

## Tea instead of opium



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How climate protection, poverty reduction and sustainability come together.  
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# Tea instead of opium

At the border between China, Laos, and the Union of Myanmar, a first area with almost no remains of rain forest will be sustainably used. Thousands of trees and bushes have already been planted – especially the traditional tea tree. The project will offer new perspectives to the entire region.

That is something special”, says Minguo Li and takes some yellowish, dry flowers, puts them carefully into a china cup, and adds boiling water. “What we are drinking here is a tea of the golden-bow dendrobium”, explains the founder and now director of the TianZi Biodiversity Research & Development Centre, one of the first environmental and sustainability initiatives which was officially recognised by the Chinese authorities. “The fine honey-like aroma of the flowers unfolds more with each infusion.” The orchid with the scientific name *dendrobium chrysotoxum* is very important in traditional Chinese medicine. Today, it is a very rare species.

If you are in southwest China and take the difficult way over rough dirt roads up to the Bulang Mountains, foothill of the Himalaya, you can see with your own eyes why there is no space left for the golden-bow dendrobium. In the border area of China, Laos, and the Union

of Myanmar, nothing is like it has been before. The rain forests which covered the hills only 50 years ago have first been replaced by opium fields, and then by seemingly endless rubber tree plantations for the production of natural rubber. The scenery is not only characterised by a never changing, boring green, there is also a dead silence. No bird sings, hardly any insect can be seen.

But if you are not deterred by the bad roads or the monotonous landscape and follow the path to the upper Mekong, you will be rewarded. On an area of six square kilometres, Minguo Li and her German husband Josef Margraf, former development aid worker, have started to create a green island. Around 50 kilometres from the TianZi Centre, the two environmentalists conserve the last remains of the formerly magnificent rain forest, but have also reforested the area of six square kilometres which had formerly been used for opium plantation. Besides that,



Traditional picker – all types of black and green tea which are cultivated on the large plantations in other countries originate in the tea from the Bulang Mountains



Akha women in traditional dress; the landscape and the remains of the rainforest before the reforestation.

Josef Margraf cultivates orchid settlings; an *Aeschynanthus mimetes*, which only grown on trees.

they cultivate inter alia the golden-bow dendrobium. “It is one of the most expensive plant products worldwide”, explains Minguo Li. “Because its Qi, which means its vital force, is supposed to have healing powers, one kilogramme of dried flowers has the value of around one thousand Euros on the Chinese market.”

A group of local workers on behalf of the Chinese forest department has planted 120,000 tea tree settlings, 20,000 cinnamon tree settling, and 10,000 mulberry settlings at the beginning of the rainy

season last year. To ensure that the secondary forest will be at least nearly as speciose as the original, the settlings have been mixed with around one hundred local tree and bush species.

For many months fifty men dug almost 50 centimetres deep holes for each settling into the thick grass and filled it with fertile soil. The planting was financed by the foundation for sustainability NatureLife-International (NLI), based in Ludwigsburg in southwest Germany, by Deutsche Lufthansa airlines, and with the money the TianZi

Centre had already earned from the selling of tea and herbs.

Today, one year later, many of these trees are more than two metres high. Bushes, shrubs, and herbs form a colourful mosaic which already houses many different animal species. The first butterflies and wild bees are flying around, birds are singing between the new plants, and lizards, pythons, and venomous tree vipers sunbathe on the stones. When the area will be connected to other refugial areas, maybe the cuddly slow loris, a rare strepsirrhine primate, will come back, too.

But how is it possible not only to create a natural paradise, but also to preserve it in the long term? The answer is to use it sustainably, and Minguo Li and Josef Margraf, together with NatureLife-International and scientists of the Hohenheim University, have suited the action to this word. Sustainable use first of all means no fertilisers and pesticides. Dai people, one of the ethnic minorities living in these mountains, cultivate and harvest local herbs, spices, and medical plants between the young trees. The income from the selling of tea and cinnamon can be added, and in eight to ten years, it will be possible to sell the first lumber. The trees

will be cut selectively to ensure that the population will not be endangered at any moment. What is not used in the region is sold in the economic centres of China, but also in neighbouring countries in south east Asia or even in Germany or France.

