In Spring of 2006, Brian Kirbis planned to join an anthropological research trip from Northern Thailand to the Yunnan plateau in Southwest China. However, upon the cancellation of this program, his path changed and his determination lead him to develop his own field study. While issues such as the relationship between humans and their ecology, ethnicity, and what he calls “the continuum between nature and culture” concerned him, he lacked a subject. While preparing for his trip, he had tried Puerh tea for the first time and quickly identified it as a motif whose study could expose the complex interplay between ecology, culture, and public policy in Yunnan in light of global market economics and consumption.

A single Puerh tea garden contains a library of cultural information about the family that tends the garden, the village containing the garden, and the broader society that purchases the tea it produces. The sometimes convenient, sometimes dysfunctional marriage of indigenous and scientific knowledge finds its expression in the maintenance and cultivation of Puerh trees, and the sale and subsequent consumption of Puerh raises questions about how the market economy alters the meaning and cultivation of Puerh through marketing tactics and commoditization. The specific continues becoming indicative of broader themes, as the tea garden also seems a choice model for use in the greater conversation about ecology, agriculture, and human health.

In preparation for his research in the field, Brian read as much of the literature as he could that had been written on the region, including the works of Xu Jianchu of the Kunming Institute of Botany, a prolific scholar on the topic of indigenous environmental practices. He also became acquainted with the practical aspects of travel in Yunnan, including its geography, climate, as well as health considerations when traveling to remote areas.

Initially setting out to produce a short film on the material culture of tea production in an indigenous tea village and the relationship between production sites and commodity markets, Brian’s aims quickly evolved as he became more knowledgeable and immersed in the realities of tea production in Yunnan. He explained that much work in environmental anthropology is crisis-driven, and he admits carrying a perceived sense of urgency during his first trip to Yunnan, in regard to the indigenous cultures’ formation of their identity versus the state’s construction of their identity, the exploitation of old-growth tea, and the development of infrastructure. The mood of 2006, with record consumer demand and low supply driving raw material (mao cha) prices through the roof, was truly urgent.

However, Brian calmed his sense of exigency, noting that “while there is, indeed, a very direct confrontation between pre-modern and modern forms of transport, agriculture, and market economics in Xishuangbanna…this is still just the most recent manifestation of an elaborate historical process.” That is to say, the history of Puerh and of tea itself has its origins in Yunnan, and the recent market forces effecting change in the indigenous people in the past decade appear less pressing when placed on a timeline that begins some thousands of years ago.
Finding Lao Man’e

Brian arrived in Kunming alone and checked into the Camellia Hostel, known for its prevalence of backpackers and expatriates. Knowing no one academically or otherwise, he connected with the head of Yunnan University’s Department of Anthropology, Yin Shaoting. He proved receptive to Brian’s research and provided him with contacts in the Jinuo (Youle), Nannuo, and Bulang Mountains. A newly acquired friend in the tea industry suggested Brian consider the Bulang Mountains in Western Xishuangbanna for his primary research location. Before heading there, he filmed the Nannuo mountains with Zhang Hai, a filmmaker at Yunnan University’s East Asia Institute of Visual Anthropology, and shot some interview footage. Zhang brought him in contact with Ai Wennan, a local Bulang who was formerly the leader of his village and a former official of the Bulang Mountain’s local government. He would prove to be an important guide for Brian on his journey to and through Lao Man’e, a village in the Bulang Mountains.

An idyllic village filled with native-style homes and surrounded by forests that contain some of the oldest cultivated and wild tea trees known, Lao Man’e seems an exceptional site to conduct fieldwork with its long history in Puerh. The Bulang people are acknowledged to be some of the first inhabitants of Xishuangbanna, and Lao Man’e boasts 1,350 years of history. Indeed, even while sitting in a teahouse on Nannuo mountain—another tea mountain rife with old-growth tea trees—the shop’s owner recounted a brief history of the area and asserted that the Bulang people planted the oldest cultivated tea trees in the Nannuo mountains.

