

Ancient Green Wisdom: How the indigenous peoples of southwestern Yunnan and their ancient tea trees continue the way in sustainability

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**“The health of our people and the health of our tea trees
are linked and always have been.”**

Dak, 43 year old tea harvester of the Bulang minority

Through a mist fed gloom, Dak, a member of the Bulang minority of southern Yunnan, leads me into a centuries' old tea forest that eats up light. It is a damp world that is draped in heavy mists that makes every shape fuzzy. The wiry and tattooed arm of Dak beckons me on deeper into a sub-tropical jungle of shadows. In the ghost-like air above the ungainly silhouettes of tea trees wander in patchy silhouettes. Craggy and bent they are the branches of tea trees. Massive tea trees some 15 metres high and centuries of uninterrupted history.

Tea's ancient birthplace in Yunnan's hidden sub-tropics suggests that there are still isolated regions where time has not changed the intuitive relationship that man and nature share. Perhaps more revealing is that even with precious Pu'erh, tea prices edging ever higher, the time-honored methods of production have not changed.

As timeless commodity, medicine, and great panacea, tea's unquestioned value in Asia goes back thousands of years and its longevity and legacy owe much to the indigenous peoples that have cared for and worshipped the 'green.' Nowhere on the globe has tea remained as worshipped, as animistic or as crucial as it has in this wedged in corner of Asia. The fierce Wa, the Bulang, the Dai and Hani, and the Lahu peoples have carefully administered gentle attention upon their precious tea trees for centuries. Using oral traditions and common sense to transmit the simple knowledge gained through generations, these mountain people whose language is based on ancient Mon-Khmer, remain inextricably bound to their precious green leaves.

This tea bastion reveals something utterly of nature's creation where locals have endeavored to minimize their effect on the land; which in turn has kept local tea growers fed, protected, and 'in the tea.'

Before Dak and I, nothing stirs. All is muffled and appears almost spectral by the moist and heavy air that seems to swim before the eyes. The scents that waft into the nose are those of a region that lives in perpetual heat and rain. The very earth is alive with sounds and aromas of humidity settling onto surfaces, and wafts of pungent soil shoot up into the sinuses. This living sanctuary that hosts a soundtrack of perpetual cicadas feels close and immediate. It is a slightly haunted world that appears untouched and it is

perhaps this very isolation that has kept the local people's intimate and timeless relationship with tea a relative secret from the outside world.

None of man's scars or clever manipulations are evident upon the land. It is a world of green heat where things are encouraged to remain in their natural order. The town of Lao Ma Er and its surrounding forests has been providing and supplying bitter jolts of big leaf tea for over six uninterrupted centuries and as such, it is a place where attention is paid to maintaining a balance and harmony, because it works. In these humid-aired surroundings, tea was born and it was from here that Asia's eternal green spread its stimulant effects to all points of the compass.



Image 1

Dak pushes further into the damp canopy, which seems to smolder and encase us with the heavy touch of tropical. When Dak moves, it is more of a stalking motion than a walk. His smooth sinewy limbs ease forward in an oiled kind of rhythm and he eases through each stride as though he is about to break into a run. Wide and utterly asymmetrical, the tea trees rule in wide swaths above. They are not sculpted or aesthetic masterpieces but rather awkward and powerful looking things that straggle where they please. The teas harvested from these silent giants will be proudly labeled with the 'gu shu cha' title (ancient tree tea), and will thus be far more expensive, but without question, worth it, to the drinkers that care.

Dak says something as we look into the impermeable gloom that stays with me for a long time. "We haven't changed our ways with tea, and now people come to us and buy up all of our tea. We make money because we haven't changed." In this era of paranoia of extravagance and huge claims, it is a bit of proof positive that quality and trust are difficult things to fake.



Image 2

Bulang, like the Wa people – both of whom are considered tea's original cultivators – have codes and oaths about their tea plants, and their lands in general. If a tea tree is destroyed or disturbed it is considered a denigration of the people or village to whom it belongs. Tribal warfare could start with the destruction of a simple tea tree. Any manipulation of tree growth or harvesting must be subject to a council meeting. The people, as it should be, are quite literally, fused into the earth. And it isn't only tea that falls under this strict rule, it is any of the earth-bound products.

Dak stalks on in a kind of respectful awe, grunting the odd noise to point out some ancient tree in the gloom. There is no sign of the recent spring harvest but that is in keeping with the simple sustainability 'rule' of this land. Though tea drinkers in-the-know, prize and impatiently await Bulang's release, the locals never over-harvest, knowing instinctively that if they do, it will begin an inevitable cycle where they will lose the very qualities (and philosophy) that has benefited them thus far.

