

Romancing the Leaf

By A. D. Fisher

My relationship with Yunnan, and particularly Xishuangbanna has always been a churned river of mixed emotions. There are currents of the greatest joys and beauty of a life devoted to tea, yet these swirl amongst darker, cloudier eddies of sorrow and pain. Coming and going from Yunnan this last decade has taught me more than just what can be learned about Puerh tea, about nature itself and man's place in it. Every time I pack for the trip, I do so with trepidation, fear and excitement bundled together like my clothes; and Banna rarely lets me down on any of these levels.

Like all the other times before, I recently returned home having passed through scenes of tremendous beauty, some terrible ugliness, joy and hope, fear and sadness, all in the name of the Leaf I love so much.

Yunnan, or "Southern Cloud" province is situated on the Tropic of Cancer in the Southwest of China. Xishuangbanna Autonomous Prefecture, which means "Twelve Rice Paddy Districts" in the local dialect, is in the southern most part of Yunnan. It borders Laos, Burma and a tiny bit of Thailand in the south—the bottom of a series of steppes leading up to the Tibetan Plateau in the far West of Yunnan. The jungles of Yunnan are home to countless species of plants and animals, many of which are unique to the area; as well as a variety of aboriginal peoples whose culture is often unique blends of Burmese, Thai and Chinese. The land itself is a beautiful jungle, flourishing with flowers, fruits, insects and the smiles of locals now used to a steady stream of Puerh tourists.



Scholars agree that Xishuangbanna is one of three possible jungles within which the ever-green tree '*Camellia Sinensis*' was born some 65 to 1.8 million years ago. The tea tree predates any borders though, existing in a primordial forest that wasn't yet interrupted by the sound of man's names—"Yunnan" or "Banna"—only the birds, monkeys and silence blended with the rivers streaming past the giant tea trees that were ancient even then. For millennia these great trees reigned over a forest of nascent verdure, nature moving past and through them on its course to man.

At some distant, unknown time man would discover the benefits and quality of the Leaf, and the lives of both would be changed forever. For thousands of years man and Leaf lived in perfect harmony, the trees of Xishuangbanna giving their leaves once or twice a year, and the aboriginal farmers respecting their domain, leaving those gardens within the forest untroubled by their slash and burn agriculture; occasionally coming and going to do a bit of weeding and maintenance to an otherwise natural garden.

"It's a romance.... We just love tea.
It's that simple...love."



left its garden in peace, only returning to beg the spirit for a bit of its essence or even pray to it now and again. When it came time, they nourished the seeds into trees naming them and passing them down within their families for generations—and the tree that once looked up at the farmers like parents, now cast a shadow on its many grandchildren.

Imagine if you can, traveling up bumpy, jostling roads for a few hours, the windows filled with glorious canyons, red rivers and green hills. Arriving at a simple village of wooden houses, the people are friendly and greet you with the welcoming, yet shy smiles only such simple people can. You hike for a few hours on winding trails, passing beautiful trees, vines, ferns, flowers and bamboo groves—stopping occasionally to drink from a spring funneled down through bamboo pipes, or to have a second glance at an animal or particularly amazing flower. Eventually, you arrive at a hill covered in very old tea trees: plants that have been central to the culture and life of a people for hundreds or even thousands of years.

On the way, the joy and beauty was awe-inspiring. You felt deeply impressed by the nature around you, the colorful dress of your aboriginal guides and the breadth of the occasionally glimpse of valleys and verdant hills through a break in the trees. You breathe deeply, the air so clean and pure, and smile, excited for the last turn around which your old friend lives. But that last turn isn't one of joy; there is no running into each other's arms. Try to imagine a year away from your best friend, spiritual teacher and elder, only to round that last corner and find him sick and dying. Perhaps you'd stop dead in your tracks. Maybe like us, you would weep:

I stood in the morning air watching the green jungle through the hazy mist of moist eyes,

waiting for the pain to swell enough to tear. My teacher Zhou Yu also wept. A few moments of silence, reverence to nature and this feeling passed. I heard one of the reporters traveling with us quietly ask another expert, Chou Hsien Pang about why we reacted thus, and he placed his hand on the



reporter's shoulder saying, "It's a romance.... We just love tea. It's that simple...love."

