GLOBAL TEA HUT

國際茶亭

TEA & TAO MAGAZINE

December 2019

茶席

茶的舞台

CHAXI

THE STAGE FOR TEA

Contents

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GLOBAL TEA HUT
TEA & TAO MAGAZINE

ROOT

This month we are going to walk the stages of tea, "chaxi." This includes all the decorations, music and incense that surround a tea session and bring the occasion to life in celebration of a unique moment in the world and in tea. And we will warm ourselves with some great shou puerh as we admire the flowers at our tea gathering.

Love is changing the world bowl by bowl

FEATURES

一期一會
世界唯一處覓得茶

TRADITIONS

recycled & recyclable

Soy ink

From the editor

In December, the weather is cool in Taiwan, especially in the evenings. We tend to drink more aged puerh, Five Element tea and also Cliff Tea and aged Taiwanese oolongs. This is also the time of year when all of this year's cakes have arrived and cooled off after their processing, allowing us to start to really get to know them. There are some amazing and unique teas this year, as well as some everyday drinkers that are also clean and solid. We love when the community starts posting about these teas too and the legends of the future are born. Speaking of legends, we dug into some Inner Path recently, and the session was outstanding. How many of you remember that special brick? At a glance, I would say the Boundlessness red will be this year's "cake to remember."

There is so much going on for us, it is hard to summarize it in this letter. When we found out we had to move by the end of the year, we were overwhelmed. It was very hard to cancel the ten-day courses remaining this year, let alone to face the prospect that we have no idea when courses will resume. And there is still an onslaught of emails regarding future courses to face all the time. Also, the guests at our courses are our personal inspiration. It is easy to put in all the hours of work to maintain the Center and this magazine when it is all supporting this free Center and you can sit back and experience the effects these courses are having on people—changing lives is the fuel of this train. Without that, we would only have the future possibility of Light Meets Life to drive our work.

Like good warriors of light and love, we got to work—hard work! We started fundraising online, and I started traveling around looking for resources, while we also scouted around for a possible location for Light Meets Life. An all that was on top of our normal heavy workload. After a few months of this rushing, I realized one day that we had lost sight of the fact that we are in this for the long run. Our aim is not just to create a free tea Center for Chajin now, but one that outlives us all and is used by future tea lovers who want to learn these brewing methods as well as our approach to tea. I realized we had to slow down and let Light Meets Life evolve organically, freely and in the best possible way. We owe it to future generations of Chajin to choose the right place, not just what is most available now.

As soon as I opened my heart to the possibility of slowing down and doing things right, which we would have done anyway had we not been forced to move, an unexpected, yet welcome wave of vulnerability overcame me, and I realized that I also need a breather. Light Meets Life will be a lot of work, and I need to catch my breath as we set out down this new road, which will be harder and more intense than any chapter in my life. The last seven years, I have traveled on average six months a year, often completing two magazines in the interims I am home while also helping with ten-day courses. I am not as calm as I would like, and my practice has suffered. As hard as it is to share with you all, I must admit I need a break to meditate, renew my Qigong practice and finish some of the many unfinished books I have in various states of completion. And as the Universe does, the moment I made this decision, a small, but clean and beautiful house showed up and we signed a lease… Now, we can stand back, catch our breath and allow Light Meets Life to unfold slowly and without any pressure. All the places we have looked at, and shown you in videos, are still on the table, but there is no stress to make a decision right away.

As I head into retreat and the Center decreases to a minimal staff, something also needs to change in Global Tea Hut. We have spent some months discussing many, many different options, and many of you have weighed in with suggestions, which has been very helpful. In the end, we have decided to rock the boat as little as possible. Amongst the many radical changes, we have decided to just decrease the size of the magazine every month. Many of you even said that this change was welcome, as the magazine is hard to read in a month. You can expect the same amazing translations, in-depth content unparalleled in the English-speaking tea world (with almost twenty issues that are the largest English publications on their topic) and same community, fellowship and, of course, amazing teas you have grown used to. Everything will be the same, only less pages. This change need not be permanent, either. We may go back up to sixty pages a month someday, but for now this change is necessary for many reasons.

This issue is a special deep dive into the stage on which we make our tea, called "*chaxi* (茶席)." We have some amazing articles on arranging your stage to have tea ceremony that we know you will love, along with some very special tea to share with our prayers of light and love as we move into this new chapter of our lives. Thank you so much for your continued support, which is needed now more than ever!

–Further Reading–

This month, we recommend using the search function on the archive (on our website). Try searching for "chaxi," and you will find many amazing articles on this month's topic. This is a great idea in general, and we should all be searching regularly!

Tea of the Month

Over the course of this month, we will be drinking a beautiful and rich shou puerh from Bulang Mountain (布朗山) in Yunnan. It is hard to find clean shou puerh these days, but this is from a certified clean farm. We also had it piled skillfully without over-fermenting the tea, which is so common for shou tea nowadays. This tea is rich and creamy and a beautiful, grounded, everyday tea for drinking through the cold season. It is warming and bright, with hints of camphor and a centering flavor. This will be a staple for the community this year.

One of the reasons that shou puerh has fallen in quality over the last decade is the instability of the market and climate. Back in the day when maocha was not so pricey, factories had access to a much higher degree of consistency. In most regions we travel to, farmers complain to us about the inconsistencies in the seasons and weather (rains, for example) and the challenges this brings to the production of fine tea with annual consistency. This means that even the same tea from the same trees has less consistency in quality, flavors and aromas that it once had when factories received similar maocha back in the 1980s (there was never absolute consistency, just a higher degree). Inconsistencies in the market are also influential, as prices can fluctuate greatly from year to year, and this means that factories cannot use tea they did the previous year, as demand has taken it from them or driven the price beyond what they can spend.

The consistency in the golden age of shou throughout the 1970s and 80s meant that the factories could create blends and then have the years they needed to perfect the fermentation process through trial and error—fermenting different blends to different degrees depending on what raw material was in the blend. It also meant that they could continue the batch of microbes from year to year, batch to batch—using slur, water or even leaves to pass on the microbial colony from one batch to the next. Inconsistency in raw material means that most shou is created from random leaves blended, that the fermentation process goes on to completion and that batches are rarely passed on from year to year the way they once were. Since this method requires less skill, the knowledge and acumen needed to create fine shou puerh is also dying.

It is hard to find a shou with good raw material, like Root. Mostly, factories just blend whatever didn't sell as sheng and fully ferment it by piling for forty-five to sixty days. For the same reason, it is also hard to find clean shou puerh as well. Maocha from good gardens and old trees is so expensive that no one wants to use it for shou puerh anymore. One of the ways around this is to use late-season, and therefore cheaper leaves, called "*huang pian* (黄片)." The Root has some later-season leaves from slightly older trees, though these larger leaves aren't quite large enough to be called "*huang pian*." The addition of some better tea mixed with younger-tree leaves makes this a nice blend, while still remaining affordable.

It is also rare to find a shou these days that was intentionally produced, meaning that a maker set out to create a nice shou puerh, as opposed to making shou as a byproduct of leftover and/or lower quality sheng. It is mostly made by so-called "boutique producers," which are small labels that create small amounts of puerh—usually companies started by puerh lovers looking to share their passion with others. This shou is smooth and clean, with a powerful and earthy energy. It's an amazing tea filled with earthy love and light that is great for drinking and aging. The old-growth material inside makes the Qi wonderful. It brews up thick and rich, with a creamy, frothy goodness. The "piling flavor" is not quite gone yet, as that will take some years, but it is not too strong to enjoy the tea now. If you like the Root, you can also pick up a cake on our website! They are going fast, though, so you should do so soon!

Root

Bulang, Yunnan, China

Shou Puerh

Bulang Aboriginals

~1,500-1,700 Meters

樹根

A Deeper Session

Further Exploration into Our Tea of the Month

Over the course of this month, we will be drinking the Root, a beautiful shou puerh from Bulang—perfect for the cold weather most of us are facing. Ordinarily, we think of shou as everyday, lower quality tea. But shou can be produced with skill and has its own standards of evaluation. One cannot judge a shou with the same criteria one uses to judge a young or aged sheng. This month, we will dive deeper into a conversation about quality in shou puerh, but as usual, we will first review some general puerh and shou information…

Let's start with the basics of puerh. To begin with, we have to start by dividing puerh into "sheng (生)" and "shou (熟)." "Sheng" means "raw" puerh; it's the greener, more astringent kind of puerh, which can be enjoyed when it is young and fresh or aged to ferment naturally over time. On the other hand, "shou," which means "ripe," is artificially fermented by humans, so it is darker to begin with. The words "sheng" and "shou" are used in Chinese to discuss food as well, referring to "raw/uncooked" versus "cooked" meals. The terms also describe the ripening of fruit. Understanding this distinction is important for exploring puerh, and specifically shou puerh, more deeply.

In order to better understand tea processing, we also have to return to a review of oxidation and fermentation. Oxidation is an enzymatic process: basically, cellular breakdown due, of course, to the exposure to oxygen, like when a banana or apple turns brown on the counter. Fermentation is similar, but it is metabolic and involves the presence of bacteria and other microorganisms, like the changes in yogurt, cheese or alcohol. Sugar is converted into acids, gases and alcohol. This distinction is important in understanding tea, and especially shou puerh, because many kinds of tea are withered (oxidized) to change the chemistry of the tea and remove moisture from the brittle leaves before processing. But puerh is also fermented post-production, which means it has a strong relationship to microorganisms—whether it is naturally fermented (aging) or artificially fermented in the factory, as with shou. Over time, puerh both oxidizes and ferments. These natural changes are more pronounced in sheng than shou. But we'll get to the aging of shou in a bit.

Like many genres of tea, puerh starts with "*maocha* (毛茶)," which means "rough" or "unfinished" tea. You'll hear this term discussed most often with regards to the genres of oolong and puerh, as they traditionally have "finishing" steps that occur later and sometimes at a different location from where the tea is initially processed. In puerh, the tea is processed fully (dried) and then sent to a factory to be blended, compressed or made into shou. And even back in the day when the final steps were done at the farm, they were still done at a later date (sometimes months later), so the term "*maocha*" was still relevant. In oolong, it refers to unroasted tea. The reason the finishing steps in these teas are completed later is because the farmers have to focus on finishing the harvested tea on the day it is plucked or the quality will suffer. And since there is freshly picked tea coming in every morning during the harvest season, they have little time to sleep, let alone finish the tea, which can be done later. These days, with regards to puerh, almost all *maocha* is sent to be finished at factories that want control over the finishing steps like blending, choosing sheng or shou and also deciding what size or shape to compress the tea into. But before we get to the factory, let's understand what *maocha* is.

Puerh *maocha* is harvested, withered out- and indoors depending on the place/tradition and the weather, fired (*sha qing*, 殺青) to arrest the oxi-

dation of the withering and de-enzyme the tea, and rolled (*rou nian*, 揉捻) to shape the tea and further break down the cells. Puerh tea is then sun-dried, which is unique in tea.

The two defining steps that make puerh unique are the firing and drying. The de-enzyming of tea is done to stop the withering and also to remove green enzymes that make the tea bitter and astringent. Like most teas, puerh is fired in a wok (often wood-fired), but it is done at a lower temperature and for a shorter duration than most kinds of tea. This, along with the varietal of puerh, is why young sheng is so bitter and astringent. Puerh is fired in this way to allow the heat-resistant spores to survive the processing, since they will be paramount in the post-production fermentation process. The sun-drying is what also separates puerh from most kinds of tea, and it is done for the same reason, since sunlight and heat are just what the spores need to start colonizing the tea again.

After the *maocha* is dried, it leaves the farm for the factory. However, it is ideal to finish the tea at the source, since the water and micro-ecology will be unique for each place; but that rarely happens nowadays. The tea is then blended or left single-region and compressed into various shapes of cakes as sheng puerh, which can then be enjoyed young or aged for later. The tea is steamed, compressed and dried on racks (often with fans, but traditionally in the sun), before being wrapped individually in natural paper and then often wrapped in stacks made of bamboo skin called a "*tong* (筒)." But if the tea is to be shou, it has a whole other journey to travel.

Shou puerh is artificially fermented by piling in a process called "*wo dui* (渥堆)," which is essentially composting: the tea is piled to about a meter, sprayed with water and usually covered with a thermal blanket. The heat inside is why shou is sometimes called "cooked" puerh. The pile is then stirred regularly until the desired degree of artificial fermentation is reached. To fully ferment the tea takes between forty-five and sixty days. With compression and drying, it's three months.

Shou piling actually happens in two phases: wet and dry. The first, wet-piling, is more a fermentation of bacteria breaking down the cells of the puerh. This piling is much deeper, usually a meter. During the second, drier piling, the thermal blanket is removed (if one was used) and the piles are thinned out (usually to around 20 cm). This is where the yeasts and molds become more active in the tea. If the tea is destined to be loose-leaf shou, then the tea will be stirred and dried like this thoroughly. If the shou is to be compressed, the second stage of piling will be cut short while the tea is still slightly damp.

Shou tea has to be compressed before it dries—right after the piling. Some factories do compress aged loose-leaf shou later, but doing so always damages the quality of the tea. Once shou tea dries, the leaves are tight and twisted from the heavy fermentation, so getting them to stick in a cake at a later date requires a much heavier, hotter and deeper steaming than with other puerh, which affects the quality of the tea, lending it boiled-tea flavors. It is, therefore, always better to compress shou right after piling. If one wanted to use aged tea, it would be better to age the *maocha* as sheng and then pile/compress it later, when it has matured to the desired age.

A Brief History of Shou

Deciding when to begin the history of shou puerh depends on how we define shou. If shou is any artificially fermented puerh, then it is actually old. Aboriginals have been artificially fermenting puerh tea for centuries.

They roast it, bury it, stuff it in bamboo, etc. Different tribes had different ways of consuming puerh, but it was rare to drink it young and green. It was considered astringent and "cold" in Traditional Chinese Medicine, and therefore, not so healthy for most Chinese people who have "cold" constitutions. Consequently, most tribes developed their own ways of artificially fermenting, roasting or boiling puerh to make it more palatable. For the sake of this discussion, however, we are going to restrict the term "shou" to its modern sense of piled puerh that has gone through *wo dui*.

Piled shou puerh is a modern subgenre, beginning in the 1960s. In most books and articles, you will find either the dates 1972, 1973 or 1974 listed as the beginning of shou puerh. There was some confusion, but recent research into historical records has verified that 1973 is the correct date. That is the date the government licensed the first commercial production of shou puerh tea for sale, starting with the Kunming factory. However, research and under-the-table batches were being produced as early as 1965 (perhaps even earlier). It took the factories a number of years to demonstrate a consistency, safety and quality that the government would license (all factories were state-run during the Communist Era, beginning in 1949). We actually have a '60s shou brick here at the Center. Most of the batches from that time were done for research, though it is likely that the factories tried to mitigate costs by selling some of this tea illegally as well.

Sheng puerh takes seventy years to reach full maturity. That number is not arbitrary. As sheng puerh ages further and further, the aging process itself begins to slow down. The cells crumble onto one another and the fermentation therefore relaxes. Even a beginner can tell the difference between a one- and three-year-old puerh, just as the difference between five and ten years is obvious. But the differences between ten, fifteen and twenty years become harder to distinguish, requiring more experience with aged and aging puerh. After that, even the experts have to start gauging the tea in terms of decades.

At seventy years, the physical appearance of the liquor will not change anymore: black in the center, moving out into browns, then auburn and maroon, with a golden ring at the edge. The tea will change beyond that, gaining depth in Qi and flavor, but those changes will be for the next generation. Of course, puerh can be enjoyed long before full maturity—even thirty-year-old puerh is marvelous. Nonetheless, it is easy to understand why producers, distributors and consumers would look for ways to speed up a process that is measured in decades, or even generations.

