

GLOBAL TEA HUT

國際茶亭

TEA & TAO MAGAZINE

March 2018

TEA TRAVELS MENGSONG 勐宋





SWIRLING MIST

This month we are traveling back to Yunnan, the birthplace of all tea, to start our new "Tea Journeys" series, where we explore the history, folklore, tea and tea culture of a single mountain in depth, taking you all with us on our trips. Of course, we'll also be drinking some great tea as we travel.

*Love is
changing the world
bowl by bowl*

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From the Editor

In March, Taiwan starts to warm up and the weather is spectacular, bringing smiles to guests and residents at the Center. We start drinking lighter teas, tasting last year's sheng puerh to notice the changes and prepare for this year's harvest. Our trips to the hot springs are over, but the Center's farm starts providing more abundantly. I always notice the meals that have our veggies in them, as it feels great to eat home-grown food. There's nothing like a warm spring morning of good sheng tea and some nice veggies grown in the Center's garden.

As some of you know, we got a new office for Global Tea Hut, which expanded out of its old location. We turned the old office into a tea space and living quarters for permanent residents, which we have chosen to name "Morning Dew (甘露)." The new office is about three times bigger, offering so much more space for guest servers, packing this magazine and Light Meets Life tea. This move has really put some wind in all our sails, as it feels like a big step upwards as this community grows closer and closer to building our permanent Center, Light Meets Life. We are inspired and grateful to be a part of all your lives. You make all this hard work worthwhile! May we continue to grow and explore tea together.

Soon we will be leaving for our fifth annual Global Tea Hut trip, which will be amazing this year. We will be guiding a large group of tea lovers through the clouds of the black dragon. This year's trip will be an amazing chance to learn about oolong tea and gongfu tea preparation. We will study both ball and striped oolong, traveling to amazing sites in Anxi to see Tieguanyin, Phoenix Mountain to see Dancong tea and then Chaozhou to learn more about the history and preparation of gongfu tea. We will visit ancient tea trees, dance in the forest, meditate, have discourses at night and learn a ton about tea processing, history and lore. We will then wrap up with two fun-filled days in Hong Kong. I spent ten days walking our path and making arrangements, tuning the trip to a fine melody, and I believe this will be the best trip ever. Each day, I grew more excited as beautiful connections, opportunities and glorious individuals stepped up in perfect alignment with what we hoped for! I was amazed at the interstellar providence, and awed at how easily things have unfolded and how fortuitously the connections I made just fell into my path, offering us some of the rarest tea experiences I have had in my decades of tea travel. We are heading off the beaten path and into some hidden spots of unexpected beauty, culture and glory. I am thrilled, actually, and cannot believe some of what is in store, as it far exceeded my expectations...

This trip will present some amazing opportunities for you all to learn with us. This year, we are going to expand the coverage of the trip in a way. We will have an issue devoted to the trip itself, as we do every year, with accounts from

the participants, but we will also be devoting a whole issue to Anxi Tieguanyin and Master Chen, the amazing farmer we will stay with there. Then, later in the year, we will also devote a whole issue to Phoenix Mountain Dancong oolong as well, offering a more in-depth look at this amazing tea, its history, processing and lore. We are also working hard on annotating this year's offering in our Classics of Tea series, which will be from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). This will be an exciting year of Global Tea Hut, indeed!

One of our goals for the coming years is to dive more deeply into coverage of specific tea-growing regions, offering a more comprehensive exploration of the people, processing and history. Along with some nice, local tea to taste, this is an exciting way to travel through the cup to the Nature that made the tea. We also want to include information about the farmers, their culture and history to provide more context for the teas we share. This kind of journalism is one of the main goals of this magazine moving forward and a testament to what we can provide distant tea lovers who cannot always make the journey to these remote locations.

Mengsong is one of Yunnan's oldest tea-growing regions and one of its highest. It was one of the first mountains I ever visited in Yunnan, and I have been back several times, as I like the area, the villages and the people. There is a rich heritage of tea culture there, with beautiful gardens of ancient trees. Over the years, I have learned a lot from the people of Mengsong, and I am very excited about this issue. It feels great to take you along with us on this amazing journey to one of Yunnan's richest tea-growing areas, drinking a beautiful sheng puerh together as we explore the tea heritage and history of Mengsong.



—Further Readings—

This month, we recommend re-reading the September 2014 issue, which is one of the most comprehensive guides on puerh tea ever published in the English language. It will help contextualize this trip through Mengsong, which will be more rewarding if you know a bit about puerh tea as we travel. Past issues are on our website.

TEA OF THE MONTH



Over the course of this month, we will be on a tea journey, traveling once again to the birthplace of all tea, Yunnan, to explore puerh tea. We hope to offer more of such tours around tea-growing regions in future issues. This magazine will then become a ticket to remote places where we can explore tea culture, tea history, processing and lore in specific places, zooming in on the geography of a region to learn more about the tea culture there, and bring value and respect to the people who preserve the traditions there. This month we are traveling to Mengsong, in the southern part of Xishuangbanna Prefecture, which is the most active of the four tea-growing prefectures in Yunnan. Before our bus to Mengsong leaves, though, let's review the basics of puerh.

We have to start with an understanding of the two main, most generalized categories of tea trees: small- and large-leaf. The original, ancestor trees in the birthplace of tea, which is Lincang in Yunnan, were large-leaf. Separating the kinds of tea trees by the leaf size can be tricky, though, because the size of any given leaf won't tell you whether it is from a small-leaf or large-leaf tree. Large-leaf trees also produce buds, which start out tiny, and small-leaf bushes also have leaves that grow up, so any given small-leaf tree's leaf maybe bigger than one from a large-leaf tree, in other words. However, standing back and looking on at the garden from afar, you will under-

stand why Chajin of the past chose to categorize tea trees in this way, because once the leaves are fully grown, large-leaf trees have much larger leaves than small-leaf trees. Another way to think about this is to say that the large-leaf trees are *able to* produce much larger leaves.

Another way of categorizing large-leaf tea is to call it "*chou mu* (喬木)," which means there is a single trunk, which grows up around a meter before branching. Though there are varieties of large-leaf that branch lower down, there is still always a thick trunk, so the separation can be useful. Small-leaf tea branches immediately, like a bush. (Again, the "dancing" varieties of large-leaf tea trees are an exception, though their trunks are still thick just beneath ground-level.)

To determine the age of a large-leaf, *chou mu* tea tree, you have to look at the thickness of the trunk, not the height. Tea can grow tall very fast. Even in ten years a tree can be several meters tall. You determine the age by the thickness of the trunk. The girth of the trunk is also relative to the varietal, but in general real old-growth trees have thick trunks. If the trunk has a diameter of two hands, you can be sure it is more than one hundred years old, and certainly old-growth. Over time, as you see more trees, you will get better at determining their age based on appearance alone.

After the distinction between small- and large-leaf, it is important to under-

stand the three kinds of tea gardens in Yunnan. Again, there is no standardization in this, so we have to create our own. Different authors and vendors, however, will describe and label these kinds of gardens in their own way. But once you have a basic understanding of these three, you will be able to navigate the discussion. We call the three kinds of gardens: plantation, eco-arboreal and forest.

Plantation tea is grown in rows, with tea propagated by cuttings all planted close together, usually in lower altitude, more accessible places, though plantation tea can be grown anywhere. The dangers of plantation tea are that this is where conventional farming is most predominant, which means the tea often is not organic and grown industrially. As such, this tea is rarely as healthy for people and most certainly not for the environment. It also lacks sustainability. Such tea is not what we call "living tea." Living tea has six characteristics. Living tea is seed-propagated, as opposed to cuttings. The tea trees have room to grow—upwards to produce large crowns, and between trees, allowing the plants to organize themselves. Living tea is grown in full biodiversity, surrounded by natural ecology. Living tea is, of course, grown without the use of any agrochemicals (the Terrible Trio: pesticides, herbicides or chemical fertilizers). The relationship between the farmer and trees is one of respect and reverence, giving and receiving on both sides.



Swirling Mist (薄霧繞)



Yunnan, China



2004 Sheng Puerh



Lahu Aborigines



~1500 Meters



Within the character for tea is the radical “human,” as Tea is a relationship between Nature and Man. Finally, no irrigation or fertilizer of any kind (even organic fertilizer) is used in living tea. This allows the trees to be independent, developing strong and deep roots and connecting to the energy of the mountain.

The second kind of garden, which we call “eco-arboreal,” is composed of living tea planted or growing wild right near the edge of the village. The trees grow up in biodiversity and live in a healthy environment, but not in the forest. These trees are just outside the village, and sometimes surrounded by other agriculture. These trees are more convenient to care for and harvest since the farmers do not have to hike to get to them. They are still quite happy and healthy, and as of now, small

Yunnanese villages aren’t so bad to live just outside of, as many are still clean and in healthy balance with the environment. Not all eco-arboreal tea is clean, though. There is rarely ever any pesticide use with such tea, but some farmers do use weed-killers around the trees and/or chemical fertilizers to increase yield. In areas where these trees are surrounded by other crops, they can also be cross-contaminated if the local farmers are using agro-chemicals on those plants.

The final kind of garden is a forest garden. These can be wild or planted by people. These are gardens in the forest, often protected parks. The tea grows naturally and in a full and natural ecosystem. Obviously, this represents the best of what puerh tea has to offer. Sadly, almost every puerh vendor in the world gives the impression

that all his or her tea is of this variety, when very little of this kind of tea actually exists anymore. You could hike into the forest and pass right by such a garden if you didn’t know what to look for, since the tea garden would look just like all the other jungle you had passed by on the way there. These natural, forest gardens are what “bring Nature to society.” This is where the sounds of the forest can be found in the bowl.

Processing

To begin with, we have to start by dividing puerh into “sheng (生)” and “shou (熟).” Sheng means “raw” puerh; it’s the greener, more astringent kind of puerh, which can be enjoyed when it is young and fresh

Puerh Production



THE PROCESSING OF MAOCHA



採摘
Plucking

萎凋
Withering

殺青
De-enzyming

揉捻
Rolling

曬干
Sun-drying

or aged to ferment naturally over time. On the other hand, shou, which means “ripe,” is artificially fermented by humans, so it is darker to begin with. The words “sheng” and “shou” are used in Chinese to discuss food as well, referring to “raw/uncooked” versus “cooked” meals. The terms also describe the ripening of fruit as well. Understanding this distinction is important for exploring puerh, and more specifically shou puerh, more deeply.

Like many genres of tea, puerh starts with “*maocha* (毛茶),” which means “rough” or “unfinished” tea. You’ll hear this term discussed most often with regards to the genres of oolong and puerh, as they traditionally have “finishing” steps that occur later and/or at a different location from where the tea is initially processed. In puerh, the tea

is processed fully (dried) and then sent to a factory to be blended, compressed or made into shou. And even back in the day when the final steps were done at farm, they were still done at a later date (sometimes months later) so the term “*maocha*” was still relevant. In oolong, it is the roasting, which is done later, or traditionally at the shop rather than the farm. The reason the finishing steps in these teas are completed later is because the farmers have to focus on processing the harvested tea on the day it is plucked or the quality will suffer. And since there is freshly-picked tea coming in every morning during the harvest season, they have little time to sleep, let alone finish the tea, which can be done later. These days, with regards to puerh, almost all *maocha* is sent to be finished at factories who

want control over the finishing steps like blending, choosing sheng or shou and also deciding what size or shape to compress the tea into. But before we get to the factory, let’s understand what *maocha* is.

Puerh *maocha* is harvested, withered out and indoors depending on the place/tradition and the weather, fired (*sha qing*, 殺青) to arrest the oxidation of the withering and de-enzyme the tea, rolled (*rou nian*, 揉捻) to shape the tea and further break down the cells and then sun-dried. The two defining steps that make puerh unique are the firing and drying. The de-enzyming of tea is done to stop the withering and also to remove green enzymes that make the tea bitter and astringent. Like most teas, puerh is fired in a wok (often wood-fired),



but it is done at a lower temperature and for a shorter duration than most kinds of tea. This, along with the varietal of puerh, is why young sheng is so bitter and astringent. Puerh is fired in this way to allow the heat-resistant spores to survive the processing, since they will be paramount in the post-production fermentation process. The sun-drying is what also separates puerh from most kinds of tea, and it is done for the same reason, since sunlight and heat are just what the spores need to start colonizing the tea again.

After the maocha is dried, it leaves the farm for the factory. However, it is

ideal to finish the tea at source, since the water and micro-ecology will be unique for each place, but that rarely happens nowadays. The tea is then blended or left single-region and compressed into various shapes of cakes as sheng puerh, which can then be enjoyed young or aged for later. The tea is steamed, compressed and dried on racks (often with fans, but traditionally in the sun) before being wrapped individually in paper and then in bamboo skin called a “*tong* (筒).” But if the tea is to be shou, it has a whole other journey to travel. (We spoke of that last month and in November of last year.)

The most distinguishing steps in puerh production are the *sha qing* (kill-green) and sun-drying phases. The firing, or “*sha qing*,” comes after withering. It is done to arrest the oxidation begun in the withering and to “kill” certain enzymes in the tea that make it bitter, which is why it may also be translated as “de-enzyming.” In puerh tea, the de-enzyming is done at a lower temperature for a shorter duration because some of these enzymes are important for the fermentation of the tea, which happens post-production (either naturally or artificially). This also ensures that heat-resistant spores will

survive and flourish, as the bacteria and mold are the source of the fermentation. The sun-drying also facilitates and encourages fermentation by reactivating the microbial worlds that live in the leaves, going about their days in Horton Hears a Who style.

Puerh production may seem complicated at first, but it really isn't that difficult to understand. We hope that the basics we've covered in this article will help simplify the process for you and increase your understanding of the more linear aspects of puerh tea. By including other articles about the energetics of puerh in this issue, as well as past and future issues, we hope to fulfill you in a more balanced way. Thus, our understanding of puerh will be more holistic, including its history, production methodology and other informative approaches along with a spiritual and vibrational understanding of this amazing tea.

