

# **Tea and Merit-Landscape Making in the Ritual Lives of De'ang People in Western Yunnan**

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## **Introduction**

Tea, produced from a member of the *camellia* species, is a common consumer product in China, generates revenue for the national economy and possesses social functions such as gift exchange in the Chinese practice of etiquette. Southwest China is regarded as one of the original places of tea cultivation. Some very old tea trees, planted around 1000 BC, are found in Sichuan and Yunnan (Chow and Kramer, 1990; Wang, 1992). Tea as a national commercial product can be dated back to the tea-horse trade between the Chinese dynasties and Tibetan empire. Today, the history of the tea-horse trade is being revived to explain the historical caravan trade between Yunnan and Tibet and is being used to expand the current tea market.

Of China's 55 official ethnic minorities, 15 are indigenous to Yunnan. Under the western region development strategy implemented by the central government, the Yunnan provincial government has made great efforts to promote both tea trade and tourism. While the government focused on exploiting tea and 'exotic ethnic culture' for Yunnan's economic development, private businesses also began to recognize the lucrative trade in tea made in the ethnic minority areas, resulting in a variety of locally produced teas that have begun to be sold in restaurants and cafés. This demonstrates the commercial importance of the region's tea culture. Surprisingly, the De'ang missed out on these initially new marketing opportunities despite their long historical association with tea.

The De'ang, an officially recognized ethnic minority in China, are Mon-Khmer speakers living along the Yunnan-Myanmar border. They share their ethnic origin with the Palaung in Myanmar and accordingly they have historically engaged in certain livelihoods common to highland minorities in the Southeast Asian Massif region referred to by van Schendel (2002) and Michaud (2009). For hundreds of years, the Mon-Khmer speaking people have been known for producing and selling tea (Milne, [1924]2004; Scott, [1932]1982). Some De'ang communities continue to keep alive their old tea trees that were planted several hundred years ago. According to some Chinese reports and my fieldwork, neighboring ethnic groups praised the De'ang as "the old tea planters" (Li, 2000; Teng, 2006). *The De'ang Social History Survey* (Yunnan Sheng Bianjizu, 1987:4) detailed the De'ang usages of tea in their lives "Men and women are fond of drinking strong tea. Each household has planted tea trees around their houses or somewhere close to the villages. Tea leaves are processed manually, mainly for the purpose of self-consumption. If people have a surplus, they engage in market exchange."

The De'ang plant tea and sell tea. They recognize the importance of tea's commercial value in their economic lives. They drink tea, eat tea and use tea in their

social and ritual lives in a way that reveals its non-commercial value among the De'ang. For the De'ang, tea is an integral part of their daily lives and cultural milieu. Two widely known folk stories relating to tea trace the ancestral origin of the De'ang to a heavenly tea-tree and explain why the De'ang call tea *ja ju* in their language. The origin myth, titled 'Dagudalenggelaibiao' (Zhao and Chen, 1983), describes how the De'ang's ancestors were created by tea and the second story reveals *ja ju* as a term relevant to tea's traditional medicinal function (Yunnan Sheng Bianjizu, 1987:24-25). *Ja* means paternal or maternal grandmother, while *ju* means 'sight', or 'seeing'; so, tea literally means "grandmother's vision." These stories reveal the deep connection the De'ang have with tea, and shows its relevance in kinship terms. Thus, for the De'ang, the value of tea goes beyond its commercial function.

In my fieldwork in De'ang communities, I find that the De'ang, like the Bulang who are another Mon-khmer speakers in the south part of Yunnan cannot avoid the market economy's effects on tea production (Huang, 2015: 1-15); however, they continue to cherish the cultural and religious value of tea well above its monetary value. They link tea with the Buddhist idea of merit. When this Buddhist idea is embodied in the tea production, consumption, and ritual use among the De'ang, it engenders what I call "a merit landscape" that is physical but bear religious markings. In this paper I discuss how the merit landscape is conceived in De'ang Buddhist tea offering rituals and how it subsequently helps the De'ang find a balance between their ecological morality and the commercial farming of tea such that indigenous ecological knowledge is responsive to the impact of development on their transregional livelihood in southwest China.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on discussions of ecological morality and its role relative to development in the social usage of things.