One of the oldest Puerh companies, Tong Xing Hao, made a new trademark ticket (*nei piao*) to accompany all their cakes starting from 1935. The text included English and Chinese since they anticipated some exportation of the tea to Hong Kong and parts of Europe. In it there is a simple sentence that is really just part of their advertisement for the benefits of Puerh tea, and yet it captures something so profound as to be beyond even cultural wisdom, perhaps spiritual. They say that their tea is special because it is "not to be compared to the leaves made by the hands of man." This all-too-often ignored relationship between man and nature has been lost from the culture and personality of so many modern people, and the resulting sickness is obvious. We destroy our land in the name of progress and then consume the tainted products of that place, poisoning

ourselves as well as the Earth. In just a decade, we are threatening trees that aboriginal people farmed harmoniously for thousands of years without abusing their ecology or environment. I think this trademark ticket represents a deep wisdom passed down culturally, and that man has in many ways lost the understanding that Nature's creations, including ourselves, have always been of a higher caliber—our own art measured by its ability to capture that energy, natural or transcendent.

Methods called "scientific" because they begin in laboratories are destroying the purer agricultural science that was designed to maintain production for centuries. And the centuries of production is still greater in quantity than the few decades of higher yield chemicals offer before they destroy the land beyond repair.



We found several places where different kinds of trees had been hacked into deep enough to kill them, or even chopped down outright, to make room for new tea gardens. Some of these trees were hundreds or thousands of years old. Traditional farming always supported the ecology rather than destroying it.

And even the gardens they later planted themselves would be hard to distinguish from the surrounding jungle if you didn't know what you were looking for.

Central to my own personal philosophy and relationship to tea is the idea that these old trees wanted it to be thus, for they too—like all of Nature—yearned for a higher state of consciousness. They wanted to be human, to be drunk and consumed, flowing through the senses of a human being. The spirit of the trees was content to give some of its bounty to the kind people that cared for it, who in return



The case of Taiwan

The problems just beginning to develop in Yunnan are very similar to the progress that has led Taiwanese tea downhill. A comparison of the two and a general understanding of quality is very important for the future of Puerh tea, lest it all become mechanized in the way much of Chinese tea from other regions and Taiwanese tea has.

In the 1960's and 1970's Taiwan began to gain some economic footing in the world. People here developed a disposable income, and prided themselves on the cultural development they spent it on. Tea and tea culture became more popular than ever. Businessmen jumped at the new opportunities for economic venture, and the very nature of Taiwanese oolong tea was changed forever.

What had once been beautiful tea plants growing on the mountain tops of Central Taiwan became large plantations of genetically modified, chemical-covered "tea" meant only to satisfy the taste buds, rather than the spirit.

One of the most disturbing influences on Western tea consumption in my opinion is the pictures vendors who sell plantation teas use to promote their teas. For a Westerner living in America who has never seen a tea tree in their life, such pictures are extremely misleading. One sees the green hills and verdant buds and thinks that the tea is surely very healthy and beautiful. The author then goes on to extol the virtues of the landscape, the fragrance and flavor of the tea, etc., all in most cases related to the fact that he is trying to sell that tea. In fact, the teas are genetically spliced cuttings that are covered with pesticides, weed-killers and chemical fertilizers. I have left many such plantations gagging and with a headache, as it was near the day when they had sprayed. The soil itself is often rock hard and devoid of nutrients and the roots are usually coming up from the ground thirsty and starving. The plants are harvested



The Famous Taiwanese tea farmer, Mr. Chou, shows us "dying" soil as a result of weed-killer.

repeatedly using this method until they die a few years later, at which time they are replaced and the process is started again. Eventually, the land will be ruined. Because of the lack of forestry, plant and animal life, and the high altitude, it will take many decades or even centuries for such soil to recover.

I recently read one such blog by a vendor of Taiwanese tea in which he not only fails to promote organic farming but even goes so far as to say that the flavor of organic tea is often not worth the added price, completely ignoring the environmental damage being done in the name of his taste buds and budget! Such vendors often act as if a trip to Nantou is an adventure to some remote and exotic land to source incredibly rare Taiwanese teas, when in fact they drove their Toyota Celica there and parked in a nice lot, their kids having ice cream while they bought their tea. The development of roads and bulldozing of much of the mountains, carving plantations where there once were natural, rocky crags has done irrevocable environmental damage.

A few decades ago when all farming was natural, the success of the places that were growing the original good quality high-mountain oolong

drove the nearby regions to abandon the production of timber, bamboo and fruit and also start growing tea. The more the tea industry thrived, the worse the situation got. More revenue meant more money for "innovation".

Flash forward to a few decades later, in the 1980's and 90's, and most all the more sensitive many tea teachers in Taiwan, like Zhou Yu, began to look elsewhere for their leaves. They would, of course, find Puerh tea. And they had arrived on the Puerh scene at the perfect time, for in the early 1990's the people of Hong Kong—who had until then been the keepers of the largest percentage of the world's Puerh tea—were liquidating most businesses in light of the forthcoming return to Mainland rule. These tea masters and their students in Taiwan had the money to purchase a lot of Puerh, with some also going to other parts of Asia.

