

THE TEA TREE CONSECRATION CEREMONY OF BULANG TRADITION UNDER THE THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM IN LAOMAN'E VILLAGE: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the tea tree consecration ceremony of the Bulang ethnic people in the Laoman'e village of Xishuangbanna (Yunnan) China. The study applied the qualitative research method in the sociological approach to religious studies. This consists of an in-depth interview with 17 research subjects, and the samples were selected from the Bulang ethnic community who are knowledgeable about the tea culture and religion in the Laoman'e village of Xishuangbanna, Yunnan. There are a total of three objectives in this research study: 1) to study the historical background of tea and how tea culture influences Theravāda Buddhism in Yunnan, 2) to investigate tea culture in relation to Theravāda Buddhism, and 3) to analyze the importance of the tea tree consecration ceremony in Bulang society. The first finding strongly indicates a long-standing relationship between tea-drinking culture and Buddhism, since both were brought to China from the nearby country of India. The second finding suggests that there are two methods used to perform the tea tree consecration ceremony: traditional rituals and Theravāda Buddhist culture. And the third finding shows that the Bulang ethnic group places great significance on the tea tree consecration ceremony and its culture in terms of economics, Buddhism, culture, rites and rituals, and society at large.

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Introduction

The tea tree consecration tradition plays a crucial role in the Laoman'e village of the Bulang ethnic group in terms of religion, culture, and economy. The tea tree consecration ceremony is a tradition, which is celebrated once a year. It has reflected the religious ritual, economy, and livelihood of the Bulang people. As a result, the local community and Theravāda Buddhism significantly benefited from the traditional tea rituals and festivals in the regions. The author as a native of the Bulang community intends to contribute this work to the community for the benefit of Buddhism, rites, customs, culture, and economy that globally draw attention to the scholars on how this festival is crucial for the community and Theravāda Buddhism.

This proceeding historical background of tea does not limit to any particular era but focuses on scholarly works of the past as data available to the author. It is to review the related literature on tea history to explore how tea-drinking cultures were adopted and flourished in China. Even though it is extremely difficult to deal with the chronological history of tea due to a lack of adequate and reliable sources, many researchers have attempted to track the roots of tea in mainland China. Instead of attempting to prove or assert the origin of tea, this study focuses more on a discussion of myth and folklore. Review of the well-known book "*Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History*" by James A. Benn. He attempts to formulate a theory about the origins of tea culture in China by analyzing the earliest writings from a linguistic perspective.

Early literary sources suggest that tea was first consumed for recreational and medicinal purposes in Southwest China during the reign of the Chinese Mythical Ruler Shennong about 2737–2697 BCE. It later moved east and north, which led to its designation of it as a southern beverage.¹ The researcher claims that tea originated in mainland China during the Han Dynasty (207 BCE-189 CE) between 770 and 476 BCE.² Approximately Chinese scholars contend, however, that Chinese tea has a long history that dates back to the Neolithic era when tea was discovered in China for the first time some 4,000 years ago. From its discovery to the present, tea has changed over time.³ Based on Indian mythology, Han hypothesizes that tea originated in Northern India and was transported to Sichuan, China, in the sixteenth century.⁴ Furthermore, according to Chinese academics, tea has been consumed

¹ James A. Benn, *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History*, (USA: The University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 21-23.

² Li Xiusong, "Chinese Tea Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27 (1993): 75.

³ Li, Xingue, et al, "Effects of Organic and Other Management Practices on Soil Nematode Communities in Tea Plantation: A Case Study in Southern China, Beijing, China," *Journal of Plant Nutrition and Soil Science* 177 (2014): 604-612.

⁴ Paul L. Han, *Chapter II: Tea and Tourism; Tourists, Traditions and Transformations*, (UK: The Cromwell Press, 2007), 24.

in China since 5,000 BCE.⁵ However, this claim is unsupported by data, and Ruan also believed that tea was served to kings and that tea plantations had existed in China as early as 1100 BCE, during the Zhou dynasty (1100-771 BCE). Tea may have entered China when Qin founded and conquered Yunnan (Sichuan) around 316 BC. This is supported by other records and anthropological studies. Tea was employed in religious activities as early as 547-490 BCE, according to religious documents.⁶ As a result, tea estates and culture were passed down from generation to generation and thrived under China's multiple past dynasties. For instance, the Han era's vivid written records of tea-drinking behavior date back to 59 BCE. During the Jin era (265–420 CE), tea drinking became a pastime for the Chinese elite culture. Since then, tea has been grown commercially, and throughout the Tang dynasty (907-960 CE), tea was a particularly lucrative product.

