

GLOBAL TEA HUT

國際茶亭

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紅印藍印
印級



MASTERPIECE ERA PUERH



BLUE MARK

To conclude this amazing year, we will be exploring the Masterpiece Era of puerh tea, from 1949 to 1972. Like all history, understanding the eras of puerh provides context for today's puerh production. These are the cakes producers hope to create. And we are, in fact, going to drink a commemorative cake as we learn!

*Love is
changing the world
bowl by bowl*

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From the editor

In December, the weather is much cooler in Taiwan. We are drinking Five Element blends, shou puerh and aged sheng. Occasionally, we spice things up with an aged oolong or a Cliff Tea. We love to celebrate the holidays at the Tea Sage Hut. We cook a large vegetarian meal, make chai and exchange gifts. We will be thinking of all of you, our beloved tea family, as we smile, laugh and drink cups of spicy chai! You are all in our hearts this month. We hope your holidays find you warm and surrounded by great tea and those you love.

This year has been great. We have started translating Taiwanese tea history, traveled to Anxi and Chaozhou, as well as Yiwu and Mengsong. We hope to continue traveling to tea-growing regions in the next year, taking all of you with us through these pages. We think that understanding tea means understanding the geography, terroir and people who create it. We also hope to further our “Classics of Tea” series in the coming year. We have already translated works from the Tang Dynasty (618–907), the *Treatise on Tea* by Song Dynasty (960–1269) emperor Song Huizhong and several Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) tea classics. Next year, we will unroll the scroll further, translating and annotating a great Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) tea text in two parts. Work on this has already begun. We will publish the first half in 2019 and probably complete the work the following year. It is our aim to eventually publish all these classics in a book. Along with travels and classics, you can look forward to some great issues on teaware, tea teachers and some rare and unique teas. We so look forward to another great year of tea wisdom, great tea trips and ceremonies around the world!

This year, our Light Meets Life fundraiser has expanded to create simple, affordable teaware for bowl tea practice, some great handmade Yixing and porcelain cups for gongfu tea and kettles for both. We also have some great teas now as well, including two shou puerh teas, several dian hong cakes and one excellent sheng as well. The proceeds from these teas are all saved for building Light Meets Life, which becomes more and more pressing as all our ten-day courses at the Tea Sage Hut have such long waiting lists. We obviously need a bigger Center! Together we can and will build Light Meets Life. We can already envision the tea rooms filled with students practicing chaxi, impromptu tea sessions in the dormitories or perhaps around the beautiful gardens. There’s one going on now in the bamboo grove... We see you meditating in the great hall, walking amongst old-growth tea trees of many varieties and making lifelong friends from around the world. We see a more robust course schedule with a great variety of courses, from Gongfu I and II to Tea and Meditation, and from Intro to Cha Dao to a Teacher’s Self Course... With your continued support throughout this amazing and glorious year of tea, and into 2019, we can build this vision together as a tea family. We cannot express in words how grateful we are!

This is an exciting issue for me. I have always wanted to find a way to take us on a tour of the eras of puerh. Puerh from before 1949 is known as the “Antique Era (號級茶時期)” and from 1949 to 1972 is called the “Masterpiece Era (印級茶時期),” 1972 to 1998 is the “Chi Tze Era (七子餅茶時期)” and then until now is called the “Newborn Era (新生茶時期).” I have been brainstorming a way to devote an issue to each era, but the problem is that the teas from the earlier eras are way too rare and exorbitantly expensive. (We cannot even imagine sending them as an Expansion Pack, let alone even dreaming of sending them as a Tea of the Month.) Eventually, I figured out a way that we could do this, as you will see, that we hope will be fun and educational for you. We are going to start with the Masterpiece Era, as opposed to covering the four eras chronologically, because there is an exciting Chinese book about the antique era coming out later in 2019 that we hope to translate for that issue.

We are also continuing our tradition of using the gift money in December to get a better quality tea to send for the holidays. This is, in fact, what gave me the idea of a way to find a Tea of the Month that would be interesting for an issue devoted to the Masterpiece Era, which is essentially made up of the various types of Red and Blue Mark cakes, as you shall see. We are thinking of reducing the gifts in 2019 to a few a year, and spending that extra budget on better teas throughout the year. What do you think?

Wishing you a great holiday and happy New Year! Let us all raise a cup of tea, while reading about puerh history and toasting all that we have achieved thus far as a community, as well as what is to come as this gorgeous community grows closer and bigger. I love you all dearly.



—Further Reading—

This month, we recommend rereading the first Extended Edition from September 2014. You may also want to review the Yiwu issue from this year, as it also has some great articles that are relevant to these topics. All our past issues are now archived on the website, and very searchable in both .pdf and .html formats.

TEA OF THE MONTH



Over the course of this month, we will be reading about and exploring the Masterpiece Era of puerh, which spans from the Communist takeover of tea production in Yunnan from 1949 to 1972 when the CNNP (中國土產畜產進出口公司, China National Native Produce & Animal By-Products Import & Export Company) was created and took over control of the tea industry in Yunnan. They changed the wrappers, and even included English that year, which is the marker that separates the second and third eras of puerh tea. (We will discuss all four eras in this issue.) We have wanted to cover the four eras of puerh individually in an issue for a long time, but were always confused about how we could find an on-topic Tea of the Month to go along with such an issue, since teas from the first three eras are so rare and incredibly expensive nowadays. In fact, even the idea of an Expansion Pack with Antique or Masterpiece Era teas would be absurd, as a single steeping of these teas would be thousands of dollars. Sending them as a Tea of the Month is even more impossible. We thought about this for a long time, wondering what to do...

The Masterpiece Era, from 1949 to 1972, really is just two types of tea: Red Mark (紅印) and then later Blue Mark (藍印). This nomenclature has a lot to do with wrapperology, which is a sub-science within puerh that has changed a lot recently, since the market has shifted to younger teas as vintage puerh has grown rarer and more expensive every year. Wrapperology is the study of all the parts of puerh cakes, including the bamboo wrappers used to wrap up seven cakes (*tong*, 筒), the various kinds of trademark tickets and the wrappers of cakes themselves primarily undertaken to authenticate the provenance of a given cake. Experts in this field, like most nuanced areas of study, have incredibly intricate information on all the aspects of a cake. They know, for example, that the producers used wooden stamps and red ink to stamp the red mark logo on cakes starting in the early 1950s, and then can separate the years based on the type of ink and the condition of the wooden stamps, which would develop nicks in certain characters and overall get more banged up over time. Slight changes in tea blending, along with a myriad of details help determine the vintage of a cake. Nowadays, in the Newborn Era (1998-present), wrapperology mostly focuses on the forgeries made to copy famous brands like Menghai.

Throughout this issue, we will dive into some of the details of these cakes, talk about the history, production and lore of puerh, as well as what it is like to drink some of these incredible vintages of red mark and blue mark, which are subdivided into many grades and types. Though the wrappers were close, there were grades of puerh even back then. As we thought of what to send as a Tea of the Month, we remembered that there were many tribute cakes pressed in the late 1990s and early 2000s to commemorate various Antique Era and more especially Masterpiece Era cakes. In other words, many factories and small “boutique” puerh producers were making their own Red and Blue Mark cakes. They did this in part because Masterpiece Era teas were booming in price and reputation, and cakes could benefit from association; but puerh lovers also made Blue or Red Mark tribute cakes because they genuinely loved the classic versions and wanted to make an homage.

Our Tea of the Month is a special tribute Blue Mark cake from the year 2000. We are very lucky that a collector friend donated half of this tea to us, so that we could all enjoy a spectacular tea to end this spectacular year of Global Tea Hut. These tribute cakes from the late 1990s and early 2000s are now often treasures in their own right. Though they aren't the original Red and Blue Mark teas, they were often made of old-growth leaf and are almost twenty years old now, turning into magnificence of their own, almost like the talented daughter of a famous musician who herself has as much talent as her famous mother. For that reason, we would once again not be sharing this tea without the generosity of a beautiful Chajin.

These commemorative cakes suggest the originals. This tea is bright and clean, with good Taiwanese storage. It was kept by a collector on the second floor for the entire eighteen years it has been alive, at a very nice humidity and temperature, making the storage also clean. Based on the flavor profile, Wu De and the donor believe the tea to include lots of old-growth raw material from the greater Yiwu area, perhaps blended with some Menghai and/or Nannuo *maocha* as well. Our Blue Mark is bright and crisp, with an uplifting energy and a deep, rich, complex flavor profile of spices, wood and some slight emerging flavors of Chinese herbs. Take the afternoon to really appreciate this special tea with some friends and family!



Blue Mark (藍印)



Yunnan, China



2000 Sheng Puerh



Han Chinese



~800-2,000 Meters



A DEEPER SESSION

Further Exploration into Our Tea of the Month

Over the course of this month, we will be learning about puerh history and particularly the Masterpiece Era (1949–1972). We will dive into these topics in great detail all throughout this issue. We thought it might be good to review all the puerh basics in this section before we dive deep into the Masterpiece cakes. We will review puerh tea in general, including its processing, terminology and aging and since much of this issue will include some of what we call “wrapperology,” it may be useful to review the parts of puerh packaging as well.

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” 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.

There are two methods for fermenting puerh tea. Knowing the difference between these categories of puerh is essential for anyone who wants to begin understanding, buying, and/or drinking puerh tea.

Green puerh (sheng, 生), often called “Raw” or “Uncooked,” is produced without any fermentation (*fa xiao*, 發酵) during the production or compression of the cakes. The fermentation of these cakes occurs slowly through an aging process that takes seventy years to reach complete maturity. These sheng cakes are by far the more valuable of the two varieties of puerh and represent the traditional method of puerh production.

Sheng puerh is said to be fully mature at around seventy years. Of course, we can enjoy aged puerh at any

time, and each age has its own charm. Young puerh has characteristics unlike any tea, as does teenage puerh, middle-aged and fully-matured. Nowadays, as vintage sheng puerh gets more and more expensive, many people consider thirty-year-old tea to be very old. Still, there is a reason why puerh experts have always said seventy years was full maturity: after around seventy years, the changes in the physical characteristics of the puerh will slow down enough to say they have stopped changing. In other words, the tea liquor isn’t going to get any darker, and the flavors, aromas and mouthfeel of a tea this old are changing so slowly, you will have to find a much older specimen to see the difference. Of course, all things equal, the older the better. As puerh ages, the rate of change decreases, so the difference between a five and ten-year-old puerh is more pronounced than the difference between a thirty and forty-year-old tea. After seventy years, the tea has reached the point that its leaves won’t get any darker and the liquor will look the same as a one-hundred-year-old tea, though the latter may have more Qi and a slightly different flavor profile.



Black or dark puerh (*shou*, 熟), often called “Cooked” or “Ripe,” is produced through a processes that ferments the tea to varying levels before it is compressed. Called “*wo dui* (臥堆)” in Chinese, this step in puerh production is akin to composting. The tea is piled, moistened and then often covered with a thermal blanket to increase internal heat. Sometimes previously fermented tea is introduced to promote certain bacterial growth. The process could be stopped at any time, though a typical “full” fermentation runs from forty-five to sixty days. Different factories may adjust the length of time that a tea is piled based on their recipes, the kind of tea they use, or the desired level of fermentation. Most older shou tea was fermented only partially, whereas the majority of shou produced today is stronger, fully fermented tea.

Ripe puerh can never attain the quality of flavor, aroma or Qi as a properly aged sheng puerh. The process of piling puerh to artificially ferment it was developed in the late sixties and then licensed for commercial production in 1973, which is usually the date most books will cite as the beginning of shou puerh. Factories were looking

to mimic the qualities of aged sheng in less time. Of course, they were not successful. What they did create, instead, was a whole new category of puerh tea to be evaluated and enjoyed according to its own criteria of quality, rather than comparing it to sheng puerh.

Ripe tea doesn’t age the same as sheng. If the tea was partially fermented, however, it will age. Since many old ripe teas were only partially fermented, they can even be sold as sheng to the uninitiated. Fully-fermented ripe teas tend to mellow out over time, losing some of the rough, “pondy” or ammonia flavors associated with such a long period spent piling.

There is a trend amongst many historians and scholars to assume that our ancestors were somehow ignorant or stupid, looking back at our past with a condescending filter. Of course, there are many ways in which our forefathers would find us to be ignorant as well. If you traveled back a few hundred years and tried to sell water by the bottle, for example, people would think you were mad. Who would purchase water when it can be collected from any stream, lake or river? And who would be so foolish as to pollute it thus?

This is relevant because you will read that ancient people discovered that puerh aged so nicely by accident or that they began compressing it merely to make it easier to transport. While some merchants may have accidentally stumbled upon the fact that puerh aged by noticing that it had changed after a long journey, this only represents some tea people. The majority of tea lovers didn’t need to bumble onto such plain truths! People who were raised since birth around puerh tea trees and grew up drinking tea would know that it was ageable. They would have been aging it in their houses, and recognized that the tea changed from the earliest of times.

There is some truth in the fact that compression makes transportation easier, but anyone can also verify that puerh tea ages much better in a compressed form. When you taste loose-leaf and compressed teas side by side over the years, the differences are so obvious. Again, people who grew up alongside tea trees and in whom tea drinking was both a part of daily and sacred life—such people wouldn’t have compressed tea for commercial reasons only when the difference is obvious.

So this may be why the merchants among them would compress their tea, but not why the shamans would. Tea as a sacred herb outdates tea as a commercial product by thousands of years, and it wasn't the merchants who discovered these basic truths about puerh tea.

Having a lot of information about puerh is no substitute for drinking these teas, and information alone is really only useful in purchasing tea, establishing or verifying a vintage or having discussions with connoisseurs. To us, Tea is medicine, and aged puerh teas hold the highest vibration. Puerh is magical in its ability to connect us with ourselves, Mother Earth and each other. It is stronger and more vibrant than most other teas. We hope to cover Tea from many perspectives in these pages, including linear information about tea, tea production, history and culture. But these are not so worthwhile without experience. What would

books of tea information be without any tea to drink? Consequently, be sure to temper all this left brain with some right, all this mind with some spirit—all these tea words with some tea wisdom!

Puerh is a Genre

Puerh tea is sometimes put into the black tea category (remember, this isn't red tea, which is mistakenly called "black tea" in the West), but it should actually have a category all its own. Traditionally, all puerh was fermented before consumption, whether artificially in the case of shou or naturally over time in the case of sheng. As we've mentioned elsewhere, tea lovers back in the day considered new, sheng puerh as "unfinished" and rarely drank it, except to see how it was aging. Therefore, all puerh tea was fermented and fit nicely into the black tea genre,

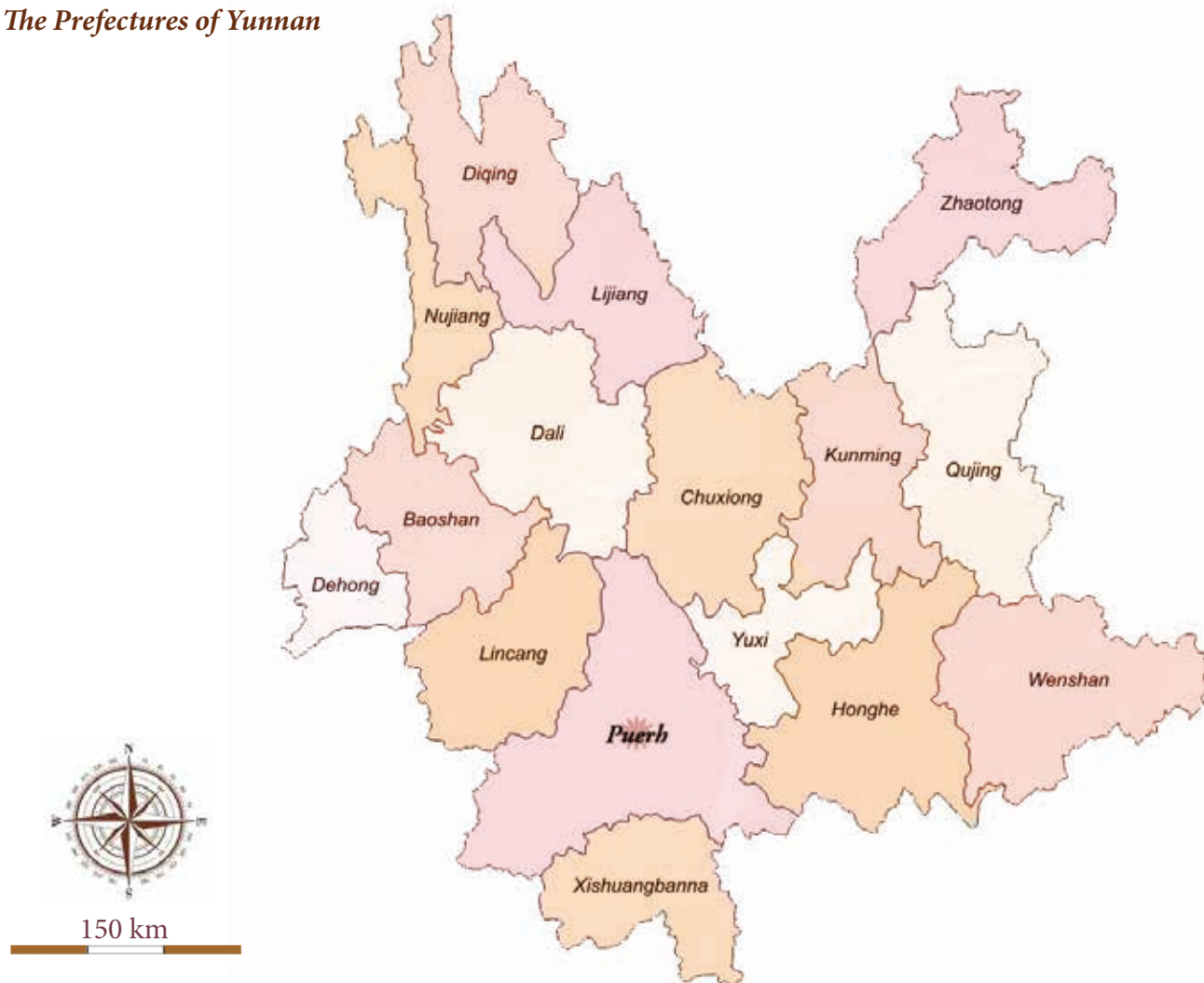
which is categorized by post-production fermentation.

