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Among the mind-boggling array of tea plantations in Southwest China's Yunnan province, the old tea forests of Jingmai Mountain in Pu'er city can claim a singular distinction. At the 45th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 2023, the Cultural Landscape of Old Tea Forests of the Jingmai Mountain in Pu'er was designated as the world's first tea culture World Heritage Site.

Residents of Jingmai Mountain have time-tested traditions in applying ecological wisdom in cultivating tea trees, embodying a special interaction between people and nature in a "natural tea tree museum". With an average elevation of 1,400 meters, Jingmai Mountain consists of five ancient tea forests, nine ancient villages and three separated shelter forests. For more than 10 centuries, ethnic groups like the Blang and Dai have utilized the ecosystem to cultivate a three-dimensional community structure of tall trees at the top, tea trees and shrubs in the middle and herbaceous plants at ground level.

Harmonious coexistence

"The Jingmai Mountain ancient tea forests are a typical representation of well-preserved, large-scale and time-honored ancient tea forests, with a history of more than 1,000 years and a concentrated area of 1,200 hectares of tea planting areas," said Zhou Tianhong, deputy director of the Pu'er Jingmai Mountain ancient tea forest protection bureau. "There are more than 3 million tea trees aged over 50 years, including more than 1 million aged over 100 years. A handful have reached up to 600 years old."

A 50-meter banyan known as "bee king tree" in Mangjing Village hosts a spectacular sight on the mountain. More than 60 honeycombs hang from its branches, but out of respect for nature, residents don't disturb them. Instead, the villagers set up their own beekeeping — underlying the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. "Bees have very strict requirements for their living environment and these bees are evidence of Jingmai Mountain's excellent ecological environment," said Zhang Pisheng, secretary of the Lancang county committee of the Communist Party of China.

Walking through the forest, one can see taller growth providing dappled light for the tea trees, while ground-level herbaceous plants nurture the soil, continuously providing nourishment. The three-dimensional community structure creates ideal conditions for the growth of tea trees in terms of light, temperature and humidity.

According to statistics from the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Jingmai Mountain ancient tea forests are home to 943 species of seed plants, 187 species of terrestrial vertebrates and 134 bird species, all playing crucial roles in pollination, nutrient cycling and pest control in the ancient tea forests.

Su Guowen, an 80-year-old Blang elder in Mangjing Village, said that compared to the world-famous terraced and farm-style plateau tea gardens, the ancient tea forests of Jingmai Mountain have a longer history and possess distinctive characteristics. "Long before the widespread adoption of modern tea garden planting techniques, the ancestors on Jingmai Mountain traveled across the mountain, utilizing limited under-story cultivation to grow high-quality organic tea without the use of pesticides and fertilizers. For example, by preserving or planting osmanthus, camphor and other trees in the ancient tea forests, their fragrances can be imparted to the tea leaves, giving the tea a natural aroma and also helping suppress certain pests and diseases."

United ethnic relations

Su said that according to legend, the Blang ethnic group migrated to Jingmai Mountain from the southwest of Yunnan around the 10th century, and initially lived off hunting. Later, the wild tea trees saved the people from an epidemic, leading them to recognize and remember the miraculous plant they called "da". Subsequently, the Blang ventured into the vast forest to retrieve wild tea seedlings and seeds, initiating the domestication of wild tea trees. The generational "tea ancestor's legacy" passed down among the Blang

The 45th session of the World Heritage Committee believes that the Cultural Landscape of Old Tea Forests of the Jingmai Mountain in Pu'er meets World Heritage Site standards. This ancient tea forest protection and management system respects local climate conditions, terrain features, and animal and plant populations, achieving the protection of cultural and biological diversity as well as the sustainable use of natural resources. It demonstrates the original traditions of the Blang, Dai and other indigenous people's complementary use of natural resources in the mountainous environment. The villages and traditional residential buildings also reflect the understanding of the ecological environment in terms of site selection, layout and architectural style.



At the 45th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee held on Sept 17, 2023, the cultural landscape of Jingmai Mountain's old tea forests is designated as the world's first tea culture World Heritage site. GAO ZHENGLIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY



A 50-meter banyan, with more than 60 honeycombs hanging from its branches, hosts a spectacular sight. It is known as "bee king tree" among Jingmai Mountain residents.

people say: "I won't leave you with cattle and horses, fearing they might perish in disasters; I won't leave you with gold and silver treasures, fearing you might exhaust them. Therefore, I will only leave you with tea trees, for your descendants to use endlessly."

In the 14th century, the Dai people arrived at Jingmai Mountain, bringing traditional tea-making techniques that greatly improved storage and long-distance transportation. Since then, Jingmai Mountain tea has been used as both a medicine and a delicacy, becoming an integral part of daily life.