According to the facts, tea culture was extensively developed throughout the Tsing dynasty (1644–1911 CE). Buddhism thus promoted extensive tea consumption and tea culture. Civitello claims that throughout the Tang dynasty, tea was widely used for devotion to and adoration of the Lord Buddha and was provided as the official beverage during religious gatherings.⁷ Theravāda Buddhist monks are permitted to consume green tea at any time, in accordance with the Vinaya because green tea is just like colored water with no ingredients mixed. According to the Pali text explanation, monks are allowed eight kinds of soft drinks such as mango juice, apple juice, cocoa-nut juice, banana juice, honey juice, grape juice, Saluka juice, and bitter flower juice.⁸ According to a Chinese scholar named Lu Yu (723-804 CE), the habit of drinking tea began to have elite social status and worth around the year 780 CE. Through Buddhist monks in Asia, it gained religious traction. Early on, the Bulang, an indigenous people in Xishuangbanna, began employing tea leaves in religious rituals and ceremonies.

Research Objectives

- 1) To study the historical background of tea in Laoman'e Bulang village and its relation to people's livelihood and religion.
- 2) To study tea culture and Theravāda Buddhism in the Bulang ethnic Buddhist community.
- 3) To analyze the significance of the tea tree consecration tradition of the Bulang ethnic Buddhist community.

⁵ Ruan Han, *Hangzhou*, (China: Zhejiang Press, 1995), 23.

⁶ Jolliffe Lee, *Tea and Tourism, Tourists, Traditions and Transformations*, (Canada: the Cromwell Press, 2007), 115.

⁷ Linda Civitello, *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People*, Hoboken, (New Jersey: Wiley & Sons Press, 2004), 33.

⁸ Calmoid, "Dhamma VS Vinaya - ist MILK an allowable drink or not?," *Dhammadhewa*, Accessed November 6, 2019, <https://www.dhammadhewa.com/viewtopic.php?t=35660>.

Research Questions

1. What is the historical background of tea in Laoman'e village, Bulang people, and its relation to their livelihood and religion?
2. How are tea culture and Theravāda Buddhism in the Bulang ethnic Buddhist community?
3. How does the Buddhist tea tree consecration tradition bring the Bulang ethnic Buddhist community together in a common socioeconomic community?

Research Methodology

This study applies a qualitative research method consisting depth interviews with the research subjects. The qualitative research method has been applied to the study of religion in order to generate empirical data directly from the research subjects in the fieldwork of the Laoman'e village and Bulang community in China. According to Steven Engler, this form of qualitative method in religious studies incorporates sociological study, but in a manner that generates theory rather than attempting to prove it.⁹ The idea is to discover new databases via fieldwork from research subjects and observation. For instance, this qualitative research approach offers the researcher a far broader and more creative variety of data during fieldwork.

This research studied the tradition of tea-tree consecration under Theravāda Buddhism in Laoman'e village at Bulang Hill Located in Menghai County, Xishuangbanna, China. It is an empirical study based on interviews and observations to find out the results of the research based on the objectives and questions of the research. All the data was empirically gathered by the researcher from February to May 2021. However, the author visited three times the interview and fieldwork sites for looking at the scope of the study and finally confirmed the research participants.

During research fieldwork, the author also witnessed the festival's ritual groups and performances of the tea tree consecration ceremony in the regions. This strategy assisted in gathering primary data from study participants. At the same time, the researcher collected data like scripts, old records, books, magazines, and other related information from offline sources. In addition, the author went through many challenges during the data collection in Yunnan province of China due to the world's pandemic COVID-19 outbreak. Usually, data collection initially began in early 2021 but the pandemic forced it to delay one year, so data collection has been completed in late May 2022.

⁹ Michael Stausberg, and Steven Engler, *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, (New York: The Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 4-5.

Research Subjects and Area

The research fieldwork took place in the Laoman'e village of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous District, Yunnan Province, China. There is a total of 26 research subjects joined the interview, but the author selected seventeen answers from the informants while analyzing the data because some of the answers were too short and irrelevant to the research questions and objectives. For instance, the research subjects have been chosen from the Bulang Buddhist community in Laoman'e village. It helped to specify the research area for narrowing down the scope of study within the territory and research subjects. However, the study solely focused on the tea tree consecration ceremony in the Laoman'e village of Xishuangbanna. So, the author was able to create empirical primary data from the informants.

Criteria and Tools of Fieldwork

The earlier research plan had been designed to directly interview the research participants and record the data, but the COVID-19 pandemic situation forced the author to make some slightly minor changes in the research plan. For example, the author directly interviewed twelve informants face-to-face and distributed question papers to the rest of the research subjects because it was not possible to meet them in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak at that time in China. The author recorded the answers for the ones who directly gave interviews in person, and for the ones who were unable to meet for the interview, they sent their answers papers through WeChat and other social media. In addition, the researcher used a smart cellphone for recording the answers and photographs during the fieldwork. When the author had all the data in his hands and translated it from Chinese to English.

Way of Communication with Research Subjects

As a native of the Bulang ethnic community in the Laoman'e village, the author already had a broad idea about the communication system with the research subjects. For instance, first, the researcher listed 30 potential research subjects. Second, the author asked for voluntary consent from the research subjects and then finally conducted interviews with 26 interviewees after receiving voluntary consent from them. In addition, the author is already familiar with the local culture, religions, and people in the village, so it was quite easy to do fieldwork. On the other hand, the villagers were very delighted after hearing about the author's research work regarding the tea tree consecration ceremony. They are also delighted to learn that the researcher is a native of the same community and from the same village and is studying the Bulang people's traditional tea tree consecration, which will be promoted and expanded internationally in academic work. As a result, they freely shared their expertise and experiences with the author.