These forests are not simply a mass of trees or a bundle of commodity, but rather a sum of parts; an ancient body that is sacred because its parts provide without fail. The Bulang people, though professed Theravada Buddhists are imbued with their animist and ancestor worshipping habits, and thus place a huge import upon the past and the environment. Elders use the expression "a cup of tea tastes of the earth" hinting at the interrelationship of everything and suggesting that there is a direct correlation between man and plant. Throughout time, in this region at least, there has never been a disconnect between man and his precious 'la' (tea).

Before Dak and I launched ourselves into the tea forests, we sat and launched ourselves into cups of the local pride. Potent and bitter, local tea stimulates as much through an almost narcotic astringency as it does through its army of happy stimulants, which run rampantly through the newly picked teas. A light lemony color belies enamel challenging force and potency. To "drink tea" in the local Bulang language comes out as an intensely nasal 'nee'um la' and these words are repeated like a local mantra. The teas of this area have long been known for their vegetal power, which imparts the very earth into every corner of the mouth.

Between loud inhalations of the tea, Dak, fiddles in earnest with his mobile phone, and at times barks the various prices per kilo of tea into the listener's ear. Even here at the edge of tea's little ancient bastion, there are outside worlds that – no so patiently - wait for the tea's unleashing and release into the world. As we depart into the silent gloom of the forest, and Dak leaves his phone on a table outside his home. No phone will defile the sanctity of our journey, I think, while Dak simply shakes his head and gets up to lead.

Here, tea has long been a medicine, blood regulator, food-stuff and stimulator without equal. Used to treat fevers, ulcers, as an antibacterial and diuretic the powers of what the ancient Han called 'du' (bitter herb) seem unlimited. Some Bulang still cling to an ancient tradition of 'sour tea', which is similar to lephet which the royalty of Myanmar's old kingdoms would consume with rice.

Raw tea leaves are heated in boiling water, pulverized into bamboo husks and buried for months (even years). The husk of encased tea leaves would be dug up and added to rice



Image 3

as a kind of flavor enhancer. The taste, which I was once 'gifted' fit somewhere between raw spinach and mildew. Wounds of the skin are still now treated with poultices made of ground tea leaves as they are believed to hasten the recovery time of tissue. Its long history as a trusted healer has perhaps allowed it to be revered as more than a simple economic commodity.

No evil sprays have ever touched the leaves here in these forests and no foreign forces are allowed to harvest or even enter the sacred forests without permission...and this is no idle warning. The Wa and Bulang have centuries of combat-ready blood in their veins and the tea forests are a kind of primordial living temple. The diminutive, wiry Wa people had an unfortunate and very real habit of decapitating those that defied or challenged their dominions of tea and habitat.

Though Dak has shed his flip-flops in preference for his competent and calloused feet and though he has removed his tattered shirt he is a man who, in every movement, demonstrates a devotion to the tea trees. Lithe, tattooed, and agile, his grace becomes evident once we reach the forest's edge. He is reverence personified.

Buyers from overseas regularly make the sometimes-treacherous journeys over landslide-ridden territory to purchase the tea directly. Counterfeit 'old tree' Puerh abounds and buyers are prepared to spend hundreds of dollars per kilo for a 'genuine' Puerh from the source. Puerh, an ancient market town, had its namesake designated to represent all tea that came from southern Yunnan's tea lands. Referring to the varietal *Camellia Sinensis Assamica*, a big leaf species that is grown and produced in Yunnan, the name Puerh has come to represent some legitimate (and a thousand pretenders) in the tea world. It was this precious tea that was smuggled through Myanmar and into India along smuggler's routes. Long known as a frontier province with rough etiquette to the dynasties, Yunnan's dynamic geography is also a treasure trove of natural medicines. Everything from fungus to herbs to perhaps the greatest cure-all: tea. The lands on the fringes of the province are populated by some of



Image 4

the most concentrated and varied indigenous peoples in the world and all have tales and songs of tea.

Yunnan also provided the basis point for the thirteen-hundred year old Tea Horse Road which saw an unending series of caravans heading to all points on the compass carrying the famed and craved tea. Empires rose and fell but throughout it all tea as a commodity never lost its potent economic influence. Dynasties were dependant on a precious green that grew on damp earthen slopes in their own empires of silence.

