



Japan Fund for Prosperous and
Resilient Asia and the Pacific



From
the People of Japan

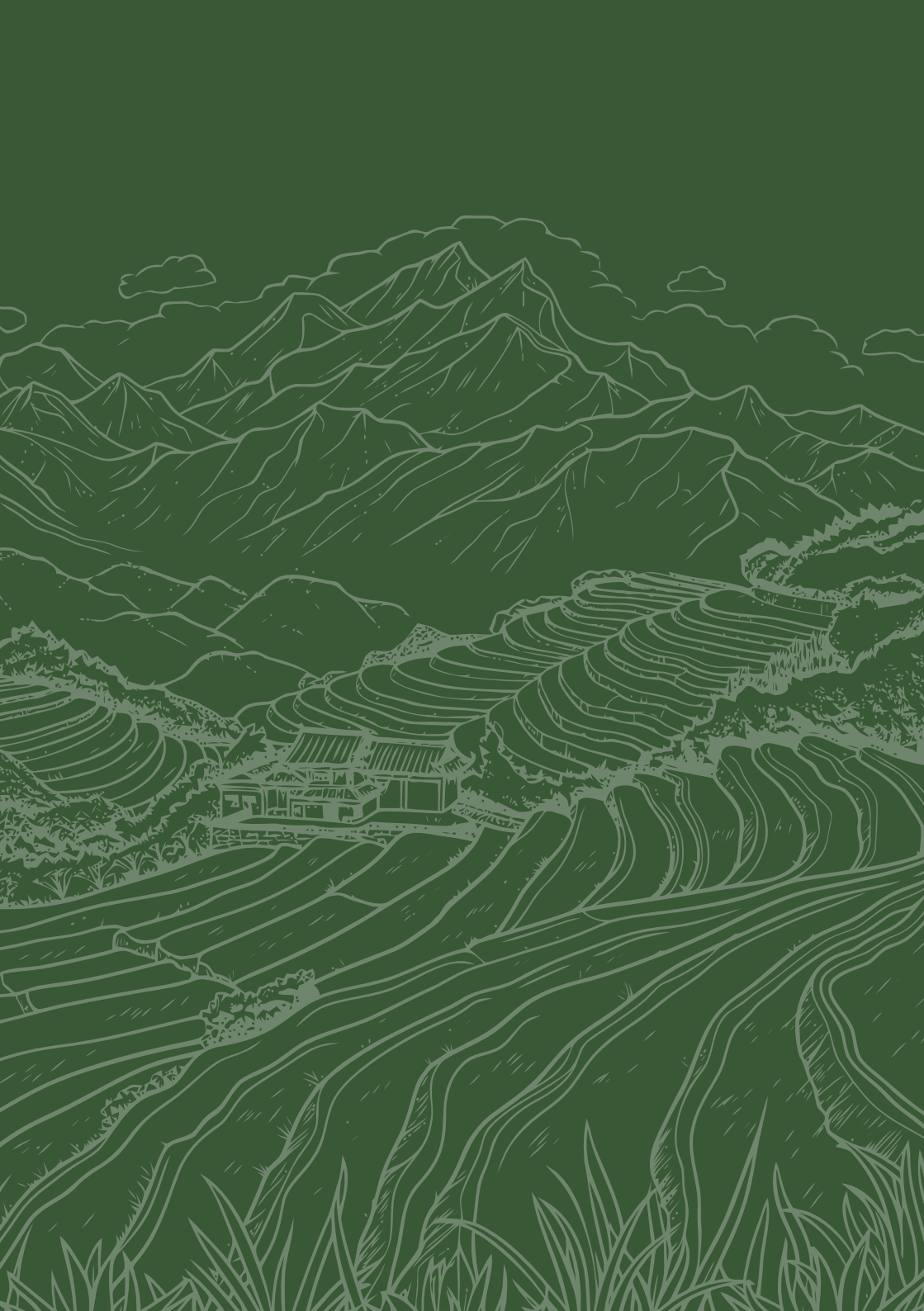
EXPLORING

Hà Giang
A COMPREHENSIVE
Snow
Shan

SPECIALTY TEA HANDBOOK

By

TONY GEBELY



EXPLORING
Hà Giang
A COMPREHENSIVE
**Snow
Shan**
SPECIALTY TEA HANDBOOK

TONY GEBELY

2025

TA6776-VIE: Strengthening Institutional Capacity for the Implementation of the Master Plan on Socio-Economic Development of the Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas 2021–2030

The grant fund for TA6776-VIE was received from the Japan Fund for Prosperous and Resilient Asia and the Pacific financed by the Government of Japan through the Asian Development Bank



This consultant's product does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or the Government concerned, and ADB and the Government cannot be held liable for its contents.



INTRODUCTION

This handbook was developed through the **Technical Assistance 6776-VIE: Strengthening Institutional Capacity for the Implementation of the Master Plan on Socio-Economic Development of the Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas 2021–2030**, with grant fund from the Japan Fund for Prosperous and Resilient Asia and the Pacific financed by the Government of Japan through the Asian Development Bank.

The handbook provides a comprehensive snapshot of Hà Giang’s specialty Shan tea production, highlighting the unique high mountain conditions and the dedication of the local communities involved in cultivating and processing these exceptional teas. The handbook is expected to promote specialty Shan tea of Hà Giang province, Viet Nam, in domestic and international markets, ultimately contributing to improving livelihoods of local ethnic minority communities.

This handbook was produced by Tony Gebely, a world-famous tea expert, with support from the Hà Giang Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and many other individual experts in the Hà Giang tea industry.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony Gebely is a world-renowned tea expert whose profound passion for tea has taken him on a global journey, transforming a personal interest into a celebrated career in the world of tea. In 2009, he began sharing his tea explorations with the world through his award-winning blog, *World of Tea*, which later evolved into *Tea Epicure* (<http://www.teaepicure.com>).

Tony is the author of two influential books, *Tea: A User’s Guide* (Eggs + Toast Media, 2016) and *The Philosophy of Tea* (The British Library, 2020). These works have solidified his reputation as a leading authority in the tea community. *Tea: A User’s Guide* offers a comprehensive examination of 130 types of tea, detailing their processing methods and origins, while *The Philosophy of Tea* explores the cultural and historical significance of tea across the globe.

Tony’s contributions to the tea world extend beyond writing. He has served as a certified international judge at the *Tea Masters Cup* and founded the American Specialty Tea Alliance, which aimed to raise the profile of specialty tea in the United States. His expertise has also been featured on platforms such as Malcolm Gladwell’s Revisionist History podcast, where he discussed the intricacies of tea culture and practice.



PHOTOGRAPHY CREDIT

Katie Gebely (www.katiegebely.com), a mixed-media artist based in Asheville, North Carolina, captured the photos of Hà Giang, highlighting its beauty, culture, and tea traditions. Tea product photos were taken by **Đoàn Ánh Dương**.



A NOTE ON THE VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE

The official language of Viet Nam is Vietnamese, a tonal language written using the Vietnamese alphabet, which is based on the Roman alphabet:

Aa, Ăă, Ââ, Bb, Cc, Dd, Đđ, Ee, Êê, Gg, Hh, Ii, Kk, Ll, Mm, Nn, Oo, Ôô, Ơơ, Pp, Qq, Rr, Ss, Tt, Uu, Ứứ, Vv, Xx, Yy

In its written form, Vietnamese employs digraphs and diacritics to mark tones, which are essential for conveying meaning. Throughout this book, a sincere effort has been made to honor these digraphs and diacritics for people's names and place names.

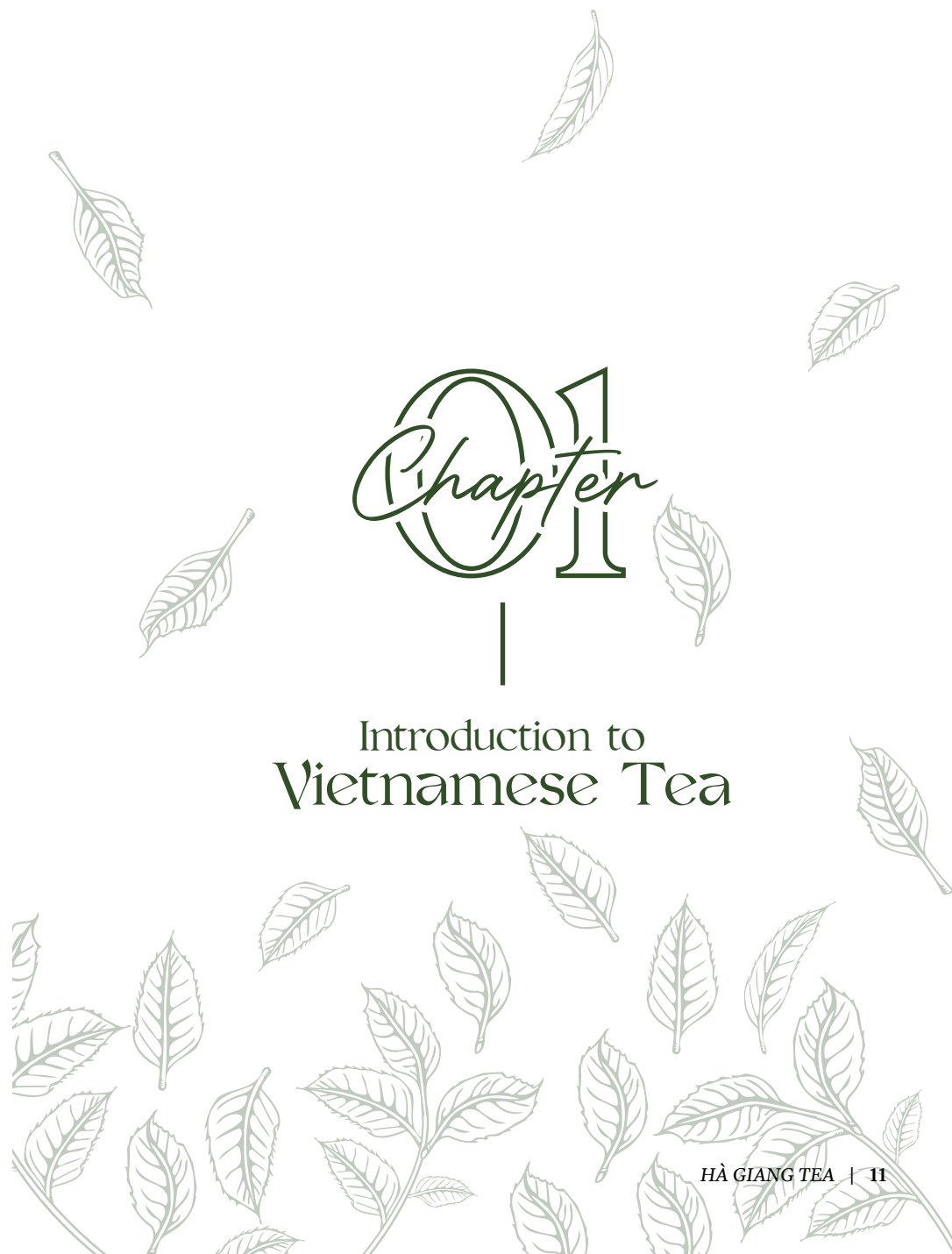
Regarding the structure of Vietnamese names, they are written in the order of *family middle given*. For example, in the name *Nguyễn Văn Ngọc*, “Nguyễn” is the family name, “Văn” is the middle name, and “Ngọc” is the given name.



Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	06
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	07
A NOTE ON THE VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE	08
 CHAPTER ONE	 11
<i>Introduction to Vietnamese Tea</i>	
 CHAPTER TWO	 15
<i>Introduction to Viet Nam Tea Vernacular</i>	
 CHAPTER THREE	 20
<i>Snow Shan Tea Overview</i>	
 CHAPTER FOUR	 25
<i>Introduction to Hà Giang</i>	
 CHAPTER FIVE	 31
<i>Cultural Aspects of Hà Giang</i>	
 CHAPTER SIX	 41
<i>Specialty Teas of Hà Giang</i>	
 CHAPTER SEVEN	 49
<i>Hà Giang City: Gateway to Ancient Snow Shan Teas</i>	
 CHAPTER EIGHT	 55
<i>Tea Heritage of Vị Xuyên: Shadows of Tây Côn Lĩnh</i>	

CHAPTER SEPTEMBER	67
<i>Hoàng Su Phì: Rice Terraces and Majestic Peaks</i>	
CHAPTER TEN	86
<i>Quang Bình: Valleys of Tradition and Tea</i>	
CHAPTER ELEVEN	95
<i>Xín Mần: Tea Gardens of the Western Edge</i>	
CHAPTER TWELVE	101
<i>Đồng Văn: Viet Nam's Northernmost Tea Haven</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	107
<i>Yên Minh: Guardians of Tea Tradition</i>	
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	111
<i>The Future of Hà Giang Tea</i>	
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	118
<i>Traveling in Hà Giang</i>	
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	124
<i>Purchasing Tea from Hà Giang</i>	
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	128
<i>Directory of Tea Producers</i>	





When one thinks of the world’s tea giants, Viet Nam may not immediately spring to mind—yet this vibrant nation stands as a quiet powerhouse in the global tea market. While it is renowned for mass-producing commodity tea, recent years have ushered in a wave of exceptional developments in the specialty tea segment that demands global attention. From the lush, rolling hills of its tea-rich regions, Viet Nam is rapidly emerging as a key player, offering unique teas that captivate connoisseurs and casual drinkers alike. This evolution is reshaping perceptions and placing Vietnamese tea firmly on the map as a source of both quantity and exquisite quality.

Tea is grown in over half of Viet Nam’s 58 provinces, with Thái Nguyên, Hà Giang, and Phú Thọ being the largest tea-producing areas. Viet Nam is currently ranked fifth in tea plantation area and sixth in terms of tea output worldwide with a total of 196,000 tons in 2022. This number is not insignificant, with the estimated value of teas produced around 552 million USD. The country’s diverse climate, ranging from the tropical south to the subtropical north, creates unique conditions that significantly impact its tea production. Key regions such as Thái Nguyên, Mộc Châu, and Hà Giang are renowned for their distinctive teas—vibrant green teas, aromatic oolongs, and robust pu’er-style teas, respectively. 48,000 tons were consumed domestically in 2022, the remainder found homes in 74 countries worldwide with Pakistan and Taiwan leading, with 48,000 tons and 14,000 tons respectively (see table below).



2023 Viet Nam Tea Export Data

COUNTRY	TONS
Pakistan	48,000 tons
Taiwan	14,000 tons
Russia	6,500 tons
China	6,300 tons
Indonesia	6,000 tons
United States of America	5,500 tons
Iraq	5,000 tons
Malaysia	4,200 tons
Thailand	3,200 tons
India	2,200 tons

One exciting area of growth within the Vietnamese tea industry is specialty tea made from the *Shan Tea variety*. Found primarily in the mountainous northern regions, this tea variety represents a significant opportunity for both the local people and the broader tea industry, yielding exquisite teas from the rugged terrain of Viet Nam’s northern provinces, specifically, Hà Giang Province. These teas, made from ancient tea trees high in the mountains, are cultivated and harvested by ethnic minorities who have honed their techniques over generations. Highland Shan tea is particularly prized for its unique flavor profile and the traditional methods

used in its production, making it a jewel in Viet Nam's tea offerings. Despite its potential, these exceptional teas have yet to gain widespread recognition in the global tea market, presenting a significant untapped opportunity.

