茶路贯古今，“新火”试“新茶”

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序言：一座塔与一条茶路

2025年12月底，宜昌早已入冬，冬日清晨，长江转弯处的江面上笼着一层薄雾，天然塔便立在这迷雾之中——守着一泓深水，迎着江风，静静伫立了两百三十余年。天然塔是一座砖石叠砌的七层楼阁式古塔。塔身七层，青砖砌就，檐角轻扬，形制古朴端庄，自下而上逐层收分，轮廓挺拔；层层出檐，其下饰以斗拱；塔座八角，有八大金刚负塔，形象生动。底层塔门西向大江，门额刻“天然塔”三字，两侧楹联彰显其巍然气势。其名“天然”，并非指塔天然形成，恰恰相反，它蕴含着“以人为之力，行天然之事”的深刻哲思。

清乾隆年间重建此塔，旨在“培地脉、壮文峰、制客山、镇水口”，即通过人力建筑弥补自然地形之不足，那时乡绅们所求的是镇住水患，佑一方舟楫平安，人们更关心水势的涨落、航道的安危。他们未必能预料到，在随后的百余年里，这座塔会被反复写入另一种历史——关于茶、远行与交换的历史。在老宜昌人的记忆里，“望塔知宜昌”是一种乡土的共识；而在茶商眼中，天然塔是万里茶道上的航标——静默无言，却见证了无数茶叶从宜昌的山野启程，走向世界的漫长旅程。

水有水的道，茶有茶的路。从天然塔出发往南行进，可到达宜都。宜都，古称夷道，是长江中游要津，自古便是南来北往的货物汇集之地。正是在这里，宜红工夫茶走过了它从地方物产到世界商品的关键一程。

老厂记忆：宜红工夫茶的守正之道

当你走进被称为“茶业活态工业遗址”的宜都红茶厂旧址（人们习惯称其为“老厂”），可以感觉到时间仿佛停止了。高大的厂房里，阳光透过玻璃窗斜斜洒下，王贤明正在检查那些静默了七十余年的机器：风选机、平圆筛、干燥机、揉捻机……它们排列有序，却不再轰鸣。铁与木的结构上留着经年累月磨损的痕迹，这些痕迹像一段段被触摸过的历史。

作为宜红茶业股份有限公司综合管理部副部长，王贤明不是因为职务要求而来，多数时候，他只是沿着车间慢慢走，偶尔停下来，看看墙角那几台早已停用的老设备。那些机器大多产于20世纪六七十年代，外壳的漆色已经暗沉，按钮与扶手被反复摩挲得发亮。他会顺手把落在机身上的灰尘拂去，检查轴承是否需要再加一次润滑油，在他眼中，这些机器早已不只是生产工具，它们更像是讲述者，讲述着一个时代的节奏、一个行业的命运。

“清朝中叶，四川、云南、贵州及鄂西武陵山的茶，翻山越岭而来，都要在这里汇集。”王贤明介绍着万里茶道古宜都段的历史，仿佛让人回到了那个遥远的年代：西南茶区的草木灵气，被揉捻成一箱箱的厚重货物，在这里完成“大船换小船，小船换大船”的转运。谈到清

朝时期这里的茶路贸易，他说：“满载着我们‘宜红’的木帆船起航，顺着长江而下，抵达汉口，然后向北或者向西行进。”

在这漫长而有序的流转中，宜红工夫茶得以与祁红、滇红齐名，并称“三大工夫红茶”。它那源于峡江山水的独特风味，跨越重洋，在海外市场赢得了声誉。那是一条真正意义上的远路。茶叶从湿润的山林出发，穿越江河、草原，抵达欧亚大陆的深处。在这条路上，茶不再只是饮品，它是货币，是礼物，是契约，也是不同文明之间对话与理解的媒介。



宜都红茶厂（旧址）保存的制茶工具

王贤明认为，这条路并未中断，新中国成立后换了一种方式继续延伸。1951年，一座国营茶厂在江畔建成。在那个时期，这是一座肩负着使命的工厂，生产的红茶主要用于出口。茶叶，不再是文人案头的清供，而是与国家脉搏紧紧相连的战略物资。

