

Tea Cultivation in Northern Thailand

History and Development

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Tradition of Tea Culture in Thailand

While the world map of tea cultivation generally offers a rather stable appearance with little changes over the past centuries, a new spot had to be added to it just recently: Northern Thailand. Where opium fields dominated the mountainous terrain's altitudes beyond 1000 m until about 20 years ago, making the area an integral part of the infamous Golden Triangle, today a highly diversified variety of cash crops covers the slopes, among them fruit, nuts, vegetables, coffee, and, last but not least, tea.

Unlike many other South East Asian countries, such as China, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Cambodia or Taiwan, just to name

a few, Thailand and the Thai people traditionally don't have a tea culture of their own. Only some hill tribes that had migrated from China to Northern Thailand around 200 years ago and the ethnicity of Shan people native to the border region between Northern Thailand and Burma used to collect tea leaves for their own consumption from a local, large-leaved sub-species of *Camellia Sinensis* that grows wild in the area in form of trees. Apart from that, tea culture was only rooted in a small class of Thai-Chinese, mainly business people representing a minority within the Thai population. Until recently, tea was even widely unavailable in Thailand.

How Opium Fields turned Tea Gardens

However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the opium cultivation and trade were increasingly challenged and relevant laws enforced by the Thai government, police and military, mainly driven by a campaign of the Thai Royals, it was particularly the mountain population that had to find and pursue new ways of generating income.

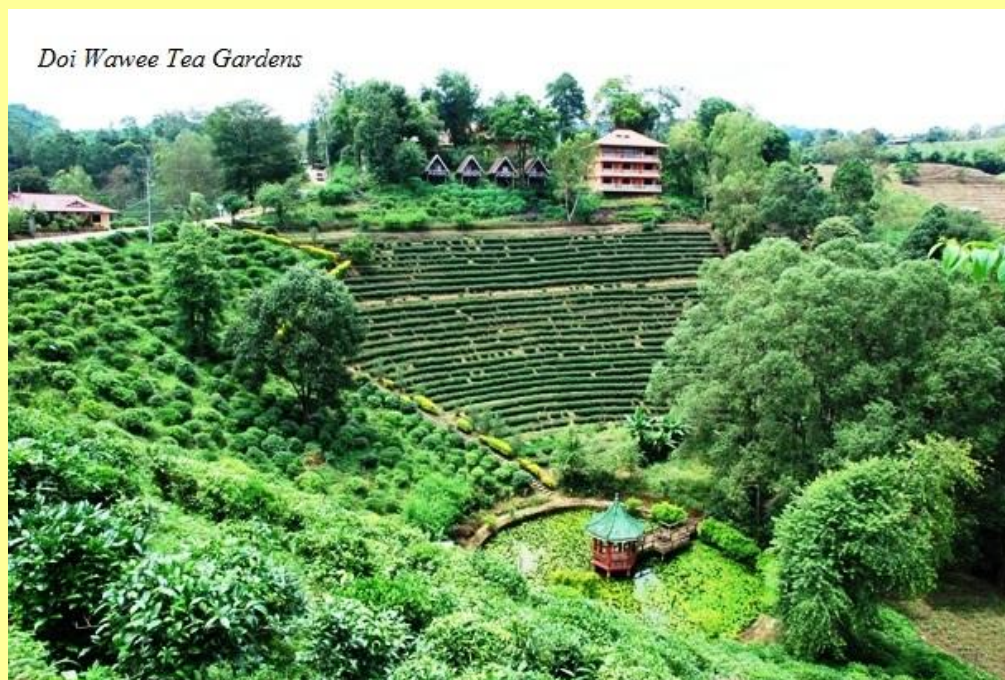
Two factors played a key role in the initiation and development of the commercial cultivation and processing of high quality teas in Northern Thailand:

1. Thai Royal Projects

While on the one hand it was clear that Thailand, in a bid to boost its international reputation as a developed and modern country, had to put an appropriate regulatory framework in place and enforce it, the wise king of Thailand, on the other hand, knew that it wouldn't be a sustainable solution to deprive people of their source of income without offering them another way to earn their living. Thus, a range of Royal Projects were initiated to be instrumental in identifying, researching and promoting a variety of cash crops that would thrive well under the region's diverse geographic and climate conditions. For higher altitudes, inhabited mainly by hill tribes and Chinese migrants, such crops included coffee and tea.