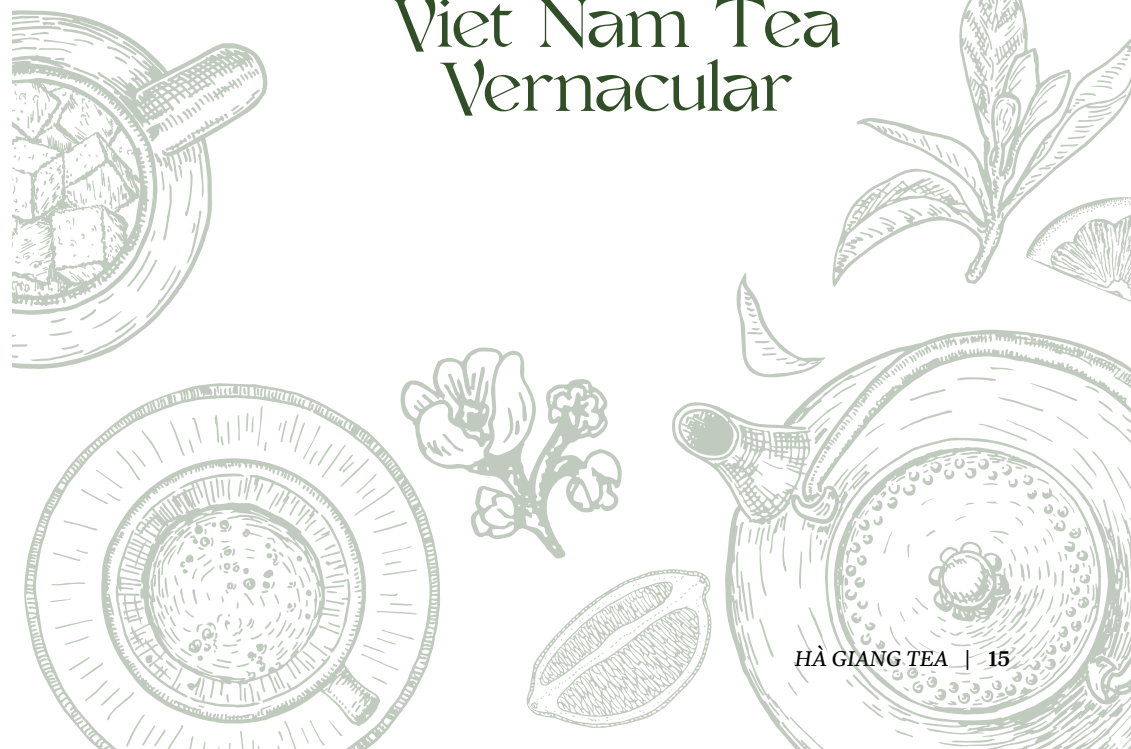
Hà Giang's tea products have garnered international acclaim, showcasing their exceptional quality. At the 2019 International Tea Competition, featuring 128 samples from 17 countries, Hà Giang's teas won prestigious awards. These included the World Impression Award for Bạch Trà (Shan Tuyết Cổ Thụ Tây Côn Lĩnh), the World Gold Award for Hồng Trà (Shan Tuyết Cổ Thụ Tây Côn Lĩnh), and the Silver Award for Hồng Trà (Shan Tuyết Cổ Thụ 1 búp Tây Côn Lĩnh). These accolades highlight the remarkable excellence of Hà Giang's specialty teas.

Before delving into the world of specialty Shan tea products, with a focus on Hà Giang, it is crucial to establish a broader understanding of the different types of tea produced globally and how they correlate to what is being produced in Viet Nam today. The next Chapter will embark on an exploration of Hà Giang province and the high-quality Snow Shan Tea products being produced there. This focus will unveil the intricate relationship between the land, the people, and their tea, highlighting how Shan Tea encapsulates the essence of Vietnamese tea culture.



Chapter 2

Introduction to Viet Nam Tea Vernacular

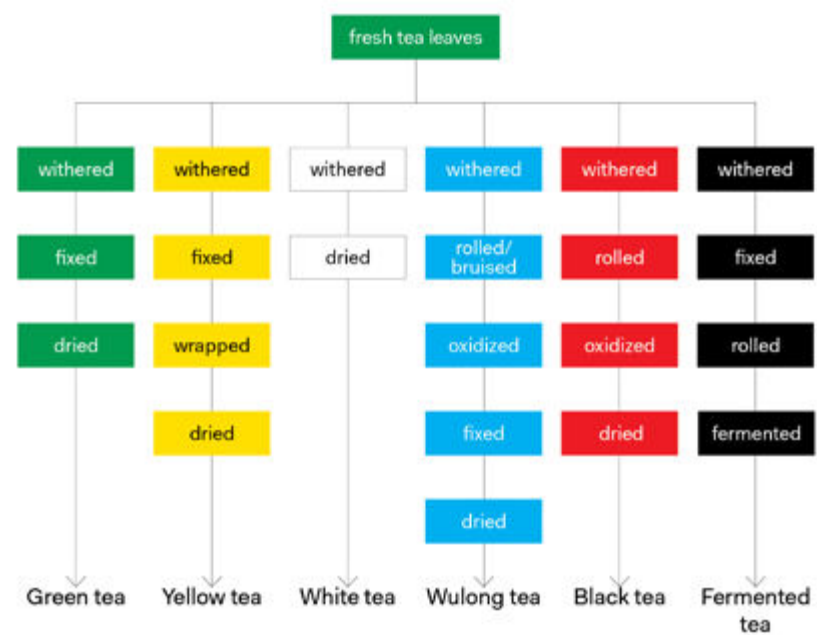


Globally there are 6 recognized types of *true tea*. True tea comes from the varieties and cultivars of the *Camellia sinensis* plant, a broad-leaf perennial evergreen. Any other plant material steeped in hot water is technically called a *tisane* or sometimes an *herbal tea*.

The 6 globally recognized types of tea are:

- **Green Tea**
- **Yellow Tea**
- **White Tea**
- **Wulong Tea**
- **Black Tea**
- **Fermented Tea**

These tea types are defined by the processing steps in which the leaves undergo once they are harvested from the tea plant. The chart below outlines the processing steps that are minimally required for a tea to be considered one of a specific type.



Any variations in processing within these broad-stroke definitions result in variations, or what we call *tea styles*. For example, when producing a green tea, the *fixing* step, in which the leaves are heated to prevent oxidation, can be done several different ways, resulting in different *styles* of green tea that exhibit quite different characteristics.

Now that we’ve established a basic understanding of the six major global tea types, let’s explore how these align with their Vietnamese equivalents. In Viet Nam, the term for tea is ‘trà,’ pronounced somewhat like ‘cha,’ but with a very soft ‘r’ and a low-pitched ‘a,’ as marked by the grave accent (à) — an indicator of the tonal nature of the Vietnamese language.

Tea terminology in Viet Nam varies, often expressed using Modern Vietnamese or Hán Việt, with the latter consisting of words derived from Chinese. Ideally, a consistent style would simplify discussions, but it’s common to encounter a blend of both Modern Vietnamese and Hán Việt in the tea industry. Therefore, we will use the vernacular commonly observed in the industry throughout this text.

Modern Vietnamese Style

- Green tea: trà xanh
- Yellow tea: trà vàng
- White tea: trà trắng
- Oolong: trà ô long
- Black tea: trà đen
- Pu’er style tea: trà phổ nhĩ



Hán Việt Style

- 绿茶 - Lũ chá: Lục trà
- 黄茶 - Huáng chá: Hoàng trà
- 白茶 - Bái chá: Bạch trà
- 乌龙茶 - Wū lóng chá: Ô-long trà
- 红茶 - Hóng chá: Hồng trà
- 普洱茶 - Pǔ ěr chá: Phổ nhĩ trà



Commonly Used by the Tea Industry

- Green tea: trà xanh
- Yellow tea: trà vàng
- White tea: bạch trà
- Oolong: ôlong trà
- Black tea: hồng trà
- Pu'er style tea: trà phổ nhĩ

It's important to note that *hồng trà* directly translates to red tea in English, a term commonly used in many Asian countries to describe what is known in the West as black tea. This nomenclature arises from the reddish hue of the tea's liquor. However, since *black tea* is the term more widely recognized internationally, we will use it in this text to maintain clarity and align with global tea terminology standards. Next, we move on to two tea types that need a little explanation when coming at this topic from a global perspective: Trà Vàng (Yellow Tea) and Trà Phổ Nhĩ (Pu'er style Tea).

To fully grasp the concepts of *Trà Vàng* and *Trà Phổ Nhĩ*, it's essential to understand Pu'er. Pu'er is a fermented tea originating from China's Yunnan Province, protected by a Geographical Indication, which restricts the use of the term *Pu'er* to this specific region. The primary raw material for Pu'er is called *maocha*, meaning *coarse* or *unfinished tea*, comprising sun-dried tea leaves that have been previously withered and fixed.

In Viet Nam, tea producers often label maocha as *Yellow Tea*, or *Trà Vàng*, which can lead to confusion with true yellow teas found in China and South Korea. These authentic yellow teas involve a unique processing step where the leaves are wrapped in cloth and allowed to yellow after fixing, a step not used in maocha production.

Moving on, in China, maocha undergoes natural fermentation to produce Sheng Pu'er, or *Phổ Nhĩ sống* in Viet Nam, or it is artificially fermented in piles to create Shu Pu'er, known as *Phổ Nhĩ chín* in Viet Nam. To simplify discussions and avoid confusion, we will use the term *Trà Phổ Nhĩ* to collectively describe both maocha and the Vietnamese

equivalents of raw and cooked Pu'er-style teas, unless specific distinctions are necessary.

In short, when you hear a tea being referred to as *Yellow Tea*, or *Trà Vàng* in Viet Nam, it is almost certainly the same as maocha or raw pu'er.

In Viet Nam's Hà Giang Province, an effort is underway to standardize tea names utilizing the local name for the wild tea cultivars found there, thus you may encounter the following tea names in use:

- Green tea: Green Snow Shan tea
- Black tea: Black Snow Shan
- White tea: White Snow Shan
- Fermented tea: Fermented Snow Shan tea

The nuances between the traditional Vietnamese terms and their global counterparts can seem intricate. By bridging this gap in understanding, you can better appreciate the distinct characteristics of Vietnamese teas and how they fit into the broader context of global tea culture. This foundation will not only enhance your appreciation but also enable you to communicate more effectively about these teas.



Chapter 3

Snow Shan Tea Overview



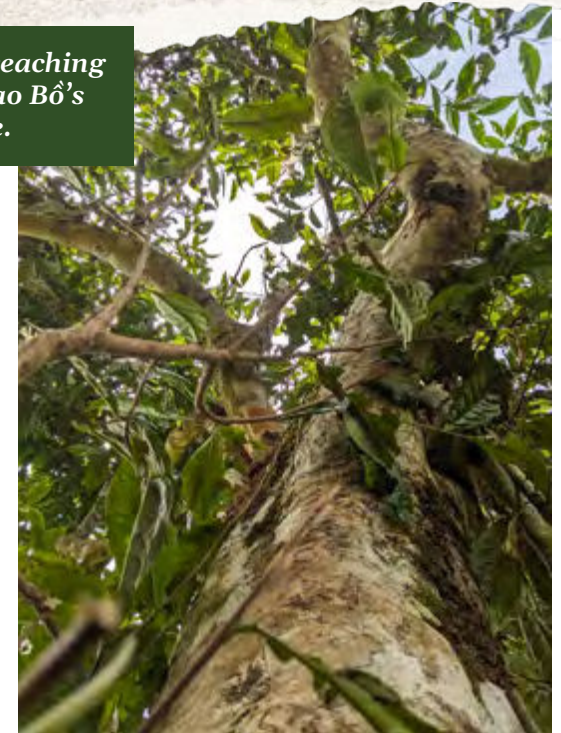
On earth, there exists a swath of land beginning in India's Assam, that runs through the North of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos, and China's Yunnan Province, ending in Northern Viet Nam. From these lands, the tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*, originates, and continues to self-propagate in the wild today.

Across this native tea belt can be found the oldest wild tea trees in the world, deep in mountain forests, in small clusters, naturally propagated by seeds on steep mountainsides; and where cultivated, garden groves of tea trees.

Unlike the tea plantations that supply most of the world's commodity teas, where you will see rows upon rows of tea plants trimmed waist-high for easy harvesting, a monoculture, maintained by fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, these tea trees, are in fact trees.

A large tea tree reaching into the sky in Cao Bồ's Lũng Tao Village.

If left unpruned, the tea plant will develop into a tree, anywhere from 2-20 meters high depending upon the variety and environmental conditions. These trees are often found in biodiverse landscapes, free from intervention by man.





CAMELLIA SINENSIS VAR. SHAN

Zooming back out, there are two primary species of tea plants, Assamica and Sinensis. The plants that make up the native tea belt are an extremely diverse array of Assamica varieties and descendants. There are also many other species of Camellia that technically aren't tea, and to make matters more confusing, there also exist hybrids between these species and of Assamica and Sinensis. Proper characterization of these plants will require gene studies and cooperation between the countries that the tea belt runs through, and some of these studies are already underway.



An ancient Shan tea tree growing in Hà Giang.

The ancient tea trees of Northern Viet Nam primarily used for tea production exhibit distinctive characteristics and have been labeled **Camellia sinensis var. Shan** and are often referred to as *Snow Shan* or *Shan Tuyết*. Here are the defining characteristics

as described by RMIT University Professor, Nguyễn Quốc Vọng:

- A large woody tree with substantial branches, growing 3-10 meters tall, with branches having a diameter ≥ 20 cm.
- Tea bud covered with fine white hair, hence the name “snow/ tuyết.” Shan tea has a large snow bud.
- A young tea stem of 1 bud + 3 leaves varies from 12cm to 15cm.
- A young tea stem of 1 bud + 2 leaves varies from 8cm to 10cm.
- The fresh weight of 1 bud + 2 leaves varies from 1.2g to 1.6g.
- Tea leaves are large, long, and serrated, with about 5-14 pairs of leaf veins, sharp tips, and light green in color.
- Flowers are large and conspicuous, 6cm to 9cm in diameter, with five petals. The color of the sepals is white.
- The so-called “fruit” is a round, large dry capsule about 4cm to 6cm in diameter, sometimes subdivided into six compartments, with each compartment containing one seed.



Tea trees greater than 100 years old are labeled *Ancient* and the teas made from them, *Ancient Tree Teas*. Not only are these teas seen primarily in biodiverse landscapes, but they also hold a biodiverse universe as a host plant as well. Moss, lichen, even orchids and ferns can be seen growing on these tea trees, adding to their beauty and distinctiveness.

Given the reverence for these ancient trees and the exceptional quality of their leaves, it is imperative that



A world of biodiversity exists, even on the surface of the ancient tea trees of Hà Giang.

they are not used for low-quality tea products. Leaves from ancient Shan tea trees should never end up in low-grade tea bags or bottled tea beverages, which are typically made from inferior leaves. Instead, these high-quality leaves deserve to be crafted into specialty teas. By “Specialty Tea,” we mean teas that are grown at high elevations, harvested by hand with meticulous care, processed with attention to detail, and comprised of large, beautiful, unbroken leaves. This careful handling and presentation elevate the tea to a premium standard, honoring the exceptional quality of the ancient Shan tea leaves. Specialty teas offer deeper, more complex flavors and aromas, and they have the unique ability to be steeped multiple times, revealing new dimensions with each infusion.

With an understanding about Shan Tea within the global context of tea production, the next Chapter will focus on Viet Nam’s northernmost province, Hà Giang, the largest producer of Shan Tea.



Chapter 4

Introduction to Hà Giang



The story of tea in Hà Giang mirrors the intricate tale of Viet Nam itself—a tapestry of intertwined narratives, rich in complexity and depth. Young enthusiasts from both this region and the bustling cities of Viet Nam are driving a renaissance in tea culture, eager to master the art and craft of specialty tea. They are joined by an ever-increasing number of international tea merchants, drawn to Hà Giang to procure Shan Tea leaves and oversee the transformation of these into their own premium products, appreciating and willing to pay for the unique beauty of the locally grown tea.

The tea industry in Hà Giang strives to carve out its niche on the global stage, often contending with the overshadowing influence of larger international markets that obscure its unique origins. The infrastructure here is evolving, gradually connecting remote villages and opening the region to the wider world. Hà Giang's landscape is a testament to natural grandeur, with its rugged terrains, steep peaks, deep valleys, swift rivers, and terraced rice fields. Amidst this backdrop lie remote, naturally occurring tea gardens, hidden treasures nurtured by the local ethnic communities. This is Hà Giang—where tradition meets potential, and the story of specialty tea unfolds in the heart of Viet Nam.

*Đồng Văn's beautiful
Sung La Valley.*

Hà Giang, pronounced *Ha ZAHNG*, is Viet Nam's northernmost province, with its northernmost point marked by the Lũng Cú Flag Tower in Đồng Văn. This 30-meter-tall tower, situated on the summit of Lũng Cú Peak at 1,400 meters above sea level, is topped with a large Vietnamese flag and sits just across the border from China.

Hà Giang boasts a dramatic landscape of towering limestone and granite peaks, deep-cut canyons, valleys, and winding river systems. The province's mountains, often shrouded in clouds for much of the year, create an ethereal, almost mystical atmosphere. This unique topography and the monsoon-influenced humid subtropical climate make Hà Giang an ideal region for tea cultivation, with altitudes ranging from 1,300 meters to 2,247 meters above sea level.

The climate in Hà Giang is characterized by an average annual precipitation of 1,162.4mm, with rain falling on 162 days each year. The region experiences a moderate range of temperatures, with average yearly highs of 26.6°C and lows of 6.6°C, and an overall average temperature of 17.1°C. This combination of high altitude, ample rainfall, and favorable temperatures creates optimal conditions for tea cultivation, contributing to the rich, robust flavors that Hà Giang's specialty teas are renowned for.

Hà Giang could very well be the best-kept secret in the global tea industry, but alas, the secret is out. A 2018 Geographical Indication put this region on the map, protecting the *Hà Giang Shan Tea* name and expressly granting 44 communes across 6 districts the ability to produce tea under this name.

Putting this region into context, Hà Giang and China's Yunnan Province share a 270km border and similar majestic landscapes, where the soil and climate have nurtured some of the world's most prized teas. While Yunnan's teas have long been celebrated globally, Hà Giang's specialty teas, particularly the raw materials, possess comparable qualities that are just beginning to be recognized. This untapped potential offers a unique opportunity for tea connoisseurs to discover new, exquisite flavors reminiscent of, yet distinct from, their Yunnan counterparts.