Conceptual Framework

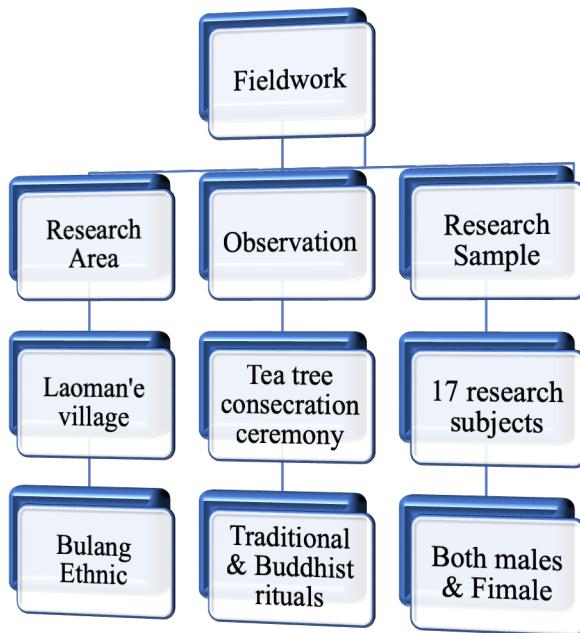


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework design shows how the researcher conducted research fieldwork for this research project in Laoman'e village, Yunnan, China. The diagram indicates that this research fieldwork consists of observation and depth interviews with 17 research participants. According to the research design, the fieldwork took place in the Laoman'e village of Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, China, and observed a traditional tea tree consecration ceremony held in the Laoman'e village from April 9, 2022. The research samples were selected from the Bulang Buddhist ethnic community which is much known about the tea tree consecration ceremony and tea culture.

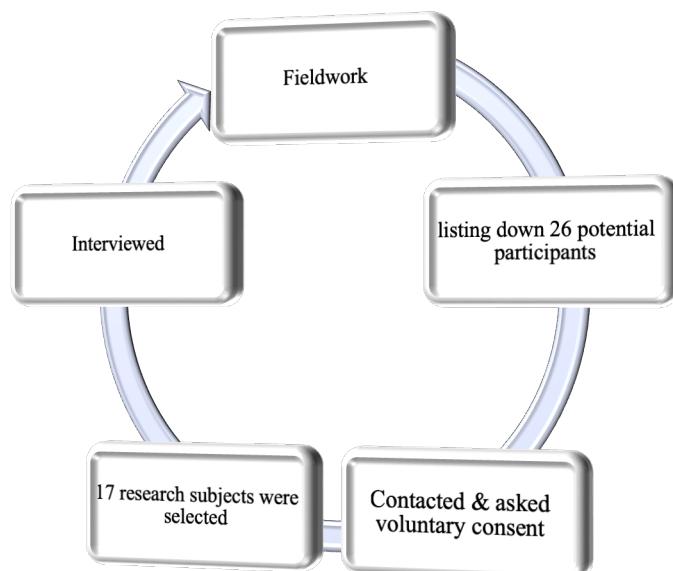


Figure 2: Theoretical Framework Diagram

Analysis:

Diagram is a theoretical framework that clarifies how this author designed and carried out the fieldwork and created qualitative data directly from research subjects. First, 26 potential research subjects have been listed and contacted for asking voluntary consent. Second, diagram II shows a slight variation in the numbering of research participants from 26 to 17 when the final step is made up for the interview. It is because some of the research subjects' answers were irrelevant and inconsistent with the research objectives, so the author omitted them and selected 17 interviewees. It also clearly shows a very systematic way of data collection method and theory of this research fieldwork designed by this researcher.

Tea and Theravāda Buddhism

This proceeding research project focuses more on the Theravāda Buddhist community of the Bulang ethnic group than the Mahāyana Buddhist community in relation to the significance of tea in religion because the Bulang ethnic people are traditional Theravāda Buddhists. However, the tea culture of the community infects Buddhism through tea drink habits, for example, Bulang ethnic people have traditional tea culture, and they are Theravāda Buddhists, so in this sense, the author relates tea with Theravāda Buddhism in the region. Theravāda Buddhism is practiced by just a small percentage of Chinese Buddhists, particularly in Yunnan Province, according to the worldview and general perception of worldwide populations. The multi-ethnicities, cultures, and faiths of the Chinese province of Yunnan are well-known. In fact, Theravāda Buddhism predominates in Yunnan province, which borders the Theravāda Buddhist nation of Myanmar and is situated close to Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. As a result, Theravāda Buddhism has a significant cultural effect in Yunnan province.