During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, the tea of Jingmai Mountain was designated as tribute, leading to the gradual expansion of the ancient tea forest planting area and increased production, thereby becoming an important economic source for the various ethnic groups living there. Today, walking down from the ancient tea forests to the mountainside, one arrives at Nuogang ancient dwelling, which preserves the traditional layout and historical appearance of the Dai ethnic villages. Two-story wooden frame houses are built against the mountainside, surrounded by streets and alleys leading to the village center. Nine similar villages are spread across the tea forests, with nearly 5,000 residents and 500 traditional dwellings — 321 of which have been designated as National Priority Protected Buildings. In Jingmai Mountain and the surrounding areas, ethnic groups such as the Blang, Dai, Lahu, Wa and Han live in harmony with each other and with nature. The locals establish village regulations and agreements, loving, inheriting and developing the ancient forests as a part of their lives. For example, when opening up the tea forests in the early days, villagers delineated buffer zones around the periphery. Cutting down tall trees without permission was punishable, fallen leaves served as fertilizer and only 70 percent of the tea leaves were allowed to be picked.

The people of Jingmai Mountain are grateful for the blessings of the land. Village construction adheres to the principle of intimate land use, leaving the best of it for tea trees. At lower altitudes with abundant water sources, farmland is cultivated and modern ecological tea gardens are developed outside the ancient forest. In each protected tea forest area exists a mysterious tree known as the "tea spirit tree" by the Blang people and the "tea god tree" by the Dai people. "When people begin to cultivate new land, the first tea tree planted is considered the tea spirit tree. Each year, if the tree is flourishing, they feel at ease; if the tree falls ill, they hold a ritual," said Xiong Dengkui, a researcher at Lancang County Museum.

Efforts to apply for UNESCO World Cultural Heritage status for the Cultural Landscape of Old Tea Forests of the Jingmai Mountain in Pu'er kicked off in 2010, stimulating protection and management measures that are continually upgraded. With the attention and protection of the government and natural villages, nearly 200 plaques and explanatory signs have been installed in the forest, and a system combining online intelligent monitoring and offline manual monitoring has added new "guardians" to the mountain.

Initially, local residents were unaware of the world heritage application and did not understand what changes the process would bring. Later on, they realized the original ecological methods of tea cultivation and tea plantation management needed better action. Since 2010, around 90,000 hectares of tea plantations in Pu'er city have completed ecological management, and since 2013, local projects have been implemented for the protection and display of village cultural relics, fire prevention and lightning protection and monitoring of the ancient tea plantations.

Wang Gang, mayor of Pu'er, said that the city will continue to enhance its reputation as an "ecological and organic hub", empowering the tea industry with tea culture and tea technology. Moreover, the city will explore the cultural inheritance and historical significance of the ancient Tea Horse Road to tell the good stories of the Chinese tea culture. Research will also be conducted on Pu'er tea gene editing, genetic breeding and variety selection to enhance the competitiveness of the modern tea industry.

By the end of 2023, per capita net income of the villages in Jingmai Mountain exceeded 20,000 yuan (\$2,750).



JINGMAI MOUNTAIN  
BREWING RICH LEGACY OF TEA CULTURE

Time-tested traditions backed by 10 centuries of expertise

Black crested gibbon

"One bud and two leaves" is a picking standard for Jingmai Mountain tea. It means that when farmers harvest crops, they only pick the tea bud and two adjacent young leaves on the tree. This type of tea-picking makes the harvested tea taste more tender and have richer nutrients.

"Crab feet" is a parasitic plant endemic to ancient tea trees on Jingmai Mountain.

Bos gaurus

Asian elephant

Residential areas of Dai ethnic group  
Grand Jingmai  
Mengben  
Manggang  
Nuogang Laozhai

Residential areas of Blang ethnic group  
Mangjing Shangzhai  
Mangjing Xiazhai  
Manghong  
Wengli  
Wengwa

When looking at the decorations atop dwellings of different ethnic groups on Jingmai Mountain, people can easily see differences:

For the Blang ethnic group dwellings, there are the "one bud and two leaves" symbols.

The Dai ethnic group dwellings have ox-horn symbols.

The Lahu ethnic group uses calabash-shaped symbols for the decoration of their roofs.

Roasting tea in a fireplace means to put dry tea into a clay pot, roasting it in the fireplace, and then adding boiling water to bring it to a tea soup. This is an ancient way of making Pu'er tea in Yunnan, with a history of more than 1,000 years. The reason for roasting tea leaves over a charcoal fire is to make the tea softer in taste.

ILLUSTRATION BY YANG LIU AND ZHANG CHENGLIANG / CHINA DAILY; HE WEINAN / FOR CHINA DAILY