Taiwan would eventually become a kind of bastion for tea arts and culture, especially Puerh. In fact, more than 80% of Puerh scholarship has been done by Taiwanese authors. And a lot of this leads back to the tea lovers who had lost their taste for oolong when it ceased to offer the same depth, spirit or experience that it had before it became a plantation tea like so many other genres.

Even today, production is varied and the issue complex. Suffice it to say, one must be much more careful when buying Taiwanese oolong; and it is by no means the only genre of tea like this. Of course, there is still great Taiwanese tea to be had, but there is also a lot of plantation tea, tea grown in Viet Nam and sold as Taiwanese tea, and unhealthy, inorganic leaf. When money dominates agricultural philosophy, it is always thus. The question then is, what exactly did Puerh offer tea drinkers that their native oolong no longer had? In answering that question, I think we'll find out everything we need to know about what to look for in tea leaves as well as the problems beginning in Yunnan.

All leaves are not alike

There is a misconception fostered by some Western authors that since all the varieties of tea are technically one species (*Camellia Sinensis*), the differences between teas must therefore be in the processing alone. The idea is that any tea leaves, anywhere, can be red, green, white, oolong or Puerh just depending on how they are processed after harvesting. Actually, this concept is only true for certain kinds of tea, and even then only partially so.

As tea plants were carried and planted in different regions of China, they adapted to the conditions of their new environments—the soil, climate, rain, etc.—and tea is a very versatile plant, making some of these changes great indeed. There are tens of thousands of teas in China, and many kinds of tea processing were developed based on the unique varietal of tea that had evolved in a specific region. While it technically would be possible to process teas from other regions in a way that matches these, the quality and taste would be quite obviously inferior. The fact is that certain kinds of teas—grown in certain places with all the variations in climate, soil and even farming—go together perfectly with certain kinds of processing. The French call this combination of soil, climate—latitude/longitude—"terroir", and the term is analogous to wine. The *terroir* of a tea is the soil, rain, humidity, sunshine and location that made it unique. And just as various kinds of wine cannot be produced away from the *terroir* that fits that processing technique hand to glove, so also is it a mistake to think that processing Darjeeling teas like oolong or Vietnamese green tea like Puerh is going to fool any real lover of those genres. Tea plants are now generally grouped into two categories of either "broad leaf" (*Camellia Sinensis var. assamica*) or "short leaf" (*Camellia Sinensis var. sinensis*), bushes. The larger-leaf varieties are often,



“So many tea masters have admonished us that Cha Dao begins on the farm.”

yet not always, within the category of Puerh, while there is a greater variety of small-leaf varieties, based on where they are grown, when they're harvested and how they're processed.

Puerh is a very unique kind of tea, only found in the ancient jungle we discussed earlier—today Yunnan, and bits of Burma, Laos, Vietnam and the very Eastern tip of India. The word “Puerh” refers to an ancient marketplace within Yunnan where teas were brought to be traded. Eventually, people in other provinces began to call this tea by the place where it had originated, at least as a commodity. While the city no longer exists, all of this kind of tea produced in Yunnan even today is still called “Puerh”.

There are several ways in which Puerh tea often distinguishes itself from all other kinds of tea, and all of these factors clearly demonstrate what it is one should look for in a leaf. Puerh isn't the only kind of tea to have many of these qualities—nor is it immune to the problems that other kinds of tea have developed. Still, many of the reasons why tea sages have turned to Puerh again and again over the last century relate to the fact that most of the tea from this region was largely ignored by mainstream tea drinkers. Without generating a tremendous amount of interest or monies, the Puerh teas grown in Yunnan remained organic and natural—utilizing the same gathering and simple hand-processing techniques that had gone on unchanged for centuries.

Whether tree or bush, small or large-leaf varietal, the best teas have always been grown *organically* on mountain tops. And the connection that the tea plant has with the energies of the mountain—its water, rain, humidity, and even spirit—cannot be over-stated. It is the *terroir* of the trees that determine their essence, not only their flavors and aromas, but the ways in which our bodies will relate to their presence, their everything. Recently, Puerh tea has also become popu-



Zhou Yu and friends under an 800-yr-old tea tree.

lar, and as a result has in some places turned down the same dead-end road so many other kinds of tea have. Nevertheless, besides such notable exceptions as Wuyi or *Dan Cong* teas, Puerh remains the tea of choice amongst most tea masters in the world. The reasons are obvious.