Ecological morality is a concept showing nature-human integration and that proposes the harmonious relation between human, society and environment. It recognizes ecological value as an integral part of the relationship between people and environment. Merit landscape, as conceived in this paper, is grounded in ecological morality as a way to view nature-human integration. Merit is a crucial concept in Buddhism, especially in the Theravada Buddhism practiced by the De'ang. It correlates to the Buddhist doctrine of *Karma*, that highlights the personal consequences of conduct with important social and cultural dimensions. Merit is a basic role value for both monastic and lay people. Monastic practitioners gain merit through practice (including meditation) and teaching, while lay people normally gain merit by being generous and good to others and following the Five Precepts of Buddhism (Bunnag, 1973; Terwiel, [1994] 2001). The practice of the transference of merit is an ancient and widespread Buddhist practice, and it is customary for many Buddhists at the end of Buddhist rituals to offer the merit generated during the ceremony for the benefit of other beings and in so doing to invite all present to rejoice in the merit of the ceremony. (Gethin, 1998:109-110) In Tambiah's anthropological

studies of practical religion in a Thai village, the aspect of ‘merit-making as requiring solution within the framework of exchange and reciprocity’ (Tambiah, 1968:43) shows an important role in the analysis of merit making and its relation to Buddhism. In this paper, I continue to analyze merit-making and its relation to Buddhism in a De’ang village of Southwest China through exploring how De’ang people link their tea and the Buddhist idea of merit to consist of a ‘merit landscape’ that furthers a sustainable relationship between people and environment in the face of economic development in their transregional livelihood.

Landscape is not simply a geographical term. In anthropology it has been diversified in a transdisciplinary arena among ecology, philosophy, psychology and other critical theories, which are engaged in the discussions between place and space especially referring to ‘the meaning imputed by local people to their cultural and physical surroundings.’ (Hirsch, 1995:1). Landscape as a cultural and analytical idea is closely related to image and representation (Barnes and Duncan, 1992), and is defined as ‘a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing or symbolizing surroundings’ (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988:1), and as a ‘cultural process’ existing in everyday social life. (Hirsch, 1995:22). As a cultural and analytical approach, Smyer Yü (2015) visualizes landscape in terms of ‘mindscape’ in the Tibetan case. Here I would like to combine landscape and merit together being a new concept of a ‘merit-landscape’ in the De’ang’s case to show ecological morality and its role in development as a cultural process of representing and symbolizing surroundings in everyday social life.

The social usage of things is an important issue related to exchange and consumption. In the dimension of exchange, Mauss argues, ‘much of our everyday morality is concerned with the question of obligation and spontaneity in the gift. It is our good fortune that all is not yet couched in terms of purchase and sale. Things have values which are emotional as well as material...Our morality is not solely commercial.’ (Mauss, 1954[1969]:63) In the dimension of consumption, Carrier points out, ‘consumption is the meaningful use people make of the objects that are associated with them. The use can be mental or material; the objects can be things, ideas or relationships; the association can range from ownership to contemplation’ (Carrier, 1996:128). The De’ang people in this paper are tea farmers and use tea in the course of exchange and consumption in their lives. Tea has values that are emotional as well as material. Among them, the De’ang have their distinctive tea usage for rituals that link tea with Buddhist idea of merit to make a ‘merit-landscape’ balancing their morality and their commercial tea farming in response to the impact of development on their transregional livelihood.

I undertook the fieldwork on which this paper is based in Chudonggua De’ang Village from 2006 to 2007, from 2009-2010, from 2014-2015. Participatory observation and interviews were my main approach of doing fieldwork. The interviewees were mainly elderly De’ang villagers though some I spoke with were middle-aged and young. I studied the De’ang language with the villagers. The middle-aged and young villagers could speak Mandarin Chinese to me and sometimes they acted as my translators for the De’ang language spoken by the elders that I couldn’t understand.

## Chudonggua De'ang Village



( Illustration I. The photo has been taken by Li Quanmin in 2007 )

Chudonggua De'ang Village is the largest De'ang village in Santaishan De'ang Autonomous Township, the only De'ang Autonomous Township located in De'ang Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture in southwest Yunnan. (see Illustration I) Chudonggua De'ang Village lies in a semi-mountainous area at an elevation of around 1,400 meters above sea-level. This area is a subtropical region with a monsoon climate. The average annual temperature here is about 17°C and the annual rainfall is between 1,300-1,700 mm. It has three seasons: warm, wet and cool. The warm season is between March and May; the wet one is between May and October; and the cool season is between October and March. Around 80% of the annual rainfall falls between May and October. The three-season pattern is common in most Southeast Asian regions with a monsoon climate.