Puerh processing is a very old and simple methodology. Different genres of tea have different measures of quality based on a ratio of raw material to processing skill. Cliff Tea, like the one we sent last month, for example, is measured at least as much in the processing as it is in the trees/leaves. But puerh is different. With puerh, the quality is much more in the trees/leaves, with tea from older trees having more breadth, wisdom and medicinal juju. Mountain, location and age of the trees will all play a large role in the price and quality of a puerh. Because of that, there is a lot of confusion and dishonesty surrounding regions and age of trees in the puerh market, with young, plantation-tree tea (台地茶, *tai di cha*) being mixed into old-growth raw material, or tea from one region being brought to another and sold under false pretenses. This means that you have to have some experience tasting teas, knowing if it is organic or not, young or old-growth and from which region (at least relatively). It also helps to have trusted sources like we do at the Hut.

Nowadays, there is also a lot of confusion about blended versus single-region tea, as well as what defines "old-growth" puerh. It is good to have some clarity on these issues, at least in terms of what we are writing about in the pages of Global Tea Hut. As for the first issue, there are great blended teas

from the Masterpiece (1949–1972), Chi Tze (1972–1998) and Newborn (1998–present) eras of puerh. Sometimes, teas from different regions, or even the same region, enhance each other beautifully. All teas are technically blends, since different sides of the same tree will produce different leaves, let alone different parts of the same forest. Still, there is something to be said for single-region puerh since that was the way that all puerh tea was traditionally produced. All the teas from the Antique Era (pre-1949) were single-region. The terroir of a place, including the culture of how to process the tea, will then be homogeneous. This includes the genetic heritage of the trees, the climate and soil, the microbial environment so important

to the tea's fermentation, and ideally also the spiritual and cultural rituals that surround harvest and production. As for what we mean when we call a puerh "old-growth," for us it means that the tea leaves were harvested from trees that are at least one hundred years old. We think that when you start talking in centuries, it's definitely "old-growth."

When drinking *maocha*, there are many criteria for finding the right tea to make into cakes: you can drink with an eye towards aging (in which case you will have to have had a lot of experience drinking aged and aging teas at various stages), learning about regions, or creating cakes that can be enjoyed young. The best teas will be great when young, middle-aged and vintage.

Living Tea

I. Living Tea is seed-propagated, as opposed to cuttings.

II. The tea trees have room to grow—upwards to produce large crowns, and between trees, allowing the plants to organize themselves.

III. Living Tea is grown in full biodiversity, surrounded by natural ecology.

IV. Living Tea is, of course, grown without the use of any agrochemicals (the Terrible Trio: pesticides, herbicides or chemical fertilizers).

V. The relationship between the farmer and trees is one of respect and reverence. Within the character for tea is the radical 'human', as Tea is a relationship between Nature and Man.

VI. No irrigation or fertilizer of any kind (even organic fertilizer). This allows the trees to be independent, developing strong and deep roots and connecting to the energy of the mountain.

MENGSONG

The Mengsong tea-growing area is located 25 kilometers from the Menghai county seat. It is primarily inhabited by people of Dai and Lahu ethnicities. The elevation of this area is between 870 and 2,219 meters. It has a southern subtropical, monsoonal climate and a yearly average temperature of 18 °C. It has plentiful rainfall and sunshine and a long frostless season. Combined with the rich fertile soil, this area has excellent conditions for growing tea trees. Along with the Nannuo tea-growing area, Mengsong is one of the areas of Xishuangbanna with the longest history. Today its old tea gardens cover nearly 4,000 *mu*. They are primarily distributed in Da'an Village, Nanben Old Village, Naka Village, and Baotang Old Village. New tea gardens cover over 40,000 *mu*. The area has a yearly tea output of nearly 1,000 tons.

All tea lovers dream of visiting the mountains and villages famed for their puerh tea. Each mountain and village has its own unique local flavor, and each has its own following in the mar-

ket. If you're looking for a robust tea with a distinct aroma, it's hard to get around the fact that puerh prices can be very high. One of the most outstanding areas is the Blang tea region with its shining star, the Lao Banzhang brand from Mount Blang, which fetches higher and higher prices each passing year. Those who are partial to the delicate, graceful flavor of mountain teas need look no further than the Mengsong tea region, whose Naka tea has been widely acclaimed in puerh tea circles for some time. The unique topography, soil and climate of the area give this tea its distinct character and its glowing reputation as "the king of Mengsong teas."

Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, in Yunnan Province, is the homeland of puerh tea. Within this region lies the Mengsong Tea Mountain (勐宋茶山), an ancient high-altitude tea garden within the borders of Mengsong Village in Menghai County. Mengsong merges into Jinghong City to the east, while to the south it meets Gelanghe Village, and it faces Nannuo

Mountain across the Liusha river. If we trace the origins of the Mengsong tea mountain carefully back through history, we find that the earliest available records date back to the Qing Dynasty. At that time, Mengsong and Nannuo both fell under the jurisdiction of an administrative division called Cheli Xuanweisi (车里宣慰司); during the Republic of China era in the early 1900s, this was changed to Cheli County (车里县).

Any discussion of the Mengsong tea region can't help but revolve around that famed peak that towers into the clouds: Huazhu Liangzi (滑竹梁子), whose name means "smooth bamboo rafters." This mountain peak in Mengsong is the highest in Xishuangbanna at around 2430 meters above sea level, giving it the nickname "the roof of Xishuangbanna." As well as its great height, Huazhu Liangzi's latitude means that it has a subtropical climate, well suited for growing tea. A warm, nurturing gift from the heavens, this stretch of alpine forest is enveloped year-round by clouds and



勐宋



mist, the abundant humidity and sunlight providing moisture for all living things and nourishing the thick vegetation. On this soil, ancient tea trees have also put down sturdy roots and unfurled their twigs and leaves. Although the tea made here comes from old-growth trees, it displays no aggressive or overpowering notes; the mountain mists of Mengsong produce a tea that is delicate, fragrant and sweet. Of all Mengsong's teas, Naka tea garners the highest praise.

Naka (那卡)

Naka is the first and most important village on our trip through Mengsong. It is the most well-known village in Mengsong because the tea from there is special. Our Tea of the Month is also from Naka. We will visit the other villages throughout the rest of this issue. Each has its own rich heritage and unique tea, but Naka represents the region in the mind of most tea lovers.

Naka is home to around 108 families, most of whom belong to the Lahu ethnicity. The name "Naka" is a transliteration from the Lahu language and in Chinese is most often written using the characters 那卡 (*naka*), but sometimes also 納卡 (*naka*) or 臘卡 (*laka*). The tea garden stands at an altitude of around 1740 meters above sea level and is situated to the northwest of Mengsong Village, where it borders with Mengwang Village. It falls under the administration of Manlü Village (also called Da Manlü) and is located about five kilometers away from the Da Manlü basin. Here, yearly precipitation can reach up to 1900 millimeters, and the soil is good quality, well-draining yellow sandy soil, suited to growing tea and many other crops.

Ancient tea trees, stretching out over more than 66 hectares of land, are the hidden treasure of Naka. And yet, the local native Lahu people never sought to make a profit from the tea trees; living life one day at a time, they only sought to cover their basic living

needs. So, what was to be done with all these old trees? Enter the Dai people: known for their industrious nature, they arrived in Naka and developed a good relationship with the Lahu people, setting up mutually beneficial enterprises that allowed most of the tea produced there to be sold outside the area and establishing Naka tea as a steady presence in the market. If you ask the locals, they'll tell you that almost anyone in the area with a larger house and more apparent financial resources acquired them through business connections with traders from outside the region.

Although the Lahu people are not especially known for their friendliness or hospitality toward outsiders, they have an endearing frankness. They are very warm to those they know well, and willingly put a lot of effort into friendships. For example, on the day we first arrived at the village, we had a chance encounter with a woman who was picking tea with a bright smile in the old mountain garden.

Although she was a bit unapproachable at first, as we muddled along trying to communicate with our differing languages, she began to open up, revealing a lovely, good-natured smile, and had soon invited us to share in the local picnic lunch there in the tea garden. We happily sat down on the grass and put down our travel gear, and contributed the rations we had brought up the mountain to add to the tea picker's lunch, a Dai-style dish called "*nami* (納咪);" it made for a hearty shared meal. *Nami* is made using a local yellow-flowered vegetable; after the flowers have wilted, they remove the petals and add water and boiled glutinous rice, then leave it to ferment for fifteen days. Then they filter out the dregs and simmer it for a few hours. Once it's ready to be used, they add garlic and some hot water to soften it up, plus whatever seasonings they like. Out here in the wilderness where resources are scarce, who wouldn't savor such a delicacy?

A Former Tribute Tea

If we look back in time to the Qing Dynasty, Naka tea already enjoyed a good reputation. At that time, all the tea produced here was sent as a tribute to the local government (in charge of Cheli Xuanweisi, the former administrative region we mentioned earlier). According to historical records, the bamboo tube-packaged tea produced in Naka was even officially designated as tribute tea by the Burmese king, so we can see that it already enjoyed wide recognition abroad, too. Even today, the people of Naka carry on the tradition of making bamboo tube tea; the locals told us that they would take tubes of tea to the neighboring villages to trade for alcohol or everyday goods, or bring it along as a gift when visiting old friends.

Because of its long history, although the old village of Naka itself doesn't cover a very big area, it has more than 66 hectares (or 1000 *mu*) of old-growth tea tree gardens, situated at an altitude of around 1740 meters above sea level. On close inspection, the leaf size of the tea trees is on the small side of small-to-medium; although the trees are old, they have naturally spreading, twisting branches.

There is a lush layer of symbiotic plants growing on the tree bark and the forest floor, displaying the flourishing vitality of the garden and the rich biodiversity created by the topography and climate.

All these gardens full of old tea trees growing peacefully on the mountainsides impart a unique charm to the bamboo tube tea that is produced here, and for many years now Naka tea has fetched the highest price among all Mengsong's teas. In 2003, it even outpriced the famous Banzhang tea from Mount Blang, a testament to its great popularity on the market. So, what other factors have combined to make Naka tea's fragrant, sweet flavor float up to stand out above the masses, and make Naka the first name on any Chajin's lips whenever Mengsong tea is mentioned? This is the mystery that our research team was most hoping to unravel when we arrived in Naka.

Compared to the aggressive vigor of Blang Mountain tea or the soft, smooth sweetness of Yiwu tea (易武茶), Naka tea displays a refined sweetness without lacking in stamina, and has a bitter base note yet plenty of energy. It is beloved of tea drinkers everywhere and is particularly highly regarded in Guangzhou.

Mr. Chen from the Mengsong Village Administrative Office told us that at the time of the puerh tea market crash in 2007, the prices of Naka tea also plummeted to rock bottom. As a result of his efforts to find a way for Naka tea to weather this predicament, he came across the well-known Chensheng tea company (陳升號). The Chensheng brand was established in 2007. They purchased the local tea leaves at a guaranteed price, which standardized the quality of the tea and provided the local tea growers with a stable income, significantly improving their standard of living. In 2012, only 24 of Naka's household tea-growing enterprises received outside orders for tea; in 2013, following the successful example of Lao Banzhang, Mr. Chen seized the opportunity of involving the Chensheng Tea Factory, and produced eighteen tons of *maocha* (semi-processed leaf) to send them as a sample. The people at the Chensheng Tea Factory were stunned by the outstanding quality of the Naka tea, and a partnership was thus established. This injection of capital from the collaboration

resulted in a great improvement in the lives of the people of Naka, evident in the new road construction and renovations visible throughout the village.

So, with stable tea prices and newly-opened roads, this time when we visited Naka we could see signs of recent construction (*see the photographs on the previous page*), like traces of the plastic sheeting that had been spread over the newly-laid concrete. According to the locals, the new cement road that led away to the left had only been open for three months.

As the attention of tea lovers has focused on Naka, the difficult lives and inconvenient transport of earlier times have slowly receded into the past; Naka, this pearl of puerh hidden deep in the mountains, is truly beginning to shine. With that glow will come all the difficulties that such a spotlight brings, including changes to tradition and culture as well as the need to focus on environmental protection and the preservation of the old-growth trees that have brought this attention here in the first place. We hope that this issue of Global Tea Hut, and the awareness we are raising, can help out in a small way. At least, we can all drink this month's tea and raise a bowl to Naka and its people!

茶 Naka's tea trees propagate via sexual reproduction; signs of the evolution of the tea plant population can be seen everywhere, from the differences in leaf sizes from tree to tree to mutations in leaf color, often with purple-bud varieties. The seeds here are ripe and full of living energy, contributing to a natural and health ecology.



茶 Swirling Mist

薄霧繞

Tasting Mengsong *maocha*, the delicate fragrance has a profound impression on you. The tea liquor is sweet to the taste with very little astringency; when swallowed it leaves a slight bitter taste in the throat, which dissipates as you swallow and evolves into a sweet aftertaste with a long-lasting fragrance. There's an old Chinese saying that "each place creates a different sort of people;" it follows, then, that the wild elegance of this land of graceful, swirling mists and lofty exuberant mountain ranges manifests itself in the cups of tea Mengsong offers, with their endlessly lingering aroma.

Swirling Mist is a 2004 cake from Naka, Mengsong. We wanted to offer the best Mengsong has to offer—this is Global Tea Hut, after all! We wanted to share a Mengsong tea from old trees and with all of the qualities that make Mengsong tea special. Our Tea of the Month is a private order, pressed by a dear friend who went to Naka himself and made this cake from old trees in the nearby forest. A lot of what makes the flavor and energy of Mengsong unique is the environment, like the old Chinese saying about how different places create different people. It is only when the tea trees are left pristine, grown by Nature, without too much interference and without agrochemicals that we have a just representation of what makes that place unique. As Wu De always says: "The leaf is an expression of the tree's relationship to its environment." This is one of the best sheng puerh teas we've ever sent you. The good news is that we will be offering a small number of whole cakes as well (*see p. 43 for details*).

Beyond just finding a tea that we were sure was clean and from old trees, we love the way Naka tea ages. In just a decade, the tea turns sweet, thick, syrupy and very patient. We find this tea incredible to drink and well worth aging for longer. The storage on Swirling Mist is clean and bright. The tea has just started to make its first shift from a young to an aged tea and tastes of sweet, spicy fruit punch with a lingering aftertaste that coats the throat and mouth. There is still some astringency, but this is a good thing, as it means that this tea has the strength to be a great candidate for long-term storage.