岁月的大河，其流也缓，其变也著。20世纪80年代中后期，随着政策调整，茶叶不再承担单一的外贸创汇功能。与此同时，国际市场上规模化生产的红碎茶带来严峻的价格竞争，宜红等传统出口红茶在价格、运输成本与国际竞争中的优势逐渐减弱。在政策与市场的双重转向下，红茶出口曾享有的政策扶持逐渐减少，宜红茶产业的重心也从单一依赖外部市场，转为探索内销市场与自身工艺的革新。

于是，老厂区的机器开始减速，继而停歇。王贤明坦承宜红过去“没有形成合力”的原因：品牌归属的历史纠葛；产区分散，跨越“两省三地”，这导致各地“各自为政”。谈及此事，他的话语里没有抱怨，只有一种沉淀后的务实，今日再度置身老制茶厂，人们更多感受到的是一种沉静的力量。

“这些机器，我们依然定期上油保养，部分构件也会修理或更换。”王贤明站在一台老式揉捻机旁解释道，事实上，他也是省级非遗传承人，师承老一辈制茶匠人，他更愿意称这里为“茶业活态工业遗址”。他推动厂区整理、设备修复和展示空间建设，把宜红的历史清晰地保存下来。“保护它，不是为了把它变成博物馆里冰冷的陈列品，”他说，“而是让它作为宜红茶的‘母体’，作为记忆的容器，继续保持呼吸。”这份“守正”的执着，是对过往辉煌的致敬，亦是对技艺根源的坚守。

下午四点的阳光斜斜地照进厂房，给老机器镀上一层温暖的光边。王贤明结束一天的巡查，锁上车间大门。钥匙转动时发出清脆的响声，在这空旷的厂房里传出很远。他站在门外停留片刻，目光掠过斑驳的墙面，像是在聆听这座老建筑无声的诉说。他转身离开，背影融入门外的光线里。这一天很平常，没有什么惊天动地的大事发生，只是一个人守护着传统、又默默为它铺设未来道路的一天。

“新火”试“新茶”：从工艺革新到品牌远行

然而，若只有“守正”，茶香便只能萦绕于故纸堆与老厂房之间，真正的传承，一定包含勇敢的“出新”。宝塔湾早已换了风景——昔日茶船云集的码头，如今被现代城市结构重新书写，但茶路从未断绝，它从喧闹的码头，悄然延伸至安静的实验室、智能化的生产车间，以及全球化品牌的战略蓝图上。

在宜昌茶业集团（简称宜茶集团）的研发室，一场关于风味的革新正在进行。品牌营销部总经理助理周斌冲泡了一杯采用新工艺生产的宜红工夫茶，汤色红亮。不过，他并未急于让人品饮，而是先拿起一旁传统的出口样茶——那是一种沉甸甸的乌黑紧细的颗粒状茶。“过去，我们的红茶主要用于出口。”周斌解释道，“像这样的茶，经过重度揉捻、充分发酵，符合欧洲市场的传统口味。但国内很多消费者觉得它滋味很浓，外观也不够‘好看’。”



周斌介绍宜昌茶业集团的茶品创新

改变，正是在这种差异中发生的。宜茶集团开始重新审视宜红的可能性。他们将老师傅的经验，与现代制茶技术相结合，周斌介绍：“我们借鉴了绿茶的做法，改良发酵程度，做出了更符合国内消费者审美和口感的新宜红。”在不破坏品质的前提下，调整工艺逻辑，借鉴绿茶工艺方式，控制发酵程度，让茶叶在保持红茶特征的同时，呈现出更加清亮的外观与更加柔和的口感。新宜红由此诞生。周斌指向玻璃杯中舒展的茶叶，条索纤秀，金毫显露。经检测，新宜红茶多酚与茶黄素单体含量较高，可溶性糖比例合理，滋味更加醇爽、茶汤更加细腻。这种改变，并非迎合，而是一种对当代饮茶方式的深度回应。

