

Making the “King of Tea Trees” in the Bulang Laoman’e Village, Sipsong Panna: Conceptualization and Buddhist Consecration

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Abstract

The Bulang (or Blang) are one of the indigenous minority groups long inhabiting Sipsong Panna or Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, the far south point of Yunnan Province. Like the majority Dai people in this prefecture, the Bulang are believers of Theravada Buddhism despite their traditional beliefs and practice of animism. English-language scholarship has so far paid virtually no attention to the Bulang, while China-based academics have conducted some research on this minority group but have been constrained by a Han-centric bias. So, in bringing attention to the Bulang, the present study situates its field in Laoman’e Village, the oldest Bulang enclave renowned for its heritage of ancient Pu’er tea trees, some of which are over one thousand years. Through a careful investigation of the Buddhist ritual consecrating one of those ancient tea trees as “the King of Tea Trees” (hereafter KTT) in 2013, the study finds that the local government has inventively conceptualized the KTT as a strategy to spur the tea economy and ethnocultural tourism of Laoman’e Village. The Bulang have profited from economic changes to certain extent, and that their social condition has also somewhat improved. But they have not been the biggest beneficiaries from the booming tea price in the recent decade given local officials’ alliance with outside tea merchants for their mutual gain. Meanwhile, the Bulangs’ traditional religious beliefs and practice have seemingly been transmuted into the highly commercialized KTT.

Keywords: The Bulang, Laoman’e Village, the “King of Tea Trees”, Conceptualization, Buddhist Consecration

Introduction

As one of the 55 ethnic minorities constitutionally recognized by China, the Bulang are mainly scattering over the mountainous areas of Sipsong Panna where the Dai comprise 34 percent of its total population as the majority followed by the Han according to the 2005 census.¹ The Bulang speak a language related to Mon-Khmer that includes some words imported from other ethnic minorities such as Wa and Lawa in the same area.² They have no written language for their own language, but today most of the Bulang also speak and write Mandarin Chinese and the regional Dai language.

Laoman'e Village is located in remote mountainous terrain around a three-hour southward drive from Menghai, the prefectural capital of Sipsong Panna. The circulating oral account suggests that the Bulang ancestors had settled Laoman'e around 1800 years ago.³ At that time, Bulang ancestors discovered the medicinal properties of tea plants in the surrounding forest.⁴ Their knowledge of and bond with tea, as a tradition, has been handed down through generations in the village-based community up to the present day. The Bulang had not thought to take the tea leaves gifted by nature as a source of profit until recent two decades, when materialism had started to take hold on people from all walks in China in tandem with the party-state's efforts to pursue nationwide economic growth.

¹ According to the state census conducted in 2005, the Dai were estimated at 358,930, occupying 34% of the total 1,049,600 population of Sipsong Panna, followed by the Han 255,294 (25%), while the Bulang only occupied 4% and estimated at 46,642. Nevertheless, China-based researcher Tao Yuming reports that the Bulang in Sipsong Panna reached 119,639 by 2010. See McCarthy, *Communist Multiculturalism: Ethnic Revival in Southwest China*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009),73; Tao, *Bulang Ethnic People in China*, (Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press, 2012), 34.

² Sebeok, "An Examination of the Austroasiatic Language Family," *Language* 18, 3 (1942): 209.

³ Mr. Yan Zong, the village head of Laoman'e reports that the legends orally handed down generation by generation to date, the Bulang had settled down in this mountainous area since the early 3rd century A.D. Mr. Yang was interviewed by the authors who conducted this study at Laoman'e during 13-19 September 2019.

⁴ "Bulang Tribe, Guardians of Tea: Tea Plant Forests, a Treasure for Bulang Tribe for China and for the World," Cha Ling, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.cha-ling.com/en/bulang-tribe-guardians-of-tea>.

Today, Laoman hosts a total of 209 Bulang households of 916 permanent residents who earn their living primarily by tea farming.⁵ The villagers are divided into exogamous clans. Newly married men have to stay with their wife's family for three years. Like the Dai and certain other ethnic minorities in Sipsong Panna, the Bulang are faithful Theravada Buddhists. Most young men become Buddhist monks for a period of time in their youth for merit-making and education as well. But the Bulang's religious practice is highly complex and culturally intermingled with animistic beliefs in which spirits such of the deceased ancestors, mountain, and tea forest are worshiped in certain annual rituals for worldly prosperity and protection.⁶ The present paper attempts to explore how and in what kind of sociopolitical context the KKT has been made in Laoman'e through Buddhist consecration.