2. Ethnic Chinese Communities

A second key factor in the development of Northern Thailand's tea cultivation were the ethnic Chinese settlers of the mountain enclaves Doi Mae Salong and Doi Wawee, established during the early 1950s by remnants of the



Chinese General Chiang Kai Shek's Kuomintang army, which were looking for a new home in Northern Thailand after having failed their resistance against Mao Tse Tung's Cultural Revolution in China. While the 2 settlements are said to have been major players in the Golden Triangle's opium trade before, the Chinese millennium-old tradition and knowledge of tea cultivation and processing paid back, when these communities tried to make a virtue out of

The Taiwan Connection

It was those Kuomintang Chinese, who introduced the crucial momentum into the development of a thriving tea cultivation and processing culture in Northern Thailand. After initial experiments with the above-mentioned local tea species had failed to produce a tea that would be marketable outside the country, the ethnic Chinese populations of the Doi Mae Salong and Doi Wawee communities remembered their old ties with their counterpart Kuomintang settlements in Taiwan's Alishan mountains, which had been successful in the growing and processing of Oolong and green teas that had already gained worldwide popularity. In 1994, they imported plants of some of the finest Formosa Oolong tea species, especially the hybrids No 12 and No 17, from the Alishan mountain region to Northern Thailand and began cultivating them.



Rise to Fame

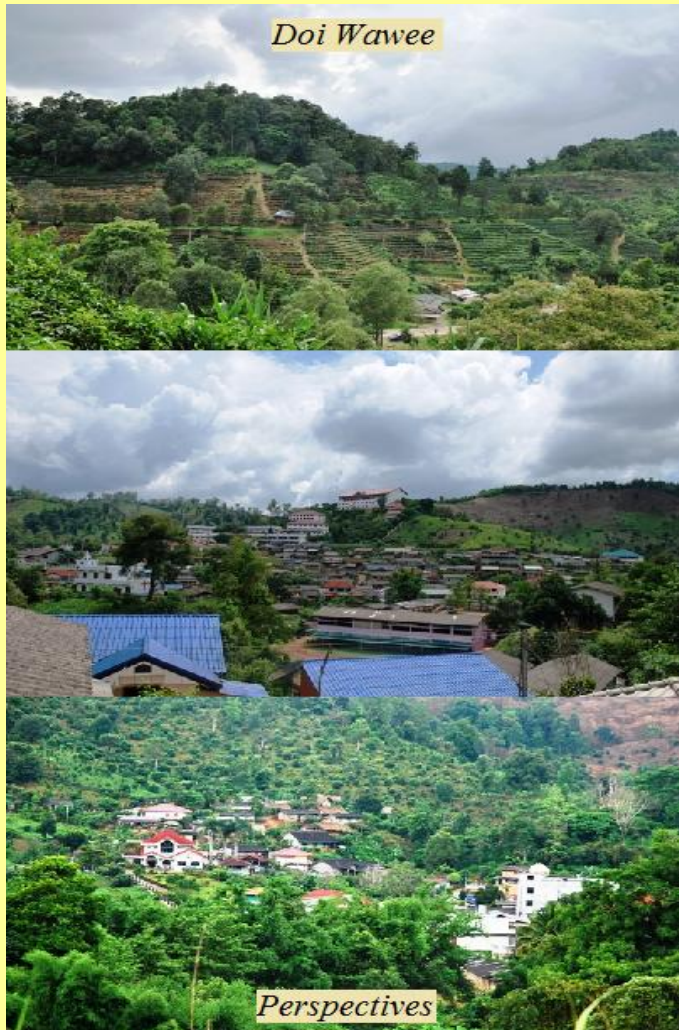
Only with the millennium change, these plants produced their first harvests, proving to produce high quality teas, which, however, still had a long way to go to the diversified tea portfolio Doi Mae Salong and Doi Wawee offer today. Besides the larger, Royal Project-driven tea cultivation and processing ventures at Doi Tung, a multitude of small to medium family-run tea productions emerged in and around the two Chinese communities, benefiting from the Chinese settlers' expert knowledge, trade connections and work and business attitude. Moreover, the rather small local tea factories impress with state-of-the-art production facilities and machinery.