The project is run in accordance with the reforestation farming, a land use system which combines small-scale agriculture with eco-friendly silviculture in the tropics. Like this, in only a few years it will be possible to realise profits which are ten to twelve times as high as the income which the – meanwhile forbidden – opium cultivation had brought some years ago. “We successfully tested the method on the Philippines, now we adapted it to the model project in the Bulang Mountains”, says Friedhelm Göldenboth, professor of agroecology in the tropics at the Hohenheim University who supports NatureLife-International scientifically. “We want to reduce poverty in the region, stop migration into cities, protect biodiversity, and lessen the danger of erosion likewise.” Even climate protection is considered. Within the following 15 years, each hectare of near-nature secondary forest will bind around 300 tons of carbon dioxide, calculates Fried-

## The TianZi Centre wants to reforest another thousand square kilometres in a similar way

helm Göldenboth. For the whole project area, that makes 18,000 tons, selective use of wood already regarded.

If the objectives of the TianZi Centre are reasonably achieved,

the project area will be enlarged considerably. With the help of the administration in Xishuangbanna and the superior government of the Yunnan province, it has already been agreed upon more than one thousand square kilometres which the TianZi Centre is to reforest in the same way. Not only since the beginning of the financial crisis, has China focused on strengthening the economy of its people in their respective homeland in order to reduce the migration into the industrial boom centres of the country. This policy has

### Key data

*TianZi-Centre: founded in 2002. Renaturation of 6 km<sup>2</sup>: 2008. The project area is leased for 35 years from the State. Plan: another 1,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Lease: no concrete amount of money, but all products are brought into the surrounding villages to be shared. Number of already planted trees: 150,000. Staff members of the TianZi Centre: 20. Helpers for the planting: 50. Daily wage per helper: 8 to 12 €. Costs of the planting: aprox. 130,000 € – NatureLife-International and the TianZi Centre paid 50 % of that amount each.*



Map: Sonja Heller. Pictures: NatureLife-International, Gerhard Langenberger

### Origin of wild tea

How an old drink combines economy and ecology.

The tea *Camellia sinensis* originally comes from the mountain forests in south east China. There, tea is a forest tree which can reach more than 20 metres. It grows in oak and laurel forests more than 1,500 metres above sea level. Legend has it that the Bulang people have been the first to use the tea more than 3,000 years ago – as a drink and a vegetable. Skillfully they climbed to the top of the trees to pick the fresh tea leaves. In China and more and more other countries, this tea is supposed to be the best and most original type of tea which is traded for more than 1,000 Euros per kilogramme. It is said that its aroma holds the energy of all the mountain forests and the orchids which grow on its trees. On long trade routes, the dried leaves of the tea reached the entire world. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tea shrubs were brought to India and Ceylon, where nowadays there are large tea plantations.



Natural treasures from the project area – blossom of one of more than 100 ginger species; caterpillars feasting on ferns;

white-lipped tree viper, white dragonfly, golden-bow dendrobium, of which the blossoms value 1,000 Euros per kilogramme.

## INTERVIEW



Claus-Peter Hutter, president of NatureLife-International.

### „All comes back like a boomerang”

Claus-Peter Hutter on the necessity to get involved in China

**Mister Hutter, your organisation is located near Stuttgart in Germany. Why do you get involved in China?**

Finally, the decision on the German forests and natural landscapes is taken in developing and newly industrialising nations. If we are not committed to the conservation of the green lungs in these countries and thus to climate protection, then our natural treasures get lost because of the climate change, too. Many environmentalists have not yet realised that the future of our climate is shaped in newly industrialising countries – and then has an effect back on us.

**Now, as the world is only concerned about the financial crisis, are people willing to get involved for nature protection – especially when it takes place as far away as in this case?**

That is not a question of willingness, but a necessity. The financial crisis is

the best evidence of what is happening when we lose sight of sustainability. Concerning climate protection and conservation of biodiversity, we have to set a good example. Therefore, countries like Germany must increase their development aid tenfold, because every default will come back to us like a boomerang.

**And how is this going to happen? Nowadays, everybody wants money from the State.**

That is not only a State matter. Lufthansa airlines, for instance, support us not only with money, but also with logistics, and the supermarket chain Edeka Südwest will finance the planting on ten more hectares.

