

La Hiao 'Tea' – The Jinuo People's Panacea



Sweat comes down my temples in thick rivulets ending up clotted in my shirt collar. I'm not a fan of the heat, which seems to come from the sky, the trees, from the very earth. There are thankfully smells of fruit blossoms, and the beautiful tang of the humid tropical forests which lie still to distract from the heat. There is too, another reason for a little bit of optimism: tea, and not simply any tea, but a tea from one of the 'Six Classic Tea Mountains' of Han lore. Above the Mekong River - long a dividing point of classic Puerh districts - Jinuo Mountain borders Gedeng (another of the classic tea mountains) and this is where I presently find myself. The ancient tea mountain of Jinuo is a perfect example of the old tea quote: "high mountains and fog produce classic teas". High humidity levels and altitudes from 600-1700 meters, and its silent isolation, have long contributed to teas that are called 'classics'.

Not given to simply 'accepting' a teas' vaunted reputation, I've actually made my way here to not simply sip of the great mountain's tea, but to observe - and inevitably sip - one of the traditional Jinuo tea concoctions known more for medicinal and ceremonial use than for any casual drinking. Like so much that is indigenous, the recipe risks being vanquished into the 'forgotten drawer' of antiquity unless passed along. Tea in these regions is now more business commodity than the more complete panacea that it once was. The local Jinuo name of this tea concoction Jinuo people is simply '*La Hiao*'. Like the Hani, and Pulang (other of the traditional tea growing peoples) the name for tea in these regions is simply - and wonderfully brief: "*la*". A little irony considering that "*la*" (tea has long been known for its cooling and anti-inflammatory abilities) in Mandarin means

'spicy'. Like any tea-growing district on the planet, a place's name is no guarantee of a tea's quality. Quality is either a decision for the mouth to make, or for a number of stages to come together in a kind of stunning symmetry: great raw materials, careful harvesting habits, and simple production methods.

My host – and hosts are so very important here – is a tiny man with bowed legs named 'Eggplant'. He doesn't feel the need to explain this 'name', and I feel no need to ask. We hustle along a tiny newly paved road, which swerves through the little town of "Ya Lo" upon Jinuo Mountain. Women, who are equally small to Eggplant, lug baskets brimming with freshly harvested tea leaves to and fro, never forgetting to engage in some chit-chat while on their way. The village is humane, slow paced, and entirely hot, and it is in the midst of the spring harvest which adds a bit of a buzz to the place. We've just spent a little over one soggy hour within the young tea forests that line the lower levels of the mountain. We have been collecting the prized delicate end-buds for the creation of this medicinal tea, known as *La Hiao*. Eggplant has about 300 grams of young spring 'end' buds in a small bag with some errant leaves tucked into his small dark fist. He reiterates numerous times that it is only the end-buds that he is interested in for this recipe. These end buds, which poke out of his hand and bag, have more of the fragrance and more of the precious health-giving properties than their elder cousins on the branches, he explains. In much of the west, these end buds are referred to as 'white tea', though here they are simply coveted for their abilities to add value to the already famed Puerh teas.

As we round a little bend of bougainvillea, which fearlessly sprays its brightness everywhere, I stop to stare at a bush that stirs something in the mind. Looking closely at the green thing in front of me, it comes to me that it is a coffee bush...here upon one of the great tea mountains of history coffee grows unafraid. I ask Eggplant for clarification about what coffee is doing here...I'm almost taken aback, fearing a kind of invasion from the great 'bean' into these lands of the great 'green'. He looks at it and simply tells me that, "Yes, it is coffee but we don't know what to do with it". I stare at him a few moments somehow expecting that he might be lying, or covering up a conspiracy. Further north of us near another of tea's bastions, Puerh City, coffee's dark power is being felt as increasingly the less scrupulous (and more profit minded) convert their tea fields into coffee fields. Coffee consumption in China is on the rise, while the flow of tea into China's youth has stagnated. Feeling this sort of paranoia arise in me, I know it is time to sip some tea somewhere. Eggplant's home is not far away, so my thirst will soon be sated, or at the very least addressed.

The tea concoction I've come for is an alternative take on the way tea is perceived. It is a recipe that not only expels heat, but the in local terminology "recalibrates the metabolism". Also used for ceremonies and for those who had taken too much of anything (including too much of the local firewater), the *La Hiao* concoction had been a veritable cure-all. Eggplant remembers one of his elder family members saying that the blend "*made everything taste better*". This part of Yunnan has long held to the belief that if a meal was served without spice, the meal had no meaning

and the recipe in question has some compellingly spicy and powerful ingredients, as I'm about to find out.

