

SPRING 2013 SHENG PUERH

Bing Dao, Yunnan

As an intro to this month's tea, Wu De reviews Living Tea and also discusses the five characteristics that make puerh tea so special. After that, he dives into September's amazing old-growth puerh and even gives us some brewing tips.

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As the seasons start to change, so do our teas. The green teas, white teas and sheng puerh we've enjoyed all summer start to take rest, meditating another year on the shelf or in jars. We usually drink a few of our favorite sheng puerhs in a last farewell to the summer. Of course, this doesn't mean we never drink a sheng in the winter (or a shou in the summer), but over time a tea lover finds a natural harmony with the weather, as it should be. When we are in harmony with Nature, our diet, exercise, tea drinking and every other aspect of our lives are also in tune with the climatic and vibrational changes that occur in our local environment over time, and we adapt our lives accordingly.

This will be a magical month, as we metaphorically travel to Yunnan once again to share one of our favorite young sheng puerhs.

Sometimes visitors to the center see all the puerh around and think that it's our favorite tea. Actually, we love all tea, as long as it is produced with a love for Tea and Mother Earth. There are spectacular and sustainable, organic examples of every kind of tea. We hope that we'll drink many, many more of them in this Hut over the coming years! Still, there is a certain magic in puerh, and it might be

worthwhile to discuss just what it is. There are five magical characteristics that make puerh tea so special:

One: Living Tea

First and foremost, there is still a lot of "Living Tea" in Yunnan—perhaps more than any other tea-growing region. "Living Tea" is a term we use a lot around here, so it is worth getting to know. True wisdom is always founded in a desire to learn and the wise never "repeat" anything; rather, with a beginner's mind, they "renew" their understanding. In that way, we deepen our truths with each time we delve into them. There is a lot to know about Tea—a huge and vast world, and a lot of it is worth repeating now and again, especially concepts like Living Tea, which is the first and most important aspect of what makes puerh tea so special!

In past issues, we have discussed what Living Tea is and why it has such healing potential. We talked about the five characteristics of Living Tea:

- 1) Seed-propagated
- 2) Room to grow
- 3) Biodiversity
- 4) Chemical-free
- 5) Respect

First, all living tea is seed-propagated. As we mentioned in previous issues, tea is a sexual plant and a lot goes into creating the seeds—a tremendous amount of natural energy, mostly involving insects and cross pollination. Every seed is unique, and every seed-propagated tea tree will also be an individual soul. In fact, that is why so little tea is seed-propagated today. Commercially, farmers think that consumers are ruled by their palates and want flavor uniformity. Is that true? Do you really want to throw out so many potatoes and carrots because they don't fit unnatural cosmetic standards? Or do you realize that Nature is wiggly, and that the magic of tea shines differently every time? It is also more work to tend a variety of trees with different needs. The vitality, however, is very different between cuttings/clones and seed-propagated trees. First and foremost, seed-propagated trees live longer by orders of magnitude—think centuries or even millennia versus decades—and, moreover, birds won't eat the seeds of cloned trees after the second or third generation.

Second, all Living Tea is given room to grow. Living things grow as large as their environment permits. Koi fish will remain small if kept in a small bowl, but grow big if they



are in a big pond. The same is true with Bonsai trees. People are this way too: we only grow as much as we give ourselves room to... Every plant has a ratio between its roots and crown, and when you prune the crown the roots also shrink. Plantation tea is pruned for easy picking. Many old-growth puerhs, on the other hand, are plucked with ladders or climbed by the pickers.

Tea trees organize themselves, in fact, in a living garden, rather than being forced into rows like on a plantation. They know which soil is more nutrient dense, and can support more trees clustered closer together, and which soil is less so, and so there they must grow more spaced apart.

Third, all Living Tea is ecological. It includes a vast array of biodiversity. We always think that in controlling a few factors in a monoculture system we can generate sustenance for ourselves, but the overall

impact is always more complex, intricate and subtle than we could ever imagine. And as we are finding out, our destructive intrusion into natural ecologies is having many larger and unintended effects, over time and space. There is no saying what the true relationship is between the weeds, bugs, snakes and even snake poop and tea trees. How are the local squirrels related to the tea trees? It may not be apparent, but if they cohabitate, they are related. Maybe the discarded nutshells help fertilize the trees, or maybe it is more complex by one or many degrees: maybe the nutshells are food to a certain insect that attracts a certain kind of bird which sings in a way that tea trees enjoy, helping them to flourish? True tea is ecological—you

The Name “Puerh”

The word “puerh” really doesn’t refer to a kind of tea. It was once a city within the Yunnan region of China. In 1950, after the Communist Revolution, the city was renamed “Simao”. Then, in 2007, after a tidal wave of puerh madness and popularity, the local government made the decision to call the city by its original name, so it is now once again called “Puerh”, as is the province.