This is a great tea to taste the stages that puerh goes through as it ages. We find that puerh passes through a stage every five to seven years, depending on the storage. This tea has passed through the green stage to the stage where the tea is brown, astringent and spicy to the third stage where the spiciness and astringency start to mellow out as the tea makes its way into the aged flavors of Chinese herbs, plum and ginseng. The energy of this tea grows more Yin with each passing year. It descends and centers us, as it is very grounding indeed. We recommend enjoying this tea in the late morning, after a nice breakfast and before the day begins; or perhaps early on a lazy afternoon. Of course, no delicious tea is as good alone as it is shared with other Chajin who know and love tea! Why not use the Global Tea Hut app and invite some friends over for tea?



Gongfu

茶道



Sidehandle



Water: spring water or best bottled
Fire: coals, infrared or gas
Heat: as hot as possible, fish-eye, 98 °C
Brewing Methods: gongfu or sidehandle (they make different brews)
Steeping: longer, flash, flash, then growing (you can only get one flash)
Patience: twenty steepings

茶 This is a stunning tea, and we would recommend brewing it gongfu if possible, which will bring out the best in a magical tea like this and provide many more steepings.

Brewing Tips

This month's tea can really be brewed any way: either leaves in a bowl, sidehandle or gongfu, but we prefer the latter two. If you are interested in learning more about the tea and tasting some of the subtleties of Mengsong tea, we would suggest gongfu brewing. But if you wish to enter a more meditative, ceremonial space, then a sidehandle into bowls will be better, allowing for a deeper heart connection with Swirling Mist and Mengsong as well. Perhaps this month, by way of brewing tips, we can review the most significant differences between bowl tea and gongfu tea.

Bowl tea is about meditative stillness and ceremonial space. It is about creating a sacred space that helps us to calm down and find our truth. We honor the tea by opening our hearts to it. By holding a bowl of tea, we remember to take the time each day to connect with ourselves, with Nature and with each other. There are no brewing parameters in bowl tea; it isn't about quality. We strive to let go of the evaluative mind that seeks to approach the tea or teaware with preferences and judgments like "too bitter" or "too hot," and instead relax into a peaceful acceptance of whatever the tea is, letting it communicate to us. Bowl tea uses larger muscle groups, as all the pouring, decanting and drinking is done from the core, using the whole of the hands and arms. This also encourages us to step back, let go of details and relax into the experience.

Gongfu tea is about sensitivity and skill. We brew gongfu tea to bring out the very best qualities in any tea. In this brewing method, we honor Tea by using all of our patience and skill, cultivated over years, to help the tea fulfill its potential—shining forth in aroma, fragrance and energy. Gongfu tea is about attention, focus on details and concentration; it's about practice, honing our skills: everything from the amount of tea to placing the tea in the pot, from pouring to lifting hot cups. Gongfu tea uses fine muscle groups like finger joints and tips, helping us to be more mindful and focused on details. We move from the gross to the subtle, zooming in on all the details of the session, becoming more present. Through gongfu brewing we learn how to evaluate tea and teaware, improving our ability to source fine tea, teaware and brewing methods as we cultivate our skills (and ourselves) over the years.

These two brewing methods work best in coordination, knowing when to sharpen and hone, using skill to fulfill a tea and when to relax, let go and open into a more soothing approach. There is a wisdom and skill needed to determine when to choose a bowl tea session and when gongfu. Knowing the tea, the occasion and the guests helps us to decide which of these methods to use. Over time, we develop a greater gratitude for the magnificent way that these methods cooperate in the life of a Chajin, facilitating tea wisdom.







勐宋

Mengsong

The Roof of Xishuangbanna

Yunnan



Mengsong



Mengsong is a name that is familiar to all puerh lovers, yet people are often hazy on the details. In terms of the teas produced here, tea companies know Mengsong (勐宋) as a large tea repository in the Menghai tea region, and teas from the larger Menghai area are sure to have some leaf from Mengsong as their base. As industry insiders know, tea from this region has a sweet aroma, a smooth energy and tea from its vast old-growth gardens is superior to that of other tea regions in terms of quality-to-price ratio. So why is it that this area, right next to Menghai, has the charm of vast old tea gardens, yet no one is clear about its history, or about the character of its tea? It seems this is due to two factors that have limited the growth of Mengsong, namely the transport conditions and the characteristics of the people who live there. In this issue, we will travel deep into Mengsong, exploring its geography and people. We will visit the villages of Baotang, Nanben, Bameng, Da'an, Da Manlü, Banggang and Banglong. But first, let's introduce the region itself.

茶人: Luo Yingyin (羅英銀)

With its title “the roof of Xishuangbanna,” it’s no surprise that the terrain of Mount Huazhu Liangzi is steep and rugged. People from many of China’s different ethnic groups live here, including the Lahu, Hani (sometimes called Aini), Han, Dai and Blang Dai peoples. (The ancestors of the Blang Dai were people of Blang ethnicity who settled among the Dai people and were influenced by their culture; they are ethnically Blang but do not have their own language, and are locally known as Blang Dai.) The steep slopes of this land are home to all these peoples, making Mengsong an abundant and diverse region. Spring brings the green of tea leaves, autumn brings the yellow of rice ears; the terraced fields descend in layers down the mountainsides, and the wheat fields sway gently in the wind. We saw water buffalo swaying along by the roadsides—a sight that is becoming rarer as time goes on. In the Hani villages, we even saw large groups of water buffalo. Looking out at the beauty of Mengsong’s mountain landscape, it really is just like a painting.

There are actually two places named Mengsong in Xishuangbanna. One is Mengsong Township in

Menghai County—this settlement is classified at the administrative level of a “town,” so it’s generally known as “Big Mengsong” or simply Mengsong. The other Mengsong is a village within the jurisdiction of Menglong Village within the bounds of Jinghong City; it’s at the “village” administrative level and is usually referred to as “Little Mengsong.” The Mengsong tea region that we refer to in this special issue is “Big Mengsong” within the border of Menghai County; it is bordered by Jinghong City to the east and Gelanghe Village to the south, and looks across the Liusha river toward Nannuo Mountain. It forms part of a group of mountains along with Nannuo, Nanjiao, Jingmai, Blang and Bada, that are collectively known as the “New Six Great Tea Mountains.” (The traditional “Six Great Tea Mountains” are Manzhuan, Mangzhi, Mansa, Yibang, Youle and Gedeng.)

There’s a well-known saying that goes: “Each mountain is its own world; each tea has its own flavor.” Nannuo Mountain is home to Banpo Village, world-renowned for its superior cultivated tea trees; Jingmai is known for being home to an ancient Blang minority village (see the July 2016 issue);

Blang Mountain has been able to support half the puerh tea market for the past few years with the forceful character of its famous Banzhang tea. So, what is it that makes Mengsong worthy of its place among these six famous tea regions? The answer lies in the fragrance and sweetness that is particular to the medium-leaf tea trees and the high elevation at which they grow.

The tea gardens of Mengsong are remote and hard to reach, and are inhabited by several of China's ethnic minority groups, often viewed as enigmatic by the outside population. Because of these factors, the old-growth tea of Mengsong didn't attract the attention of the outside world until the late 20th century. The Global Tea Hut team (via Wu De) first set foot in the hidden world of Mengsong's tea gardens in 2002, criss-crossing deep into its mountains and forests and discovering the ways that tea provides a livelihood for the people there. The following article is a field report detailing the impact that tea has had on the culture of the Lahu, Hani and mountain Han ethnic groups living in the area. It also contains an investigation of the unique character of the tea produced from the medium-leaf tea trees that grow on the steep slopes of Mengsong's high-altitude gardens. Over the years, increasingly convenient transportation and a surge of interest from the tea market have revealed Mengsong tea to the world in all its refined, enchanting grace.

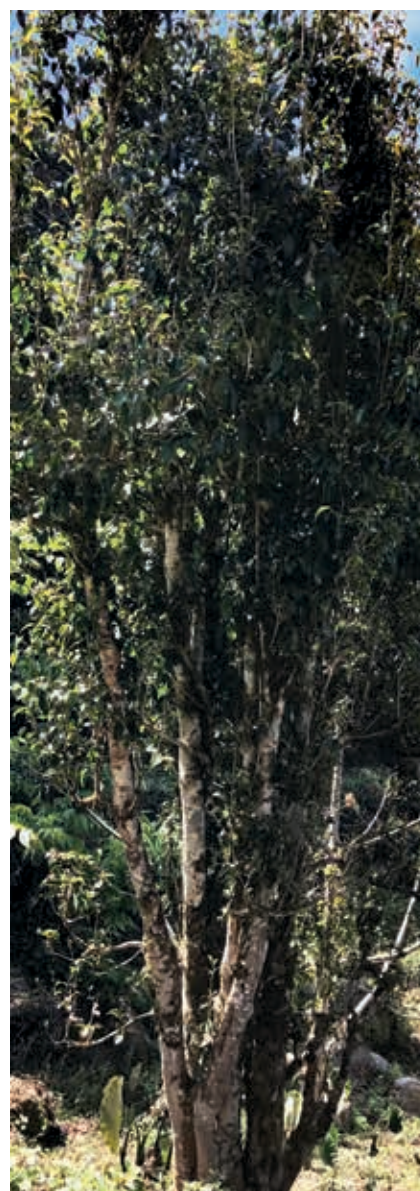
High-Altitude Gardens.

Situated within the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, Mengsong is home to swaths of high-altitude old-growth tea gardens. Mount Huazhu Liangzi (滑竹梁子), or "smooth bamboo rafters," at over 2400 meters, is known as "the roof of Xishuangbanna." The ancient tea trees cling to its sides, lending a unique posture to their branches and a distinctive character to the gardens. We followed the bumpy dirt roads in our car, rounding the craggy mountain ridges, the landscape around us changing with each bend and dip. Once we climbed higher than 2200 meters, almost everything in our field of vision was a wilderness of stones and gravel

with barely any green in sight. Even though it was already the middle of spring, the earth was still a swath of dusty grey; the terrain on this mountain ridge wasn't even suitable for pine forests to grow, let alone broad-leaf forests. As we gradually descended to the areas below 2100 meters, tea gardens that had been developed during the mid- to late-1970s came into view. The tea tree communities up here largely consist of Yunnan large-leaf varieties, which propagate via sexual reproduction, planted in rows. The endless green leaves of the tea trees spread out across the earth, mirroring the white clouds that floated across the pure blue sky, the sort that you only see at this high an altitude. Contemplating this scene of Mengsong in springtime was just like being transported into an impressionist painting.

Continuing onwards down the mountain, the terrain becomes green with diverse vegetation; the different shades of green and widths of leaves and branches lending a many-layered depth to the mountainsides. This is the zone where most of the old tea trees grow; the forest brandishing its freshly-dressed green twigs with the posture of a leading actor on the stage. Mengsong still has more than 200 remaining hectares of old-growth tea gardens, the twisted roots and branches of the ancient trees entwined together, clinging to the steep sides of Mount Huazhu Liangzi. The mountain slopes give life to three communities of ancient tea trees, spreading across the land like arteries. In the southeast there is Sanmai, which faces across toward Nannuo Mountain and leads on to Nanben and the old village of Da'an. Extending to the southwest are Old Baotang Village, New Baotang Village and Bameng, while villages such as Da Manlü and Naka occupy the north.

In terms of longitude, the location of Huazhu Liangzi means that the tea trees receive plenty of light and moisture every year, unfurling their twigs and shoots around the mountain like a wreath. If we want to theorize about the history of Mengsong, we can infer from the several hectares of tall, thick-trunked ancient tea trees that remain today at Baotang Village that the ethnic minority peoples of Mengsong have just as long a history tea as those on neighboring Nannuo Mountain.



Mengsong is one of the oldest tea regions in Menghai. Most of Mengsong's ancient gardens were planted by people of the Lahu ethnicity, and the gardens all have old Lahu Villages attached to them. The larger Han Chinese settlements of Nanben, New Baotang Village and Da Manlü were all established by Han people drawn there by the tea. It's said that by the time of the Qing Emperor Guangxu, Han people had already settled in Baotang and Nanben to trade in tea leaves. During the Qing Dynasty, Mengsong, along with Mount Nannuo, formed part of an administrative district called Cheli Xuanweisi (车里宣慰司), which became Cheli County after the Republic of China was formed. About 20 years into the Republic (around the 1930s), Han traders such as Chen Xi (陳璽) and Chen Bi (陳碧) came over from



Yiwu in Mengla County and settled in Mengsong, where they opened tea shops and made compressed tea. In 1941, the Fohai Tea Factory (佛海茶廠) set up a tea processing plant in Mengsong, as well as a tea purchasing station. The factory director at the time, Fan Hejun (範和鈞), also sent envoys to purchase tea bricks from Chen Xi's privately-owned tea business. Records indicate that the old tea gardens of Mengsong still covered an area of more than 330 hectares at that time.

Sexual Propagation

According to Mengsong's village secretary, Li Hairong (李海榮), the township currently has a population of around 23,000 people and covers

an area of nearly 500 square kilometers. More than sixty percent of the population makes a living from tea. The whole township is made up of 11 village committees, of which 9 (comprised of 114 small groups) are engaged in growing tea. There are about 500 hectares of large-leaf tea trees, while medium-leaf varieties such as those found in Naka cover about 200 hectares. As the economy has stimulated a boom in the tea industry, many more tea trees have been planted over the past few years, mostly as seedlings. Seeds are selected from high-quality old-growth trees, then cultivated into seedlings before being transplanted to the mountainside. Nowadays, although this tea is still regarded as "small tree tea," it is still different from the ordinary tea commonly known as "tableland" or "plantation" tea

(台地茶, *tai di cha*). The biggest difference is that the latter is a product of tea trees that reproduce asexually, planted to increase competitiveness and sustain a stable production volume. The tea trees in Mengsong, on the other hand, are grown from seedlings descended from the community of ancient large-leaf trees that reproduce sexually. This means that each tree has its own unique genes, just like the old tea trees planted by hand a hundred years ago whose branches now cast their shade on the mountainsides, and whose full-bodied tea is the main reason behind puerh tea's popularity. This is one of the main advantages of the Mengsong gardens.