Tea is the villagers' traditional farming crop. The villagers followed the farming calendar 'Dachun' and 'Xiaochun' for tea cultivation. 'Dachun' refers to the farming time between May and October. 'Xiaochun' is the one between November and April of the next year. Tea farming activities in January involve plowing tea lands. In February, spring tea picking and the picking of the first flush of leaves from mature tea plants is undertaken. (see illustration II)



(Illustration II. The photo was taken by Li Quanmin in 2007)

In March and April, the picking of spring tea is continued, as well as the sowing of tea seeds in nurseries and transplanting the tea seedlings into the fields. May marks the beginning of the picking of summer tea, as well as the application of liquid dung-fertilizer on the fields in which tea has been newly-planted and this pattern is continued in June. In July and August, summer tea picking continues and the fields are weeded. September's activities include, picking autumn tea and fertilizing. In October and November, autumn tea is still picked and weeding is continued. December's activity centers on weeding the tea fields. It can be seen that when the tea plant is mature enough to sustain harvest, the tea picking starts from the end of February and goes until November. Villagers traditionally leave some spring tea for family use and sell the surplus to local markets. As to the market price, the spring tea, considered to be superior, fetches the highest price, the autumn tea is second and the summer tea is the lowest. The establishment of nearby tea factories in recent years has encouraged the development of the village's commercial farming of tea. More and more villagers sell their tea to the tea factories nearby.

Chudonggua De'ang village has a very close kin relationship with Bansidai Palaung village in north Myanmar as most villagers are tied together by marriage and family alliance. They hold rituals regularly each year and attend rituals together on both sides of the border, making their transregional livelihood into one unit. In each ritual, they would use tea to convey their Buddhist idea of merit between their expectations of good lives and their survival environment. Tea is an important part of villagers' everyday lives. They are fond of drinking thick tea, eat prepared tea leaves as a dish and use tea as a gift; it is a commodity and a ritual goodbye exchange in their social lives. (Li , 2008) Among them, the villagers would use their ritual usage of tea to express their understandings on the sustainable relationship between themselves and their environment.

### **Merit-landscape making: tea offering in the ritual lives of De'ang villagers**

Chudonggua De'ang Village regularly hosts Buddhist rituals each year. These rituals are 'Duo Hi Mai Bong' in February; 'Hong Pra' in April; 'Kao Va, Gan Va, Ou Va', which together comprise Buddhist Lent between July and October; and 'Kathin' in November. Before a ritual starts, the village prepares ritual goods showing the importance and centrality of their beliefs and practices in their lives. Additionally, the ritual expert, acting on behalf of the whole village, prepares tea as a collective offering for the rituals

'Duo Hi Mai Bong' means burning bare wood and is a ritual that signals the warming of the weather. It lasts two days. On the first day of this ritual, a tower made of a pile of bare branches is set on fire. The morning of the next day, the ritual expert takes some of the ash from the site of the ritual, together with tea and some small colorful-paper flags, small white-paper flags and a few flowers wrapped in banana

leaves that he has prepared on behalf of the whole village, to the temple and offers these things to the Buddha. The villagers also go to the temple with small flags and flowers they have prepared. The offering of tea is only practiced by the ritual expert on behalf of the village.

‘Hong Pra’ means water splashing on the Buddha images. As the biggest ritual of the year, all villagers must attend. The three-day ritual involves villagers splashing water on Buddha statues and on each other and they don’t work at all during the period of this ritual. The monk and the villagers are very busy at this time. On the first day, the ritual expert, on behalf of the village, first goes to the temple and invites the monk to the village square where ‘Hong Pra’ is held. Then the monk presents the offerings that the villagers have collectively prepared on behalf of the village to Buddha. These offerings mainly consist of tea, small colorful-paper flags, small white-paper flags, flowers wrapped in banana leaves, cooked rice wrapped in banana leaves. After the monk finishes the offerings, the villagers present their own offerings to Buddha. There is no tea in the villagers’ offerings. The old villagers say that tea can only be offered by the monk on behalf of the village, as it is the most important of the valuables and also the linkage between the sacred and the profane. After the offerings are made, a few young people beat drums and gongs, male villagers follow the ritual expert into the temple and move the small Buddha statues around the big Buddha, circumambulating out of the temple to the pavilion located in the village square. After the small Buddha statues have been moved into pavilion, the monk kneels in front of the pavilion and the villagers kneel behind him and listen to him chanting scriptures. Till the evening, the old people stay in the special place beside the pavilion belonging to the temple where lay visitors may rest and sleep and stay when they are invited to the village to attend certain rituals. On the second day, the monk repeats the offerings of the previous day to the Buddha statues and chants before he leads all the villagers to fetch water twice from a pond some kilometers away from the village. On the third day, the monk repeats what he did on the previous day and the villagers fetch water to splash the Buddha statues and splash themselves. The villagers believe that the water washes the impurities of the last year away and gives them a clean beginning.