These days, however, much more sheng puerh is consumed young than old. And since sheng puerh vastly overshadows shou in quantity and in historicity (shou only dates back to the sixties or seventies), sheng obviously typifies puerh tea.

One solution to this change in tea production/consumption would be to put young sheng puerh in the green tea category and aged sheng along with shou in the black tea category. But that seems much more confusing than just giving puerh tea its own genre. We think that since it's the oldest tea, and from the birthplace of all tea, puerh deserves its own genre!

Puerh is unique amongst all the genres of tea because the importance of the raw material far outweighs any processing skill. The quality of most oolongs, for example, is determined as much by the source of the leaves as by

The Prefectures of Yunnan



the skill of the one processing the tea. The value of puerh, on the other hand, is ninety percent in the trees. There are many kinds of tea trees in Yunnan, and the source determines the value of the tea. What village a tea comes from and which trees will decide its value, in other words. Of course, there is also plenty of dishonesty in the puerh world: material picked in one region and then taken to a more expensive one to be sold as native tea, young trees sold as old trees, etc. This means producers and consumers have to be able to distinguish the differences between regions and types of leaves.

Puerh trees can roughly be divided into two main categories, though it is useful to understand some of the subdivisions as well: old-growth (*gu shu*, 古樹) and plantation tea (*tai di cha*, 台地茶). Old-growth tea is by far the better of these two. This refers to older trees. There is some debate about what constitutes “old-growth” since tea trees

in Yunnan can range from dozens to thousands of years old. Arbitrarily, we think that when a tea tree becomes a centenarian (100 years), it can rightly be called “old-growth.” Old-growth tea can then be subdivided into trees that are wild or those that were planted by people. Though planted by man, the latter are often indistinguishable from the former as they are both found in small gardens in the heart of the forest. In fact, you would have difficulty picking them out from their surroundings without the help of a guide. Another subdivision could be called “ecologically-farmed old-growth,” which refers to old trees planted in gardens closer to villages and/or homesteads. Some people also like to have a category for 1,000+-year-old trees as well, calling them by that name or maybe “ancient trees.”

Plantation puerh is far inferior and often not organic. The trees there might even be several decades old, but

they aren't Living Tea, and lack many of the qualities that make puerh so special, as we discussed in our article about this month's tea.

Rough Tea (Maocha)

All puerh tea begins with *maocha* (毛茶), which translates as “rough tea.” *Maocha* refers to the finished leaf as it leaves the farm to be sold directly to factories small and large, or independently at market. Tea at this stage has been plucked by hand, wilted, fried to remove the raw flavor (*sha qing*, 殺青), kneaded (*ro nian*, 揉捻), and dried. These processes need to occur almost immediately after the tea has been plucked, which is why they are done directly at the farm rather than at the factory.

Most varieties of tea include all the same stages of processing as puerh with some exceptions here and there.



Unlike puerh, however, the final processing often ends there and the loose-leaf tea is then packaged right at the farm. (Some oolongs were traditionally finished at shops, as well. The shop owners would do the final roasting to suit their tastes.) Puerh, on the other hand, often travels to a factory for final processing: compression into cakes if it is raw, sheng puerh, or piling and then compression if it is ripe, shou puerh.

Some varieties of puerh are also destined to become loose-leaf. At the start, that means that they remain “maocha,” but once they are aged, they are technically no longer “rough tea.” So an aged, loose-leaf puerh shouldn’t really be called “maocha.”

Traditionally, these loose teas were the ones that were grown at smaller farms that didn’t have contracts with any factory—often from so-called “Border Regions” where Yunnan borders Laos, Vietnam or Myanmar. Such teas were then sold at market, traded between farmers or bought and stored by collectors. You can’t be certain, however, that a loose-leaf puerh is a Border Tea, as the big factories also packaged and sold some of their teas loose, though not as much as compressed tea. Although some of the tea that was sold loose was fine quality, most of it was considered inferior.

We have a huge collection of loose-leaf puerh tea here. In fact, we have so much that we have also become collectors of rare antique jars to store it all in. Loose-leaf puerh, no matter how old, is always cheaper than puerh compressed into cakes. One reason for this is that the cakes have an easily-verified vintage. Though there are fakes, experts have developed systems of identifying them, using a combination of factors from a kind of “wrapperology,” which identifies characteristic marks, color changes, etc., in the printing of the wrappers, to the cake itself—its shape, leaf color or size, compression, etc. Also, very few aged loose-leaf teas are pure. Most of them are blends. Some were blended during production, though more often tea was added later on to increase the quantity of an aged tea. Sometimes blends of wet and drier stored teas, or even sheng and shou, are mixed to make a tea seem older than it is. When drinking aged loose-leaf puerh, it is a good idea to only rank them relative to other loose-

leaf puerhs, rather than relying on the date the merchant has given. While some loose-leaf puerhs do have a distinct vintage, most are blends. Looking at the wet leaves after steeping will also verify this.

Beyond that, cakes have been found to have more Qi than loose-leaf, so that if the same tea were left loose and processed into a discus (*bing*, 餅), for example, and then aged for thirty years, the cake would have more Qi than the loose-leaf. Having done several experiments where we stored the same exact tea from the same farm in both loose-leaf and cake form, we can say for sure that the compressed teas age better, and not just in Qi. They are better in every way: flavor, aroma, etc. They also age faster and more evenly. One reason for this is that the steam used to compress the cakes seals the bacteria in, and the inner moisture creates a better environment for them to do their work. Still, despite the fact that cakes are better, loose-leaf teas are often great deals since they are much cheaper than cakes of the same age. It’s like choosing a more affordable antique teapot with a chip under the lid versus a perfect, very expensive one. Depending on your budget, the former may be the better choice.

Processing

The freshly plucked leaves are carried back to the house or village and gently spread out on bamboo mats to be slightly wilted before they are heated to remove the raw flavor. The purpose of wilting the leaves is to slightly reduce the moisture content in the leaves so that they will be more pliable and less likely to be damaged when they are heated. This process must be watched carefully so that the leaves do not oxidize more than is absolutely necessary. For that reason, wilting typically takes place both outdoors and indoors. The tea is withered outdoors for some time and then placed in a well-ventilated room, often shared by members of a particular farming village.

The firing process is literally performed to remove the raw flavor of the tea leaf. This occurs in the production of most all kinds of tea (except white tea, which categorically skips this pro-

cess). In Yunnan, the heating process is still often done by hand in large wood-fired woks. The temperature must remain constant, and the leaves have to be continuously turned to prevent any singeing. In larger farms, though not often in Yunnan, this is done in large barrel-like machines that spin around like a clothes drier. With puerh, however, the firing is often still done by hand, once again lending tradition and wisdom to the puerh process. Workers sift the leaves around in circular motions ensuring that they never touch the wok for longer than a blink. Through generations of experience the farmers can tell by appearance and feel when the leaves are done and their timing is as impeccable as any time/temperature-controlled machine. Scientifically, the process is removing certain green enzymes within the leaf that lend it a raw flavor, which can be too bitter to be drunk. As we’ll discuss later, the *sha qing* of puerh is less-pronounced than in many other kinds of teas.



After the leaves are fried they are kneaded (*ro nian*). This process also occurs by hand on most puerh farms or villages near old trees. A special technique is used to knead the leaves like dough. This bruises the leaves and breaks apart their cellular structure to encourage oxidation, and later fermentation, which will occur through the various methods, explained in the box about sheng and shou puerh. It takes skill and method to achieve a gentle bruising without tearing the leaves. We have personally tried this in Yunnan and Taiwan, and found it is very difficult to achieve. We invariably tore up the leaves. The farmers, however, can go through the movements with surprising speed.

Finally, after the *maocha* has been kneaded and bruised, it is left to dry in the sun. Once again, this process must be monitored carefully to prevent any unwanted oxidation or fermentation from occurring. Usually, the leaves are dried in the early morn-

ing and late evening sun, as midday is too hot. They move the leaves into the same well-ventilated room used earlier for wilting during the hot hours of the day. The leaves will be inspected hourly and when they have dried sufficiently, they will be bagged and taken to the factory to be processed, or to market to be sold as loose-leaf.

The two most distinguishing aspects of puerh production are the *sha qing* and the sun drying. The firing of puerh tea does arrest oxidation, as in all tea, but it is usually less pronounced than other kinds of tea, leaving some of the enzymes in the tea alive, as they help promote aging, as well as the heat resistant spores of bacteria and fungus which survive the low-temperature, short duration firing. Puerh is usually fired at around 100 to 120 C °, while most other teas are fired at double that. Then, after firing and rolling, puerh is sun dried. This gives it a certain flavor, texture and aroma and helps further the natural vibrations present in the

tea. Not all puerh is processed in this way, especially with all the innovation and change in the modern industry—though, ideally, we want tea made in traditional ways.

Once the leaves are processed, they will often go through their first sorting (*fan ji*, 分級). A second sorting will occur later at the factory itself. This sorting is to remove unwanted, ripped or torn leaves, as well as the leaves that were not fried or rolled properly. At this stage, the factory/producer may ask the farmer to sort the leaves according to size, called “grade.” This practice is becoming rarer, however, as the price of old-growth puerh increases. Nowadays, farmers sell almost everything. Sometimes, they don’t even sort out the broken or mis-processed leaves. Blending as an art is not what it once was when tea was cheap and readily available to choose from. Back in the day, blenders had a choice of different regions, gardens, trees and even vintages of *maocha*.



茶 The two most important steps in puerh production are the firing and the sun-drying. The firing is done for a shorter duration and at a lower temperature than all other teas. The firing is de-enzyming, so this lighter firing preserves enzymes that age the tea. Also, the heat-resistant spores from the forest survive the firing and are then awakened in the sun-drying, which contributes to the fermentation of the tea post-production.

AT THE FACTORY

Upon arrival to the factory, the *maocha* goes through its second sorting. This is often done by hand even at the larger factories, though some have large winnowing machines. And most have strict rules controlling the diet of the sorters. Tea is an extremely absorbent leaf and will be altered by any impurities. Sorters therefore cannot eat chili, garlic or onions. Nor can they drink alcohol the night before a sort, as it will be secreted through their skin and contaminate the leaves. The sorting that occurs on the farm was more cursory and based solely on leaf size or “grade.” This second sorting is more detailed and thorough. The leaves are distinguished not only by their size, but also by their quality, type (old or young growth, which mountain they came from, etc.), and other criteria that are constantly changing. Larger factories often have *maocha* arriving from all over Yunnan and therefore employ experts to monitor all sorts of conditions to determine which leaf size, which locations, etc., will have a good harvest that year. More and more, factories are targeting collectors by creating limited edition sets, with cakes from certain mountains, for example.

There is much discussion nowadays about the differences between single-region and blended puerhs. For the last fifty years, most all puerhs were blends. The factories would collect the *maocha* from various regions and then blend them in ways they thought improved the tea: choosing strength and Qi from one region, blended with sweetness and flavor from another, etc. In this way, cakes would be more balanced. In the last fifteen years, there has been a trend towards single-region cakes, and with it the idea that such tea is purer. It should be remembered that all old-growth puerh is actually a blend, since no two trees are the same. So even tea from a single mountain will be a blend of different teas. If you are sensitive enough, you can even distinguish the leaves from the eastern and western side of a single tree, since they receive different sunlight. There are merits to both kinds of cakes, and it seems pointless to say that one is better than the other. It would be better

to talk about specific teas, as a certain blended cake may be better than a given single-region cake or vice versa.

The trend towards boutique, private and single-region cakes has also changed the way that puerh is produced. For example, some cakes are made on site and completely processed by the farmers themselves. Most tea, however, still travels to factories for sorting (blending) and compression. What was once one of the simplest teas, at least as far as processing goes, has now become complicated by the vast industry that has grown up around it. *Mao cha* can sit in a factory for a long or short time, depending on many factors. In doing so, it technically ceases to be “rough tea.” Sometimes tea is aged for a while and then piled to produce a nice, mellower shou tea than a new tea could produce. Other times, the tea that is inferior and doesn’t make it into a cake is then sold loose-leaf later, and labeled “aged” to help market it.

Once ready, the leaves are carefully weighed and placed into cloth compression bags or metal pans. The texture of these bags can be seen imprinted on puerh tea if one looks closely. They are not used to package the tea, only in the compression process itself. They are made from special cross-woven cotton. Strangely, even the larger factories that we’ve visited still used antique-looking scales to do their weighing. Along with human error, this explains why even new cakes are often incorrect in either direction by a decimal of a gram (of course in aged tea this is usually due to a part breaking off).

Steam is used to prepare the tea for compression. The steam is carefully controlled—mostly automatically in the larger factories—to ensure the leaves are soft and pliable, but not cooked or oxidized in any way. It is basically a process of slight re-hydration. The steam softens the tea and the cloth in preparation for compression. Sometimes the steaming takes place before the tea is placed into the cloth, using metal pans instead. In a non-mechanized factory, a wooden table is placed over a heated wok full of water. The

steam rises through a small hole in the center. This is far more difficult than the automatic steam generators at larger factories because the temperature control is lacking and the leaves can end up being burnt. It requires the skill of generations to successfully steam the tea this way.

The compression process was traditionally done with stone block molds. The tea is placed in the cloth, which is then turned and shaped into a ball. The *nei fei* (內飛) is added at this time—an “inner trademark ticket” compressed into the tea to establish branding. The cloth is then twisted shut and covered with a stone mold block. The producer would then physically stand on the stone block and use his or her weight to compress the cake. In some of the smaller family-run factories, puerh cakes are still created using this method. On our recent visit to Yunnan, we had the chance to make our cakes by dancing around on the stone molds, to the delight of the Chinese audience present. Larger factories often have machines for compressing their cakes, though some still produce some of their cakes in the traditional way. Some are hand-operated presses that require the operator to pull down a lever and press the cake into shape; others are automatic and occur with the press of a button. We even saw one machine that was capable of compressing twelve *bings* simultaneously.

After compression, the cakes are taken out of the compression cloths and placed on wooden shelves to dry. They are still slightly damp from the steam at this stage. Many larger factories have a separate room with tons of shelves lined with drying cakes. The cakes are monitored and often even stored on particular shelves that are numbered according to their processing time. Different types of puerh leaves and different shapes or levels of compression will affect the amount of time that is needed to dry the cakes, from hours to days and sometimes even up to a week. Some big factories use ventilation systems and/or fans to speed up the process.

When they are finished drying, the cakes are taken off the shelves to

毛茶之後送到工廠



be packaged. Each generation of cakes has its own unique characteristics with regards to the wrapping paper, printing, style of Chinese characters, *nei fei*, etc. As we discussed above, there is a whole science of “wrapperology.” Each decade brought revolutions in the printing process worldwide, so it seems obvious that the larger factories would change their printing methods. Also, the wrapping paper in particular is handmade, and a lot can be discerned from fibers, texture, and the appearance of the paper as well as the ink color. It is impossible to forge many of these paper and ink combinations and make them appear aged.

Discus-shaped cakes, called “*bingchas*,” are individually wrapped in handmade paper and then bundled in groups of seven (*chi tze*, 七子) called *tongs*. Each *tong* is wrapped in Bamboo skin/bark. Sometimes English authors mistakenly assume that these are bamboo leaves. Actually, bamboo trees shed their skin whenever they get bigger or sprout new stems. You can see this material covering the floor of any bamboo forest. The bamboo bark conserves the freshness of the tea and makes packaging easier. Twelve *tongs* are then further wrapped using bamboo into a *jian* (件), which is twelve *tongs* of seven, so eighty-four *bing*s in all. Other shapes of compression include bricks (*zhuan*, 磚), mushrooms

(which look like hearts to the Tibetans they were primarily exported to, and thus named “*jingcha*,” 緊茶), bowl or nest shapes (*toucha*, 沱茶), and sometimes melons. We have found that the discus-shaped cakes age the best.

Puerh production may seem complicated at first, but it really isn't that difficult to understand. We hope that the basics we've covered in this article, along with the accompanying charts, will help simplify the process for you and increase your understanding of the more linear aspects of puerh tea. By including other articles about the energetics of puerh in this issue, as well as past and future issues, we hope to fulfill you in a more balanced way. Thus, our understanding of puerh will be more holistic, including its history, production methodology, and other informative approaches, along with a spiritual and vibrational understanding of this amazing tea.

Young or old

As puerh ages, something magical happens and it changes from a bitter, astringent and strong brew to a dark, smooth, soft and sweet ambrosia. There is no tea as nice as a well-aged puerh. Back in the day, when aged puerh was readily available, people

rarely drank newborn tea, except to check how it was aging. Nowadays, exploration to new regions of Yunnan, exciting new teas, and the rarity of aged puerh have all shifted the tea world, and much more newborn puerh is consumed. As this shift was happening, many who had been drinking aged tea were saddened by the very sudden increase in price, as many vintages became way too expensive for all but the richest amongst us. Previously, it was thought that puerh couldn't be called “puerh” unless it was fermented. Tea lovers back in the day thought of new puerh as “unfinished tea,” but things have certainly changed in the last ten or fifteen years.

Time passes, as it does, and rather than feeling down about this, we've discovered a whole new dimension to enjoying puerh. Young and old puerh needn't be compared against one another, but rather appreciated and used medicinally—each for her own reason. We used to only evaluate new tea based on how it would age, but now we drink it for its own sake. There is a great joy in drinking newborn puerh, like this month's, and also in aging it, watching it change over time. We've learned to appreciate all the different ages of puerh—from new to adolescent to well-aged. They each have their place and season to be brought out and shared with beautiful guests like you!

PARTS OF A PUERH CAKE

Outer wrapping (bao zhong, 包裝): Wrappers are almost always made from natural fibers; these surround the cake itself. They help identify vintages and to some degree protect the cake. However, since the wrappers are made from natural fibers, there are more bugs that eat them than tea, so many cakes' wrappers have nibble marks on them.

Inner trademark ticket (nei fei, 內飛): This is a small piece of paper mixed in with the tea and compressed into the cake. This is to verify brand and/or vintage even if the wrapper is lost. That can still be hard when it comes to vintage tea, as many *nei fei* are the same for years at a time.