Eggplant's home and even the little village itself, is in the midst of a chaotic turn from isolated tea-outback into a space of big homes that seem out-of-place. But, it is like so much of this region, a place that has come into its own and will decide how to proceed with profits from its prized tea. It still retains an old charm and seems incapable of throwing off its wonderful village-vibe, but here and there new concrete homes appeared in front of the older thatched homes of wood. Thankfully there are still the high-pitched wails of greetings and for the time being at least, the huge homes don't seem to have erected barriers between people. Eggplant shuffles into his home, covered in a camouflage jacket that was hanging off of one shoulder, but not before depositing the freshly harvested leaves we have gathered on a massive wooden table.

I sit in a sheltered patio section that is simply a covered area where a huge trunk of a tree has been artfully but simply carved into a tea table that runs at least 4 meters in length. Wood, bamboo, and tea, are all linked here as much to each other as they are to the people. Wood homes, tools, and tables; bamboo used as cookery, boiling tubes, storage devices and tea tables; and tea, long consumed as stimulant, medicine, used in rituals and in healing practices.

Eggplant's wife comes out of the home holding a baby in one arm and a freshly collected handful of orange tree blossoms in the other. It is the beginning. Following closely on the heels of his wife and the orange blossoms, Eggplant emerges with two small white bowls gesturing for me to peek in. He disappears once again. Within one bowl, lie the 'flavoring' ingredients: two raw garlic cloves, two potent looking chilly peppers (local specialties), and a small amount of salt. Within the second remaining bowl lie five mottled-colored peppercorns (again local). Looking over the potent ingredients I imagine the explosive result, though I'm still not entirely sure how it will all end up. Peppercorns, not far to our south find its bastion in Vietnam, a country that produces and exports more of it than any other nation. Used by the indigenous (and used heavily in Ayurvedic medicine) to help expectorate phlegm, stimulate the digestive system, and clean toxins out of the body, peppercorns join tea and garlic in forming an absolutely complete cleanser and neutralizer.

On the table beside me two antiques of wood from another time. One long wooden carved tool looks more like a weapon than anything culinary. It is a pestle and I'm told it is an indispensable tool still now. The Jinuo people are fond of grinding essences together. I know from a few simple meals in the area and the idea that flavors and tastes are blended into each other is a reoccurring theme in these parts. Medicines in this part of the world have been similarly created, mashing the ingredients together to form cure-alls. The other piece is a carved wooden vessel – more a wooden trough than anything - that looks nothing less than ancient. It is the

host in which all of the ingredients will find their way for the final stages of this spiced tea.

Eggplant comes out of the house again ready to begin, but first in a brief show of theater, he waves around us before pointing to the ingredients and explaining: “Everything here is local and from the region, and this is the way we lived not so long ago”. He has quick snappy movements as though entirely high on tea, while at the same time having one of the most gentle and calm sets of eyes I can remember seeing. He begins, softly muttering some little tune while grinding the garlic cloves together with the chilly peppers and salt.

“These provide the base”, he tells me. They are lovingly ground into a pulp. Everything about the sharp fragrances and even the visual aesthetic hints at the power of this combination and my mind is trying to predict what the taste might be, but I know better. The peppercorns are next and it is impossible for the nose not to be moved this way and that by what is wafting out of the simple white bowl and its pulverized ingredients.

Finally it is time for the fresh young tea leaves and the orange leaves to be added. It is as though we’ve come to some sort of climactic moment. With his short powerful fingers he carefully puts the leaves in with the rest of the unrecognizable elements and deliberately folds the leaves, bending them to break the outer epithelial layer. This tear in the skin begins the fermentation cycle and causes reactions within the tea leaf to begin releasing some of its potent abilities.

Eggplant then gently grinds the leaves as if he hopes to simply encourage the fragrances and properties out of their green-skinned homes.

Now comes a moment when he carefully places the pestle down, and pours water into a kettle.

“The water must be *heated* only without boiling”. Having done this – the water is only lukewarm – he adds a bit of water to the mixture to loosen it, and then stirs it slightly. Then it is all poured into the wooden bowl, with more water added.

I’m then taken by the elbow for a cup of ‘straight’ tea at another little tea-table. The concoction that I’ve been mesmerized by needs 25 minutes to imbue itself, release itself, and whatever else it needs to do in the water. My brain and senses have been almost paralyzed in curiosity and I’ve taken notice of little else around me. The day’s sun and heat have blanketed the whole village and there are other fragrances swimming around in the air, but they are only whiffs that are distant secondary’s to the garlic-peppercorn-chilly blend mingling that bludgeons my nasal cavity still.