创新也不止于一杯茶，在宜茶集团湖北萧氏茶业有限公司的现代化车间里，另一种改变正在发生。

玻璃墙内，被誉为“无人工厂”的全自动化生产线安静高效地运转着。这里是湖北省规模最大的茶叶商品化加工车间之一，分布着数条国产与进口的智能化生产线，车间的年设计加工能力高达10000吨。从原料处理到成品包装，每一道工序都被纳入标准体系：原茶经过输送带进入清洗、杀青、揉捻、干燥等各个工序模块，自动化系统按照预设程序精确控制温湿度、发酵时间和传送速度，使得加工环节几乎不再依赖传统的人工作业。这种智能化流程不仅提升了生产效率，还极大地减少了人为差异对口感与品质的影响。在车间尽头，自动化包装机将茶叶装入小巧的盒中，盒子设计简约、现代，上面印着一个醒目的名字：Yivana。

“这是我们自己的海外品牌。”总经理向清华的语气中带着自豪，这是宜茶体系下的出口新尝试，也是宜昌茶叶重新进入世界市场的一种方式，宜茶集团的创新者正在利用安琪集团遍布全球的海外资源，把这杯“新茶”推向世界。

“Yivana”，这个名字听起来既有远古的梵韵，又透着现代的时尚。“Yi”取自宜昌，“Vana”在梵语里有森林之意，简单说，就是“来自宜昌的好茶”。它的创立，根植于宜茶集团成立的宏大背景。曾经，宜昌的茶叶大多以大宗原料的形式，隐没在供应链的深处，价值被剥离，姓名被遮蔽。长期以来，宜昌茶虽品质优异，却陷入“有品类、无强势品牌”的困局，各家茶企各自为战，难以形成合力。Yivana的孕育，肩负着整合宜昌茶优势资源、代表产区集体形象直接叩开国际市场大门的使命。它的出现，标志着宜昌茶从过去分散的原料供应商，向统一的品牌运营者转变的关键一步。2024年初，Yivana迎来了首个里程碑——首批3.5吨小包装茶叶正式交付，运往非洲市场。这不仅仅是一笔订单，更是一个信号：依托宜茶集团整合后的产业链与安琪集团的全球网络，宜昌茶正以自主品牌的形式，重新嵌入全球供应链。到2025年，印有Yivana标识的产品已稳定供应中东、非洲等地区，进入大洋彼岸的寻常家庭。

“我们实现了从‘原料出口’到‘品牌输出’的转变。”向清华说。2022年以来，Yivana系列茶产品已销往全球30多个国家和地区，宜昌茶产品线丰富，除宜红外，也包含优质绿茶。“珍眉”便是宜昌绿茶的代表之一，其外形纤细如眉，滋味鲜醇，与宜红工夫茶一同构成宜昌茶走向世界的风味矩阵。尤其在肯尼亚、摩洛哥等地，Yivana能很好地满足当地对浓强风味绿茶的需求，“珍眉”正以极高的标准化质量，成为当地人日常生活中不可或缺的饮品。



自动化车间内的“Yivana”系列样品

“过去，茶更多被当作农产品，”他说，“而现在，它必须同时是工业产品、食品产品。这三点决定了我们能走多远。”茶叶正作为“宜昌名片”向全球输送，这不再是19世纪以物易物的原始贸易，而是当今万里茶道深度嵌入全球供应链的体现。Yivana品牌的国际化之路，始终伴随着对“宜昌风味”如何被世界认知与接受的挑战，如今，这个从长江之滨生长出的名字，不仅是一个商标，更是一个移动的坐标，让“宜昌”二字，以一种可品味、可记忆的方式，在世界茶叶的版图上找到了属于自己的位置。

茶回日常：山野、节令与人的生活

创新，并不止于产品与渠道的革新，它更是让茶回归日常，让历史照见当下——山野间的茶不只是待运远方的货物，更是老百姓生活的底色。

每年春末夏初，当山谷的雾气尚未散尽时，宜昌的茶山便逐渐忙碌起来。武陵山东麓的五峰土家族自治县是宜红茶无可争议的故乡与万里茶道的重要源头。目前，该县共有20多万亩茶园，2000多年的茶文化历史造就了其“楚天茶叶第一乡”的美誉，全县可年产干茶超3万吨、茶叶产值突破14亿元。