Inner receipt (nei piao, 內票): This is a paper that is sometimes inserted between the cake and the outer wrapping. Not all cakes have them. They often contain details about the production, region and sometimes even advertising. Some vintage *nei piao* even have broken English ads promoting the health benefits of puerh.

Bundle (tong, 筒): This is seven cakes wrapped up in bamboo bark. Sometimes more bark is used to tie them, while other tongs are tied with metal wire. Traditionally, a *tong* was always seven cakes, but nowadays some are five.

Case (jian, 件): Cases were traditionally twelve tongs bundled together, or eighty-four cakes. They were usually tied together with more bamboo twine for shipment. Nowadays cases can have more or less cakes, and are often cardboard boxes as opposed to the traditional bamboo *jian*.

Big label (da piao, 大票): These were big brand labels that were attached to each *jian*. This sometimes is still practiced, but it was more prominent in previous eras. We have one from the Antique Era in the center.



tong (筒)

nei fei (內飛)



da piao (大票)



jian (件)

THE FOUR ERAS

It should be noted that most all the terms used to identify the families and eras of puerh tea began for the most part with the scholarship of the 1990s. During their own times, these teas were everyday commodities—names and trends always changed with the times. Also, one should remember that the lines between these eras, while based on reason, are ultimately arbitrary. Though most scholars agree in general, certain vintages right near the boundaries might slip into either age depending on what one reads.

蹣跚茶時期 The Antique Age

This era of tea includes all the tea that was produced prior to the formation of Communist China in 1949. All of the factories from that time were private businesses, and none had anywhere near the output of those today. Many of these trading firms also dealt in other goods as well, like rice and other agricultural products. Puerh tea was just one commodity amongst others. Some of them were even owned by single families, like the legendary *Song Ping Hao* and *Tong Qing Hao*. They were often small, rural houses where tea and other products were all processed completely by hand. The demand of the market at that time was small and annual production in numbers that would make even the state-owned factories of later years scoff. Old tea house owners in Hong Kong have reported that 10 *jian* (or “cases,” each with 84 cakes, therefore equaling 840 cakes) was enough for the entire island for one year. The demand for puerh was low because the retail price was relatively high compared to other teas. Nevertheless, many would argue that the cleaner and more natural farming methods and environment lent these cakes a certain majesty not found in any of their descendants. The fact that many of these teas are now 70 or more years old, coupled with the fact that very few were produced to begin with, makes them extremely rare and valuable—sometimes costing more than a hundred thousand USD per cake and up to several hundred thousand!

The cakes from the Antique Era were never wrapped with an outer wrapping paper. Perhaps it was considered too costly at the time, and preservation wasn't as much of an issue. However, all the cakes did have a *nei fei* or “inner trademark ticket” embedded into the tea just like the ones of today. Many also had a *nei piao* or “stack ticket” that rested in each stack of seven cakes (*tong*). Other than the leaves themselves, these trademarks are really the only way that collectors can tell cakes apart, especially ones from the same factory, like for example the Red and Blue Mark *Song Ping Hao* cakes. The leaves in these ancient cakes were larger-leaf blends, harvested completely from old-growth trees.

When the “New China” was established in 1949, the central government declared that all industry belonged to the people. Even the tea industry was handed over to the local government. These changes closed many family-run, private businesses in the 1950s and the Antique Era came to an end.

印級茶時期 The Masterpiece Era

The start of the Masterpiece Era began with the creation of the state-run factories, like Menghai, which is still in existence today (though it is privately owned now). In order to control and stabilize the production of tea in Yunnan, the “China Tea Corporation, Yunnan Branch” was created. They had their own logo, brand and trademark—established in 1950, and registered with the central government in 1951. This trademark is the now famous “Eight-Zhong Tea” character that is in the center of all the cakes from the Masterpiece and later Seven Sons eras. The character “*zhong* (中)” means “middle” or “Middle Kingdom,” viz. China. Eight of them surround the character for tea (茶) since that number was considered lucky. It also symbolized the goal of distributing Chinese tea to all eight directions of the world.

Red and Blue Mark teas, as well as others from the Masterpiece Era, are now also very rare. While they aren't

as expensive or as difficult to find as Antique Age teas, many vintages are quickly approaching comparative values. Like the older teas, these too are treasures.

Tea cakes in the Masterpiece Era are distinguished from earlier ones by the obvious change to using outer wrapping paper. All these cakes were wrapped in handmade papers with the “Eight-Zhong” trademark in the center. The name of the “China Tea Corporation, Yunnan Province Branch Company” was printed in a ring around the central character, and read from right to left (which helps distinguish these cakes from later ones produced in the Seven Sons Era). The style and methods used to wrap seven cakes into *tongs* didn't change in the Masterpiece Era: they still used bamboo bark with soft bamboo twine to hold the *tong* closed.

The Masterpiece Era is considered to be the 1950s and '60s, and characterized by four main categories of tea. Some authors subdivide these cakes into more varieties. This list is, therefore, a gross simplification, as most Chinese anthologies will include some later teas in this era, as well as subdivide these categories into many cakes. Nevertheless, this is a start to understanding the Masterpiece Era:

Red Mark Round Cake

Red Mark *Tie Bing* (鐵餅, iron discus)

Grade A and B Blue Mark Round Cake

Artistic Font Blue Mark *Tie Bing*

七子餅茶時期 The Seven Sons Era

The Seven Sons Era began in 1972 with the formation of the now-famous “China National Native Produce & Animal By-product Import & Export Company,” referred to so often as the “CNNP.” The new agency would take control over all the puerh production during the period. The three main factories of the time period were Menghai, Xiaguan and Kunming. During this time, the production of puerh tea increased as a result of a growing foreign market. More tea was exported around the world than ever before.

As a result, more of these teas are floating around the vintage market than their predecessors, though some of these famous vintages are also now starting to become rarer and more expensive. Some of the earliest cakes from this era are just now starting to reach maturity, and connoisseurs are all interested in tasting these vintages as well as the earlier ones.

When the CNNP took over the production of puerh in Yunnan, they changed several aspects of the design used to package tea, as well as the blends and raw materials. Consequently, besides the change in management, these changes justify the demarcation of two eras of tea at this time. Firstly, all the teas were no longer called “Yuan Cha” or “Round Tea Cakes.” Instead, they were all now called “*Chi Tze Bing Cha*,” which literally means “Seven-sons Tea Cake.” As mentioned before, the characters on these cakes also changed from ‘right to left’ to ‘left to right.’ The cakes made by Menghai also began using Roman Pinyin font beneath the Chinese for the purpose of exportation. (Xiaguan and Kunming factories were slower in making this change). Menghai also began adding a *nei piao* between every cake and outer

wrapping. Scholars often differentiate these *nei piao* tickets from the ones used in the Antique age by calling them “Description Tickets” and the earlier ones, “Stack Tickets.” The *nei piao* from the Seven Sons Era were called “Description Tickets” because they contained short descriptions of the tea inside, sometimes with the region, product information or even marketing about the health benefits of puerh tea. Again, Xiaguan and Kunming’s early Seven Sons Era cakes didn’t have these *nei piaos* inside. Of course, the name around the “Eight-Zhong Tea” was also changed from the China Tea Corporation to the CNNP. There were several other changes in packaging at this time, like the use of metal wires to tie *tongs*, factory and batch codes, and even changes to the design of the *nei fei* tickets compressed into the tea.

新生茶時期 The Newborn Era

Different authors end the Seven Sons Era at different times. Many modern factories are still producing cakes with the same packaging designs as those made during this era,

and the continuous production of that design makes the delineation between the Seven Sons Era and what scholars call the “Modern” or “Newborn Era” difficult indeed. However, most all puerh historians end the Seven Sons Era sometime in the mid to late 1990s. For us, 1997 is a good time to mark the end of this era because the private orders made by tea merchants to the national factories increased drastically after 1997. In addition, different kinds of wrapping styles emerged alongside the Seven Sons style. Since the beginning of the Newborn Era, the production and variation of puerh tea has increased in a whirlwind of volume. Also, more single-region tea is being made these days, and there has also been a dramatic increase in what we call “Boutique Tea,” which means private, small productions made by shop owners or puerh lovers who travel to Yunnan themselves to see the trees and order cakes to their taste.

茶 Our Tea of the Month



工廠代碼 FACTORY CODES

Many state-produced *bingcha* have a four-digit production number. This trend began in the late 1960s or early 1970s and consequently doesn't apply to very old antique puerh. These were internal, factory batch codes originally and were only known and used by factory workers and merchants who ordered from them. Nowadays, however, the old recipes have become famous and many companies, small and large, are trying to reproduce the famous "7542" or our favorite, "8582." Consequently, it's worth knowing a little of what these codes are about.

Basically, the first two digits are the year in which that production was first started. If a particular mixture/processing procedure sold well, it was then continued the next year, sometimes even for decades to the present. In other words, if the first two digits are "75," this means that this particular production method/mixture was first begun in 1975. This doesn't mean that the tea itself dates to 1975. It could be a 2006 cake. It just means that the recipe itself began in 1975. The methods used to blend and process puerh tea into cakes are often experimented with until better formulas are developed.

The third digit refers to the leaf size or "grade" used in production of the cake. Grades of teas were and are often very complicated. Different factories follow different guidelines and/or change them over time. Generally, though, the first-grade leaves are the smaller ones, buds, and then the bigger the leaves and further back up the stem, the higher the grade. In the olden days, the first four grades were often used to process bowls or nest-shaped teas (*tuocha*) and mushrooms (*jingcha*) and larger fifth through ninth grades were reserved for *bingcha* and brick puerh. This has changed in the modern era. Nowadays all different kinds of cakes are made from the selection of grades. The word "grade" can occasionally confuse English-speaking people. This is because the grade mentioned above is not always relevant to quality. Of course, a first-grade leaf is more expensive by weight because the buds are smaller and there are a lot less of them. But price and quality are not always commensurate. The word "grade" in English also denotes "quality" and is therefore misleading. There are two Chinese words, one for the grade (*dang ji*, 等級), i.e., size and location of the leaves on the plant, and another for the quality of the leaves/tea (*pin tze*, 品質). Often times, the first leaves are better quality, but not always.

The final number in the four-digit code refers to which state factory produced the *bingcha*. Knowing the factory can often help determine the tea-growing region in which the raw material was farmed as well. In those days there weren't as many factories as today. As we mentioned above, these recipes are now copied or commemorated by many different factories, so the last number has less relevance in modern times. The numbering for the factories is as follows:

- 1 Kunming Tea Factory (昆明茶厂)
- 2 Menghai Tea Factory (勐海茶厂)
- 3 Xia Guan Tea Factory (下关茶厂)
- 4 Feng Qing Tea Factory (凤庆茶厂)
- 8 Hai Wan Tea factory (海湾茶厂)
- ("8" was also used by Long Sheng Tea factory in the past 龙生茶厂)
- 9 Langhe Tea Factory (郎河茶厂)

Sometimes factory codes are also followed by a dash and then a number of the particular batch. This doesn't occur that often, though. But when it does, it can help identify the vintage as long as one knows how many batches are produced each year. Here is a summary of the four numbers present in a factory code with an example for clarity:

75	4	2
These two numbers refer to the date in which this processing method began, so that in the case of this tea, processing began in 1975. It, unfortunately, doesn't describe the date of the actual tea, as many production processes are carried on for many years.	This digit refers to the average size of the leaves used, often called "leaf grade." So this tea is composed of fourth grade leaves.	This last number refers to the factory that produced the cake. So this cake was made by the Menghai Tea Factory (勐海茶厂).

Brewing Tips

冲泡技巧 完成好茶

This month's commemorative Blue Mark should really be brewed gongfu. Gongfu brewing is about brewing a tea with mastery. "Gongfu" literally means "skill through self-discipline." It is about brewing the tea to its greatest potential, bringing out the best in the tea. Gongfu brewing is about brewing the tea the way it wants to be brewed, in other words. Bowl tea, on the other hand, focuses more on meditation and ceremonial form than on the quality of the tea itself. However, this doesn't mean there isn't any skill in bowl tea, or that quality is completely irrelevant; nor does it mean that there isn't any meditation or ceremony in gongfu tea. The two definitely overlap. (You can read a lot more about this in our past issues.) If you cannot or do not feel ready to brew tea gongfu, if you haven't learned or do not have the teaware, for example, you can brew this month's Blue Mark in a sidehandle, though it won't shine as brightly.

There is definitely a quality above which we will always turn to gongfu brewing. When a tea is rare and special, not to mention valuable, we almost always want to brew the tea to its greatest potential—honoring it by bringing out its greatest qualities as opposed to honoring the experience in a bowl tea ceremony. We feel that such rare and special teas deserve more attention paid to their appreciation, as opposed to the form of the ceremony or our experience being with the tea. This focus on the sensuality of tea does not exclude the ceremonial aspect of tea. As we mentioned, the two can and do overlap. There is also a great magic in the fact that Nature has created something that suits our senses so perfectly as to cause bliss and joy in us. Focusing on the details of brewing such special teas changes us as well. It is, after all, mastery through "self-discipline." We focus, in other words, on brewing the tea beyond the ordinary: water, fire, teaware and method.

Brewing tea always starts with fine water. Every cup of tea is 99% water, after all. The easiest, fastest and best way to improve your tea is with better water. Try to source some great spring water from Nature yourself. Gathering water is an investment of time and energy, but the more you put into the tea, the more you get out of it. At least, taste some different bottled spring waters available to you and splurge on the best one for this month's tea (whether you are brewing it gongfu or in a sidehandle pot).

As for fire, we recommend using charcoal for a tea like this. It makes a huge difference. If you do not know how to use charcoal or don't have the right materials, the next best would be a gas stove or infrared if you go electric. Using a fine kettle made of iron, silver or good ceramic clay will also improve your tea greatly. Try to boil the water as fast as possible, which helps to preserve the structure of the great water you have chosen.

When it comes to teaware, the Four Treasures of Gongfu tea are a great starting point: an authentic Yixing teapot, porcelain cups, a teabowl and a kettle/stove of good quality. These are the essentials needed to make a fine cup of tea. There are a lot of good articles on water, fire and teaware in the past issues of Global Tea Hut. After you have the materials, you can then focus on developing your own skill and a centered, calm heart. We must know the tea, know our teaware and know ourselves to bring a tea to its highest potential.

In the beginning, focus on temperature. It is the key to developing a great gongfu tea practice. "Preserve the heat and begin to absorb peace" is the beginning of instruction in our tradition, learning to keep our heart still while maintaining temperature from kettle to cup. This means showering the pot before and after steeping and pre-warming the cups before decanting. If you do that, you will be well on your way to brewing Blue Mark to its greatest aromas, flavors and energy!



Gongfu

茶道



Sidehandle

Water: spring water or best bottled

Fire: coals, infrared or gas

Heat: hotter, fish-eye, roughly 90–95°C

Brewing Methods: gongfu or sidehandle (gongfu is better)

Steeping: longer, flash, flash, then growing (flash=instant steeping/decanting)

Patience: twenty steepings

茶 Try showering the pot both before and after steeping each time. Also, practice pre-warming the cups before every decanting.

Gongfu tea is about the preservation of temperature.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF PUERH TEA

茶人: Yang Kai (楊凱)

This was one of the first articles Wu De had translated almost twenty years ago, and was one of the first sources of learning about puerh tea that he referenced often in the early days. He has great esteem for the author and for this article specifically, feeling like it moved his understanding of puerh tea forward. There are aspects of this article that are dated, sometimes in a charming way. The author is native and this was written in the early 2000s, at the time when almost all Yunnanese tea, including plantation tea, was clean and green. He also promotes Yunnan puerh with pride, so the article sometimes reads like a vintage advertisement. But we find this honest and, frankly, cute to read. There is a tremendous amount of worthwhile information in this article, even if it is old, that still has great relevance to tea lovers nowadays. We hope you enjoy it as much as we do!

The beginning of puerh is the beginning of tea. It is well known around the world that tea cultivation, and before that leaf utilization, originated in China. Tea is a traditional and natural drink; and has already spread to thousands of households and become an integral part of daily life for millions of people. Over hundreds of years of savoring and sampling, tea has become recognized as “a genuine, healthy, and civilized drink” and “an embodiment of courtesy and purity.” Indeed, we may well say that it is hard to win a bosom friend by drinking a thousand glasses of good wine, but easy to infatuate a person by tasting a cup of pure tea.

It is also well known to the world that the Xishuangbanna, Puerh and Lincang areas of Yunnan Province are the birthplaces of tea trees, where our ancestors planted a kind of broad-leaf tea tree named after the old and beautiful region “puerh.” From then on, puerh tea began to enjoy popularity in the country and became a fashionable drink all over the world. No matter where you’re from or what language you speak, when you taste a cup of clear tea giving off delicate fragrance, and when you feel deeply that it helps

not only to produce saliva but also prevents disease and benefits health, you cannot help but praise highly its wonderful effects, and hold in esteem the people who produce this world-famous tea from Xishuangbanna, a mysterious treasure land.

Today, in beautiful and fertile Xishuangbanna by the roadsides, the eyes are greeted with green tea bushes that lie layer upon layer and row by row in uniform order, connecting mountains and ridges and reaching the sky. Among them are scattered rare trees such as camphor, dragon and spruce trees with hidden fragrances, gladdening the heart and refreshing the mind. China puerh tea goes from these green mountains to the factories, and then on to the world.

The history of puerh tea can be traced back to the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220). According to legend, the species was left over by Zhuge Liang, Marquis of Wu, and Chief Minister of the State of Shu in the Three Kingdoms. Therefore, the use of puerh tea dates back at least 1700 years. The first official record appears in 862 in the *Book on Barbarians*, in which Fan Chuo, the envoy sent by the emperor of the Tang Dynasty to the State of

Nan Zhao, writes, “The tea is yielded in mountains beyond Yinsheng City and picked from scattered trees without processing. Barbarians of Mengshe drink tea by cooking it with pepper, ginger and cassia.”