While this type of essentialization* usually causes intercultural miscommunication, particularly when the tea industry or government appropriates indigenous culture and identity in performing the discovery of tea in their marketing efforts, it can occasionally be useful. Such declarations, like that the Bulang were the first cultivators of tea, for instance, can affirm their claim to land through inheritance and support of local resources, such as water.

Lao Man’e embodies tradition and dynamic modernization, undergoing significant change over the past decade. As mentioned, the price of raw materials in 2006 reached record highs; materials that sold for 25 yuan per kilogram now sold for upwards of 200. Prices in Lao Man’e in 2007 skyrocketed to 800-1200 yuan per kilo. Even still, while some cherished old tea trees for their now enormously profitable returns, slash and burn agriculture had felled many old trees before tea became a hot commodity; on the other hand, short-sighted profiteers chopped down old, wild trees in order to harvest their upper-most leaves. In the span of a year, Lao Man’e gained major access roads and its residents invested tea profits into upgrading their homes with bathroom plumbing, solar water heaters, and other improvements. While the standard of life improves, however, new infrastructure and increased cultivation risks are placing stress on local resources, such as water.

Brian stayed in Lao Man’e with villagers who opened their homes to him. He began exploring the centuries-old tea plantations and abandoned cultivations in the surrounding forests and observing elements of local culture as they pertained to tea and agriculture. He thought he had seen most of their tea gardens his first year in the village, but the following year, he continued to see extremely old gardens in the surrounding forests, and he was told that these older trees were not harvested, but instead used as seed banks for tea propagation.

* Essentializing: creating a concept of a culture by assigning it natural “essential” characteristics that inaccurately and stereotypically explain its members’ behavior. E.g., women are inherently emotional, dependent, and men are naturally rational, independent, etc. Essentialist thinking’s often conservative nature can actively block or passively slow changes in society. But, as illustrated by the state-accepted history of Bulang and tea cultivation, essentialist claims can be useful rallying points for “anti-colonial” struggle by justifying local knowledge.
Propagation, Cultivation, Production, and Sale: The Bulang and their Puerh

The relationship between Puerh tea and locals in Lao Man’e is one demonstrating a disconnection between growers and the final product, Puerh. This complicated relationship has often proved problematic for Lao Man’e’s business, in terms of market price transparency for the Bulang or access to standardized (unblended) mao cha for tea traders, perhaps owing to the remoteness of the location: physical distance can discourage the participation of the cultivating locals in Puerh production and inhibits direct marketplace inclusion. On more geographically accessible mountains such as Yiwu or Nannuo, this is less the case.

Furthermore, the state of the tea forests and distribution of old trees, now most influenced by the tea market, has tangled roots in the Bulang’s agricultural history, government policy, and the present-day Puerh marketplace. The current relationship between farmers and the older tea gardens increasingly finds its course dictated by the market demand. Ai Wennan related to Brian that the age and distribution of tea gardens throughout Lao Man’e exists in agreement with the deterministic outcome of shifting agricultural practice over the village’s extended history: previously, the Bulang practiced subsistence agriculture and felled trees to clear fields, accounting for the fact that the largest tea trees are less common than before. But today, even though local practices have long held a strong conservationist approach to cultivation, seemingly limitless consumer demand and the villagers’ desire for increased income have caused villagers to stress some tea gardens through overharvesting. The government’s agricultural and forestry policies, often existing in contradiction to one another, have also played an important role in the fate of old growth forests.

Increased demand has also lead to new gardens in modern terraced agriculture, in Lao Man’e and numerous other Bulang and other ethnicities’ tea villages. This practice began with the Chinese government some 50-60 years ago, giving some smaller villages with no old-growth tea hybrid seedlings to plant in their old terraces. More commonly, however, newer terrace tea planted to meet demand has its origins in larger factories and outside growers, and these terraces are found in closer proximity to factories.

Because older trees’ mao cha is valued amongst buyers, and because this style of agriculture often requires irrigation, fertilization, pest control, or some combination thereof, these new gardens pose both commercial and environmental challenges to the Bulang who grow this new tea, their ecology, and their level of participation in the Puerh marketplace. These new plantations must grow in balance with local ecology, lest they become yet another strain on finite resources, for what appears to be marginal gain: mao cha from young bushes often sells at one-third to one-fourth the price of old-tree mao cha, sometimes less. However, poorer villages have come to rely on terrace tea for substantial income and are at risk because of the aforementioned practices that threaten the sustainability of their intensive monoculture. For this reason, these new growers are in greater need of assistance.