与此同时，在长江三峡北岸的宜昌市夷陵区邓村乡，这个被誉为“中国名茶之乡”和“世界茶旅小镇”的茶乡，另一幅画卷同时展开。头采的嫩芽在茶农指尖被轻轻掐下，它们不仅是制作顶级名优茶的原料，更承载着从传统种植向“茶文旅”深度融合转型的任务。

“我们未来想要进一步发展‘制茶—吃茶—玩茶’的‘三茶’文旅融合典型路线，让游客在体验中真正感受茶文化的魅力。”尚清华介绍的“三茶”文旅融合活动，要数五峰、邓村等地茶山的开园节最热闹。初春将至，万物复苏，茶芽尚含睡意，茶农们沿着蜿蜒的山径而上，聚集在山腰与峰岭之间。开园节上，伴随着鼓声，众人深吸这一季山野清润的气息，然后用最原始的声音呼唤山岳：“茶发芽啰！”——“喊山”的悠长呼号率先划破山谷的宁静，随后，茶歌与土家族南曲的旋律交织升起，将几代人的劳作与热望传递给每一片新叶。

“喊山”之所以动人，不只因为它的声响，更因为这声音背后承载的情感与愿景。对于茶人而言，这是向天地报春的宣言，是对一年劳作与希望的祈愿；这是对大地馈赠的虔诚回应，是一种将人置于自然节律之中的共鸣，其间既有对丰收的期待，也有对自然的尊重。

如今的开园节，其意义已从传统的“祭神祈丰”拓展为“以茶兴农、以文促旅”的载体，让一片茶叶，凝聚起一方土地对推进乡村全面振兴最热切的期盼。

在这样的日常与仪式之间，宜昌的茶旅路线悄然成形。它不像城市景区路线那般刻意，而是串联起茶山采茶、制茶工坊体验、萧氏茶博馆研学、茶席品鉴的完整链条：游客可与茶农并肩采茶，在制茶棚学习火候手法，在茶博馆触摸老物件、感知万里茶道历史。“这种体验没有隔阂，它让茶不再只是商品，而是回到了人最初认知它的方式——作为一种日常、一种共同体的记忆。”尚清华说。在这种交叠的体验里，茶被内化成生活的一部分，被重新融入人们的经验与语言中。

结语：塔守江畔，茶行其路

新宜红琥珀金汤蕴含的蜜果甜香，车间里精密运转的全自动生产线，远渡重洋的“Yivana”小包装茶，乃至茶山上那唤醒春天的“喊山”仪式与可漫步、可体验的茶旅小径……这一切，共同汇聚成今日可见的“新火”，它让茶的生命在更多人的生活里清晰地展开，让“万里茶道”“远行”这些沉寂的词语重新变成可感、可触、可饮的当下生活。昔日的“大船换小船”，是驼队与帆船跨越千山万水也要让茶走向世界的努力；今天的“新火试新茶”，更多的是一种文明的对话——它通过标准建立跨越语言的品质信任，通过品牌讲述独特的风土故事，更通过茶旅融合将文化转化为可亲身体验的、沉浸式的生命感知，照见过去，更照见当下。

夕阳为天然塔镀上金边，江水不言，依旧东流，水面上映照的，早已不是昔日木船的帆影，而是跨江大桥的车流与远方高楼闪烁的霓虹。仿佛一切都在变——江水的流速，船只的形制，茶叶的样貌与它远行的轨迹。但仿佛总有些什么，是不曾变过的，譬如这江水总向往着更广阔的天地，譬如这片土地上的人们，总愿意将山野间那一点芬芳，竭尽心血地揉捻、烘烤，然后竭尽所能地送往远方。

所谓“新火”，并不是对旧手艺的否定；所谓“新茶”，也不是对传统的背离。其“新”意，

是在恒常之中寻找变化，在变化之中确认自身。

塔，还在那里。

路，从未消失。

茶，仍在流动，去往世界的每一个角落。

The Great Tea Route Through Time: "New Flames" Brew "New Tea"