From Seed to Tree

One of the biggest differences between Puerh tea and most other varieties is that it comes from trees. And not just any trees, but the ancestors of the original kings of Yunnan, the source of all tea and Cha Dao on Earth. While it is possible for tea to grow into large trees in other parts of the world, very few are given such breadth and time. (The largest domesticated “bush”—small-leaf varietal—I've seen was just over 2 meters; though I've seen wild, old-arbor trees in Wuyi and on Phoenix Mt. that are much larger).

From ancient times, the greatest, most sought after teas always came from large trees, often growing wild on the tops of mountain peaks. Almost all the ancient texts on tea mention this fact. And even today the oldest Da Hong Pao or Long Jing trees, for example, are considered the most valuable, as it is with just about every genre of tea.

One of the things that had turned a lot of tea lovers in Taiwan away from their native oolongs was the switch to the manner in which the farms were propagated. There was a time when the difference between tree and bush varieties wasn't as important—when oolongs, green and white teas all came from natural propagation. However, this is no longer the case. Tea can potentially be reproduced using one of two methods, either seeds or genetic cuttings. Most plantations have shifted to propagation by cuttings. The reason for this shift in agricultural methodology was twofold: Firstly, by using cuttings the gap between growing seasons is sped up significantly, to the point where the new tea bushes can be harvested within a year or two. Tea trees, on the other hand, take 5 to 7 years to reach a seed-bearing age and often don't start yielding high-quality leaves until around 10 years or so (this differs amongst varieties). Secondly, cloning tea plants through this kind of reproduction allows the farmers more control over whatever characteristics they wish to breed into the plants, and then the consistency of thousands of copies once they find it. However, so much is lost from this agricultural “innovation”—the teas become weak in flavor and energy, lacking the spirit of their ancestors.

When each tree is unique, creating a special flavor all its own, the chance for variety is greater and the farmers must therefore also be great blenders. Most modern farmers have lost the ability to blend great teas, relying instead on genetic uniformity to create flavor.

Actually, some masters would argue that whether or not the tea is planted via cuttings or seeds is less important than whether or not the tree is allowed the freedom to grow up. It is the patience of the true farmer that creates the qualities we seek in tea, and there is some common sense in these arguments.

Most plants, including tea, have a root system in ratio to the crown they produce above ground. Consequently, the smaller the plant, the smaller the root system. It seems obvious that by chopping the tea plants down to more manageable sizes, as most all plantations have done, the root system is shortened, which then of course decreases the amount of nutrients the plant is able to absorb. Plants get their nutrients from their roots and the photosynthesis of their leaves; and as we chop a tree in half, the root system shrinks accordingly. Only the first of such leaves harvested will maintain the energy of the mountains where they were grown—while all the later leaves will be weaker as a result of the tree being cut in half. Larger trees have deeper roots, absorb more nutrients and energy and then flourish greater crowns of leaves which, through photosynthesis, further the health of the plant. It's that simple. One of my teachers always cautions audiences at his lectures that cutting the trees down is like the old Chinese proverb of “killing the hen to get the eggs.”

The Dong Ding tea farms of Taiwan, for example, were once way up on small trails (the very word referring to the flexing of the calf muscles needed to climb up and down such paths) and the trees grew tall and strong with enough room between them to develop deep root systems. These deeper roots then gathered the minerals, nutrients and spirit of those great mountains and used it to make brighter, juicer crowns beneath the sky. The leaves on such trees are stronger, healthier, brimming with the energy of the mountains, sky and earth. This is the reason that so many tea masters

of this modern era have admonished us to remember that Cha Dao begins on the farm: planting seeds, allowing tea to grow into trees, with enough space between each one so that they aren't competing for resources—these are the ways that tea trees grew naturally, before tea was domesticated, and this also represents the traditional wisdom of the first thousands of years that Chinese farmed the Leaf. Whether it was aboriginal tribes or monks, there was always a patience and reverence for the plant as more than just a generator of income, always balanced and healthy agriculture. Always trees.

Conversely, the changes to an agricultural system based on output, on flavor, caused many farms in Taiwan to be built on lower, flatter and more convenient places. Other plantations were literally dug out of the mountains, rather than using the natural topography as is done in Yunnan. The trees were halved to a more easily harvested knee-high height, for that is what drives the tea "industry"—harvest, harvest and more harvest. A big part of what makes Puerh special is that until very recently, almost all the tea used to make Puerh was taken from trees. As it too has become popular, the last few years of financial success have caused some of the farms that were previously producing green, red or even white teas to begin processing their tea as "Puerh". The results are highly questionable, and most tea lovers can recognize the quality difference right away.



