

三十一

As we coasted downstream
on a long bamboo raft
sliding into the river
and feeling quite daft
the clouds up above
formed a quizzical cast
like a sail held high
overhead on a mast



Chapter 31 – Bamboo Rafts, Oolong Tea, and Tulous

Wǔyíshān (武夷山) was like a mini-Guilin with karst mountains and a river called Nine Bend Stream (九曲溪 Jiǔqūxī) winding through it. It was a hot day when we floated on 4” diameter bamboo pole rafts and “accidentally” fell off into the stream’s cooling waters - where we were not allowed to swim. But I had discovered early in my travels in China that it was a lot easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission. There are very few natural water areas in China where swimming is actually permitted.

I would be remiss to leave Wuyi Shan without mentioning 大红袍 Dàhóng Páo, one of the world’s most renowned and expensive teas. Nearly a thousand years ago, it was leaves from these tea plants growing under Tianxin Rock (天心石 tiānxīnshí) which were highly coveted by the emperor. I never thought that tea grew on trees until I visited 西双版纳 Xīshuāngbǎnnà, in southeastern China, home of Pu Er tea and saw tea trees that reminded me of the apple and cherry trees growing in my grandparents orchard in Missoula. Prior to that experience, I thought all tea grew on bushes like the wonderful green tea plants around Hángzhōu (杭州) and Mògānshān (莫干山.) What I discovered was that tea plants left to grow wild, grew into trees. Da Hong Pao, a very dark Oolong tea, grows in the heavily oxidized soil of Wuyi Shan where, in 2002, 20 grams of a very high grade Da Hong Pao sold for around US\$28,000. By 2016, there were only six of the Ming Dynasty Da Hong Pao trees left.



In 2015, I had an opportunity to take two bicycle tours in southern Fujian province not far from Xiamen, where I got to spend quality time in a kind of multi-generational family homes called “tǔlóu” (土楼.) A part of the architecture of south-eastern China, they appear like natural outgrowths among the terraced fields and persimmon trees in southern Fujian. Shaped like giant bagels,

these homes have been built by the southern Min (閩南 Mǐnnán) and Hakka aka 客家 Kèjiā people in this part of China for almost a millennia. Hakka (lit. translation – guest family,) sometimes called the “Gypsies of China,” were people from northern and central China who settled into Fujian and Guangdong in or around the 9th century CE. These multi-story structures, some over 70 metres in diameter with six foot thick rammed earth and wood walls, were like walled cities or castles which could house hundreds of people. One wonders how a building made out of mud could withstand the weather until one actually approaches the structure and feels the walls. The rammed earth has hardened like cement and tulous have proven to be remarkably resistant to wind, rain, and even earthquakes.

Several of the tulous, which served as extended family homes for centuries, have now opened up to accommodate tourists – complete with flush toilets, showers, and breakfasts. Fall is a beautiful time to bicycle through the low hills of southern Fujian and experience these magnificent structures from a distant past.