Clusters of dark green tea trees can be seen blending in into the forest on a hillside in Hoàng Su Phì district.

While Shan Tea is found across northern Viet Nam, Hà Giang stands out with over 90% of the country's Shan Tea trees located within its borders. The ancient tea tree groves of Hà Giang span approximately 7,200 hectares and house an estimated 2 million tea trees. The majority of these trees are concentrated around the Tây Côn Lĩnh mountain range, thriving at elevations ranging from 600 to 1,500 meters. The region's unique microclimate, enriched with mist and ample rainfall, creates optimal conditions for these tea trees to flourish.

The ancient tea tree gardens in the highlands of rural Hà Giang are maintained by the many ethnic minorities who call this region home, with 30,361 households relying on tea as their primary source of income, 90% of which are Dao and Hmông. Ethnic Hmông, Tày, and Dao Villages have

been caring for and harvesting tea leaves from Hà Giang's ancient trees for generations. Income from these trees either comes from selling the fresh leaves to processors, or from harvesting and processing the leaves themselves to sell to tea traders.

Viet Nam's provinces are divided into municipal-level subdivisions, a framework we will use to navigate through Hà Giang Province. The major tea-producing districts of Hà Giang include Hà Giang City and its surrounding communes, Vị Xuyên under the shadows of the province's highest peak, Tây Côn Lĩnh at 2,419 meters, Hoàng Su Phì in the west, Quang Bình to the south, and Xín Mần on the western edge. Additionally, the tea production areas extend northeast to Đồng Văn and Yên Minh, where the unique tea culture and heritage of Hà Giang thrive. An overview of hectares under production and tea production totals can be seen in the table below, the result of a 2017 district-level survey.

District	Tons of Tea Produced	Total Tea Hectares	Total Hectares Under Harvest
Vị Xuyên	13,203	3,652	3,334
Hoàng Su Phì	12,880	4,503	3,252
Bắc Quang	9,505	2,364	2,364
Quang Bình	8,570	2,405	2,255
Xín Mần	8,444	2,829	2,222
Yên Minh	2,000	1,343	630
Hà Giang City	676	315	301



With an understanding of Hà Giang’s significance in Viet Nam’s specialty tea scene, it’s essential to explore the cultural context of the people who call this region home. The people of Hà Giang, with their rich heritage and unique traditions, are integral to the region’s tea story. Their customs, rituals, and way of life are deeply connected to the land and the ancient tea trees they nurture. The following Chapter will delve into the cultural fabric of Hà Giang and explore how it influences and enhances the tea production that defines this province.

H À G I A N G



05
Chapter

Cultural Aspects of
Hà Giang



Hà Giang province, with its rugged landscapes and remote villages, is a living tapestry of ethnic diversity, natural splendor, and rich cultural heritage. Home to 19 ethnic minorities, the region's population is nearly 90% composed of groups like the Hmông, Tày, and Dao people, whose histories span thousands of years. This chapter delves into the profound cultural practices, daily life, and the integral role of tea in this enchanting province.

The indigenous people, the Dao, Hmông and Tày, have deeply influenced Hà Giang's cultural landscape. Their distinct traditions are reflected in their music, dance, costumes, rituals, and religious beliefs. Life in these villages is intimately connected to nature and traditional practices, creating a harmonious existence with their surroundings. Electricity is provided through extensive networks of wires extending from the towns below, while fresh water flows from mountain springs above, piped down to meet the needs of daily life-cooking, washing, and irrigating rice paddies and fishponds. Villagers rear a variety of livestock, including pigs, water buffalo, and chickens, which roam freely. When it's not tea season, they devote their time to cultivating other essential crops like rice and corn, maintaining a self-sufficient lifestyle that has sustained them for generations.

The ethnic minorities in Hà Giang often reside in distinctive traditional homes, including houses on stilts, wooden houses with thatched roofs, and houses with earthen walls. These unique architectural styles reflect their deep connection to the land and natural resources. Their vibrant and diverse traditional costumes further showcase their rich cultural heritage, with each piece of clothing telling a story of their history and traditions. The colorful attire, often adorned with intricate patterns and designs, is a testament to their artistic expression and cultural identity.

Tea is not only a vital crop but a cornerstone of social and cultural life in Hà Giang. In many villages, around 95% of households are engaged in tea production in some capacity. Typically, women take care and harvest the tea, while men handle the processing. This division of labor highlights the community's collaborative spirit and the significant role of tea in their daily lives.



The bright and ornate costumes of the Red Dao ethnic minority in Quang Bình's Tân Tiến Village.

The province's tea culture is deeply ingrained in the lives of its residents, who take immense pride in their tea. The tea produced in Hà Giang is celebrated for its unique flavors and exceptional quality. With its distinctively rich and earthy notes, the tea here reflects the region's terroir, influenced by the pristine air, fertile soil, and ideal climate conditions. Each stage of the tea cultivation process is marked by meticulous attention to detail, from the tender nurturing of the tea bushes to the skillful plucking of the leaves, all of which culminate in the creation of premium teas that are renowned for their unparalleled taste.

Beyond its agricultural significance, tea in Hà Giang serves as a social fabric, fostering community ties and expressing hospitality. When visiting a home, guests are warmly welcomed with a cup of tea, symbolizing peace, unity, and respect. This tradition transcends language barriers and cultural differences, inviting visitors to partake in the cherished custom of communal tea drinking. Tea is also central to various cultural festivities and rituals, such as family reunions, weddings, and community gatherings, where it symbolizes warmth, hospitality, and the forging of bonds among participants.

The ancient tea trees of Hà Giang are more than just crops; they are family heirlooms, passed down through generations. The villagers recall that these trees were already mature when they were born and have remained the same size throughout their lives. Their ancestors also harvested leaves from these same venerable trees. These tea trees, deeply rooted in history, are cherished and cared for, symbolizing the enduring legacy and connection between the land and the people. The guardianship of these trees is a revered responsibility, ensuring that the tradition of tea cultivation continues unbroken.

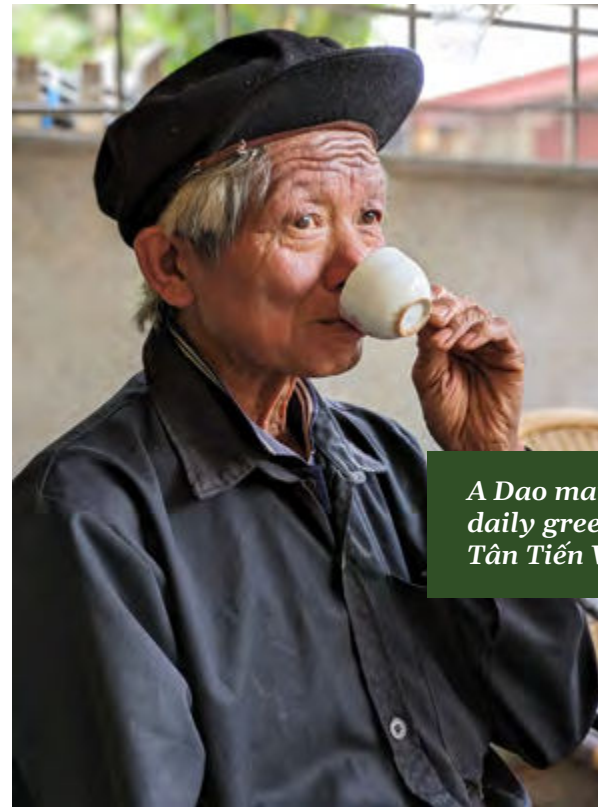
In the past, the Dao and Hmông people had a unique method of processing tea that has since faded into history. They would stuff freshly picked tea leaves into bamboo tubes and dry them under the sun. These bamboo tubes were then stored over the fire in the kitchens, where the smoke would further preserve them until the tea was ready to be consumed. This method imparted a distinctive roasty flavor to the

tea. Although this traditional practice has largely disappeared, a few producers are reviving it as a tribute to their heritage, keeping the spirit of this tradition alive in a modern context.

What follows is an account of this ancient cultural practice from a Hà Giang native:

After being harvested, tea leaves are put into a pan and lightly roasted to wilt them, then kneaded to reduce the sap. Afterward, they are either dried in the sun or placed in a drying oven before being sold to trading stores. A portion is kept and stored in bamboo tubes, hung above the kitchen to be used gradually. The way the local people drink this type of tea is also quite unique. Whenever guests visit, they are invited to gather around the hearth. The host boils water, takes a handful of tea from the bamboo tube, just enough for one teapot, and places it on a pan made of iron or aluminum, setting it on glowing coals to roast again until the tea buds crackle. Only then is it placed in the teapot for brewing. The teapot used is often a large one, about 1 liter, while for the Dao and Cờ Lao people

in Túng Sán commune, they use teapots made from old bamboo trunks, which not only retain heat but also enhance the tea's flavor. In the cozy atmosphere, the boiling water is poured into the teapot with a loud hiss,



A Dao man enjoying his daily green tea in Quang Bình's Tân Tiến Village.

and the fragrant aroma of Shan Tuyet tea rises, blending with the mist and mountain breezes. With just one bowl or cup of thick, hot tea being passed around from person to person, the host and guests become one.

Living in such remote areas presents numerous challenges for the tea-producing ethnic minorities of Hà Giang. Access to these villages is often limited to motorbike trails, and the rugged terrain can make transportation of goods difficult. Despite these obstacles, the villagers have adapted, utilizing the resources available to them and maintaining their traditional way of life. The introduction of modern infrastructure, such as new roads, electricity and improved water systems, has helped to ease some of these challenges. However, the essence of Hà Giang's tea culture remains rooted in its traditional practices and the resilience of its people, making Hà Giang a living heritage, a blend of tradition and adaptation.

Shan Tea from the Tây Côn Lĩnh Mountain area is deeply intertwined with the legend of Mạc Trà. According to the tale, Mạc Đăng Dung, a 16th-century emperor of Viet Nam, developed a fondness for a peculiar leaf harvested from the cloud-shrouded summit of a distant mountain. One day, while engrossed in the pursuit of a giant fish, he lost track of time and found himself wandering the vast mountains, weary and fatigued. After several arduous days, he stumbled



A Hmông woman arrives from the tea garden with a basket of tea leaves on her back in Xín Mần's Cốc Cộ Village.



A Hmông woman sorts tea leaves in Xín Mần's Quảng Hạ Village

upon a small riverside inn where the proprietor offered him three bowls of water. Miraculously, upon drinking the water, his exhaustion vanished, and his vitality was restored. Intrigued, he asked about the source and learned that the water was infused with leaves from a tea tree growing in a remote region.

From that moment on, Mạc Đăng Dung made it a ritual to drink three large cups of this tea and four cups of wine before practicing his swordsmanship or presiding over court, believing it enhanced his strength and intellect. As he lay on his

deathbed at the age of 59, he requested that a dragon sword and a large cup of tea be brought to him. Thus, in later times, the tea came to be known as “Mạc Trà” in his honor.

The economic benefits of tea cultivation are clear, with many villages relying on tea as their primary source of income. This income from tea either comes from selling the fresh leaves to processors or from harvesting and processing the leaves themselves to sell to tea traders.



A Dao woman in Quang Bình harvesting tea leaves (Documentary photo).

continues to grow and that the cultural heritage of the ethnic minorities is preserved for future generations.

The tea culture of Hà Giang is a rich tapestry woven from the traditions, histories, and daily lives of its people. From the ancient tea trees that have stood for generations to the modern efforts to preserve and promote Shan tea, the story of tea in Hà Giang is a testament to the enduring connection between the land and its people. As you explore the diverse tea products produced in this region, you will gain a deeper appreciation for the cultural heritage and the dedicated efforts of the communities that sustain this unique industry.

The cultivation and trade of tea contribute to the economic sustainability of the province, offering employment opportunities and driving tourism. Hà Giang's tea plantations have garnered attention from enthusiasts and connoisseurs, drawing visitors from far and wide to witness the scenic beauty and partake in the flavorful brews that have earned Hà Giang a distinguished place in Viet Nam's tea industry.

The future of Hà Giang's tea industry looks promising, with increased focus on preserving the ancient tea trees and promoting the unique qualities of Shan tea. The government, in collaboration with organizations like the Asian Development Bank and the Japan Fund for a Prosperous and Resilient Asia and the Pacific, is working on initiatives to support tea tree preservation, provide training to farmers, and improve the overall quality of tea production. These efforts aim to ensure that the tea industry



A woman preparing to sun dry tea leaves on tarps in Vĩ Xuyên's Trung Sơn Village.

Chapter

Specialty Teas of Hà Giang



SPECIALTY TEAS FOUND OF HÀ GIANG

The specialty teas of Hà Giang are distinguished by their exceptional qualities, falling into the green (trà xanh), white (bạch trà), black (hồng trà), and fermented (trà phổ nhĩ) categories. Each type of tea produced here exhibits unique profiles and production methods that set them apart in the broader market. These teas are attracting researchers and tea lovers worldwide and have gained global recognition having been on full display in Viet Nam's reception ceremonies in the highest levels of government, including a 2023 reception where a white tea from Hà Giang was served to President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping with Viet Nam General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng, prepared by Nguyễn Cao Sơn-- winner of the World Impression Award at the 5th International Tea Competition in Paris, France in 2022.

This chapter will highlight the distinctive attributes of Hà Giang's specialty teas, emphasizing the unique flavors, aromas, and craftsmanship that make these teas stand out. The future of tea in this region lies in celebrating and promoting these unique characteristics.



GREEN TEAS OF HÀ GIANG


Green tea (trà xanh) reigns as the most popular tea consumed in Viet Nam. In Hanoi's bustling business district, it's common to see businessmen at tea stalls, sipping strongly brewed green tea from glass cups. Hà Giang's green teas are usually made from one bud and one leaf, or one bud and two leaves. The production process involves either hand pan-firing or using machines to heat and tumble the leaves, halting oxidation. Afterward, the leaves are dried either in a drying machine or by continuing to tumble in the same machine. The mist-shrouded mountains



Tea leaves undergoing a fixing step by tumbling them over heat, these leaves will be processed into green tea.

of Hà Giang promote the formation of amino acid in the leaf, which results in a brothy, umami-rich character in the cup. This along with the drying process results in roasty green teas that have a robust body and depth. When tasting these teas, you can expect to find notes of melon, roasted nuts, herbs and a honey finish.

These teas steep quickly and can become quite astringent if left steeping too long. While this astringency isn't inherently negative, international consumers might find it unfamiliar. Steeping less tea for a shorter time at a lower temperature can reduce astringency and yield a sweeter taste.



White tea withering in the sun at a workshop in Phương Độ Commune's Lũng Vài Village.



BLACK TEAS OF HÀ GIANG

Black teas (hồng trà) are found throughout Hà Giang and are made from a variety of plucking standards. The leaves are withered, rolled using a rolling machine to initiate oxidation and then, are allowed to oxidize before being dried in a drying machine or in the sun. The black teas from this region are among the most cocoa-forward without actually containing cocoa. Their strong strong cocoa flavors are complemented by notes of honey, earthy undertones, roasted walnuts, and a hint of rose.



WHITE TEAS OF HÀ GIANG

High-end white teas (bạch trà) are typically made from buds, or buds with 1-2 leaves, with the buds being a key feature. The Shan variety of the tea plant, known for its large, snow-covered buds, makes Hà Giang an ideal region for producing exceptional specialty white teas. Hà Giang white teas boast intense floral aromas and deep flavors reminiscent of fresh bread, pear, and soy milk. A long, sweet honey finish further distinguishes these teas, making them some of the most flavorful white teas available.

Hà Giang's white teas are typically harvested, and then allowed to wither until dry, a process that takes around 3 days of full sun.



Tea rolling machine in Phương Độ Commune's Lũng Vài Village.



FERMENTED TEAS OF HÀ GIANG

Sharing a border with China's Yunnan Province, it's no wonder that Hà Giang is a powerhouse of fermented tea (trà phổ nhĩ) production, with China being the largest buyer of these styles of tea from Viet Nam. Primarily producing maocha, for raw pu'er style teas, these teas are harvested, withered, pan-fired and dried in the sun, just like their Yunnan counterparts. At times, they are charcoal roasted and sold to Guangxi for inclusion in a style of tea there called Liu Bao. There are also several producers who will pile ferment the leaves, to make shu pu'er style teas.

The distinctive flavor characteristics of Hà Giang's fermented teas set them apart. Raw Pu'erh style teas from this region boast prominent floral aromas, subtle hints of stone fruits such as apricots and plums, light herbal tones, delicate earthy flavors, and a lingering sweet aftertaste. Ripe Pu'erh style teas, on the other hand, offer strong earthy flavors, subtle woody notes, hints of roasted nuts, a smooth and velvety texture, and a soft, mellow sweetness. Given the high-quality raw material from the ancient trees in Hà Giang, and despite the growing recognition these teas are receiving, they deserve even greater focus and attention from tea buyers worldwide.



OTHER TEA-RELATED PRODUCTS OF HÀ GIANG

In the *Shan Tea Overview* chapter, we referenced the portion of our globe where the tea tree originated. Deep in the forests and usually at the highest elevations, untouched by man, throughout this region, we find close relatives to the tea tree. These plants are still from the *Camellia* genus, but they are not from the species *sinensis*.