The process of speeding up fermentation began long ago with wet storage. Puerh lovers, especially in Hong Kong, would carefully store their tea for a few years in warehouses near the sea or in basements with very high humidity, occasionally rotating it to higher, drier warehouses. This "traditional storage" would greatly speed up the fermentation process, decreasing the quality of the tea, but allow people to enjoy it much sooner. In those days, the raw material used to make puerh was very inexpensive (especially compared to these days), so they didn't mind such compromises. Factories wanted to speed this up even more, inspired by the artificial fermentation that was already very established in the black tea industry of next-door Guangxi, which produces Liu Bao. Guangxi and Yunnan had already been exchanging raw material and ideas for decades, so it came as no surprise that researchers from factories in Yunnan would one day show up in Liu Bao to study the artificial fermentation there. Of course, they had to adapt the process, because the varietals, trees and leaves of Yunnan are different from Liu Bao and other black teas, and also, perhaps more importantly, the microbial ecology is very different. The "microbial terroir" is why various kinds of beer in Germany, wines in France or even Mao Tai alcohol in China are not reproducible elsewhere, despite many attempts to forge famous examples. The same is true of cheeses, which will be very different when fermented in different places, even if the milk and cultures are the same.

The main difference between the piling of shou and other black teas is that the piles are deeper, wetter and hotter. The thicker, larger leaves of large-leaf Yunnanese puerh require a deeper pile, and the wetness perhaps was inspired by the "traditional" wet storage—shou puerh is, in fact, the wettest of wet storage. Wetter piles also work faster. Finally, the factories in Yunnan added the thermal blanket to increase the speed and degree of fermentation.

It may go without saying that the puerh factories were not successful in reproducing in a month what Nature makes in seventy years. Like "traditional" wet storage, the shou process of artificially fermenting (piling/composting) the tea reduces its quality in terms of flavor, and even more so in Qi, sacrificing much of the energy of the mountain and tree. What they were successful in achieving was adding complexity to puerh by creating a sub-genre that needs to be understood and evaluated on its own terms. You really cannot compare shou to sheng in any meaningful way, whether the sheng is young or aged.

A Dying Art

In recent years, much of the skill and craft that goes into making fine shou puerh has been lost. Overall, the puerh market has gone through many changes over the last fifteen years.

Sheng puerh has also changed a lot, which has affected shou puerh as well. As more and more tea lovers have started consuming young, green sheng puerh, the criteria for evaluating sheng puerh has changed: Back in the day, all sheng puerh was evaluated based on its candidacy for aging—its "age-ability," in other words. But nowadays, more sheng is consumed young, which means tea lovers now evaluate it on its "drink-ability," which, for us, is to say the Ten Qualities of a Fine Tea. And the two sets of criteria don't always line up, meaning that a tea that is great for long-term aging is not necessarily great for drinking young, and vice versa. Many famous vintages of puerh, like Red Mark (紅印), were notoriously bitter when young. Usually, if a tea is to be aged long-term, it must be bitter and astringent, strong and vibrant. If a runner is already weakening five kilometers into a forty-two kilometer marathon, he probably won't go the distance. This has all resulted in great changes to puerh production,

as producers move towards meeting a demand for drinkable young sheng tea. They have begun to process their puerh more like green tea (or sometimes even oolong, which we call "poolong"). Such tea may taste nice now, as it is fresh, but isn't worth taking up valuable storage space.

The second influencing factor that has had a tremendous impact on sheng and shou production over the last decade is that the cost of quality *maocha* from nice trees has skyrocketed. Old-growth raw material is extremely rare and expensive, so the overall cost of cakes has gone through the roof, making it hard for tea lovers to age their own sheng. This change has also indirectly affected the production of shou, which is the main topic of our discussion.

As we discussed earlier, shou puerh is never as good as sheng. All things equal (the same raw material), the piling of the tea leaves takes away some of the essence. Sheng will always be stronger, cleaner and more vibrant—filled with the energy of the mountain and forest the tea came from. Also, natural fermentation and oxidation that happens slowly over time breaks the cells down in a much more gentle, smooth and clean way, as opposed to piling and covering with a wet blanket, which creates heat and moisture, forcefully composting the tea in a short period of time. Shou and sheng are apples and oranges: you cannot use the same criteria to evaluate them, as they are very distinct categories of puerh tea. But, once again, all things equal, sheng is better, which is why it is much more expensive than shou. The difference in quality is reflected in the market price, in other words. And that is as it should be. Sheng cakes are much more expensive than shou, especially if the tea is from good trees.

The quality of puerh tea is measured differently from other genres of tea. Most tea is qualified by some ratio between the terroir/garden/trees and the processing skills of the producer: leaves and processing, in other words. Puerh, on the other hand, is evaluated by the mountain and its reputation (sometimes warranted, other times, partly hype), the kind of garden and the age of the trees. Since the cost of good *maocha* from nice mountains, gardens and older trees is so high, if a producer tried to create a shou tea from this material, she would have to sell it for the same price as the sheng cake, which very few customers would pay. In fact, she may have to sell it for more, since, as we discussed with regards to shou processing, shou has an extra piling step in post-production and can therefore be even more expensive, as a result of the extra labor costs. Also, there is a genuine loss of quality that happens through the piling, which is hard to justify when the raw material is so rare and expensive.

The end result of all these changes is that there is very little shou puerh intentionally produced these days. Most shou is just a blend of plantation tea grown and produced cheaply. Even if it does come from slightly better gardens, it is still often just the leftovers of whatever sheng puerh didn't sell that year or from the previous year. These trends have further widened the gap between the quality of sheng and shou. Very few producers start out with a desire to create a shou cake, let alone the skills to execute—though there are exceptions, like our Tea of the Month.

The Processing of Maocha

- Plucking
- Withering
- De-enzyming
- Rolling
- Sun-drying

The Processing of Shou

- Sorting
- Piling
  Artificial Fermentation
- Drying
- Steaming
- Compression
- Packaging

The Gongfu of Shou

There are three main skills that go into the production of a fine shou puerh, which are unfortunately becoming rarer, as they aren't passed down within factories anymore, as lower costs and increased productivity have become the aims of the larger factories, while smaller boutiques have focused their energies more and more on sheng puerh production. To make a nice shou puerh, the producer has to start with that aim: evaluating shou based on its own terms, with heart and soul bent on creating the best possible tea within those parameters. This means that rather than seeing shou puerh as a second-class citizen, one needs to stop comparing it to sheng puerh altogether. We know that we said over and over that; all things equal, sheng is better tea, but in terms of trying to create a beautiful shou, a comparison to sheng has no bearing. The producer should instead be focused on what makes a great shou tea, and on honing the skills needed to create one, which we will explore in this section.

The first and most important skill needed to make any fine puerh tea is selecting the leaves or "***blending***," which means sourcing good quality, clean, chemical-free tea from a nice mountain, a good garden and the oldest trees possible. Finding organic shou puerh has also become more difficult, as factories resort to using more plantation tea and/or blending lots of tea together in the piling. Back in the day, *maocha* was very cheap and also very consistent, so the factories could really focus on creating fine shou tea as a separate endeavor from sheng, following its own criteria. They knew a lot more about which kinds of leaves, blended or not, result in nice, creamy, rich and delicious shou puerh. Sourcing good raw material forms the basis of all fine tea.

The second skill needed to create fine shou puerh is to ***add starters*** from previous batches to the piling. This creates long-term bacteria strains, much like sourdough cultures, which can potentially be passed down for centuries. In the '70s and '80s, factories had strains for certain blends/kinds of raw material, which were passed from batch to batch, creating the ideal fermentation for each kind of tea. The microbes can be added as a starter in three ways: Firstly, the producers can add "slur," which is the dark water that runs off the piles after they are sprayed, covered and fermented. This thick liquid is full of microbes. Secondly, they can also add the microbe-dense balls, called "*cha tou* (茶頭)," that form at the bottom of piles due to the heat and pressure. Traditionally, there were fewer *cha tou* due to more skillful stirring of the piles, but it is impossible to prevent them from forming at all, and they make a great starter for future batches. Finally, microbes can be added as a starter by simply saving some of the wet leaves from one batch and adding them to the next. The preservation of certain colonies of microbes for certain types/blends of raw material (*maocha*), improving over time, creates the best fermentation.

9/ Root, (Shu Gen, 樹根)

熟普洱製作功夫

After all, it is the microbes that are doing all the work in making shou tea, and so a healthy colony will, of course, result in a better tea. If the microbial colonies are off in any way, the tea will also have off flavors, as with any fermented product in the world.

The third skill needed to create fine shou is the ***skillful piling*** process itself. This starts with knowing how much water to add, when to stir the leaves and how often, as well as when to add or remove the thermal blanket, depending on the ambient temperature. More importantly, skillful piling is about understanding the desired degree of fermentation relative to the leaves being piled. Different blends/types of leaves need to be piled to a different degree. Nowadays, as fewer producers focus on shou puerh, these skills are being lost (except the skill of recognizing when shou is completely fermented, though some factories have lost even that, going beyond the time the tea is as fermented as it can be). It is much easier to fully ferment the tea for forty-five to sixty days, no matter what kind of leaves are used. However, this is not ideal for fine shou. The best shou teas are fermented more lightly than this and are stopped intentionally at a precise degree of fermentation that is ideal for the type of tea being piled. As we discussed earlier (more than once), shou is lower quality than sheng (again, all things equal), because the piling process alters the tea, and some of the natural purity of the old trees and the mountain forest where the tea grew is lost as a result of this processing. Obviously, if the fermentation is done to a lesser degree, these changes are also less aggressive, preserving more of the natural essence of the tea. Knowing when and how to stop the piling is a skill that requires a deep understanding of different types of leaves, as well as knowledge and experience with fermentation. As with all stages in tea production, piling should enhance the tea and leave no trace, so the best piling should not result in a piling flavor.

So, consistency in *maocha* year after year allowed early shou producers to create better blends, add starter material from previous batches of the same blend and then skillfully experiment with the piling of the same tea year after year until they figured out the ideal degree of artificial fermentation. Nowadays these skills need to be adapted.

Without consistency, blending has become a matter of utilizing a lot of experience cultivated over years together with the opportunity and good fortune to try many, many samples as potentials for one's blend. This all begins with what we call "intentionally-produced shou," which is a tea that was intended from the start to be a shou rather than being made from leftovers, as the majority of shou puerh teas are. So, assuming the aim is to make a great shou that doesn't cost as much as sheng, the blender will need good connections to lots and lots of samples of clean tea, knowing how to find some affordable ways to include better raw material, like using *huang pian*.

茶 *The piling of shou puerh is a long process of what is, essentially, composting the tea. We call it "artificial fermentation," not because it is not natural (it is), but rather to distinguish it from the natural fermentation that occurs when sheng puerh is aged. In the 1960s and early '70s when factories were adapting these techniques to puerh, they realized that the methods used in black teas like Liu Bao were not strong enough for the tough, thick leaves of Yunnan, so they changed the process, spraying more water and using thermal blankets to increase the heat to induce heavier fermentation. This can also introduce toxins, however, so the process should, ideally, be done with care.*

A good shou producer is thinking ahead and knows how to add deals to blends. Much of the same skills used in properly blending sheng will come in handy when blending shou tea as well.

After the blend is made, a producer of good shou will have to know the piling process from years of experience and know when to stop a given tea based on previous similar blends. If possible, she could also add in starters from previous batches that are similar as well. Alas, these techniques are hardly ever used nowadays.

Like all things tea, quality is a cooperation of Heaven, Earth and Human. To make fine tea, including shou, you need the right combination of weather (a good year), a healthy ecology and trees, which create healthy leaves and then the skill of people who love what they do and do it well. All of this is, really, what we call "terroir."

Shou Storage

Many shou puerh teas from the '70s and '80s would taste like an aged sheng to the inexperienced puerh drinker, because tea sellers knew that many of their customers would age the shou tea. Since the blends were intentionally produced using fine-quality raw material, and then artificially fermented to a much lesser degree, the newly produced shou tea was still "green," especially compared to all the fully-fermented shou puerh teas sold these days. This meant that the tea still had room to naturally ferment. It was worth storing these teas long-term, in other words, as they would grow and change over time—fermenting and oxidizing like a sheng, only to a lesser degree. And this is the main factor in storing shou puerh even today.

To properly store shou puerh, a tea lover should learn to recognize the degree of fermentation used. Ideally, one would have access to fine shou puerh, produced using the three skills we discussed earlier (like our Tea of the Month, for example), but that may not always be possible. Fully-fermented puerh is often "pondy," tasting of ammonia or pond water due to the long, aggressive piling process, which results in the production of many gases as the tea is forcefully composted over forty-five to sixty days. Such tea is not suitable for long-term storage. Since it was already artificially fermented to a high degree, there isn't much room for it to change over the long haul. There is little left in the leaves for natural fermentation and oxidation slowly over time, in other words. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't age fully-fermented shou.

The best option for most of the fully-fermented shou teas is to mellow them out. "Mellowing" is so relevant in today's puerh world, full of such shou, that it is even a criteria of all the shou tea reviews we conduct for various tea magazines. Of course, one should start with organic, clean shou, even if it is piled unskillfully. Then, you age it for around ten to fifteen years. There is no point in going beyond this. Ten or fifteen years is enough to mellow out the tea, which means that it loses the pondy, "piling flavor (*dui wei*, 堆味)" it had when it was young. It will become smoother, thicker, creamier and gentler as well. The aggressive piling of most shou puerh teas makes them rough, so mellowing them out will result in a much more enjoyable tea liquor.

If you find intentionally-produced shou puerh that is artificially fermented to a proper degree, then you will have found a candidate for long-term storage. Such tea will grow finer and finer over time—the older, the better, in fact. Our Tea of the Month fits into this category, and so does Inner Path, which some of you will remember. (It would be great if everyone shared some more examples on the Global Tea Hut app this month!)

Whichever kind of shou you are storing, it should be stored like all other teas: in a cool, dark place that is clean and free of aromas. For that reason, the kitchen is always the worst place to store any tea, as the air is full of oils, spices and other smells. Find a nice, quiet place that is consistent in temperature and is dark. Puerh needs some humidity and airflow, which most other teas do not. A fluctuating humidity that rises and drops seasonally is ideal, with a minimum of 60% humidity, which is the low end for

It takes a lot of skill to ferment shou puerh properly, and even the best shou produced nowadays is not made with anywhere near the care or skill that the old ones were. This mainly has to do with consistency of raw materials. Without access to the same maocha year after year, it is difficult to a) create a great blend for shou, b) experiment with each generation to find the perfect degree of artificial fermentation and c) develop living micro-ecologies that can get stronger and then be handed down batch to batch. These days, we tend to think of shou puerh as dark, black and creamy, but in the old days, everyone felt that good shou was red and clear. Some foolish producers and vendors even thought these cakes were blends of shou and sheng leaves. There is a big difference between partially-fermented shou that is aged and new shou that is fully fermented. They both have dark liquor, but the flavors, aromas and energy are very different. From far left to right, we have a well-fermented new shou, an aged shou that was well fermented and a new, fully-fermented shou.

puerh (this means indoor humidity, not based on an outdoor hygrometer).

It is important to keep shou puerh away from all other kinds of tea. The strong piling/artificial fermentation aromas of shou puerh are notoriously detrimental to all other kinds of tea, especially delicate teas like green, white, yellow or young sheng puerh. Shou should have a cabinet all to itself, kept clean and apart from all other teas, though you can store both kinds of shou together—those you are storing long-term and those you are mellowing out.

The more puerh stored together, the better—a warehouse will produce way better tea than a few cakes in a cabinet. Traditionally, we store all puerh as at least a "*tong* (筒)," which is seven cakes wrapped in bamboo skin and an extra cake left loose (eight cakes in total). The bamboo skin protects the seven cakes in the tong. The extra cake is for tasting over time. Tea aged in a whole, unbroken cake is way better for the long run, and when it is time to drink a tea, breaking the cake up completely and storing the pieces in a jar for at least a month will result in a much better liquor. After a long period of storage, this is important, since the center of the cake has not been exposed to any oxygen throughout that time. Breaking a cake up makes for a more even, smoother tea. This is why we need the "tester" cake: to determine when it is time to dig into a tea (when it has aged enough). Then we can break a whole cake up and store it in a jar for consumption, carefully closing up the *tong* to protect the six remaining cakes, and so on, until the tea is gone…

More on the Skill of Piling

Historically, Yunnan big-leaf tea would firstly be sun-dried to make *maocha*. After processing, the *maocha* would become what we call "Yunnan puerh tea." If those puerh teas are not being consumed immediately but being stored for years, we would then call them "aged teas." Nowadays, tea producers would often further process *maocha* by the procedure of *wo dui*, and we would also classify those teas as puerh. If the tea leaves were sold as they were after being processed, they would be called "loose leaf puerh." If the tea leaves were being further processed and compressed into the form of a cake, a bowl or a brick, we would call them "compressed puerh tea." Different kinds of Yunnan compressed teas have different names in different places. However, I believe what really matters is that you understand the classification of those teas.