Mr. Chou with a sick and dying tree that is probably fifty to one hundred years old.



Such over-harvested trees will die if they continue to be treated this way. Mr. Chou shows a branch demonstrating that the excessive picking has begun in the last year or so.

The spirit of the farm

The important connection tea has to the mountains, water and climate it is raised in is only part of the energy of a tea. There is also the conversation that occurs between the farmers and the tea, day in and day out. If the farmer's philosophy is based on money, this will translate to the leaves he or she cares for; while those farmers more connected to the land, patient and loving, will achieve the same standards as the ancient teas that were coveted by saints and emperors alike. Traditional agriculture went on for thousands of years without ever upsetting the ecological balance around it. More modern practices focus on gathering as much from a place as quickly as possible and then moving on to somewhere else when the land is destroyed. One of my venerable teachers and elder brother in tea, Zhou Yu, says that the "aboriginal people in Yunnan are beginning to sell their land and trees to larger companies just as those in Taiwan did decades ago. They think that they can get a large sum of money and still be paid an income since they will be hired to pick the leaves, without any of the responsibility. They don't realize the long-term issues, just as those in Taiwan didn't."

The Three Posions

Even worse than cropping/pruning the trees, are the use of pesticides, weed-killers and chemical fertilizers. In the 1970's, as Taiwan's tea industry began to expand, it attracted the attention of the dealers in these poisons, offering sweet promises of "higher yields" poured like Shakespearean honey into the poor farmers' ears. And Taiwan isn't alone. Very few kinds of tea in the world are organic, and even those that claim to be aren't always so—for the enforcement of these laws isn't nearly as rigorous as it is in the West. Seeing the beginnings of this in Yunnan made us cry. Large tea trees were being weeded with weed-killer rather than by hand merely out of convenience rather than any kind of need.

They were using the chemical Glyphosate, shown here, which is the world's most renowned weed-killer, known by the brand name 'Roundup' in the United States. While most authorities classify it as a III on the toxicity chart, there have been studies showing that it is higher in relation to skin disease and reproductive damage. Actually there is no pesticide or weed-killer in existence without cases of poisoning. In Yunnan its relationship to humans, however, is secondary since the farmers usually live fifteen minutes, one or even five hours hike away in a village. Nonetheless, the weed-killer does remove the natural fertilization such plants provide, according to expert Chou Hsien Pang. He also said that the death of the undergrowth that used to attract a percentage of insects now forces the bugs to move on to the tea trees. These two factors often lead to the need for chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the very triad dealers in such chemicals are hoping to make the farmers dependent upon. Mr. Chou said that even just weed-killer will slowly harden the soil, and the lack of undergrowth to renew it will eventually lead to the sickness and death of the tea trees. He said that



such chemicals were really designed for seasonal farms of vegetables or other harvested plants that are replaced each growing season, not trees. "Even if it takes twenty years of spraying to kill this tree," he said patting an ancient tree "it still isn't a long time considering she is around 500 years old." It is easy to see the future of Puerh if it follows this course, as it is reflected in Taiwanese tea:

Tea plantations with a production-based philosophy have grown dependent on these three kinds of chemicals because they have crowded their tea bushes together into rows so packed one cannot even distinguish each tree without bending down to look at the roots. Without the space to grow, the trees are all in competition with one another—add that to the aforementioned cropping of the tea plants down to half or less of their natural size and the result is weaker, more fragile plants. These bushes cannot afford to compete with any other plants, as they are already in great competition with one another over the paltry nutrients available to them in the upper parts of the soil their roots reach. For that reason, the farms must employ chemical weed-killers to remove the threat



of nearby plants. In the more traditional farming of tea trees, the trees were all given the breadth they needed to grow strong, with deep roots. Such trees aren't threatened by nearby plants. In fact, the undergrowth helps provide nutrients to the greater ecosystem, as well as attracting insects that might otherwise eat the tea leaves.

If you pick up a handful of earth from any forest, the soil will be dark and smell rich even from a foot away. The hard, often reddish earth of such farms has no smell of loam even when held right up to your nose! Furthermore, as I mentioned above, the roots of the trees are often coming up above the soil, thirsty and starving for the water and nutrients the hard earth cannot afford them.