Technically, products from these related plants are not *true teas*, but they are marketed as such around the world. These relatives of the tea plant are usually very tall trees, and they produce buds that look

quite different from buds of *Camellia sinensis*. Growing at the highest elevations, these trees are scarce and the harvesting process is labor-intensive, resulting in a limited supply. The combination of these factors and the high demand for their unique flavor profiles drives the price of these teas. The buds are typically harvested only in January and February, adding to their exclusivity.

Two distinct products found in Viet Nam made from buds of these plants are Dragon Teas (chè đuôi rồng) and Fairy Teas (chè bạch tiên). Each comes from a different type of wild tea plant relative and is processed like a white tea, resulting in their distinct appearance and flavor profile. These products likely have little to no caffeine. More research must be done to determine the exact species of *Camellia* these plants belong to in Viet Nam.



An example of a Dragon Tea from Hà Giang, this example is from Hà An Trà, in Hoàng Su Phì.

Dragon Teas (Chè Đuôi Rồng or Trà Rồng) are made from the buds of one type of wild tea plant relative. These teas are highly sought after for their unique flavor and appearance and are akin to a style called *Ya Bao* which is produced primarily in China, however, these teas are made from local Vietnamese cultivars. The buds are often plump, slightly green and still closed and are sometimes referred to as "Dragon Tails" or "Dragon Claws." Dragon Teas are distinguished by their fresh mountain forest flavors with green stonefruit notes, never bitter, and offering long, subtly sweet, peppery spice aftertastes. These teas can be steeped many times with little reduction in flavor.

An example of a Fairy Tea from Hà Giang, this example is from the Hà Giang Organic Agriculture Cooperative in Quang Bình.

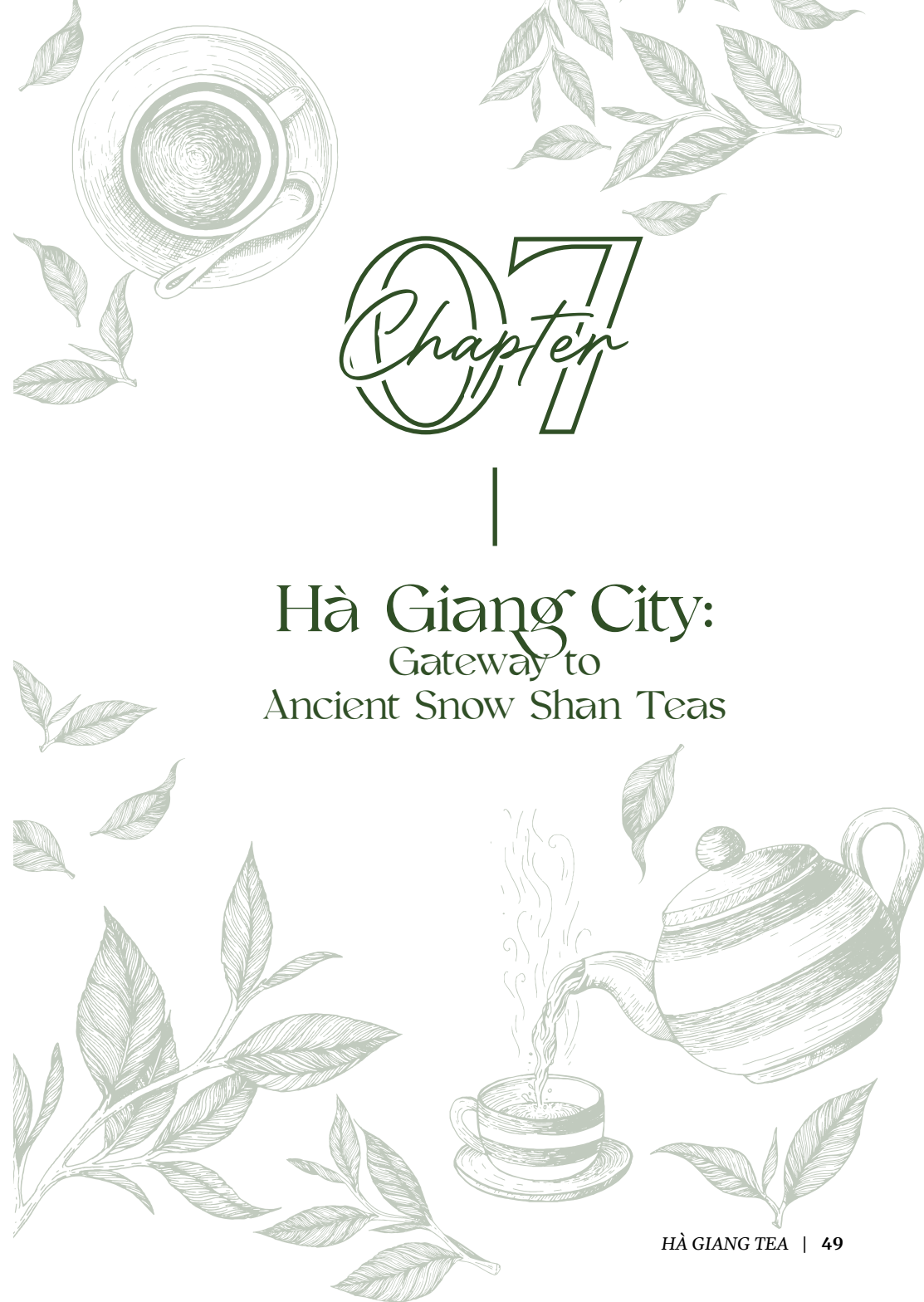


Fairy Teas (Chè Bạch Tiên or Trà Tiên) come from the axillary buds of a different type of wild tea plant relative. They are known for their delicate and nuanced flavors, often with floral and honey-like notes. The buds used for Fairy Teas are slightly open and look closer to bud-based white teas from the tea plant. Fairy Teas have a flavor profile reminiscent of fresh hay and fruity undertones, complemented by a honey aftertaste and a floral aroma. These distinctive qualities, along with the ability to be steeped multiple times, make this a unique offering in Viet Nam.

The tea harvest for ancient Shan tea trees in Viet Nam occurs in two main seasons: spring (March to May) and autumn (August to October). During these periods, villages may either harvest and sell fresh leaves directly to processing facilities or process the leaves themselves at a household level. These processing facilities can be cooperatives composed of village households or standalone processing companies.

It is crucial to have a cursory understanding the supply chain before visiting Hà Giang to navigate the market effectively. Familiarity with these practices will help in sourcing and evaluating tea from the region. More detail on this topic will be covered in the chapter “Purchasing tea from Hà Giang.”

With an understanding of the unique products being produced in Hà Giang, the following chapters present first-hand accounts from ethnic minority villagers, tea farmers, tea processors, and tea cooperatives. Each narrative shares unique perspectives on the wonderful teas they produce and the rich cultural heritage they uphold, setting the stage for an immersive exploration of Hà Giang’s tea culture.





*Beautiful Lũng Vài Village
in Phương Độ Commune.*

The journey begins in the areas surrounding the provincial city of Hà Giang. Just west of the city center, Phương Độ Commune is a significant hub for tea production. The commune encompasses three villages dedicated to tea growing, covering a total of 192 hectares. These villages are home to over 6,000 tea trees, some of which are aged between 200 and 800 years. Among these, Lũng Vài is particularly renowned for its exceptional tea production, making it a key highlight in the region's tea landscape.



LÝ VĂN HẠC



Mau Don White



Green Tea 'Tra Man'

In the serene setting of Lũng Vài Village, Lý Văn Hạc, a member of the Dao ethnic community, has been deeply engaged in the art of tea harvesting and processing since 2010. Annually, he produces about one ton of finished tea, which he mainly distributes through agents in Hà Nội. When asked about his motivation for starting this venture, Lý Văn Hạc expressed a profound commitment to preserving the heritage of his ancestors. He reminisced about the old days when tea was a crucial part of village life, transported by horse along narrow mountain paths before modern roads were constructed.

*Lý Văn Hạc spreads fresh
tea leaves out to wither in
Lũng Vài Village.*





HÒA AN COOPERATIVE

Đàm Văn Hòa, born in 1975, has been involved in the tea industry since he was eight years old, learning the trade from his parents who were tea traders. They processed and sold tea, instilling in him the intricacies of the trade. Today, he operates the Hòa An Cooperative, specializing in “made-to-order” teas with a minimum order of 2 tons, exclusively on a wholesale basis. He recounted the early challenges, including living in a tent and selling tea in Chinese border markets, and navigating the downturn after the pu’er bubble burst in 2008. Hòa mentioned, *“to stay in the tea business, one must be passionate about tea to persevere through hard times.”* His business has since recovered, and while he leads a team, he remains hands-on in tea processing. Hòa values every aspect of his work, cherishing the rewards that his tea business brings.



Đàm Văn Hòa sharing his teas with guests at his workshop in Lũng Vài Village.



TRÀ THIÊN SHAN



Phạm Thế Duyệt stands beside his tea products as they dry in the sun.



**Hòa An Cooperative
Silver Needle**

**Hòa An Cooperative
Forest Fairy**

Phạm Thế Duyệt, born in 1991, is one of the youngest individuals working with Shan Tea. Based outside of Hà Nội, Duyệt rents a processing facility in Hà Giang each spring to produce various teas for export, including pu’er (maocha), green, white, and red teas. He spent six years studying tea in Hà Giang, driven by a passion sparked when his uncle brought him low-quality tea from the region. This led Duyệt to perfect his processing techniques, learning from local villages and online resources. Notably, he won both

Maocha and white tea drying on raised bamboo mats at Phạm Thế Duyệt's workshop.



Chapter

Tea Heritage of Vị Xuyên: Shadows of Tây Côn Lĩnh

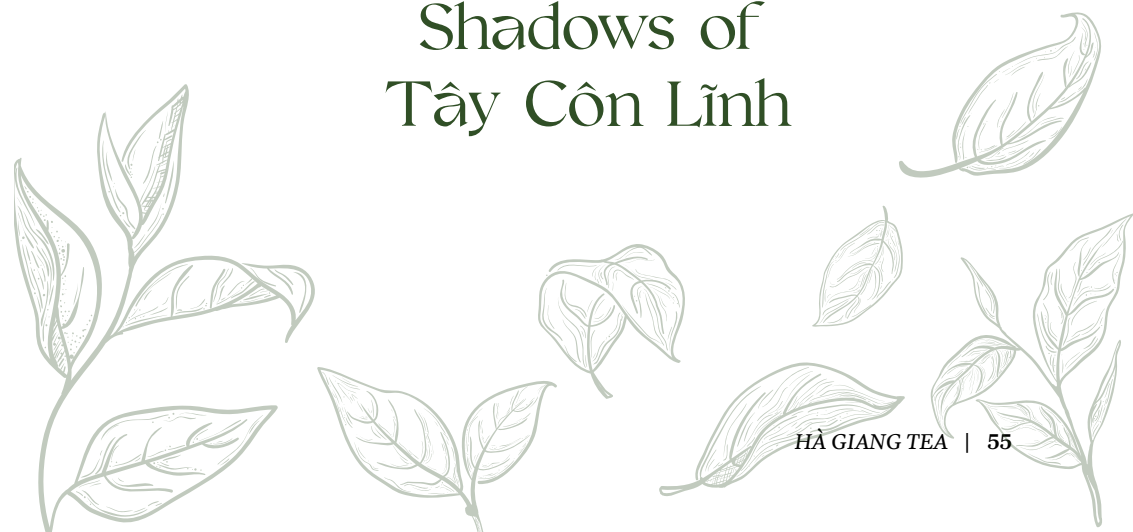


Trà Thiên Shan Lotus Tea



Trà Thiên Shan Maocha

the *Tea Preparation* and *Tea Tasting* category in the 2019 Tea Masters Cup in Hoàng Su Phì, highlighting his expertise and dedication to Shan Tea. Duyệt runs his company, Trà Thiên Shan, with a commitment to producing high-quality tea rather than prioritizing volume, making just “enough” to meet his exacting standards.





The stunning scenery around Phương Tiến Commune's Xà Phìn Village.

Vị Xuyên, Hà Giang's largest district, is centrally located and encompasses the provincial city of Hà Giang. This district is notable for its rich tea culture and the impressive Tây Côn Lĩnh peak, which straddles the border of Vị Xuyên and the neighboring Hoàng Su Phì district.

In Vị Xuyên, three significant tea producing communes stand out: Phương Tiến, Thượng Sơn, and Cao Bồ. Phương Tiến Commune, known for its high-altitude tea cultivation, boasts tea gardens above 1000 meters, where over 100 households hand-process teas from ancient tea trees, most over 50 years old. Thượng Sơn Commune spans 14,994 hectares, with 1,154 hectares dedicated to ancient Shan tea production, supporting four cooperatives and 18 household-level mini processors. Cao Bồ Commune, home to Lũng Táo Village and the Cao Bồ Tea Factory, highlights the integration of traditional practices with substantial yields, showcasing Vị Xuyên's significant role in Hà Giang's tea production.



TRÀ PÈNG COOPERATIVE

Located in Phương Tiến Commune’s Xà Phìn Village, the Trà Pèng Cooperative is a notable tea-producing establishment headed by Đặng Văn Háu, a fifth-generation tea producer. Established in 2020, the cooperative comprises seven households and primarily sells to domestic wholesalers. Háu, who started picking tea leaves at three years old, is deeply passionate about tea, stating, “my life is tea”.



Đặng Văn Háu in Dao dress standing among the rice terraces of his village, Xà Phìn.

In addition to selling maocha to international markets, the cooperative sees great potential in developing their own products. Háu believes that the tea buds at Trà Pèng are uniquely large, contributing to the exceptional sweet value of their teas. Historically, villagers used to barter with tea leaves, reflecting the region’s rich tea heritage. The names *Xà Phìn*, meaning “tea mountain”, and *Trà Pèng*, meaning “plain of tea”, highlight the significance of tea in the area. The *plain of tea* offers breathtaking vistas, with tea trees stretching as far as the eye can see, perched above the village below. The cooperative’s notable offerings include their Fairy tea, and a five-year-old shu pu’er style tea called “Trà Du”.



Trà Pèng White Tea



Trà Pèng Green Tea



TRÀ SHAN TUYẾT XÃ THƯỢNG SƠN COOPERATIVE

The Trà Shan Tuyết Xã Thượng Sơn Cooperative, located in Trung Sơn Village within Thượng Sơn Commune, was founded in 2019, consists of seven members under the direction of Vương Văn Khương. Khương who began his journey in the tea industry in 2016 as a fresh leaf collector, was born into a tea farming family, and grew up on a small tea plantation in Thượng Sơn. Despite the challenges and long nights spent processing tea, his dedication to the craft has remained unwavering. The cooperative’s operations are driven by customer demand, producing ‘made to order’ teas. A notable aspect of their production includes a very dark maocha that is smoked before being fully dried and used in Liu bao production in China.



*Vương Văn Khương
surrounded by
many tarps of
maocha being
dried in the sun.*



Thượng Sơn Fairy Tea



Thượng Sơn Dragon Tea



*Cáo Diu Giang's
trellised tea
garden outside
of his home and
workshop in
Thượng Sơn's Dán
Khao Village.*



CAO GIA TRÀ

Cao Gia Trà, a tea farming and processing business in Thượng Sơn's Dán Khao Village, is operated by Cáo Diu Giang, a young man born in 1996 and a third-generation tea producer from the Cờ Lao ethnic minority. Giang's father was also a tea maker who sold tea across the Chinese border. Giang initially crossed the border for labor but then shifted to tea production. Inspired by a Chinese friend's revelation about old tea trees in Yunnan, Giang realized, "we have those in Viet Nam too." He learned to process maocha from a Chinese friend and green tea from his father. Giang now produces black, white, green, and maocha teas, including a notable semi-oxidized black tea.



Cáo Diu Giang observing the progress of the withering process in his indoor withering trough.

“Tea is my life, a source of everything for my family,” Giang shared. His home and workshop are perched on the mountainside along the road. Below, his tea garden thrives. The view from his property is breathtaking, with lush greenery stretching out as far as the eye can see. Giang is deeply passionate about his tea trees and has built bamboo structures with his uncle to protect them during picking. His dedication aims to preserve the trees for future generations, ensuring the continuation of his family’s tea legacy. Giang is another shining example of the younger generation carrying the torch for Shan tea, infusing traditional practices with a fresh perspective.



Cao Gia Trà Green Tea



Cao Gia Trà Hong Tien



A majestic ancient tea tree in Cao Bồ Commune’s Lùng Tao Village.

LÙNG TAO VILLAGE

Lùng Tao Village in Cao Bồ Commune is accessible via a steep motorbike track, that offers breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape. The village’s tea garden, characterized by large ancient tea trees stands as a testament to its rich tea heritage. Mr. Quang, the village head, shared insights into the village’s tea production, noting that the tea trees had remained the same size since his grandfather’s childhood. Lùng Tao, home to 76 households, is deeply involved in tea production, with most villagers producing fresh leaves for nearby processors.



