



A KU CHUONG TEA CEREMONY

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During our time in Yunnan, we shared tea ceremonies amongst ourselves a few times when we had breaks in our full travel schedule. As we've discussed in previous issues, every tea session is a beautiful and unique chance for connection. These sessions were no exception—we shared a deep peace and bond in each one. Yet one tea ceremony stood out from any we've ever shared before and any we're likely to share again. It was a tea session served by our gracious hostess, Ai Li Juan, in Ai Lao, Yunnan.

We had just rolled red tea for this month's Global Tea Hut, when Ms. Ai appeared in stunning traditional garments bearing some yellow-hued rice, chunks of *jaggery*-like sugar and a bowl of sheng puerh leaves. We didn't quite know what to expect, but we saw in the light shining from her eyes and the humble grace with which she moved that it would be something really special.

Ms. Ai is a member of the Ku Chuong ethnic minority. The Ku Chuong have inhabited Ai Lao since around the third century CE, and they are also found in nearby Laos and Vietnam. For about 1700 years, they have been interacting with local tea trees, including the ones Wu De wrote about this month. Today, some still say prayers to the trees, leaving offerings at their roots. And some, like Ms. Ai and her family, still revere the trees and the deep soul nourishment they offer. During our short time in her town, she had already sung us songs about Tea. She had blended tea with adept skill and with more than a touch of artistry. And she had rolled tea with graceful ease and firm strength in perfect balance. Certainly, we were in for a treat.

Charcoal smoldering in the concrete brazier, a slab of stone resting on its wire grill: the set-up was simple. Ms. Ai spread the dry, yellow rice on the slab. Its color, we learned, was from a local flower (just one of the many wild plants that locals gather by hand to make their food powerfully nourishing and downright delicious). She spread the rice over the hot stone with a pair of wooden chopsticks, and then placed a glazed, brown pitcher over the coals. Into the pitcher, she dropped a handful of long, wiry sheng leaves.

An aroma hinting at old trees and far older mountains curled out from the lip of the pitcher. She held the vessel out to each of us so we could savor this ode to nature, written in hot air only to disappear no sooner than it was created.

Next, she added a new pitcher to the heat: a smaller, unglazed clay one, streaked with the horizontal ridges of a potter's fingers as they met the gentle, rhythmic spin of a

pottery wheel. She scooped up the grains of rice with her fingers and placed them into the small pitcher. Then, she shifted the larger pot to the space she made on the slab. With her chopsticks, she patiently stirred the rice, as it got increasingly hot over the coals. After some time, the grains began to puff and pop, like the toasted rice in Japanese Genmaicha (only yellower, thanks to the flowers).

A sudden look of alertness in her eyes... Time for the sugar! Using chopsticks, Ms. Ai swiftly took the russet-colored lumps of sweetness from a bowl and placed them, gingerly, on the hot block of stone. She poured the contents of the small pitcher into the large one, mixing together the roasted sheng and the puffed rice. Then, she transferred the hunks of sugar into the small pitcher for more heat. After a few minutes, they began to bubble and sizzle softly, caramelizing in the heat as the rice and tea continued to roast. As she stirred, the dark brown sugar began to melt into an even darker brown syrup.

The rice and tea were ready to brew. Ms. Ai grabbed a kettle of simmering water and poured it into the pitcher. She gave it a stir then plopped in the melty nuggets of sugar. She waited and watched closely. Then, she arranged white tea bowls on the stone above the fire. She gave the brew a final stir and poured a small sip to sample. Satisfied with the result, she poured a bowl for each of us. Hands still red from rolling tea, we received the bowls with thanks and smiles.

The liquor was rich and roasty, sweet and complex, and just as tasty as you might expect it to be. More importantly, it contained all the care and love that Ms. Ai had put into it from the trees to handing us the bowls. And it contained all the tea sessions shared by her and her family, stretching back many generations. She wasn't just giving us homemade sweet tea. She was sharing a tradition that has been a part of her culture for hundreds of years, and sharing the love of tea and hospitality that has been a part of her people's tradition for all that time. She was giving a blessing from one tea tradition to another, and we were grateful to receive it. And while we probably won't start sweetening our tea with *jaggery* any time soon, I can only hope that we learn from and spread the spirit of Tea she shared with us that day. Perhaps the next time we serve you tea, you'll see a glimmer of Auntie Ai in us...





The rice is yellow because of a flower added during cooking



An aroma hinting at old trees and far older mountains...

A Ku Chuong Tea Ceremony



Stirring the rice with deft hands, it began to pop...



She added the lumps of melty sugar to the simmering rice and tea...