Li Tingyi

Preface: A Tower and a Tea Route

At the end of December 2025, Yichang was already deep in winter. On a winter morning, a thin mist lay across the bend of the Yangtze River, and there, in the haze, stood the Tianran Tower—guarding a pool of deep water, facing the river breeze, quietly upright for more than two hundred and thirty years. Tianran Tower is an octagonal, seven-story pavilion-style ancient tower built of brick and stone. Its body rises seven tiers, laid with blue bricks; the eaves curve up slightly, the form simple and dignified, narrowing tier by tier from bottom to top with a clear, upright silhouette. Each tier projects eaves supported by bracket sets; the tower base is octagonal, carved with eight divine guardians bearing the tower, vivid in form. The ground-floor gate faces west toward the river; the lintel is inscribed with the words "Tianran Tower", and couplets on both sides emphasize its imposing presence. The name "Tianran" does not imply that the tower sprang from nature unaided; on the contrary, it embodies a profound philosophy: "to act through human effort so that things appear natural."

The tower was rebuilt during the Qianlong years of the Qing Dynasty with the stated aims of "nurturing the land's pulse, strengthening the cultural peak, taming visiting mountains, and guarding the river mouth", in other words, using human construction to compensate for the deficiencies of natural topography. At that time, the local gentry sought protection from floods and safe passage for boats; people were mainly concerned with the river's rise and fall and the safety of the navigation channel. They could not have foreseen that, over the following century, the tower would be repeatedly written into another history—a history of tea, long journeys, and exchange. In the memory of old Yichang locals, "one can know Yichang by looking at the tower" is a piece of local consensus; among tea entrepreneurs, the Tianran Tower is a beacon on the Great Tea Route—a silent witness to countless consignments of tea that set out from Yichang's hills and traveled the long path to the world.

Water has its way, tea has its road. Going south from Tianran Tower leads to Yidu. Yidu, known as Yidao in ancient times, sits at a crucial point in the middle reaches of the Yangtze

River and has long been a gathering place for northbound and southbound traffic. It is here that Yihong Gongfu Black Tea completed the pivotal leg in its transition from a local product to a commodity in the world market.

Memory of the Old Factory: The Orthodoxy of Yihong Gongfu Black Tea

When you step into the former Yidu Black Tea Factory—a site hailed as the "living industrial heritage of the tea industry" (commonly called the "old factory"), you feel as if time has stood still. Sunlight slants through the glass windows of the high factory halls, and Wang Xianming is inspecting machines that have been silent for more than seventy years: wind selectors, round sieves, dryers, rolling machines... They stand in orderly rows but no longer roar. The iron-and-wood structures bear traces of long wear, like sections of history that have been touched.

As deputy director of the Comprehensive Management Department of Yihong Tea Industry Co., Ltd., Wang Xianming does not come here merely because of his position; most of the time, he walks slowly through the workshops, stopping occasionally to look at a few long-retired pieces of equipment in the corners. Most of those machines were manufactured in the 1960s and 1970s; the paint on their casings has dimmed, and buttons and handrails have been polished bright by repeated handling. He will brush dust off a machine and check whether a bearing needs another dose of lubricant. To him, these machines are no longer mere production tools—they are storytellers, narrating the rhythm of an era and the fate of an industry.

"In the mid-Qing Dynasty period, tea from Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and the Wuling Mountains of western Hubei all came over the mountains to converge here," Wang Xianming recounts the ancient Yidu section of the Great Tea Route, as if transporting listeners to that distant time: the flora and spirit of the southwestern tea regions were kneaded and rolled into heavy parcels and bricks, then transferred here in the "big-boat to small-boat, small-boat to big-boat" interchange. Speaking of the tea trade along the route during the Qing Dynasty, he says, "Our wooden sailboats loaded with 'Yihong' set off down the Yangtze River, reached Hankou, and then either continued north or turned west."

Through this long and orderly circulation, Yihong Gongfu Black Tea rose to prominence alongside Keemun and Dianhong black tea, forming the "three great Congou black teas". Its distinctive flavor, born of the gorge's mountains and rivers, crossed oceans and earned acclaim in overseas markets. This was genuinely a long road: tea set out from moist mountain forests, passed rivers, grasslands, and frigid zones, and reached into the depths of Eurasia. Along this route, tea ceased to be only a beverage—it became a currency, a gift, a contract,

and a medium of dialogue and understanding between civilizations.

Wang Xianming believes that this road has never been closed. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, it continued in a different form. In 1951, a state-owned tea factory was built on the riverbank. At that time, this was a factory that carried a mission—the black tea it produced was primarily for export. Tea was no longer merely a literati's refreshment; it was a strategic commodity tied to the pulse of the nation.