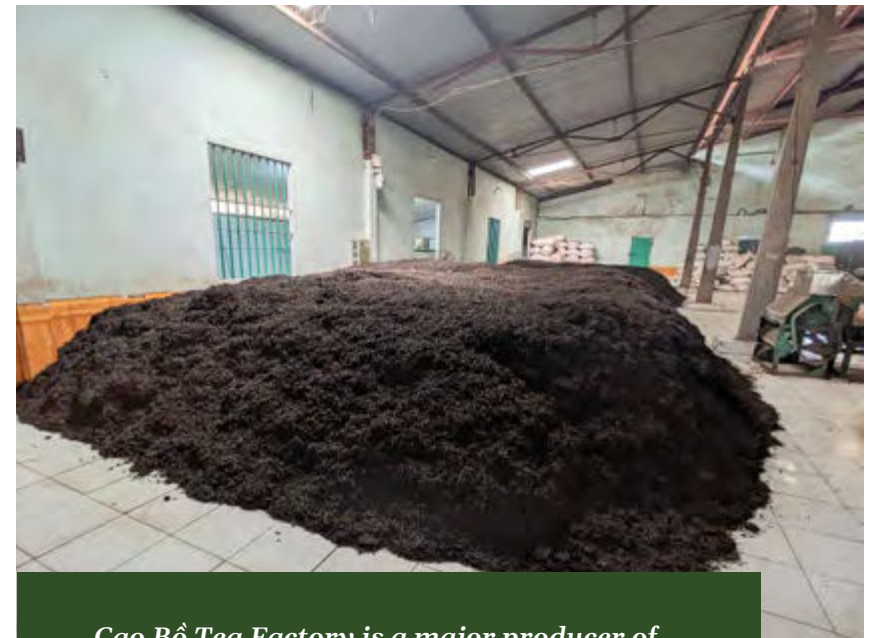
Mr. Quang, the head of Lũng Tao Village standing among the ancient tea trees that provide for his village.

Mr. Quang expressed a strong desire for investors and businesspeople to learn about the unique teas of his village. He is committed to increasing the value of their teas through differentiation and innovation in processing methods. His village is actively investing in new processing equipment to achieve this goal. Notably, he highlighted that the younger generation in the village shows a keen interest in tea and a better understanding of the market. This gives him hope that tea production will continue to grow and support the local community in the future.



CAO BỒ TEA FACTORY

Cao Bồ Tea Factory, located in Thác Tăng Village within Cao Bồ Commune, is a prominent operation established as a joint-stock company in 2017. Led by CEO Nguyễn Toan, who comes from a family with a rich history in tea processing, the factory focuses on producing four IFOAM-certified organic tea products. Toan and his wife, Nguyễn Hương, run the



Cao Bồ Tea Factory is a major producer of shu-pu'er style teas in Hà Giang province, here you can see the pile fermentation process taking place.



Nguyễn Toan and wife Nguyễn Hương standing outside of Cao Bồ Tea Factory in Cao Bồ Commune.

Chapter 9

Hoàng Su Phì: Rice Terraces and Majestic Peaks



Cao Bồ Shu Pu'er Style Tea



Cao Bồ Black Tea

business, which includes pile-fermenting maocha to create shu pu'er style teas. Alongside their wholesale business, they also manage a retail outlet in Hà Giang, showcasing their commitment to both large-scale production and the local market.



Hoàng Su Phì, located west of Vị Xuyên, is the second-largest tea-producing district in Hà Giang Province and a popular destination for tea buyers. Known for its breathtaking valleys of terraced rice fields, Hoàng Su Phì is also home to notable peaks like Chiêu Lầu Thi at 2,400 meters and Tây Côn Lĩnh at 2,419 meters. This district exemplifies the perfect blend of natural beauty and agricultural richness, making it a prime area for tea cultivation. The tea regions of Hoàng Su Phì encompass four major tea-producing communes: Túng Sán, Thông Nguyên, Nậm Ty, and Hồ Thầu.

Rugged mountains and rice terraces make up most of the landscape in Hoàng Su Phì, district.

TÚNG SÁN COMMUNE

In Túng Sán Commune, 200 hectares of tea are concentrated around Hợp Nhất Village. This commune has 600 households, 500 of which make a living from tea, predominantly from the Cờ Lao, Hmông, Dao, and Nùng ethnic minorities.



Tẩn Thị Tiên, from the Dao ethnic minority, has been harvesting tea leaves for 30 years.



Tẩn Thị Tiên harvests a tea tree in Hợp Nhất Village's tea garden in Túng Sán Commune.

HỢP NHẤT VILLAGE



In Túng Sán Commune's Hợp Nhất Village, the tea gardens rise majestically above the village, creating a stunning panorama of lush greenery. Here, villagers are often found meticulously picking leaves from ancient tea trees. Among them, Tẩn Thị Tiên, a Dao woman, has dedicated 30 years to this craft, a legacy handed down through generations. She nostalgically recalls a cherished tradition of dry-frying tea leaves before boiling them for guests, a practice that has faded over time. Today, Tiên sells her meticulously harvested leaves to brokers, reflecting the evolving tea trade in the region.

THƯỢNG SƠN CỔ SHAN TRÀ

Thượng Sơn Cổ Shan Trà, located in Túng Sán Commune, is run by Thăng Tấn Sai, whose main workshop is in Vị Xuyên's Thượng Sơn, hence the name. Sai, born in 1988 in Thượng Sơn, transitioned from being a Chinese translator to tea production in 2020. He learned tea processing using Chinese methods and operates a wholesale, made-to-order business. Sai is particularly proud of his pu'er-style teas. Impressively, he makes a Vietnamese Long Jing clone and has the machinery to do so, he also has a garden of a well-known Long Jing cultivar imported from China that he uses to produce this tea, this is a rare practice in the region.



Thăng Tấn Sai showcasing a bamboo tray of leaves that have been withering just outside of his Túng Sán workshop.



**Thượng Sơn Cổ Shan Trà
Dragonwell**



**Thượng Sơn Cổ Shan Trà
Black Tea**



Freshly processed maocha drying in bamboo trays in the sun at the Hà An Trà workshop.



Shu Kuo An and Nguyễn Thị Cúc outside of their workshop in Túng Sán Commune's Tân Tiến Village.

is uncommon in the region. Each autumn, he explores the nearby forests with his ethnic minority friends, often coming across massive wild tea trees, some reaching up to 20-30 meters tall.

He is heavily involved in training technical processors at his factory to increase production, a process he claims takes three years and four months. He has several students currently undergoing this rigorous training.

Hà An Trà sells both retail and wholesale. The name Hà An Trà reflects this philosophy: *Hà* for Hà Giang, *An* for peace of mind and purity, and *Trà* for tea.



Hà An Trà, located in Túng Sán Commune's Tân Tiến Village, is a distinctive tea producer with deep ties to both Taiwan and Viet Nam. The business is owned by Shu Kuo An, a fifth-generation tea producer from Miaoli County, Taiwan, renowned for its Oriental Beauty tea. His wife, Nguyễn Thị Cúc, comes from Thái Nguyên, another prominent tea-producing region in Viet Nam, and is a second-generation tea producer.

Shu Kuo An started processing tea in Viet Nam in 2014 in a rented space and built his own factory in 2019. This factory is the most immaculate we saw, equipped with the most advanced tea processing machinery in Hà Giang, reflecting his dedication to quality. An's love for Viet Nam grew from his time working for a Viet Nam representative office in Taiwan. He focuses on producing high-quality specialty teas rather than mass quantities. His products include ball-style oolongs and Oriental Beauty style teas, uniquely made using Shan leaves, which



Hà An Trà Oolong



Hà An Trà Black Tea

THÔNG NGUYÊN COMMUNE

Thông Nguyên Commune boasts 500 hectares of tea spread across 13 villages. The majority are Dao, with two Tày villages. Phìn Hồ Village stands out as a prominent tea producer, known for its famous Hà Giang tea brand.



Ethereal Phìn Hồ Village, nestled in a mountain valley, surrounded by tea trees.

PHÌN HỒ VILLAGE

Phìn Hồ Village, nestled in a mountain valley under the clouds near the majestic Tây Côn Lĩnh peak, lies at altitudes ranging from 1500-2000 meters, evoking a scene straight out of Tolkien's tales. This picturesque village is renowned as Hà Giang's most famous tea village, thanks to the Phìn Hồ Trà Cooperative's successful branding and product differentiation. The face of the village and the brand with the same name is Triệu Mùi Nghinh, a venerable 95-year-old who graces their tea packaging. The valley is dotted with ancient tea trees, many of which are numbered by the government to keep track of these historical treasures.



Triệu Mùi Nghinh, the face of Phìn Hồ Village and the Phìn Hồ Trà brand.

Fifth-generation tea picker, Triệu Tà Khe displays his harvest.



PHÌN HỒ VILLAGE

Triệu Tà Khe, a dedicated fifth-generation Dao tea picker, exemplifies the deep-rooted tea traditions in Phìn Hồ Village. Beyond tea picking, Khe also cultivates rice and engages in various agricultural activities to sustain his livelihood. Roughly 70% of fresh tea leaves harvested by the villagers is sold to the Finn Hồ Trà Cooperative for processing, the rest is processed by household processors in the village. The sight of villagers meticulously tending to their tea gardens amidst the breathtaking, mist-shrouded landscape was awe-inspiring.



FÌN HỒ TRÀ

Located just off the main road outside of Thông Nguyên, Finn Hồ Trà is a cooperative formed in 2008 by 53 members of Phìn Hồ Village who supply fresh leaves. Finn Hồ Trà is a cooperative formed in 2008 by 53 members of Phìn Hồ Village who supply fresh leaves. The operation is currently run by Lý Thành Nhân, who took over from his father in 2023. We spent several hours tasting teas with him in their retail outlet, learning about the business.



Lý Thành Nhân, of Finn Hồ Trà poses for a photo while giving a tour of his processing facility.

Nhân, a prime example of the younger generation carrying the torch, uses social media to build the Finn Hồ Trà brand. Their EU Organic Certified teas are widely distributed throughout Viet Nam's retail establishments. The cooperative's flagship products include green, black, white, pu'er, and forest teas.



Finn Hồ Trà Green Tea



Finn Hồ Trà Red (Black) Tea



KHÉ SHAN CỔ

Khé Shan Cổ in Thông Nguyên is a tea shop founded in March 2018 by Đặng Tà Khé, a third-generation Dao tea producer from Phìn Hồ Village. Khé preserves traditional methods while incorporating modern techniques. He shared the process of making bamboo tea, where tea leaves are pressed into bamboo, hung above the kitchen fire to dry, and stored until ready to consume. Khé has updated this method by packing steam-softened shu pu'er style tea into bamboo and sun-drying it for a week. Additionally, he creates mandarin orange packed tea using sour oranges collected from the forest. His methods bridge the gap between tradition and contemporary tea production, preserving his heritage while adapting to modern techniques.



Khé Shan Cổ Bamboo Tea

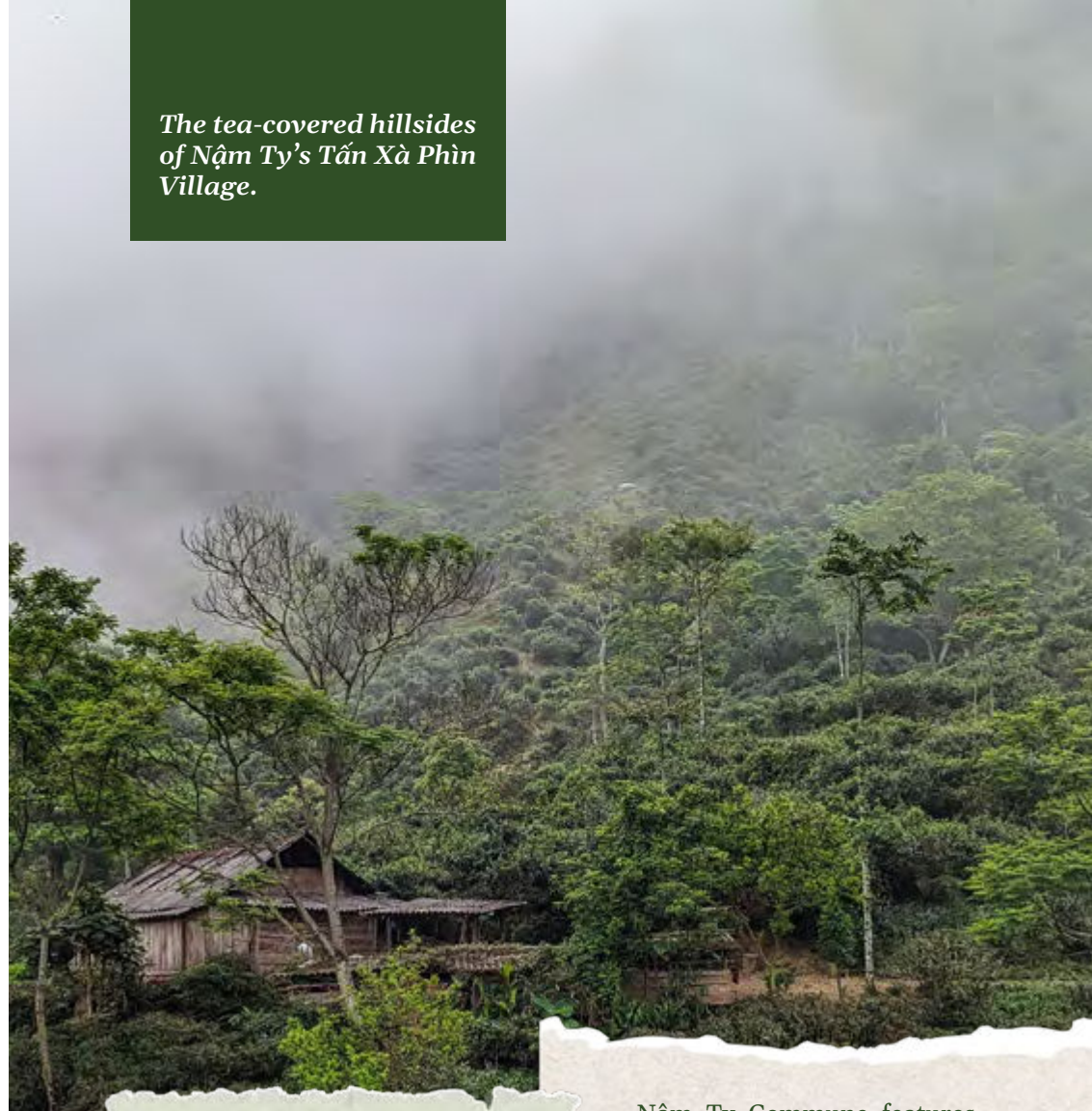


Khé Shan Cổ Mandarin Tea



Third-generation tea producer, Đặng Tà Khé in Dao dress outside of his shop, Khé Shan Cổ in Thông Nguyên.

The tea-covered hillsides of Nậm Ty's Tấn Xà Phìn Village.



NẬM TY COMMUNE

Nậm Ty Commune features 475 hectares of tea with 615 households, of which 90% depend on tea production. The tea-producing villages here are primarily inhabited by the Dao and Hmông ethnic minorities.



Đặng Trần Lụa taking a break from harvesting tea in Nậm Ty's Tấn Xà Phìn Village.



TẤN XÀ PHÌN VILLAGE

Tucked just off the main road and up a steep path lies the hidden grove of tea trees belonging to Tấn Xà Phìn Village in Nậm Ty Commune. From the road, there is no sign that tea is grown above. As the path ascends, waves of mist roll through the tea garden from the mountaintop, creating an ethereal scene that seemed almost otherworldly. The grove is home to tea trees tended by families for generations. Among them is Đặng Trần Lụa, a Dao man who has been picking tea since his childhood. He shares that tea is an integral part of their cultural practices, used especially during New Year celebrations to worship their ancestors.

In Nậm Ty Commune, Chiến Hảo, founded by Mr. Chiến originally from the Red River Delta Region, is a prominent tea producer. Beginning his tea journey in 1987 in Hoàng Su Phì, Chiến established Chiến Hảo in 1995 after a factory merger, starting operations in a tent. His son, Vũ Đình Đạt, now serves as CEO, managing both domestic and international markets. Đạt addresses the challenges of the tea market, noting the hard work and market instability, yet recognizing the potential for significant income during favorable periods. Chiến Hảo produces red, green, and maocha teas, catering to wholesale and retail channels.



CHIẾN HẢO



Chiến Hảo Hong Cha (Black Tea)



Chiến Hảo Maocha



Vũ Đình Đạt stands on the factory floor of his family business, Chiến Hảo, where he has recently taken over from his father.