Yunnan's wild tea tree communities are mostly found growing throughout the southern and western mountainous regions of the province, mostly in the forests outside villages.



Tea thrives in places along the mid and lower stretches of the Lancang River including Xishuangbanna, Lincang, Baoshan and Dehong. According to preliminary figures, they are mostly found in high-elevation mountain forests; some grow in large continuous patches while other individual trees can be found growing on their own. While in Mengsong, we noticed that tea trees could be found scattered throughout the whole tea region; for example, there were traces of them growing all throughout the stretch of land from Sanmai to Da'an Village. In the vicinity of Banglong Village, we also saw tea trees growing sporadically throughout the old-growth forest, even up to the high-altitude mountain wilderness at an elevation of 2100 meters.

Tea Companies

Mengsong is hailed as the "Roof of Xishuangbanna," with almost every tall mountainside covered in old-growth forest. On top of this, it has several hundred hectares of old tea trees nestled against the slopes of Mount Huazhu Liangzi, forming a serene tea forest; all these factors have naturally attracted the attention of tea industry professionals. The famous Chensheng

Tea Factory (陳升茶廠) began buying Lao Banzhang tea at a guaranteed price in 2008; in 2013, they also advanced into Naka and began buying old-growth tea. At the same time, the Yulin Company (雨林企業) was building a facility for the initial stages of tea processing at the old village of Nanben as well as undertaking a large-scale construction project in the dense forest to build an impressive puerh tea processing plant. As well as these two, numerous other companies could be seen building tea processing plants or heading to the mountains and villages to buy tea; these included companies such as Jin Dafu, Yangpin Label, Lao Tongzhi, Yibang Tea-Horse Trading and Quan Zhenwei.

Layered mountain ranges wind away endlessly on all sides, and white clouds gently float between the verdant peaks and valleys; the old-growth mountain tea gardens are covered in clouds and mist all year long, resplendent with unique scenery that can't be found in Xishuangbanna's other tea gardens. As the mountain breeze blows the clouds aside, the hillside tea gardens gradually reveal their elegant greenery; the humidity of the mountains really creates a rich, luscious environment for the tea trees to grow. Overlooking the Lancang River, the ravines snake across

the landscape, and the wind slices between mountain ranges, eroding the soil to create a unique geological environment.

Mengsong Terroir

The nutrients that nurture the old tea trees as they mature infuse the tea shoots in each region with their own unique charm, giving rise to the saying "every mountain has its flavor." Bameng Village, for example, is situated in the mountain pass of Huazhu Liangzi; the tea here grows at a high altitude, and comes mostly from medium-leaf, tree-shaped old-growth tea trees. They produce a tea with a delicate liquor, a floral aroma and a refreshing sweetness; it's highly sought after by those in the know. Several years ago, a tea merchant once took me to visit the old-growth tea garden at Old Baotang Village; just as the tea trees at Lao Banzhang are known for their large size, the trees in this garden can only be described as ancient. While the old-growth tea trees on Mount Nannuo are known for being tall and straight with thick trunks, the trees in this garden each have their unique shape, tall and unyielding. If you smell the tea liquor before tasting



✪ *Mount Huazhu Liangzi is steep and rugged with simple dirt roads traveled by many different kinds of people and vehicles. People from many of China's different ethnic groups live here, including the Lahu, Hani (Aini), Han, Dai and Blang Dai peoples. The steep slopes of this land are home to all these peoples, making Mengsong an abundant and diverse region. People dress in a combination of modern and traditional clothes, even as they make tea by hand, which is symbolic of the changes happening here in general.*

it, you can detect a delicate hint of fragrant nectar; it's an easily recognizable tea with a mellow quality and a faint bitterness that fades into a lingering sweet aftertaste.

In the old village of Da'an, the most important village in the area where Mengsong Township meets the mountains, the old tea trees intertwine their roots and branches to form a continuous blanket of forest. Here, the tea is sweet with a hint of bitterness; the final aftertaste is long-lasting with a somewhat vigorous stimulating effect on saliva production. In the southwestern villages of Sanmai and Nanben, meanwhile, the old-growth tea trees stretch endlessly from mountainside to mountainside; the elevation is high and the trees are very old. In the early spring sunlight, their dappled blanket of fresh emerald green sways to the rhythm of life. The tea is sweet and smooth with a mellow fragrance, the aftertaste as fine and serene as a mountain ridge.

Exploring the mountain peaks and ridges, savoring the essence of the Mengsong old-growth tea gardens, is truly a memorable experience. Stepping into the clouds in the verdant rocky valleys of Naka's old-growth tea gardens truly fills one with the joy of the wilderness that all tea lovers hope to find. Just as the reputation of Mount

Blang is upheld by the aggressive vigor of its Lao Banzhang tea, Naka in Mengsong is known as the home of puerh "rock tea." Some people say that Naka tea is the signature tea of Menghai, because its character is the most unique of all the teas from this group of mountains. Those who have tasted Naka tea are enchanted by its honeyed fragrance, recalling clouds floating among winding mountain ridges, and by the fine, lingering aftertaste of its liquor, with its distinct "rock tea" charm. If we explore the reasons for this unique flavor, we find there are several: this tea region has unique geological features, with the old tea trees growing out of cracks in the rocky peaks; the tea trees are a unique, tree-shaped small-leaf varietal; the high-altitude environment provides plentiful moisture and nourishment. All of these factors contribute to Naka tea's fragrant, rock tea flavor. Anyone who is familiar with Naka tea considers it among the "royalty" of puerh teas.

Mountain Roads

The old-growth tea gardens of Mengsong have stood for hundreds of years, yet have only recently attracted much attention. Why? The main

reason is that the transport conditions influenced the development of the whole area. Tall mountain ranges and ancient forests make it difficult to build roads. Traveling to any tea mountain generally means driving up rugged, bumpy mountain roads, and being thoroughly shaken about is only to be expected. But accessing Mengsong's tea mountains in the early days meant encountering hairpin bends and slippery dirt roads when it rained. Especially if you wanted to drive into the old-growth forests, it really was a case of "one step forwards, three steps backwards," with perils at every turn. The deteriorating transport conditions posed a significant obstacle to the development of the whole tea region. To stimulate economic development, the village administration oversaw the construction of a mountain road circling Mount Huazhu Liangzi within a timeframe of three years, most of it sealed with cement. This year when we visited Naka, it was a smooth drive up the mountain. As transportation becomes more convenient, we can expect to see more and more tea lovers' gazes diverted from Mount Blang's famous Lao Banzhang tea toward Mengsong's fragrant alpine tea forests. Will that be a good thing or will it be the cause of more environmental issues?

Aside from the influence of transportation, the local ethnic groups have also played a part in the development of Mengsong's tea industry. The old-growth tea trees in Mengsong were originally planted by people of Lahu ethnicity, so anywhere in the mountains that you can find old-growth tea trees, you'll also find Lahu villages. The Lahu people tended to live simply and didn't have a very developed economy; they lived year-round deep in the mountains and had no contact with the outside world. Their traditions often involve expressing their gratitude to the earth: each year when the new grain is harvested, they boil up a fragrant batch of rice; the first bowl of rice is respectfully presented to the god Esha as an offering. This is followed by a lively celebration that marks the "New Rice Festival," the most important festival of the year for the Lahu people.

Economy & Change

With their unassuming and optimistic nature, the local mountain people haven't always had a good understanding of finance; on top of that, entertainment is scarce in the mountains, and people are used to entertaining themselves by drinking and gambling. It's not uncommon to see a bottle of spirits traded for a plot of tea trees. So, over a long period, it's been difficult for the Lahu people to break out of poverty. The population in these mountain communities is also not very large, so they have become increasingly vulnerable and have found themselves at the edges of society; a difficult social phenomenon. Old Baotang Village, where we saw a row of simple, low houses that were home to more than 20 families, paints the best picture. A bit further down the mountain is New Baotang Village, a Han settlement that houses more than a hundred families; in terms of the standard of the buildings and daily life, it presents a clear contrast to the old village.

In recent years, thanks to stimulation from the tea trade, the tea villages have been quietly changing. In Mengsong, the old tea trees were originally planted by the Lahu people who lived nearby. As the local tea economy has taken off, young women of Hani and

Blang ethnicity have also come to the villages and married locals; this has gradually led to a change in the Lahu custom of marrying within one's clan and has brought diversity into the local gene pool. As times have progressed, the Lahu people's sphere of life has gradually extended outward beyond the mountains; nowadays, teenagers head down into the towns and villages to go to middle school. It takes them about six hours to walk down the mountain from the village of Naka; when they head down, they take bamboo tubes of homemade tea with them to trade for basic supplies. Come the weekend, they walk from dawn till dusk once more to return home. According to the village teachers, Lahu children often find it difficult to stay sitting inside a classroom during lessons and are always running outside. At bedtime, the teachers often have to go looking for the students, as they aren't used to sleeping in concrete rooms and will often light a fire somewhere outdoors and fall asleep lying under the stars, unafraid of darkness or mosquitoes. It seems they really are "children of the earth!"

Bamboo Tea

Speaking of bamboo tube tea, Mengsong's Naka tea has been widely acclaimed since early times. It's said that it enjoyed widespread fame during the Qing Dynasty and was sent every year to the local Cheli Xuanweisi government as a tribute tea. According to historical records, the king of Burma also designated "Naka Bamboo Tube Tea" as a tribute tea. Naka tea, with its distinctive fragrance, has always been one of Yunnan's famous teas, and its name is well known to those who are familiar with Menghai's tea.

Almost everyone in Mengsong depends on tea for a living; this includes not only the people in the Lahu villages, but also most of those in Hani settlements such as Banggang, Banglong, Bameng and Sanmai. While the Lahu people are known for being simple and unassuming in nature, the Hani people, on the other hand, are known for being lively and full of emotion. The Hani ethnic group are traditionally more open when it comes to love and courtship, with young people be-

ing free to choose their own romantic partners—unlike the Dai people, among whom marriage is arranged by the parents. If you visit a Hani village, you'll notice that a lot of the houses have a small cabin built outside the main dwelling; it turns out these are built for young lovers by the young man's family so that the couple can live there together before getting married. Once married, however, the custom, quite unusually, is that the husband and wife sleep in their own rooms; in traditional Hani houses you'll see that there are separate rooms for the man and woman, and sometimes even separate staircases to get to the second floor. Traditionally, Hani people were forbidden from marrying members of the Dai ethnicity; it's said that this is because of a curse laid by the ancestors, which means that intermarrying will bring death or misfortune to one of the spouses. In reality, there were some couples who fell in love and got together despite this, about whom the village people will tell story after story, none of which have very good endings; listening to these stories, you feel yourself gradually gaining a new reverence for the local culture.

The native people are the guardians of the old tea tree communities; when you visit places such as Baotang, Da'an and Naka, you are struck by the feeling that tea really is *supposed* to be this tranquil, and human life this simple. Although some say that the development of tea in Mengsong was inhibited by the transport conditions and the characteristics of the people who live here, if you look at it from another perspective, it was exactly those factors that allowed Mengsong's ancient tea mountains to exist in such peaceful seclusion. Perhaps the difficult access and reclusive customs of the local people were, in fact, the best path to protecting this piece of ancient mountain forest.



茶 Life is still very traditional in rural Yunnan, despite the growing economy and changes just over the horizon.



BAOTANG

保塘



Ticket in hand, we hop on the rickety old bus that will take us up and down bumpy mountain roads that twist and turn through the gorgeous scenery of southern Yunnan, Xishuangbanna. Just near the border, we're exploring the villages of Mengsong one by one, learning about the people and tea culture there. We start our journey with Old Baotang Village, where people have lived with the leaf for centuries, their lives written in its veins as it courses through theirs...



茶人: *Chen Mingcong* (陳明聰)

Following the mountain road, our research team rounded Mount Huazhu Liangzi and arrived at the historic village of Baotang (保塘). Situated on the mountain's southern slope at an elevation of about 1760 meters, the ancient tea garden at Baotang has one of the best natural environments in the puerh tea-growing region. Baotang is inhabited by the Lahu people, who have made their livelihood from planting tea since ancient times. Today, perhaps because of the difficulty of mountain life, there are only around 20 families still living in the Lahu settlement, which is now known as "Old Baotang Village." Further down the hill is a larger Han township—it's said that many Han Chinese people were drawn here to trade in tea more than a hundred years ago and formed a settlement, nowadays known as "New Baotang Village."

Across the mountain's sandy yellow soil, the ancient tea trees grow scattered throughout the forest. The rich biodiversity of the area provides an excellent habitat for the old tea trees; many different tree communities grow up alongside the tea trees, subtly nurturing the enchanting flavor of Baotang tea. For the past century, the old tea trees in the Baotang tea region have lived in symbiosis with the forest plants; they don't grow very densely and have been free from human interference, flourishing naturally on the earth, rain and sunlight to produce a

tea liquor with a flavor that is all its own. With old-growth tea trees, most of the leaves won't look very lush in appearance, but the tea trees are well-spaced thanks to their straight, thick trunks, so each leaf receives ample nutrients and grows to be full and a glossy dark green in color.

Baotang tea is one of the most recognizable of Mengsong's old-growth teas. The tea liquor of the finished product is a clear golden yellow; before drinking the tea, you'll notice it giving forth a rich aroma of nectar. The liquor is smooth, with fine-quality teas displaying a hint of bitterness and astringency followed by a subtle, long-lasting sweet aftertaste; it has a detailed, evolving flavor profile. Although it's not produced in large quantities and doesn't have a complicated refining process, these factors do nothing to dim the brilliance of Baotang tea.

Old Baotang Village

Around twenty Lahu families make their homes in Old Baotang Village, which stands at an altitude of roughly 1800 meters. The name of the Lahu (拉祜) people means "tiger hunters." They are descended from ancient nomadic people of the Qiang ethnicity who originally lived in the provinces of Gansu and Qinghai, and gradually moved further south. They were eventually assimilated into the majority

Han culture and became part of the agricultural economy. These days, they mainly rely on tilling the land by hand, with grains such as rice and corn forming their main crops. They also raise water buffalo in the villages. In 2009, the first time we visited the region, we ate lunch at the home of a local Lahu family. Because they didn't have the resources to buy plates, we each ate out of a banana leaf cupped in our hands, sitting around together in a circle. Although we visited many tea gardens on our journey, that meal was the most unforgettable of them all, and we still hold fond memories of it to this day.