Traditionally, Puerh was the market center where all the tea grown in the region was brought to be traded and/or sold. Later, all the tea from Yunnan came to be known as “Puerh Cha (普洱茶)” or “Tea from Puerh”. There are many markets today, like Kunming in Yunnan or the biggest puerh market in Guangzhou, where producers trade and sell tea. Many producers and factories nowadays have contracts with particular farmers and buy their crops directly. Since the tea produced in Yunnan is so unique, puerh has come to warrant its own category of tea.

cannot distinguish a Living Tea garden from the surrounding forest!

Fourth, and the most obvious, is that Living Tea is chemical free. The evil triad (pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilizers) that pollutes our earth, animals, birds and people is not sustainable and not a healthy compromise. It doesn’t matter that a study proves that such pesticides *can* be consumed by people without quantifiably detrimental effects. First off, they destroy the environment,

often running down the mountains and harming other ecologies as well. Second, what are healthy amounts? And how long was the study? Maybe the participants showed no deterioration of health after a two-year study (which would be a long one), but what happens when you consume pesticide-laden tea for ten years? Such chemicals are unhealthy for people and harmful to the earth. They defeat the purpose of tea, which is to bring Nature to society. Master Zhou Yu always asks, “How can you sit in a beautiful tea room and connect to Nature, when the thing you are using to connect was produced in a way that destroys Nature?”

Finally, tea is a conversation between people and Nature. In the Chinese character for tea, the radical for ‘man’ is right in the middle. Tea was traditionally always respected. Each tree was seen as a unique being, with life and spirit and treated that way. Most farms don’t treat animals or plants in that way anymore. There is no respect for the individual being in any of the trees—you can hardly tell where one ends and the next begins on most farms. It is just uncountable “tea”—product, value, stuff, object for consumption, etc. Living Tea, on the other hand, is cared for, plucked and processed by hands and heart that love Tea and Nature!

Two: Yunnan

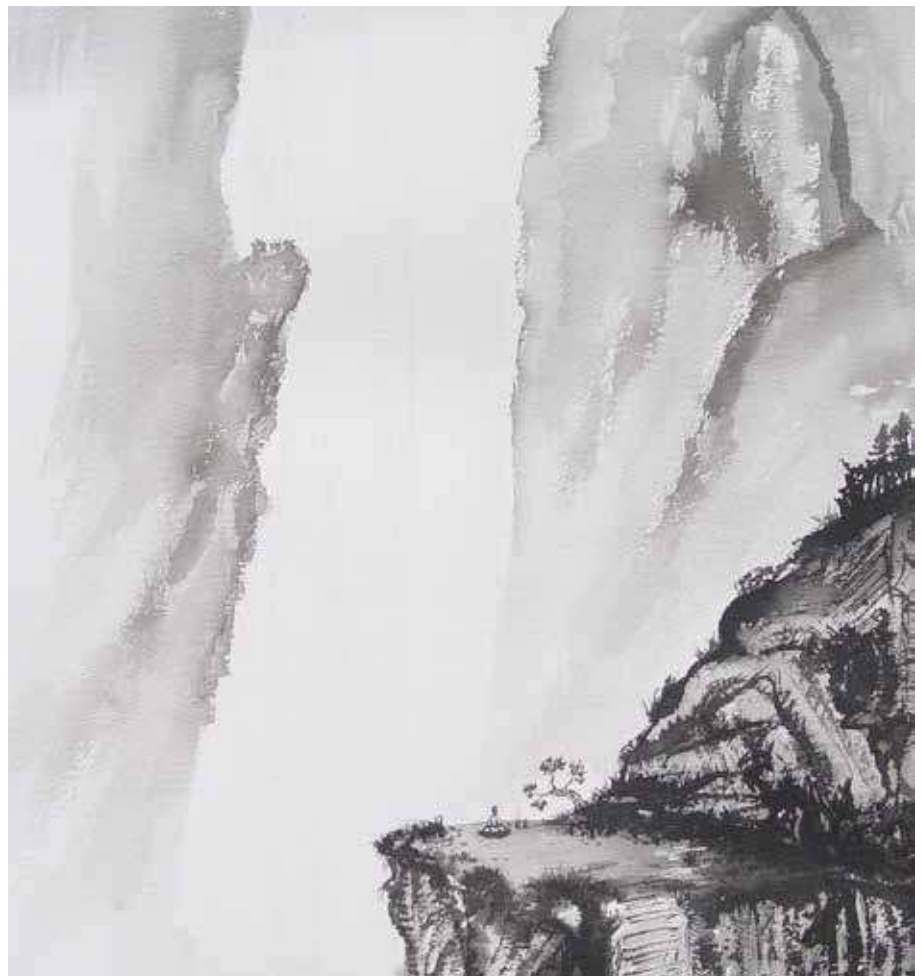
It’s no wonder that Yunnan is the birthplace of all tea. It is a magical land, vibrant in flora, animal wonder and distinctive culture. There is more biodiversity “South of the Clouds” than anywhere else in China, and more than most places on earth. In fact, 25% of all species in China live in Southern Yunnan, which is tiny compared to the vastness of China itself. The soil there is rich and loamy, and even plants found elsewhere are bigger here. Rich mountain soil, con-