Especially Doi Mae Salong soon developed a broad portfolio of tea products, ranging from high quality Green Teas via Chinese and Taiwanese classic Oolong teas such as "4-Seasons Tea", "Dong Ding Tea" and "Oriental Beauty" Tea and a range of scented or flavored teas, for which Jasmine Tea, Osmanthus Tea or Rice Tea, a particular Northern Thai/Shan areas specialty, might serve as examples, to some herbal teas made from local herbs such as the Chinese "immortality herb" Jiaogulan and Safflower Tea. Just recently, Doi Mae Salong has even started producing a Black Tea that is often compared to a Darjeeling by tea connoisseurs.

While these teas initially were produced mainly for the local Thai market, with exceed volumes sold to and via China, and Northern Thai teas not enjoying a reputation of their own, this has started changing just recently. Due to the producers' accumulated know how and experience, teas from Northern Thailand are about to establish their own name in the industry, with more and more international and smaller traders and trademarks now counting a "Thai Oolong" to their portfolio. This trend is strong and continuing, fuelled by the ethnic Chinese Northern Thai producers' constant quality enhancement and product diversification efforts.



Present Picture and Outlook



Today the hill slopes around both Doi Mae Salong and Doi Wawee, are covered with extended tea gardens and plantations. Space seems to be the minimum factor; however, the limitedness generated this way only contributes further to the value of Northern Thai teas.

Also meanwhile, especially Doi Mae Salong has achieved significant tourist appeal and popularity based on its natural treasures, cultural particularities and increasingly omnipresent tea culture. Tourists strolling through town, shopping on the daily local Chinese market, hanging out in tea shops and tea rooms and savoring the local tea specialties have become a common sight on Doi Mae Salong's 3-km-long, windy roller-coaster main street.

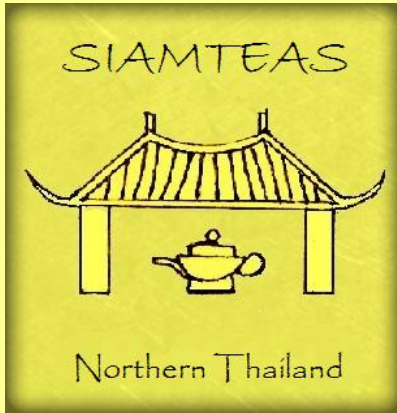
While Shin Sane Guest House, the town's first tourist accommodation, established in 1982, when backpackers still came here to see poppy fields and try some opium pipes rather than tea, still exists, with a handful more low-budget accommodations having risen in the nearby neighborhood, some fancier Hotel and Resort operations, such as the "Khum Nai Pol" or "Flower Garden" resorts, have meanwhile established, too, serving a more demanding and, of course, more solvent audience. The tourists, bringing bags of Northern Thai teas back to their home countries and spreading the word there as well, have significantly contributed to the rising international popularity of teas from Northern Thailand. However, once the industry has taken notice of a niche, this will soon become a part of the mainstream, leading to Northern Thailand's above-mentioned entry on the world map of tea cultivation. And

the industry is just about to take notice: more and more often, agents from large and medium size trading companies can be seen visiting the Doi Mae Salong factories and shops now in order to find a supplier and complement their portfolios. Fortunately, limits are only set by volumes, not by quality, so the cultivation and production of tea in Northern Thailand looks at a bright future in regard to local development and the further expansion of its rather modest international stake.



Tea production facilities in Northern Thailand

Availability of Northern Thai Teas in the West



Though Northern Thailand as a tea cultivation area is now represented in many tea traders' portfolio and tea shop shelves by the one or other "Thai Oolong", the full spectrum of Northern Thai Green Teas, Oolong Teas, Scented Teas, Black Teas or Herbal Teas, was hardly available in the West until recently. However, the young venture SiamTeas, whose founder and general manager is a German, who calls Northern Thailand his home by choice for more than 20 years now, has now specialized in teas from Northern Thailand and particularly Doi Mae Salong, covering a comprehensive portfolio of Green Teas; Oolong Teas, Black Teas, Scented Teas and Herbal Teas produced there. You will find more detailed and background information about teas from Northern Thailand on SiamTeas' "Siam Tea Blog" under www.siamteas.com, and Western tea lovers can buy Northern Thai tea products at Siam Tea Shop under www.siam-tee.de.