Research Methods

Besides referring to local gazetteers and a number of Chinese academic publications on the Bulang people, we carried out a series of interviews with elderly residents and local government officials during our fieldwork in Laoman'e in September 2019. Most of these talks were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, Bulang or Tai languages for the convenience of our interviewees. From these informal interviews, valuable insights and a breadth of information beyond the written sources were obtained.

1. Conceptualizing the “King” of Tea Tree under Governmental Innovation

On 27 December 2013, the standing committee of the Sipsong Panna People's Congress legislated that there will henceforth be a Bulang Songkran Festival every 9 to 11 April. The selection of these dates signals an intention to avoid eclipsing the Dai Water-Sprinkling Festival customarily, already

⁵ The data was collected from Bulang Township Government under the help of Mr. Yan Zong.

⁶ Neng, “A Study of the Tea and Social Culture of Bulang Minority in Laoman'e Village,” (Master's thesis, Yunnan Minzu University, 2016): 85-88.

celebrated every 13 to 15 April.⁷ The most prominent aspect of this festival was to consecrate one of the ancient tea trees in Laoman'e as a sacred “king” through Buddhist rituals.



Fig. 1: Bulang tea cultivators in their ethnic costume and headdress presenting a replica of the King of Tea Trees" at the 2018 King of Tea Trees Festival held in Menghai.

(Photo credited to Wen'en Yan)

Having a “king of tea trees” is a true innovation, having no precedent in the Bulangs’ long association with tea cultivation, and it bears no relation to Songkran Festival, which is celebrated in Buddhist countries across Southeast Asia at this time. To create a tea-centered Bulang version of Songkran Festival, local authorities re-branded traditional Bulang events at this time as the King of Tea Trees Festival so as to attract tea enthusiasts and purchasers from China and abroad. From 2013 onward, an annual King of Tea Trees Festival has been organized in the capital town of Menghai under the sponsorship of the county government. Bulang tea farmers have been invited upon the stage at this event, where they stand alongside the local Dai and Han officials to present newly harvested tea leaves to the participating crowd (see Fig. 1). At the beginning of each year’s celebration, Bulang monks are requested to lead a public blessing of the tea under the assistance of Dai monks dwelling in towns. The young men and women from Laoman'e village have been trained to perform traditional

⁷ The 12th Standing Committee of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture People's Congress. “On the Decision to Determine the ‘Songkran Festival’ as the Traditional Festival of Bulang People,” accessed May 23, 2020, https://www.xsbn.gov.cn/107.news.detail.dhtml?news_id=21947.

songs and dances in their ethnic costume and headdress during this celebration. Directed by the government, the festival has been grandly produced, with a King of Tea Trees thus popularized among the participants.

Benefiting from these governmental efforts, the tea leaves produced by the Bulang have earned more recognition outside the region, leading to this commodity's increased valuation in the Chinese beverage market (see Chart I). At the same time, Laoman'e has emerged as a popular tourist spot reputed for its ethnic traditions and tea farming. The yearly income of village households has substantially increased, to the extent that some young Dai women have started to break their previous self-imposed taboo on intermarriage with the Bulang and other ethnic minorities, whom they had thought to be of lower status.⁸ Wealth has thus made a difference in reclassifying social status.

| Year | Price of tea leaves |
|-----------|---------------------|
| 2000-2003 | 3-5 yuan/kg |
| 2004 | 15 yuan/kg |
| 2005 | 30 yuan/kg |
| 2006 | 90 yuan/kg |
| 2007 | 700 yuan/kg* |
| 2008 | 180yuan/kg** |
| 2009 | 250yuan/kg |
| 2010 | 300 yuan/kg |
| 2011-2012 | 400 yuan/kg |
| 2013 | 700yuan/kg |
| 2014 | 1400yuan/kg |
| 2015 | 1600 yuan/kg |
| 2016 | 1800 yuan/kg |

⁸ According to our fieldwork in Laoman'e village on 13-19 September 2019, 25 Dai women have married into this village in the last 5 years. 20 of them have had high school or higher education. The elderly Bulang men who agreed to be interviewed for this study recalled that it had been almost impossible for a Bulang man to gain even a glance from a Dai woman as recently as 10 years ago.

| Year | Price of tea leaves |
|-----------|---------------------|
| 2017-2018 | 2000yuan/kg |
| 2019 | 2200yuan/kg |

Chart I: The wholesale price of processed tea leaves picked up every spring from 2000 to 2019⁹