With regards to sales, Brian observed village families blending their different mao cha into one large batch when a buyer became interested in a larger quantity than one family could provide alone. While as tea drinkers and collectors we may perceive this as a challenge to consistency in craftsmanship and leaf type, the families blended teas to maintain a mean price for all households and assure that no tea is rejected and that all families benefit from the large sale. In the face of the bull that is the Puerh market, the Bulang have preserved local cultural egalitarian collectivism.

Oddly enough, Brian never saw compressed Puerh in Lao Man’e. While each home drinks their own garden’s tea, they throw a handful of mao cha into a glass and continually re-steep it. Brian related that, as far as their taste goes, at least one family preferred a particular sub-varietal from their tea gardens—which they harvest only for their own consumption. As for Bulang who have relocated, Brian found that they drink mostly mao cha from their own villages.

The Bulang are one of a few ethnicities known to have considered tea both food and beverage, although today such practice is rare. Tea packed into bamboo tubes was buried to ferment before eating, known in Bulang as “miam” and in Chinese as “suan cha” (酸茶), or sour tea.
Bringing Puerh to the Public

One of Brian's main concerns pertaining to anthropology is the relationship between theory and practice. He draws a parallel between anthropological field work and academic performance and the production of tea in Yunnan and its consumption by foreign consumers. Production and consumption across substantial physical and cultural spaces, such as between Lao Man’e and the rest of China, or between China and the West, must be negotiated to fulfill a greater intimacy between the people at either end of these continuums. With the presentation and tea tasting, "Garden to Gaiwan," at the UC Berkeley Patty Hearst Museum, Brian aimed to do just that: bring together his research, academia, Puerh farmers, and Western tea drinkers in an environment both academic and interactive.

"I feel quite strongly that there is a significance to my work within the public sphere, where there is an increasing interest in these teas," Brian explained, "[T]here has been a strong tendency abroad to exoticize these teas. Helping to provide greater clarity amongst consumers about the environments, peoples, and issues affected by their consumption practices is the complement to my work in Yunnan. My hope was that people would leave the event with a greater understanding and appreciation of Puerh tea culture and more intimately aware of their consumer choices."
Over 60 people participated in the event. Brian introduced his short film and launched into a discussion of his research objectives and discoveries accompanied by the many photos capturing the environment and people of Lao Man’e and illustrating the many changes that occurred during his time there. The film featured the talkative and theatrical Ai Wennan, the voice of Bulang tea production and philosophy for the film. Footage of villagers producing tea, of Brian’s travels to older tea trees, and of the changing life in Lao Man’e at once captivated and educated the audience.

After the presentation, eight brewers at eight outdoor brewing stations served tea Brian acquired in Yunnan to the guests. He chose the teas for the tasting with the aim of providing a sampling of the diversity of Pu’erh: Shou and Sheng, young and aged, village and factory production. By providing this cross-section, he hoped to allow people unacquainted with Pu’erh to experience its variety and history. The California Pu’erh community was represented, from Los Angeles to the Bay Area; Brian invited two of us from LA to brew tea, and we shared a carpool. Each brewer offered a unique setup, varying from the bare essentials to the elaborately decorative, making me wonder if people would be visually enticed to a table that suited their preferences, rather than join a table by caprice alone.

I was surprised that everyone at my table had some experience with Pu’erh, a tea that only a few years ago most tea drinkers avoided or did not recognize. A few other brewers, including Bay Area native David Lesseps, remarked the same. This gave us the pleasure of wandering away from tea conversation and getting to know each other better. We drank tea and talked for some three hours. The greatest pleasure for me that evening was the opportunity to meet face-to-face with so many tea friends I have known online for years.

Brian reports that, based upon responses he received by attendees during and after the event, he believes he achieved his goals, and is “pleased to have been able to facilitate this coming together of the tea community, no matter how brief,” and he hopes that it resonates into the future.