The Bulang ethnic group practices Theravāda Buddhism, and its Laoman'e village in Yunnan province, China, is home to numerous exquisite Theravāda Buddhist ethnic minorities. The ingenuity of China's thriving tea sector is largely credited to Buddhist monks since earlier times. According to data, tea was likely grown close to Buddhist temples in Xishuangbanna, particularly during the Ming era. Today, tea is one of the most important and premium commodities in China's tea market. In Chinese history, Yunnan Pu'er tea has a stellar reputation, and the region is also known as the birthplace of old tea trees. According to Chinese history and legend, the tea culture in Xishuangbanna started around 2100 years ago.¹⁰ However, the Ming dynasty was a time of invention and upheaval in the tea industry, which changed and altered tea culture in a unique way. Indeed, there were many forms of tea literati culture that

¹⁰ Yunnanexploration, "15 Days. Southwest Yunnan Ancient Tea Culture Tour", *Yunnan Exploration, Unique Ethnic Culture Experience*, 387 (2018).

were concerned with tea poetries, including art, literature, paintings, and so on during the Ming era.

At the same time, tea songs, dramas, and lyric poetry were linked to artwork and various literary genres. In the opinion of the tea researchers, tea objects like baskets, stoves, braziers, cups, and bowls received intense aesthetic consideration.¹¹ In their gardens in Xishuangbanna, the research participants showed some of the oldest tea trees. They demonstrate and describe how some tea trees are 1000/ 900/800 years old, and so forth. These tea plants are referred to as the "**king of Tea Trees**" by the locals. A co-authored study paper with Yaoping Liu examined king tea trees, religion, and Bulang society in the Laoman'e village of Xishuangbanna.¹² So, the author investigated tea and the blessings given to it by the Bulang Buddhist community.

The locals believe that the oldest, most ancient tea trees are guarded for a very long period by spirits and deities, so they are still significantly producing premier tea leaves. As a result, the "tea-tree consecration" ceremony became a traditional ritualistic celebration among the Bulang people. They worship the tea trees because they believe that the king of tea trees has spirits and gods who protect the trees and give good harvests from it. Elderly villagers are dispatched as members of the representative to pray and give gifts to the spirits and deities beneath the old tea trees during the performance of the event. While chanting, the invited Buddhist monks recited protection suttas as the laypeople sprinkled holy water beneath the tea trees.

During fieldwork, the author observed that the Bulang Buddhist community in Laoman'e village is becoming more and more accustomed to worshiping the tea tree spirit and consecration. Because it is regarded as a form of animism, then it is "worshiping tea plants and spirits" based on this notion. It is believed that every tree has deities and spirits that reside on the tree, so the Bulang people worship the tea trees in order to have good health and profitable business. According to the Theravāda Buddhist Vinaya text, Buddhist monks are not allowed to chop trees, if they cut off any tree then they commit an offense. During the Buddha's lifetime, a monk once chopped off a tree branch and unintentionally cut off the hands of a sleeping child deity. As a result, his parents became angry with the monk and made the decision to kill him, but finally decided not to kill that monk because killing a Buddhist holy monk is not proper for her. In fact, the deity complained about it to the Buddha, and Buddha subsequently established the Vinaya rule that forbade tree-cutting by monks.¹³

¹¹ James A. Benn, *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History*, (USA: The University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 21.

¹² Liu Yaoping, and Yan Wenen, "Making the King of Tea Tree in the Bulang Laoman'e Village, Xishuangbanna: Conceptualization and Buddhist Consecration," *Journal of the Philosophical and Religious Association of Thailand: Bangkok* 15 (2020): 66-78.

¹³ Pali text "Bhūtagāma Sikkhāpada", Volume II, Number 34. (PTS).

The Bulang Buddhist community similarly holds this belief which is why every year they hold sacred ceremonies for worshiping and making offerings to the spirits and deities of the tea trees. Ancient tea trees are typically revered for good fortune or happiness by the native Bulang community. It's interesting to note that even the state government also became interested in the occasion and is now striving to support such customary tea tree consecrations every year to draw visitors' attention to the province, both domestically and internationally for propagating tourism.

Tea and Religion

Tea is a major source of income for many Bulang ethnic villages in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province, China. Tea is intricately related to the Bulang people's religion because it has grown to be the province's main source of income. The Bulang people think that by giving money to the temple and monks, they can raise their merits if they are able to make enough money from the tea business platform. According to an informant, on January 12, 2022, "If you love your religion (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha), you must work hard and make more money than conduct good deeds." In order to earn more merit, this technique substantially alters income. For instance, wealthy lay followers in the Bulang community and society provide funding for monks and novices to continue their education at home or abroad. The construction of temples and the holding of elaborate ceremonies to earn merit—both significant means to express devotion to the Buddha—are funded by affluent Buddhist households at the same time.

On the same day on January 12, 2022, another key interviewee expressed his idea saying: "Since we cannot live or do business properly without the Buddha's blessing, one must express gratitude to the Buddha when everything is smoothly going with family and the tea industry." According to this research observation and data analysis, the Bulang people strongly believe that if something is wrong with the family or if their tea company fails or the market value drops then they must do wholesome deeds like making donations to the Sangha at temple. The local temple's monks, for example, assist the entire community in organizing customary rites and rituals water-pouring merit-making ceremonies to fend off such ailments. After listening to 30-minute chanting protection suttas by Theravāda Buddhist monks, laypeople offer the Sangha a number of different kinds of stuff including cash and items. Donors then pour water on the ground or soil as monks repeat a blessing mantra for everyone's well-being, including members of the family, village, community, society, and business. In order to purify the trees, they also sprinkle chanting holy water on the ground beneath the tea trees.

