



August

2013

In August, the world turns towards home. This is a month of returning, reuniting and celebrating our old friendships. It is a great time to call some friends and family you haven't spoken to in a while and catch up; or better yet, schedule that tea gathering you have been longing for! Soon, crops will ripen and harvests will begin. But for now it is the space in between: a leisurely month—good for strolls with loved ones, dreamy naps on a meadow or lazy tea days near the woods. It is a great month for ball Oolongs and Dan Cong teas. Sometimes, it is a good time for those middle-aged Puerhs, and checking how they are aging. After all, if it is a good time to reunite with loved ones, why not tea you haven't spoken to in a while as well?

In the lunar calendar, we enter the Orchid Moon in August, which represents the limit of heat and the return towards Yin. It was traditionally a time of holiday, for returning home and visiting loved ones. Most tea is resting, absorbing the sun and moon, stars and deep earth minerals so that it can bud once again in the autumn, or traditionally next spring. Summer tea, like Eastern Beauty and Sun Moon Lake Red Tea is just coming to market now, so those farmers might be busy with the final stages of production, like sorting, weighing and packaging.

There are two very important Chinese holidays in the Seventh Moon. The first is called 'Double Seven (*Qixi Jie*)' or sometimes 'Chinese Valentine's Day (*Qingren Jie*)'. As legend has it three orphans lived together in a village. The two older siblings threw out the younger one so they wouldn't have to share. He wandered with his ox finding menial labor. One day the ox spoke to him and revealed that he was actually a god who had been cast from Heaven for helping humans with magic seeds during a famine. His punishment was to roam the earth as an ox. He helped show the boy, who was called 'Niu Liang (Cowherd)', a pool where some of the daughters of Heaven came to bathe. The boy met one of them, named 'Zhinu (Weaver Girl)' and they fell in love. They were married and soon had twins together. However, her parents were angry that she had married a mortal and kidnapped her back to Heaven. Her mother

sent her back to her loom to weave clouds, forbidding her to see the boy again. Meanwhile, on earth, the ox gave Niu Liang his horn to use as a magic boat, so he could, together with his children, travel to Heaven to find his love. The queen of Heaven thwarted him by scratching the Milky Way between Earth and Heaven so that Niu Liang couldn't see his wife ever again. And so these two stars stare across the Milky Way at each other in longing. They say that once a year, on Double Seven, all the magpies of the Earth—romantic at heart—form a bridge so that the two lovers can cross and spend the day/night together.

The second holiday is Mid-year Festival, which is also Ghost Festival. It is a time for burning paper money, offering incense, fruit and food to one's ancestors, as well as appeasing ghosts and demons so they don't haunt us. In ancient times, some people called the entire seventh moon the 'Ghost Moon', believing that the gates of Hell opened and ghosts roamed freely amongst the living until the end of the month. It is a time for filial piety, returning home and paying tribute to one's elders and ancestors. In some places paper lanterns are lit and set adrift on water or released into the air to help lost ghosts find their way home. You may not be superstitious, or even believe in ghosts, but there is something beautiful in praying for the salvation of all, even the dead; and in honoring our ancestors, and all those who have come before and handed down traditions and truths to us, sacred or mundane.

We can learn from the way that the ancients propitiated the darkness rather than trying to battle it. They had holidays, altars and made offerings to the demons, recognizing that if light defeated darkness, the universe would end. These forces are always in balance, and though the darkness makes more noise in this day and age, the light is equal to it. Forgive your demons—make peace with them and see what happens: the ones that need conflict will go elsewhere, and the ones that remain will be cute imps that no longer bother you. Sometimes we can even turn our demons into great protectors, like the fierce demons that guard all Buddhist temples and monasteries...