evidently into the leaf, and the cup, that his customers gladly pay the 50-euro per 50 grams he charges for it.

This high price ensures that this tea, when purchased for individual consumption, will be cherished, enjoyed fully, with confidence that it is an unblemished gift of Nature delivered via caring human hands. It's as close as the tea lover can get to the ancient tradition of Man-Nature interaction.

If a tea merchant buys this tea, he or she can almost certainly never resell it for a profit, and so thoughts of gain dissipate. Instead, the tea will likely be shared, and often for free with good friends and/or valued customers. The focus here is on the Leaf, not the coin—as it should be!

In any case, when one buys tea from someone like Mr. Gao, one is focused on supporting the principles embodied before you—not only to acquire superlative tea. It's a vote of confidence for a lifestyle and approach to Nature all too rare in this age of "more."

Mr. Gao wishes only to have enough—to keep his children in school, to live comfortably, to continue this lifestyle for his family and himself. Selling all of his tea allows this, and even to accumulate small savings. He could easily think, "Hmmm, if 40kg brings me this much, if I were to just double it to 80kg, still not much, I could get a better car and more satellite channels and take extra trips..." However, to achieve this, he'd have to do many other things: change the way he works, hire new people, make structural changes to his very simple processing space; start using some form of pest control; think more of how to market his teas, maybe develop a web site and hire someone to run it for him... These would be lifestyle and philosophical changes he is not ready to make. He knows that the seed of desire sprouts double-edged swords as buds. It's not possible to have one thing (lots more money, say) without a lot of other things, and he knows

with great certainty that he does not want those other things.

"To truly live the simple life," he tells me while steeping one of his teas for us to taste, a *Baozhong* he calls "*Wan Xiu*," "you must be ready to put down many things: money money money, name name name. In the end, 'I am nothing—that's important to remember."

Every small-scale organic tea farmer I encountered who worked in collaboration with the Earth (versus forcing it to provide what he wanted from it) espoused the same philosophy—of living as simply as possible while remaining comfortable and desiring only that which is needed. On top of that, none want to endanger their own health by living near chemicals.

Running the Family

If big profits are not his motivation, what fuels Gao Ding Shi's dedication to natural methods of tea farming? Indeed, Mr. Gao has great reason to be sensitive to this issue: personal tragedy.

Along with tens of thousands of other migrants from China's Fujian province, just 180km across the Taiwan Strait, his great-great-grandfather arrived in these parts from Anxi, the mountainous county renowned as the homeland of *Tieguanyin*, perhaps the world's most famous oolong tea. These mountains reminded him of home. He had grown tea in Anxi, and so when they moved to Taiwan looking for a better life, they grew tea there, with the clippings they'd brought from the mainland. The family's next generations continued growing tea; technology and the commercial tea market changed alongside them. By the time his father took over tea production, Taiwan was in an exportation boom and volume was therefore highly valued. Pesticides were commonplace, often cheap ones banned already in the developed world. His father died young and painfully of cancer, and other members of his family developed cancer and crippling diseases which by all appearances seemed directly related to living alongside chemicals.



This loss, and seeing his family suffer from needless poisoning, left huge emotional scars in Mr. Gao (his eyes well up quickly when speaking of his beloved father) and served as the catalyst for major life—and business—changes.

"The tea trees are my brothers and sisters," he says, "members of my extended family. They have fed and protected my own family for generations and I wish to return the favor."

And Then, the Rains

Gao Ding Shi's tea processing house lies at the bottom of a winding road cut through thick swaths of trees and has a terraced view overlooking valleys. One feels embraced by the mountains, a welcome visitor in their realm. The processing area itself is really just a concrete house, half of which is living space for his aging mother, who spends most of the day



peeling vegetables, making food and sleeping while her son, other family members and a few hired helpers carry on making tea.

This is not what many readers might have in mind when thinking about a tea processing plant; this is real life. There are bugs and flies coming in and out of the open doors; the floors are far from spotless; a friendly dog wanders about; laundry hangs next to baskets of drying tea. In short, nothing *Better Homes and Gardens* would aim their cameras at.

Yet this is *artisanal* tea production, not sterile factory tea production. Life happens here, and in the best sense, we can taste it in the tea. Mr. Gao washes his sturdy hands, which are thick from hard work—barely calloused despite the almost constant work he does—yet as elegant as a cellist's, and opens a pack of *jiao tai*, the green tea he produces.

Luckily, it starts to rain. Heavily. The transformation from sunny day to

stormy lasts but a few minutes. Soon, relentless vertical curtains of water are falling across the outside landscape. The morning harvest yielded five bamboo baskets-full (each the width of outstretched arms) of tea leaves of the *Qinxin Heimien* cultivar and they were left to wither in the sun outside. With the first drops of rain, though, Mr. Gao scurries to bring the baskets inside and place them on racks to wither there. He planned on making some *Dong Fang Mei Ren* from those leaves, but this slight change of procedure makes it more appropriate to make red tea from them. Man plans, God laughs. And man needs to quietly, humbly adapt.

I say “luckily” about the rain. Had the day remained clear and dry, Mr. Gao would have been too busy with his tea leaves to attend much to us. Making *Dong Fang Mei Ren* takes more time and effort than red tea, foreign guests or none. But now he had some time to sit with us, pour us

some tea, and chat. Somewhat unusually, he steeps his green tea for four minutes at 40C, water quite cool. “A good tea is good at any temperature,” he says gently. He steeps and pours his tea calmly, slowly, one thing at a time. A lovely peace falls over the place, nestled as it is in the forest and now caressed by the lulling sounds of rainfall.

Before the weather clears and it's time to say goodbye, we have the luxury of spending a few hours in Mr. Gao's calm company. Even aside from what I know of his commitment to Nature and Tea, I have the feeling of being in the presence of a truly beautiful soul, someone living in total flow and happy with the easy partnership he has with life.

“Tea has taught me humility, to be humble towards Nature. When we want to smell tea leaves, we bow down to them, we don't keep our head held high.”