In Lahu culture, it's forbidden to eat dog meat; legend has it that one of their ancestors was once rescued by a dog. Since then, the Lahu people have seen dogs as "man's best friend." It's not only taboo to kill a dog or eat dog meat; dogs are treated just like people, sharing the same food and dwellings. Even though the Lahu people don't have a lot to spare, they'll happily share their own food with their dogs.

The very first time we set foot in a Lahu village, our first impression was that the Lahu people weren't very easy to get along with, and we started to doubt whether we'd be able to establish enough of a connection with them for our visit to have a worthwhile outcome. It wasn't until later that we realized that the Lahu people are actually very kind, warm and hospitable, as one would expect of a Yunnan tribe;



茶 The local government came up with a policy entitled “a television for every home,” but none of them have ever been watched. They don’t even have power in most homes. Such is “modernization!”

On the road to Baotang, it was even difficult for two vehicles to pass each other; inconvenient transport made the village hard to reach.

The government built a row of concrete houses for the Lahu people, but no one ever moved into them. The Lahu people live in bamboo houses that they’ve built themselves, which are cool—concrete houses just cannot compare.



it’s just that this side of their personalities is reserved for their “own people,” in other words, close friends or family, those considered to be insiders. If they see you as a stranger, the Lahu people tend to remain closed off and keep a respectful distance. But after you’ve interacted enough to be considered a friend, they cast off this detached exterior, revealing a genuine, unpretentious warmth.

Sitting in one of the Lahu families’ bamboo houses, we asked them about the row of concrete buildings that we’d seen in the village, which had made us quite curious. We found out that a few years ago, the government had built this row of concrete houses for the Lahu people, but no one had ever moved into them. The Lahu people explained that they were used to living in the bamboo houses that they

built themselves, which were cool and well-ventilated—concrete houses just couldn’t compare. Living in the concrete jungle of big cities, as so many of us do nowadays, we can’t avoid using air conditioning in summer and heating in winter; whereas the Lahu people live in a natural forest—and rely on the natural forest. Shutting themselves up in a concrete building would run totally counter to their customary way of life.

After our meal, the Lahu family took us to look at their empty concrete house. The main room was completely deserted; the only furniture was a small wooden cabinet against one wall with a television sitting on it. We were very curious about this TV, as we hadn’t noticed any of the Lahu people using electrical appliances since we arrived in the village. When we thought about

it afterwards, we weren’t even sure if the village had a power supply; so why would they have a television? It turns out that the local government had once come up with a policy entitled “a television for every home;” so, to enact the policy, they arranged for a load of TVs to be delivered and put one in every house. But none of those TVs had ever been watched; in fact, it was most likely not even possible to watch them. If you think about it, this scene of “modernization” is certainly unexpected, but you can see how it came to be; in the city, a television is seen as an ordinary everyday item, while up here in the village, all it can do is sit there being ornamental, doing nothing except fulfilling a policy.

In the Lahu village, almost every item people use is homemade out of bamboo, from their tea-dry-



✿ *The old tea trees in Baotang have lived in symbiosis with the forest plants; they don't grow very densely and have been free from human interference, flourishing naturally on the earth, rain and sunlight to produce a tea liquor with a flavor that is all its own.*

The Lahu people of Old Baotang Village are all expert tea pickers, easily climbing the tea trees without any equipment. Their thick soles allow them to stabilize themselves on any foothold. They find themselves a secure position, then let the tea leaves fall to the ground as they pick them. Later, they gather them up in baskets.

ing platforms to the houses they live in. When entering a Lahu house, the most eye-catching feature is probably the indoor fire pits. Most houses have two fire pits; one for the elderly family members to use, and one for cooking the family's meals. The hearth is the heart of a Lahu household, and is as sacred as a shrine. It's forbidden to spit into the fire, or to sit on top of the pit, or to step over it, and it's even more important not to step on the tripod-shaped cooking frame or the stone that pots are set upon.

Living a Life of Tea

The Lahu people of Old Baotang Village are all expert tea pickers. The old-growth tea trees differ in height and breadth depending on their age,

but are generally quite big and tall. If any of us wanted to climb up one, we would definitely need the help of a ladder—and even with a ladder, we would still have to climb up slowly and cautiously, one step at a time. It's quite possible we wouldn't make it all the way to the top, and even if we did, we might get stuck swaying around up there, unsure how to safely climb down! But the Lahu villagers, on the other hand, all seem to have a natural talent for climbing trees. They easily scale the tea trees without any equipment, relying on the strength of their arms and legs. Their thick soles allow them to stabilize themselves using any foothold the tree might offer, big or small. Once in the tree they find themselves a secure position, then let the tea leaves fall to the ground as they pick them. They'll often stay up in a tree for

a good half-day; it's almost as if they become one with the tree. While staying in the village, we would quite often walk under a tea tree, oblivious to the fact that there was someone picking tea right above our heads! You sometimes get the feeling that it would be impossible to separate the Lahu people from the tea trees they live among. It's almost like they are family, companions peacefully co-existing in this corner of the world and depending on each other for survival.

In 2009, the first time we visited Old Baotang Village, we chanced upon an elderly tea picker as we were strolling through the forest. As we wandered along, admiring the old tea trees growing freely all around us, we suddenly noticed something shadowy and indistinct moving in one of the trees. When we went up for a closer look,

it turned out to be one of the village elders, nestled up in the tree busily harvesting tea. Although we'd stopped beneath the tree, the old man showed no sign of having noticed us; it was as if in his world, nothing else existed but himself and the tea tree.

After some time, the elderly tea picker seemed to come to a pause in his work and easily slipped down onto the ground. Following his movement, we noticed a pile of smoking ashes off to one side. The old man picked up a twig and stirred the ashes a few times; when he saw a flame emerge, his face, which up until that moment was calm and expressionless, suddenly broke

into a hearty, joyful laugh. Clapping his hands and rocking back and forth, he chuckled to himself for quite some time, then took a silver pipe out of his pocket, lit it with the flame, and puffed away contentedly. It turns out that he kept the pile of ashes there so that he could easily light his pipe each time he took a break from tea picking without having to start a new fire. Seeing all this, we were surprised that an inconspicuous pile of ashes could conceal such ingenuity; aside from this, it also gave us a sudden insight into the true meaning of being content with what you have. These days, people are always busy chasing after all the

pleasures life has to offer, when really, we can find happiness in the simple things; just like this elderly tea picker, who didn't need fancy technology or luxurious surroundings to find joy and satisfaction in life.

The Han Village

Further down the mountain from Old Baotang Village, at an elevation of about 1600 meters, is the Han township, home to 120 families of the majority Han Chinese ethnicity. The Han village is about one kilometer away from the old village, with old-growth



茶 The Lahu people are frank about their feelings. If they see you as a stranger, they tend to remain closed off and keep a respectful distance. But after you've interacted enough to be considered a friend, they cast off this detached exterior, revealing a genuine, unpretentious warmth. They always want to share some tobacco or tea with you once you break the ice and begin chatting with them. If you smile enough, they will even invite you to their home for tea and a meal, like Mr. Zhou to the far right, whom we met on the road in the Han village. He invited us home with him and started a fire, offering us tea and a meal. His hospitality left us wondering if the reserved stares we met were a modern change there.

tea trees covering the whole area between the two settlements. During the reign of the Qing Emperor Guangxu, many Han people were drawn here by the tea trade and settled in the area. The township has existed for more than a hundred years; according to the local Han people, their families have now lived here for five or six generations, all relying on this stretch of old-growth tea forest for their livelihood.

Down in the Han village, the surroundings are quite different from those in the old Lahu village. The most noticeable point of difference is the red brick houses that are particular to the Han people. The walls and sin-

gle-story houses that you can see along the roadsides are all built out of neat, uniform red bricks. Last year marked our second visit to Baotang, with the Han village being a major stop on our itinerary. We had lunch at the home of Mr. Zhou, a 46-year-old resident who chatted to us about his family and their tea. We all sat down in Mr. Zhou's main room around a square table and shared a plentiful meal of meat and vegetable dishes.

The tea trees surrounding this village are ancient and majestic, situating the people and their culture in an environment older than their memory. Baotang village was built according to

where the tea grew; everywhere in the village you can see people making tea, drying the leaves on homemade bamboo platforms that extend out from the clifftops. Every day they lay out the leaves to dry, and gather them in again; and so life goes peacefully on in the ancient village.



NANBEN



The trip to Baotang was worth the long bus ride, and with a belly full of tea and some new friends, we hop onto another old bus and pull out of Baotang, waving at the aboriginal children who love us. We are now on our way to Nanben. The jungle passes by, reminding us of the vibrancy of Yunnan. The changes we see everywhere we travel are a bit disconcerting, and we wonder about the future of puerh tea and the people who produce it as we pull up to our second stop...



茶人: Li Yunyun (李昀耘)

Nanben, which belongs to the Sanmai Village district, is situated in the southeastern mountain region of Mengsong in Menghai County, Xishuangbanna. The population is not very large, and is made up of 70 families belonging to three different ethnic groups: Han, Lahu and Aini. In the past, it was very difficult to reach the old village of Nanben (南本) from the city, so its name was largely unknown in puerh tea circles. It wasn't until 2010, when a road was built connecting Nanben to the outside world, that people had the chance to slowly draw aside the mysterious veil that had concealed Nanben for so long. When they did, it revealed a blanket of beautifully preserved old-growth tea forest, stretching all the way to Sanmai. From that day forth, the name of Nanben slowly ventured out from among the mountain mists and made its way into the wider world of puerh.

Nanben is home to a rich ecosystem, with a great diversity of plants living together in peaceful symbiosis. In the village, things are much the same among the human population. The seventy households that live here belong to three different ethnicities: Lahu, Aini and Han. Although these three ethnic groups are known for having quite different characteristics and traditions, they have all put down roots here in Nanben's soil. Over the years, the generations have grown up together, intertwined like the branches of the tea trees, to create a unique local culture.

The Lahu people are known for being quite blunt and direct. However, after you've shared the companionship that comes with drinking together, they will usually let down their guard and see you as a friend. When it comes to their outlook on life, they tend to live in the moment. In the village of Nanben, it's said that in the past, Lahu people would often trade a *mu* of land (about 670 square meters) for a bottle of alcohol from the Han people. If you observe the Lahu people, they are candid and honest in nature, and take their word seriously; it's not hard to imagine that there may be some truth behind those stories.

In the past, the Lahu people in Nanben owned a large area of tea gardens, but nowadays most of the land is owned by Han people. It makes one wonder if this really was a result of those lively banquets of years gone by, whether the friendly comradeship of the Lahu people unconsciously ended up benefiting others, and all those acres of tea garden really did change hands amid the clinking of cups and the cheerful sounds of laughter.

Educating the Future

The Aini people are generally quite rigorous in matters of finance. They have one of the highest levels of education among Mengsong's ethnic minority groups and are quite industrious. According to the locals, the Aini people used to sell the tea trees to the Han people one individual tree at a

time to pay for their children's education, as they place a lot of value on the power of education to open up new possibilities for the future.

One of the locals we met on our visit, Wang Xiaohui (王晓晖), is a good example of someone who places a lot of value on education. Yet, as he told us, after completing his degree in Education Studies at the University of Kunming, he chose to return to the village and contribute to developing the tea industry. Even with a university degree in Education, with the many restrictions in the education system and society's subtle resistance during the period after he graduated, it was still quite difficult to establish himself in the education system and become a teacher.

Because of these types of limitations that were prevalent at the time, the tea garden started to see highly educated people returning home. This influx of knowledge contributed to advancements in all areas of the industry, be it marketing, operations or planting cycles. As this development process continued, it also had the effect of gradually establishing links with the outside world, which eventually allowed large tea brands to come into contact with Nanben.

Simple and Lively

As the sky gets bluer and the air gets thinner, you know you have ventured further up the mountain, finding more quiet and more tea trees as well.



Nanben's ancient tea tree communities mostly grow at around 1700 meters; in the past, traveling this high up the mountain was much less convenient than it is today. The people who planted and picked the tea up here had to make do with limiting themselves to distances they could travel on foot, or with basic modes of transport.

The road leading into the old tea forest was not purposefully built; rather, year upon year of footsteps have worn a faint, secluded pathway into the mountainside. The abundantly green forest has an air of ancientness about it; we city dwellers, used to stewing in the hustle and bustle of the daily grind, unconsciously began to absorb the peaceful atmosphere.

With every step we could feel the softness of the weeds, we could hear the crackle of fallen leaves and the carefree sound of stones scattering freely across the ground. We got a feeling just like the total ease you experience when you return home after a long day and cast aside the mask you show to the outside world; simple and unadorned. The forest gently accepted anything and everything into its welcoming embrace, even the scattered footsteps of these visitors from afar.

If you stop and stand still for a while in this exuberant forest and look around you, you'll notice konjac plants

growing, whose fleshy root or "corm" is used to make jelly and other foods; many-colored insects float unhurriedly about the forest, passing under the generously spreading branches of the *Sphaeropteris lepifera*, or "brush pot" trees. *Dendrobium* orchids flourish elegantly on the tree trunks; if you turn your head you can even see the side of a steep cliff, where the dense and sturdy roots of the great trees intertwine with the soil. All living things exist in harmonious communion in this peaceful corner of the world.

The higher up the mountain you go, the harder it was to reach in the old days. The area around 2100 meters above sea level is where the largest number of Nanben's old tea trees grow today, and it is the best preserved. Even with the much-improved road conditions of today, it's still quite tough going once you get up this high. Although the wild tea trees up here have not yet reached the age of old-growth trees, this altitude used to be very hard to reach with old-style forms of transport, so the wild tea trees grew naturally and were not planted by people. This, together with the fact that the tea trees reproduce sexually, means that the genes of these plants are especially rare.

If you take a deep breath, you can feel the humidity in the air, which

combines with the fertile soil to provide moisture to the rich diversity of plant life. The forest plants are just like a group of children who all come from different environments; under the loving care of mother nature, they help each other to grow and thrive. These scenes all bear witness to the character of Nanben, embracing all living things in its simplicity and magnanimity.