Yunnan puerh tea is commonly classified into sheng tea, sub-categorized "dried-stored" and "wet/traditionally-stored" sheng puerh, and the second main category, shou tea. Some people nowadays prefer to classify puerh tea by the location that the teas were stored in: Yunnan, Malaysia, Guangzhou, Hong Kong or Taiwan, for example.

Before 1985, the production and supply of all tea leaves in the Mainland was organized by the Tea Corporation of China. There were production schedules or sales targets for every tea planter, producer and seller. Each and every process you can imagine about teas (including planting, processing, producing and selling, etc.) in the mainland of China was implemented based on the annual production schedule set by the Tea Corporation of China.

During this period, Yunnan compressed puerh tea was commonly classified into three categories: border-sale tea, domestic market tea and export tea. Border-sale teas were sold to the western border areas of China, including Tibet, Qinghai, Gansu and Xinjiang, etc.; domestic market teas were sold to Sichuan, Hunan and Guangdong, etc.; while export teas were mainly exported to Europe. Most of the border-sale teas and domestic market teas were sheng puerh, while most of the teas exported to Europe were shou puerh.

Tea retailers in the Guangdong province found that sheng puerh teas must be aged for a long period of time before they could be sold in the market. Therefore, the CNNP arranged for the staff members of the three state-owned tea producers in Yunnan (Kunming, Xiaguan and Menghai) to learn the production method of shou tea in Guangdong.

It was hoped that by learning the *wo dui* technique from Guangdong tea producers, the time required to age sheng puerh teas could be shortened. However, all of the three tea producers failed in their first attempt, bringing them back to Guangdong again in 1971. This time, Xiaguan Tea Factory succeeded in producing shou puerh tea. However, as this factory was focusing on producing border-sale big-leaf sheng teas, it decided not to start the production of shou puerh immediately. Kunming Tea Factory was the first runner-up to succeed in the production of shou teas, and it became the first Yunnan tea factory to produce and export shou tea bricks. That's the reason why the public wrongly assumed Kunming Tea Factory to be the first tea factory to learn the craft of shou tea production.

We have often heard our fellow tea lovers saying that some puerh teas were "mixed." For example, they would say a puerh was 30% sheng mixed with 70% shou, while the other one was 20% sheng mixed with 80% shou. This was not the case, at least not for the teas produced in Yunnan before 2000. The truth is that the technicians responsible for the fermentation process of shou teas would sometimes decide to dry the teas earlier, stopping the fermentation sooner based on the types of leaves they were using and what their goals were in creating a shou puerh. Some small tea factories in Yunnan unwisely believed there was some truth in the myth, and they started producing mixed teas (blends of sheng and shou) in the early 2000s. In fact, the production method of shou puerh was a secret between the tea producers in Yunnan, and only a handful of technicians who were responsible for the fermentation process would know the tricks of the trade. In recent years, the representatives of tea companies from other areas often requested to visit the tea producers in Yunnan, and some of them naively thought that they could master the craft in one visit. We should all be concerned about the consequences of letting those tea producers make shou puerh themselves.

Shou puerh is potentially unhealthy if the piling does not follow important guidelines. Like all fermentation, microtoxins may be produced, and these can be unhealthy for human consumption in both the short term and the long term. It is therefore important to get your shou from reliable factories that have hygienic piling rooms and methods.

Modern Shou

Before fermenting the puerh teas, the factory needs to prepare the *maocha*. The maocha could be wild arbor puerh, planted puerh or a mix of the two, depending on the requirement of customers. The tea leaves used are generally thick and old unless otherwise requested by the customer. The shou puerh teas produced could be classified into spring harvest, summer harvest and autumn harvest (also commonly called "*gu hua cha,* 穀花茶"), according to the season that the tea leaves are being collected. For each harvest, anywhere from six to fourteen tons of tea leaves would be fermented. Before fermenting the *maocha*, the fermentation plant must be cleaned thoroughly. The size of fermentation area depends on the amount of maocha being processed, while the thickness of maocha placed should not exceed two feet, regardless of the amount of teas being fermented.

Before the fermentation process begins, the water content of the maocha would generally be less than 10%. During the process, water is added constantly to the teas, until the water content level reaches 25%. On the other hand, the technicians would keep on turning the teas until their condition met the requirement of customers. After that, the teas would be flattened and dried. Generally speaking, it takes three months to complete the fermentation process. So, how can you determine how well a shou puerh is fermented?

A perfectly-fermented shou puerh tea gives amber color in its liquor. The liquor would be clear and transparent, and you can steep the tea multiple times. Brewed leaves are soft and give deep-red color. An under-fermented shou puerh tea gives a lighter amber color in its liquor. Like a perfectly-fermented shou puerh, the liquor is clear, transparent, and it allows you to steep it a few times. The brewed leaves are soft and their color is somewhere between rusty red and dark green. If a shou puerh is over-fermented to a stage where it is almost carbonized, the liquor would then give a dark-brown color. The liquor would also be clear and transparent, and the brewed leaves would be soft and black. You should note that this tea does not like to be steeped for too long. If a shou puerh is so over-fermented that it is carbonized, the liquor will be clear and yield a chestnut red color. The brewed leaves are hard and black in color. This tea, like the one we discussed above, cannot be steeped for too long. Of course, this is all dependent on the right ratio of leaves to the size of your pot, as putting too much leaf in a pot would also result in a darker brew than what is ideal. Still, it is very rare indeed to find an intentionally produced, properly fermented shou puerh these days.

All of the shou cakes we make are intentionally produced, and come from good blends with clean and quality resources, and our producers do their best to pile our teas to our specifications. Still, only one out of a few cakes are really piled to the perfect degree for the leaves. Mostly, they are over-fermented. We often have to pay extra to have the tea piled skillfully, as the trend is just to fully ferment nowadays, and it is a challenge to even find someone who is willing and able to pile skillfully in any other way than full artificial fermentation. The skill is, as we mentioned earlier, a dying art. But we do our best to get them to stop. The Root was piled just over thirty days, for example. The best advice we have for over-fermented shou teas, which will represent most of what you will encounter in your tea journey, is that, first, they are not good candidates for long-term storage, and second, they should be aged for ten to fifteen years to mellow out the heavy piling flavors (even seven years is really great for this). If you cannot wait, and need a tea to drink, at least let them sit for six months to a year to mellow out a bit.

茶 ***Cha tou*** **(茶頭)** ***are balls that form due to the heat at the bottom of the piles of shou tea.***


茶頭

Brewing Tips 冲泡技巧完成好茶

This month, we are drinking a shou, which means that sidehandle or gongfu are the methods for brewing this tea well. In fact, there really is not a better way of brewing this month's tea. Many teas like this do not necessarily lean towards bowl tea or gongfu tea, but rather result in very different sessions depending on the brewing method. When prepared sidehandle, the Root is deep and grounding, meditative and soft, resulting in a beautiful day. Gongfu, on the other hand, is more expansive, and you notice many more subtleties in this blend than when it is in the bowl. There are actually many layers to this tea, flavors and aromas that are highlighted when this tea is brewed gongfu.

When brewing fermented teas—including aged sheng and shou puerh, as well as all black teas, like Liu Bao, Liu An or Hunan teas—temperature becomes very important and makes the difference between a great and mediocre tea. We find that the very dark and very light teas are the most temperature sensitive. In the case of dark teas, like Root, we want the water as hot as possible. This is tricky, because a full boil is not great for long periods of time. When water is at a full, rolling boil, which is called "dragon water" or "old man's hair," it starts to lose structure and becomes rough. We obviously want our tea to be smooth. This also effects patience, as a smooth and consistent temperature will result in more steepings, as the tea leaves release their essence slowly and steadily. For this reason, we want to bring the water to a boil as quickly as possible, which is called "martial heat."

In Chinese cooking, martial heat is often used with stir-fried greens. When done properly this creates amazing greens that are both cooked and somehow fresh and green at the same time, almost as if the veggies were tricked into being cooked. It is delicious. We want to achieve the same thing with the water we use for tea, especially dark teas like this month's beautiful shou puerh.

There are three main factors that will go into well-heated water for tea: first, the type of fire; second, the speed it takes to reach a boil; and, third, how the temperature is maintained. (This list is only about fire and does not include the materials used, like what type of kettle, which is also important). As for the fire, as we have so often discussed in these issues, we recommend charcoal, gas or infrared. Charcoal is ideal, adding depth and virtue to your tea. If you cannot use charcoal, then gas or infrared will do. But we need martial heat. The faster the water boils the better. This means that charcoal should flame and be lively and vibrant, boiling the water fast; the gas should be strong and focused on the bottom of the kettle; and the infrared should be high-wattage for fast boils. Finally, it is very important that we maintain temperatures. Different types of kettles hold temperature better or worse; for example, iron tetsubins hold temperature for a long time compared to ceramic ones, and there is a great variety in the types of clay as well. Charcoal, alcohol burners or infrared can all be used to maintain temperature, but you have to be careful about duration.

For bowl tea, duration is hard to control, since we need so much more water. Traditionally, gongfu tea involved a skill that has mostly been lost: boiling each steeping individually so that the water is always fresh. Using very small clay kettles and strong charcoal flames, each steeping could be ready just as the cups returned. This is another of the many "skills" that make this method "gongfu."

Sidehandle *Gongfu*

Water: *spring water or best bottled*
Fire: *coals, infrared or gas*
Heat: *hot, fish-eye, roughly 95 °C*
Brewing Methods: *sidehandle or gongfu (both are great; different, not better)*
Steeping: *longer, flash, flash, then growing (this the same for both methods)*
Patience: *fifteen to twenty steepings*

茶 *Try paying attention to how fast you boil your water for this tea. It will be much better if you can use "martial heat," boiling the water as fast as possible with a very strong flame.*


茶席
茶的舞台
Chaxi
THE STAGE FOR TEA
茶人: Shen Su (聖素)

Tea is a Way of Life
茶是一種生活方式

Let us start by considering the term "*chaxi* (茶席)," as it literally translates: "tea stage." Like in all tea practices, working with your tea stage is an expression of your state of mind, not to be confused with an expression of your *self*. Though an aspect of yourself will inevitably come through in the final expression, it is not the goal of a *chaxi* to express the self. We might simply say the goal of a *chaxi* is to create a harmonious setting that honors the communion between guest, host, and Nature in a chance encounter over tea.

In this tradition of Cha Dao, we live a life of tea. And that includes all facets of our daily life beyond the tea ceremony itself. It's about carrying the meditative mind into all that we do, on and off the tea table. The closer an activity is to the tea table, the easier it is to understand its relationship to a tea practice. The further away from preparing tea we get, however, the more difficult it is to recognize the influence an activity has on our tea practice, like taking out the garbage, for example. But a tea practice is comprised of many skills, like working with charcoal, fetching water, cleaning, arranging flowers and so on. And each of these can be further refined as our understanding of Cha Dao moves from the gross to the subtle. It is, therefore, easier in the beginning to stay focused on the big picture, before zooming in on the details—to start at the tea space, for example, before expanding into other areas of our lives. We can consider our tea space as a stage upon which to practice what will eventually become a way of life.

Honoring the Guests & the Occasion

As host, when you invite guests to your house for a special occasion, the first thing you do is clean and then decorate. Out of respect for ourselves, our environment and our guests, we clean! After creating a tidy space, we decorate in a way that's appropriate to the occasion—be it a party, wedding, birthday or other special event. In this way, we welcome our guests into a clean and especially-beautified space that says: "I care about you and this time we're sharing together!" This is common practice around the world. Hosts clean and decorate before opening their houses to guests.

Similarly, when we prepare for tea, we first clear off and clean the table and then decorate our tea stage. And the desire to honor our guests and the occasion is where our *chaxi* practice begins. A well-thought-out, well-arranged *chaxi* says to your guests: "You are important to me. This time and occasion are important to me. I am honored to welcome you into my home." This is why creating a *chaxi* for every tea session is so important. It demonstrates a heart of respect that recognizes the uniqueness of the time you'll have together. It also celebrates the occasion itself—the precious time shared in sacred space, drinking tea. In Cha Dao, this quality is called, "one encounter, one chance," which will be discussed at length further on in this article. In this way, we treat every occasion as special, and they certainly are! We need a *chaxi,* therefore, to welcome guests in a way that expresses our respect for them and celebrates the fact that this will be the first and last time we drink tea together...

Tip for Honoring the Guests: One simple tip to begin setting the occasion apart is to avoid "sticky teaware!" By "sticky," I mean teaware that you are reluctant to move—teaware that has a tendency to sit around and gather dust. This might be a heavy, clunky tea sink that is not convenient to move, or a piece of teaware you always use when you lack creativity. Sticky teaware that lingers on your table stagnating betrays an over-casual air, as if to say, "Well, if you're here, I'm having tea anyway. Join me if you'd like, and if not, no worries." By arranging a new chaxi for each occasion, with your specific guests in mind, you are developing the respect that will lay the foundation for a successful chaxi practice to take root. When you care about your guests, clean your space and decorate it in their honor; then this love and care will come through your chaxi, and the tea you serve, in a way that makes them feel like this occasion is special, and like they are welcome and loved.

Keep Tea as the Focus

I have seen beautifully decorated *chaxi* at many tea events in which all of my attention went straight to the elegant and flashy elements of the design. The themes were obvious, but what was missing was the guest of honor: Tea Herself! This is akin to hosting a party and paying so much attention to the surface-level details that amidst all the lights and banners and music, you forget to invite the guest of honor! A well designed *chaxi* should always invite our attention towards the tea.

Your design should have a clearly defined subject and background. In other words, it should be clear from the beginning that tea is the subject. Every step in your design must stem from this understanding. All elements of your design should draw attention towards the tea. That includes the runner, tea pillow, scoop and stick, and any other element or utensil used. Tea sits at the center of the *chaxi*, so the elements should focus our attention there. Remember, *chaxi* can be translated as "tea stage." And like in theater, the backdrops, music, lights and other elements should draw the audience's attention to the star, not detract from her performance. Otherwise, Tea becomes lost among the elements,

茶 Start your chaxi practice simply. The simplest chaxi are often the best. Here we have put two blue runners down, one plain and one with a wave pattern. We framed the bright pot with a little bonsai that leads the eyes to the pot, and from there to the cups. When the brewer sits down, she can either brew around the tree or move it to the empty side of the chaxi (the guests' right). Sometimes it is nice to have elements that move once the session begins. This simple chaxi is easy, and can be done with either gongfu or bowl tea, depending on the occasion.

without the due respect She deserves. It is, after all, *tea* ceremony, so we must keep our priorities straight and remember for whom we are throwing the party!

Don't Forget Function

In order to design a successful *chaxi*, you must understand the occasion. Who is attending your session and how many guests there are. How are they feeling and what tea will suit them? What season is it? What's the weather like? What time of day is it? All of these questions and more should go into designing your *chaxi*. Intuition is also important, but in the beginning, stick to the functional questions first. When you understand the practicalities of the occasion, you will be able to choose a suitable tea, the appropriate brewing method, and design your *chaxi* accordingly.

It is important to focus first on function and then form. A *chaxi* that looks beautiful but doesn't function well is like a fine teapot that delights the eye but doesn't handle nicely when brewing tea. The ideal is almost always a *chaxi* that is functional and beautiful, like food that is both nutritious and delicious. In the beginning, focusing on function first will be very helpful. Get the basics down and don't let your creativity get in the way of the session that's trying to unfold. This is not to say don't express yourself creatively, but rather remember that anything which draws attention to you is drawing attention away from the guest of honor, which is worth repeating throughout this discussion: *Tea Herself*.