*Kao Va*, *Gan Va*, and *Ou Va* are the three important rituals in what is commonly called Buddhist Lent, between July and October. During this time, monks must stay in the temple. According to many sources this was originally because of the belief that if they walked abroad during the rainy season they might injure or kill tiny insects. Additionally, the villagers can’t build houses or hold weddings, and unmarried people are not supposed to court. *Kao Va*, in the De’ang language means entering the temple and this event lasts three days. The ritual expert prepares tea and other offerings on behalf of the village to the temple, elders go to the temple to listen to the monk and the ritual experts chanting scriptures. *Gan Va* lasts two days, and as before, tea is an important ritual good offered by the ritual expert together with other offerings to the temple before he joins the chanting with the monk. *Ou Va*, marking the end of the series of three rituals, also lasts three days and tea is a ritual necessity too. The monk, the ritual experts and the villagers repeat the actions performed in *Kao Va*.

*Kathin* means presenting new robes to the monks in the temple. Taking place in

November, a ritual expert again prepares tea on behalf of the whole village together with other offerings to offer to the temple. A ritual expert in Chudonggua De'ang explained that tea is more important than money, as it carries the *suo* (merit) of the whole village. This tea offering embodies the merit of the whole village for the health, safety and prosperity of their lives in their landscape. Tea is a visible and visualized expression of the merit-landscape, mediating between the ritual offering and the village's ability to provide for a good life for its residents.

### **Merit-landscape in Chudonggua De'ang Village: an ecological image with indigenous cultural practices**

The above account has shown that the De'ang value merit-landscape making because they believe that merit accumulation in this life will assure a rebirth with happiness, prosperity and wealth. The De'ang ritual expert acts on behalf of the whole village to offer tea and other ritual goods to the temple, and the monk offers blessings to the whole village in return. The monk is the intermediary who can access mystical powers associated with the Buddha, and who can transfer these powers to the village in a form that can positively sacralize this life and the next life. He chants in the collective religious ceremonies as well as in the funeral rites. He performs certain ritual roles for the village whenever he is needed. When the De'ang ritual experts bring tea together with other ritual goods to the temple, the intention is to convey the collective aspirations for the health, safety and prosperity of the whole village. Under the ritual experts' instructions, the villagers identify with their fellow laymen with whom they make merit together. They believe that they will improve their own merit if they share it with parents, ancestors, or other villagers. From another, more functionalist, point of view, merit-landscape making is a collective action directed to the temple and the monk provides these occasions for the laymen to assemble periodically. The workings of merit are personal, yet it can also be achieved through collective ritual actions. Although one's private thoughts, words or acts may be of merit, the most common public occasions for merit-landscape making are ritual acts toward the temple and toward the village and all villagers.

Ingold says, "Every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space" (Ingold, 1993:152). Tea is a product of the De'ang. Their merit-landscape making can be seen as part of public activities in their ritual lives. In particular, tea offering in course of Buddhist rituals reflects a set of reciprocal ideas that center on the concept of merit-landscape in the relationship between the De'ang and their living environment. In this case, merit-landscape making can be explored from Mauss's theory of gift and reciprocity, thereby reflecting something about morality in the connection of the sacred and profane as found in the De'ang undertaking of transregional livelihood. Mauss argues,

The thing given brings return in this life and in the other. It may automatically bring the donor an equivalent return – it is not lost to him, but reproductive; or else the donor finds the thing itself again, but with

increase. Food given away means that food will return to the donor in this world; it also means food for him in the other world and in his series of reincarnations. Water, wells and springs given away are insurance against thirst; the clothes, the sunshades, the gold, the sandals for protection against the burning earth, return to you in this life and in the other. (Mauss, [1954]1969:54-55)

The De'ang villagers' merit-making demonstrates a kind of reciprocity, as Jane Bunnag (1973) shows. Additionally, Mauss's idea of material reciprocity is helpful to explore the merit-landscape conceived in the tea offering rituals of De'ang making it possible to conceive of merit, grounded in a particular place, as a landscape in between the sacred and the profane.