Sanmai

The old-growth forest spreads all the way to Sanmai. The people who live here, with their origins in different places and environments, have come up with various planting models. For the past few years, the growers of Sanmai have been extending their eco-garden. The eco-garden was developed out of concern about over-exploiting the tea forest and represents an effort to take steps toward sustainable harvesting in the ancient forest. The hope is that more efficient management will also result in improvements to both output and quality, and thus a higher income for the tea growers.

Since the tea trees reproduce sexually, some genetic variation naturally occurs in the diverse and abundant forest environment. The most well-known variant is known as *zi juan*



❄ *Factories don't always produce the highest-quality tea, but they can provide jobs for the locals and help improve their quality of life. We need to encourage them to preserve the pristine Nature found in Nanben.*

(紫娟) or “Purple Beauty” tea; as the name suggests, the leaves of the tea plant display a lovely, distinctive purple color. Purple Beauty tea is planted in many of the villages; to preserve the unique characteristics of this varietal and avoid them being lost through the same process of genetic variation that created them, Purple Beauty tea trees are generally artificially pollinated and cultivated by the tea growers.

The Yulin Tea Factory

In addition to the difficult transport conditions in the early days, harvesting tea from the sky-high trees was no easy feat, either. After weathering a millennium of seasons, and being nurtured by the fertile forest environment to survive until today, each one of the ancient tea trees is thick of trunk and towers into the sky. In the past, a whole day of harvesting yielded at most three baskets of old-growth tea leaves; it was intensive and time-consuming. Nonetheless, this method of harvesting tea by climbing up the old trees with bare hands to pick the leaves still remains in the muscle memory of Nanben's older generation of tea pickers. Although today many tea factories have established a presence and have developed more efficient and convenient harvest-

ing methods, this method of picking tea by climbing the trees still stands as firm and unwavering as the trees themselves as part of the history of Nanben.

In the last couple of years before the new road in and out of Nanben was completed, there was a growing buzz on the tea market about these pure, untouched old tea forests, which naturally drew the gaze of tea merchants and factories. Around 2012, a succession of tea companies started to arrive and set up factories. One of the best-known of these was the Yulin Ancient Tea House company (雨林古茶坊)—“Yulin” meaning “rainforest.” Originally, the local tea farmers used to harvest, dry and process the tea themselves; gradually, this shifted into a business model where the tea factory purchased the freshly-picked leaves from the local tea farmers and took over the processing steps that followed.

As the market began to have some expectations towards the quality of Nanben's tea, the locals hoped to help the natural beauty of this tea stand out from the crowd even more, and not fall into oblivion due to all sorts of limitations imposed by the terrain. The factories aimed to stabilize and even improve quality with each batch of tea they produced, and to introduce a systematic management model. Once the factory had set up in Nanben, they

built bamboo platforms around the towering tea trees for more efficient and convenient picking. They also became more selective about harvesting, and implemented uniform product standards for the tea. Once they had established these quality standards, they slowly shifted their focus to increasing output in response to market demand and Nanben's sales volume.

Hearing about Nanben's ancient tea forests in the old days before the area opened to the outside, we were enchanted by the image of the pure, untouched forest. It was exactly this quality that gave Nanben tea its reputation on the tea market as a rare and precious treasure, and attracted the gaze of so many tea lovers and merchants. Yet, as all sorts of developments open up the area in the wake of this spotlight, will the untouched Nanben that we treasured so much in the beginning slowly fade away? How will Nanben face all these new developments? What sort of changes will it meet with? In this period of transition, what sort of future will grow out of this meeting of old and new? Will they be able to co-exist for the prosperity of all? Looking to the future, it's essential that Nanben and the outside world unite to tackle this problem together.



BAMENG

霸纓





As we hop on yet another old bus, Nanben leaves us with the kind of questions all our trips to Yunnan do: How do we reconcile the environmental issues Yunnan faces with an improvement to aboriginal life? And how do we, as puerh lovers, improve the situation, creating dynamic markets that protect Nature and preserve traditional cultures while also providing the means for these people to develop their villages in healthy ways? Maybe Bameng will offer some answers...



茶人: Li Yunyun (李昀耘)

Mount Huazhu Liangzi is the tallest peak in Xishuangbanna; standing tall like a roof beam above Mengsong, its name literally means “smooth bamboo rafters.” Thanks to its high altitude and well-suited climate, it is home to a precious resource: old-growth tea tree forests. Because of its remote location and linguistic isolation, the area didn’t open up to the outside world until quite late; this allowed the natural ecosystem of the tea mountains to remain undisturbed. The large area where the ancient tea trees grow is situated on the middle slopes of Huazhu Liangzi; people generally refer to this area as the “great Huazhu Liangzi tea garden.” The puerh tea produced here has the sweetness of mountain tea and an elegant aroma, earning it a good reputation on the tea market. Clustered around the middle reaches of Mount Huazhu Liangzi are a number of villages, scattered like stars around the moon. If you want to reach the high-altitude tea gardens, there are only a handful of old roads that will get you there, and they are all slow-going. One of these roads passes through the village of Bameng; because of this, Bameng has become one of Huazhu Liangzi’s main hubs of communication with the outside world.

Steep Terrain: Precious Old-Growth Tea

The village of Bameng (坝檬) is situated on the southern face of Mount Huazhu Liangzi. At an altitude of around 1730 meters, it’s about halfway up the mountain. To the residents of Bameng, the ancient tea forest behind the village feels like their own backyard, familiar and comfortable. To us outsiders, however, finding your way into the forest requires quite an effort. Reaching the main Huazhu Liangzi tea garden from the village means climbing uphill for three hours, often on hands and knees, crawling or pulling yourself up depending on the terrain. Every so often you have to cross one of the slippery streams that provide moisture to the surrounding forest. It’s almost as if Huazhu Liangzi has purposely hidden the precious tea forests away at its summit.

As our research team drove up the mountain road that was established by later generations, we were surrounded on both sides by old-growth forest and big tea trees. These old tea trees, who have stood apart from the world in secluded independence for more than a hundred years, were tree-shaped in appearance, with medium-sized leaves.

The tea they produce has a fine liquor, clear and sweet with a floral aroma; these are the distinguishing characteristics of Huazhu Liangzi's tea.

There are 85 families of Aini ethnicity (a branch of the Hani ethnic group) living in Bameng. You can also see signs that Han people have settled here too, such as the orderly wheat fields that line the roads. All the people who live here rely on tea for their livelihood—the whole village economy is inextricably linked to the tea gardens of Huazhu Liangzi.

The area extending from Bameng to Baotang stands at an altitude of 1900 meters and is covered in

medium-leaf tea trees. They are mostly about 60 years old and were planted by the government around 1950. At that time, in order to provide the hard-to-reach villages that encircle Huazhu Liangzi with an extra source of income, the government provided one to two hectares of land to the nearby villages, including Bameng, for the tea growers to plant tea.

Thanks to its unique flavor, the tea produced on Huazhu Liangzi attracted the attention of many tea lovers and merchants, and demand for it began to rise. About three years ago, the area of the tea garden on Huazhu Liangzi was expanded again, with another two

hectares of tea being planted in the hopes of increasing production volume.

The tea trees here reproduce sexually; coupled with the unique characteristics of the surrounding rainforest, this creates a habitat rich in biodiversity. To preserve the unique flavor of the old-growth tea, the tea farmers harvest the seeds from the old trees and cultivate them into seedlings before transplanting them back to the mountainsides. In this way, they hope to prevent the tea's unique style from disappearing over time.



茶 The village of Bameng is situated on the southern face of Mount Huazhu Liangzi. At an altitude of around 1730 meters, it's about halfway up the mountain. The ancient tea forest spreads out behind the village like a big backyard. In Bameng, people's lives revolve around tea; the whole village economy is inextricably linked to the tea plantations of Huazhu Liangzi. As the demand for tea rose, so did the demand for labor. To solve this problem, the local tea factory at Bameng brought in outside tea workers to help, most of them Aini people from the Da Menglong area. Such a long commute would be inconvenient for the workers, so the factory provided a dormitory for the outside tea workers.

A Changing Population

As the tea from Huazhu Liangzi grew in reputation, market demand increased, which brought about a series of changes in Bameng Village. This included changes in the makeup of the local population, the economy, the transport linking Bameng to the outside world, and the way the industry operated.

The most obvious change arose from the surging popularity of Huazhu Liangzi's puerh tea. This resulted in a growing demand for labor to harvest and process the tea, and it became increasingly obvious that the remote

village of Bameng just didn't have enough people power to keep up. To solve this problem, the local tea factory brought in outside tea workers to help, most of them Aini people from the Da Menglong area. Such a long commute would be inconvenient for the workers and would impact the amount of time they had available for harvesting tea, so the factory provided a dormitory for the outside tea workers. As well as increasing efficiency, it also made life easier for the workers.

This influx of people from outside the region meant that the village of

Bameng, which had long been fairly closed off and inaccessible, now had the opportunity for contact with the outside world. The ethnic makeup and culture of the village both underwent visible changes, and economic activity expanded, too. So, with each wave of new workers flowing in and out, Bameng had the chance to discover and benefit from new ways of life and new aspects of human culture.



DA'AN

大安



Yet another rickety bus and more bumpy mountain roads to spend our time staring out at the lush jungles and try to reflect on all that we've learned on our journey so far. One thing is certain: there is still hope in Yunnan! We have seen it in the preserved old-growth gardens and in the bright eyes of our aboriginal hosts. The trees remind us of where we come from and some of the modern changes tell of where we may be heading if we aren't careful...



✎: Zhang Yaoyue (張耀月)

We set out from Mengsong Township and begin to wind our way up the mountain. Our car sways and bumps along the craggy mountain road, the natural, unadorned landscape spreading out as far as the eye can see. Simple houses with black-tiled roofs are scattered across the densely forested hillsides, and pigs trundle leisurely back and forth across the dirt roads, foraging in the undergrowth. The whole area has a relaxed and carefree feel to it. We have arrived at Da'an Village (大安寨) in the Mengsong tea region. Da'an Village is not a very economically developed area, and the surrounding environment is very much in its natural state. Its residents, who belong to the Blang Dai ethnic group as well as the majority Han ethnicity, live in simple conditions—perhaps it's precisely this absence of the lure of material wealth that has contributed to the humble, unpretentious local culture.

Lower Da'an

Many of the inhabitants of Lower Da'an Village belong to the Blang Dai (布朗傣) ethnic group. This name is a joining of two officially recognized

ethnic minority groups in China, the Blang group and the Dai group, as their origins come from both cultures. It's said that their ancestors were people of Blang ethnicity who settled here in the early days after purchasing local residence permits or *hukou* (戶口) from the local Dai people. The temples here combine Blang architectural elements with Dai language, culture and religious tradition. Young boys in the area, upon reaching the fifth or sixth year of elementary school, go to live in a monastery for two years to learn about the local religion and culture. So, as well as conducting religious activities, the temples also take on the responsibility of educating the population; religion is deeply present in people's lives and plays an important part in local society. Clumps of Bodhi trees, considered sacred to believers of Buddhism, are scattered throughout the village. Perhaps because of their devout belief, the local people, though they tend to be quite shy and reserved, are also very warm and friendly.

Our research team came to the village to meet with the local people—although there was a bit of a language barrier, they happily showed us around their houses and buildings. We all muddled through partly understanding each other, and we really got

a sense of their warmth and humble hospitality. The local houses were plain and unassuming both inside and out. The walls were hung with corn, used for brewing liquor and feeding to the livestock. Their simple kitchens only contained a few pans for firing tea and implements for making liquor. From the kitchen equipment and the spaces on the roofs for drying tea leaves, it's clear that even though the locals live very simply, tea is an indispensable part of daily life.

Back in 2007, we had paid an earlier visit to Da'an Village and were welcomed warmly by the locals. They headed straight out to the tea garden, where they harvested some tea leaves, twisted them briefly and skillfully, and then roasted them over a charcoal fire. After one or two minutes of roasting, the leaves are then put into a pot of boiling water. This whole process is called "cooking" the tea and has the effect of reducing the "cool" nature of the tea (in the traditional Chinese medicinal sense). It's an ancient tea drinking method particular to Yunnan's native ethnic groups, and results in a tea with a robust fragrance and full flavor. In just a few minutes, the lively aroma of tea began to waft through the air, touching the senses and invigorating the heart and soul.

We couldn't wait to take a sip of the steaming hot tea. As soon as we took the first sip, we felt ourselves enveloped inside and out by an instant warmth, our tired minds and bodies soothed. From the strong tea liquor, we could not only detect the pure and natural character of the tea, but even more so, the simple, honest human warmth of the people who made it. This year when we returned to the village for another visit, the locals' tea drinking methods had changed; the traditional custom of "cooking" the tea was no longer practiced, and they had even started using Taiwanese tea implements. The

influence of tea culture from outside the region was evident. Although the spiraling steam of roasting tea was now absent from the village, the mellow fragrance of the tea and the warm sincerity of the people were the same as ever.

Upper Da'an

Just five minutes' drive up the mountain from Lower Da'an Village, you'll start noticing subtle changes in the surrounding landscape. The traditional black-tiled roofs of the Dai people are gradually replaced by Han-

style red brick houses, and although the tea gardens are similar to those of Lower Da'an Village, up here you'll see more farmland and water buffalo. There are wet rice paddies for growing white rice, dry fields for red rice, and terraced fields for both varieties. The several dozen Han families who live on the mountaintop have diverted water from a local dam to irrigate the fields. Although these local people are of Han ethnicity, their residence permits or *hukou* officially say that they belong to Yunnan's Lahu ethnic group. There's a theory that they are the descendants of traders who arrived with



茶 Natural, unadorned landscapes surround Da'an Village. Simple houses with black-tiled roofs are scattered across the densely forested hillsides, and the whole area has a relaxed and carefree feel.

To welcome our visiting party in 2007, the Blang Dai people headed out to the tea plantation to harvest and "cook" some tea leaves. This is an ancient tea drinking method particular to Yunnan's native ethnic groups. Despite the language barrier, the Blang Dai residents happily showed us around their houses and buildings. We really got a sense of their warmth and humble hospitality.

caravans; perhaps they headed up into the mountains because business down by the dam was poor and they could no longer afford the rent, or perhaps it was because they were fleeing pursuers and sought refuge with the local Dai people. Whatever the cause, they eventually settled down on the mountain-top to live their lives in this secluded corner of the world.