stantly shifting biodiversity and the moist climate of mists and rains that roll through the valleys make this the perfect place to farm tea.

The terroir of Yunnan also includes the rich cultural heritage here. Where there is such tremendous vibrancy—and has been since the last ice age carved these valleys—people were of course attracted by the easy life and abundance here. Yunnan has always been a meeting place of many people: Sino-Tibetans who migrated here from the Himalayas, Han Chinese as well as the hundreds of aboriginal tribes who migrated here from Southeast Asia. These are some of the oldest cultures on earth, with shamanistic traditions dating back to the dawn of man. (In fact, the majority of Chinese herbs used in Traditional Chinese Medicine originated in Yunnan, the best of

which is of course tea!) It is likely that these tribal peoples are related to the same who crossed the Bering Strait and began Native America. They are deep and earthy people, with a strong connection to the mountain spirits and Nature. It was their ancestors who first gathered tea from the forest, using it to commune with Spirit, themselves and each other. We should follow in their footsteps!

Every variety of tea on earth is found in Yunnan, even the ones that evolved elsewhere. They have been brought by modern farmers to grow there, and most all of them are happy. The vibrant soil and fertile energy of Yunnan influence the tea, pulsing through the leaves, through the liquor and into us. Sages of the Dao, past and present, have always taught that there are what they call “Dragon Veins” running down into the Earth



Dragon veins have always been a part of traditional Chinese paintings, connecting Heaven and Earth.



Wild, old-growth tea trees in Yunnan

from the Heavens above, bringing “Cosmic Vitality” (*yang*) down into the energy of the Earth (*yin*). This philosophy forms the basis of the ancient teachings of Daoist Geomancy (*Feng Shui*), which situated hundreds of the most famous and beautiful monasteries and hermitages in ancient China. And, so it is said, Yunnan has more Dragon Veins than anywhere on earth! With such an environment as its birthplace, it is no wonder that tea developed into such a powerful, rich plant.

Three: The Trees

The indigenous, wild, old trees found in Yunnan are of the most important aspects of why puerh tea is so unique. Remember, there are two general kinds of tea trees (every tea tree is a unique being, so categorizing them is like categorizing people: useful but also dangerous). Big leaf tea trees have a single trunk, and roots that grow down, while small leaf tea trees have many trunks, are bush-like

and their roots grow slightly outward. The big leaf variety is older, while small leaf tea evolved later as tea traveled to colder climates, both naturally and carried by man. Traditional Yunnan tea is big leaf, and made from old trees grown in gardens or wild.