VIỆT SHAN TEA



Triệu A Mênh, in red Dao dress outside of Việt Shan Tea factory in Nậm Piên Village, Nậm Ty Commune

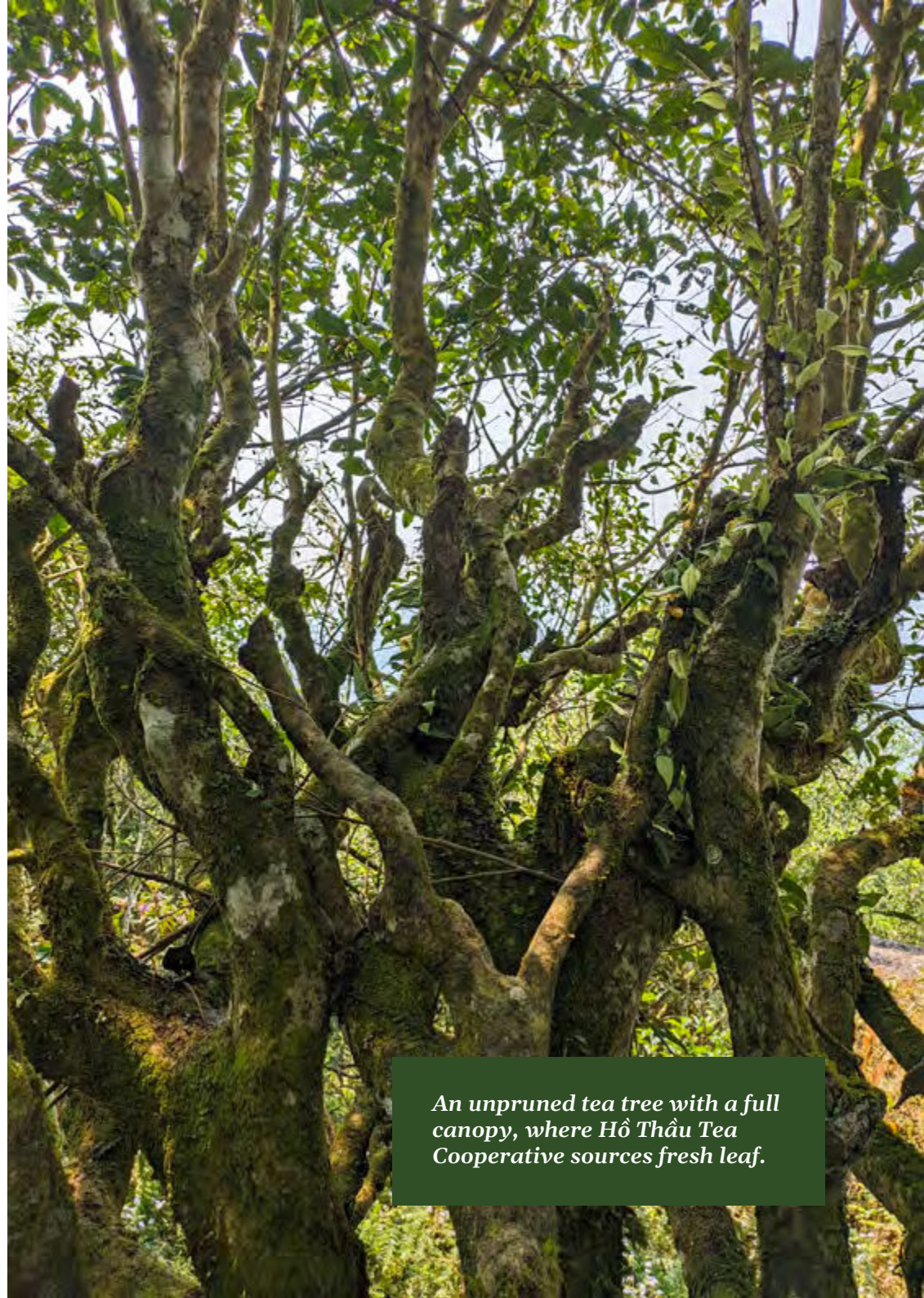
Việt Shan Tea in Nậm Piên Village, Nậm Ty, is owned by Triệu A Mênh, a member of the Dao ethnic minority. He founded the business in 2018 after leaving another tea company. Growing up, Mênh harvested teas in the forest with his father, continuing a family tradition in the tea business. Việt Shan Tea is notable for its strong branding and differentiation, focusing on specialty production rather than quantity. They produce 22 different tea products, with their most notable being a beautiful red tea called Đại Hồng Tiên, or “Big Red Fairy”. Mênh’s family has a long history in the tea business, originally producing traditional bamboo teas, though this method has largely fallen out of practice. The business handles both wholesale and retail operations, emphasizing high-quality teas over mass production.



Việt Shan Đại Hồng Tiên



Việt Shan Hoàng Trà Tiên



An unpruned tea tree with a full canopy, where Hồ Thầu Tea Cooperative sources fresh leaf.

HỒ THẦU COMMUNE



HỒ THẦU TEA COOPERATIVE

In Hồ Thầu's Tân Phong Village, the Hồ Thầu Tea Cooperative exemplifies a new approach to sustainable tea farming. Founded in 2019 by seven investors, this cooperative has implemented an agreement with the local village to adhere to strict eco-friendly practices. These practices include not pruning tea trees excessively, preserving biodiversity, avoiding the use of chemicals, and preventing overharvesting. This ensures healthier tea trees and higher quality tea, albeit with initially lower yields. Nguyễn Trung Dũng, the cooperative's director,

In Hồ Thầu Commune, there are 524 hectares of tea, with 480 hectares actively harvested. The commune includes 3 hectares of forest tea, marked by GPS by the government. It is home to 450 households, 350 of whom rely on tea, with the majority being of the Dao ethnic minority. This commune supplies leaves to two cooperatives and seven household-level processors.



Nguyễn Trung Dũng among the ancient tea trees from which he sources fresh leaves for the Hồ Thầu Tea Cooperative.

emphasizes that these practices lead to better quality tea, which is the goal of their cooperative.

Dũng's journey into tea began with his background in Ethnology from the Viet Nam Academy of Social Sciences. Initially working in community development, he found it too theoretical and sought more practical involvement. His work in agricultural technology and medicinal herbs eventually led him to Hà Giang, where his interest in tea was sparked. Originally from Thái Nguyên, Dũng's connection to tea runs deep as his grandfather was a tea processor.

Dũng envisions Viet Nam as integral to tea's origin story and believes "it is part of tea's origin story and is poised to start a new chapter for tea". He believes that by gradually building new stories, Viet Nam will continue to develop and consolidate its tea culture. Dũng is particularly optimistic about the future of specialty tea in Hà Giang, emphasizing its potential to elevate the region's tea industry.



Hồ Thầu Maocha Spring '23



Hồ Thầu Hong Cha (Black Tea)



Chapter 10

Quang Bình: Valleys of Tradition and Tea



Due south of Hoàng Su Phì lies Quang Bình district, home to tea-producing communes Xuân Minh and Tiên Nguyên, as well as a processor utilizing fresh leaves from across the district.



Phạm Thị Nhung showcases the Hà Giang Organic Agriculture Cooperative's jasmine flower garden.

HÀ GIANG ORGANIC AGRICULTURE COOPERATIVE

Hà Giang Organic Agriculture Cooperative is managed by Phạm Thị Nhung, who oversees all activities at the facility. Nhung's mother-in-law, previously a tea processor for Fìn Hồ Trà, introduced several beneficial practices to the cooperative. Their current strategy focuses on specialty teas, starting with the domestic market.



Tây Côn Lĩnh Hong Tra Shan, 1 leaf, 1 bud (Black Tea)



Tây Côn Lĩnh Bạch Trà Tiên (Fairy Tea)

The cooperative is innovating in multiple ways. They provide bi-annual training for farmers on plucking and preserving leaves before transportation, requiring the use of bamboo picking baskets to prevent leaf damage. This initiative helps maintain the quality of the tea leaves, ensuring a superior final product. They are a member of VOSTEA (Viet Nam Organic Specialty Tea Alliance), demonstrating their commitment to organic and specialty tea production.

Additionally, the cooperative operates a nursery for raising cuttings of the Shan tea variety and maintains a jasmine field for scenting teas. They process fresh leaves from Nậm Khảm Village into green teas and leaves from Xuân Thành Village into black teas, optimizing the quality of their products based on the proximity of the fresh leaf sources.

Their major retail brand, Tây Côn Lĩnh, is a testament to their high standards and innovative practices. Furthermore, they have initiatives to support tea gardens run by women, promoting gender equality and empowering women in the tea industry.

XUÂN MINH COMMUNE

In Xuân Minh Commune, we found 10 villages primarily inhabited by the Dao ethnic minority. With 521 hectares of tea, nearly all 540 households out of 563 are involved in tea production. There are 234 household producers and three cooperatives contributing to the district's tea output.



The remote hillside tea gardens of Xuân Minh Commune's Xuân Thành Village.

XUÂN THÀNH VILLAGE

In Quang Bình's Xuân Minh commune, Xuân Thành Village is a remote Dao village that requires over an hour-long motorbike ride from the main road. The journey takes you through valleys and across rivers, with some areas so steep that we had to walk our motorbikes up the hills. Upon arrival, you will find tea trees growing everywhere-in between

homes, on rocky hills, and new tea seedlings sprouting naturally from seeds dropped by larger plants. The main tea harvesting area extends to the horizon in all directions from the center of the village, creating a breathtaking landscape.

Đặng Sùn Pú, an avid green tea drinker and head of Xuân Thành Village. He oversees the village's tea cultivation. The entire village takes care of and harvests tea trees, selling all fresh leaves to private sector businesses for processing into finished teas.



Đặng Sùn Pú and son making a visit to Xuân Thành Village's main tea harvesting area.



Phùng Sùn Chòi in Dao dress on the floor of the Minh Quang Cooperative factory.



MINH QUANG COOPERATIVE

Minh Quang Cooperative, founded in 2018, is a family-run business with seven members and ten households providing tea leaves. CEO Phùng Sùn Chòi, from a Dao family with generations of tea-making experience, oversees the operation. Before transitioning fully to tea, he managed a small-scale factory starting in 2007. His son handles sales and marketing, ensuring the cooperative's presence in both wholesale and retail markets, although they primarily focus on wholesale.



Minh Quang White Tea



Minh Quang Black Tea

TIÊN NGUYÊN COMMUNE

Tiên Nguyên Commune features 830 hectares of tea and 900 out of 1027 households engaged in tea production. The commune has a diverse population consisting of 90% Red Dao, with the remainder being Tày, Kinh, Nùng, and Hmông. The area supports 400 mini processors and three major tea businesses.



The tea garden of Tiên Nguyên Commune's Thượng Bình Village under the shade of palm trees.

THƯỢNG BÌNH VILLAGE

In Tiên Nguyên Commune's Thượng Bình Village, the primary tea harvesting area, is a picturesque valley where tea trees grow under the shade of palm trees. This shade enhances the amino acid content in the leaves, resulting in a richer, umami-forward characteristic in teas produced from leaves in this area. The village, a Red Dao community,

has 83 households all engaged in tea production. Đặng Giào Trình, the village head, has been using a tea rolling machine since he was 12. His family has been involved in tea production for generations, with his three children continuing the tradition. The village's tea output is split between 60% pu'er maocha style tea and 40% green tea for the domestic market. Tea-related cultural practices from the area include drying tea fruit, frying it, and boiling it to make a drink, although its origins are unclear.



The head of Tiên Nguyên Commune's Thượng Bình Village, Đặng Giào Trình.



SHAN TUYẾT QUANG SƠN

**Shan Tuyết Quang Sơn
Black Tea**



In Tiên Nguyên's Tân Tiến Village, Shan Tuyết Quang Sơn stands as a significant tea processing facility established in 2007. During our visit, we met with the owner, Lý Chàn Tòng, and his daughter-in-law, Triệu Thị Thu, who is in the process of assuming leadership of the business.

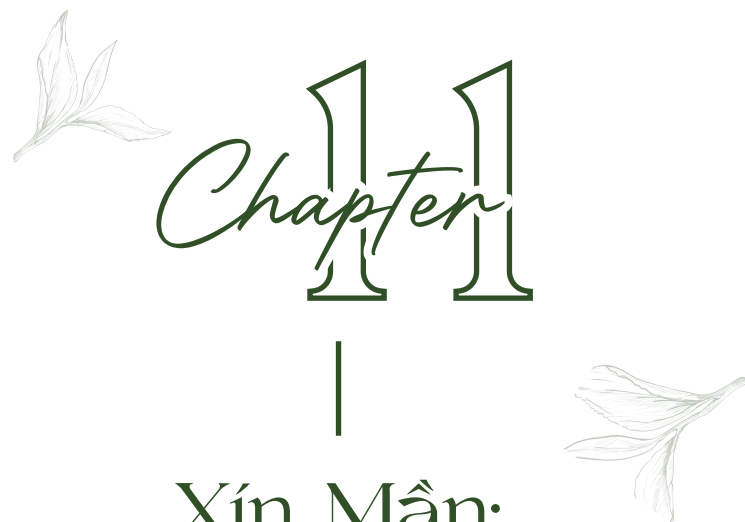


**Shan Tuyết Quang Sơn
Green Tea**

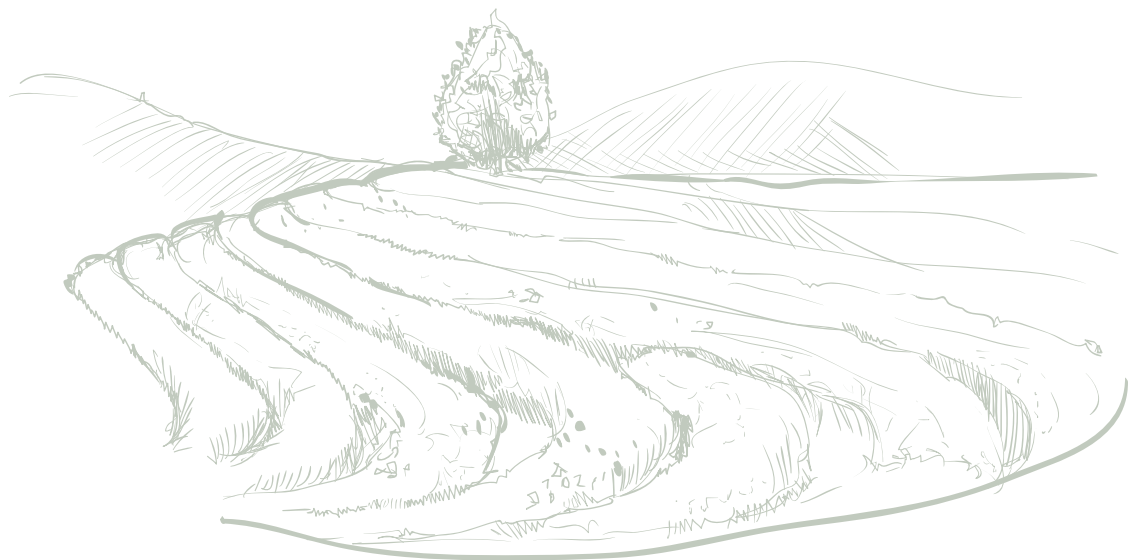


*Triệu Thị Thu in Dao dress
showing off recently fixed tea
leaves destined for maocha.*

The facility's primary product is green tea, though they also produce black, white, and pu'er maocha teas. Their business model predominantly revolves around made-to-order teas for both domestic and international clients. The raw materials for their teas are sourced from Thượng Bình Village. Thu's vision for the future includes not only maintaining the quality and reputation of Shan Tuyết Quang Sơn but also expanding its reach and technological capabilities to keep pace with market demands.



Xín Mần: Tea Gardens of the Western Edge



Xín Mần, the westernmost district of Hà Giang province, presents a diverse and picturesque landscape. To the east, it borders the district of Hoàng Su Phì, and to the west, it adjoins the neighboring Lào Cai province. Dominated by the shadow of Chiêu Lầu Thi peak, Xín Mần is split by the Chảy River, which runs east to west through the northern portion of the district. The major tea-producing regions of Chế Là Commune and Quảng Nguyên Commune, are where the rich tea culture of the district thrives.



The Chảy River, winding through the peaks of Xín Mần province.



CHẾ LÀ COMMUNE

An overhead shot of an organic tea garden in Xín Mần's Chế Là Commune.

Chế Là Commune in Xín Mần district is a notable tea-producing area. With 269 hectares dedicated to tea cultivation, 151 hectares are specifically Shan tea. The commune's tea production is centralized around Cốc Cộ, Đản Diêng, and Cốc Độ villages. The Hmông and Nùng ethnic minorities make up 90% of the population here. The commune boasts one cooperative, Xuân Mai, whose brand Shan Tuyết Chế Là has achieved a 4 OCOP star rating. There are also three household-level processors. The region's elevation ranges from 1,400 meters to 1,500 meters, providing ideal conditions for tea cultivation.



XUÂN MAI COOPERATIVE

In Chế Là's Cốc Cộ Village, the Xuân Mai Cooperative stands out. Sen Thị Dân, a member of the Nùng ethnic minority, brings down tea leaves from the mountain, continuing a tradition passed down through generations. She has been picking tea for 25 years, primarily as a means of making a living, although she drinks green tea daily. Each day, she picks from 7 am to 11 am, bringing in 8kg - 15kg of fresh leaves to be weighed and processed by the cooperative. The cooperative mainly produces green tea for the domestic market and has received a 4 OCOF star rating for its high-quality production.