When we first came here ten years ago, we saw a young girl of eleven or twelve carrying sack after sack of heavy rice, her small frame bent over with the weight. The fact that even such young residents needed to help with the farm

labor was a reminder of the down-to-earth lives of the locals, and the scarcity of material resources. When we passed by again ten years later, the way of life was still much the same, with the local people planting rice and tea and raising livestock; returning to the village, it almost felt as if those ten years had been rewound. However, the rising price of tea in recent years has brought about some change in the local culture and day-to-day life. The improving economic conditions have attracted people of Hani and Lahu ethnicity to come to the village and marry locals, which has led to a change

in the Blang Dai people's traditional custom of marrying within their own clan, and an increase in contact and exchange between the different cultures. The clothing and accessories of a few of the local people provide glimpses of the influence of capitalism and modernization that is gradually starting to appear in the village. Who knows how this simple, unassuming mountain sanctuary will continue to change in the next ten years?



連 在 傳 統

森林人保管
茶道



Swirling Mist

薄霧縹 Offer

OWN A CAKE OF THIS MONTH'S BEAUTIFUL MENGSONG TEA!

Swirling Mist is an amazing tea. It's one of the best sheng puerh teas we have ever sent in Global Tea Hut, and a great tea for drinking and aging. It is a treasure that we are also aging towards a bright future of abundance in aged tea. The strength that this tea demonstrates after almost fifteen years makes it an excellent candidate for long-term aging. But when we drank it as a possibility for this month's tea, we were also stunned at how wonderful it is now. This is a rare chance for you to get a cake of this equally rare tea.

Our Tea of the Month is what we call a "boutique tea," which is what we call a tea produced by a tea shop owner or small brand that loves tea. We call a tea "boutique" when the owner travels to Yunnan and selects the tea personally, offering a higher quality to tea lovers like themselves—not to mention the transparency of visiting the site, meeting the farmers and bringing home a description of the geography, terroir and production along with the cakes. Quality and quantity rarely go together. The best puerh teas are almost always boutique, especially in the modern era. The big factories produce in vast quantities that can only be supported by plantation tea, often with agrochemicals. To get puerh from the old-growth trees grown in the forest, it is always better to go with boutique tea. Small groves of old trees only produce a small amount of tea each year, and the bigger factories are therefore rarely in-

terested in investing the time, effort and money to hike into the mountain forests to harvest and process this rare tea. But tea lovers are scrambling to find such tea, and are always interested.

Back in 2004, it was much easier to source amazing old-growth tea, and many forests were much more pristine. A good friend of ours traveled to Naka, Mengsong and spent a few weeks pressing tea for himself and good friends. None of the tea was branded in any way. He pressed the cakes at the farm, as opposed to taking the tea to a factory to have it pressed. This has the advantage of using the same water to steam the tea for compression that the trees drank from. It also means that the micro-ecology of the steam room will be similar to the forest where the tea grew, whereas most puerh teas are pressed in factories far away from the mountains they come from and therefore introduce new bacteria, fungi, mold, etc. in the pressing process. As a result of being completely processed on the mountain, these teas don't have an inner trademark ticket (內飛, *nei fei*) or even a wrapper. In those days it would have been more challenging to take such things with you to the mountain. Anyway, since our friend was intending this tea to be for himself and friends, he didn't need any packaging other than bamboo around seven cakes (筒, *tong*) to protect the tea. Wu De has offered to paint the wrappers in gratitude for your support.

Our friend spent a few weeks in Mengsong and produced five different teas. He hiked with local guides deep into the forests near the border to find old trees to harvest. Wu De has also traveled extensively in the Mengsong area, and has said that in the early 2000s the area was gloriously remote and untouched. Swirling Mist is our favorite of the cakes our friend made, and we are very fortunate to get enough for the Center to age some, to share it as the Tea of the Month and now to offer you the chance to get a cake of your own. These cakes are phenomenal. They will age well and are also very drinkable, as you will see when you do get around to trying this month's tea.

If you are interested in a cake, we will have a very limited quantity up on the website for sale. If you are interested, we suggest expedience as the tea will be offered on a first come, first served basis. These cakes are great candidates for long-term storage or for sharing with friends now. The storage is pretty clean. We would call it "mildly wet." We have certainly put some cakes aside for ourselves as well and are excited to see what you think of this special tea!

The cakes will be a minimum of \$150 + shipping:

(www.globalteahut.org/swirlingmist)



薄霧繞
勐宗茶山

DAMIANLÜ

大蔓露



We manage to score a ride from Da'an to Da Manlü, riding in the back of a truck with large white sacks of maocha. The smell of the tea reminds us why we're here in this remote part of the world: the birthplace of tea. Here by the border, we find that forest time matters more than our watches and weather makes a difference in our days, especially when you are riding in the open back of a truck. Reflection turns to present moment awareness when the locals riding with us burst into song...



茶人: Yan Jie (顏婕)

Our research team hadn't been driving for long in the direction we'd been pointed in when we caught sight of a dense mass of black-tiled roofs joining together to form one large village. We knew we'd arrived at Da Manlü. The village of Da Manlü (大曼呂) is situated in the southwest of the Mengsong tea region, around five kilometers from Naka, and is home to around two hundred households. The village is made up of 15 smaller groups, ten of which belong to the Lahu ethnic group, while four are of Blang Dai ethnicity and one is of Han ethnicity. Because of this mix of ethnicities, several languages are spoken here. The residents are also accustomed to living near to larger Han settlements, so most people in Da Manlü are fairly fluent in Mandarin Chinese and are used to communicating with the outside world. What's more, it's a convenient trip from Da Manlü to the nearest big city, Jinghong, taking only about two hours. With this ease of communication and transport, plus the excellent quality of its tea, Da Manlü was one of the earliest-developed tea centers in the Mengsong tea region. Some people describe the tea from Da Manlü as "Close to the fragrance of Naka; chasing the sweetness of Nannuo," which gives us a good idea of its character and quality. (We heard this while there.)

After our research team had made our way down the bumpy dirt roads and arrived within the limits of Da Manlü, we were immediately drawn to the carefree enthusiasm of this corner of the world. Compared to other villages, Da Manlü clearly has a bigger population; in earlier times, the government established a public grain management center here. (This was an administrative unit responsible for purchasing all the grain produced in an area; distributing grain staples, related non-essential foodstuffs and oil to the population; issuing grain purchasing licenses to the residents; setting sales quotas; and processing residence permits for citizens who wanted to switch from farming to non-farming permits.)

The fertile soil of Da Manlü produces plentiful crops, so the residents are well provided for. There are even enough leftover crops to produce various agricultural by-products. When we visited the village, we noticed that many of Da Manlü's residents are equipped with their own set-up for making maize-based alcohol; the locals are fond of brewing their own liquor. When good friends gather together, they also like to jokingly challenge each other to drinking competitions!

It's said that the Blang people have a tradition: if one family builds a new house, the whole village turns up to help. Because of this, whenever the

construction of a new house is completed in the village, the owners will hold a housewarming ceremony, and express their thanks by holding a banquet and inviting their friends and relatives from throughout the village to come and celebrate together. Right at the time we were wandering around Da Manlü, we noticed that just about the whole village all seemed to be out and about, headed somewhere; it turned out that they were all going to one of these housewarming celebrations! The women of the village, all dressed up, were all crowding into somebody's house—our curiosity piqued, we followed them, into what indeed looked to be a brand new two-storied house.

As we entered the yard, we saw that the air was full of smoke; there were about a dozen stoves with pots noisily bubbling and boiling, smoke curling from the chimneys. The women had slaughtered chickens and pigs and were cleaning them up for cooking while a group of young men, not wanting to be left out of the action, raised their voices in a lively song (whose meaning we couldn't understand, since it was in the Blang language). Our senses were filled with the heat and noise of this lively moment; it was a rare opportunity to witness a local ethnic minority celebration. Because we had a lot of places still to visit, we regretfully declined the locals' invitation.



If we'd been able to stay a bit later, we could have watched everyone setting up iron stands at the host's place and lighting the fires, then gathered together around the banquet tables, eating, drinking and singing. It must surely be one of the most joyous and carefree interludes to life up here in the mountains!

Ancient Gardens

Da Manlü has access to the precious resource of Mengsong's ancient tea trees and was one of the earliest-developed gardens in the Mengsong tea region. Throughout the 1980s, the era of state-run tea gardens, the government set up a tea-purchasing station in Da Manlü, which was a considerable affirmation of the excellent flavor of the local tea. Most of the tea trees in Da Manlü are between one hundred and three hundred years old, and grow at an altitude of about 1460 meters. The yearly rainfall is stable and sunlight is abundant, creating a superior ecosystem perfect for the ancient tea trees and the surrounding life to grow and multiply.

Because the area went through a period where the local tea leaves were

being harvested in large quantities, all the old tea trees in the area bear the marks of pruning, carried out to shorten them and facilitate more convenient picking. When we visited, we noticed that the locals were very experienced tea pickers, and almost all of them were able to uniformly pick the tea shoots in the standard "one bud and two leaves" configuration. With the locals' tea-making skill and the superior quality of the leaf, along with its reasonable price, Da Manlü's tea is a favorite among tea lovers far and wide. Da Manlü tea has a superior mouthfeel and an exquisitely structured flavor, similar to that of Naka and Nannuo teas. It has a unique, elegant aroma, which lingers in the mouth for several minutes after drinking the tea. Many tea lovers eagerly vie to purchase it, and it is praised on the market for its qualities of being "Close to the fragrance of Naka; chasing the sweetness of Nannuo"—a phrase we heard often while in the village.

At sunrise, as we were preparing to leave, we gazed back on the hillside of old tea trees, their green leaves rustling with flourishing vitality. A gust of wind set them fluttering in the sunlight, reflecting little points of light like rippling water. The locals told

us that if we followed the road that curved out of Da Manlü, we'd be able to circle around the peak of Huazhu Liangzi and truly immerse ourselves in the unique local environment that gives life to the ancient tea trees. After some discussion, we decided that our next stop would be the village of Banggang. We reluctantly said farewell to this rich and plentiful land; with our wheels sending up a cloud of dust, we journeyed onwards, the beautiful old tea gardens of Mengsong beckoning us to continue our exploration.





茶 The fertile soil of Da Manlü produces plentiful crops, so the residents are well provided for. There are even enough leftover crops to produce various agricultural by-products. But tea is still the mainstay, and we saw it drying everywhere in the village.

A local woman holds her newborn grandson, welcoming the next generation into village life.

Whenever the construction of a new house is completed in the village, the owners hold a house-warming ceremony, inviting their friends and relatives from the village to a banquet to celebrate together. Our senses were filled with the heat and noise of this lively moment; it was a rare opportunity to witness a local ethnic minority celebration.

BANGGANG

A photograph of a tea processing facility. Numerous large, circular bamboo trays are arranged in rows, each filled with dark, dried tea leaves. The trays are supported by metal stands. In the background, a person wearing a white headscarf and a blue shirt is visible, working with the tea. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an indoor or semi-enclosed space with natural light.

蜂園

It was hard to leave Da Manlǜ! As so often happens when you travel off the beaten path, you find remote places you wish you could spend more time exploring, or at least come back. But then you remember the festival they invited you to attend, happening now as you drive away, and know that this place will never be the same again. The baby you saw will have grown. Will the tea still be as pure years from now? You hope that your writing on the bus will help make a difference...



✿A: Zhang Yaoyue (張耀月)

Climbing the winding mountain road, we drove past Manduanla and through a stretch of dense and luxuriant old-growth forest, before arriving at our destination: the township of Banggang (蚌崗寨). Banggang doesn't have a lot of land resources, but all the people who live here work hard for a better life. Who are these local residents? Many years ago, around 200 families of the Hani ethnicity were the first to settle here; the area where they live is known as the "Old Village." On the next hill, facing the old village, is another settlement, inhabited by Lahu people who migrated here not long afterward. Later still, Han people came to the area to make a living, so the place where they settled is called the "New Village." Altogether, there are about 400 families living in these three villages. The villagers belong to 11 smaller village groups: eight Hani groups, two Lahu groups, and one Han group (also known as Banggang Han).

Banggang Ha

The village where the Hani people live is also called Banggang Ha. There aren't too many old-growth trees here, with the mountaintop being almost completely covered in shorter tussock and undergrowth. Whether because the sunlight hours are too few or be-

cause of the foggy climate, it's difficult for any tall or sturdy plants to grow here. Because of this, some years ago the government began to divide up the land to encourage people to cultivate it and grow cash crops. Under these circumstances, the Hani people arrived in this wild place; after a difficult beginning, they finally established a steady and peaceful existence.

The local people led our research team on a tour of Banggang Ha. We noticed that a lot of village elders, despite their white hair and stooped posture, seemed to be in robust good health, their wrinkled hands taking on many tasks, their weathered faces framing their pipes, carrying infants on their backs. It seemed that this was just life as usual. The houses were all decorated very simply, but we saw quite a few vehicles in the village. When we enquired about this, we learned that because the villagers lived in a place with underdeveloped transportation, they came to profoundly appreciate the necessity of having a means of transport. Whenever they were able to save up some money, they prioritized buying vehicles to allow them to transport goods and keep their business running. By comparison, the Dai people, who live in more accessible places near dams, tend to spend their money on building and renovating houses. So, the ways these different communities choose to use their money are an inter-

esting reflection of their differing values and approaches to business management.

Here on the mountain, the hard-working Hani people grow crops such as corn, fruit and tea. If you go into one of the sheds they've built and look up, you'll see glistening yellow corn hanging across the whole ceiling. It's a sign that the agricultural economy up here has achieved some progress; despite the geographical limitations of this somewhat hostile environment, the Hani people have made themselves a peaceful and happy home.