Knowing which brewing method you will use makes a big difference in your *chaxi* design. *Chaxi* for gongfu tea, while not lacking in beauty, is often more contained around the brewer. It should be designed to make the best cup of tea possible, which facilitates the function of gongfu tea and means it will naturally be a more function-oriented arrangement. Traditionally, gongfu tea was reserved for smaller parties of up to five people, which meant a smaller tea space. Therefore, additional elements quickly became unnecessary and only the essentials remained. When designing a *chaxi* for gongfu tea, stick with the necessary tools to brew the finest cup of tea possible, and then refine and highlight with decoration. Oftentimes, the essential elements themselves can be decorative, like a fine wastewater basin, for example.

This can, in fact, be the whole of a simpler *chaxi*, where the teaware is in itself the decoration.

Tip for Keeping Tea as the Focus: Your design should be simple. Less is more! My teacher almost always takes something away from my "completed" chaxi. If adding an element to your design doesn't absolutely offer an enhancement in form and/or function, as well as draw attention towards the subject, then it's probably superfluous. There are no neutral elements in a chaxi. If you feel it's neutral, then it is most likely detracting from the subject. Remove it. Simplify. Do so until your chaxi expresses what it needs to with as few elements as possible.

Chaxi for bowl tea, on the other hand, while not lacking in function may appear to be more aesthetic in its design, which is appropriate for the purpose of the method: to share tea as medicine with sacred intention in ceremony. It's therefore easier to make the mistake of letting aesthetics override function, but the function should be well-integrated into the design of this kind of *chaxi* as well.

Bowl tea is appropriate for both large and small tea sessions, so utilizing space for function and form becomes more of a challenge. A *chaxi* for ten people is quite different than one for three. Knowing how many guests there will be plays a large role in the functional elements that will guide in the arrangement of a *chaxi* for this kind of ceremony.

Tip to Not Forget Function: In general, keep chaxi for larger gatherings simpler and lower to the table, with fewer elements that might easily become obstacles when serving so many people—obstacles to the one brewing, who will have to navigate them when handing out and collecting the many bowls, and obstacles to your guests' attention. When designing a chaxi for bowl tea, I always sit at the brewer's seat first to see how it feels functionally, and then stand back to see how it looks and feels from the guests' perspective.

What's the Theme?

This is where your creativity can finally come into play! What is it that you want to express? It helps to keep your themes general in the beginning and then work towards more refined, specific themes as you get better at arranging *chaxi*. Obvious themes can be based around certain events, like Chinese New Year, anniversaries, birthdays, etc. You could also theme your *chaxi* as an offering to your highest self, or a friend or family member far away, setting aside an extra bowl or cup of

tea for the person in mind. The possibilities are limitless...

You can think about your *chaxi* as a *mandala*: a piece of art connecting this brief moment in time to the entire universe. This can be achieved by using symbolic elements in your design. For example, a small statue of the Buddha, a *vajra* (a symbol of spiritual power), a red or gold runner or a sutra, just to name a few, are powerful images, symbols and colors that express a lot of meaning. Use them wisely, for the right occasion and in conjunction with tea—never at its expense!

There are many ways to theme your *chaxi* around Nature, the season or the weather. For example, strive to make your guests feel cool in the summer. A small water feature might be used to this end, or a blue runner that could symbolize a cool river. In the cooler months, you can create a warm ambiance by using certain colors, like orange and red, and/or arranging the elements in a tighter configuration. There are always seasonal elements, often just out your front door, that you can bring into your design to bridge the boundary between inside and outside, Nature and Tea. Flowers, greenery, rocks, moss, leaves and more can all be brought inside to connect us to Nature.

Tip for Your Theme: In bowl tea, some elements like the bowls or teapot will be used during the tea session but won't be part of your chaxi. It's often better to leave your chaxi as bare as possible for when the guests arrive, suggesting the tea to them, inviting them onwards. This is like when the guest of honor makes a grand entrance at her party. By leaving the teaware off the stage until all the guests are seated, the tea will have a more defined beginning. Let your guests sit at the table and enjoy what you have created for them. Once the water for tea is ready and the feeling is right, slowly and carefully add these other elements for the actual brewing of tea to commence. Usually a cha tong (tea helper) will aid in this process. This doesn't mean the teapot cannot be used in the design of your chaxi as a centerpiece; it will often be so. The bowls will almost always come out after the water is ready, once your guests have had some time to sit and appreciate the tea stage; but they can also be used successfully in a stunning chaxi.

Start with Emptiness

"Without anxious thought, doing comes from being."

–Wu De

Once you have a clean stage upon which to practice, the next most important step is *being before doing.*

Remember, this is both the ending of the last tea session and the beginning of the next. Expand your definition of the tea ceremony. You are always drinking tea. By being present, you prepare yourself for the next moment and honor the last.

How you act now will play a very influential role in the unfolding of the tea ceremony. What you lay out on the table will be a demonstration manifest of your state of mind. This might sound a little extreme, but really, it's a matter of heart. If we are to live a true life of Tea and Zen, we must fervently seek the balance that strives towards perfection, and yet rains compassionately on all shortcomings. Life is fleeting, and this expression of beauty and art on the table could very well be the last mark you make on this Earth... Take a few breaths, quiet the mind, and envision your *chaxi*.

Arranging a Chaxi

"Instead of thinking through the question that life is confronting you with, sit quietly and let your thoughts settle down. Allow the answer to emerge spontaneously from your intuition without unnecessary deliberation. Go straight to the solution."
–Wu De

As with choosing a suitable tea for each ceremony, the design of our *chaxi* should strike a balance between certain practical factors and our intuition. It is always helpful to consider details, such as the time of day, the weather, the season, the number of guests, bowl tea or gongfu tea, etc. In fact, in the beginning, most of us will lean towards using these details to design our tea stage. But it's just as important to begin an internal dialogue with your tea, the space, the tea utensils and the spirit of the Leaf. There is then less "me" in the design and more tea spirit, as it should be.

You may think yourself limited by having a small selection of tea stage elements, but this is actually a good place to start. Having less to work with is actually an advantage in the beginning, just as it is advantageous to start with bowl tea, requiring only leaves and hot water in a bowl. With less parameters to consider, we can more easily connect to the spirit of what we are doing, and also as with bowl tea, the spirit of *chaxi* lies in simplicity and balance. With this as our foundation, it will be easier to work towards more elegant and refined *chaxi* layouts in the future, just as we progress to the more refined and complex brewing method of gongfu tea after first brewing bowl tea for a long time. As we so often say around here, *advanced techniques are basic techniques mastered!*

Elements of Chaxi

A discussion of the elements of anything would not be complete without due respect to Nature, for what are the elements if not aspects of Nature Herself? Remember that when you are creating a *chaxi* for your tea ceremony that it is akin to building a temporary altar. A beautiful, well-designed *chaxi* honors Nature as we bring the elements together in a balanced way for a brief period of time. Like an altar, the elements should be balanced and focus one's attention towards the center, where the god or goddess rests, or in our case, where the Tea is made.

When crafting your *chaxi,* it is important to first consider the size of your tea space and the number of guests. A large tea space with many guests will generally require a far different set of elements than that of a smaller tea space with less guests. It is so important that your *chaxi* function well for the occasion, just as a teapot should primarily function well and then delight the eye. A beautiful teapot that doesn't do its "job" ends up a display piece, and that is a shame. No matter how beautiful the teaware, it must work well first... Clearly, the ideal is a teapot or *chaxi* that both functions well and stirs the aesthetic spirit in all of us! Just as the ideal for food should be that it is nutritious and delicious, but nutrition must come first.

Another important initial decision will be whether to create a rustic or elegant *chaxi*. This distinction is a good generality to begin with, as most all *chaxi* will either be refined or simple (*wabi*). At this point, the theme of our tea stage starts to unfold as we envision our *chaxi*. Here are the main elements we'll use to create our arrangements:

Chabu (茶布)

The *chabu* or tea runner/cloth will often be one of the first elements we look to. It will play a huge role in determining whether your *chaxi* will be rustic or elegant, simple or refined. *Chabu* can be made of cloth, bamboo, sticks woven together, rattan, straw and/or a variety of other materials. They can range greatly in shape, color and pattern. One thing to consider before choosing your *chabu* is what type of tea you will be brewing. For example, if you brew a dark tea in a large company, then a white or easily-stained cloth should be avoided (unless you want stains on it), since you will have to pour faster the more guests you have in order to keep the liquor consistent. When you choose a *chabu,* it will quite literally lay the foundation for your tea ceremony, as upon it all other elements will find their place. (You could also choose to use a piece of wood or stone, something unique or even nothing.)

Tea Boat or Pillow (茶船 & 茶枕)

With the *chabu* chosen, the next element will play the role of focusing our attention on the center of the stage. This is important to remember, because if the other elements are out of harmony with the theme of a *chaxi*, it can actually draw our attention away from what's most important—the tea! The boat or pillow will act as a surface between the base of your teapot and the *chabu*. Usually we use a boat in gongfu tea as it catches water that is showered over the pot, whereas a pillow is anything to rest your teapot on, more often used in bowl tea.

It is probably important to remember here that in gongfu tea, function plays more of an important role than form, which doesn't mean we rule out form and beauty from gongfu tea sessions. Likewise, bowl tea, while seemingly more designed with form in mind, still must consider function. They obviously overlap; we might say that in both gongfu and bowl tea, we start with function and work towards form, but with bowl tea, form is often more pronounced. This has to do with the aim of both brewing methods, which is refinement of the tea and brewing the best cup possible in gongfu, and ceremony that facilitates meditative space in the case of bowl tea.

Since this element should focus our attention on the center of the stage, it should therefore contrast the *chabu*, while remaining in harmony with the theme and overall feeling. Sometimes, the simplest rattan trivet is enough to find that balance. Other times, a very elegant, shallow dish is just the right touch. A noteworthy exception here is when you don't use a *chabu*. One such example would be a larger, flat piece of wood, upon which you wouldn't need the addition of a pillow.

"The value of a piece of teaware is reflected in the tea it makes and the state of mind it brings to the space."

–Rikyu

***Tea Utensils* (茶具)**

Scoops and sticks are often used together. The scoop is to display the tea, and the stick can then guide the loose leaf into the pot and sometimes act as a spout cleaner should some leaves clog it up. One major difference I've noticed at the Center over the years as we serve more people in larger numbers is a general shift away from scoops and sticks, unless they are very suited to the theme and don't constrict movement or get in the way. That being said, these will still be important elements for most people as they are extremely practical and can fill space nicely on a large *chabu*. Definitely don't feel forced to use them both. Sometimes, the scoop or dish used to hold the tea is all you will need. As we add more elements to our *chaxi*, the choice becomes increasingly difficult. We need to take into account all the other elements to find balance. In fact, great skill and aesthetic appreciation are required to create a *chaxi* that values emptiness as much as form. More is definitely not always better.

One more element you will want to consider is the wastewater basin, or *Jianshui* (建水). This is the vessel into which discarded water goes. Out of respect, we clean our tea and teaware before our guests. It is therefore essential to have a *Jianshui*.

In bowl tea, we almost never display the *Jianshui* for the entire duration of the tea ceremony, but rather only for the cleansing in the beginning. For the rest of the ceremony, it is generally kept out of sight under the table or off to the side. Unlike the other elements, where having a greater variety to choose from offers versatility, only one *Jianshui* is necessary for all practical purposes. While its role is mainly functional, don't hesitate to use a beautiful *Jianshui* in your *chaxi* if you have one. Otherwise, any large, open bowl will do.

In gongfu tea, the *Jianshui* is usually present on the tea table, as we warm the pot and cups at each infusion, so it's very important to have nearby. Because it's on display, a smaller, more refined *Jianshui* is nice to have. This could mean a larger wastewater basin is needed off to the side to pour off the water from the smaller one.

In this tradition, we find the art of *chaxi* useful in our ceremonial approach to tea. A functional and aesthetic *chaxi* is a great way to welcome and honor your guests to the tea space, and definitely influences everyone's experience. We are fortunate to have this luxury to use as yet another tool

towards cultivating a life of Tea. In that light, we craft our *chaxi* and invite you to join us for tea! The *chaxi* draws you in and makes you feel at home, filling you with peace.

The Final Touch

During the process of arranging the elements, I always sit down a number of times and get a feel for how everything is unfolding. I put myself in the guest's position and contemplate how they might experience this *chaxi*. There comes a point at which you either feel satisfied or not. Feeling satisfied is easy to understand, just as when you level a scroll or hang a picture in the perfect spot—everything just clicks into place and you know it's in harmony. This happens when you are calm, respectful and heartfelt. When you feel unsatisfied, however, you can take something away, add something or change everything! When my teacher corrects and adjusts my *chaxi*, he takes something away or has me start over. Simplicity is the hardest thing to achieve.

Finish your *chaxi* in a timely, calm fashion. Obviously, do not rush such an endeavor, but also don't get caught up thinking too much. Stay centered, find your breath throughout, and work single-mindedly. When the tea begins, everything is perfect just as it is. But each time, ask yourself, is this your best effort?

How you finish anything is how you start the next thing. Just as we started by cleaning our stage, so too we end by cleaning. Gratefully, clear everything away. Do yourself and your guests a favor and make a new *chaxi* for every occasion! Be diligent! In doing so, your actions will be in harmony with the fact that this very encounter will only happen but once in our lives.

One Encounter, One Chance (一期一會)

As with all things Tea, *chaxi* is like a luminous stone, simple in appearance from one angle, but concealing flashes of brilliant colors when turned in another direction. It is succinctly the things in the tea space and nothing more. And yet, arranging *chaxi* is rich with opportunities for insight and self-cultivation.

One of our personal favorites of the great legacy of tea sayings that has been handed down over generations is "*Ichigo ichie,*" which is Japanese for "one encounter, one chance." Any discussion of *chaxi* would be remiss without an exploration of this poignant expression, as it speaks to the underlying spirit of a great *chaxi* and the session that will take place upon it.

Before the session begins, this expression asks us to remember that this tea session we are preparing for is unique and pregnant with possibilities. It reminds us to treat it with the same respect and attention we would give to a once-in-a-lifetime meeting with someone very important, which it surely is. Like that same empty page that was the beginning of all great works of literature, music and art alike, a clean and clear tea space waits for us to impress upon it our intention for the next session.

And the *chaxi* represents those impressions put on the paper like musical notes, quietly awaiting someone to sit down and play.

The energy and intention we put into these moments will greatly determine the outcome of this meeting. This intention and the state of mind with which we carry it out are just as important as our intention and state of mind when the session begins. Don't rush to set up a tea session in order to get to the point where the tea drinking begins! After all, if the instruments are not in tune or the stage is improperly set, it doesn't matter one bit how well the music is played later on, it's going to be disharmonious.

Once the session has begun, *Ichigo Ichie* reminds us to cherish this moment, taking nothing for granted. Even if (*Especially if!*) you and I drink tea together every day, even if it's the "same" room, the "same" time, the "same" tea, this saying reminds us that, in fact, nothing and nobody are ever the same. We are always sitting down to tea for the first and last time together. The whole Universe is changing every second, and so are we.

This is much easier to realize when my guest is the cause of a special occasion—such as my teacher or a dear old friend I haven't seen for many years. It is more difficult when the guest is a roommate or neighbor or weekly tea-friend, and perhaps most difficult when the guest is my own higher-self alone. But the more difficult it is to muster the spirit of "one encounter one chance," the more important it is to practice doing so! Invite your higher self to tea; invite more presence and awareness to join you when you drink tea—and in life—by spending more time setting up a nice *chaxi* as though you yourself were the dignified guest. Are Presence and Awareness not royalty?

Ideally, in the true spirit of *Ichigo ichie*, the *chaxi* should be changed before each and every session of tea. In this way I pay homage to the transient nature of this tea and this tea session, and recognize that it will never happen again in exactly the same way. Even if I make tea for you every single day, and even if we drink "the same" tea, what a loss it would be if I took even one of those sessions for granted! And it's the same with all days, all meetings, all moments. It's so important, such a crucial part of making the most of our brief time here for our own happiness and the benefit of others, to cultivate as deep and experiential an understanding of this truth as we can. Arranging *chaxi* is a time for reflection and intentional practice.

