

# 沒有比這杯更好的

最好的茶葉在太陽底下

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The morning I left home, it was snowing and around zero degrees Celsius. Just eleven hours later, I found myself on the other side of the world in the busy city of Shanghai, home to twenty-three million people, in pouring rain, the temperature twenty-five degrees higher, with humidity through the roof. Early on, this felt like an adventure to come.

The next day, trekking on the steep steps of Huangshan, cloud-hidden, it is difficult to encapsulate in words what the senses are perceiving. It truly feels like a scene out of a fantastic dream or at least a *Lord of The Rings* movie (I imagine Huangshan is the place where dwarves live). This is the place where a soul goes to rest, and it is no wonder this location is the source of inspiration for countless works of art.

A few wandering days later, our journey brought us to Qimen where we got to participate in the picking and processing of tea, experiencing firsthand how difficult a labor it is, making us have second thoughts from now on every time we throw away tea leaves that would yield a couple more steepings! Standing amidst vibrant seed-propagated tea bushes in a valley by a small rural village of around three hundred inhabitants was amazing. If one were to bring one's face down to ground level, one would witness a fascinating private world revolving around the thick roots of the trees: all kinds of lovely critters, bugs and insects mingling and minding their own business, being protected by the leaves from the burning sun.

In Huangshan, shortly after harvesting the leaves, we brought them back to the processing room where we all got to try our hand at patiently shaking the leaves on a bamboo tray over hot charcoal to dry them. Besides managing to spill the better half of the leaves, some even burned themselves. We were quite the sensation, bringing together a notable amount of friendly locals! Time seemed to follow its own slow and relaxed pace.

The day was already drawing to a close, and after spending quite a few hours on the bus, we were finally approaching Yixing, as indicated by the number of cars being interchanged with worn-down trucks carrying goods of all kinds on the highway. As in most cities in China, we were greeted with flashing neon lights, colors of the whole spectrum, decorating the vast buildings on our way downtown. I'd heard people's travel stories of arriving in Yixing and being surprised to discover a city with a somewhat industrial feel. Being a Western tea lover fond of Yixing teaware, one can easily develop an over-romantic picture of the home of the teapot.

After a good night's sleep, we went to see the old Qianshu Dragon Kiln. What was once on the outskirts of the town is now in the back alley of an anonymous small street with just a few signs along the way to point out the direction. Later on, we got off the bus near a nondescript multi-laned street, adjoined by a great wooden gate and a white wall. Behind these barriers lay the original closed mines of Yixing. We

could just get a glimpse of what is behind the walls, glimpsing the top part of the hills. We walked a bit further down the street and Master Zhou, who was our generous guide, climbed up a hillside, grabbed a chunk of rocky soil and showed it to us exclaiming: "This is it! This is Yixing ore!" The particular chunk was obviously not high-grade ore (more suitable for making a flower vase than a decent teapot), but nevertheless, it was utterly fascinating to see how what we perceive to be a simple piece of rock has the potential to be the teapot we so adore.

Master Zhou then took us to a hall where we were officially welcomed to Yixing in the warmest of manners, with generous gifts and several signs erected to honor us. After our formal tea gathering (drinking, amongst other teas, some amazing vintage Liu Bao that Henry brought to us from Malaysia), we were spellbound for the next two hours as we closely watched, barely blinking, a true master at work. Master Zhou usually makes two to five teapots a month, spending several days on some of the processing steps he rushed through this time for the sake of demonstration. With his work, details make the difference.

Thinking back on the days of the trip, I'm reminded of a scene in the movie *The Cave of the Yellow Dog* by a Mongolian filmmaker, Byambasuren Davaa. The story revolves around a nomad family and their young daughter. The girl gets lost in the fields, and as the night falls, she finds shelter at the house of an old woman.