Nevertheless, Bulang tea farmers have not been the biggest beneficiaries from the increasing price of tea leaves. The Han tea merchants who have close connections with local governmental officials have gained even greater rewards. Consider Dayou Tea Industrial Company, for example. As early as 2010 this Taiwan-originated tea merchant set up a tea processing factory in Laoman'e, where it could either rent tea plantations or buy fresh tea leaves from the villagers at a much lower price than on the market. One of the most profitable deals that Dayou has made in Laoman'e so far is obtaining a five-year franchise of the tea leaves grown on the one tree that has been designated as the king of all tea trees, and the usage of the "King of Tea Trees" trademark from 2019 to 2014 (see Fig. 2).

Initially, the Laoman'e Bulang villagers, who collectively own the "king of tea trees" according to China's Forest Law,¹⁰ accepted 150 million *yuan* in Chinese currency from Dayou for its five-year franchise. But Dai and Han officials in the local government insisted that Dayou could only offer a maximum of 300,000 yuan, and the local government would retain the final authority to seal the deal, even without the villagers' consent.¹¹ Eventually the deal was made, but in obvious favor to Dayou,

⁹ The figures were estimated from data offered by the Office of the Head of Laoman'e Village. The price skyrocketed due to overheated speculation in the tea market, and the price subsequently sharply dropped under the impact of the global financial crisis.

¹⁰ According to Article 3 of China's Forest Law enacted on 01 January 1985, the state generally owns forestland and resources, while collective ownership can be granted to villagers who have a substantial history of dwelling in certain forestlands. According to this Article, the Laoman'e villagers' ownership of the tea forests has its legal base despite of the vagueness of the Article itself. See the China Government, "China's Forest Law," accessed May 25, 2020, http://www.gov.cn/banshi/2005-09/13/content_68753.htm.

¹¹ The Laoman'e Bulang villagers interviewed in this study on 18 September 2019 said that they were left no better choice than accepting the 300,000 yuan or getting nothing.

which blatantly claimed it as an unprecedented triumph.¹² It is still too early to know to what extent Dayou will benefit from this deal. But this story tells us that the Bulang do not yet sufficiently understand principles of the market and Chinese law. In light of this intervention from the top level of local government for the sake of alien investors, the Bulang were left no choice but to hold back at their own expense.

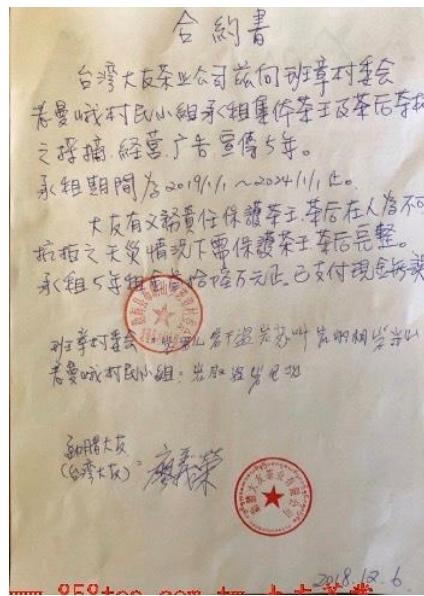


Fig. 2: The contract signed between Dayou Tea Industrial Company and the Administrative Committee of Banzhang Village, which has jurisdiction over Laoman'e.

(Photo credited to Mr. Yan Zhong, the village head of Laoman'e)

2. Buddhist Consecration of the King of Tea Trees

As noted previously, the concept of a king of tea trees had never existed among the Laoman'e Bulang community until 2013. Indeed, the Bulang have long believed that spirits inhabit their tea trees, along with local animistic deities. Every spring prior to harvesting the tea leaves, the community

¹² In an update on 7 December 2018, Daiyou states: "Due to their perseverance and wisdom in public relations and communication, the company successfully saved 110 million yuan in finalizing the deal for a five-year franchise of King of Tea in Laoman'e." See Dayou's Tea, "Stick to the Truth based on Data," accessed May 23, 2020, <http://www.858tea.com.tw/discuss/viewDiscuss.asp?View=48890>.

customarily sends its elderly representatives to worship and make offerings to the spirits.¹³ Nevertheless, from 2013 onward more and more Bulang villagers started to turn their faith from the traditional spirits of tea trees to a “King” of tea trees that was to be ritually consecrated by Buddhist monks under the sponsorship of the local government, in the wake of the soaring price of tea leaves. As a result, the king of tea trees, one of many ancient tea trees that have been receiving consecration, has since emerged as the most popular singular spirit in the Laoman'e Bulang community, monopolizing the worship and offerings of the villagers.