Anything at all that instills in me a sense of the uniqueness of this moment in time is worth contemplating. I might reflect on the emotions I experienced the day before, or something that had seemed important once that has now passed away. I might notice that new smudge on the floor or the way the sunlight has changed since Spring. The subtler the better, but even more superficial changes such as a new freckle or haircut are worth acknowledging.

At the end of the day though, there is something refreshing and complete in emptying the table, cleaning it and laying out something wholly different than before. The more you practice *chaxi,* the more you will begin to feel the way the energy you created at first slowly drains away the longer it sits, until like a flower it wilts and withers, instilling lifelessness into the space. Make sure to pay attention to this and change and clean the space before this happens, or your tea will be stale and lifeless as well!

Beyond the tea space, my *chaxi* practice reminds me that each moment of my life is a unique gift, no matter the form, and encourages me to respect and cherish them all. Over the years, I have cultivated greater appreciation and respect for all the moments of my life through practicing my *chaxi*.

After several years of putting *Ichigo ichie* into practice through my *chaxi*, I have made huge strides towards appreciating the never-ending uniqueness of the moments and people in my life and continue to improve. Of course, every moment of a tea session (and life) is an opportunity to practice this. But I have found that in setting up the *chaxi* for a given session, an opportunity to explicitly practice is created. Creating that space cultivates awareness and attention towards finding that truth in other moments throughout my day. Personally, I really need this time of intentional practice each day; otherwise I will miss many of those opportunities the day presents me with.

Nothing is guaranteed in this life—it's all a gift! We have no rights to it; we didn't earn it and we don't get to keep it as long as we want to. We don't even get to know when our lease is up. It has been granted us through some extraordinary fate, and everything can change in a flash. Not long ago, somewhere in Japan a man was sitting drinking tea quietly in his house, and a huge wave of water fell on his head. The floor my tea table and I are sitting on might crumble beneath us in an instant. We just never know.

As we travel along this journey with Tea, many of you will have noticed that the tea is never the same, although it is sitting there in its jar on the shelf where we left it last. Even more obviously within each session, we will never drink that same sip of tea we drank the sip before. Tea is an expression of the inexpressible and ungraspable beauty of change in this way, teaching us to let go of our desires to keep and possess, our desires for whatever we love in life to remain the same forever, allowing the beauty to slip through our fingers (and our cups) freely, without attachments, and find the greater beauty in that very transience. Like our daily guest, each sip is different.

"The Philosophy of Tea is not mere aestheticism... for it expresses conjointly with ethics and religion our whole point of view about Man and Nature. It is hygiene, for it enforces cleanliness; it is economics, for it shows comfort in simplicity rather than in the complex and costly; it is moral geometry, inasmuch as it defines our sense of proportion to the universe."

–Kakuzo Okakura, "Book of Tea"

茶 ***Remember that tea is always the subject of every chaxi. It is therefore important that the flowers do not overpower the tea. They should lead the eye to the tea, as opposed to distracting from it. Flowers for tea should be more simple, wild and free, as they appear in the fields.***

Valiant Steed Tethered to a Thatch Hut

Great performances can occur upon a stage, and great tales can be told and brought to life before your very eyes. Upon the stage for tea, however, the performance is a little different and perhaps simpler than most. There is only one star on this stage, and her name is Tea—though She may play many different roles, from white to black and everywhere in between. During this simple performance, which we might call a ceremony, when the elements of the stage come together in harmony, a very simple setting on the outside can aid in a very significant inner experience for the participants in the ceremony. A harmonious *chaxi* (tea stage) is just one of the factors that goes into transforming something very simple, like drinking tea, into something extraordinary, like a tea ceremony; the difference can be profound. A harmonious tea stage and the elements therein is a topic we've covered in articles before, and yet, like any good *chaxi*, the closer you look, the more details reveal themselves to you. And so, we take a further look into another aspect of designing a balanced and harmonious stage for tea!

As always, it is perhaps most important to consider your guests and the occasion before starting to build your stage for tea. Remember, it is about choosing a tea and designing a *chaxi* that is suitable for your guests and the occasion, not about choosing based on what you want. It is, therefore, important to know your teas and the elements of your tea stage. We specifically addressed the elements of *chaxi* back in our January 2016 issue. You can ask yourself: Who is coming for tea, and what does the occasion call for? You will also want to consider other factors, such as the weather, the time of day, the season of the year and so on. As you quest to answer these questions and more, you will find yourself well on the path towards a fine tea session. The more you put into preparing for your tea gatherings, the more your guests will get out of the experience.

At this point, you might want to ask yourself a new question: should your *chaxi* be rustic or elegant? The elements of a *chaxi*—such as runners, scoops, plates, lid rests, coasters, etc.—can quite easily be categorized as either rustic or elegant, humdrum or refined. It's a simple division that opens up an entire new approach to designing your tea stage. There are so many possibilities in each of these kinds of *chaxi*, let alone the myriad combinations of the two that you can create.

駿馬拴在茅草屋上

Rustic Chaxi: The Hut

What makes a *chaxi* rustic? What comes to mind immediately for me is something more earthy, elements that express natural colors you might find while walking amidst a forest in any season, like dark shades of green and brown or autumn hues of gold and red. Rustic designs tend to be more imperfect, with asymmetric, frayed or weathered edges and boundaries, incorporating elements such as leaves, rocks or flat pieces of driftwood. When I decide to design a rustic-themed *chaxi,* I find myself reaching for elements made from bamboo, wood, rattan, woven straw, and other tea things that are less glossy and more matte. Rusticity is probably an easier theme of *chaxi* to work with in the beginning, especially when so many elements from the natural world can be repurposed towards designing your tea stage. A simple walk outside can offer countless options, or simply drinking tea outside in a natural landscape is itself a form of this rustic art. The stage is already naturally designed for you—all you need to do is make time to drink tea! What a great opportunity as well to learn from Nature.

Elegant Chaxi: The Steed

We might now consider objects with the complete opposite characteristics of the rustic *chaxi*—those full of luster and glaze, vibrant colors and patterns, and metal utensils of bronze, copper, silver and gold! Here we have a greater range of uses for flowers and petals, small statues and even water features, and more aesthetic and stylish elements to really highlight a specific theme. For these designs, I find myself reaching for beautiful cloth runners, porcelain plates, celadon tea pillows, metal tea sticks and glazed or refined scoops made from all types of different materials. Because the Center is abundant in teapots and bowls, I choose from many, like a more stylized sidehandle teapot or our pure white tea bowls with tiny black speckles. The elegant *chaxi* has to be designed more carefully, with even more attention to detail, because each element can have so much strength of style. As always, less is more, and one refined piece of teaware says a lot more than too many, which can cause disharmony, competition for attention, and imbalance—unless perfectly arranged!

To the left is the Vimalakirti chaxi discussed above and later in this issue on pp. 45-46. It is a rustic chaxi with deep symbolism and a strong theme. Rustic chaxi can be very simple, but that doesn't mean they aren't filled with meaning. A good chaxi is an outward-facing "V" towards your guests, meaning that the guests should be able to read into it, finding far more and deeper meanings than you intended. A good chaxi is suggestive, in other words. Above is a very elegant chaxi, including a silver sidehandle. Some occasions call for more elegance. Usually, such occasions would be better served with gongfu tea, but we chose this chaxi to show that there are always exceptions to the rule. Think about what occasions this chaxi could be for and what types of tea would go with it. That is a good exercise for all the chaxi in this issue, in fact, and will help you in your practice.

Tethered Together
拴在一起

Of course, too much of anything is also out of balance. Too much elegance is showy and distracting, whereas too much run-of-the-mill is dull and without definition. One must strive to find the middle way, properly defining the tea at the center of the stage, and in this case, expressing a theme of elegance or rusticity. Remember, there are no neutral elements in the design of your *chaxi*. If it doesn't create harmony and redirect out attention towards the center of the stage, either reposition it or remove it altogether. And so, the question to ask yourself, in the form of a metaphor, is what elements play the role of the thatched hut and the valiant steed in your layout? As you can already imagine, the thatched hut represents the rustic aspects of your design, and the valiant steed the elegant ones. Many tea stages incorporate both aspects to varying degrees. A rustic-themed *chaxi* should incorporate some small elegant detail to achieve overall balance and harmony, and vice versa for an elegant-themed *chaxi*. It is the silver lining, the golden thread within the thatched roof, that feels harmonious, like a single, beautiful flower along an overgrown forest path. The path is naturally chaotic and messy, but the flower isn't out of place. It is momentarily captivating, making you feel as though you're going the right way. It didn't draw you off the path, but shifted your state of mind towards presence and kept you along your way. Sometimes a single element can achieve this balance all on its own, like the golden-rimmed teapot or the pink flower shown in the pictures. Other times you will need to mix and match elegant and rustic elements to find an overall balance. (In the *chaxi* shown here, the flower is literally tethered to the simple bowl of tea and rustic pot.)

As you consider all the factors of a tea gathering and start to lay out the elements upon your stage—be it inside or outside, on a table or in a pagoda, near a pond or beside an old tree—always take a step back and feel where the balance lies. Take note of which elements represent the thatched hut and the valiant steed, and ask yourself if you have brought them into harmony. They should complement each other like the black-and-white circles of the *taichi* symbol, which represents Yin and Yang, not too much of one or the other, and placed just so…

茶 One of the most important ways to arrange a chaxi is to use something that adds a slight bit of elegance to a simple, rustic chaxi. In this case, we have a simple duanni pot and zisha/porcelain boat with a simple runner twirled to provide slight elegance. The real gold rim on the cups also adds some elegant radiance to the chaxi. This pairing of some treasure or preciousness in a field of simplicity is what Rikyu called "the first grass poking through the snowswept field," suggesting more to come...

駿馬

The Art of Chaxi

茶人: ***Chen Yu Ting*** (陳郁婷)

Many of the runners we use in the Center were sewn by Yu Ting and her chaxi have always been inspirational for us. Every time we go to Master Tsai's for tea, we are always impressed by both student and teacher's aesthetics (Yu Ting is Master Tsai's student). It was only natural, then, for us to ask her to contribute to this issue. She has broken down the process of arranging a chaxi into very simple terms that we think will be inspirational and informative for many of you to begin or deepen your tea practice.

People and tea drinking go back a long way, whether we look at the Chinese customs of steeping and whisking tea during the Tang and Song Dynasties, or the English tradition of afternoon tea. The arranging of the *chaxi*, then, is a social and cultural activity, with tea as its medium. If we look at the literal sense, *chaxi* refers to the surroundings that set the stage for a tea session; this could include a harmonious layout of the tabletop and the surrounding space, as well as the seating placement of the people attending the tea session. It is often translated as "tea stage"—in Chinese, when the attendees at a tea session have drunk a round of tea, we can reorder the characters from the word "*chaxi* (茶席)," saying that they have "drunk a stage of tea (*he le yi xi cha*, 喝了一席茶)." This term also lends all the poetry of a playwright and all the feelings of participation an audience feels when watching theater. Beyond that, there are the subtler and deeper connections between theater—an equally ancient art form—and tea, which can also lead to transcendence as well.

Below, I will introduce five elements of a *chaxi*: people, subject, time, location and objects. By considering these five elements all together, we can start to plan the design of our *chaxi*.

茶藝術

茶 People

Host or guests? Tea host or tea drinkers? Attending to the guests, or taking care of the logistics of water? In other words, are you hosting guests or friends, are they Chajin or new to tea, etc. (Here, I choose not to use the commonly used "tea host" to designate the main tea brewer in a *chaxi*, as "tea host" can designate many different roles, which we won't elaborate on here.)

茶 Subject (Theme)

What is the purpose of this tea session? Is it to try a new tea that has just become available? Or to mark the opening of an art exhibition?

茶 Time

What is the season? What time will the session start? How long will it last?

茶 Location (Space)

Natural or man-made environment? Indoors or outdoors? Compact or spacious?

茶 Objects/Teaware

What sort of tea will you choose? How about teaware? What materials will you select—pottery, porcelain, glass, metal, lacquerware, wood…?

All that is needed for a simple *chaxi* is tea, a teapot, cups and hot water. For most day's *chaxi*, however, there are many other things to add to the list of items we must prepare, such as a tea-boat or pillow, a pitcher if you need it, tea spoon, tea utensils, saucers or coasters, a tea towel and a waste-water basin. When preparing a *chaxi*, it's certainly not the case that more abundant or more expensive paraphernalia is necessarily better. What's important is to find a balance between elegance, taste and abundance; to bring a feeling of comfort and safety to the participants. The planned lines of movement should be smooth and fluid, with the brewer laying out the teaware easily according to the intended pattern. The handling of teaware and implements should never cause the participants to feel uneasy, uncomfortable or inconvenienced. Also, we mustn't forget to practice our tea serving skills in order to increase our familiarity with the teaware and the ritual.

Teaware must be kept clean and should be adapted to the time and place—for example, using pottery vessels on cool winter days and glass ones in the heat of the summer. Aside from the teaware, don't forget that the host and attendees must also be in harmony with the *chaxi* itself, and vice versa, to create a sense of wholeness.

We must remind ourselves of this: *I am an inseparable part of the chaxi. Every time I arrange a chaxi, it is a representation of my current intentions and desired theme, including questions such as: What sequence do I want to follow for today's tea session? How will I act toward the participants? What sort of frame of mind should I cultivate? What sort of atmosphere do I want to create?* All of this will be reflected in the design and layout of the *chaxi*.

Once you have done all this to the best of your ability, if you still have some energy left over, don't forget to add a touch of beauty to draw the gaze of the participants. To this purpose, you can add things like a tea cloth/runner, small objects for people to pick up and toy with or flower arrangements.

Once we are comfortable arranging a *chaxi*, we can add more elements, such as tea snacks, calligraphy, incense, music or dance performances, and so on. Thus, we can plan a unique tea gathering, inviting more tea companions to attend and arranging a program of activities, adding to the richness of life.

Drinking tea alone is a solitary joy, while tea sessions are made for the joy to be shared. They were born out of our basic needs for life (quenching our thirst and detoxifying the body), and later became an expression of an elevated lifestyle, aesthetic beauty and refined self-restraint, before finally evolving into a distillation of all that we find meaningful in life. So, let's lay out our *chaxi* and enjoy some tea together!

Chaxi & Tea Life

茶人: ***Ju Lizhi*** (琚利智)

As we travel this tea journey, we are constantly meeting with serendipity. The tea world is vast, but often feels small. You often meet people you feel you have known forever, and others with stroies that somehow parallel your own in amazing ways. Many of you may not know this, but Wu De's book has been translated to Chinese and is quite popular in mainland China. Ms. Ju amazingly found tea through Wu De's book. Then, looking for a teacher, she found Master Tsai, a dear tea brother. Then, in full circle, she met Wu De on our annual trip. When she heard that we were making this issue, she was excited to contribute. She is an amazing author in her own right, as you will soon see. Wu De said that this is one of his favorite Global Tea Hut articles, full of life, poetry and tea spirit. He and Ms. Ju are lifelong tea friends now. Tea truly connects us across time and space, from America to China, we are one big tea family, finding each other through our love for the Leaf.

I grew up in a true "Jiang Zhe" household—my mother is from Jiangsu Province, and my father is from Zhejiang. Zhejiang Province is an abundant producer of green tea and has a long history of tea culture. Although the senior members of our family were in the habit of drinking tea every day, I didn't absorb any of their influence in this respect. As a child I was mystified by these green leaves with their aroma of stir-fried melon seeds—what special charm did they hold that could refresh someone so thoroughly, or keep them awake all night, so that everyone was so cautious and serious about drinking a cup of tea? Yet, perhaps thanks to experiencing life's ups and downs as I grew up, during my university years I fell in love with this "mysterious leaf." I remember the day in 2013 when an auntie of mine who was a keen tea drinker gave me a book called *The Way of Tea* (喝茶是修行) by Wu De (the Chinese translation). This was the first tea book that I read in earnest. At the time, the thing that most piqued my curiosity was that this book was written by a Chajin from the United States. It was this same curiosity that led me to dive headlong into the *Way of Tea*; I stayed up all night reading until I had devoured the whole book in one sitting. When I finished it, I didn't run straight to a tea shop to buy some tea and experience its wonder for myself; instead, I just sat there on a chair in my studio, lost in thought, for quite some time.

