



PAUL WAGER PHOTO PORTFOLIO
for
PHA TAD KE BOTANICAL GARDEN
August 2016

The village head donned his purple and pink silk cap, adding Yao cultural gravitas to the moment. While pigs snuffled around our feet, and the elders sat wreathed in smoke from gurgling bamboo pipes, he went to a collection of hessian sacks at the back of his simple thatched hut.

As the mid-morning sun slanted through the walls, bouncing through the dust from the dirt floor, he took handfuls of long curled tea leaves from one sack. Deeply inhaling, his half lit face was impassive, as it was for the next two sacks. Finally an imperceptible smile appeared, and his fingers closed around this particular handful.

Reaching into an old cardboard box covered in locally woven fabric, he pulled out two delicate lidded cups painted with red and pink peonies into which he placed the tea. The top of a very battered thermos lifted with a faint gasp as he poured the still boiling contents into the cups and replaced the lids. Pulling out an exquisite bamboo tray onto which he placed the porcelain bowls, he then lifted the lids and inhaled deeply. I caught the fresh grassy smell of the tea from across the room. He poured the fresh tea

into the runnels in the tray before again adding water.

Reaching into another smaller box, he pulled out an array of tiny glass cups. So clear they made minute rainbows on the broken walls of the house.

The tea tasted of the forest, of the earth of the love and care of the nai ban who had made it, of the thousand years it had taken to the trees to grow. It filled Paul and I with wonder at what we had just been part of, the concentrated elegance of the ceremony in such a completely rustic setting. We sat in virtual silence enjoying the moment, the only noise being the odd grunt from a passing pig or the bubbles rising in the pipes. It all seemed part of the ritual. Somehow *'One for Each Person and One for the Pot'*, the western slogan which underpins British tea making tradition, seems oddly perfunctory against this meditative ceremony. Even more so in this age of tea bags that has stripped tea from all its sacramental practices. Coffee with its hissing machines and cup twirling baristas has moved the other way, from instant spoons in a cup to having its own fan clubs.

The tea of this part of the world is vastly different, more subtle and floral and grassy, than its full bodied, dark flavoured Assam cousin, typically grown in South Asia. This is not milk and sugar tea. The tea is savoured like wine, the complexity emerging as a result of its artisanal production. One packet may offer different tastes from its double, depending on weather, soil and the ineffable, such as the mood of the picker or processor.

We left our host at his old ledger, calligraphic brush in hand entering the week's production and sales data in Pinyin. Now overtaken by technology his skill and style reminded us that Lao tea after all, has Chinese roots. The prefecture whose capital is the famous city of Pu'er, and home to China's classic style tea, shares a border with Phongsaly.

Earlier in Khomaen village we had risen in the pre-dawn chill to follow the villagers to their stands of equally famous 400 year old trees. Their banter sparkled across the cloud filled valleys as the villagers abandoned their shoes and wrapped prehensile feet around the narrow bracts. Their costume of red and black caught the first rays of sunlight as

it warmed us all. The Phu Noy (lit "*small people*") migrated from Burma in times that have faded from memory, but revealed in their facial structure. We watched as the mornings pick was tossed into a wok and literally cooked, the steam rising as the leaves wilted and curled. Later old women squatted next to woven trays to roll and tease the leaves into releasing their aromatics.

Cloud soaked Phongsaly maintains its dependence on the well trained noses and fingers of its peoples. It is they and not gleaming machines that arbitrate the process. That is what makes this part of Laos so wonderful; the red flash of a headscarf crowning a warm smile among the tea (*Camelia sinensis*) bushes, the concentration of those 'cooking' and rolling the leaves, laughter of the pickers as they call to each other across the valleys, the meditative tea ceremonies.

Melody Kemp, August 2016

























Paul Wager

From Australia, lives and works as a photographer in Laos since 11 years and has taught photography to countless visitors and young people.

Melody Kemp

Is an environmental and geographic writer who has by turns been a health worker and labour educator before writing full time. She is a regular contributor to the Royal Geographical Society's Magazine.

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