On April 14, 2022, the author participated in a religious event at Laoman'e village and observed it. Making people happy and placating the spirits of ancestors and tea plants are the main objectives of holding such a traditional religious festival. As a sign and commitment that

they do deserve it for their goodwill in the present and the future, they routinely pour water on the earth. The method of this kind of ceremony consumes a lot of time for careful planning till the end of the ceremony. For example, Buddhist novices and monks are welcomed, and they gather in a spot that has been conserved inside the settlement. When everything is ready to start the process, the participants first pay respect to the three gems (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha), after which a senior or leader monk bestows five precepts on the lay devotees.

The senior monk then leads the gathering of monks and novices in chanting for 30 minutes. A follower gathers money from each participant in a bowl as the monks chant the protective suttas, and they then give the money to the sangha at the end of the chanting. Of course, participants are welcome to offer the monks personal donations as well as money and different items. To demonstrate their dedication to upholding morality and honesty, they sprinkle water over the land at the conclusion of the customary ceremony. For instance, they pledge to refrain from defrauding customers by combining new and old tea tree leaves.

Theravāda Buddhism in Yunnan province, particularly in the Laomane village of the Bulang ethnic group, gradually changed as a result of the community's tea-drinking customs. Many Bulang peoples in Yunnan's hill country depend significantly on the sale of tea as one of their primary sources of income, hence they hold tea trees in high respect. Therefore, they organize an annual tea festival every year to honor their forefathers, who left thousand-year-old tea trees for future generations, and to worship tea trees. The Bulang ethnic group invites Buddhist monks to execute the tea tree festival ritual in accordance with the five and eight precepts since they follow Theravāda Buddhism.

The Bulang People and Laoman'e Village

The Bulang people live mostly in the mountainous parts of Xishuangbanna and surrounding Lincang prefectures, as well as the Simao Zone. The Bulang ethnic Buddhist community is one of the fifty-six ethnic minority groups recognized by the People's Republic of China. Some of them can be found in the border areas of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. They are mostly found in the Menghai and Jinghong counties of Xishuangbanna in Yunnan, China, especially in Menghai County's Mountain Bulang, Bada, Siding, Messman, and Daluo districts; Jinghong County's Xiaomengyang and Damenglong; and Xishuangbanna's Mengpeng Town and Mango Village.¹⁴ According to the 2010 Chinese census, the Bulang population was 119,639 people in 2010, 91,891 in 2000, and 82,280 in 1990.

¹⁴ Liu Yaoping, and Yan Wenen, "Making the King of Tea Tree in the Bulang Laoman'e Village, Xishuangbanna: Conceptualization and Buddhist Consecration," *Journal of the Philosophical and Religious Association of Thailand: Bangkok* 15 (2020): 66-78.

According to censuses done in 1982 and 1978, there were 58,476 people in 1982 and 52,000 in 1978.¹⁵ They are known by different names that they call themselves or that other ethnic groups call them. Those who live in Xishuangbanna refer to themselves as "Bulang," whereas those in Simao refer to themselves as "Benzu," for instance, "Lawa, Wu, Wuren, Aerwa, Yiwa, Wa, Wenggon, and Awa." In fact, they were formerly known as "Puman, Plang, or Meng" by the Han people; "Buen" by the Bai people; "Kapu" by the Lahu people; and "La" by the Dai people. The Bulang ethnic group is also known as "Da," "Mila," "Manl," and "Abe." After successive communist governments took over China in 1949, all of these groups of people were given different names by the government, but they were all considered to be part of the Bulang identity.

The Bulang are said to be descendants of the ancient Pu (Lolo) people, with the Pu choosing to remain in the highlands rather than migrate to the plains, creating the core of the Bulang. Many Bulang villages were formerly under the sway of Dai landowners.¹⁶ The Bulang speak a Mon-Khmer language and follow Theravāda Buddhism as well as many natural beliefs relating to animism including making annual sacrifices. There is no written language among the Bulang but they have historically employed the Dai dialect and Chinese writing.¹⁷ Bulang descendants' early education has been conducted in the Dai dialect in Buddhist monasteries, profoundly rooting the Bulang people in Dai-style Theravāda Buddhism. The Bulang, who live among and near Dai, have many things in common with them, including clothing codes and religious rituals.

The Bulang, on the other hand, have their own distinct culture and religious traditions., for instance, the tea-tree Consecration ceremony is one of the Bulang-oriented Buddhist ceremonies that has become increasingly popular in recent decades as the Pu'er tea leaves growing in the wild forest surrounding Laoman'e village have miraculously become one of the most popular herbal drinks among city dwellers. The ritual has a strong Buddhist flavor to it, and a delicate yet powerful animism-derived hue. The animist notion that spirits govern the tea trees and determine how much and what sort of tea leaves to produce is what makes this ritual feasible. Two of the most flourishing old tea trees within easy reach will be chosen to become the tea god and his female companion, the tea goddess, prior to the ritual.