The age of these trees belies wisdom. The depth of their roots connects them to the earth and all the Nature and biodiversity around them in a very powerful way. Ancient trees have such deep roots that they are connected to the heart of the mountain, and many even get close to the geothermal warmth of the earth, absorbing this heat into their beings. Some of the trees are completely wild, while others were planted by people and tended, but still live in the forest and are indistinguishable from the jungle around them. In fact, a beginner would hike into the forests of Yunnan and find it difficult to pick out the tea gardens if they weren't pointed out by a guide. There is a natural mystic in the leaves

of such old trees, many of which have seen millennia of suns and moons—the rise and fall of dynasties. Some were here before the pyramids were built! And there aren't many words that can describe the age and wisdom that comes with consuming the energy of such an old life form.

Such old trees are indeed plant teachers. They evolved to show us our source. Most every tribe in Yunnan believes that they are descended from tea trees, and one even believes that all life on earth was born out of tea. This mythology holds great truth, if you but have a bowl of this month's tea and shift your perspective a bit. Of course the plant kingdom is our source; it is our source in the big way, as we all evolved out of the plant kingdom, as did all animate life on this planet. It is also our source on a more daily level, since all our energy is plant energy. We breathe air made from plants, we eat plant energy (whether you are vegetarian or not, it's originally plant energy). The plant kingdom is indeed the source of life

on this planet, for it is through the plants that the cosmic energy is transmuted: they absorb the sun's energy and provide it to the rest of the life forms on this planet.

As the oldest beings alive, plants have a lot to teach us, and these old trees in particular. The old trees from this forest speak a gentle language that we can easily learn and incorporate into our own, human vocabulary. We can learn to live closer to Nature and see ourselves in it, as opposed to apart from it. Due to increase in demand, a lot of puerh is now being produced on plantations. When this happens, you lose this quality and the magic of puerh with it.

Four: The Water

Beyond just the combination of rich soil and poignant mists, Yunnan is also irrigated by one of the most holy of all waters. More than 5,000 meters above sea level in Tibet,

on the Zhanarigeng Mountain, there is a glorious spring the locals call the "Water of Stone". From this fount, a great flow of water and life begins its epic course down the steps of Yunnan, and eventually through six countries on its way to the ocean. Through Yunnan it becomes the Lancang River (River of Countless Elephants), in Thailand it is the Mae Narn Khong (Mother of All Water), in Cambodia the Toule Thom (Great Water), and then in Vietnam the Mekong. This "Danube of Asia" has ever been the mainstay of countless animals and people on its 4,000+ kilometer voyage from the Himalayas to the South China and Indian seas. The Chinese once called this great body of water the "River of Nine Dragons", referring to the vivacity and spirit of the water elemental. The pure glacial water that flows down into the southern parts of Yunnan from that enshrined spring at the top of the world brings with it an incredible amount of minerals, nutrients

and the spirit of the highest mountains on Earth.

Five: The Midichlorians

Like no other tea on earth, puerh has an amazing and wondrous relationship with microbial life. Before it is even picked, puerh tea trees are covered in hundreds of species of molds, fungi and bacteria. The leaves are teeming with them. Of course, such bacteria play a role in all life on earth. You and I are mostly composed of them. By number, around 90% of the cells in our bodies are non-human DNA. The bacteria in us are much smaller than our human cells, though, so they are much less of our mass. But if you count the cells in a human body, they are the vast majority of what we call "me", and further testament to our deep connection with everything around us!

We need bacteria and other microbial life to survive. There is



*Cracks millennia deep
and a beard of moss
are signs of your wisdom.
And yet, the sun still shines
through each branch and leaf,
and the forest floor sparkles
with all that dancing shadow and light.
Far away, I raise a bowl of you,
and sit wondering
if anyone can see past those leaves...*

—Wu De



true: that a large part of the medicinal power of puerh tea comes from these microbes, and perhaps from the relationship they then have with the microbes in us. Our friend, the microbiologist, extracted some of the living microbes from the sample we gave him and cultured them. He made a drink, similar to kombucha, and shared it with us when we visited the States. It was amazing, and almost as powerful and as medicinal as the tea itself. It forced us to acknowledge just how influential the Midichlorians in puerh tea really are!

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literally an entire ecology of them in our bodies that mirrors the great diversity of beings that live symbiotically with puerh tea. These molds and bacteria are what give puerh its unique ability to ferment and age like no other tea on earth.