The first image that came to my mind was a childhood memory of the first time I drank tea, when I was visiting the family home in Jiangsu with my maternal grandfather. It was wintertime, and the charcoal briquettes were blazing in the stove. I remember climbing onto the bench seat and curiously watching my grandpa put a small amount of tea leaves into a glass. Next, he picked up the water that had been set to boil beside him and poured it in. We watched the leaves tumbling around in the glass, first floating near the surface before mysteriously sinking to the bottom, one by one, as if they had reached some kind of final destination. My grandpa picked up the glass and blew gently on the tea. Perhaps he noticed my curious, puzzled expression, because he put down the glass that he had just brought to his lips and pushed it towards me. Neither of us said a word; I simply copied my grandpa, picking up the glass with four fingers and gently blowing on the tea, with some of its leaves still floating around. My face was instantly enveloped by a cloud of warm steam and a fragrance that reminded me of stir-fried broad beans. Since ancient times, Tea has been celebrated for Her ability to transport us.

Awaking from this reverie, I suddenly understood how the experience of drinking tea can truly bring you to tears and can re-awaken the connection with one's nearest and dearest, no matter how faint the memory or how great the distance between you. An old dining table, a grandfather and granddaughter, a glass: this is my purest understanding of *chaxi*. The true beauty of the *chaxi* lies in genuine emotional connection. A book, a Taipei afternoon, a painting: these were the beginnings of my life of Tea.

When I started my tea practice, I didn't go down the usual route of finding a Cha Dao teacher. This was because I had a few questions that I needed to ask myself first. What was I hoping to achieve through my tea practice—to soothe the frazzled nerves that come with the life of a busy homemaker? To be entranced by the beautiful teaware and flowered cloth of the tea table? Or simply to brew the perfect cup of tea? It was while muddling along on this path of self-driven exploration that I came upon a teacher who would help guide my way—Master Tsai Yizhe. From Nature Herself to the cup of pure tea I hold in my hand, he helped me understand clearly that tea practice is not simply a course of study in knowledge; rather, tea practice is an embodiment of our love for life in all its beauty.

The study of life—this was my new understanding of tea after learning more about it. I recall that after studying tea with Master Yu Ting at the Long Cui Fang (龍翠坊ˇ) tea space in Taipei, I brought back a Long Cui teapot which I was quite enchanted with. As soon as I got home, I eagerly unwrapped it, only to notice that the edge of its lid was "mysteriously" missing a piece the shape of a crescent moon. At this I gave a small laugh, and gladly accepted it the way it was. Perhaps this was an expression of the same wisdom as the old saying "the moon may shine bright or dim, and ever will wax and wane"—the nature of a situation depends on how you see it. So, this little

pot has accompanied me in the drinking of many a tea and has appeared in many of my *chaxi* photographs. Someone once asked me, "Why do you still use this broken pot in your photos?" I gently replied, "You may see it as damaged, but I really love this pot—so it's perfect!" Although "perfect" is perhaps a bit of a stretch, it's certainly true that when my little pot was part of a *chaxi*, no one saw it as damaged because of its crescent-shaped birthmark; on the contrary, they were full of admiration. The beauty of a *chaxi* comes from love; love makes everything perfect and embraces all. Love is the true spirit of tea: the reason to practice and the reason to share it as well.

I remember visiting the wild tea garden at Tongmu Guan on Mount Wuyi with my teacher at the beginning of the year. As we drove through the great valley, the road we traveled on seemed like a scar that Pan Gu, the legendary creator of the universe, accidentally left there when he was making the world. If a girl's face had a scar like this, imagine the horror-movie shiver it might bring. Yet, out here amid Nature, the insignificance of human activity lends the whole landscape an air of reverence. This mountain valley is home to countless life forms, earning Tongmu Guan its reputation as "a paradise for birds, a kingdom of snakes." The feeling of life here is exquisitely beautiful, indescribably wonderful. It's just like the abstract images of women in Picasso's paintings; they are not depicted with breathtaking beauty, but they truly transport the viewer into the feeling and spirit of the time. In art, we often pursue this sort of spirit, the power to move people; only things with spirit, with life, with emotion, have the ability to touch the heart. That wild scene that we witnessed at Tongmu Guan left a profound impression on me. For our *chaxi* there, we may not have had an abundance of tea implements all within easy reach, but what we did have was the yew trees standing between the mountains, full of tenacious life clinging to the Earth.

Even after the Thunder God's caress, the green moss, nourished by moist mountain mists and the lush foliage of the wildflowers with their small yellow blossoms, nestled between the wild tea plants, thrived and grew to the sun. It was a wonderful setting. Wood chips from the thunder-split yew trees formed a mat, and the shale from the hillsides formed a makeshift fort for the moss and yellow flowers. In the wild tea garden, with the yew trees standing guard, we were deeply moved by all these incarnations of nature. The most powerful *chaxi* are full of life's energy.

Beauty does not have a definition; it has a unique randomness, a spontaneous, as-you-please quality. It can be found in crashing ocean waves and in the sparkle of a dewdrop in the light of dawn. After obtaining my little red clay stove, I quickly fell in love with outdoor tea sessions. My studio is located in the outskirts of Shanghai, quite far from the city; although it doesn't have any green hillsides nearby, it is next to Dianshan Lake, known as the source of Shanghai's water. When I have some free time, I take my charcoal stove to the lakeside and set up a *chaxi* however the whim takes me. The mossy rocks of the lakeshore become unique pot stands, the dry twigs beneath the trees make excellent fuel; sometimes I'll find an empty mussel shell by the lakeside, which makes for the most elegant of flower vases. I savor the fragrance of the tea in the company of the water birds; together we appreciate the sunset, feeling it deep in our hearts. Although there may be no musical instruments to provide a melodic accompaniment to the moment, the friendly songs of the water birds have their own wild charm; a light breeze ruffles the curtain of night as it falls across the land. This gentle *chaxi* is filled with a spirit of easy spontaneity.

"Water to purify the heart; objects to conjure a feeling." I prefer to see the aesthetics of the *chaxi* as a fluid art, without any specific constraints; it simply gives silently to the time and place. It's just like the white space between black ink strokes in Chinese calligraphy, or the Venus de Milo statue, that embodiment of beauty in Western art with her broken-off arms—something that seems damaged can also contain its own harmonious beauty. There is a duality to everything in life; this is the yin and yang spoken of in Daoist philosophy. Hence the line "there is room for both yin and yang"; both spring from the boundless fountain of life. The beauty of a *chaxi* lies not in restriction or conformity, but in manifesting what is in the heart.

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Formal Chaxi for an Event

正式茶席

在聚會上公享茶

茶人: *Shen Su & Connor Goss*

Tea gatherings are quite popular in Taiwan. They take many different forms, sometimes highlighting brewing methods specific to one country or region, and other times bringing people together from different tea cultures around the world to share in the universal language of tea. This gives tea participants the chance to demonstrate their brewing skills in a fixed period of time in front of an audience so that they can share their love of tea in a formal and public setting. Such gatherings often include periods of time to talk about the theme of your *chaxi* (tea stage) and the efforts that went into designing it for these special occasions. We are occasionally invited to these gatherings by longtime tea friends who help to organize these events. Recently we were invited to one such gathering. We are often more than happy to attend so that we can support our friends and to simply share our love of tea with more people.

At this particular gathering, we had to brew a form of gongfu tea using aroma cups, which is a not a common brewing method for us. However, the brewing methods in our tradition more than prepare us to adapt to other methods. When you understand one of the primary "functions" of tea, which is to connect, and you serve tea with your heart, then adapting to the core of any brewing method becomes possible. Nonetheless, we had to practice the form for at least a month in advance, and more time would have been better! While the brewing method was fixed, we were given the freedom to use our own teaware and to design our own *chaxi* which played a large role in this tea gathering. It required a lot of time and effort to design and prepare our *chaxi* for this event.

Designing a Chaxi

We always teach an entire class on *chaxi* in our 10-day courses at our tea center. It includes the main principles to design a tea stage and practical tips for starting a *chaxi* practice at home. The first principle is to honor the guest and the occasion. Honoring the occasion in some cases might simply mean considering the time of day, the weather and the season. Considering these practical factors helps us to narrow down what kind of brewing method

and tea to use for the occasion. For example, if I'm going to drink tea in the evening when it's cold in winter, I would be more likely to choose a warming and relaxing tea, perhaps a nice shou puerh. I wouldn't choose a young sheng puerh or lightly oxidized oolong that is cooling in nature and energizing, because it wouldn't suit the time of day, weather, or season. One must also reflect on and honor the guests, perhaps by asking who they are, how many are attending, and what their relationship to tea is, if any at all? By asking these practical questions before designing your *chaxi*, you are already well on your way towards satisfying the first principle of *chaxi* design and creating a tea stage that will honor your guests and the occasion. As an aside, this will also prevent us from designing tea stages based on our personal preferences and what we want. It's not about what we want, but rather how we can be of most service to tea and our guests.

Because the occasion for this tea gathering was quite different from our usual situation where guests come to our center for tea, we had to think and design differently. Since there is a time limit for each participant, the *chaxi* not only has to be suitable for the aroma-cup brewing method, but it has be set up and taken down in an efficient and organized manner, meaning it can't be too complicated or contain too many props and other elements, lest you take too much time setting up or cleaning up. Like all good tea stages, the focus must be on the tea, not the extravagance or clutter of the elements. Though the aesthetic quality of a tea stage is important, we are here to drink tea after all. Simplicity is a key feature. Furthermore, it must be functional above all else and not get lost in the aesthetic of the design. Don't lose function in the form, in other words. Finally, a theme must be chosen to work with so that all elements can be brought together in a harmonious, beautiful, and functional way. I often try to use the minimum number of elements that still expresses the theme clearly; this is a very challenging balance to achieve! Not too much and not too little. More often than not, we make the mistake of adding too many elements, which distracts, clutters, and often impedes functionality and breaks the rule of simplicity that governs *chaxi* and all of Cha Dao.

As lovers of tea, we often treat these gatherings as opportunities to express a deeper meaning of tea because we are given the time and space to do so. It's suitable for the occasion, in other words, to put more thought into the design of our stage for this special event. We often think of Buddhist connections to tea or origin stories of tea, not so esoteric that no one understands, but also not so simple that it's too obvious. So, all of this must be navigated very carefully. Like all fine art, a well-designed *chaxi* will still the mind rather than excite it. There are exceptions to this, however, and sometimes there might be an occasion that calls for an exciting and bright *chaxi*, like at Chinese New Year, for one example. In general, though, it's wise to honor the guest and occasion, use the elements of *chaxi* to focus attention on the tea, maintain functionality over form and choose a theme to help guide your decisions, applying simplicity throughout.

My Theme: Vimalakirti & His Thatched Hut

Vimalakirti was a famous lay-disciple of the Buddha. He represented the ideal layperson, attaining full enlightenment while living in the world as a wealthy townsman, fully engaged in everyday affairs. He was especially respected by Zen practitioners for his attainment in the world and his influence on the tea ceremony. In the Vimalakirti sutra, he describes a small ten-foot-square hut that could magically expand to host thousands of guests, where he often gave discourses on Buddhism and shared tea. As a result of the popularity of this sutra, many tea rooms were modeled after his simple hut, especially in Japanese culture. The tea ceremony practiced in these small thatched tea huts offered temporary ordination for laypeople who lived everyday lives but nonetheless created time and space to practice the ideals of Buddhism and Zen through the service of tea. In modern times, the tea ceremony has broken

all cultural boundaries, being shared among people around the world. As a simple metaphor, Vimalakirti's ten-foot-square room represents a small and simple thatched tea hut in which we can all share tea together regardless of how many people there are, where we come from, or who we are.

The story of Vimalakirti is well known in Buddhism, Zen and tea, especially in Eastern cultures, so it was a suitable theme to try and represent at this tea gathering. It took some creative thinking and craftsmanship to come up with the necessary elements to express this theme. Eventually, we decided to make a miniature thatched hut that could be placed at the center of the tea stage. We created the thatched hut by cutting the natural fibers of a broom and gluing them onto a cardboard frame that rested on four small bamboo pillars. The roof was also decorated with some moss and dried tea leaves that I'd saved from a visit to a tea farm some time ago. This gave it a realistic feel and added an extra layer of tea-depth. In the beginning, before brewing tea, the gongfu teapot was placed inside the hut and perched on a beautiful piece of wood. In order to brew tea, however, the hut would have to be moved off to one side. We commissioned a local woodworker to carve a small statue of Vimalakirti that would also fit nicely inside the thatched hut, so that when the hut was repositioned, it would be placed over the Vimalakirti statue, freeing up the center to brew tea, and symbolizing the magic of his dynamic hut. It took the woodworker over two weeks to complete the statue. We also made our own coasters for the aroma cups out of cut tatami, cardboard and craft paper and framed them with natural rattan. We maintained an earthy color theme throughout, with green and light brown runners, a bamboo scoop that matched the hut, a dark green pitcher and brown tea jar and a cream-colored tablecloth that highlighted all the main elements. When looking at the *chaxi*, all attention was directed right at the middle with the teapot and thatched hut. (In another version Vimalakirti could start in the center.)

Even spatially, the hut occupied the most vertical space, creating a sort of pyramidal focal point, letting everyone know that we're clearly here to brew tea, but also wondering how it was going to function, what the hut symbolized and perhaps who the little wooden statue was if they didn't already know. It was a good balance that kept focus on the tea and also left room for curiosity and contemplation. It's always important as a guest to contemplate and appreciate the tea stage that was designed for you. Let it calm and still your mind, preparing you for tea. Once we started brewing tea and finally had a chance to explain our theme, everything was clear. We were quite happy with the final design, and it was well received at the tea gathering.

Believe it or not, what we wear while brewing tea should also harmonize with the theme of the *chaxi*. I also glued thatched roofing to my clothes and sprinkled leaves all over myself… Pathetic jokes aside, we just wore comfortable tea clothes that supported the general color theme. In fact, I tried on multiple shirts to see how it influenced the point of view of the guest. I was originally going to wear a long-sleeved green shirt, but it actually blended in too much and blurred the focus, whereas when I wore a simpler cream-colored shirt, it brought more attention to the center of the stage. The color of my shift became the background upon which the subject was highlighted. Tea clothes should never bring attention to you, but should complement the *chaxi*. It's difficult to codify what that means, and it's a sensitive subject, but in general, neutral, simple, harmonious and respectable are good qualities to aim for in your choice of clothing for tea. We even had to consider what shoes to wear because literally everything is on display when you're brewing tea in front of an audience like this. Details, details, details... the details matter to the person of tea, and these tea gatherings are a great place to practice that attention. As you can imagine, however, these kinds of details can get out of hand if we don't have our priorities straight. I'm far more concerned about what water I can use, what teaware to bring and how to brew properly than I am about how my hair looks and if my shoes match my outfit. Everything matters, even one's hair and shoes, but in the right order…

The Final Stage

Though these tea gatherings sometimes result in glamorous, extreme, and overly complex *chaxi* designs,

I'm always humbled at the lengths to which tea lovers go to design a really nice *chaxi* for tea. The Taiwanese and Japanese in particular have an amazing talent for incorporating lush green plants, wood, and water features into their designs that make you feel like you are drinking tea in a rainforest. Not to the mention the other design features that people incorporate, like bonsai, hanging scrolls, candles and light fixtures and so many other natural elements that are combined in wonderful ways to express a theme, all in the name of serving tea. I found myself putting more time and effort into this particular *chaxi* than ever before. It really expanded my idea of what it takes to make a truly well-thought-out stage upon which to brew tea. It took over three weeks to complete everything, only to have it used for thirty minutes or so; it was like preparing for a performance for days, weeks, or even months in advance when the performance itself may only last minutes. In this way, we start to realize that the preparation for the activity is as much the activity as the final performance itself. In the same way a great master serves a cup of tea; it didn't just take a few minutes; it took a lifetime of cultivation to make that cup of tea before you. I'm sure some of the other participants spent even longer on their tea stages than we did at this gathering. It was an honor to witness their efforts take shape in the form of a beautiful and harmonious stage, all with the intention to make a fine cup of tea to share.