¹⁵ Li Shi, et al, "Genetic Link Among Hani, Bulang, and Other Southeast Asia Population: Genes and Haplotypes Distribution," *International Journal of Immunogenetics: Beijing, China* 37 (2010): 467-475.

¹⁶ Thomas S. Mullaney, "Ethnic Classification Writ Large: The 1954 Yunnan Province Ethnic Classification Project and Its Foundation in Republican-era Taxonomic Thought," *Information of China: Beijing, China* 18 (2004): 207-241.

¹⁷ Gérard Diffloth, "On the Bulang (Blang, Phang) Languages," *Mon-Khmer Studies* 18 (1992): 19-28.

¹⁸ Daniel L. Pals, *Chapter III: Society as Sacred in Eight Theories of Religion*, (London: The University of Oxford Press, 2006).

The two chosen old trees are formally dedicated as the yearly tea god and goddess after a well-patterned Buddhist ritual performed by senior monks of Theravāda Buddhism. The tea leaves from the two plants quickly became the most valuable. The trees themselves became holy since they held the spirits of the tea's god and goddess, and the peasants who practiced tea growing and commerce worshipped them. Participants in the event are religiously incorporated into the shared belief group. They are also tied together socially and economically for a higher tea harvest in the village and a better price on the outside market.¹⁸

The result-I

The connection between tea and Buddhism

The first finding strongly indicates that tea and Buddhism have a long-standing correlation, which interwoven each other cultures in China. The replies assert that there are many ties between tea and Buddhism such as historical, economic, cultural, and social relations. Since the arrival of Buddha Dhamma from India, China is credited with establishing the long-standing connection between Buddhism and tea. While taking interviews with a key informant, she emphasized the historical truth that China's tea-drinking culture witnessed significant contemporary innovation under the Jin, Tao, and Tang dynasties, which is in line with Paul Leung James Benn, and Han's studies.¹⁹ Tea was first consumed for recreational and medicinal purposes in Southwest China during the reign of Shennong (2737–2697 BCE). It later moved east and north, which led to its designation as a southern beverage. From its discovery to the present, tea has changed over time.²⁰ He added that Buddhist monks also planted tea plants around temple grounds throughout these three eras, and every well-known temple had tea rooms for storing tea leaves.

This study agrees with Vitello (2004) that Buddhist monks also developed tea poetry in the same period for use with tea-brewing equipment. Since then, tea has been one of the most well-known ways to conduct religious rituals and promote the economy. When tea became one of the most popular soft drinks, another informant said "*The Chinese integrated tea-drinking culture as a component of their culture and their religious practice.*" One of the essential elements of a Chinese person's everyday life is tea. Another informant asserts that prior to the advent of Theravāda Buddhism, Bulang people engaged in nature worship because they believed that gods or spirits guarded them in the form of trees or from trees as spirits.

¹⁹ Paul L. Han, *Chapter II: Tea and Tourism; Tourists, Traditions and Transformations*, (UK: The Cromwell Press, 2007), 24.

²⁰ Li, Xingue et al., "Effects of Organic and Other Management Practices on Soil Nematode Communities in Tea Plantation: A Case Study in Southern China, Beijing, China," *Journal of Plant Nutrition and Soil Science* 177 (2014): 604-612.

They thus had awe of the sky, mountains, trees, and woods. Because of this viewpoint, the Bulang people worship tea plants in a similar way in order to be protected and to have a greater harvest from the trees. For instance, almost all of the participants emphasized how the Mahāyana and Zen schools of Buddhism had a closer connection to the tradition of drinking tea. Chinese Buddhist monks drink tea a lot while they do mindfulness meditation because it makes their minds feel tranquil and quiet.

Another key informant illustrates that there is an economic relationship between tea and Buddhism that has existed side by side. The Buddhist Bulang people are able to stabilize their fragile economic situation via the tea business. As a consequence, when tea merchants earn substantial profits, they go to the Buddhist temple and make a donation of cash and stuff. To propagate the Buddha Dhamma, which has been acknowledged and justified as great merit in Theravāda Buddhism. Therefore, in order to propagate the Dhamma, Buddhist monks urge wealthy tea merchants to support temples and monk students because the Buddhist monks become highly educated and qualified in Dhamma then they can easily explain and promote Buddhism in society. They also work along with lay followers to promote tea in order to assist the community business.

The connection between tea and Buddhism, according to a study participant, is one of mutual encouragement for tea production and spiritual practice. He said, "*Lay people believe that if monks don't bless their tea business, they won't be able to generate big profits from it. Therefore, lay people and monks are interdependent.*" Therefore, laypeople think that in order to increase their merit and blessings, they should offer money and other stuff to the monks at the temples. Buddhist monks, on the other hand, think that if their lay adherents are not sufficiently rich or are unable to earn a profit from the tea business, they may not make an attempt to offer money and other items to the temple. So, they (the monks) offer them suggestions on how they may grow their tea company and get spiritual virtue.