The river of years flows softly, but changes are evident. In the mid-to-late 1980s, with policy adjustments, tea no longer had to shoulder a single role as an export earner. At the same time, internationally produced broken black teas created fierce price competition, and traditional exported black teas such as Yihong lost advantages in price, transport costs, and global competition. Under the combined influence of policy and market shifts, the policy support that had once favored black tea exports receded, and the Yihong industry's focus moved from dependence on external markets toward developing domestic sales and innovating its own processes.

Consequently, the machines in the old factory began to slow and then fall silent. Wang xianming admits the reason Yihong "did not form a concerted force" in the past: historical disputes over brand ownership and the natural dispersion of the producing area across "two provinces and three localities" led to a situation of "each doing its own thing". In speaking of this, he shows no complaint, only a practical calmness born of reflection; standing again inside the old tea factory, one perceives above all a composed strength.

"We still oil and maintain these machines regularly, and some parts are repaired or replaced," Wang Xianming stands beside an old rolling machine and explains. In fact, he is also a provincial-level representative inheritor, apprenticed to an older generation of tea masters. As a member of the unit charged with protecting this heritage, he prefers to call the site a "living industrial heritage of the tea industry". He has pushed for tidying up the factory grounds, restoring equipment, and creating display spaces to preserve Yihong's history clearly. "Protecting it is not to turn it into a cold museum exhibit," he says, "but to keep it as the 'matrix' of Yihong tea, a vessel of memory that continues to breathe." This devotion to preserving orthodoxy is both a tribute to past glory and a guarding of the craft's roots.

At four in the afternoon, slanting sunlight gilds the old machines with warm edges. Wang Xianming finishes his inspection for the day and locks the workshop door. The key turns with a crisp sound that echoes far across the empty hall. He lingers outside for a moment, his gaze sweeping the mottled walls as though listening to the building's silent speech. Then he turns and walks away, his silhouette melting into the light beyond the doorway. It is an ordinary day: nothing epoch-making occurs, only another day in which tradition is guarded and, quietly, a path to the future is being laid.

"New Flames" Brew "New Tea": From Process Innovation to Brand Journeys

However, if preservation alone is all there is, the aroma of tea would be confined to old papers and the old factory. Genuine inheritance must include courageous innovation. Baota Bay's scenery has already changed—where tea boats once crowded the wharves, modern urban structures now rewrite the landscape—but the tea route has never been severed. It has quietly extended from the bustling docks into quiet laboratories and intelligent production workshops, and onto strategic blueprints for global brands.

In the R&D room of Yichang Tea Group (referred to as Yicha Group), a flavor revolution is underway. Zhou Bin, assistant general manager of the brand marketing department, brews a cup of newly processed Yihong Gongfu Black Tea; the tea infusion is bright red. He does not rush to let people taste it; first, he picks up a traditional export sample beside it—a weighty, tight, black granular tea. "In the past, our black teas were mainly for export," Zhou explains. "Teas like this, heavily cut and fully fermented, conform to traditional European tastes. But many domestic consumers find the flavor too strong and the appearance not 'attractive' enough."

Change arises from such contrasts. Yicha Group has begun to re-evaluate the possibilities of Yihong. They combine the masters' experience with modern tea-processing technology. Zhou explains, "We borrowed techniques from green tea production, adjusted the degree of fermentation, and produced a new type of Yihong more in line with domestic aesthetic and taste preferences." Without altering the varietal essence, they adjusted processing logic and adopted green-tea ideas to control fermentation so that the tea retains black tea characteristics while presenting a clearer appearance and a softer palate. Thus, a new type of Yihong was born. Zhou points to the unfurling leaves in the glass cup: slender strands, visible golden tips. Testing shows higher levels of tea polyphenols and theaflavin monomers and a reasonable proportion of soluble sugars, producing a sweeter, rounded taste and a finer mouthfeel. This change is not mere pandering; it is a substantive response to contemporary drinking habits.

Innovation is not limited to a single cup. Inside the modern workshop of Hubei Xiaoshi Tea co., Ltd., Yicha Group, another kind of change is taking place.