We gave a piece of 1950's Red Mark puerh to a brother of ours in the States who has a PhD in microbiology. What he found completely amazed him. He later told us that he found species of microbes that the scientific community had thought to be extinct for millions of years. He hopes to eventually publish his results in scientific journals. He also informed us that the aged tea was

swarming with microbes that could change shape. We're no experts on what this means, or even the proper terms to discuss it, but energetically it reminds us that tea is an "adaptogen", which means a kind of medicine that can change its vibrational pattern to help heal many different kinds of ailments.

When I was younger, we drank a lot of aged puerh. It was cheap and much more abundant back then. We used to joke that teas with a ton of Qi had a higher "Midichlorian Count" based on the microscopic intelligent beings from the Star Wars world. While the term was facetious, what it pointed to was very real and

King of the Forest 喬木王

This month's tea is one of our favorite young sheng puerhs. It was produced by the well-known Mengku Shuanjiang factory in the spring of 2013, using the first flush of tea from the village of Bing Dao. Located in Mengku county, "Bing Dao" literally translates to "Ice Island". The aged trees this tea comes from are found at around 2,500 meters above sea level. The whole county is well known for its strong, pungent and bitter puerh teas. Teas like this are said to age better, having the strength and power to last the years. But with some brewing finesse, they also make for a fine bowl or cup even now!

When this tea was first released in 2006, it won the Expo Tea Award in Kunming, and the factory then continued production into the coming years. It is called the "King of the Forest (*Qiao Mu Wang*, 喬木王)". Our 2013 version was produced in a very limited amount, especially considering how big the factory is. Only 500 cases, called "jian" were produced. (Later on in this issue, we'll discuss all the parts of puerh cakes and their packaging, including a "jian"). Each cake is 500 grams, which is bigger than the traditional 357.

This tea was processed in a traditional way, sun dried and stone-pressed. The wild leaves bring it to life in a powerful way. We also have a love for it because it is certified organic, which is rare for puerh. Most great puerh comes from small villages, and the farmers can rarely afford certification. We don't mind that. We support clean tea, certified or no. But it also helps when some of the bigger factories can step up and produce high-quality puerh that can win mainstream competitions and is also certified organic. When mainstream consumer demand starts to push for organic production, the tea world will shift. This is true of all agriculture. There are, of course, many limitations to certification, but it is one positive force amongst many, helping to change our consciousness and promote greener living.

This tea is a powerful one—strong, bitter and astringent. When a guest complains that a tea is bitter, one master we study with always replies, "The nature of tea is bitter." Tea is a bitter plant. It can be processed in a way that makes it sweet, but then all of it isn't there. You have to take things out to do that. This is a symptom of life as well, we want

to process it so that all the flavors aren't there—only the sweetness. But it isn't possible. We have to learn to accept the bitterness. Over time we even begin to enjoy it. Most old people love bitter things! Try paying attention to the way the bitterness and astringency transform in your mouth, moving through to a sweet aftertaste. Check the brewing tips for some help, as over-steeping this tea might make these qualities unbearable. In the later steeps, you'll find a deep Qi arising with a sweetness that grows more and more pronounced. The energy of the deep rocks and minerals will also shine through.

We chose the name "King of the Forest" due to this tea's power and force. You can feel the jungle thriving through it. It races through your physical body to the subtle body, transforming into Qi in a fast and vibrant way. It will purge unwanted toxins—of body, mind and spirit. We recommend drinking it in the morning, in quiet. In that way, you'll find that it can change your whole day!



Brewing Tips for This Month's Tea

The most important brewing tip for this month is: *don't oversteep this tea!* You will need a pot to brew a compressed, strong tea like this month's. Try using less tea at first and then add more. In fact, that's a good rule of thumb for all tea preparation: you can always add more but it's a waste to take tea away! Less is more, as with all things. Try flash-steeping the first few brews, which means pour the liquor out as soon as possible. Later on, you can increase the time.

Puerh tea responds well to hotter water. Try using crab-eye water for this tea, or as close to a full boil as you can get without rolling. The hot water will bring out more in the tea.

It may also be a good idea to share this tea after breakfast rather than before. Young sheng puerh can upset some people's stomach, especially when empty. It is strong and astringent, aiding in digestion. You will find that it feels very comfortable to drink tea like this after a nice meal!



Our tea of the month: front and back wrapper, inner receipt and the cake. Notice the organic certification sticker on the back.