Similar records are found in *The Sequel of Botany* written by Li Shi of the Song Dynasty: “The tea comes from the mountains beyond Yinsheng City, is picked without regard to the seasons and drunk by cooking it with pepper and ginger.” Research has revealed that “Yinsheng City” was Yinsheng Prefecture, one of the six governors’ seats of the Nan Zhao State during the Tang Dynasty, now Jingdong County, Yunnan Province, covering today’s Xishuangbanna and Simao (Puerh Prefecture). “Barbarians of Mengshe” was a general term referring to aboriginals of the Nan Zhao State, during the Tang Dynasty. Even now some of the nationalities continue to drink tea cooked with pepper and ginger. “Picked without regard to the seasons” is a description true to the growth cycle of the subtropical zone where Xishuangbanna is located, and to the fact that the tea here flushes many times a year, each time full of verdant and lush green buds.



History shows that tea cultivation flourished during the Tang Dynasty (618–907) through the Song Dynasty (960–1279). During the Tang Dynasty, puerh tea grown mainly in Xishuangbanna was transported for sale throughout the empire. According to Ruan Fu in his book *The Records of Puerh Tea*: “The Han people began to use puerh tea during the Tang Dynasty.” In the Song Dynasty, the State of Dali sent envoys to Guang Xi Province to barter puerh tea for horses with troops stationed in Jing Jiang. There were also tea and horse exchanges in Sichuan, Yunnan and Tibet. Puerh tea sold in the Central and Southern Shina was “*Jintuancha* (Compressed Round tea),” also called “*Yuancha*.” Wang Yu Cheng, a well-known scholar of the Song Dynasty, upon tasting the sweet-scented puerh tea, praised it writing a poem, which reads: “It smells as sweet as an orchid in bloom and has a shape like an autumn full moon. For fear of running out, I begrudge a try, as with it my gray-headed parents I’ll supply.”

In the Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368), puerh tea was already an important commodity in the market. Li Jing, in his book *The Customs of the Aborigines*

in Yunnan Province, with chapters entitled “Gold Teeth,” “The White Tribe” (referring to the Dai people), points out that: “Exchange of felts, cloth, tea and salt in fairs takes place every five days.” The term “puerh tea” originated from within the tea trade among the people who bought and sold it, referring to the place it came from. The term was officially recorded in history during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Xie Zhao Zhi of the Ming Dynasty points out in his book *An Outline of the History of Yunnan*: “Government officials and ordinary people all use puerh tea.” *Newly Edited History of Yunnan* similarly points out that: “Puerh tea enjoys such popularity that no tea made in China, whether from Anhui, Fujian, or Zhejiang, can compare with it.”

The time from the Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) was a great period of prosperity for puerh tea, because puerh tea as an article of tribute was appreciated by the government very much, which subsequently promoted its rapid development. Xishuangbanna, with Six Tea Mountains as its main base, produced eighty-thousand *dan* (a unit of weight = 50kg) of dried tea annually, an all-time high yield up until then.

According to historical records, puerh tea sold in Tibet in 1661 reached thirty thousand *dan*. From 1862 to 1874, the production of puerh tea was still on the rise. Mansa Mountain alone yielded more than five thousand *dan* of dried tea annually. Almost every household in Xishuangbanna was engaged in tea cultivation, manufacturing and selling. With bells of packhorses ringing, the tracks in the mountains were blocked by tea merchants and caravans, and business boomed.

In 1729, Yi Ertai, Governor of Yunnan, instituted a policy meant to strengthen the government over the aborigines. For example, in Youle Mountain, (the biggest of the Six Tea Mountains; now a town of the Jinuo people in Jinghong County), a county government was established with five hundred soldiers stationed to guard tea cultivation and collect tax revenue. In the Mountains of Menghai, Mengzhe, Yiwu and Yibang, special bureaus were set up to control grain and tea taxation. In 1736, the county government was withdrawn from Youle and re-established in Simao (now Puerh), where a government tea-commerce bureau was established by the national government, shifting control of tea.

The new bureau had branches in charge of collecting revenues and purchasing tea in the Six Tea Mountain areas. In Puerh, a tea factory was established and the tea commerce bureau was responsible for tea manufacturing and tea selling, thus changing the government-controlled tea market among the people into a tea distributing, manufacturing and trading center and a place for paying tribute. From then on, the reputation of puerh tea became widespread. As Tan Cui writes in his book *A Survey of the Mountains and Rivers of Yunnan*: "Puerh tea is well-known to the world and comes from the Six Tea Mountains which are Youle, Gedeng, Yibang, Mangzhi, Manzhuan and Mansa, stretching along eight hundred *li* (about 500m, so roughly 400km in total). Workers engaged in the tea business amounted to more than 100 thousand people. Merchants purchase the tea and tea is carried everywhere. It is really a large business!" In *A Survey of the History of Yunnan, The History of Puerh City and The History of the Great Qing Dynasty as a Unified Domain*, there are also similar records. For example, this from the latter: "The aboriginals, living in a compact community, barter tea for everything, thus feeding on tea mountains."

During the period from 1821 to 1875, puerh tea was at the peak of its production and marketing. Merchants flocked to Puerh from all parts of the country, and the market boomed. More than a thousand Tibetan merchants went there every year to purchase tea. Merchants from India, Burma, Ceylon, Siam, Cambodia, Vietnam and other countries of Southeast Asia also came to engage in tea trade. Annually, caravans consisting of more than fifty thousand horses and riders with bells ringing greeted the ears of our ancestors throughout the year.

For thousands of years, puerh tea has found favor in the eyes of the broad masses of Chinese consumers. *The Records Among the Reeds of the Buddhist World* by Chai Yi, written in 1925, points out that "puerh tea is warm in property, fragrant in smell and able to cure diseases. The tea, pressed into a round mold by means of bamboo sticks, is steamed and sold as dearly as gold." Puerh tea as a traditional drink has particular curative

effects besides the effects of producing saliva, quenching thirst, and refreshing the heart and mind. The *Supplementary Amplifications of the Compendium of Materia Medica* by Zhao Xueming of the Qing Dynasty points out: "Puerh tea from Youle and Gedeng is warm in property, fragrant in smell, and the tea from Manzhuan is bitter in taste and potent in its essence. It is able to dispel grease and clear the toxins from eating beef or mutton. It should not be taken by the weak. Being bitter and astringent, it is helpful in reducing phlegm and improving breath, is able to speed peristalsis and ease constipation. Puerh *Chagao* (puerh tea extract) is as black as lacquer and can dispel the effects of alcohol. It is still better to help digestion and produce saliva when it is black with greenish hue." In volume six, "Part of Xylophyta," he points out that "puerh tea extract can cure many diseases such as abdominal distention and chill that can be sweated out by taking ginger and puerh tea. Additionally, mouth or throat ulcers can be cured by keeping a bit of puerh tea extract in the mouth for the night."

Special Characteristics of Puerh Tea

Puerh tea's distinguishing features and curative effects are the result of many factors. First, the influence of climate: Xishuangbanna is located south of the Tropic of Cancer, and dominated by mountain ranges and valleys. Twenty percent of the region is tropical, at altitudes of 900 or fewer meters above sea level, while 80% is subtropical at altitudes of 900 or more meters above sea level. In the subtropical zones, the quality of heat is good and rainfall plentiful. There is neither bitter cold, nor intense heat, but an abundance of foggy days with high relative humidity, which is suitable for the growth of tea trees, especially the Yunnan broad-leaf tea trees that need such weather conditions the most. Notably, temperature inversion is caused under the influence of cold air going down the slopes whose temperature drops due to radiation. Therefore, at certain altitudes the growth period of the same plant is so inverted that the tea trees in the mountain areas have a

better quality of heat than those in the valleys.

The geographical location of Xishuangbanna determines its long exposure to sunshine with more than 2,000 hours of sunshine a year. In the regions 900 meters or less above sea level, the annual average temperatures range from 20 to 22 °C, while in the regions 900 meters or more above sea level, temperatures range from 18 to 19 °C, as the sun casts its rays on the mountain slopes, changing its direct light into oblique light and thus weakening in intensity. Due to this, the tea trees grow all year round. With an annual acting accumulated temperature of 6,500 °C, the vigorous growth period at a temperature of 18 °C lasts more than 200 days. In Jinghong, the period is still longer, reaching 365 days. Usually, the spring tea-picking period is ten days earlier than in other areas of the country. In Xishuangbanna, the yearly difference in temperature is insignificant, but significant is that the daily difference can be more than 10 °C. Hence, the tea trees can take in heat by day, growing fully, and consume less energy, breathing at night with higher net assimilability, helpful to the accumulation of energy.

Xishuangbanna is plentiful in rainfall because, with the warm and moist air from the Indian Ocean moving north over the region, the temperature drops and rain is formed with 120-150 rainy days and annual rainfall reaching 1200-1600 mm, more than meeting the needs of tea cultivation.

As is well known, "high mountains, enveloped with clouds and mist yield famous teas." Xishuangbanna is not only a beautiful and fertile land. It also has lofty ridges, and towering mountains without a break. Every mountain is covered with trees and every gully filled with rushing water. It is really a green world full of life, scattered with mountain gardens. Huang Shan is famous for its sea of clouds while Xishuangbanna is famous for its sea of fog. All year round, the fog appears silently in the midst of night from valleys and mountains, instantly blotting out the sky and the earth, covering everything in such a vast blanket that one simply cannot tell the time of day or the directions. Only the trickle of dripping dew reminds one that this is a world where life and growth will never cease. At



茶 *These are some dried leaves. The leaves of big-leaf, or “broad-leaf,” trees are much larger and juicier than those of small-leaf trees.*

noon, when the blazing sun is high in the sky, the all-encompassing fog suddenly vanishes without a trace. It is the fog that covers everything and moistens everything, making the broad-leaf tea leaves luxuriant, their taste particular and their nutrients abundant and wonderful, thus creating the best raw material for preparing this famous tea.

The second distinguishing characteristic of Yunnan and puerh tea is the composition of the soil. The soil in Xishuangbanna tea cultivation areas is formed by the weathering of granite, purple rock, sandstone on bedrock, and is mainly laterite (a soil formed by decaying rocks weathered by tropical heat and centuries of heavy rain), and partly yellow soil, highly weathered, with an acid reaction and pH of 4-6. Compared with other tea cultivation areas, the soil in Xishuangbanna has the following prominent features: The quick decomposition and quick accumulation of soil elements and the organic substances of the soil are comparatively abundant, usually about 5%. According to measurements by

tea research institutions, the topsoil in Nannuo Mountain, where the King Tea Trees grow, contains organic substances amounting to 5.1-6.78%; in Nan Langhe, tea garden these levels reach 3.7-4.25%; in the garden of the Menghai Tea Research Institute, it is 3.5-6.3%—levels which are quite rare in other tea cultivation areas.

Under warm and moist conditions, the weathering process is quite rapid, and the thickness of true soil may reach several meters deep due to the protection of beneficial vegetation. According to measurements, the main roots of the sixty-year-old tea trees (young for puerh) reach depths of 3.7-10m. Notably, only deep roots can make trees luxuriant. The presence of sand in the soil, to which a high content of organic substances of appropriate weight, proper softness, rich moisture, and air permeability is added, all make this place ideal for tea trees.

The third unique characteristic of Yunnan and puerh tea is the rich ecosystem. In the course of tea tree cultivation, individual tree health is a recur-

rence of the ecosystem's health. Thus the environment surrounding the tea trees must be secured, including light, heat, water and many other factors necessary for a rich biodiversity of animals and plants. The vegetation and plant community play a controlling role in adjusting factors such as light, heat and water. Any change in vegetation can change all ecological factors. In the tea cultivation zones throughout the country, Xishuangbanna's ecosystem provides the trees, plants, animals and insects to be vibrant and strong.

The fourth quality of puerh tea is the rare and unique varieties and species of tea trees in Yunnan. Puerh tea is a broad-leaf tea species found only in Yunnan, and the excellent natural environment in Xishuangbanna adds brilliance to its splendor. Yunnan's broad-leaf tea has thick mesophyll, large sprouts, high germination, more pekoe, long age and abundant oils and fragrant chemicals. Its essence is stronger and bolder than any other tea on Earth, with a rich and full tea liquor resulting from such leaves.

Scientific measurements show that Yunnan broad-leaf (or large-leaf) tea is superior to small-leaf tea in many ways. Also, broad-leaf tea growing at lower latitudes is better than that at higher latitudes. According to measurements taken by the Yunnan Tea Research Institute, the water-soluble extracts of broad-leaf tea, a norm for measuring tea quality as these substances are what we steep into our cups, is 3-5% higher than that of small-leaf tea; its tea polyphenols are 5-7% higher; and its catechins are 30-60 mg/g higher. The water-soluble extracts of Yunnan broad-leaf tea growing at a northern latitude higher than 25 is 41-48%; its tea polyphenols 30-33%; and its catechins are 135-150mg/g. While in Xishuangbanna (at latitudes between 21-24N), the water-soluble extracts are 47-48%, the tea polyphenols 33-36% and the catechins 170-190mg/g.

The broad-leaf tea growing in Xishuangbanna flushes with buds five to six times a year, and its annual growth period is often more than 300 days. This tea's picking period lasts almost nine months from the last ten-day period of February to the middle ten-day period of November. Its new branches can grow 185cm in a year. Its buds are heavy and compact. Its grade-three young tea leaf with a bud weighs on average 0.7g, and two leaves with a bud, 0.8g. The heaviest bud is 4.6g and the longest 16.8cm. Mature leaves 33cm long and 13.6cm wide have even been found! According to the measurements, the granum (grain) lamella of Yunnan broad-leaf tea reaches 200 layers, two times more than that of small-leaf tea, thus ensuring a high yield. Xishuangbanna is characterized by its complicated topography, thus forming small eco-zones where the tea trees, growing in different eco-systems, develop their own species of local colonies, characteristic of particular botany by natural hybridization, natural and artificial selected improvements to popularize or as parents to breed new varieties. With respect to diversity, Yunnan is far superior to all other tea-growing areas. Also, since species are integrated and inseparable from their environments, even though some areas have introduced Yunnan broad-leaf tea through seeds or cuttings, such teas cannot compete with puerh since they grow in a far weaker

and less diverse ecology. Therefore, our seed-breeding experts have come to the following conclusion: "As to Chinese red tea, the small-leaf tea varieties are inferior to the broad-leaf tea trees, and the best broad-leaf tea comes from its place of origin."

The fifth specialty of puerh tea is the unique processing of this tea, including the post-production transformation. "The processing of puerh tea is unique, undergoing procedures such as firing, rolling, sun-drying and heap-ing/piling." This Qing Dynasty quote shows that compressed tea was produced by hand through rolling at that time. Nowadays, processing is very different, though the general steps remain the same.

On the whole, the processing of puerh tea consists of the following procedures: fresh tea leaf picking, withering, firing, rolling and sun-drying, after which it becomes "*maocha* (毛茶)," which tastes strong and thick, but is not up to the required standards of tea drinkers. This *maocha* can be divided into "ripe tea" and "raw tea," depending on what post-processing procedures it undergoes. If it is piled and fermented artificially, it is called "ripe tea," which can be sold as is. The taste becomes steady and more mellow after storage that usually lasts from three to five years. "Raw tea" refers to *maocha* that turns into ripe tea by means of natural transformation without piling, which takes from five to seventy years. Once totally matured and steady, this aged raw tea possesses a vigorous lingering aroma that is life transformative. The longer it is kept, the stronger its internal essence, fragrance and flavor are revealed. Therefore, a tradition of producing new tea and selling old tea has existed for centuries, in which fathers pick fresh tea leaves, process them and leave them to their sons or grandsons for sale after long years of natural oxidation and fermentation. "The longer it is stored, the stronger its flavors, energy and more fragrant it becomes" is an old saying concerning puerh tea.

The unique flavor of puerh tea is also related to these natural transformations over time. Finished puerh tea cakes, having undergone processing and been compressed into different shapes and various sizes, are laid out to dry in the shade, then packed in bas-

kets and carried to other parts of the country according to demand. Yunnan is located in the frontier region and Xishuangbanna is along the border where mountains are high and rivers dangerous. In ancient times, transport was quite difficult and depended entirely on horse or ox caravans. On some roads, the horse caravans could make only two trips while the ox caravans managed but one trip a year. The tea was packed on the backs of horses or oxen and carried far and wide.

Tribute Tea

The beginning of payment of puerh tea as tribute began no later than 1726. When Yi Ertai, Governor of Yunnan and Guizhou, carried out a policy of strengthening the government, it had most likely already begun. We know from the decree "The Official Banning of Purchasing Tea by Forcing



Prices Down” that reads, “It is decreed that puerh tea will be purchased with government silver which has been appropriated to the Bureau of Simao for purchase and transportation” that puerh tea was purchased every year for tribute.

In the town of Ning’er, Prefecture of Puerh, a special government factory and tea bureau were set up to manufacture high-quality products for tribute to the imperial court and for gifts to the emperor’s guests. As the Qing imperial court was especially fond of puerh tea, it was stipulated that 66,000 *jin* of tea should be ready for annual tribute. Puerh tea paid as tribute to the Qing imperial court was organized by local officials and was much better in fragrance, curative effects and digestive power than the tribute tea from other places. All these characteristics met the needs of the relatives of the emperor, all of whom came from nomadic tribes ate too much meat. Therefore, Maiden’s Tea, Compressed Round Tea and

puerh extract all enjoyed great popularity among the imperial kinsmen, generals and ministers, including the emperor himself. For quite a long period, it was a fashion to drink puerh tea among them by either steeping it in boiling water or cooking it in boiling water or milk.

The payment of puerh tea as tribute to the Qing imperial court did not stop until the downfall of the Qing Dynasty (1911), which lasted for almost 200 years. Through the early 1960s, the Palace Museum still had a few tons of puerh tea left by the Qing imperial court, including Compressed Tea, Maiden’s Tea, tea extract and others, and it still has kept an intact sample of Human Head Tea, weighing about 2.5 kilograms.

As the imperial court valued it very much, ordinary people began to follow suit. Thereupon puerh tea began to gain great fame and high prestige. That is why there is a description of Jia Bao Yu drinking puerh tea to ease digestion

in the novel *A Dream of the Red Chamber*. The book *Maids of Honor Talking About the Past* also mentions the Empress Dowager drinking puerh tea: “The old Queen Dowager entered the room and sat east of the *kang*, and her maid brought a cup of puerh tea which was warm and grease-dissolving.”