Behind the glass walls, a fully automated production line—lauded as a "man-less factory"—runs quietly and efficiently. This is one of the largest commercial tea-processing facilities in Hubei Province, housing several domestically and internationally sourced intelligent production lines with an annual design processing capacity of up to 10000 tons. From raw material handling to finished packaging, every step is standardized: the leaf enters on conveyors into modules for cleaning, fixation, rolling, drying, and other procedures; the automation system precisely controls temperature, humidity, fermentation time, and

conveyor speed according to preset programs, making the processing chain largely independent of traditional manual judgment. This intelligent workflow not only raises operational efficiency but also greatly reduces human-caused variability in taste and quality. At the end of the workshop, an automated packing machine fills tea into compact modern boxes, minimalist in design and stamped with a striking brand name "Yivana".

"This is our own overseas brand," the general manager, Xiang Qinghua, says with pride. It is a new overseas-export attempt under the Yicha system and a way for Yichang tea to re-enter the global market. Yicha Group's innovators are leveraging Anqi Group's international network to push this "new tea" abroad.

"Yivana" sounds at once ancient and modern: "Yi" for Yichang, "Vana" meaning forest in Sanskrit—simply put, "good tea from Yichang". Its founding is rooted in the grander backdrop of Yicha Group's formation. Historically, Yichang tea often disappeared as bulk raw material in long supply chains where value and identity were stripped away. For a long time, Yichang tea, despite its quality, suffered from "a category without a strong brand"—companies operating individually, unable to form synergy. Yivana's birth carries the mission of integrating Yichang's advantageous tea resources and representing the producing region's collective image to directly knock on the international market door. Its appearance marks a key step in Yichang tea's transition from scattered raw-material suppliers to unified brand operators. In early 2024, Yivana reached its first milestone: the first shipment of 3.5 tons of small-pack tea was dispatched to African markets. That was not merely an order but a signal: relying on the integrated industrial chain of the Yicha Group and Anqi Group's global network, Yichang tea is re-entering the global supply chain under its own brand. By 2025, products bearing the Yivana label were steadily supplied to the Middle East, Africa, and other regions, reaching ordinary households across oceans.

"We have achieved a shift from 'raw-material export' to 'brand export'," Xiang Qinghua says. Since 2022, the Yivana series has been sold to more than 30 countries and regions. Yichang's product line has diversified beyond Yihong to include high-quality green teas. "Zhenmei" is an exemplary Yichang green tea: slender as an eyebrow, fresh and mellow in taste; it, together with Yihong Gongfu Black Tea, composes the flavor matrix by which Yichang tea projects itself onto the world stage. Especially in places such as Kenya and Morocco, Yivana meets a local demand for strong-flavored green teas; Zhenmei, produced to a very high standard, is becoming an indispensable daily beverage.

"In the past, tea was more often treated as an agricultural product," he says, "but now it must also be an industrial product and a food product. These three aspects determine how far we can go." Tea is now sent out as a "Yichang calling card"; this is no longer 19th-century barter trade, but rather the contemporary embedding of the Great Tea Route into the global supply chain. The internationalization of brands is always accompanied by the challenge of

how the "Yichang flavor" will be recognized and accepted globally. Today, this name, grown on the banks of the Yangtze River, is not only a trademark but a mobile coordinate that lets "Yichang" find its place on the world tea map in a way that is both palatable and memorable.

Tea Returning to Everyday Life: Hills, Seasons, and People's Lives

Innovation is not only product and channel reform; it is also bringing tea back into daily life, letting history illuminate the present—the tea growing on the hills is not simply cargo to be shipped away but the background color of local people's lives.

Every late spring into early summer, when the valley mists have not yet dispersed, Yichang's tea mountains begin to bustle. On the eastern foothills of the Wuling Mountains, in Wufeng Tujia Autonomous County—undisputedly the homeland of Yihong tea and an important source area for the Great Tea Route—over 200000 mu of tea gardens awaken from the morning fog. This land, with a tea culture history spanning over 2000 years, is today acclaimed as "the First Tea Town in the Chu Region". The county achieved an output of 30000 tons of finished tea, and the annual industrial value of the tea industry exceeded 1.4 billion yuan.