At this point it will be interesting to know how the Bulang selected and then consecrated one of the tea trees from their village to be the king of tea trees. In selecting one of the ancient tea trees to be the king, monks from the village temples recalled, in early 2013 the Sangha suggested that the villagers should choose one that was attractive and conveniently accessible to receive the sanctifying power of the triple gems (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha).¹⁴ Local officials highly appreciated this idea, as they thought a beautiful sacred tea tree in an accessible location could attract tourism.¹⁵ The increase in visitors to Laoman'e in recent years demonstrates that this was indeed an astute choice (see Fig. 3).

The consecration ritual itself was conducted on 9 April 2013. At that time the monks and lay participants gathered at the major village temple, where the whole assembly vowed to take refuge in the Triple Gems of Buddhism. Then, the assembled laity requested the Five Precepts (Pancasila) from the Sangha prior to their worship of the Triple Gems under the monks' guidance. This was followed by a recitation of Mahamangala Sutta, Mahajayamaigala Gatha, and Ratana Sutta in the assembly for protection, victory and wealth. After that, the assembly moved to the selected tea tree, where the monks poured holy water from plastic bottles on the tree's main trunk (see Fig. 4) while

¹³ Elderly Bulang villagers interviewed in this study on 19 September 2019 said that the spirits of tea trees were instrumental in determining when to harvest tea leaves, a belief handed down for generations.

¹⁴ Bulang monks dwelling at the temples in Laoman'e, who were interviewed in this study on 16-17 September 2019, said that they believed that the Triple Gems were above all kinds of spirits or deities and that its sacred power could be invited into a selected tea tree.

¹⁵ In our interview on 18 September 2019, Mr. Xuqing Yan, the head of Laoman'e, said that local authorities were pleased upon hearing the monks' idea and urged the villagers to do accordingly.

chanting the Karaniya Metta Sutta, Khandha Paritta, Abhaya Gatha, Pubbanha Sutta, Brahmaviharapharaoau, Metta Bhavana, and Sumaigala Gatha for protection, love-kindness, purity, power, and so on.¹⁶



Fig. 3: Tourists with Bulang monks under the King of Tea Trees in Laoman'e after consecration.

(Photo credited to Ban'en Yan, the younger brother of Wen'en Yan in 2013)

At this point the consecration had reached its completion, whereupon the young Bulang started to perform some traditional songs and dances in celebration. Hereafter, the villagers entered the tea farms to pick some fresh tea leaves. The local government had sponsored the whole event, including a reverential offering for the monks. At the same time a number of journalists from government agencies were invited to propagate the local history of tea planting and Bulang ethnic culture.¹⁷ Since then the ritual has been annually conducted in the same pattern as the King of Tea Trees, whose reign over the tea forest in Laoman'e seems to be ongoing.

¹⁶ The procedural data on the consecration ritual was generously offered and explained by Venerable Wenquan Yan, the chief monk of Laoman'e, on 15 September 2019. It should be noted that the transliteration of the sutra titles follows the Dai-styled Pali canon.

¹⁷ Mr. Yan Zhong, the Village Head of Laoman'e, as previously noted, was assigned to receive journalists, and he guided them throughout the village on 9 April 2013.



Fig. 4: Senior Bulang monks pouring holy water on the tree consecrated as the King of Tea Trees.

(Photo credited by Ban'en Yan, the younger brother of Wen'en Yan in 2013)

The purposes of the Bulang villagers for participating in the tree consecration and the King of Tea Trees Festival respectively held in Laoman'e and Menghai varied in our findings in this study as we can see in Chart II below.