Banggang La

One hill over from Banggang Ha is the village of Banggang La, named after the Lahu people who live there. Banggang La is very close to the old-growth forest; at the edge of the forest there's a shrine to the mountain god, and nearby are several *mu* (a few thousand square meters) of good quality tea gardens. The tea trees are about 100 years old, with some as old as 300 years. Most of the tea trees are medium-sized, with a handful of old-growth tea trees. Although there aren't many old trees, because they are close to the old-growth forest, they produce excellent quality tea and a good quantity of fresh leaves are harvested each year, becoming fragrant *maocha*.



珍葉的守護者

桃花源徑

茶道

山上的朋友

茶 Climbing the winding mountain road, we drove past Manduanla and through a stretch of luxuriant old-growth forest before arriving at the township of Banggang.

Here on the mountain, the Hani people grow crops such as corn, fruit and tea. If you go into one of their sheds, you'll see glistening yellow corn hanging across the whole ceiling.

A lot of the village elders, despite their white hair and stooped posture, seemed to be in robust good health, their wrinkled hands taking on many tasks, their weathered faces framing their pipes, carrying infants on their backs. It seemed that this was just life as usual.







Thanks to its fine quality and mid-range price, the tea produced here is good value and a favorite with tea merchants. In the past, the State Forestry Administration used to lease this land to chopstick manufacturers to grow bamboo. But because of the difficult transport conditions, sales didn't do too well, so they later switched to growing fir trees and small tea trees there instead. As we were passing through the area, we came across a primary tea processing facility. The owner, surnamed Li, showed us around the factory. We learned that their yearly output of

spring tea is more than 12 tons; clearly, tea is one of the area's main cash crops.

Strolling around the village of Banggang La, you often catch glimpses of vibrant color, adorning the backdrop of jade-green hills with lively splashes. The Lahu people like to wear multi-colored headscarves, or traditional headdresses decorated with red flowers, and often wear simple silver jewelry on their wrists. From a distance, their bustling figures look just like butterflies, fluttering from Camellia flower to flower as they gather nectar.

In the village of Banggang, the Hani, Lahu and mountain Han people all work hard to make a living, steadfastly farming the land and bringing life and vitality to this once-deserted corner of the earth. Banggang's tea trees, once hidden in the depths of the old-growth forest, were thus made known to the world. As the years go by and the tea industry continues to flourish, demand increasing with every passing day, perhaps this ancient village will see even greater changes in the future.



榮耀的茶精神

另一個化身的朋友



BANGLONG

蚌糶



As the trip starts to draw to a close, you wonder at how the road has changed you. Seeing yourself through the eyes of an older and deeper culture has been a catalyst for change. One thing is for sure: every pot, every cup of tea you drink from now on will taste different now that you know how much work has gone into it, and how much the Leaf means to the people who grow it. This trip has filled your cup with a bit more respect. The mountains will also seem closer with each and every sip...



茶人: Luo Yingyin (羅英銀)

If you travel along the southwestern face of Mount Huazhu Liangzi, somewhere between 1700 and 2000 meters in altitude you will come to the village of Banglong (蚌龍). Banglong is one of Mengsong's major tea-producing areas and makes excellent quality tea. Thanks to its prominent sweetness and fragrance, it represents very good value for money and is quite popular among Chajin everywhere.

The residents of Banglong belong to the Aini ethnicity, which is a branch of the Hani ethnic group. Although the Aini people are not included on China's list of 55 officially recognized ethnic minority groups, and are counted as belonging to the Hani ethnicity, here in Banglong the people identify themselves as Aini.

Last year, with assistance from the government, the landscape of Banglong saw some significant changes. In 2015, the Banglong village committee oversaw the laying of a paved road to bring an old-style look back to the village; each paving stone reportedly cost 5 *yuan*. In 2016, a cement road was added; although it was barely wide enough for two cars to pass each other, it already represented a big step up in terms of ease of access. Back in 2012, all of Banglong's tea processing was done by hand, whereas now the entire process is done by machine.

The Aini people make their living mainly from agriculture and harvesting tea. The tea they pick is sourced from the old-growth tea trees that cover the land surrounding Banglong up to an altitude of around 2100 meters. At the implementation of the government, Banglong now produces large amounts of wildy-grown red tea. We interviewed 20-year-old Zhe San (折三), an expert in wild red tea production. He told us that each time the tea leaves are brought in from harvesting, they must first be set aside until the stems have hardened to the point where they won't snap, then the tea leaves are rolled for half an hour. They are then packed into bags and stored until the stems redden, and the leaves are then dried.

When we paid a visit to Zhe San's home, his 83-year-old grandfather was sitting by the doorway, carefully mending a kettle. The Aini people are known for being frugal and industrious; although they may not have much material wealth, they value self-reliance and apply their "do-it-yourself" spirit to everything from mending appliances and building houses to planting, picking and processing tea. The houses that we saw were kept spotless, without a speck of dust, even though they had earthen floors. We asked ourselves: how many of us, in our concrete houses with well-sealed doors and win-

dows, manage to keep our houses that dust-free?!

Wandering around the village at lunchtime, we met 84-year-old Mrs. Bian (邊娘), who was returning from a morning of tea picking. Apparently, she could pick about five kilograms of tea leaves in a day, and even when she returned to the village at midday, you wouldn't see her sitting down to rest or eat and drink; instead she would be turning over tea leaves in the hot midday sun and picking out the yellowed leaves. We saw her from inside and asked her concernedly if she wanted to come inside for a drink of water and some lunch before she continued her work; however, she replied that she was in no hurry to eat and would just come inside whenever she got hungry. With that, she turned back to her tea and kept on working. Later, Mrs. Bian told us that she had seven children, three daughters and four sons. Three of her sons, however, had moved their families to Myanmar to make a living after getting married. It was much easier to make enough to get by in Myanmar than here in remote Banglong, certainly at least twenty years ago when they moved, but it meant that there has hardly been any occasions over the years when the whole family has been able to reunite. She was sad, expressing how much she missed her sons and grandchildren.

AINI CULTURE: TEA, GODS & PEOPLE

The Aini people's faith plays a profound part in their lives. Their religion combines polytheism with the worship of ancestors, and they regularly give offerings to protective deities such as the gods of the sky, earth, dragon tree, village, and family or home. They also make sacrifices to restrain or drive away spirits who might cause sickness or misfortune. The Aini people also celebrate many religious festivals—there's generally about one festival per month. The Aini people have one more important sacrificial offering, made to the “dragon gate” or *longba men*

(龍巴門), the main gate to the village that protects those who live there. Items woven from bamboo play an important part in Aini religious offerings, as woven bamboo is believed to ward off evil spirits, so you can see woven bamboo figures, such as birds and the 12 zodiac animals, tied to the village gates. Many of the village's young people don't remember why these bamboo figures were originally put there.

Aside from religious offerings and festivals, one of the other highlights of Banglong village is the unique food. As well as the famous rice noodles and

glutinous rice cakes or *nuomi baba* (糯米粑粑), the villagers like to eat a variety of dishes and to drink alcohol. This said, what struck us most about the Aini food and drink culture was the omnipresence of tea in people's lives.

When we arrived in Banglong, we saw that many of the households had roof terraces, which were, of course, covered in sun-drying tea leaves. The Aini people's houses are *siheyuan* (四合院), courtyard houses with four sides built around a central open garden or space for withering tea.



茶人





They have two smaller rooms on either side of the main hall—these are known as *erfang* (耳房) or “ear rooms,” due to their position. The *erfang* have flat roofs with thick logs as the main beams and thatching made from finer sticks and rice straw, and finally are tamped down with clay to make a platform (these days, many people now use cement instead). These roof terraces or *shaitai* (曬臺) are used for sun-drying grain and hanging laundry, and also serve as a terrace for enjoying the fresh air, for children to frolic and women to spin and weave. Almost any kind

of activity can take place there, making these terraces an important hub of activity for both working and playing.

In the daily life of the Aini, it seems that tea, gods and people are all interconnected. From sacrifices and festivals to weddings and funerals, tea is involved in all important rituals and occasions. In wedding ceremonies, the groom must bring tea when he goes to the bride’s family’s house to ask for her hand, and the dowry also includes tea, to signify the hope that the couple’s life together will grow richer with time like a cup of tea brewing, and will be

memorable and long-lasting like the flavor of a fine tea. In daily life, many aspects of interpersonal relationships can be expressed with tea, from making friends to entertaining guests. To the Aini people, one of the greatest honors you can pay to your guests is to serve them tea.





TeaWayfarer

Each month, we introduce one of the Global Tea Hut members to you, in order to help you get to know more people in this growing international community. It's also to pay homage to the many manifestations that all this wonderful spirit and Tea are becoming as the Tea is drunk and becomes human. The energy of Tea fuels some great work in this world, and we are so honored to share glimpses of such beautiful people and their Tea. This month, we would like to introduce Kristen Fix.

I lived in Beijing and taught English nearly a decade and a half ago. I had just finished college earlier that year, traveled around the United States and came home to figure out where my path next led. I remembered an email a friend had sent me several months earlier about teaching in China, followed up on this, and less than a month later flew across the world to a foreign place I was to call home for the next year and a half. This spontaneous decision was sparked by a general interest to travel and see the world and China just happened to be the place. Unbeknownst to me at that time, this journey was surely guided by the gracious hands of destiny and it led me to one of the greatest treasures of my life, Tea.

During the Chinese New Year, I traveled with a friend to visit her family in Fujian. Upon arrival, I was greeted with tea in the family's living room. The tea, Tieguanyin, and the ceremony of how it was served opened up my world and I fell in love right away. It was all completely new to me yet instantly felt so right. The Leaf reached out to me and held me in her folds and I have been here ever since. She came into my life and our relationship continues to flourish and unfold like the petals of a lotus flower.

I returned home with a supply of tea and teaware. At first I would just drink tea here and there, but at some point She became a part of my daily practice. As I try to recall now when this was, the timeline eludes me as it seems I have been a part of Her and She a part of me for so long. In the beginning I was on my own, guided by the little bit of experience I had drinking tea in Fujian and in the tea markets of Beijing, and by my natural love and respect of the Leaf. As happens along this path, soon I came into contact with other tea lovers and could share Her magic amongst friends.

While living with one of these tea friends, Solala Towler, I picked up Wu De's book from library shelf (*The Way of Tea*). The teachings and reflections shared in these pages spoke to me in such a deep and profound way. Some years later while visiting Solala, he excitedly told me about the Global Tea Hut magazine. Again I felt such affinity and inspiration from the words I was reading and soon after became a member of this amazing community myself. This propelled my relationship with Tea to new levels. Tea as Medicine, Ceremony, Tea as a way of life. I can see that previously Tea had been all these things to me, but to encounter these living teachings and people that practice this as a part of their daily lives as well, truly brought these ideas into focus and life within me.

For me, part of the magic of Tea is how Her influence extends beyond the tea table and into all aspects of my life. Part of my practice is to make this more and more so, more and



茶人: Kristen Fix

more true. I grew up on a fruit farm that has been in my family for more than 100 years. I am an organic farmer. I love to grow healthy, nourishing food for others and myself. There is such a sweet connection for me in putting my hands into the soil, smelling the aromas of the earth, reminding me of a dark steaming bowl of shou puerh and the wise Yunnan trees and terroir that birthed these delectable leaves. I love being in Nature, indeed.

I feel a beginner on the Way of this Life of Tea. A double leaf sprout two inches out of the ground. All that I said above about tea extending to all aspects of my life is a continual work in process. And this is beautiful and exciting because it means there is so much more ahead—new insights, new joys and sadness, new challenges, new surprises always around the next bend. As I continue to cultivate myself through a Life of Tea, over and over again I am deeply humbled and in great gratitude that She is a part of my life.

Thank you, dear tea friends, for sharing this journey with me. Thank you for being you. If you ever find yourself in Nevada City, California, feel free to stop by for some tea, go for a walk, swim in the Yuba river. I would be honored to meet you and get to know you over a steaming hot bowl.

Inside the Hut

COMING SOON TO GLOBAL TEA HUT MAGAZINE

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茶主题: Classics of Tea

茶主题: Chajin Stories/Biographies

茶主题: Tianmu Bowls



If you serve tea regularly and would like some extra magazines or tea tins to give out to help spread the word about Global Tea Hut, please let us know. We are also looking to donate magazines to public places.



We are trying to expand by connecting with podcasts, blogs, journalists and other communities. If you have a suggestion, please email our PR point person, Emily Cross at: emily.global.tea.hut@gmail.com



We shall revitalize our video content this year, bringing weekly videos to Instagram and YouTube, along with our live broadcasts. Help participate and let us know what you would like to see.



We will be converting all the past issues to .html shortly, which will allow you to search past articles by author and topic much more easily. We hope this reference is useful to tea lovers around the world.



Take a picture of you and your loved ones opening Global Tea Hut or drinking the Tea of the Month and #tag us on Instagram. We will be selecting five people who post their experience to receive free tea every month from now on!



We are considering hosting two Annual Global Tea Hut Trips in 2018: our usual spring trip to a tea-growing region of Asia and a second trip within Taiwan itself. Would this second trip interest you?



We have been looking at land for Light Meets Life. Help us make our new Center a reality by reading the "10kx2020" pamphlet and contacting us if you feel there is any way you can help!

Center News



Before you visit, check out the Center's website (www.teasagehut.org) to read about the schedule, food, what you should bring, etc. Make sure you apply early for courses as they fill up fast (this is why we need a bigger, more awesome Center).



We have just opened all the ten-day courses to service! This is exciting for those of you who have already taken a ten-day course and want to come serve one. You can apply on the website. This is also another way to visit if a course is full!



Our longer course for older students will be over the course of two weeks in late August. This course is for those who have been initiated into our lineage and will cover aspects of this practice in greater depth than we have ever gone. Contact us if you are interested in attending. Dates will be announced soon.



It is worth getting on a waiting list if the course you wish to apply for is full. We often have last-minute openings for courses if you are willing to fly last minute!

March Affirmation

I am tolerant

Do I use my travels to grow in understanding and empathy? Do I allow the perspectives of others in? I change the way I see easily. I am freedom of views. I grow compassion out of my understanding of other people and ways of life.



www.globalteahut.org

The most traveled Tea magazine in the world! Sharing rare organic teas, a magazine full of tea history, lore, translations, processing techniques and heritage, as well as the spiritual aspects of Cha Dao. And through it all, we make friends with fellow tea lovers from around the world.

GLOBAL TEA HUT

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