Meanwhile, on the north bank of the Yangtze River's Three Gorges, in Dengcun Township of Yiling District, Yichang City—a town hailed as a "Hometown of China's Famous Teas" and a "World Tea Tourism Town", another scene unfolds. The first-picked tender buds are gently pinched off by tea farmers' fingertips; they are not only raw materials for top-quality teas but also carry the mission of transforming from traditional cultivation to a deep integration of "tea, culture, and tourism".

"We plan to further develop a typical 'three-tea' cultural-tourism integration route of 'tea production-tea consumption-tea leisure', so that visitors can truly experience the charm of tea culture," says Shang Qinghua. The liveliest days are the opening-festival days of the tea gardens in Wufeng, Dengcun, and the like. As early spring arrives and everything revives, the buds are still drowsy; tea farmers climb the winding mountain paths to assemble between hillsides and peaks. At the garden-opening festival, with drums sounding softly, people inhale the season's mountain freshness, and then call to the mountains with the most primordial voice: "The tea buds have sprouted!"—the long shout of the "shan-calling" first pierces the valley silence, and then tea songs intertwine with the melodious Tujia Nanqu (a traditional southern tune of the Tujia ethnic group), passing generations' labor and hopes on to each new leaf.

The power of the "shan-calling" lies not only in its sound but in the emotion and aspiration behind it. For people who make their living from tea, it is a declaration of spring to heaven and

earth, a prayer for the year's labor and hopes; it is a devout response to the land's gifts and a resonance that places humans within nature's rhythms—encompassing both anticipation of harvest and silent respect for nature.

Today, the garden-opening festival's meaning has expanded from traditional "sacrificial rites praying for abundance" into a vehicle for "boosting rural income through tea and promoting tourism through culture", allowing a tea leaf to embody a locality's most ardent hopes for rural revitalization across the board.

Between such everydayness and ceremony, Yichang's tea-tourism routes are quietly taking shape. They are not contrived like urban sightseeing lines, but instead link together a complete chain: tea picking on the hills, hands-on workshops in tea processing, study visits to the Xiaoshi Tea Museum, and tea-tasting sessions. Visitors can pick tea alongside farmers, learn temperature control and firing techniques in processing sheds, and touch historical artifacts in the tea museum to feel the history of the Great Tea Route. "This experience has no barrier; it returns tea from being merely a commodity to the way people first recognized it—as a daily practice and a shared communal memory," Shang Qinghua says. In these overlapping experiences, tea becomes internalized into people's daily lives and re-integrated into people's experience and language.

Conclusion: The Tower Stands by the River, Tea Follows Its Way

The honey-fruit sweetness in the amber-gold infusion of the new type of Yihong, the precisely running automated lines in the workshop, the Yivana small-pack teas shipped across oceans, and even the "shan-calling" ritual that wakes spring on tea slopes and the walkable, experiential tea-tour trails—all of these converge into today's visible "new flame". This "new flame" clarifies tea's presence in more people's lives and turns the once-silent terms "the Great Tea Route" and "long journey" into something tangible, touchable, and drinkable in the present. The old "big-boat to small-boat" exchanges are a testament to caravans and sailboats crossing thousands of mountains and rivers to carry tea to the world; today's "new flame" brewing "new tea" is more a conversation of civilizations—forging cross-linguistic trust through standards, telling unique terroir stories through branding, and converting culture into immersive, firsthand life experiences through tea-tourism integration. It illuminates the past and penetrates the present.

The setting sun gilds Tianran Tower; the river flows silently east as ever; reflected on the water are no longer the sails of wooden boats but the traffic on cross-river bridges and the neon lights of distant high-rises. Everything seems to change—the river's speed, boat designs, the look of tea, and its travel routes. Yet some things remain unchanged: the river

still longs for broader horizons, and the people of this land still willingly take the modest, rustic fragrance of the hills and woods, kneading and roasting it with all their heart, then doing their utmost to send it afar.

"New flame" is not a denial of old craft; "new tea" is not a betrayal of tradition. The novelty lies in seeking change within constancy, and in affirming identity amid change.

The tower still stands.

The road has never vanished.

Tea still flows, bound for every corner of the world.