**Can private individuals help, too? Indeed they can! With our initiative for climate protection GlobeClimate, for example, you can compensate your own carbon dioxide emissions. Each euro we get from the initiative will be used for projects like the one in China.**

**In Germany, nature protection often meets a lot of opposition – is that the case in China, too?**

There, many people have changed their attitudes during the last years. Politicians and administration support our partners because they understand that we offer new perspectives for the people of their regions, far away from the economic centres.

**Do the people in the Bulang Mountains feel the effects of the financial crisis, too?**

The great boom in China has also reached such remote areas like the Bulang Mountains. People who had formerly lived from nature suddenly needed money. Like this, they got into a fatal dependence. Because of the financial crisis, the prices of natural rubber went through the floor, and they hardly get any money for their work. But to live from nature is not possible, neither, because there is no nature anymore.

**And what will happen next? The project in the Bulang Mountains is an ecological building block with which we want to demonstrate how it is possible to renature an over-used area and thus improve its value for both humans and nature.**

Pictures: NatureLife-International, Lilac, TianZi

become even more important in regard to the dramatically decreasing economic growth.

But the mountain people of the region are not the only ones who benefit from the project. If it is possible to enlarge the project to such a large area, the last tropical forests – which reach until the north of China – can be connected to each other. Like this, the habitats of the archaic gaur (the largest species of wild cattle in the world), the last Chinese elephants, or the hornbills would grow immensely at a stroke and thus significantly increase their chance of survival.

To signal that the Dai people cherish the tradition of their people and at the same time believe

The golden-bow dendrobium begins to flower exactly during the spring festival, which marks the beginning of the rainy season

in the success of the project, the Dai girls again adorn their head with the golden-bow dendrobium in spring. The mountain people call the flower simply Dai orchid – after their own name. The orchid is very important for

their tradition, because it begins to flower exactly during the Dai spring festival, which marks the beginning of the rainy season in the mountains.

The small orchid and the healthy tea which is made from it have become a symbol of how nature and culture can be brought together sustainably in many different ways. “What we need now is a paved road”, says Josef Margraf outright. A rare statement of an environmentalist, but his reasons are convincing: “If the ethnic minorities who live in these mountains are to benefit from the sustainable development, the area has to be accessible for the purchasers of the mountain products as well as for responsible ecotourism.”

HORST HAMM

TRANSLATION: JANA GLASER

## NatureLife-International (NLI)

For mankind and nature.

Whether environmental education, practical nature protection or poverty alleviation and protecting biodiversity through sustainable development: What really matters in all NLI initiatives and projects are the results we achieve for both, human beings and nature, what counts are results not ideologies. Projects/Initiatives: • Climate protection • Food protection • Fighting against poverty • Protection of biodiversity through reforestation of formerly cleared areas of rain forests e.g. in China, in the Philippines and in Sri Lanka • Several projects for the protection of species • Sustainability check for big events • Climate protection through carbon dioxide compensation ([www.globe-climate.com](http://www.globe-climate.com)).

### MORE INFORMATION

**NatureLife-International:** Bahnhofstr. 35, D-71638 Ludwigsburg, Tel. (+49/7141) 920321, [www.naturelife-international.org](http://www.naturelife-international.org)  
Donation: BW Bank, Donation Account: 2209029, Bank Code Number 60050101, IBAN DE 22 6005 0101 0002 2090 29  
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**TianCi-Centre:** [www.natureproducts.net](http://www.natureproducts.net)  
**GlobeClimate:** [www.globe-climate.com](http://www.globe-climate.com)

## Biodiversity – the very basis of life: Lufthansa assumes responsibility.



Lufthansa has actively supported the work of national and international environmental and nature protection organizations for many years. The goal of our commitment is to preserve biological diversity and unique natural landscapes. One area of emphasis bundles the Group's numerous species protection activities, with special attention going to the protection of the world's endangered crane species and their natural habitats. Maintaining a balance is an obligation for our company. More on this subject in the brochure "Lufthansa's Environmental Sponsorship Program" and our Sustainability Report "Balance," both of which can be downloaded or ordered at [www.lufthansa.com/responsibility](http://www.lufthansa.com/responsibility)