In reading the classic *Cha Ching* by Lu Yu, we know that even as early as the Tang Dynasty it was known that the best teas were grown in the gravelly, loose soil of the highest altitudes, where the water would pass over the roots and the environmental stress would cause the trees to produce higher quality leaves. As such, these bushes were the strongest of the strong, with deep root systems, strong trunks and large crowns of leaves; not puny,



Healthy trees are still to be found in Yunnan.

crowded munchkins with starved roots poking above lifeless, compacted dirt!

Another of the greatest problems with plantation-based agriculture is the over-harvesting of the plants. With trees, it was common to only harvest once or twice a year, allowing the trees a chance to recover so that the new leaves would be as healthy and strong as the ones the plant created in the previous harvest. Leaves were only picked down to the third or fifth leaf, leaving anything beneath that for the next season. Nowadays, on these plantations, the teas are harvested down as far as the machines or pickers can reach. The plants are harvested again and again, sometimes weekly, and each successive time the leaves re-grow, the plant is weakened.

Some smaller farms allow a part of their farm to grow up while they harvest the other into the ground; then they replace the now-fallow field with cuttings from the part they left alone, switching back to the section that has grown up. The best case scenario is a larger farm that has enough land to leave some plants alone, harvesting each section in periods. Such tea will be of a higher quality despite the fact that it isn't organic.

Tea is a very resilient plant, and in a natural ecology is very rarely decimated by insects. Other methods of organic farming, like introducing insects, using natural deterrents like interspersed camphor trees, etc. are all often against the grain of most farms' philosophy—as they cut into the quantity and speed of harvest. Alas, the only solution then is to spray the leaves with pesticides.

I asked some experts in Taiwan and America and they said there is no pesticide designed specifically for tea. Most all of them are designed to be used with seasonal vegetables/fruits that can be washed several times before consumption, whereas tea can only be fired and/or rinsed when brewing. Whether or not these two have any effect on the pesticide levels is uncertain.

It's no wonder then that while doctors of long ago were prescribing tea to heal most all ailments, many modern Taiwanese doctors are suggesting that people drink less tea each day. Furthermore, one must remember that when pesticides are banned in the West, as they are found to be unhealthy by the FDA or other authoritative agencies, the companies often do not destroy their stock, suffering great financial losses, but distribute the barrels of forbidden pesticide to Asian countries with less-rigorous laws governing the control of such substances. Many of the worst pesticides on Earth wind up in Asia, and some of them have possibly even coated the leaves of tea.



Pesticides are powders and as the spraying continues the liquid in the container gets more condensed, at which time the farmer should return and add more liquid. However, haphazard farming often results in white sections as shown in this picture. The trees in this section are white-ish because they were sprayed with the condensed pesticide from the bottom of the canister, what might be a lethal dose in fact.

There are also farms that use chemical fertilizers to stimulate the bushes to produce more and more leaves, literally harvesting tea into the ground. And when the plants are essentially dead, and the bushes can no longer produce tea that can even be drunk (which is often just a matter of years) they just destroy the field and plant a new set of clones, starting the whole process over again. Sometimes they also don't allow the fields to rest fallow before propagation, and soon the environment itself is damaged; and it can take decades or even centuries for it to recuperate.

This over-harvesting was another sad fact that we saw repeatedly in Yunnan. Most of the trees that had only been plucked twice a year are now being picked four or more times a year, and many

are dying as a result. The local farmers and even Puerh factories don't realize that these practices are destroying their own economic futures. And just as our discussion has weaved in and out of this chemical triad, the need for pesticide creates the need for fertilizer and so on, resulting in an agricultural painting that in the end captures only a barren environment signed in the name of industrial yield.

Rather than using the foresight of traditional methodology which balanced yield with preservation and conservation of future resources, the new approach to tea farming is like the hungry ghosts of Buddhist mythology, distended stomachs constantly yearning for more than

the small mouth can consume. And this applies to most all forms of industrial agriculture as much as it does to tea.

While looking at these images, however briefly, is unpleasant, it is important for every tea lover—whether connoisseur, amateur hobbyist or spiritualist—for only we as consumers have the power to influence these trends. And the situation isn't all bleak: there are still many farmers interested in growing tea "trees" organically. In fact, ecologically sound agriculture is becoming more popular not just with tea, but also with fruits/vegetables too. The increase of organic groceries is evidence cating people to shop responsibly. I am



fortunate that my tea teachers have all taught me the importance of being responsible for the environment. It is not enough to lock oneself away in



the tea room and drink tea, finding peace or pleasure for oneself alone—not in this modern world.