The chieftains of past ages in Xishuangbanna also set great store by puerh tea. According to the records of *The History of Xishuangbanna*, an envoy, Dao Yingmeng, once in 1572, prepared gifts for his wife, who was the daughter of the King of Burma, when she went to visit her parents. Among the gifts were four bamboo tubes of puerh tea with four compressed cakes in each tube, which were regarded as precious as gold, silver or pearls.

Puerh tea has a long history; hence, there are a lot of cultural relics and historic sites concerned with it in existence. In the thickest primeval forests of Yunnan, steles are found with inscriptions and carvings of tea.





Two types of nei fei and wrapper of Red Mark cakes.



Fu Lu Gong (福祿貢) nei fei from old puerh cakes describing puerh tea.



These are the Fu Lu Gong cakes for the above nei fei with old-growth leaves.



One portrays a tea farmer riding a white bull and holding high a teacake in both hands, was carved on a cliff. This is evidence that since ancient times, people have taken pride in producing round teacakes. The most famous stele is the tea-case stele, or lawsuit-settling stele, with an inscription of more than 1100 characters recording the whole story of a tea case. The stele, 1.3m high and 70cm wide, still stands in the courtyard of the Shiping County Guild on the right side of the temple of Guan Yu, in Yiwu Township, Mengla County.

Aside from the court and mainstream society, Xishuangbanna is inhabited by Dai, Yi, Hani, Bulang, Han and many other tribes of aboriginals that have their own ways of drinking tea. During the Tang Dynasty, they “drank tea by cooking it with pepper, ginger and cassia.” In the Song Dynasty, they also “drank it by mixing with pepper and ginger.” With the development of society and the increase in varieties of puerh tea, the ways of tea drinking among the various tribes became more varied, involving different ways of preparing tea, performing ceremonies and observing proprieties. For example, the Jinuo people like cold-

tossed tea, the Wa people are fond of cooking tea, the Bulang people prefer bamboo green tea, the Lahu people are keen on roasted tea, while the Dai people love tea packed in bamboo tubes. The Hani people have a fancy for tea cooked in ollas.

Prosperity in Puerh

The earlier and middle stages of the Qing Dynasty were a period of great prosperity for puerh tea, during which production was already perfected and in conformity with norms. According to the records inscribed by Zhang Hong in 1775, from his book *A New Discussion of Southern Yunnan*, “Puerh tea is a treasure that is divided into ‘Maojian (Pekoe Tip Tea),’ ‘Ya-cha (Sprout tea),’ ‘Nu’Ercha (Maiden’s Tea)’ and so on. The tea picked before Grain Rain Day (穀雨) is called ‘Bud Tea,’ that is not compressed into balls and has a flavor as sweet as lotus flowers and a color as green as lotus leaves. Sprout Tea is thicker than Bud Tea, and is compressed into balls weighing 1-10 jin (a unit equal to 0.6kg) each, enjoying popularity among people of

Yunnan.” It is recorded in *Supplementary Amplifications of the Compendium of Materia Medica*, written by Zhao Xue Ming in 1765: “Puerh tea is prepared in the shape of a ball falling into three sizes. The biggest, weighing five jin, is made into the shape of a human head and called ‘Rentoucha (Human Head tea),’ used especially for paying tribute and therefore unavailable in the market. Sometimes counterfeit products called ‘Chuancha (meaning tea from Sichuan)’ are produced by the local people at the border of Sichuan and Yunnan. These cakes are not as compact and green as the tea from Puerh, which is also fragrant beyond comparison. Puerh tea extract is as black as lacquer and is good for dispelling the effects of alcohol, and still better if it is black with a greenish hue.” This shows that the methods for producing puerh tea were quite good at the time—maybe better than nowadays. The China Tea Scientific Research Institute still has “human head” tea cakes left by the Qing imperial court. As for Maiden’s Tea, according to *A New Discussion of Southern Yunnan* the name was based on the fact that the tea was picked and produced entirely by young girls to accumulate wealth for their dowry. It is,

遠古夢



茶 On the left page is an ancient tea tree in Xishuangbanna. These special trees are one of the main reasons puerh tea is so special. Left and above are Antique Era (pre-1949) da piao (大票, trademark ticket). These were placed inside of a case (jian, 件), above the tongs. They discuss the special characteristics of puerh. To the right are workers loaded with tea for transport in Sichuan Sheng, China in 1908. This old photograph was taken by Ernest H. Wilson.



therefore, also known as “Dowry Tea.” In the novel *A Dream of the Red Chamber*, it is described as the tea that Jia Bao Yu drinks.

In *Records of Puerh Tea*, Ruan Fu writes, “Strong tasting puerh tea is well known to the world, and people of the capital value it very much.” As the imperial court set great store by it, the needs of the court had to be met first, and puerh tea became a tribute tea, which in turn promoted improvement and development of manufacturing methods, technology and a greater variety of products. The production of tribute tea was very stringent. Excellent tea bud sets had to be picked. According to *Records of Puerh Tea*, “Fine white buds, called ‘*Maojian* (Pekoe Tip Tea)’ are picked in February for tribute; and only after this, is tea for the people allowed to be harvested.” Great attention was paid to the colors and designs of the cakes, as well as the type of tea given in tribute. *Records of Puerh Tea* also points out: “Those who pay tea for tribute must prepare compressed tea weighing 5 *jin*, 3 *jin*, 1 *jin* (remember, this is a unit equal to 0.6kg) and 1.5 *liang* (a unit of measurement equal to 50g) respectively. Additionally, they also have to prepare Bud Tea

and Sprout Tea packed in bottles, and tea extracts packed in cases, encompassing eight designs called the ‘Eight Designs of Tribute Tea.’”

There was compulsory quota of tribute tea claimed for the emperor. According to *Detailed Accounts of Tribute Tea*, lost to us, but consulted by Ruan Fu in his book: “As a rule, tribute tea is paid through the provincial financial bureau at the cost of 1,000 taels of silver, which is drawn by the financial branch in charge of purchasing tribute tea, including preparation of tea containers such as tin jars, brocade cases, and wooden boxes.” After the fall of the Qing Dynasty (1911), people stopped paying tribute, but the tea-producing methods and technology were maintained for some time.

The History of Puerh City, compiled during the Qing Dynasty, mentions that tea picked in different seasons can be made into different varieties of products: “The tea buds picked in February are all fine and white, called ‘*Maojian* (Pekoe Tip Tea),’ and specially prepared for paying tribute. The leaves picked in February or March are called ‘*Xiaomancha* (Grain Full Tea),’ and those picked in June or July are called ‘*Guhuacha* (Rice-flower Tea).’

The tea compressed into large cakes is named ‘*Jintuancha* (Compressed Round Tea),’ while that compressed into small round cakes, weighing 4 *liang*, is named ‘*Nu’Ercha* (Maiden’s Tea),’ which is picked and prepared entirely by girls before Grain Day. The tea and fine tea outside is called ‘*Jiefangcha* (Remade Tea),’ and the tea rolled with dark-yellow tea leaves (*huang pian*, 黃片) is called ‘*Jinyuetian* (Golden Moon in the Sky Tea),’ while tea, compressed so that it is hard to break, is called ‘*Gedacha* (Lump Tea).’”

Export

As mentioned above, the cultivation of tea can be traced back to the period of the Three Kingdoms (220–280), and its sale abroad no later than the Tang Dynasty. The sale of puerh tea in great quantities began at the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Qing Dynasties. Tan Cui of the Qing Dynasty writes in his book *A Survey of the Mountains and Rivers of Yunnan*: “Puerh tea is well-known to the world, and many thousands of workers are engaged in the production and trade of it.

Tea merchants flock there, almost blocking the roads, purchasing tea and carrying it everywhere. It is really a large and profitable business!" At that time, puerh tea was not only sold all over the country, but also abroad as far as Japan and the countries of Southeast Asia.

"Economics," which is Volume 19 of *The History of Puerh City*, compiled during the reign of Emperor Guangxu, also points out: "Puerh belonged to Yinsheng Prefecture in ancient times, and foreigners have begun to drink puerh tea ever since the Tang Dynasty." In the Song Dynasty, there were fairs to barter tea for horses. During the Yuan Dynasty, tea already became an important product for exchange among the people of different nationalities along the borders of Yunnan. In the Ming Dynasty, government officials and ordinary people all drank puerh tea, and during the reign of Emperor Shenzong (1573–1620), a special institution was set up to manage the tea trade.

A Survey of the History of Yunnan: Army and Defense, compiled during the reign of Emperor Daoguang of the Qing Dynasty, states: "In view of the

exploitation of tea peasants by unscrupulous merchants by means of usury, monopoly of tea trade in all of the mountains and uprisings with arms by peasants in desperation.... Yi Ertai, Governor of Yunnan and Guizhou, decided to set up main stations in appropriate places to manage the tea trade by magistrates who also collect tax money at three *qian* (equal to 5g) of silver for each horse load of tea." The Qing government set Youle County in Youle Mountain as its county seat in 1729, and in Menghai, Mengzhe, Yiwu and other places, administrative offices were set up to manage the grain and tea business. In 1736, the Youle County seat was moved to Simao (now Puerh), where a government tea bureau was set up to which any merchants engaging in tea trade had to apply for licenses; thus Simao became another puerh tea transfer station and flourished as a result. From 1821 to 1876, "more than a thousand Tibetan merchants visited Simao every year, and merchants and caravans from India came to carry loads of tea, shellac and other goods to their countries, proceeding in an endless stream along the roads. Merchants from Burma, Siam, Vietnam, Laos,

Cambodia and other countries also came to do tea business."

The establishment of customs bureaus in modern times promoted further development of tea sales abroad. Article three in "The Commercial Treaty between China and France" signed in 1895, stipulates, "It is agreed that Simao in Yunnan is open to France as a trading port." In 1897, Britain forced the Qing imperial government to sign the "Nineteen Additional Clauses," which were attached to the earlier "Treaty between China and Burma." The clauses stipulate: "It is agreed that Britain may set up a consulate in Simao." France set up her customs bureau in Simao on the 2nd of January, 1897, and Britain set up hers on May 8, 1902. According to statistics from 1912 to 1923, puerh tea exported through these Simao customs bureaus was worth 110,210 *liang* of silver.

At this time, tea exports from Yunnan depended mainly on transportation by horses or oxen. During the peak period fifty-thousand packhorses and several thousand oxen hobbled along the post roads year-round with the highest annual sale abroad amounting to more than forty thousand *dan*. As



茶 Zhuge Liang (181–234) was a scholar, noble, engineer, author, artist, inventor and explorer. He has been heralded as a genius throughout history. He was a Confucianist, well-known even in his own lifetime for his influence on agricultural reforms. He is very important to Yunnanese people, especially the Han people living there.

puerh tea enjoyed popularity among the Tibetan people, it played a positive role in frustrating the attempt of British imperialism to control Tibet by selling tea from India.

The routes for puerh tea sale abroad were as follows: The first route was from Puerh to Xiaguan, Luzhou, Xufu, Chengdu and Chongqing, where the puerh was transferred to Tibet and Xizang. The second route started in Menghai and went to the border port of Daluo, where the route branched into three: the first led to Burma and Thailand, the second to India via Burma, and the third to Malaysia and Singapore via Burma. The third route began in Yiwu, Mengla County. The tea was then transported by horse caravans to Phongsali, Laos, then on to Hanoi, Vietnam, where the tea was then carried by train to Haiphong and on to other countries in the south by sea.

Besides tribute, puerh tea was also presented as a gift to dignitaries from other countries. The Qing imperial court also used puerh tea as a high-grade gift to foreign delegations. For example, in 1972 Britain appointed Lord George McCartney, Former Governor stationed in Madras, India, to head a delegation consisting of 95 persons with great quantities of gifts to be presented at court on Emperor Qianlong's eightieth birthday and to request that the Qing imperial court establish additional commercial ports, lower taxation and set up concessions and post counselors. Though he did not express agreement, Emperor Qianlong presented precious gifts, including puerh tea and puerh tea extract.

Zhugeliang, the Marquis of Wu

The production of puerh tea has a long history from which many old legends have evolved. The most representative one is reflected by the fact that Zhuge Liang (諸葛亮, Chief Minister of State of Shu in the Three Kingdoms) was chosen as tea saint of the tea merchants, which is entirely different from the practice of most of the tea merchants in central China, who have chosen Lu Yu as their forefather to pray to. Every year, on the 23rd day of the seventh month of the lunar

calendar, on the birthday of Zhuge Liang, in every village, a mass rally is held, called "Meeting the Creator of Tea," which shows that Zhuge Liang is omnipresent in all activities, blessing the tea trade.

It is said that tea cultivation was taught to the people by Zhuge Liang. According to legend, in Manse Mountain, Yiwu County, tea was harvested as early as the Han Dynasty. Zhuge Liang is said to have taught the local people how to cultivate, pick, process and drink tea during his expedition.

“Every year, on the 23rd day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, on the birthday of Zhuge Liang, in every village a mass rally is held, called ‘Meeting the Creator of Tea,’ which shows that Zhuge Liang is omnipresent in all activities, blessing the tea trade. The local tea farmers have great respect for the large King Tea Trees which grow in the Six Tea Mountains. Every year, before picking new tea, they make offerings to the King Tea Trees in a grand ceremony. ”

The people of Han Chinese descent who live in Manzhuan Mountain say that the local people followed Zhuge Liang who, for fear that they would fall behind, told them to sleep face down and tie their horses facing north. Unfortunately, they acted contrary to the instructions and fell behind. Seeing what happened, Zhuge Liang sowed three handfuls of tea seeds, saying, "Now your livelihood, your very food and clothes, will depend on these trees!" Thereupon the local people remained in the tea mountains and lived on tea. The Jinuo people in Youle Mountain, who also claim Han heritage, say that they were also left when Zhuge Liang went south. "One day Zhuge Liang was missing all of a sudden, and they found him after two days of searching, but Zhuge Liang wanted them to stay and gave them a handful of tea seeds and allowed them to settle down to live from tea cultivation." This is why the Jinuo people call themselves the "Lost Ones" and have such great respect for Zhuge Liang, honoring him with prayers.

Also, the names of Six Famous Tea Mountains are all related to things left behind by Zhuge Liang. According to legend, Zhuge Liang traveled all over

the Six Tea Mountains. In *The History of Puerh City* are found the following records: "In ancient times, the Marquis of Wu (Zhuge Liang) traveled the length and breadth of the Six Famous Tea Mountains on his journey, where he left a gong of copper at Youle (攸樂), a cauldron of copper at Mangzhi (莽枝), a brick of iron at Manzhuan (蠻磚), a clapper of wood at Yibang (倚邦), a stirrup of leather at Gedeng (革登) and a seed-sowing bag at Mansa (曼撒), and the places were named after all of these articles."

The book also mentions that among these mountains, there is one mount called Kongming Mount (another name for Zhuge Liang), where he stored his arrows. It is located 100 li west of Xishuangbanna Township, Mengla County.

The ancient "King Tea Trees" in Yunnan are often also related to Zhuge Liang. The local tea farmers have great respect for the large King Tea Trees which grow in the Six Tea Mountains. Every year, before picking new tea, they make offerings to the King Tea Trees in a grand ceremony. According to legend, some of these ancient trees were planted by Zhuge Liang himself. Ran Fu of the Qing Dynasty mentions this in his book *The Records of Puerh Tea*: "King Tea Trees, larger and taller than other tea trees, grow on Gedeng Mountain. According to legend, they were left by the Marquis of Wu. The aborigines there offer sacrifices and make prayers to these trees before picking new tea." Most old trees have altars beneath them, and the traveler to Yunnan will be greeted by these prayer flags and altars when hiking in the pristine forests. Sometimes you may have the fortune of meeting aborigines in the act of praying and you can join them.

MODERN TIMES

During the later period of the Qing Dynasty, puerh tea production declined because of heavy taxation. According to *The History of Puerh City*: “It was stipulated in 1735 that each hundred *jin* of produced tea is a *yin* (50kg) and on each *yin* three *qian* and two *fen* (equal to 0.5g) of silver is levied as taxation. Permission for three thousand *yin* of tea was issued that year, and 960 *liang* of silver was collected. From then on taxation was increased every year, and 3,200 *liang* of silver was levied on ten thousand *yin* of tea at its peak.” The taxation was so heavy that the tea peasants suffered greatly and the tea merchants were unable to make profits. Consequently, “The puerh tea business became a disaster” (*A Sequel to the General History of Yunnan*). In the last years of the Qing Dynasty, the tea taxation was still heavier, and the government appointed tea officials to control tea trade and levy tea taxation. Later, foreign customs were set up and two *fen* of silver, the provincial transit duty, was laid on the quantity of tea worth a *liang* of silver. Unable to bear such heavy taxation, the tea peasants gave up the tea business and sought out other ways to make a living. Subsequently, horse caravans sought other loads. A succession of fires befell the Six Tea Mountains, tea trees burned up, diseases spread, many tea peasants died, and the number of tea trees dropped sharply to less than half of the earlier number. The tea gardens in the Six Tea Mountains languished as tea production dropped from eighty thousand to fifty thousand *dan*.

Tea production continued to decline in the early twentieth century. From 1913 to 1928, when the Simao-Puerh Border Administrative Bureau was set up, the political situation was stable and a private government joint operation was introduced to promote tea production and sale, enabling tea peasants and merchants to make profits. Tea output thus leveled off to fifty-thousand *dan* a year. From 1929 to 1938, the provincial government set up a county government in Xishuangbanna and changed the original form into a private-run and government-operated joint venture, under which tea merchants could set up factories

to produce tea and sell it with taxation levied by the government. In 1930, each kilogram of tea was subject to taxation of three Yunnan *yuan*; in 1936 it was increased to five *yuan*; and in 1938 to eight *yuan*. Additionally, after 1936, tea from India and Ceylon entered the international market in large quantities, competing with puerh tea, and thus affecting its export to Southeast Asia. Therefore, the yearly output of puerh tea dropped to less than forty thousand *dan*.

During the Second World War, tea production dropped rapidly as well. After the war, the China Tea Company attached to Kuomintang Ministry of Economics was moved to Nanjing, and the tea monopoly came into the hands of Lu Chongren's Fuhai Tea Factory. Later the factory was merged and then renamed “Renqi Company.” On the eve of liberation, the Company transferred its assets, causing a rapid drop in tea production to less than six thousand *dan*.