In one sense, I was designing the tea stage, but in another sense, the process of creation was re-designing my understanding of *chaxi*. This is a common lesson in tea, because you might feel like *you* are serving tea to your guests, when in actuality, those guests are serving you—because without them, how can you practice serving anyone? It's a shift in perspective onto the idea of service. The service of making a *chaxi* for this gathering was the gathering serving me the time and space to practice the art of *chaxi* making. Next time you are preparing a *chaxi* to serve tea, you can ask yourself, "who is serving whom?" While you may not require three weeks to prepare your next *chaxi*, perhaps you might give it some more thought and time and feel how the process of making the *chaxi* is also the *chaxi* itself, which was one the most important lessons I experienced at this gathering.

Shen Su

In September, we had the wonderful opportunity to participate in a tea gathering here in Taiwan where we were given a space to create a *chaxi* and serve tea. I had previously attended the tea gathering several years ago, helping *cha tong* for Shen Su; however, this time destiny unfolded so that I would be serving tea as well. I surrendered my expectations to serving tea in a particular way, resting in the occasion that allowed me to share tea with people who I probably would not have met had it not been for the tea gathering.

The greatest question in making any *chaxi* is to consider what the purpose of this occasion is to share tea together. Perhaps it is a formal tea ceremony or an informal meeting of friends who have not seen each other in a long time. Whatever the purpose is will inform the rest of the process of making a *chaxi*, manifesting one's vision into reality, or at the very least attempting to create a *chaxi* that resembles that vision, that expresses its essence. The main purpose of the tea gathering was to show up and share tea. While we were not able to make tea in a way that I am used to brewing, instead it was done in the spirit of the Taiwanese brewing methods, I did want to honor and share this tradition and its brewing methods as much as possible, if not in the actual brewing methods, then at least in spirit, and in the *chaxi* itself. There were many possible paths I could take to achieve this, and in the beginning, it was rather daunting! How do I choose a suitable *chaxi* that will be easily understood by the other guests at the tea gathering, while also honoring the brewing methods of this tradition?

This challenge of choosing an appropriate theme was a wonderful, insightful opportunity to move beyond my conventional, often routine way of thinking and making a *chaxi*. Instead, being given the invitation to explore different ways of creating a *chaxi* that could be understood easily by the guests, all the while transcending the human boundaries created from language and culture. Eventually, the internal dust settled for a moment, and a clear, bright idea shined forth. How better to honor tea and its incredibly vast and deep relationship with humans and spiritual practice than to draw together the parallels between tea and Buddhism. Between the conscious dedication of Chajin to learn, preserve and pass on the teachings, similarly to how Buddhism or any practice or spiritual tradition has been handed down the generations. This also connected with my desire to honor the brewing methods that I know intimately and carry with me, moment to moment.

In the end, the *chaxi* I created communicated these ideas in a way that I hope was understood, or at least the meaning glimpsed, as ultimately, we cannot impose our own interpretation of a *chaxi* theme onto our guests. The perspective of our guests will be radically different to ours, or anyone else, drawing from the wellspring of their own lived experience. All that I can do is attempt to create a stage for tea that honors the occasion, tea and my guests. What I intend to express may be understood, and it may not. Often times the impressions of a *chaxi* from guests after a tea ceremony far transcend what I had sought to manifest and express. My ability to create *chaxi* is still limited by my ability to get out of my own way, out of the often linear, constricted ways of thinking that hinder the free flow of energy and creativity. This means that sometimes the *chaxi* that I create harmonize with the occasion and spirit of tea, and other times I am unable to see beyond my ways of interacting with the world and create a *chaxi* that does come alive. The difference between the two can be felt immediately, and sometimes it can be the exact same *chaxi*, with maybe a few elements changed or moved around, and then all the elements harmonize together to express a living truth.

The *chaxi* I designed had its roots in the spirit of tea, and the power that can be found in tradition and spiritual practice. We practice the brewing methods passed down through the generations who have come before us, preserving the wisdom to hand down to future generations. These brewing methods help to connect us to this present moment, bringing stillness to our hearts and connecting us to the future Buddha that we can become when we rest in a calm, purified heart. As we purify our heart, we can see things more clearly, and our inner, inherent state of awakening shines forth, through our heart and tea.

I also wanted to communicate how in tea ceremony we rest in the Pure Land, in heaven, in our higher selves. As in the practice of Cha Dao, we are all purified, temporarily ordained as monks and nuns. As the bowls come in and out, we find ourselves moving closer to seeing things clearly and resting in the way things are, without expectations. This is why I choose to have the three Buddhas sitting on clouds in the Pure Land. In choosing lighter, pure colors that represent purity I can express this in a way that can easily be understood, without any understanding around Buddhism or spiritual practice. This feeling of harmony is then strengthened by placing the three Buddhas on white clouds. Even if one does not have an understanding of Buddhism or the Pure Land, one can still feel into the quality of mind that the elements invoke as these are universal qualities not constrained to a particular culture or religion. I choose to use Medicine Buddha, Amitabha and Maitreya, as they represent clearly the underlying threads of my *chaxi*. The Medicine Buddha represents the power of tradition, and how these brewing methods have been passed down through countless generations for us to cherish and carry forward for future generations, gifting those who come after us the healing that can be found in tea. The Medicine Buddha also represents the purity that we find in tea ceremony, cultivating ourselves and washing the debris from our hearts so that we can be noble, upright beings. This leans into Amitabha who represents our inherent purity, the light that shines brightly when we slow our racing minds and hearts to rest in this moment. Maitreya represents the inner state of awakening that manifests when our heart is purified, the mind calm, and our vision clear—this is our inherent Buddha Nature.

The tea gathering was a wonderful opportunity to explore the world of *chaxi*, finding ways of communicating beyond the human-imposed borders and boundaries, and simply creating a space to share the spirit of tea. I left feeling more deeply inspired that tea connects us all, regardless of our perceived differences, and that even if someone practices different brewing methods, we can easily sit down for tea together, quickly becoming brothers and sisters as the kettle boils and the steam rises.

Connor Goss


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Arranging a Chaxi

The Beauty of Nature

茶人: *Tsai Yizhe* (蔡奕哲)

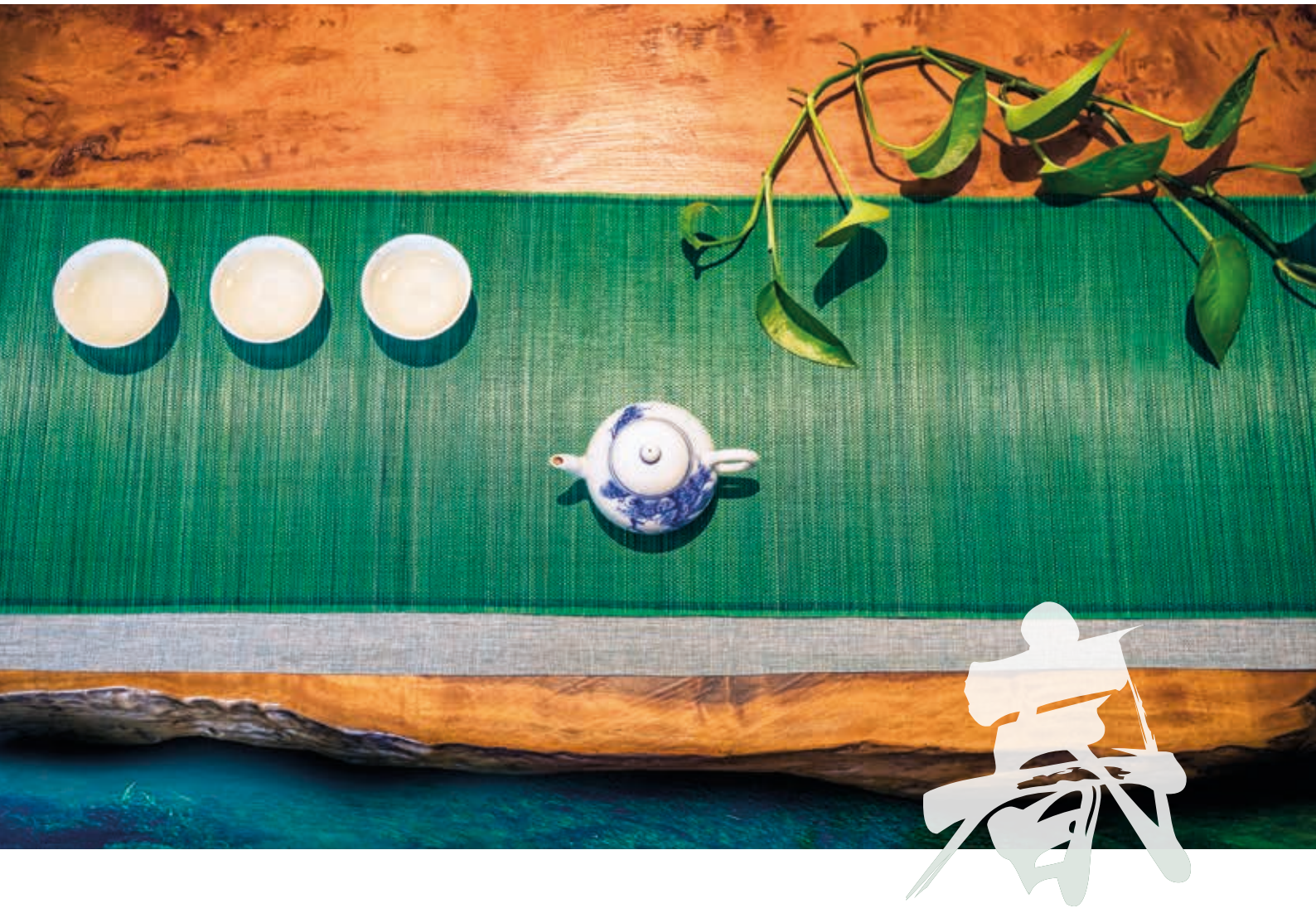
We are once again so honored to have Master Tsai bless our magazine with his insight and wisdom. He offers a philosophy that, like all things Tea and Zen, is lofty, deep and worth contemplating over a lifetime and beyond, while at the same time remaining practical and applicable in our day-to-day tea practice. This article not only captures the spirit of chaxi, but of Cha Dao.

Recently while sharing tea with some friends, I noticed that even some of my friends who were usually only interested in fine dining, alcohol and coffee have also started talking about tea. This trend seems to be growing more and more prominent. I'm surrounded by a circle of good friends who are enamored of modern aesthetics; in the past, their conversations all revolved around things like fancy meals, travel, whiskey and red wine. Now, to my surprise, their thoughts have turned Eastward, and they have begun enthusiastically exploring things like calligraphy and traditional ink painting, *chaxi* and the beauty of a quiet life. Many of my friends now post photos of their *chaxi* on social media; I've seen a bunch of *chaxi* that proclaim themselves to be art, a study in aesthetics. Yet, though they are rich in variety, I can't help having some mixed feelings about them. Of course, there's nothing inherently good or bad about this; after all, no single person can lay claim to the definition of "beauty." That said, I feel that if art simply comes down to an arrangement of colors, if a *chaxi* is reduced to a display of originality in the shapes of the teaware, without true creativity, without life, without soul, then what real meaning does a *chaxi* have?

Ever since my student days, I have loved the atmosphere of a tea session. During my Zen studies, we often used to drink a cup of tea to refresh and clear the mind. Sometimes, watching the elegant poise and easy, unhurried movements of the host at the tea table, I would think to myself, "Ah! Drinking tea really is the best choice. If it weren't for tea, how else would I be able to enjoy and participate in such an atmosphere?" Today, however, when watching a tea performance, although I appreciate it, in the end it's really just derivative; it's not real life. Sitting down to a *chaxi* is like entering a friend's home; you can experience a genuine intimacy with the "performer." Drinking the tea is akin to eating a friend's home-cooked meal, prepared for you with care; your senses are particularly attuned to the flavors and textures, and you get the feeling that the love and energy that went into making the meal travels through your body to your heart and soul. It's really a different experience.

To help everyone better understand *chaxi*, I spent a few days gathering some information. In fact, there are no clear instances of the word *chaxi* (茶席) in our earliest historical books, nor does it appear in the dictionary. In a literal sense, the two characters in the word translate to "tea" and "woven mat." During the Tang Dynasty (618–907), people would sit on a mat on the floor; at banquets mats served as seating and also as a space to lay out the food. The *Book of Songs: Daya* ("Major Odes") mentions "arranging a banquet with four bamboo mats," while the *Analects of Confucius: Xiang Dang* ("In the Village") contains the line, "When the ruler would send a gift of food, he would always straighten his mat and sit down to taste it first." When it appears in these excerpts, the word *xi*, literally "mat," is used to refer to the banquet as an event, or to seating.

What, then, is the definition of a *chaxi*? These days, everyone has their own definition. Personally, I think of the *chaxi* as the "tea space" which the tea host sets up for serving tea, a space to facilitate the enjoyment of the tea, to create a sense of beauty and a certain artistic mood. When arranging a *chaxi*, we seek to create a lively, elegant and moving artistic tableau. There are two main techniques involved in arranging a *chaxi*: setting the scene and setting the mood. A visually pleasing scene is the backbone of a *chaxi*, while the artistic mood is its soul. If you focus purely on the visual/aesthetic aspect, the *chaxi* will feel rigid and lack a certain intangible spirit.



On the other hand, if you focus purely on the mood, it can make the *chaxi* so lofty as to be inaccessible and difficult for people to understand or connect with. A *chaxi* without a sense of beauty cannot be called art, but a *chaxi* without spirit is no more than a rigid tableau, lacking that special something.

Every item that is used in setting up a *chaxi*, the overall aesthetic and coordination of items, how well-integrated the *chaxi* is—these things should all be consistent. To achieve this, we must first decide on a theme for the *chaxi*, and the arrangement should follow the theme; otherwise the overall effect won't be very moving. A careless arrangement won't have the power to convey the intended idea, and without this, it's impossible to create a *chaxi* with beauty and feeling. A *chaxi* is a sort of microcosm of our approach to life; over the course of a *chaxi*, the distance between people diminishes, all the while maintaining a sober, clear-headed state. From the arrangement of a *chaxi*, you can get to know the tea host's sense of aesthetics; in the planned lines of movement and whether or not the motions are fluid, you can observe the tea host's consideration for the participants, how much they value or feel close to their guests, whether there's any sense of pressure on the guests. In my opinion, a graceful bearing should be an expression of one's approach to life. The inner and outer self should be consistent; we must not be two-faced, showing one side when performing on the "stage" but a completely different side when out of the spotlight.

For a *chaxi* to be successful, we must first establish the primary and secondary elements. The theme must be prominent and shouldn't be too bland or uninteresting; secondary elements that are not central to the theme must content themselves with being supporting players, and not try to upstage the main characters. A *chaxi* with only primary elements and no secondary ones will appear crude and simplistic, while one with only supporting characters and no leading actors will seem loose and incohesive.

It's also important to have a sense of balance. Achieving balance and harmony in a *chaxi* means that the placement of all the teaware and decorative items, whether in terms of horizontal, vertical or diagonal planes, should have a sense of order and balance. The overall effect should be one of visual harmony, symmetry or balance between light and heavy. If the layout of these physical elements does not achieve this harmony, it will inevitably make the participants feel unsettled.

What's more, making clever use of both echoes and contrasts in your *chaxi* will make the whole tableau more vivid and thought-provoking to the participants. It can not only bring out the theme more clearly, but also enhance

茶席的元素

the visual picture. Making good and flexible use of these techniques requires careful thought. Below I will give a brief overview of what to consider, and what to avoid when setting up a *chaxi*. Then we will go on to discuss some of them in more detail.