Smyer Yü (2011:59) argues that the sentient ecology pertains to the eco-religious practices and eco-spiritual sentiment embodied in the landscape. He affirms the inherent mutual saturation and bonding between landscape and mindscape in the case of Tibet, which is not only a place, but also symbolizes the embodiment of sacredness in its mountains. Although the sensorial and ecological dimensions of landscape are critical, he argues, it is 'the actual bodily experiences of individuals in the landscape of Tibet whether they are natives or outsiders' that makes the narratives of Tibet happen (Smyer Yü 2015:21), and he adopts 'affordance' to affirm the materiality of placial potency of place. In a related way, it can be seen that the De'ang use the giving of tea offerings in their ritual lives to accumulating the merit that is "afforded" by the tea that provides their livelihoods and connects them to their place – and that is the most precious form of accumulation in the worlds of birth and rebirth. When De'ang ritual experts use tea as a collective ritual good to make merit for the whole village, tea represents their spiritual connection between the sacred and the profane, between De'ang themselves and supernatural beings, and between the monastic and lay communities. They do this in recognition of a need for balance between their values and the commercial farming of tea on which family well-being, fertility and regeneration depend. The De'ang wish for fertility, regeneration, health, safety, and family unity for their community explains why tea is considered a more important offering than items of greater monetary value, even though they grow tea as an economic crop. In this regard, this merit-landscape, for the De'ang, integrates landscape and mindscape through affordance.

Ecology and religion are often considered together in order to examine cultural awareness of interactions required for the continuity of life, and can present "an important lens whereby humans can understand and reenvision their roles as participants in the dynamic processes of life." (Grim and Tucker, 2014:63) Chudonggua De'ang villagers are Theravada Buddhists. They are used to making merit in their daily lives. Merit making in their language is called 'Suo Chiu', 'Suo' refers to merit, which means valuables, and 'Chiu' means making. The villagers often use tea in their ritual activities to link merit which they call it 'Suo' in their language for their survival safety in their living space. They believe that one receives a reward for doing good and punishment for doing bad. The reward can be better health,



happiness and material prosperity in this and in future lives. Punishment can be sickness, misery and poverty. The villagers show their aim to get great fortune in this life or a better status in the next life in their Buddhist idea of merit and their usage of tea in their rituals. It has been mentioned that merit refers to the personal consequences of conduct with important social and cultural dimensions. Landscape as a cultural and analytical idea is connected with image and representation. In comparison to Tambiah's village study in Northern Thailand, 'the villagers engage frequently in merit-making as a positive action devoted to acquiring religious values' (Tambiah 1968:42), Chudonggua De'ang villagers located their usage of tea in connection with the Buddhist idea of merit in their rituals, which produces an ecological image with indigenous cultural practices and religious values, that is, merit-landscape.

### **Conclusion: Merit-landscape and the commercial farming of tea in Chudonggua De'ang Village's development**

Tea has been an important commercial product of going across the boundaries of the country between China and the rest of the world. The tea industry has been encouraged as an economic pillar to develop the local economy in Yunnan. In Xishuangbanna and Pu'er district in the southern part of Yunnan, large areas are dedicated to tea cultivation and are mainly managed by tea companies. The farmers of these large areas employ workers from the Han and other ethnic groups. As they are only employees, they have no ownership rights to the tea products themselves.

The De'ang, however, known regionally as being historically linked to tea farming in the southwest part of Yunnan, cultivate their own tea and sell it in the local market themselves, though seem not to be influenced by the wide-spread economic development of the tea industry. Their farming of tea has been household-based, with half of their production for self-consumption and half for selling. In Chudonggua De'ang Village, the scale at which tea is farmed has been decreased due to increased pressure to produce sugar cane as a cash crop that brings families more income than does tea.

In spite of commercial pressures that push for greater cultivation of cash crops, the De'ang merit-landscape protects their tea farming from completely diminishing. Their ritual use of tea, as well as their commercial cultivation of the plants, reveals a nexus of religion, culture, and traditional ecological knowledge. As Berkes (1999:8) points out,

Putting together the most salient attributes of traditional ecological knowledge, one may arrive at working definition of traditional ecological knowledge as a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment.

Thus we can see that De'ang villagers create a merit-landscape that balances their ecological morality and their commercial farming of tea in response to the impact of development in their living place, putting the most salient features of their traditional ecological knowledge as a combined body of knowledge, practice and belief about the relationship of people with one another and with their environment. The cross-regional trade of tea, and the similar cultural practices and religious rituals found in other transboundary villages and regions in the tea-growing areas of southern Yunnan provide evidence of meaning-rich livelihoods that are ecologically defined and that take into account a complex interweaving of material, this-worldly, aspirations of keeping a sustainable relationship between people and environment

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