Tea became associated with Buddhism as a consequence, and most Chinese monks of the Mahāyana and Theravāda schools started to take tea to relax and enjoy themselves. One assertion made by one of the participants, "Actually, there is a link between Buddhism and Chinese tea culture, but there is not one between Buddhism and tea itself. According to the researcher's opinion, Buddhism is still precisely the same as it was when the Buddha first thought about it some 2500 years ago. However, how faiths are practiced and developed is influenced by the cultures of diverse ethnicities and religions." He asserts that Buddhism and tea have nothing to do with one another and that religious groups only have cultural influences to do with such things. Tea drinking is a cultural practice that has an effect on both Buddhist and non-Buddhist Chinese people since it is a religion that follows socially influenced cultural trends. Theravāda Buddhists at their heart, the Bulang people are wealthy mostly because of

their trade in tea. As a result, tea culture is deeply ingrained in the Buddhist community, and as a result, Buddhism and tea are closely connected.

Result II

The Precession of Tea Tree Consecration

The second finding revealed that the process of the tea tree consecration ceremony consists of two phases. The first phase is performed by the local elderly men and takes place in animal sacrifices (chickens). In the second phase, Buddhist monks are invited and performed traditional religious rites like chanting protective sutta and delivering a Dhamma talk at the event. The majority of participants often focus on the actions taken in the traditional Theravāda Buddhist manner, which are performed by the Sangha, while explaining the procedures involved in the tea tree consecration process. They assert that older people from the village perform the entire procedure before the Sangha's arrival. In the first phase, they host a large assembly with the communities, paying special attention to the youth and other young men and women. The location, date, and budget are all determined at the meeting, and the agreed-upon measures are subsequently carried out. When everything is in order and there is sufficient funding, invite VIP visitors, most likely government personnel from Religious & Cultural Affairs as well as the Sangha.

This result is in line with Yaoping Liu's work, which indicates a similar assertion on the tea tree consecration ceremony. Statistics show that the process of blessing a tea tree follows a traditional schedule.²¹ It starts with the sacrifice of an animal and ends with a Buddhist monk. An interviewee gives a detailed account of the activities leading up to the animal sacrifice.

"This ceremony is not only a lot of fun, but it is also quite simple to set up. Simply set up a table, and fill it with rice, chicken, tea, and soft drinks. Then the old guy, surrounded by men and women, recites scripture. He then offers rice in bamboo baskets at each of the platform's four corners and lays money in bamboo baskets in the middle of the allusive platform."

Blessings and individual wishes or prayers occur at the same time, as though evil and impure spirits also depart with the tea plants. Animal sacrifices are often performed by prominent community leaders (often traditional healers) in the first phase of the event. They then set up a table and laid out several types of stuffed chicken on it after worshiping the tea

²¹ Liu Yaoping, and Yan Wenen, "Making the King of Tea Tree in the Bulang Laoman'e Village, Xishuangbanna: Conceptualization and Buddhist Consecration," *Journal of the Philosophical and Religious Association of Thailand: Bangkok* 15 (2020): 66-78.

plants and offering prayers to the spirits, or "tea gods." Young men and women conduct dances while wearing variously colored traditional attire after they have completed honoring the spirits. In addition, some people drink wine and tea while attending the event. Since some of them see it as wonderful entertainment and delight blended with traditional and religious lines, many people come to enjoy it and acquire merits from it.

The consecration ritual is conducted by Theravāda Buddhist monks, according to two important informants. They assert that arranging a religious ceremony like "donation of Sangha (Sangha Dana) is comparatively common and similar to all Theravāda Buddhists such as in Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. At least four or six monks are called "One Sangha", a minimum of four monks is required for Sangha Dana. In fact, the tea tree consecration ceremony is also like Sangha Dana where monks bless living beings. It is necessary since the occasion entails Sangha Dana, in which the organizing committee provides the Sangha's members with food and money. The monks offer the lay followers the five precepts before beginning to chant the suttas. Following this meeting, people launch and give money and other gifts to the monks. This ritual's preparation by the monks has finished. They frequently pour holy water beneath the ancient tea plants to cleanse them. In order to earn merit and get blessings from the monks, Bulang people take part in this portion of the religious process at the dedication of the tea tree.

Result III

The Significant of the Tea Tree Consecration Ceremony

This finding is related to the four broad principles derived from research subjects on the significance of the economy, religion, culture, and social benefits. This result is consistent with the early study of the tea economy and religious practice in a southern Yunnan Bulang community by Zhen Ma.²² The overwhelming weight of the evidence points to the Bulang people of Laoman'e Village, Yunnan Province, China, as having significantly transformed their desperate economic status into a sustainable position as a result of their tea tree consecration rite and tea business. In this analysis, four major profits were highlighted by the most of interviewees. The first is the economic benefit, which was praised for its original analysis of its financial situation. Once they (the Bulang people) made the tea plantations their main source of income, the tea plantations became concentrated as a dependable resource for the community.