The founding of the People's Republic of China and the establishment of a socialist system in 1949 brought life back to puerh tea. Taking various measures, the people's government devoted major efforts to develop tea production by establishing tea company branches in various counties, setting up tea-purchasing stations in various tea garden areas, raising tea-purchasing prices, founding tea-research institutions, managing tea production guided with scientific theories, actively transforming old tea cultivation areas and opening up new tea cultivation regions. As a result, the output of tea has risen annually since then. By 1952, Xishuangbanna Prefecture had developed new tea gardens covering more than 32,000 *mu* (roughly 700 sq. meters), changing the distribution of old tea cultivation areas, and laying a solid foundation for further development of puerh tea production by setting up state-run tea factories, raising yield per unit area and improving tea quality.

With reforms and China's “Open Policy,” tea production in Xishuangbanna has continued to rise. Now, Xishuangbanna sustains tea gardens covering an area of 250,000 *mu* with an annual output of dried tea exceeding

200,000 *dan*. In 1994, 9,300 tons of puerh tea were produced, 2,500 tons of which were sold abroad. Tea-processing technology has further improved, with new methods and varieties of tea, thus forming a complete line of puerh tea products. After the success of Congo red tea in Western markets, production of new kinds of tea—such as Broken Red Tea, Nannuo Baihao, Yunhai, etc.—has ushered in a new epoch for Yunnanese tea.

The Yunnan Tea Research Institute, founded in Menghai, has preserved more than a thousand tea tree varieties, bred new ones, improved varieties for several decades and made ten significant breakthroughs in applied basic research, the utilization and popularization of which have helped to promote puerh tea production and the tea trade in Yunnan.

With the progress of science, we have also increased our understanding of the curative effects of puerh tea. Our compatriots in Hong Kong and Taiwan have long called puerh a “Treasure and Longevity Tea,” and claim that puerh tea can produce saliva and quench thirst, tonify the spleen and dispel the effects of alcohol, stimulate the appetite and empty the bowels, balance gut bacteria and reduce weight. They treasure it as an indispensable wonder tonic. The Japanese call puerh tea an “Inconceivable Panacea Tea.” In 1991, the Kunming Medical Institute demonstrated the anti-cancerous role of puerh tea at the Asian-Pacific Region Tumor Symposium. Medical experts from Japan, France and other countries have also concluded that puerh tea not only has curative and preventative effects against cancer, but also plays a role in lowering blood fat, cholesterol, uric acid, etc. Thus, puerh tea is not only a good-quality drink, but also a great tonic for fighting cancer, reducing weight and prolonging life!





Gongfu Teapot

功夫茶壺



So, you've fallen in love with tea and immersed yourself in the basics for some time. You've spent at least a handful of months, if not a year or two, laying a solid tea foundation, connecting deeply to the roots of this Way. You love every aspect of it and just want to let Tea teach you more and more—patiently. It's not that you're bored, nor overzealous, but the purple clay way is at your feet and you decide it's time to take your first step...

In our gongfu tea classes at Tea Sage Hut, we often start with two caveats. You can think of these as the first signs posted at the trailhead of the gongfu tea path, telling you where you are, roughly where you can go, and highlighting some pitfalls along the way. The first warning is the most important, because even though we are going to discuss some of the special teaware

traditionally used in gongfu tea, the most important element is always *you*. Even with all the best teaware that money can buy, no tea can be made or enjoyed without you and the heart you put into it, so always keep that in mind as we navigate this calm and gentle, heat-preserving method of making tea. The second caveat is that drinking tea, in any method, is ultimately an aimless activity. The goal is simply to enjoy the leisurely process of making and sharing tea. This is particularly important to remember in the very beginning of our gongfu tea practice because it can be confused as a very goal-oriented method of making tea. For the sake of education and communication, we will talk about gongfu tea as a method of brewing the finest cup of tea possible and will even give a means by which to measure this statement, always remembering the two warnings listed above.

With that in mind, let's see what other useful information lies at the start of this purple pot pilgrimage.

Also listed on the trailhead sign, below the two warnings, is a definition of gongfu tea and a little history. It tells us that gongfu means "mastery through self-discipline" and can be applied to any activity, be it yoga, cooking, archery, tea or others. Therefore, gongfu tea means to make tea with skill through self-discipline. Some few hundred years ago, the traditional method of gongfu tea arose in the city of Chaozhou, in Guangdong province, China. The development of this brewing method was heavily influenced by martial arts practitioners, a sense of frugality and simplicity and in response to the creation of oolong tea. The trailhead sign points out that although this method of brewing tea has expanded beyond its original bor-



GETTING STARTED IN GONGFU TEA

茶人: *Shen Su* (聖素)

ders and changed in many ways, this particular path of gongfu tea is referring to the traditional form as it arose in Chaoyzhou. Because this path has been paced by many tea lovers before us, it has been kept in pristine form for hundreds of years, clearly outlining the way and always staying connected to its origin. Without getting attached to the sign itself, we move onward feeling confident and privileged to have received this useful information at such an early stage in our practice.

Teaware Before Tea

Almost immediately down this graceful looking path, you come across a weather-worn sign and on it is written in fading but bold characters: “Teaware Before Tea.” If you’re getting into gongfu tea, then aside from

meditation, teaware is paramount. This surprises many people, but it’s actually quite clear because fine teaware will improve any tea, whereas cheap teaware will take away from what every tea really has to offer. Therefore, we start by sourcing good quality teaware that facilitates the main function of gongfu tea: to make the best cup of tea possible. Many excited tea lovers save up much of their money and mistakenly budget for expensive tea, but as the sign suggests, it will greatly benefit your gongfu tea practice to invest in great teaware first. This doesn’t necessarily mean that such teaware is expensive, although it can be relatively more expensive than teaware used in simpler brewing methods. Money should never prevent you from enjoying and practicing gongfu tea. You can still follow the guidelines of this article and can also work with what you’ve got;

remember that *you* are the most important element! There is often entry-level teaware at more affordable prices, but saving up to buy a treasure that will befriend your tea practice for a lifetime can also be a rewarding part of the process. Master Lin has a saying that, “not all expensive things are nice, but all nice things are expensive.” Of course, there are rare garage-sale exceptions and price is not the only indicator of quality, but it’s a useful saying to keep in mind when navigating the overwhelming world of teaware.

Another good piece of advice Wu De often gives is that “maybe” always equals “no.” This means that if you aren’t sure about authenticity, don’t buy it. (Unless the price is very low.)

Strolling along, we’re left to ponder what makes teaware great and what kind of teaware is necessary to make gongfu tea?

THE FOUR TREASURES

Making gongfu tea doesn't actually require that much teaware, and as we say in this tradition, "as the person seeks the leaf, so the leaf seeks the person." That saying holds true for both tea and teaware. If you set out with an open heart and clear mind to find the best teaware to make fine tea, you'll find that as you continue down this gentle path, such teaware might just meet you part of the way! Traditionally, there were four pieces of teaware essential to make gongfu tea: a purple-sand clay zisha teapot from Yixing, antique porcelain cups, a tea boat, and a mulberry creek brazier and kettle. Choosing and acquiring these four treasures will be the most tangible first step as we invite the method of gongfu tea brewing into our lives.

Purple-Sand Clay Teapot: Sourcing an authentic purple-sand clay teapot will be the first uphill stretch along the path. It might prove so steep at times you may need to stop and catch your breath! You might come across branching paths with cheap and shiny teapots or perhaps easier routes dressed in red or yellow clay pots, but you're committed to staying on the main path for the time being. And not to worry; you can see where the incline ends, so it's just a matter of perseverance to get there. It is true—finding authentic purple-sand clay can be challenging, and more so with each passing year. This is because the ore used to make such clay came from two mines in the Yellow Dragon and Blue-Green Dragon mountains of Yixing. Those mines were closed in the late 1990s and have remained shut ever since, meaning the reserves of ore are finite and dwindling as it is refined into clay and used to make all sorts of different Yixing wares. Therefore, not only does it become more difficult to source, but more expensive to buy over time as it becomes rarer. Yet, you trudge on, wondering why purple-sand clay is so important? There are so many other teapots that basically look the same. Could the material really make that big of a difference? You are determined to find out! It turns out that purple-sand ore is composed of a special blend of minerals and compounds that when refined into clay and made into a teapot develops a magical ability to smooth out and improve the structure of water and tea. Its composition apparently has a double-porous structure, allowing it to breathe and retain heat better than any of the other available ores and clays, lending itself to more patient, smooth and balanced tea sessions. You wonder to yourself if there is a way to learn this

through experimentation, to really put these claims to the test? In any case, you're convinced that it's worth it to source the real deal so you can find out for yourself and see if purple-sand clay is worth all the hype.

Sometimes, Wu De reflects on the times when his teacher taught him how to tell the difference between authentic and fake zisha teapots. For him, it often meant taking a real zisha pot with him to compare when looking at pots on the market. We can't all expect one-on-one teachings from a master to differentiate real zisha from fake zisha, and to the untrained eye it can be very difficult to see, but all is not lost. We are quite privileged through our mutual relationship with Global Tea Hut, Light Meets Life, and

Master Zhou! We can be rest assured that the pots coming out of Master Zhou's studio, like Starry Sky teapot and the Heart Sutra *Ju Lun Zhu* (巨輪珠) are made of authentic purple-sand clay from Yixing. If you already have one these pots, it would be an excellent standard by which to compare other pots if you're in the market. As chajin, our tea karmas have aligned so that we have access to such high quality modern teawares, especially in a sea of so many fakes and phonies and a world where authentic teapots, especially antique ones, are few and far between. As well, Wu De wrote a definitive article on how to choose an Yixing teapot in our September 2017 Extended Edition. An extensive article on Master Zhou is also detailed in the same issue.



潮汕四寶

Antique Porcelain Cups: The temperature is rising as we stroll along and catch our breath. Old thick trees line the path at this point, but nascent growth is also prominent under the canopy. The next treasure on the list is antique porcelain cups. What a lucky find it would be to acquire some antique cups, from times when this path was just being blazed a few hundred years ago. However, we are more than happy to accept a part of the trail that suggests starting out with more modern, standard gongfu cups that are all the same size, shape, and color, and cost not more than a meal or two. The body of these cups is shaped like a tulip that slightly flares out at the rim to comfortably meet the lips. They are great to practice with in the meantime, as we work towards the ideal of antique cups. They seem very suitable to use for experiments as well, seeing as they are all identical. What a great and easy find! With a pot in hand and a handful of cups, we're halfway down this treasure trail.



The Tea Boat: A light drizzle dampens your path but creates a glistening, refreshing scene as you walk along. Little puddles form filling the ruts of this otherwise rugged terrain. The tea boat is surprisingly essential and equally easy to source. As you may have seen, we always shower the teapot with hot water both before and after steeping the tea. The water that is used to shower the outside of the teapot must collect into a shallow dish, which we call the tea boat. Because showering is so important (as we will see later), the tea boat is equally important. An ideal tea boat would be made of excellent purple-sand clay just like your teapot, but like the cups, there are simple alternatives that suit the function just fine. In fact, a shallow dish of any material that fits your pot and has walls high enough to collect water could be used as your tea boat.

Mulberry Creek Brazier and Kettle: The whistle of a distant creek catches your ear from time to time but never reveals its location. There are some mountains off in the distance and some nearby openings among the trees that look inviting for tea. You've almost got everything you need. Originally, local white clay from Mulberry Creek in Chaozhou was used to make kettle and stove sets for hundreds of years because it made nice water for tea. However, Mulberry Creek's location is no longer known. That means only antique sets are available to us now, which are rare, fragile and expensive. If we were to stick to this condition, it would be too difficult for all tea lovers to acquire the fourth treasure. Therefore, in the spirit of tea, a suitable adaptation is necessary. So long as you find yourself a good heat source and a good kettle, then you can prepare good water for tea, and the four treasures are complete! And yet, the trail appears to unravel a little more, though a little undefined around the edges, leading into an unclear opening that fades into the forest shadows. Peering through, you discover a concealed sign. Brushing away the cobwebs and dried branches that shroud the sign, you find there is an unmentionable treasure (or perhaps the fifth treasure) otherwise known as the waste-water basin, or *jianshui* (建水). It makes sense, really, because if you're showering your teapot, then where do you discard the collected water from your tea boat? Luckily, any bowl or bucket will suffice, though an elegant one in the future might be nice.

Back into the light of day and onto the clearly defined path, you reflect on all the signs that guided you along. There is a renewed vitality in each step, and you feel as though you could hike among the clouds on the highest peak, but quickly you arrive at that grassy opening you saw before. A *Chajin* from another time has left some charcoal, a gourd canteen, an old-looking pouch full of tea leaves and directions to a nearby spring...



OTHER MODERN ADAPTATIONS

As we learned before, this gongfu brewing method is rooted in Chaozhou and has been preserved and passed down to us in a very pure form. We are very fortunate indeed. You may notice other adaptations beyond the four treasures, such as the rectangular tray that holds our cups, and coasters to place our cups on when serving guests. Remember, this is a 300-year-old brewing method rooted in tradition and refined over those hundreds of years; it's not something to toy with or manipulate out of personal preference or lack of understanding. Changes that stem from a place of ego, quick and convenient mindsets and/or profit are not the right changes to make. Changes that stem from a deep

connection with the spirit of tea over decades of dedication and practice is a skillful place from which to allow changes to arise, if they're necessary to suit the modern times. Changes should facilitate both the function of the brewing method itself and service to your guests. In the case of gongfu tea, therefore, changes should facilitate making the best cup of tea possible, and if it doesn't serve that function, then it's not a change worth considering. And how do you go about determining whether it improves your cup of tea or not? That's where experiments come in and why it is important for all beginners to participate. They give us an experiential understanding of why it is we're doing what we're doing.

For example, we (and others) have found through experimentation that small tea trays for cups and coasters meet both conditions to improve the tea and the service of tea, especially when they are made of fine purple-sand clay. Though they aren't necessary, they can enhance your tea.

To continue the metaphor of gongfu tea as a path, we have left you with five more trails to tread, each one in the form of an experiment. Though there are many more, these are the five essential ones to traverse in order to assist your learning and enjoyment of gongfu tea as a new practice in your life. Happy trails, and congratulations on embarking on the gongfu tea journey to many bright cups!



BASIC GONGFU EXPERIMENTS TO GET STARTED

For each experiment below, it important to use a tea that you are very familiar with. We often use a lightly oxidized tea and brew it in smaller amounts, about 1-2 grams depending on the size of the brewing vessel. If you use too much of a dark, aged or complex tea, it will be distracting and difficult to notice the subtle differences when comparing teaware and brewing methods. It will be assumed that you need the four treasures for most experiments. Otherwise, any additional materials will be detailed in the procedure.

You'll want to have a notebook to record your findings. Write as many details as you can, including date, materials used, procedure, observations and other remarks. This will be very useful in the future when you come back to do the same experiment again. It will also help you gauge your progress.

As you record your observations, remember—it's not about what you think is better or worse, but any differences you notice. Being able to notice that there is a difference based on the teaware or method used is good enough. Focus on the Ten Qualities of a Fine Tea, and set flavor and aroma aside as much as possible for the time being. How does the tea feel in your mouth and in your body? Maintain a quiet ambiance throughout each experiment so everyone can focus on the tea. Feel free to discuss the outcomes once everyone is finished.

Note that we won't reveal the conclusions of any of these experiments. That is completely left up to you! It's more fun learning through your own experience anyways, and there's no pressure to find a right or wrong outcome. Always stick to your experience and be open to the fact that next time a new subtlety may reveal itself to you that you weren't sensitive to the first time. We're not here to convert anyone to our brewing method, but rather to give you a platform upon which to have fun and learn to make better tea through your own experience.

Choosing Water

The best and easiest way to improve your tea is to improve your water. Tea is 99% water, so obviously better water will go a long way towards helping you make better tea.

Procedure:

For this experiment, buy at least three different bottled waters. Randomly choose two, pour equal amounts into two cups, and drink them side-by-side back and forth. Make notes of any differences you notice. Based on the ten qualities, choose one of the two bottles which you feel is more suitable to make tea, and then compare it against the third bottled water. Remember, water should have no aroma or flavor; it should quench your thirst, and like any good tea, should be round, smooth, soft and easy to swallow.

Continue with this process of elimination until you've decided which water you feel is most suitable for tea. If you have a good source of spring water, perhaps compare your top bottled water to the spring water and again, see if you can notice any differences. (We recommend studying the "Ten Qualities of a Fine Tea" before doing this experiment, especially. It will be extremely helpful.)



Essential Three Cup Experiment

This is one of the most important and simplest experiments to do. It's the one I do most often with guests at the center. It's also an excellent example of why the first line in the gongfu poem is so important: "Preserve heat and begin to absorb peace..."

Procedure:

Before the water is fully boiled, pour it into one of three identical cups. There is no need to pre-warm your cups. Pour half the water from the first cup into the second cup. Then pour half the water from the second cup into the third cup. Starting with the last cup you poured into, quickly drink back and forth between all three cups recording your observations as you go. Repeat at least three times, making sure to pour accurately from each cup to the next. You could easily do this experiment with more than three cups.

三
茶
杯



Pre-heating the Cups

This is another eye-opener. Many people think we are cleaning our cups between each steeping, but actually we are preheating them. What for? And does it really make a difference?

Procedure:

Prepare everything as usual, using two cups per person. Only pre-heat half of the cups with boiled water and don't pre-heat the other half. Pour off the water from the pre-heated cups into your waste-water basin, and soon after pour the tea into all your cups. Drink both cups back and forth, recording your observations as you go. Repeat two or three times.

To Pitcher or Not to Pitcher That is the Question

To really understand when and when not to use a pitcher, this experiment is essential. What are the pros and cons of using a pitcher, and do the sacrifices outweigh the gains? Where and when did the pitcher even come from? What's the most appropriate situation to use a pitcher?

Procedure:

Line up your cups and a glass or porcelain pitcher. It's often difficult to pre-heat all the cups and the pitcher, unless there's only one person, so don't worry. Just steep the tea and pour back and forth into your pitcher and HALF the cups. Immediately pour the tea from the pitcher into the other empty cups. Take both cups, one with tea from the pot and the other with tea from the pitcher, and drink them back and forth recording your observations. Repeat the experiment at least three times and take notes.