**Xuân Mai Cooperative
Green Tea**



*Sen Thị Dân, who has been
picking tea leaves for 25 years.*

QUẢNG NGUYỄN COMMUNE

Quảng Nguyên Commune is another significant tea-producing area in Xín Mần district. Tea is a major crop, covering 524 hectares, with 80% of the tea trees being ancient and the remaining 20% planted after 2000. The commune is home to 1,180 households, 800 of which rely on tea for their livelihood. The majority of the population is Dao, with the remainder being Hmông, Tày, and Nùng.





QUẢNG HÀ COOPERATIVE

In Quảng Nguyên's Quảng Hà Village, Hoàng Thị Hương leads the Quảng Hà Cooperative alongside her mother-in-law. Founded in 2019, the cooperative has 15 members and focuses on producing green tea for the domestic market and maocha for international markets. Born in 2000, Hương is a young leader, of Tày ethnicity, married into a Dao family. She is dedicated to continuing the family business and is looking to expand their market reach, with a focus on domestic growth.



Quảng Hà Cooperative
1 leaf 1 bud Green Tea



*Hoàng Thị Hương, who runs the
Quảng Hà Cooperative along-
side her mother-in-law.*



Chapter 12



Đồng Văn: Viet Nam's Northernmost Tea Haven



Đồng Văn is the northernmost district in Viet Nam, and because Hà Giang is the northernmost province, Đồng Văn holds the distinction of being home to the northernmost point of the country, located in Lũng Cú Commune, about 24 km from the center of Đồng Văn district. This district shares its northern border with China, with the Nho Quê River running along the eastern edge. The region is renowned for the UNESCO-designated Đồng Văn Karst Plateau Geopark, a stunning landscape characterized by rugged limestone formations, steep peaks, deep valleys, and intricate cave systems. The terrain here is harsh and seemingly inhospitable, making one wonder how anything could thrive. Yet, against the odds, tea has found a way.

*The Đồng Văn Karst
Plateau Geopark.*

LŨNG PHÌN COMMUNE

In Đồng Văn, tea production is concentrated in Lũng Phìn Commune, which, despite the relatively low tea output, is renowned for its high-end teas. The commune has 83 hectares of tea plantations, of which 33 hectares are currently harvested, with many new plantings underway. Among these, 3.6 hectares are ancient tea trees, contributing to the quality and reputation of the tea produced here. The commune is home to two cooperatives and is predominantly inhabited by the Hmông ethnic minority, who have cultivated these teas for generations.



CÁN PẤY HỎ A VILLAGE

A short motorbike ride from town leads to Cán Pẩy Hở A, a Hmông village and the primary source of ancient tree tea leaves in Lũng Phìn. Down a path from the village, we encountered hundreds of tea trees growing out of the rocky soil, with numerous seedlings naturally propagated through the rocks.



The remarkable tea gardens of Cán Pẩy Hở A village in Lũng Phìn Commune.

These trees are left unpruned, displaying full canopies and allowed to grow and bud naturally. The villagers avoid pruning out of fear of harming the trees. Although heavy pruning can increase yield, it also decreases quality, a trade-off the villagers were unwilling to make.



A tea seedling peeks out through the rocks in Cán Pẩy Hở A Village.



LŨNG PHÌN SHAN TUYẾT PROCESSING COOPERATIVE

In Lũng Phìn Commune, the Lũng Phìn Shan Tuyết Processing Cooperative is led by Mùa Chúng Vừ, a member of the Hmông ethnic minority. Established in 2021, this cooperative comprises 14 members, mostly from Cán Pẩy Hở A village. They focus solely on green tea production, operating from a simple, tiny, yet pristine factory. Vừ, who has been processing tea by hand all his life, aspires to scale up the business. To achieve this, he recognizes the need to learn how to process other types of tea.



Lũng Phìn Shan Tuyết Processing Cooperative Green Tea



Mùa Chúng Vừ, director of the Lũng Phìn Shan Tuyết Processing Cooperative.

In Lũng Phìn Commune, Trà Shan Lũng Phìn Cooperative stands out for its award-winning white tea and diverse tea varieties. Established in 2022, the cooperative is run by Thảo Thị Chứ along with seven members. They produce black, white, green, and maocha teas, with green tea being the primary product. Fresh leaves are sourced from Cán Pẩy Hở A village. Thảo Thị Chứ, with the help of her husband and seasonal staff, manages both retail and wholesale operations, primarily targeting the Hà Nội market.



Thảo Thị Chứ collecting leaves at Cán Pẩy Hở A that will be processed into tea products at the Trà Shan Lũng Phìn Cooperative which she runs with her husband.

TRÀ SHAN LŨNG PHÌN COOPERATIVE



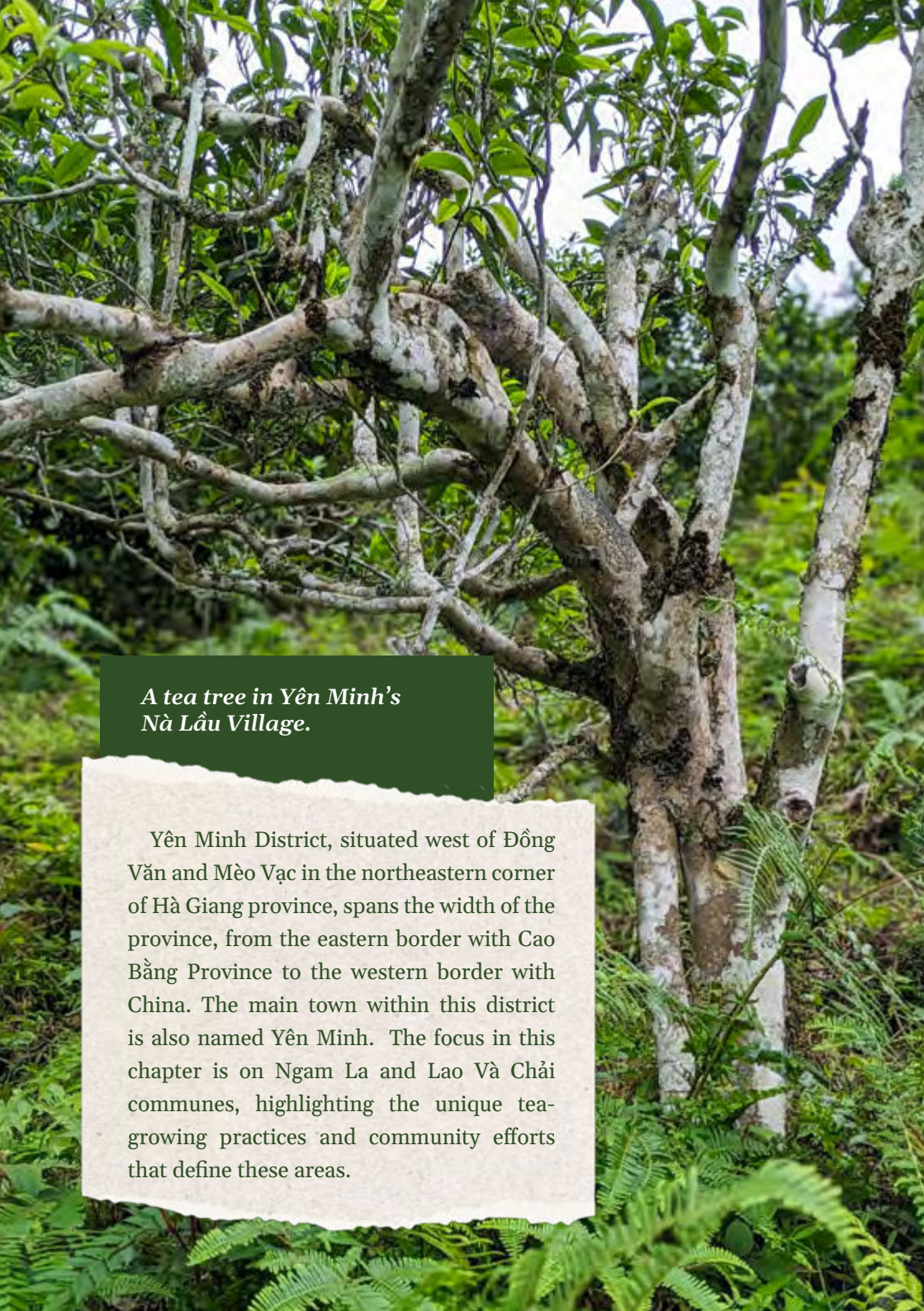
**Trà Shan Lũng Phìn
Cooperative Black Tea**



**Trà Shan Lũng Phìn
Cooperative White Tea**

Chapter 13

Yên Minh: Guardians of Tea Tradition



*A tea tree in Yên Minh's
Nà Lầu Village.*

Yên Minh District, situated west of Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc in the northeastern corner of Hà Giang province, spans the width of the province, from the eastern border with Cao Bằng Province to the western border with China. The main town within this district is also named Yên Minh. The focus in this chapter is on Ngam La and Lao Và Chải communes, highlighting the unique tea-growing practices and community efforts that define these areas.



NGAM LA AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY COOPERATIVE

In Yên Minh District, Ngam La Agriculture and Forestry Cooperative in Ngam La Commune is a notable example of local tea production. Cháng A Nghe, the director, founded the cooperative in 2021. Under the brand “Chè Shan Tuyết Ngam La,” the cooperative focuses on green tea production for both wholesale and retail, primarily serving the domestic market.

Nghe, born in 1986 in Nà Lầu Village, has been involved in tea since childhood, helping his grandparents pick and process tea. He recalled carrying bags of tea to market on foot in the 90s. Now, his two sons assist him in the business. Nghe believes that tea trees bring significant benefits to the community and views tea as a vital part of their lives.



*Cháng A Nghe, who
leads the Ngam La
Agriculture and
Forestry Cooperative
in the tea fields of Nà
Lầu Village.*



Chè Shan Tuyết Ngam La Maocha



Chè Shan Tuyết Ngam La Green Tea



CÔNG THÀNH AGRICULTURE, TRADE, AND SERVICE COOP

The Công Thành Agriculture, Trade, and Service Cooperative, founded in 2019 is a key player in Yên Minh's tea industry. The cooperative has 11 members and over 50 households supplying tea from Ngán Chải Village in Lao Và Chải, including 12 mini households processing tea directly for them.

Hoàng Văn Tuyền, the sales manager focuses on selling to foreigners through the UNESCO Geopark and local shops. Shan green tea from this cooperative stands out for its natural organic growth, despite often lacking formal certification. The robust market, bolstered by tourists on the Hà Giang Loop, supports their operations. Tuyền, a first-generation tea producer born in Yên Minh, is committed to preserving and promoting local tea traditions.



**Chè Shan tuyết Công
Thành Lao Và Chải
Green Tea**



**Công Thành Agriculture, Trade,
and Service Coop sales manager
Hoàng Văn Tuyền.**

Chapter 14

The Future of Hà Giang Tea



These tea buds in Hà Giang have a bright future.



The primary story in Hà Giang is one of opportunity. The recent success of tea companies that have differentiated themselves through innovative processing and high-quality branding, coupled with the influx of domestic and international tea buyers, signifies a promising future for all involved in the tea supply chain.

Government initiatives, supported by organizations like the Asian Development Bank and the Japan Fund for a Prosperous and Resilient Asia and the Pacific, are committed and actively working to ensure the preservation and sustainable development of Hà Giang's tea industry in an open and friendly manner. These efforts include infrastructure improvements, quality assurance programs, and support for local tea producers.

Over pruning causes a tea tree to produce more leaves, but they are lower quality. This practice can harm tea trees and lead to a shortened lifespan.



The preservation of ancient tea trees is a key focus, ensuring that future generations can continue to benefit from these valuable resources. Sustainable practices and certification programs are being implemented to maintain high-quality standards and promote environmental stewardship.



A numbered and protected tea tree in Hoàng Su Phì's Phìn Hồ Village.

In recent years, some tea trees have been heavily pruned to increase the short-term quantity of fresh leaves. This practice not only leads to lower quality teas, it puts the trees at risk of premature death. Here, Hà Giang's Department of Agriculture has stepped in, and is actively working on policies to support tea tree preservation. These policies include providing certificates for the handling of specific numbered ancient tea trees and offering small financial grants to maintain proper standards of tree husbandry.

For international tea buyers, Hà Giang presents an unparalleled opportunity. The region offers unique, high-quality teas that are gaining global recognition. The combination of traditional methods and modern innovations results in teas with distinct flavors and characteristics that appeal to connoisseurs worldwide.



For a tea buyer approaching Hà Giang for the first time, there are 5 key areas of opportunity:



1. Unparalleled Quality of White Teas

Hà Giang's Shan variety, known for its large, succulent buds, offers white teas that stand out globally. Whether single buds, one leaf with one bud, or two leaves with one bud, these teas boast intense floral aromas, honey-like flavors, and a long, sweet finish, making them a unique offering for customers worldwide.



2. Incredible Value in Age-able Teas

Hà Giang presents an excellent opportunity for buyers and collectors of pu'er and other aged teas to purchase in bulk without the market hype and price fluctuations found elsewhere. Establishing early relationships with producers can secure a steady supply of these teas before they gain widespread recognition.



3. Unique Flavor Expressions in Black Teas

Hà Giang's black teas are renowned for their cocoa-forward flavor, complemented by notes of honey, earthy undertones, roasted walnuts, and a hint of rose. This distinctive, yet familiar flavor profile makes these teas a

wonderful way to introduce customers to high-end loose-leaf teas. The Shan cultivar and Hà Giang's rugged terroir produce these prominent notes, with potential for further experimentation, such as grinding into a matcha-like product.



4. Exceptional Quality of Raw Material

Hà Giang offers a major opportunity for those with tea processing expertise. The region's ancient tea tree stock, high elevations, and cloud-shrouded tea gardens provide raw materials of exceptional quality. Buyers can purchase raw materials and oversee production to meet their standards, creating unique and high-value products. This provides a unique opportunity to source high-quality tea while ensuring the best practices in production.



5. Exclusive Dragon and Fairy Teas

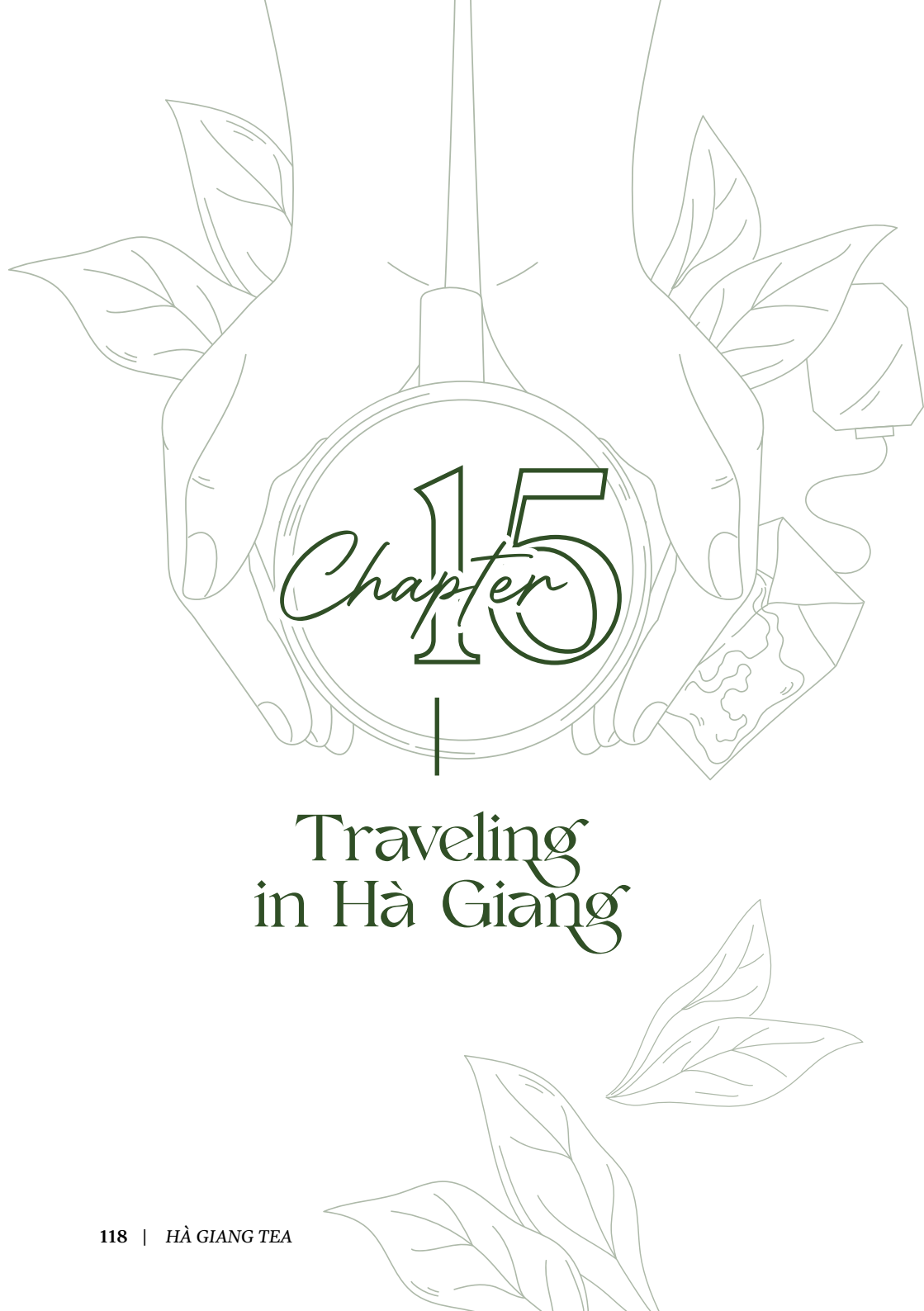
Unique to Viet Nam, Dragon and Fairy teas from Hà Giang offer exceptional flavors and characteristics. Dragon teas present fresh mountain forest and green stone fruit notes with a long, subtly sweet, peppery aftertaste. Fairy teas have fresh hay and fruity flavors with a floral aroma and honey aftertaste. These teas, while not technically from the tea plant, are low in caffeine and can be steeped multiple times, highlighting their quality and making them a distinctive addition to any tea buyer's portfolio.