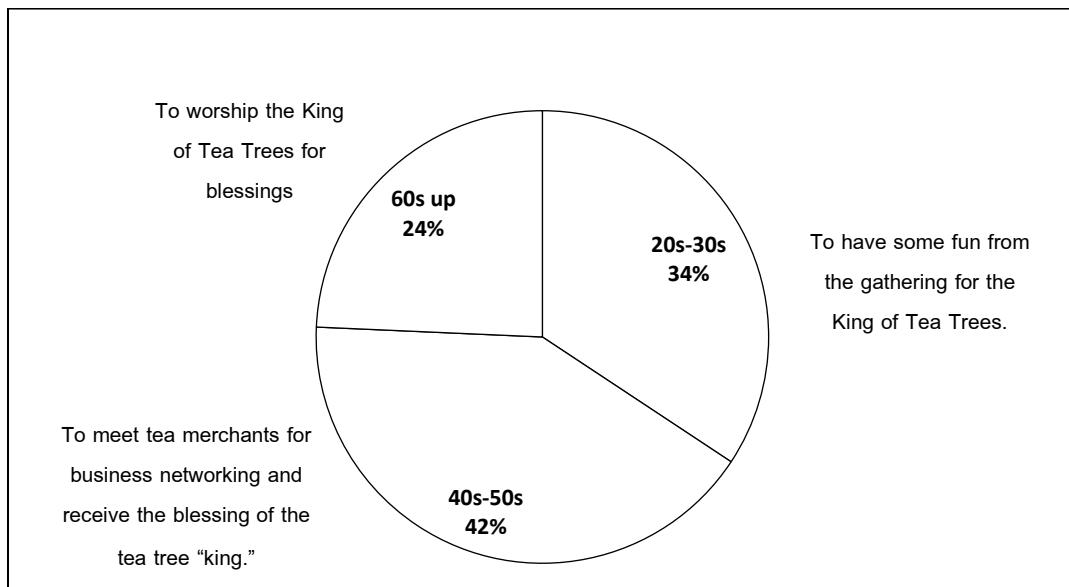


Chart II: We categorized the 350 Bulang villagers interviewed in our survey concerning the consecration of a king of tea trees and the festival of the same name into three age ranges: 20-39, 40-59, and over 60.

Based on the findings highlighted above, it is apparent that Bulangs in their 60s are most religious, while those in their 40s and 50s are more concerned with business interests, although they also cherish the blessing of the King of Tea Trees on their tea harvest and market price. The young generation of Bulang in their 20-30s, are less religious than their seniors, but the activities centered on the King of Tea Trees seems to make them interested a lot. These findings also signal that the concept of a king of tea trees has taken hold within the Bulang community, due to the strenuous efforts the local government has made to boost local economic growth.

Some Critical Remarks

Since the early 1950s, after the Communist Party of China (hereafter CPC) assumed the power in China, the party-state undertook to lead all ethnicities to a socialist future of “common prosperities” in common with the majority Han.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Han-dominated local governments have been profiteering on the ground from the CPC’s preferential ethnic policies. Dayou’s successful manipulation of governmental intervention to obtain a five-year franchise on the tea leaves from Laoman’e at a price far lower than market in 2018, and the trademarking of a “king” of tea trees, highlights the self-interested behavior of local government officials. The local government too easily sacrifices the interests of ethnic minorities for the sake of regional growth. Given the powerful local Han officials’ bias toward outsiders for personal interest, the Bulang have hardly benefited from their participation in the market-driven Chinese economy. With this kind of practice continuing, it is just a matter of time before multiethnic areas of Yunnan could be faced with ethnic conflicts of the sort that have frequently occurred in Xinjiang and Tibet. The CPC should consider some effective measures to assure a fairer redistribution of China’s economic growth, rather than just promoting slogans of “common prosperity” from the top.

The findings of this study also indicate that local government has not hesitated to enlist religion in its endeavor to boost economic growth despite the CPC’s atheist ideology. As we have seen in the case of Laoman’e, the Menghai county government mobilized the Bulangs’ ethnic and religious resources

¹⁸ State Council Information Office, “White Paper on China’s Ethnic Minority Policy and Common Prosperity for All Nationalities,” accessed May 25, 2020, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7078073.htm.

to invent the marketable idea of a king of tea trees after seeing the economic potential of tea leaves grown in this village. The Bulang, both monastic or lay, were thus unprecedentedly invited by the government to play a leading role in selecting and consecrating a single king of tea trees. To this end, the local government even invited the assistance of the Dai, who had traditionally regarded themselves as superior to the Bulang and other smaller ethnic groups in Sipsong Panna. One unexpected result of this development is that the Bulang have newly attained a degree of social equality, if not with the Han then at least with the Dai, in cultivating a particularly esteemed kind of tea tree under governmental sponsorship.

The notion of this king of tea trees, especially as it has gained popularity within and outside the Bulang community, has brought a boost from the tea economy in Laoman'e. In effect, the Bulangs' traditional beliefs in spirits inhabiting tea trees has been reconfigured as a religious King of Tea Trees, albeit created for economic purpose rather than a truly religious purpose. Will this lead to a new, commercially oriented kind of religiosity? It will take more time for us to know.

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