茶
海
否



Heavy Showers Predicted

You'll notice we shower our gongfu tea with heated water both before and after steeping the tea inside. The results of this experiment always surprise me.

Procedure:

For this experiment, you will need to do three consecutive steepings. Order matters, and you will need to pay careful attention at each steeping. For the first round, with the tea inside your teapot, shower the outside of your pot with hot water, lift the lid and steep the tea, then close the lid and completely shower the pot again. This will be called “showers before and after.” Pour the tea into your cup. Drink quietly and record your observations focusing on the sensations in the mouth. For the second round, shower the pot before you fill it, but not after. This will be called “showers before.” Again, pour the tea into your cup, drink, and record. For the final steeping, fill the pot and only shower afterwards—“showers after.” Drink that cup.

It's difficult to repeat this experiment once the leaves have been steeped a few times and the pot thoroughly showered. You could simply repeat the experiment later with fresh leaves.

重
淋
水

Bonus Experiment: Color Gradient

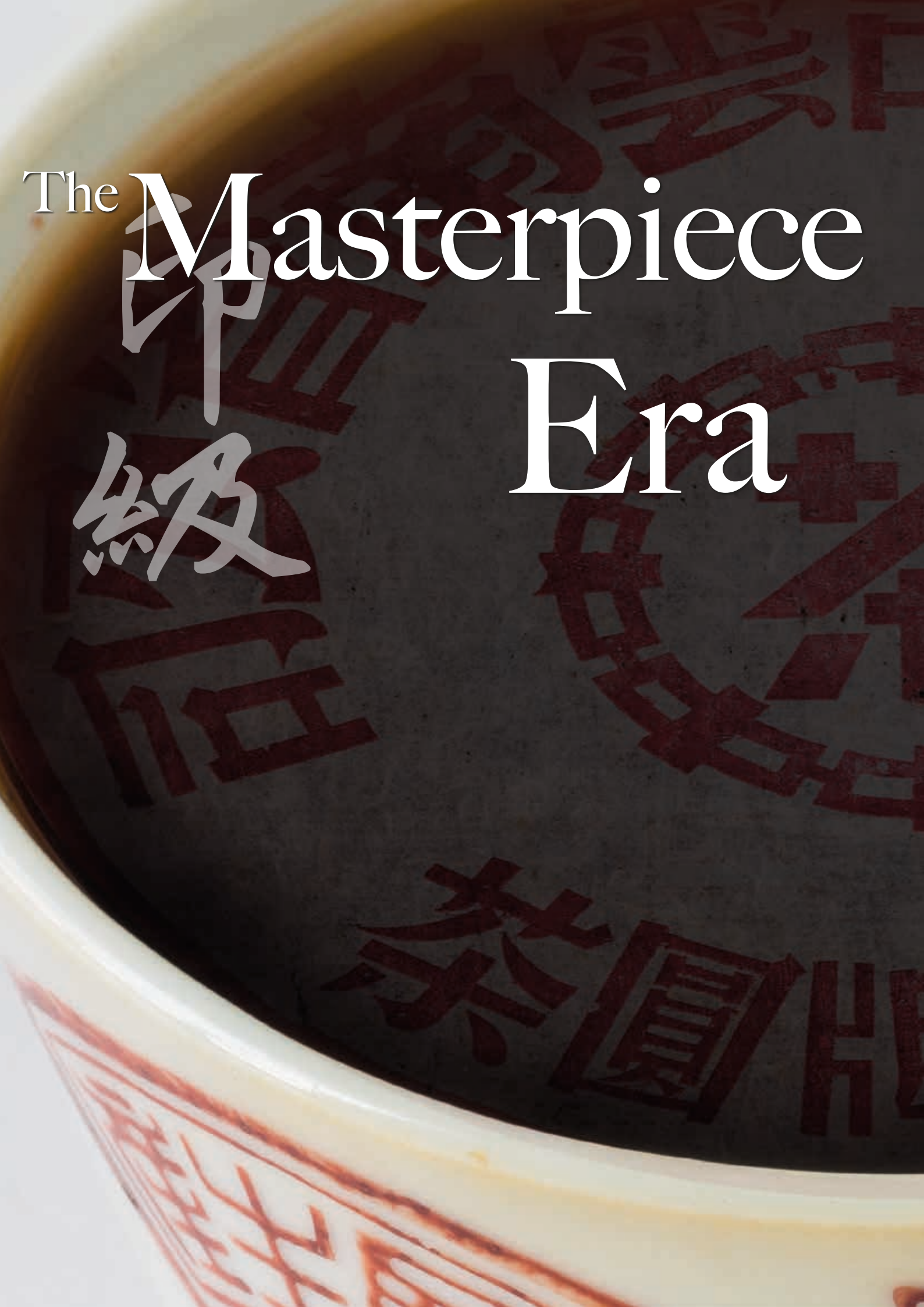
I recently came back to this experiment and marveled at how revealing it is—not to mention it is so simple that I could do it in tandem with almost every other experiment or during solo tea sessions. I hope you'll include this one often in your experiments because it's so interesting to see a color mapping of your entire tea session! What does a uniform color gradient imply? How about sudden changes of color from one cup to the next? The proof is literally in the cup!

Procedure:

With as many of the same white porcelain cups as you have, simply brew tea as usual, but instead of pouring into one cup, pour into two. Drink and enjoy one cup and place the other somewhere in front of your tea stage. Repeat the process, setting one cup aside from every brew, steeping as many times as you have cups (and continue to steep more beyond that!). Once finished, you should have a lineup of cups with a very revealing color gradient that shows you how consistent or inconsistent you brewed your tea.







The Masterpiece
Era

中級



of Puerh Tea
普洱

THE MASTERPIECE ERA

RED MARK

Master Chen Zhitong is one of the world's leading experts on puerh tea, and a dear friend and teacher of ours. His book "The Profound World of Chi-tze (深邃的七子世界)" is the reference bible in the puerh world. We are honored to translate some chapters from it for you here. This is yet another seminal translation brought to you by Global Tea Hut!

茶人: *Chen Zhitong* (陳智同)

Red, most striking of colors, has special significance in Chinese culture, with its connotations of new life, new beginnings and celebration. But the association of the color red with puerh tea is not as simple as a mathematical equation: "red" + "puerh tea" = "red puerh tea." Rather, the intervening variables of history and cultural values have produced a tea that will make any puerh aficionado wistful: Red Mark Puerh.

After all, Red Mark Puerh is not just a star performer of today's state-run tea factories; it also represented a favorable start for the state-run factories when they became involved in Yunnan's tea industry—red packaging for the first new batch of tea. The founders of the Fohai Tea Factory, Mr. Fan Hezhun (范和鈞) and Mr. Zhang Shicheng (張石城), endured some challenging times. Two years after starting their factory, they finally officially commenced production in 1942; their Red Mark Round Cakes seemed to mark an auspicious start for the factory, just like the red envelopes of money that people give out as gifts at Chinese New Year. As the first batch of tea produced after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, it was also seen as a symbol of the continued growth of socialist China. Whether produced in the 1940s or 1950s, aged Red Mark

Round Cake puerh teas are all imbued with an indelible sense of historical significance and cultural memory.

Red Mark Round Cakes (*hongyin yuancha*, 紅印圓茶) are familiar to all lovers of puerh tea, but also unfamiliar. They're familiar because they were once widely circulated on the market, yet unfamiliar in the sense that they all come from a bygone era; they most likely come from trial batches of round cakes produced between 1942 and 1958 for sale outside of China. After that time, more than a decade of war and unrest saw production halt up until the change in political regime.

The varying manufacturing styles and changes in the circumstances and market also introduce a multitude of factors into the subject of the vintage, blend and distinguishing of Red Mark Round Cakes.

So, before we get into discussing the characteristics of the Red Mark Round Cake market, or the differences in classification, vintage and blend, we'll first delve into two other aspects: the origin of the "Red Mark Round Cakes" name and the characteristics of their shape and packaging.

The "Red Mark" name began as a shorthand term used on the tea market, alluding to the red packaging—it had nothing to do with the actual names of the production units

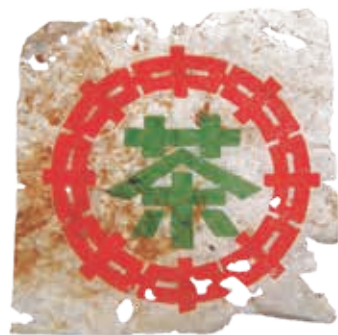
that made the tea. Thanks to the big, eye-catching red characters printed on the outer wrappers and the festive, auspicious feeling they created, the "Red Mark" name spread quickly. Red Mark Round Cakes have always been made with the best raw tea leaf, while leaf from the coastal areas was made into round puerh tea cakes with a green "tea" character on the packaging. So, it's evident that the Red Mark name originated mainly from the characteristic packaging of these cakes, which are as follows:

A. The packaging of all Red Mark Round Cakes is printed in red ink.

B. The paper used to wrap the cakes is always handmade cotton paper or long-fibered paper, which have quite dense fibers. They are hand-printed in the woodblock method using cinnabar ink.

C. The labels are printed entirely in traditional Chinese characters, without any Roman Pinyin/English text.

D. The *nei fei* (內飛) or "inner brand tickets" inside the wrapping all bear the Eight-Zhong (*ba zhong*, 八中) brand, while the later Seven Sons Tea Cakes (*Chi Tze Bing*, 七子餅) all have different *nei fei* indicating the name of the manufacturer.



紅印



E. Except for the Grade A Red Mark cakes—which also have the words “Grade A” (*jia ji*, 甲級) added—and the “revised edition” cakes with extra paper stuck on them, the color and font of the printed characters is identical on all Red Mark Round Cake wrappers.

F. The outer bundle of all Red Mark cakes is made completely out of bamboo.

So, aside from their uniform packaging style, Red Mark Round Cakes are also quite distinctive in terms of their vintage, printing style, market characteristics, blend and what they are like to drink. In the following pages, we’ll take a detailed look at each of these in turn—but first, let’s start with a brief overview of the five main types of Red Mark tea, namely Grade A Red Mark Round Cakes, early-, mid- and late-period Red Mark Round Cakes, and paperless Red Mark Round Cakes with soft bamboo packaging.

Vintages of Red Mark Tea

There are two main approaches to discussing the vintages of Red Mark Round Cakes. As the era involved is now some time in the past, we’ll look at these approaches in two separate sections. The two viewpoints of the tea’s age differ by about a decade, so this warrants a detailed discussion and a certain amount of flexibility in our approach. On top of this, Red Mark Round Cakes have already existed on the market for several decades, and the market has had its own established conclusions from quite early on. Of particular note are the opinions of Hong Kong’s former tea house owners and puerh tea merchants, which represent two basic points of view. To start, let’s discuss the first point of view which has been around since the early days.

Estimating Vintage: Approach One

This approach appears in the *Memoirs of Mr. Fan Hejun* (范和鈞先生回憶錄), as well as in *Puerh Tea* (普洱茶) and *Records of Puerh Tea* (普洱茶記). It essentially divides Red Mark cakes into two periods: the Fohai Tea

Factory period (1942–1950) and the Hai Tea Factory period (1951–1957).

The Fohai Tea Factory Period

This period is further divided into the early period (1940–1942) and the later period when production resumed in the post-Sino-Japanese war era (1944–1949).

Early Years: 1940–1942

According to the *Memoirs of Mr. Fan Hejun*, the Fohai factory was established in 1940. Around two years later the factory adopted a new mechanical production method and began encouraging tea farmers to produce and sell their own tea as subcontractors. Most of it was compressed tea intended to be aged for sale. The experimental tea factory produced its first batch of tea in 1942. The manufacturing conditions at the Fohai Tea Factory had several characteristics that differentiated them from those of the People’s Republic era Hai Tea Factory, which are as follows:

1. Production was carried out using machines, and output was undoubtedly quite high. After the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, Mr. Tang Qingyang (唐慶陽) took over the management of the factory—by this time, all the machinery had been stolen to be sold off, resulting in poor manufacturing conditions that were inferior to those of the earlier Fohai Tea Factory era. From this, we can infer that the output of the Fohai Tea Factory was much higher than one might imagine.

2. The Fohai Tea Factory era was a time of competition with privately-run tea enterprises; as well as Mr. Bai Mengyu’s (白孟愚) Mount Nannuo Tea Factory, there were also other private enterprises producing tea. In response to the competition for raw leaf, Mr. Fan developed a strategy of unified transportation and sales among the tea farmers, and acted as a guarantor to help the farmers take out loans from the Dianfu Bank (滇富), which gained him preferential access to the raw leaf. This provides a major testimony as to the consistent quality of Red Mark Round Cakes—after all, the first product of a new factory can naturally be expected to be of high quality. That said, round tea cakes only represented

part of the factory’s product line—it also produced quite a lot of green and red teas.

3. Before the Fohai experimental tea factory commenced production, it was engaged in buying compressed tea and round tea cakes from private tea businesses. So although the factory wasn’t officially operational until 1941, it was already selling tea via subcontractors from 1940. Subsequently, the Fohai Tea Factory continued to employ this strategy of purchasing finished teas and on-selling them to supplement low output. So it stands to reason that if Red Mark tea was already being produced during the Fohai Tea Factory era, its estimated age can be shifted back in time by two years. According to *A Brief History of the Growth of the Fohai Tea House* (佛海茶莊發展史略), in 1940 the experimental Fohai Tea Factory put up a large amount of capital to purchase tea at high prices, namely around 35,000 *dan* (1,750 metric tonnes) of extra tight (compressed) tea and around 7000 *dan* (350 metric tonnes) of round tea cakes, which resulted in Fohai’s highest output.

The Red Mark tea produced during the Fohai Tea Factory era (in other words the earlier vintage Red Mark Round Cakes) are known as Grade A Red Mark (*jiaji hongyin*, 甲級紅印) or early Big Character Red Mark (*dazi hongyin*, 大字紅印). Grade A Red Mark can be basically classified into two groups by time period: early and late. The earlier Red Mark tea took longer to produce, and displays wide variation in blend style, belying the influence of inconsistent manufacturing conditions during those years. Because of this, according to the owners of Hong Kong’s old tea houses, there was a demand for the Red Mark tea that they ordered to be blended using Blue Label Songpin brand (藍標宋聘號) tea, which had been aged for 75 years. This meant that the blend style was quite consistent, and involved a high ratio of buds. This resulted in a much more robust tea than ordinary Red Mark, with a rich aroma and a stronger orchid fragrance. From my experience of drinking Blue Label Songpin, the style is extremely similar, but Grade A Red Mark has a more robust quality.

The estimated vintage of early-period Red Mark Round Cakes and Grade

A Red Mark Round Cakes is around 1940–1950 (excluding the period from 1942–1944 when production was suspended). According to the *Yunnan Province Tea Import–Export Company Records* (雲南省茶葉進出口公司誌), output took a nose-dive amid the economic depression following the civil war, so we can infer that the majority of early-period Red Mark was produced roughly between 1940–1947. So, this gives us a reasonably accurate picture of the probable vintage.

The Hai Tea Factory Period

In 1951, Mr. Tang Qingyang founded the Fengqing Tea Factory, and in the same year he officially re-started production at the Hai Tea Factory. There were two main reasons for re-opening the factory:

1. There was a high demand for compressed tea cakes among the Tibetan

people, so tea for cross-border sale was a major focus of production. Subsequently, the government of the People's Republic of China even implemented measures such as price control for cross-border sales and subsidies for shipping costs. So, evidently cross-border sales of compressed tea not only supplied a needed commodity to the Tibetan people, but also played an important role in moderating sentiment in Tibet.

2. The puerh tea industry had become an important part of Yunnan's economy, and provided an avenue to improving the living standard of rural farmers as well as reinstating jobs in the post-war era. At that time, Hong Kong also had a high demand for puerh and had the ability to trade with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Hence, recovering living standards and maintaining sales to Tibet were the two main rea-

sons for resuming production. I'm of the opinion that whether or not the tea was actually exported is not really a valid question given the circumstances at the time. I've heard that there was conflict among the right-wing and left-wing restaurant owners in Hong Kong at the time, and only the left-wing owners were able to purchase any tea. This is worth considering in the context of the above argument.

The Hai Tea Factory of this period had some clear differences from the earlier Fohai Tea Factory in terms of operating structure and surrounding circumstances. Here's some detail on these points of difference:

1. The production model had now changed as part of China's planned economy. This meant that provincial tea companies oversaw the production of all the raw leaf (*maocha*).



茶 All Red Mark cakes used the same type of red ink and were printed on thick, handmade cotton paper. The labels use traditional Chinese characters and do not have any Roman Pinyin or English text like later cakes do. The design of the wrappers also shifted at the beginning of the Masterpiece Era to the "Eight-Zhong" style, which is the same except for the Grade A Red Mark.



茶 The tongs of red mark are, of course, made of bamboo, often thicker than other bundles. The nei fei of Red Mark cakes also changed, heralding the beginning of the Masterpiece Era. They too have the "Eight-Zhong" logo printed on them. All the cakes in the Chi Tze Era also have this nei fei, though the sizes and ink change in that era.



They were also in charge of distribution and sales of both raw leaf and finished tea between each province. Manufacturing, on the other hand, was the responsibility of the individual tea factories, so there was a division of labor between production and sales.

2. During the war, the factory's machinery and equipment had all been stolen, and there was practically nothing left. Hence, production methods shifted from mechanical to manual, which presumably resulted in decreased production volume.

3. Due to the decreased output, some of the factory's products in the early period after production resumed were actually purchased as finished products from suppliers among the local population. So from 1955–1956, even though it was the early days of the People's Republic, private enterprises still existed alongside the state-run tea factories. This was mainly due to the low production output from the factories and the importance of compressed tea sales to policies aimed at maintaining stability in Tibet. I believe those were the main factors that allowed individual tea businesses to exist for a period of time even after the socialist People's Government had been established.

So, from this discussion, we can see that early- and late-period Red Mark tea was likely produced during the Hai Tea Factory era. Because of the involvement of subcontracted suppliers the blends are not consistent, but because the tea was hand-processed the quality is certainly not inferior to that of early Red Mark. Given the scarcity of Red Mark tea in today's market, there's really no way to distinguish between early and late Red Mark in terms of sales; as long as it's been stored in good conditions there's no mistaking the authenticity of the tea. Whether it's early or late Red Mark, you can be confident it will be a wonderful tea.