Elements to consider when arranging a chaxi:

1. "Weight": balance between light and heavy
2. Color scheme
3. Harmony
4. Empty space

Things to avoid when arranging a chaxi:

1. A "top-heavy" or unbalanced composition
2. Unnecessary repetition
3. Placing items facing the wrong way on the tea table
4. Letting supporting elements overwhelm the main element/theme
5. Overdoing it with superfluous details

These sets of recommendations for what to do and what not to do are not separate from each other; they must be applied in tandem when arranging a *chaxi*. Only by using both together can we create the desired aesthetic and mood, can we touch people's hearts and make our *chaxi* a pursuit of life and beauty, bringing our participants the sense of delight that comes from a simple, elegant arrangement. When we talk about beauty in the context of a *chaxi*, the emphasis is on the elegance of simplicity, rather than on gorgeous embellishments. When we talk about a sense of "life," this refers to the principle that all the ornaments in a *chaxi* should be things that are readily available for everyday use. A diverse array of *chaxi* arrangements can be created without buying extra things especially for the purpose. A set of tea implements can be adapted into many different forms, expanding the concept of a *chaxi* to include endless possibilities. If our *chaxi* can often be adapted to express these qualities of beauty and "life," they will naturally take on an artistic flavor, infusing our daily lives.

In terms of the use of color schemes in a *chaxi*, the usual approach is to use a single colorway, choosing a cloth table runner that echoes the color of the tea. For example, we might choose a green cloth for high mountain tea, a red cloth for red tea, an orange cloth for Baihao Oolong (白毫烏龍), and a brown cloth for Tieguanyin or puerh. An alternate approach is to choose a contrasting color to set off the color of the tea, such as by choosing a purple cloth for Baihao Oolong.

Further, we must be clear about the choices we make: does the *chaxi* make use of warm and/or cold colors, complementary colors, bright or subtle colors? Color is a wonderful medium for expressing the feeling and style of a *chaxi*: it can give rise to mental images, associations and ideas. If coordinated well, color can used to great effect. For example, when we see the color green, our mind may respond with images of spring, a tranquil lake or a grassy green field. When we see the color brown, we might think of autumn, or vast, hazy landscapes. Red often makes us think of summer, or a festive atmosphere, while white carries associations with winter, or purity… These are the types of images and associations that colors can produce. In addition to the color scheme, a *chaxi* also aims to convey a simple artistic concept or mood; it might make people feel peaceful like a wide green field, or free like a white cloud floating in the sky. For example, you might embody this by choosing a green tea runner and pairing it with a white teapot, pitcher and cups to create a springy feeling, recalling a poetic landscape of riverbanks turning green at the touch of the first spring breeze.

When appreciating classical Chinese paintings, we can observe that the artists don't tend to emphasize distinctive personal characteristics much when depicting people.

The figures are usually so small that one barely notices them amid the landscape; the emphasis is on the natural scenery. We must learn from this approach when establishing the aesthetic of our *chaxi*; it's important not to over-emphasize the ego, buying all sorts of dazzling eye-candy to fill up our tea table and make ourselves look good. Doing so will create a lot of pressure for our participants.

The use of blank space is also an important technique employed by the artists behind many well-regarded historical paintings. In an essay entitled *Painting a Fish Trap*, the early Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) painter Da Zhongguang (笪重光) wrote that "emptiness and substance give birth to one another. There is no painting in which every spot is filled with clever detail." In a *chaxi*, blank space acts as a bridge, connecting and unifying all the elements, and as a window, framing our view of the mood and aesthetic of the *chaxi*. It provides a boundless space for imagination and beauty to expand. When writing about the appreciation of poetry, late-Tang Dynasty poet Si Kongtu (司空圖) also made an allusion to this idea, writing of "the shape outside the shape, the scene outside the scene, the meaning outside the meaning, the flavor outside the flavor." This world is a noisy place, and our hearts are restless. The secret to calming our bodies and spirits lies in two words: "*kuan* (寬)," which can mean "broad," "expansive" or "open-minded," and "*dan* (淡)," which can mean "mild," "calm" or "weak (as in weak tea)." Without expansiveness of heart and mind, how can we roll with what life brings? Without calm and simplicity, how can we attune ourselves to the beauty in everyday situations? The more we open our hearts, the wider the path beneath our feet, the calmer the scenes we see will appear, and the more beautiful life will be. Tranquility makes for an elegant life; openheartedness makes for a bigger life.

There's a poem by Yuan Dynasty tea and Zen master Shiwu Qinggong (石屋清珙) that portrays just this kind of expansive *chaxi*:

The breeze sets the tea steam adrift
over the bamboo couch;
The stream flows by,
and petals alight
on the crystal pond.
How can we live
through thirty-six thousand days,
If we do not still our body and mind
for a moment?

Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) painter and calligrapher Dong Qichang (董其昌) wrote the following in *On Painting*: "Of the six skills of a painter, the first is to achieve a vivid and distinct spirit. This spirit cannot be learned, but is something that an artist is born with, bestowed by Nature. Of course, there are also things that can be learned: read ten thousand books and walk ten thousand miles,

and thus you will clear the dust and impurities from your mind. The hills and vales will naturally arise within you, forming a landscape. Then, every stroke you write will convey the spirit of Nature's real landscapes." The phrase "clear the dust and impurities from your mind (胸中脱去塵濁 ,自然丘壑內營)" is very insightful; it applies not only to painting, but even more so to the art of *chaxi*. The famous tea-loving Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) advocated four categories for evaluating paintings: "divine," "carefree" (also translated as "untrammeled" or "unaffected"), "wonderful" and "capable." Leaving aside the "capable" for a moment, we can use these first three as a foundation to discuss three classes of *chaxi*. Below is an adaption of an ancient artist's concept of these classes. Adapted in this way, they can apply to tea as well as art:

1. The artistic mood of tea corresponds to the shapes of the teaware, embodying the lofty mysteries of Nature, combining thought and spirit to create new meanings and forms, their subtleties combining with transformative powers. Before one pours the tea this spirit has already begun to soar, infusing into the tea. This is why we call it "divine tea."

2. The most unrivaled tea is that which eschews any rigid rules of Cha Dao and disdains minute thoroughness in tea gatherings. The teaware is simple, yet its forms are complete and attain naturalness. It cannot be imitated, as it exceeds all expectations. This is why we call it "carefree tea."

3. Tea is brewed by people, and each person has their own individual nature. The mind transmits its intention to the hands, pouring out its hidden secrets. Just like the skilled Butcher Ding who cut up the beast with practiced meditation, the heart moves the tools, and the flavor of the tea is miraculously subtle. This is why we call it "wonderful tea."

I have been making ongoing efforts toward the conservation of our tea mountains and environmental protection in general. I feel very deeply that the essence of a *chaxi* is intimately connected to Nature. I chose to become involved in the world of natural eco-arboreal tea firstly because of its necessity for health, and secondly because ancient tea texts do not mention any use of pesticide or fertilizer. Besides this, drinking living or eco-arboreal tea over a long period has the benefit of sharpening our senses. When we drink tea that's free of packaging, we naturally tend to put more into experiencing it with our senses. In the past, the overly fancy packaging designs that we were faced with were a sort of assault on the mind and senses; but now, we are more attuned to everything that surrounds us, to all life's sublime details: the beauty of a gentle breeze; the beauty of the clouds at dawn's first light; the beauty of a desolate, melancholy landscape; the beauty of a field in springtime…

There are two paintings by Ming Dynasty artist Tang Yin (唐寅) entitled *Tea-Drinking Paintings*, both of which portray scenes of literati drinking tea in thatched huts amid the pines. The paintings depict a host who is well-versed in the art of tea managing the proceedings, along with a servant boy who has been enlisted to help fetch water, brew the tea and serve it to the guests. The guests sit calmly opposite, curls of tea steam wafting through the air. Sipping a wonderful tea like this, experiencing the true taste of tranquility, is surely one of life's greatest pleasures. In these moments, our surroundings, from the Heaven-sent beauty of the natural environment to the human-made scene that we create ourselves, serve to bring a sense of elegance and tranquility to the experience of drinking tea. Thus, the beauty of the surroundings and the moving experience of drinking tea can lift our minds and spirits to a higher state. Tang Dynasty painter Zhang Zao (張璪), known for his "broken ink" style of landscape painting, once said: "Take Nature as your teacher from without, and use your heart's inspiration from within." This is how he expressed his theory of artistic creation, and it very much resonates with me. We need both the external element of careful study of Nature and the internal element of our own appreciation and understanding in order to create a truly great work of art. So, to put this principle in practice in the aesthetics of our *chaxi* and show our esteem for the scholarly flavor of the *chaxi* of old, we must look to Nature for our inspiration.

Finally, once we have finished laying out our *chaxi*, whether simple or elaborate, we should always seek a sense of elegance in the setting and a return to Nature. We can use five criteria to evaluate the *chaxi*: it should be complete, rational, well-integrated, convenient and have a natural beauty. If you apply these criteria one by one and your *chaxi* meets all of them, then in principle it can be considered a good *chaxi*. And of course, we must not forget that to realize a truly successful *chaxi* with genuine warmth, the key lies in sharing the beauty of Nature and the selfless love from deep within our hearts.

As the saying goes, "May we have quiet years and a peaceful life." (A quote by author Hu Lanchang, 胡蘭成, upon his marriage to author Zhang Ailing, 張愛玲.) Nothing in this life is permanent, so a single *chaxi* needn't be an earth-shaking affair! It's enough to fully savor each second and minute as it comes, and to truly enjoy every moment that we spend on tea!

茶 ***As Master Tsai mentions in this article, it is unnecessary to go out and buy things to make chaxi. Some of our favorite chaxi items are old pieces of wood we found by the side of the road, river stones, like on the first page of this article and hollowed gourds as flower vases.***

Tea Wayfarer

Each month, we introduce one of the Global Tea Hut members to you in order to help you get to know more people in this growing international community. It's also to pay homage to the many manifestations that all this wonderful spirit and Tea are becoming as the Tea is drunk and becomes human. The energy of Tea fuels some great work in this world, and we are so honored to share glimpses of such beautiful people and their Tea. This month, we would like to introduce Mariana Rittenhouse.

I think my tea story is a love story. And no, not in the way you're thinking—it's a love story because ultimately, Tea has taught me how to love. I was an introverted little girl who grew up in Hong Kong, a city teeming with tea. I was the type of child who hung out with grandparents or family friends more than other kids my age. Some of my earliest memories are of me going to a British next-door neighbor's house to have afternoon tea with her after school each day. I loved the ritual of it and the connection it brought about and to this day am still an afternoon tea fanatic.

My mom used to take me to tea shops when I was little, and I would marvel in awe at all the ceramics. She told me she would buy me any tea set I wanted, but I couldn't choose one. They all looked so different and no one could really tell me the differences between them or why I would want one over the other. This curiosity about tea followed me into my adult life. I worked in the natural foods industry and at all the trade shows I would visit the tea companies and learn as much as I could. My family would buy me all sorts of tea and tea gadgets for Christmas and my birthday each year, but the funny thing was I would never use them or drink any of the tea. I unwittingly became a tea hoarder! Not being able to get rid of any of these things because I knew there was something special there, but also not interested in drinking any of the tea or using any of the wares they got me. The day I got rid of all of the tea memorabilia was also the day I decided my "love" for tea was nothing more than an egoic attempt to attach tea to my identity. After all, if I really loved tea, I had no excuse to not be fully engaged with the gifts I'd received over the years. I said goodbye and moved on.

A couple of years later my ears perked up when I heard about a retreat in Italy where someone was serving tea ceremony. "Tea ceremony?" I thought, "What do they mean?" Yes, there were tea ceremonies I had gone to in Asia growing up, but the way they described this sounded completely different, involving meditation, silence and plant medicine. I knew I had to go and see for myself… I was so excited, I felt like I was about to find what I had been looking for ever since I was a child. I emailed the retreat producer asking if I could attend every tea ceremony during the retreat and packed my bags.

I fell in love with Tea in Italy. Not tea the plant, but Tea the being. The beautiful energy of Tea that has taught me so much in terms of how to be a better human. It was not easy to find her, but most things worth looking for never are. After Italy I begin a daily tea practice and never looked back. About six months in I got my first lesson: Tea taught me how to listen. How to get out of my own way and be present to what is going on inside. She taught me how to come back to my beginner's mind and beginner's heart. Tea taught me how to be in community with others, how to seek solace in lineage and surrender to teachings from time immemorial. Tea taught me to love nature on a cellular level, especially trees. I remember one tea ceremony a while back when I looked outside the window to the trees on my land and thought for the first time ever, "I understand why someone would sacrifice their life for that of a tree." These little pieces of wisdom that come from the leaf herself, or from Wu and the Global Tea Hut community, continue to flow into my cup and life and for that I am so grateful. No matter what is going on in my life, I know I can sit down, put the kettle on, and Tea will help peel back the layers around my heart so I can reconnect to myself and the neutrality of Universal Flow. From this place, with tea in my belly and my heart, it is easy to trust, accept and love in this chaotic world that we live in.

I am not a perfect person by any means. It is not always easy for me to show love for others in my day-to-day life or to be my higher self. Tea has become one of the main ways I can show people that I love and care for them. Be it a stranger, a lover or my own mother, tea is the great connector of my heart and yours. Love is not a feeling, it is an action, and to actively love someone is to serve them. So, every day I wake up, and I serve tea…

茶人: ***Mariana Rittenhouse, USA***

Inside the Hut

Coming Soon to Global Tea Hut Magazine

茶主題: *Zen & Tea*

茶主題: *Chajin & Teahouses*

茶道

茶主題: *Gong Ting Puerh*

茶主題: *Food & Tea*

We need your help to get to a place where we can build your permanent Center, Light Meets Life. (And we do hope that you feel that our Center is yours, not ours.) If everyone in this community donates, we can together create the most gorgeous Tea Center ever. Obviously, not all of us have a lot of money to give, but we can all do our part. Each of us is also connected to a larger community of people who can share in the building of this project. As a global community, we can do this for us and for future tea lovers!

Let us know if you have any advice for the changes coming this next year. It really means more than ever that you continue to help and support us through these big changes.

We have some of the best teas we have ever had for a Light Meets Life fundraiser this year. We figured we had to get some excellent teas, since this year we are trying to build a new Center. Don't miss out!

Wu De will once again be doing a retreat at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California from Feb. 16th through the 20th of 2020. We are very excited to once again be drinking tea and meditating on such sacred land. Come and join us!

Wu De has published a new book called "Fallen Leaves." We are super excited. We think you are all going to love reading it, especially while you drink tea alone or share tea with friends. Right now you can purchase a limited-edition, hardcover, full-color and signed edition from our website, on the "teaware" page. Otherwise, you can get your paperback copy at Amazon or other online retailers. All the proceeds from this new book will help us build our Center, Light Meets Life. This is another great way to help!

November Affirmation

I am beautiful

Do I see the beauty in my being? Do I recognize that my ability to see beauty around me is bound up in my inner beauty? I acknowledge the miracle that is this life. I see the beauty within and without and take the time to surrender to it.

Center News

It is Light Meets Life time!!! We have launched a giant, worldwide fundraiser to make the move this very year. This will be our permanent Center, offering tea courses for the rest of our lives and beyond, serving future generations of tea lovers. Visit **www.lightmeetslife.org** now!

It may seem daunting, but together we can raise the funds we need to move into a new Center—*your* new Center. If you have any experience dealing with fundraisers of this nature and want to get involved, please email us and let us know your ideas.

The Center will be closed indefinitely for obvious reasons. There will be no courses, though if all goes according to plan, we hope to restart in 2020 or perhaps 2021 with an even better and more varied schedule than ever before. Help us make this happen!

We have moved to a new house, closed Morning Dew and the Tea Sage Hut, and are taking a much-needed breather for this coming year before building Light Meets Life.

www.globalteahut.org

The most decorated tea magazine in the world! Sharing rare organic teas, a magazine full of tea history, lore, translations, processing techniques and heritage, as well as the spiritual aspects of Cha Dao. And through it all, we make friends with fellow tea lovers from around the world.

GLOBAL TEA HUT

TEA & TAO MAGAZINE