It is important to note that I am not claiming that all Taiwanese farmers are producing such tea, or that all plantations are bad. In every genre of tea, there are farmers and farms with healthy, natural approaches to tea production, those which compromise on some issues while still trying their best to create good teas, and those which are interested only in money—though certain kinds of tea certainly have more unhealthy practice than others. My good friend, and one of the most knowledgeable tea farmers I have ever met, Chou Hsien Pang, runs one of the most famous organic farms in Taiwan, based on decades of research and a powerful respect for nature and tea. His trees are all allowed to grow large and strong, and most are even decades old. His entire farm is chemical-free and the difference in quality, flavor, aroma and Qi is apparent. And unlike vendors (and those sellers posing as non-profit bloggers) who are trying to sell plantation teas, the added expense is worth it to me! Perhaps the flavor of an organic tea isn't miles ahead of the chemical covered one, but



The roots of the trees are often coming up above the soil, thirsty and starving for the water and nutrients the hard earth cannot afford them.

you're paying for more than just flavor—you're paying for a healthier lifestyle and a cleaner global environment. You're also paying for a philosophy. Look around at some pictures of Taiwanese plantations and you'll see betel nut trees, fruit or even coffee planted amongst the tea, showing the farmer's true colors, as one or even two crops aren't enough.

When I see tea merchants and other businessmen condemning organic tea to promote their own plantation tea with misleading information or flowery pictures of "green plantations" taken from a misleading camera angle or tea on shiny plates with lotus petals next to the tea that such and such a person sanctified, I take comfort in the old Chinese adage that "if you make of tea nothing but profit, your tea liquor will taste of coin."

The fact is that we don't live in the age when renunciation to mountain hermitages was possible. Even the idea of building in the forest to get away from the city would ultimately destroy the seclusion and serenity of such places if enough of us made the move. Tea definitely has the ability to connect us with nature and ourselves, but that connection should also result in responsible living. An experience of connection with the universe only demonstrates that much more clearly that its destruction is but our own suicide. Harming the land, and then consuming the produce of that wounded place, is the same as hurting ourselves. And that is why so many tea masters are encouraging farmers to return to the eons of wisdom that form the basis of tea culture, art and Dao. Without any leaves, there is no Cha Dao to speak of.

Solutions for the Future of Puerh Tea

It is not enough for us to just watch as the future of Puerh tea travels the same slippery root down into the valley of plantations and chemical rain. We must also remain positive. Many of the farmers and factories in Yunnan are beginning to understand that the loss of the old trees is in many ways harmful to their future business. Many of these trees have been a part of the cultural heritage of Chinese people for hundreds or even thousands of years. In the same way that we protect a three-hundred-year-old building that has historicity, a painting or other piece of art or cultural heritage, so must we also start to initiate projects to protect the old tea trees from over-harvesting and unnecessary spraying of manmade chemicals that will harden the soil and eventually kill the trees given enough time.

While in Yunnan, we were most hospitably taken care of by the Chang Tai Tea Group, who even have a hotel built into their factory. One evening we sat with the company's founder and head, Mr. Lei Guang Yue. We drank some wonderful 1950's Lan Yin and discussed all matters Puerh related. I mentioned all that we had seen and he seemed genuinely interested. Zhou Yu commented that several of our guides had mentioned that the local magistrates were selling 30-year leases on old tea trees for prices as little as 100RMB (app. 15 USD) per tree. It seems cheap, but Mr. Lei explained that just as in Taiwan the locals think they lose very little. They get a lump sum for the leases and then are hired by the factories to pick the tea and paid the same per-kilogram price as they were when they owned the tea. Zhou Yu said that aboriginal people in central Taiwan had the same kind of thinking when they sold their land to tea plantations. In the long term, however, they always get hurt by such transactions.



We discussed using the system itself to protect the trees. I suggested that Chang Tai lease some gardens in each of the famous mountains and then use their ownership rights to demand that the farmers protect the trees, listing the qualifications necessary if they wish the factory to buy the harvested tea. This may not be able to stop over-harvesting but it could easily prevent the unnecessary spraying of chemical weed-killers that we had seen. Mr. Lei seemed to like the idea and told us enthusiastically that he would definitely look into the project. He wholeheartedly agreed that the future of the Puerh industry, his business, was dependent on more protective measures being taken by the factories in cooperation with the local government and farmers. At one point in the conversation, he became very serious and turned to Zhou Yu, in whose opinion anyone interested in tea must respect, asking "Do you really think the matter has grown that serious?" Zhou sighed, "I've been coming to Yunnan two or more times a year for a long time, and I've been writing articles about these problems for several years now. The problem has only gotten worse. To me, it was serious a long time ago."



