

## **Eternal Green**

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

**Dak, 43-year old tea harvester of the Bulang minority**

Through a mist fed gloom, Dak, a member of the Bulang minority of southern Yunnan, leads the way into a centuries’ old tea forest that eats up light. It is a damp diagonal world that is draped in heavy mists that makes every shape fuzzy. It is from here amid the wandering Bulang Mountains in southwestern Yunnan, that camellia sinensis’ hearty DNA spread throughout the world, though Dak hardly cares. His wiry and tattooed arm beckons deeper into a sub-tropical jungle of shadows. In the ghost-like air above the ungainly silhouettes of tea trees wander in patchy silhouettes. This isn’t the world of carefully manicured bushes or aesthetic masterpieces, but rather the ancient, gargoyle-like provider a of green stimulant fuel. It is from this humid-stained world that some of the globe’s most coveted teas are harvested.

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

As a timeless commodity, medicine, and great panacea, tea’s unquestioned value in Asia goes back thousands of years and its longevity and legacy owe much to the indigenous peoples that have cared for and worshipped the ‘green.’ Perhaps nowhere on the globe has a green leaf remained as coveted, or as essential as it has in this wedged-in corner of Asia.

This tea bastion reveals something utterly of nature’s creation where locals have endeavoured to minimize their effect on the land; which in turn has kept local tea growers flush, and ‘in the tea.’ It has also turned out that this intuitive and enlightened methodology has contributed to ever-increasing prices for the precious teas that are harvested. Until very recently there weren’t credit card transaction points at all within the villages. Bags of money ushered in in 4x4’s banging in upon mazy roads that for much of the year were impassable. That too has changed.

Where only a few years ago mildewed homes on wooden stilts with fire pits on the floors constituted a village, now prime Puerh tea producing villages like Lao Banzhang sit like hidden empires with massive homes tucked into the famed red clay soils. It has become a land of millionaire forest-dwellers who can claim a hint of that rarest of rare wonders: autonomy.

Puerh's from Bulang Mountains' Spring harvests this year will range up to over a thousand dollars a kilogram...and happily sell.

The fierce Wa, the Bulang, the Dai and Hani, and the Lahu peoples have carefully administered gentle attention upon their precious tea trees for centuries. Using oral traditions and common sense to transmit the simple knowledge gained through generations, these mountain people remain inextricably bound to their precious green leaves.

Dak says something as we look into the impermeable gloom that sums up much with little fanfare. "We haven't changed our ways with tea, and now people come to us and buy up all of our tea. We make money because we haven't changed." In this era of paranoia of extravagance and huge claims, it is a bit of proof positive that quality and authenticity are to be found in the forests.