As Hà Giang continues to gain international notoriety, the commitment to quality and sustainability will drive its growth. From the villagers who care for and harvest the tea trees to the processors who create the final products, everyone is

invested in the success and future of Hà Giang tea. The collaborative efforts of the government, local communities, and international organizations are paving the way for a bright future, benefiting both the people of Hà Giang and tea buyers worldwide.

Hà Giang tea is on the move!





Chapter 15

Traveling in Hà Giang

With its remoteness, rugged terrain, and infrastructure still a work in progress, travel to Hà Giang province can be quite difficult at times. At the same time, it is the remoteness, rugged terrain, and minimal infrastructure that make Hà Giang such a wonderful destination.

The tea harvest for ancient Shan tea trees in Hà Giang occurs in two main seasons: spring (March to May) and autumn (August to October), so be sure to coordinate your travels with these times in order to obtain the freshest products possible.

Getting There

Those arriving internationally should plan to fly into Hà Nội. Here, you can stay for a couple of days to soak up the local tea culture, which is booming. There are many high-end tea cafes in the city where you can sample a variety of Vietnamese teas and talk to local tea sellers about Hà Giang. This allows you to get a better idea of what to expect from your journey. Don't forget to spend some time at Bát Tràng pottery village just outside the city to see the tea wares crafted by local artisans, which can add a unique touch to your tea-drinking experience.

Hà Giang province is Viet Nam's northernmost province, and the primary means of transportation there is via car or bus. You should expect a 5-6-hour drive from Hà Nội to Hà Giang City, the provincial capital and center of commerce. You can book a bus from one of the many travel agents in Hà Nội's Old Quarter, which costs between \$10-\$20 each way. Alternatively, you can hire a private car for around \$125 to make the trip in comfort and at your own pace.



A popular photo spot along the river: zero more kilometers until you reach Hà Giang City.

Staying in Hà Giang City

Hà Giang City offers numerous hotel options, all easily found on major booking websites. From Hà Giang City to your tea destinations, hiring a motorbike from one of the many rental agencies is highly recommended. The region is renowned among backpackers for the “Hà Giang Loop,” making motorbike rentals convenient and accessible. This mode of transport is ideal for exploring remote tea-growing areas off the beaten path. Alternatively, you can hire a 4-wheel drive vehicle, although travel may be slower, and some destinations might be inaccessible due to the rugged terrain.

Exploring The Province

From Hà Giang City, a motorbike ride to the Phường Độ or Phường Tiến commune takes less than an hour and a half, allowing visits to local tea processors while enjoying scenic views. The tea regions of Cao Bồ and Thượng Sơn are about two hours away. Given the limited accommodation options in these communes, it’s advisable to keep your base in Hà Giang City.

For those planning to visit Hoàng Su Phì’s tea areas (Thông Nguyên, Nậm Ty, Hồ Thầu) or locations in Xín Mần and Quang Bình, staying in homestays in Thông Nguyên or Hồ Thầu communes is ideal. These options offer an immersive cultural experience and stunning mountain views. There are also some hotels in Hoàng Su Phì town, but many prefer the authenticity of the communal accommodations.

Travelers heading to the northern reaches of Hà Giang province should consider making Yên Minh town their home base. This location is particularly advantageous for exploring the surrounding district, as well as Đồng Văn and its Karst Plateau Geopark, a UNESCO site featuring remarkable geological formations and rich biodiversity.

Arranging Visits

Before arriving, it is essential to arrange visits with tea producers in advance. Contact information is provided in the appendices of this book. For initial outreach, using a translation tool like Google Translate is crucial since English usage is sparse in rural Hà Giang. For the intrepid tea sourcer, getting by with a translation tool during your visit is possible, but hiring an interpreter is highly recommended. This ensures smooth communication and accuracy, especially when purchasing teas and arranging shipment to your home country.



Connectivity

Cell phone coverage is widespread throughout Hà Giang, though some remote villages lack coverage. Most areas have decent 4G coverage as of 2024. Ensure your carrier provides international coverage and that their partner in Viet Nam covers Hà Giang. An e-sim app like Airalo may offer better coverage through local partners.

Travel Tips



Road closures are frequent in Hà Giang due to the many infrastructure projects underway in the province.

While traversing Hà Giang province, expect delays, road closures, construction, and landslides. Infrastructure is actively being developed, so while road conditions are constantly improving, there may still be times when you need to wait 1-2 hours for a landslide to be cleared or construction to be completed. Despite these challenges, the journey through Hà Giang offers stunning landscapes and an authentic glimpse into Viet Nam's rich tea culture.



Chapter 16

Purchasing Tea from Hà Giang

The supply chain in Hà Giang is a fascinating and complex network that reflects the unique characteristics of the region and the people involved in tea production. Whether you intend to purchase tea directly from a village household, cooperative, or processing company, some planning is required.

The chain begins with the villages, where the tea is cultivated, and extends to various processing facilities, cooperatives, and companies that prepare the tea for market. At times, tea will be processed by small household-level processors, such as Cao Gia Trà in Dán Khào and Lý Văn Hạc in Lùng Vài. More commonly, the leaves are quickly transported to cooperative or processing companies.

Cooperatives are sometimes made up of villagers who provide the leaves, or are sometimes made up of investors who buy leaves from villages and have contracts with the villages to maintain desired field management and harvesting practices, such as with the Hồ Thần Cooperative.

Chinese traders currently dominate the market, buying fresh leaves or maocha to be sold as Yunnan Pu'er. Vietnamese tea companies are making attempts to differentiate from maocha production in order to fetch higher prices, and this presents a unique opportunity for tea buyers.

Hà Giang's tea businesses are keen to develop their own distribution channels for high-value products, aiming to reach premium markets more effectively. This presents a unique opportunity for international and domestic buyers to collaborate with local tea processors to produce specialty teas of exceptional value. These partnerships can help elevate the profile of Hà Giang's teas, emphasizing their high quality and unique characteristics.

Be sure to familiarize yourself with any regulations around tea importation in your home country before attempting to import large amounts of tea. Organic farming practices are prevalent in Hà Giang, and efforts are being made by the government to maintain these standards. However, if you are in the USA, you will need an FDA number to clear

customs. Some EU countries may require an MRL (Maximum Residue Level) test. Familiarizing yourself with these regulations will help you avoid potential legal issues and ensure a smooth import process without delays.

Purchases can be made directly with a tea producer, or they may have a broker (often in Hà Nội) that you can work through. The latter is often an easier process, but brokers will take a cut. Funds can be transferred to the producer or broker via international wire transfer, or digitally using PayPal or similar services. Ensure that you have arranged the payment method in advance to avoid any complications during the purchasing process.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS



1. Quality Assurance

Ensure that the teas you are purchasing meet your quality standards. It is advisable to request samples before making a large purchase. This helps you verify the quality and taste of the tea once it arrives in your home country.



2. Building Relationships

Establishing a good relationship with the tea producer or cooperative can be beneficial. Regular communication and visits can help build trust and ensure you receive the best quality tea. Understanding their challenges and working collaboratively can lead to a more successful partnership.



3. Logistics and Storage

Plan for the logistics of transporting the tea from Hà Giang to your home country. This includes arranging for proper storage to maintain the tea's quality during transit. Understanding the best practices for storing tea will help preserve its flavor and aroma.



4. Cultural Sensitivity

Be respectful and mindful of the local culture and practices. Building a respectful relationship with the local tea producers and understanding their traditions can enhance your purchasing experience and contribute positively to the community.

By considering these factors, you can ensure a successful and smooth process when purchasing tea from Hà Giang, while also supporting the local tea industry and its people.



Chapter 17

Directory of Tea Producers

When reaching out to tea producers in Hà Giang, it's essential to be patient and give them time to respond. Many producers operate in remote areas with limited internet access, so responses might not be immediate. To improve your chances of a timely reply, consider using popular messaging apps in Viet Nam such as WhatsApp or Zalo. These apps are widely used and can facilitate smoother communication.

Below, you will find a directory of tea producers in Hà Giang:

1. Hà Giang City:

Tea Producer Name	Primary Contact	Contact Information
Hòa An Cooperative	Đàm Văn Hòa	damvanhoapdhg@gmail.com
Lý Văn Hộc	Lý Văn Hộc	<ul style="list-style-type: none">84 0322 244 833https://www.facebook.com/lungvai.lungvai

2. Vị Xuyên:

Tea Producer Name	Primary Contact	Contact Information
Cao Bồ Tea Factory	Nguyễn Toan	<ul style="list-style-type: none">https://caobotea.com/caobotea@gmail.com+84 098 326 07 95https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100027209168215https://www.facebook.com/caobotea.organic/
Cao Gia Trà	Cáo Diu Giang	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100043437137374
Trà Pèng Cooperative	Đặng Văn Háu	+84 0825 377 017

Trà Shan Tuyết Xã Thượng Sơn Cooperative	Vương Văn Khương	https://www.facebook.com/khuong.vuongvan.71
Trà Thiên Shan	Phạm Thế Duyệt	https://www.facebook.com/phamthe.duyet.355

3. Hoàng Su Phì:

Tea Producer Name	Primary Contact	Contact Information
Chiến Hảo	Vũ Đình Đạt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> https://www.trachienhao.com/trachienhao@gmail.com https://www.facebook.com/DatChienHao
Trà Finn Hồ	Lý Thành Nhân	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> https://finhotra.com.vn/ https://www.facebook.com/nhan0199
Trà Hà An	Thư Khoát An	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> https://haantea.com/haantea@gmail.com https://www.facebook.com/HaanTea108
Hồ Thầu Tea Cooperative	Nguyễn Trung Dũng	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> hothautea.coop@gmail.com +84 0988 555 800 https://www.facebook.com/1077015976/
Khé Shan Cổ	Đặng Tà Khé	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> +84 0373 537 222 https://www.facebook.com/dang.khesuphi
Thượng Sơn Cổ Shan Trà	Thăng Tấn Sai	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61550609066921
Việt Shan Tea	Triệu A Mãnh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vietshantea@gmail.com +84 84 403 3888 https://vietshantea.com/ https://www.facebook.com/vietsantra/

4. Quang Bình:

Tea Producer Name	Primary Contact	Contact Information
Hà Giang Organic Agriculture Cooperative	Phạm Thị Nhung	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> hagiangtea.vn@gmail.com +84 0818 540 295 +84 0982 652 525 https://www.facebook.com/pham.nhung1234
Minh Quang Cooperative	Phùng Sùn Chòi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> htxcheminhquang@gmail.com +84 0945 122 878
Shan Tuyết Quang Sơn	Triệu Thị Thu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> +84 0838 595 871 +84 0378 166 581 https://www.facebook.com/thuhackok.12

5. Xín Mần:

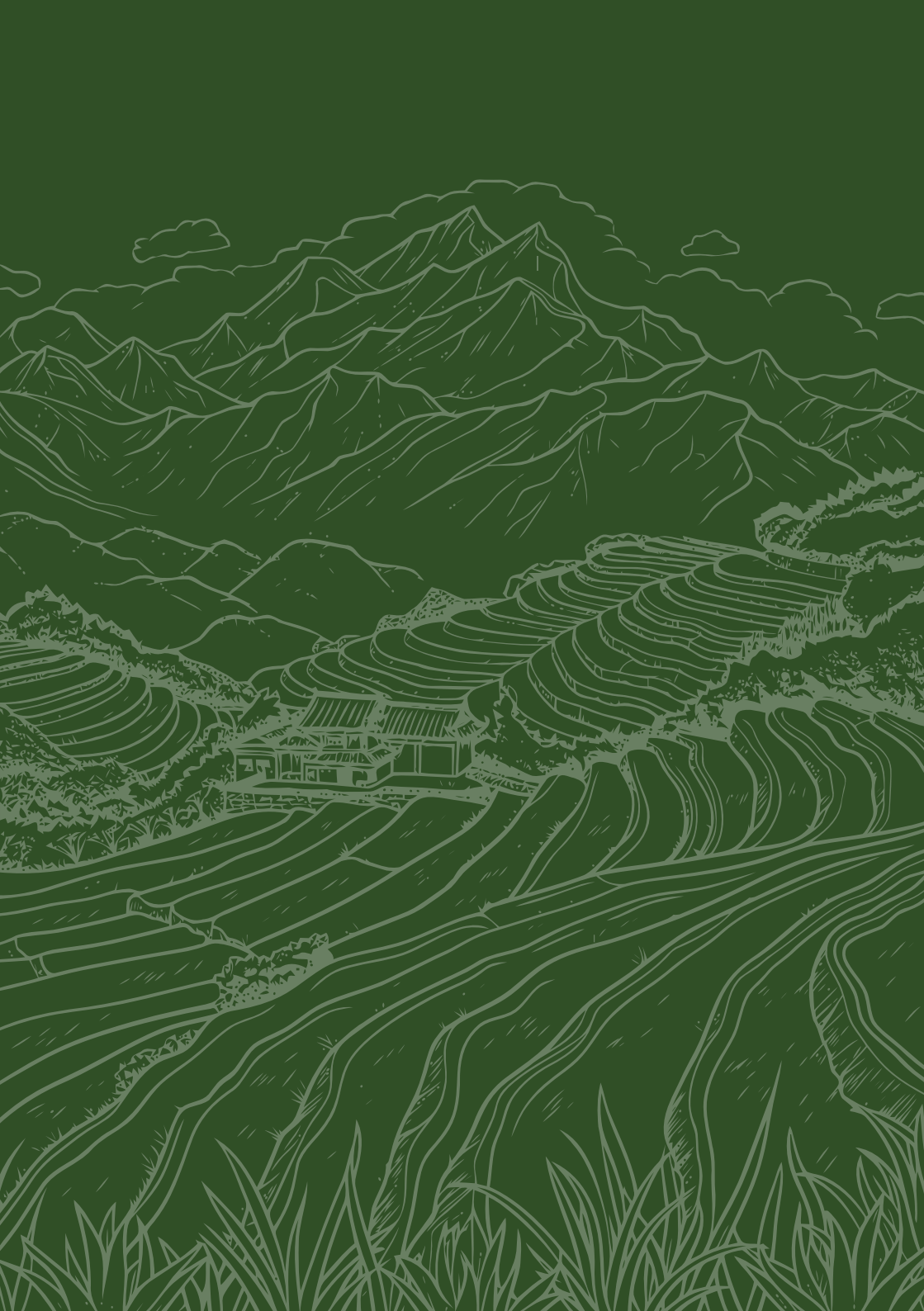
Tea Producer Name	Primary Contact	Contact Information
Quảng Hạ Cooperative	Hoàng Thị Hương	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100010914878342
Xuân Mai Cooperative	Sen Thị Dân	+84 0982 122 888

6. Đồng Văn:

Tea Producer Name	Primary Contact	Contact Information
Lũng Phìn Shan Tuyết Processing Cooperative	Mùa Chúng Vừ	+84 352 871 896
Trà Shan Lũng Phìn Cooperative	Thào Thị Chúc	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + 84 0334 267 183 lungphontradv@gmail.com

7. Yên Minh:

Tea Producer Name	Primary Contact	Contact Information
Cổng Thành Agriculture, Trade, and Service Coop	Hoàng Văn Tuyên	<ul style="list-style-type: none">htxcongthanhvcym@gmail.com+84 0977 625 651https://www.facebook.com/friends/?profile_id=100010027426757
Ngam La Agriculture and Forestry Cooperative	Cháng A Nghe	<ul style="list-style-type: none">+84 0394 487 149htxnonglamnghiepngamla@gmail.com





EXPLORING

Hà Giang
A COMPREHENSIVE
Snow Shan
SPECIALTY TEA HANDBOOK