Some conscientious tea farmers still produce organic, ecologically sound tea. This factory in You Le seemed to be ahead of all of the large brand names, including Chang Tai, as far as environmental awareness is concerned.



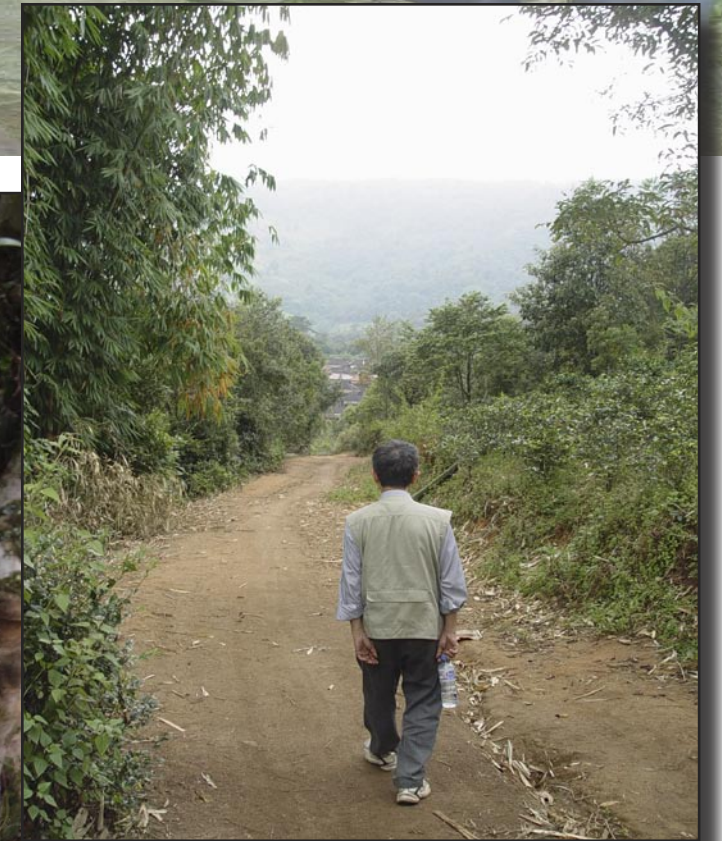
tion of their garden(s). “I’d be willing to pay the added expense for such tea,” said Scott. The idea definitely has merit. I told Zhou Yu about what we had come up with and he said it is definitely an excellent idea, though it would take the cooperation of factories, the government and farmers. He said that a big part of what we can do is just to write articles such as this one and educate consumers about tea, hoping they will decide to spend the extra money to protect the environment, independent of their taste or budget, and contrary to what your average Taiwanese tea vendor claims. He went on to add that Westerners perhaps could influence the situation positively by attracting the attention not only of the media, but of environmental charities. Zhou Yu says that an American charity has already turned a part of Lin Cang into a national park due to some other endangered plants and animals in the area, and that there is tea in the park that is indirectly being protected as well.

Later, as we discussed the issue several more times on our own, my good friend Scott Wilson and I came up with an alternative plan: Just as there are private, non-profit certification programs for Organic tea as well as Fair Trade, we could develop an “Ecologically Sound” certification. If farmers were willing to meet a certain set of criteria, they would be eligible for a certification stamp that would then increase the price of their processed tea by enough to make it worthwhile. They wouldn’t be allowed to spray any chemicals and the teas could only be harvested twice a year. Both of these qualifications, and any others, are easy enough to inspect. If the price increase is enough to warrant the certification, the farmers would definitely be eager to refrain from harvesting in the summer and winter, at least for a por-



Puerh tea has been an intimate part of my life for so many years that it is hard for me to imagine living without it. Hardly a day goes by that I don’t meet with my old friend Puerh and share some quiet time together. These leaves have been great friends to me, warming up occasions of joy, solacing me in times of trouble and even guiding me spiritually, as I have learned to be quietly within myself, further understanding Nature and my connection to it.

I sat down and drank some wise old tea before writing this article, in the hopes that some of the spirit of the trees would come through in askance of the choices we have made, for we consumers are equally responsible for the trees as are the farmers and factories. Part of the sadness I felt on seeing those dying trees was caused by the guilt of knowing that my own love of Puerh tea had played a part in what I was seeing. I needed to take responsibility for that, and did so with a tear. But tears won’t heal the problem. I hope that we can all



find a way back to the methodology that promoted a harmonious relationship between the trees and man—the traditional wisdom of thousands of years of agriculture in which the trees, man and tea all formed an endless circle somewhat analogous to Nature herself.

The Leaf



Tea made the traditional way with charcoal.