We sip the local tea which itself is arousing in its enamel-challenging freshness, but it merely serves to pass time and increase my interest in the ‘stew’ which rests nearby.

When 'time' comes, Eggplant and that powerful short-limbed body of his simply jumps up without any warning and I follow behind. There is the curiosity that inevitably arises when one is about to embark on something intimately familiar (in this case tea and garlic) that is out of context. Though not as much of an essential standard in my life as tea, garlic has rarely been out of my life for more than a few days and having grown up eating Hungarian for much of my life it too was a constant and welcome fixture. The resultant mix of these sage elements together into a potent organic mix of powerful antioxidants is what now waits before me.

Taking a ladle that has been carved out of bamboo, Eggplant gently stirs the contents of the wooden bowl to ensure a final blending. And then, without any drama whatsoever he presents the ladle full of the murky liquid. I tip it back trying not to expect anything.

What '*hits*' – and it does *hit* – is nothing creeping or subtle but rather a number of triggers that seem to explode simultaneously in all areas of the mouth creating flavors and sensations. The garlic is there - fresh and potent in all of its glory - but what surprises slightly is that nothing in the amalgam totally dominates. There is a slight sharp tang from the chilly but again it doesn't overwhelm. Tea's influence plays more of a back-up roll as it is there but only as a part of this package. Salt's satisfying feel on the tongue seems to cool the entire mouth and the orange blossoms soft hints register in the softest ways inhalations.

A couple of ladles full later, I feel it impossible to ignore an ignition of sorts within the whole physical and physiological body. A kind heat is spreading through the body and there is a welcome clarity and sharpness of the senses. It is as though the soft-focus heat of the day has suddenly had a stabilizing filter fitted on top of it, forcing all senses to feel more. I'm aware too that sweat glands along my rib cage have opened wide. After a few more ladles, I'm almost skidding off of the little veranda searching for a place to relieve the bladder. Eggplant lets a little chuckle out, telling me that it is entirely expected that the body will begin to purge with infusions of the liquid taken. In traditional times, I'm told, an affected or ill person would ease off on solid foods and instead sip away – sometimes for days – on the mixture. The effect of the elixir was to purge the body, while re-configuring the body's balance through the ingredient's effects on the organs. A balance of cooling agents (tea), stimulating heating agents (chilly peppers and peppercorns) and salt introduced into the body to pacify, expel, and soothe all at once.

Later, still buzzing on the concoction, Eggplant and I take a walk through the village, with him acting as a kind Master of Ceremonies to the village's history. I ask when the last time the *La Hiao* was made for ceremonial use, and he tells me of somewhat recent wedding that was celebrated, with the elixir being prepared by the bride's aunt.

In such places, beyond the eyes and lush green horizons there still remain these ancient traditions and what makes them special is that, while locals may not be able to explain precisely the effects or the 'why's' of something's usefulness, they do know that it works.

Later, Eggplant tells me that we should return to the home, to continue in some 'real' tea drinking, by which he means tea unencumbered by any other additions. There is little that I can do other than smile, and follow his shuffling body back to his home and prepare for another pleasant onslaught of 'pure' tea.



'Eggplant' collects supple buds off of tea trees for the ensuing recipe, 'La Hiao'.



Jinuo, being one of the six famous tea mountains of Chinese lore already has a reputation and sells out of its tea based on name alone. In the past, locals had to take their tea leaves into bigger market areas to sell, whereas now, the buyers come directly to the town itself. Here, 'Eggplant' with some of the fresh spring harvest which will be used for the elixir known for medicinal effects.



The assorted ingredients for the La Hiao: tea leaves (left), a bowl of garlic cloves, salt and red chilly peppers, and orange tea leaves (right). The only thing missing from the image are the locally grown and potent peppercorns.

Below, the ensuing results of the concoction, after having pulverized the ingredients and let them sit together for 25 minutes, the brew is ready for consumption.





'Young' tea trees. No more than 70 years old these youngsters are already producing great teas, and only gain in value by having the precious "Jinuo Mountain" designation.



'Eggplant' stands in his yard. In the background is a tea fryer which must be covered from the sun to ensure that withered leaves that are being fried are not affected by the direct sun rays. It is for such a reason that frying is only done at certain points of the day when the sun doesn't hit the fryer.