The mountain-bound Tibetans benefited from the vegetal proteins and from the abilities of tea to break down much of the fatty elements of their diets, and lovingly referred to the potent bitter teas of this region as 'ja kabo' (strong or bitter tea). Many peoples of northern Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma still do prepare cold dishes using tea to cool down the innards after meals of robust spices. Conquering armies of Mongols took back molded Puerh teas from Yunnan in the 13th Century. From this little corner tea's liquid tentacles spread forth.

Harvesting methods have changed little and the common sense used in maintaining the harvests has ensured the continuing bond of leaf and man. In the great tea tree forests of Banzhang, Yibang, Nannuo and Jingmai, ancient tea trees still produce teas that are so anticipated that they are often purchased a year before the tea is actually picked. There is a trust in the finicky buyers that the tea is picked, prepared, and produced with an attention that befits the sacred source.

While Dak pauses to study a tealeaf, the sun makes an effort to burst through the heavy foliage. It is time to return to sip some of the teas that have been surrounding us for the past hour. In his minimalist way, Dak simply nods his head to the side to indicate the time has come to leave.



Image 5

The village of Lao Ma Er sits like in a trough-like valley encased by slopes. Bamboo racks lie out covered in freshly clipped tea buds and leaves. Tea is everywhere and it appears as a princely vegetal entity. Dak's stilted dwelling requires a delicate march up stairs into a room that seems to function as a space where all is done. Bamboo reeds cover a bamboo floor – indeed were it not for the mounds of tea sitting absolutely everywhere it would seem a village where bamboo ruled – and Dak immediately shoves a beaten and blackened kettle of water on a smokeless bamboo fire. While tea rituals are sometimes known for their tedious details and exact amounts, it is a refreshing irony

that some of the globe's most anticipated tea comes with little in the way of ornamentation or fuss. In Dak's simplistic verbal brilliance, "It is the tea that matters."

His wide hairless hand digs deep into a bag and simply grabs a handful of dried tea leaves feeding them into the burbling kettle. Moments later I have a tiny glass that is immaculately clean and filled with a light yellow fluid before me. It has been a little over two hours since our last tea onslaught, but already the mouth is puckering for another beloved dose. This tea is different from our pre-tea forest departure in that it is an 'aged tea.' It is a 7 year old Spring harvest from the ancient forests and with its age, a slight ebbing of a fresh tea's almost violent burst of potent bitterness.



Image 6

Dak's intense eyes gleam over the rim of his glass at me as he inhales a good portion of his tea in one take. My own tentative sip takes in a fluid that floods the front part of my tongue with a bitterness that seems to eat into very skin before releasing somehow its hold. As it makes its way into my throat it leaves only a slightly sweet trail. "All great teas have this quality. That is the taste of a real tea with no altering." Dak tells me gesturing out to the not-so-distant tea forests. After many more jolting slurps of his



Image 7

vintage stock, Dak makes a comment that perhaps sums up not only what tea means here but what the very earth and soil mean to the people, "Without our care the land will no longer provide us with its gifts. I am not a smart man but I know that the health of the earth means the health of the tea trees and their health gives us a livelihood." A simple green circle of ancient wisdom continues to work here.

Captions for images 1-7 (All images by Jeff Fuchs)

Image 1: A Bulang elder near the tea town of Lao Ma Er in the Bulang Mountains studies and fawns over a new spring tea leaf.

Image 2: An ancient tea tree that is close - so say the locals near Nannuo Mountain - to a thousand years old. Entire forests of these giants constitute the valued Ancient tea tree forests of southern Yunnan, where tea probably was first born.

Image 3: A Bulang woman pushes freshly boiled tea leaves into a bamboo husk. In a tradition stemming back hundreds of years, the mixture will then be buried and reclaimed months or years later. The resultant 'sour tea' will be consumed as a foodstuff with rice or other grains.

Image 4: A Hani woman explains the timeless importance of the tea forests, which stand behind her, near Ban Po Lao Zai village in Menghai county.

Image 5: An elder of the Dai minority sorts tea leaves according to grade, near Jingmai in southwestern Yunnan province. Jingmai's teas are traditionally one of the most sought after, and pricey, due to the age of their tea forests which are some of the oldest on the globe.

Image 6: A small collection of tea leaves rests in the sun. Some peoples, like the Lahu will leave the fresh tea leaves in the sun to increase their supposed 'strength' in taste. What makes tea from these small villages so special is that the leaves themselves are collected in small amounts, by families and then 'shared'. In bigger families, they will only create their own teas for sale.

Image 7: A member of the Hani minority enters into a tea tree forest near Nannuo Mountain in southern Yunnan, where this ritual has been played out for centuries. Slow growing and craving mists, humidity, and slopes, these trees are worshipped by the people that care for, harvest from, and drink of them