²² Ma Zhen, "Sensorial Place-Making in Ethnic Minority Areas: The Consumption of Forest Puer Tea in Contemporary China," *The Asian Pacific Journal of Anthropology: Beijing, China* 19 (2018): 316-332.

The community gains much from organizing such a tea festival, especially in terms of economics. For instance, tea farmers are advised to boost production, market their products, and sell them in lucrative markets. As a result of their rising personal and family economies, tea dealers concurrently advertise premium tea in the most lucrative way feasible. A research participant stated that the state government wishes to support the tea tree consecration ceremony every year because it understands how important it is to the province's economy and to draw in more visitors.

Second, many young boys and girls come to join the event and have the propensity to uphold Theravāda Buddhism and observe moral precepts. It also has a religious meaning, especially for the younger generations who are motivated and attracted to come and practice culture and religion. It is believed that young people are drawn to religious presentations and cultural performances including dancing, singing, and so on. Consequently, through the atmosphere of ceremonial celebrations, they gradually learn to understand the way of life under Theravāda Buddhism. On the other hand, when tea is promoted by the festival, merchants and tea growers stand to gain great revenues, which they may use to support Buddhist temples and monks who work to propagate Buddhism across the world. At the same time, by continuing to observe traditional religious rituals, practices, and beliefs on a yearly basis, we may make sure that the following generation understands and respects their values. The tree consecration ritual is revered, says a key informant, as a means for people to thank their ancestors and the spirits who left the tea plants as a legacy for the present generation. So, the Bulang people give this tradition a lot of importance and believe that they can gain a lot of virtue by telling their dead relatives and ancestors about their good deeds.

Third, the commemoration of the tea tree consecration ritual in Laoman'e village has cultural significance, according to the respondents. An elderly informant claims that the present generation is at risk of forgetting its own culture, heritage, and traditions because of modernization. He continued by saying that not enough of them recognize and care about our culture to guarantee its continued existence. For example, he proceeded by noting that many of them may be seen wearing their traditional dress when there is a religious or cultural event, such as the dedication of a tea tree, which significantly improves the neighborhood's cultural attributes. Several of the interviewees also talked about how important it is for the culture that at least some of the guests dressed up in traditional clothes and sing songs every year at the tea festival.

Fourth, a participant said that each festival has a lot of social advantages in addition to its religious and cultural components. The celebration of the tea tree consecration itself is a significant element of their culture. For instance, it reduces the social communication gap in society, and they come together with an understanding of social as well as religious needs. It

helps to build social and religious harmony and peace among the people in a society. In addition, many individuals have started to think that the government's planning of such a large traditional event is an effort to strengthen relationships between their community and other communities. The tea tree consecration ritual has considerable significance for the community since it helps people communicate with one another, promotes harmony, and brings all of them together in trust on the same platform of religious practice as the tea tree consecration ceremony. In addition, this result also agrees with Lee Joffiffe's work on tea and tourism that ethnic communities and provincial governments encourage tourism through tea festivals, which significantly transformed one of the major earning resources for the welfare of the local community in Yunnan, China.²³

Conclusion

In summary, this study concludes with a range of religious, economic, cultural, and social significances of the tea tree consecration rite from the viewpoint of Bulang ethnic people. The study conducted research fieldwork and interviewed 17 subjects and looked at the significance of the tea tree consecration rite. First, there has been a connection between tea and Buddhism since the religion was brought to China from its close neighbor, India. The data suggest that Buddhist monks advanced and influenced tea culture during the Han, Jin, Tao, and Tang dynasties. Tea continued to be consumed by the locals and eventually became one of China's most widely used soft drinks as it grew along religious lines.

Achieving a goal that had economic, religious, cultural, and societal significance was the subject of the third finding. The findings show that the tea tree consecration ceremony has a variety of symbolic implications for the community, signifying clear social progress. Organizing a tea festival, for instance, benefits the community much in terms of economy, religion, and culture. This particular style of tea festival is typically seen as a tribute to the forefathers of the community who bestowed the oldest, most ancient tea tree on the succeeding generation. The responders feel that this completes a significant cultural and ritual consecration for the locals. The Bulang people cherish it as a way to express gratitude to the spirits and ancestors who left the tea plants as a legacy for the current generation.

Furthermore, most of the interviewees think that the government's decision to prepare such a sizable traditional event is an effort to improve bonds between their town and other groups. The ritual fosters unity and trust in modern society by assisting people in communicating with one another. The research's conclusions show that the local economy and cultural values have unquestionably benefited from the tea industry and ceremonies for

²³ Jolliffe Lee, *Tea and Tourism, Tourists, Traditions and Transformations*, (Canada: the Cromwell Press, 2007), 115.

consecrating tea trees, often known as tea festivals. This research comes to a close with these historic tea trees serving as a "blessing of ancestors" for future generations, which significantly enhances the lifestyles of the Bulang community in Yunnan, China. But according to this study, the state should take special note of the tea tree consecration ritual and other related celebrations in order to assist the Bulang ethnic group in enhancing their economics, culture, and religion so that they can continue to innovate and develop.

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