Estimating Vintage: Approach Two

The second approach to estimating the vintage of Red Mark Round Cake tea centers around the company name printed on the packaging: "China Tea Corporation, Yunnan Branch" (中國茶業公司雲南省公司). This name

was only in use from 1950 onwards—prior to that, during Fan Hejun's era, the company was called the "China Tea Trading Company" (中茶貿易公司), leading some to conclude that all Red Mark teas were produced in the 1950s. In addition, the bright red of the packaging represents the red of socialist China, symbolizing hopes for the future of the new People's Republic. On top of this, the Eight-Zhong logo—so called because it features the character *zhong* (中) from the word "China" (*zhongguo*, 中國)—was registered in 1950, providing further evidence that Red Mark teas are all post-1950 products. Personally, I think this point of view also has a reasonable amount of credibility—however, there are a few more factors that we should consider in evaluating the vintage.

1. The Fohai Tea Factory era and the Hai Tea Factory era didn't operate according to the same system. On a political level, this change was due to the defeat of the Kuomintang and the birth of the new People's Republic of China. Furthermore, Mr. Tang Qingyang (of the Fengqing Tea Factory) also allocated some technicians from the Yiliang Tea Factory and other factories to work on reviving the Fohai Tea Factory. (This information appears in the aforementioned *Import-Export Company Records*.) So it's clear that there wasn't much continuity from Fan Hejun's era—in fact, the physical factory where they resumed production was probably Mr. Bai Mengyu's Mount Nannuo Tea Factory, rather than the original Fohai Tea Factory (since the latter had lost most of its equipment). There's much debate surrounding this; the assertion that the Eight-Zhong brand was established in 1950 due to the formation of the new People's Republic would be an unassailable claim if it weren't for the change of political regime in the preceding years. But during the war-torn era of the Fohai Tea Factory, a chaotic period where production halted in 1942 and was resumed (it's not certain by whom) on a small scale in 1948, it's entirely possible that the Eight-Zhong brand was in use earlier but wasn't registered until 1950 after the change of regime. As yet, there is not enough proof to draw a solid conclusion; however, it's certainly at least worth discussing.

2. After the Fohai Tea Factory ceased production in 1942 and before the retreat of the Kuomintang, a lot of raw leaf (*maocha*) and finished tea was stockpiled at Baoshan. Due to the war, the tea industry in Yunnan was on the verge of shutting down altogether, so many private merchants probably also had some raw leaf and finished tea stored away. This meant that when production resumed in 1950, it's quite likely that these reserves of old tea were used to make compressed tea cakes, with packaging that featured bright red printing to symbolize the new era of socialism.

I brought this point up recently during a tea session with Mr. Zhou Yu (周渝), and we were both in agreement about it. I also mentioned a piece of supporting evidence, which is this: it's clear that Red Mark Round Cakes and Red Mark *Tie Bing* ("iron disc," 鐵餅) were not all produced in the same year. The packaging style is not all the same, with the vintage differing between the large-character Red Mark cakes (including Grade A Red Mark) and the small-character Red Mark cakes. There's also quite a marked difference in vintage evident when drinking the tea; it's not overly subtle. A consensus was reached on this long ago on the Hong Kong and Taiwan markets, and prices also vary accordingly. Therefore, this theory can be considered credible, and is still quite widely endorsed today. It's a rational conclusion when you consider the wartime circumstances of that era.

Whether Red Mark teas originated from the Fohai Tea Factory era or the Hai Tea Factory era, they are a very representative product. While it's possible that their vintage is even earlier than the 1950s, no matter which of the above two theories you ascribe to, the time range still only differs by a few years. Whatever the case, it won't change the market status of Red Mark Round Cakes; aside from their recognizable packaging, these old teas are also clearly identifiable by drinking them. It's not by chance that teas of such astonishing quality and rich character as Red Mark fetch a high price on today's market; their value also reflects the imbalance between supply and demand, as these teas are quite scarce and enjoy a high degree of recognition.



✳ Above left is the leaf of normal Red Mark, which has a lot of buds, much more than other types of tea. The right is the highest grade of Red Mark. Below is Grade A Red Mark, with the “jiaji (甲級)” stamp. The printing of the Grade A Red Mark is the same style as the Red Mark Iron Discus (Tie Bing, 鐵餅), which is below right. The Grade A Red Mark is the pinnacle of puerh from the Masterpiece Era.



Grade A Red Mark

Grade A Red Mark tea is considered a “non-standard product.” In 2000, I was the first to publish materials regarding Grade A Red Mark on the tea market. At that time, there was little information about Grade A Red Mark, and this tea had not been around on the market for as long as some of the other “Mark” teas (*yin ji cha*, 印級茶). Grade A Red Mark was mostly available in Taipei, so people didn’t tend to know much about these teas, let alone drink them. Even today, although it’s now well-known, there’s still a lack of information regarding Grade A Red Mark. So, we will now explore several aspects of Grade A Red Mark, including the shape and packaging, market characteristics, blend, drinking and evaluating quality.

The packaging of Grade A Red Mark tea displays the following characteristics:

A. The characters printed on the wrapping are in the early Red Mark style.

B. The words “Grade A” (*jiaji*, 甲級) are added on the paper wrapping below the central Eight-Zhong logo.

C. According to the recollections of Hong Kong tea house owners, there were also some cakes from which the seller had cut away the “Grade A” characters on the wrapping and patched the gap with plain white paper, whether due to difficult sales or a change of buyer. Under the circumstances of the period, it was quite commonplace to change packaging to adapt to the production or sales environment, so it’s not unreasonable to suppose that amid the chaos of wartime and the challenges it posed to transportation, sellers might have revised the packaging in search of a buyer.

D. There are also some Grade A Red Mark cakes without the “Grade A” characters, and without the white paper patch-up job indicating that the two characters had been cut away. Rather, the lettering is similar to that of the early period Red Mark cakes, but the print specifications are the same as for the Red Mark *Tie Bing*, so there’s no danger of confusing the two.

To summarize the above points, we can classify Grade A Red Mark cakes into four different categories/editions

based on their wrappers and packaging styles:

1. Grade A: Dark Blue Edition
2. Grade A: Sapphire Blue Edition
3. Grade A: Revised Edition
4. Grade A: Standard Edition

Regardless of what’s printed on the packaging, these four versions are all Grade A Red Mark tea and are virtually indistinguishable in terms of quality and vintage—at the time, tea cakes with all four types of wrapping were packed together in the same bamboo tube. In my experience, the Standard version and the Revised version are the most common. Those with the “Grade A” characters are very rare—on average, a case of twelve *tong* (bamboo tubes) of tea cakes will only contain about ten to fifteen of them. Since they’re so rare, being lucky enough to count one of them among one’s collection is exciting indeed. An A-grade tea makes for A-grade drinking and an A-grade collector. These teas are really the best of the best when it comes to the Masterpiece Era, and a real joy to drink with friends.

The Antique Era teas known on the market today (in other words, those produced by private tea companies with a vintage earlier than Red Mark Round Cakes/the Masterpiece Era) have a *da piao* (大票) or “big label,” a slip that gives product information about the tea. The *da piao* from brand names such as Puqing, Cheshun, Tongqing Twin Lions and Fu Yuan Chang all contain details such as the features of how it was produced, the blending method or the registration year. The product descriptions all reflect a set of essential values and viewpoints, no matter which brand they came from. They are the same values that we still maintain today and apply when evaluating puerh, namely:

1. Choosing spring tips
2. Using a high ratio of buds
3. Highly skilled processing, firing and rolling

The first two items on the list refer to the method of selecting and blending the tea, while the third refers to the processing technique.

The concepts of choosing spring tips and using a high ratio of buds are the most important when it comes to puerh tea, because the blend directly influences the quality and mouthfeel. Aside from having slightly different lettering on the packaging to standard Red Mark cakes, Grade A Red Mark is blended using a higher ratio of buds, which means that its flavor is more robust than that of other Red Mark teas. The aroma is strong and yet follows in the tradition of “orchid fragrance Red Mark,” but with more of a rich, mellow quality. Grade A Red Mark teas which have been aged only using the “dry storage” method have an even more intense flavor if drunk before the tea has been completely “awakened,” giving the drinker a completely different experience than other Red Mark teas and making the uniqueness of Grade A Red Mark stand out even more.

According to Hong Kong’s tea house owners, the Grade A Red Mark cakes were blended using Blue Label Songpin tea, made with the best Yiwu Zhengshan spring tea. From comparing the surface of the two teas, I’ve noticed that the style of blend is indeed very similar. From my personal experience of selling Blue Label Song Pin

and Grade A Red Mark teas, both have a very lasting flavor; the Grade A Red Mark, with its excellent quality and its sixty-odd years of aging, does indeed have an even more admirable character than privately-produced teas from the same period, or even later. So, Grade A Red Mark Round Cakes are a better purchase than late-period teas made by private tea enterprises. I’m confident that anyone who has drunk these teas will readily agree with this opinion. After all, buying high-quality tea at an optimal price makes good sense from a market standpoint.

After being on the market for a certain period of time, Grade A Red Mark prices are as follows: if we consider available volume, those teas that are the scarcest—the dark blue and sapphire blue edition cakes—fetch the highest price, and people are most reluctant to sell them. Next come the Revised Edition and Standard Edition cakes (the ones whose lettering is the same as that of the Red Mark *Tie Bing*). So, even the exact same tea, of the same quality, varies in price. This is testament to the diversity of the puerh tea market; these “limited edition” Grade A Red Mark Round Cakes are the first choice for drinking and the dream of many a collector.

Early-Period Red Mark

Early-period Red Mark is considered a “standard product” among Red Mark teas. The packaging can be essentially divided into two types:

1. Large Character Edition
2. “A Little Bit of Red” Edition

The paper used for the wrapping can roughly be divided into three types:

1. Handmade thick-fibered paper
2. Handmade thick cotton paper
3. Handmade thin cotton paper

Basically, whichever type of paper was used, the quality of the large character edition early-period Red Mark displays a certain amount of consistency. This is mainly because during the early Red Mark period, the producers had priority access to the raw leaf, so the quality is much higher than that

of teas produced by the private merchants during the same period. During the later Hai Tea Factory era when director Tang Qingyang was in charge, it was even easier to acquire raw leaf under the planned economy; add to this the fact that processing was all done by hand in the early stages, and one can well imagine the fine quality that resulted.

While the “A Little Bit of Red” edition cakes have unique printed characters on the wrapping, in terms of tea blend they are more or less similar in style to Grade A Red Mark. The overall character of the tea essentially shares the classic Red Mark style of mouthfeel and fragrance; it’s on the robust side, with a full mouthfeel and a rich flavor. Aside from the standard plum and orchid elements in the aroma, it also has quite a strong medicinal fragrance. I believe that the vintage is reasonably early. I find “A Little Bit of Red” to be quite a unique tea within the early-period Red Mark category, but it’s extremely rare. Even up until now I have had no intention of driving up the price; after all, there’s always a market for rare items—the only issue is the shipping. Lucky is the collector who can get their hands on some!

There really isn’t too much diversity when it comes to classifying early-period Red Mark teas, because they are a “standard product” and were produced for a fairly long period of time, unlike the short-lived made-to-order Grade A Red Mark. According to my experience with puerh, early-period Red Mark does have some diversity in terms of blend. While the flavor and character are of course similar in style, the blend can display some marked differences—you can see them simply by looking at the leaf. Hence my classification of early-period Red Mark into two basic types based on the differences in packaging and blend. There are two main reasons behind these differences:

1. According to Hong Kong’s early tea merchants, the changing blends of Red Mark tea were influenced by the buyers who commissioned them. Before standardized production formulas such as 7572, 7542 and 7532 began to take shape, there was no effective link between market demand and adaptations to production methods. Blending was far more random in this era.



Grade A Sapphire Blue
甲級紅印寶藍版



Grade A Dark Blue
甲級紅印深藍版



Grade A Revised Edition
甲級紅印修正版



Grade A Standard Edition
甲級紅印普通版



Early-Period "A Little Bit of Red"
早期紅印 一點紅紅印



Early-Period Large Character
早期紅印 大字紅印



Middle Period Wide Character
中期紅印 中字紅印



Middle Period Thin Character
中期紅印 細字紅印



Middle Period Extra-Thin Character
中期紅印 超細字紅印

Production was largely under the control of the China Tea Corporation, which regulated the tea factories. Grade A Red Mark, which is already quite a vigorous tea, of course had even more of an irritating quality back then when it was freshly produced; this was not at all suited to the tastes of Hong Kong tea drinkers, who were used to the mouthfeel of shou puerh. So the appearance of Red Mark Round Cakes, with their superior leaf and blend and smoother mouthfeel, was largely in response to the changing market.

2. During both the Fohai Tea Factory and the Hai Tea Factory eras, the factories used methods such as cooperating with private tea producers and on-selling of finished tea to supplement their limited production capacity. So it's not surprising that the teas have slight differences in blend style.

The blend style of standard edition early-period Red Mark cakes can be classified into two types:

1. A blend with a high ratio of buds.
2. A blend that uses larger leaves.

The "Little Bit of Red" early-period Red Mark teas are made using more buds, but have a different flavor when drunk. If you compare them to other Red Mark teas, they show the difference in quality between Red Mark teas, which leads us to the following conclusion:

The diversity in blend styles is sufficient proof that Red Mark teas are not all of the same vintage, but were made over a certain period of time.

The method I use for distinguishing the teas is to classify the early-period Red Mark cakes into three basic categories of blend style. Actually, we could further divide these into sub-categories, but since our senses have their limitations, it makes sense to stop at three. The most important thing is to clearly convey my main point, which is that Red Mark Round Cakes, although they are all of a consistent quality, display much variation in terms of flavor. One only needs to taste them attentively and with an open mind to see the truth in this statement.

In terms of the printing on the wrappers, early-period Red Mark can be divided into the two categories/editions we mentioned earlier:

1. "A Little Bit of Red" Edition
2. Standard Edition

In terms of the paper type, early-period Red Mark can be divided into three categories:

1. Handmade thick-fibered paper
2. Handmade thick cotton paper
3. Handmade thin cotton paper

In terms of blend, early-period Red Mark can be divided into two categories:

1. Using more buds
2. Using larger leaves

In today's puerh market there's an overwhelming demand for early-period Red Mark; in the newer markets in China's big cities there's an especially enthusiastic search for information about Red Mark Round Cakes. On the Taiwanese market, the price of early-period Red Mark is fairly consistent, at around half the market value of Grade A Red Mark. "A Little Bit of Red" edition Red Mark teas, on the other hand, are very scarce, so the market value is the same as that of standard edition Grade A Red Mark. The above can serve as an approximate reference for the current state of the market, with the exception of teas that have been subject to inferior storage conditions.

Mid & Late Red Mark

Mid- and late-period Red Mark teas are those which are generally acknowledged to be of a later vintage; at the latest, we can estimate that they date to the trial production in 1958 of "overseas export round tea cakes," meaning that these teas were being produced over a period of about seven years. This represents more than half of the total production period of Red Mark Round Cakes, so the amount of mid- to late-period Red Mark is also equal to about half of all the Red Mark in existence. Its production period overlaps with those of Pink Edition Blue Mark Grade A and B Round Cakes and Green Mark *Tie Bing*. But because it was still made with the same blend style as the early-period Red Mark, the quality was consistently high.

Add to this the fact that Red Mark teas have already been around on the market for a long time, and the result is that mid- to late-period Red Mark is now very scarce. Because of this, with the exception of Grade A Red Mark, the market value of early- and mid-period Red Mark is really about the same, while late-period red mark is worth about 15% less. In my opinion, though, because of the limited quantity of Red Mark in general, in the future it will be difficult to make these sorts of finer distinctions. However, from a scholarly standpoint, a systematic classification and discussion of the different types of Red Mark tea and their quality is still very important in order to establish the right values on the market.

The division between mid- and late-period Red Mark is mainly based on changes in the lettering printed on the wrapping. In fact, in terms of "standard product" Red Mark, the quickest way to get an initial idea of the vintage is simply to take a look at the packaging—what do the characters look like? The reason for this is that the paper wrappers were hand-printed using wood-block printing methods, so the more prints that were made, the fuzzier veins of ink appeared around the edges of the carved pattern. After a certain period of time the carved wood block would need to be neaten up around the edges, resulting in an increasingly thinner font, which became the main way to distinguish Red Mark teas. It's worth emphasizing again here that I am simply presenting a systematic discussion of the ways to distinguish Red Mark teas; I didn't invent these methods—they've been established for quite some time. According to my experience of drinking Red Mark tea, this method of classification is both relevant and reliable.

If we take the wrapping as our yardstick, the principle of categorizing Red Mark Round Cakes into early-, mid- and late-period teas is that the wider the printed red characters are, the older the tea. You can see this at a glance from the pictures below.

Mid- and late-period Red Mark tea appears to have already grown out of the green, astringent phase and settled into an aged flavor. Popular opinion among aged puerh tea cake tasting circles holds that among all the

紅印和藍印之比較 COMPARISON OF RED & BLUE MARK



Red Mark leaves



Blue Mark leaves



Fu Lu Gong tea tong (for comparison)



Red Mark tong



Blue Mark tong



Red Mark cake



Blue Mark cake

茶 This is a comparison of Red and Blue Mark cakes. The Red Mark cakes' blending is obvious as the buds are apparent and predominant. The processing is also better and the grade of tea higher, which is obvious from looking at the leaves. The buds are arranged clockwise, spiraling. They resist the compression, as they are juicy and bright. The Blue Mark leaves are larger, from later in the season, with less buds. The edges of Red Mark cakes are reddish from the juice and buds, whereas the Blue mark cake is dark near the edges. The tong/bamboo wrapping of Red Mark is softer than Blue Mark, which is more stiff.

50 to 60-year-old aged puerhs, the Red Mark Round Cakes from the state-run tea factory era are the most consistent in quality. This is one of the main reasons why Red Mark is such an important category of tea, along with its historical significance in marking the beginnings of the state-run tea factory.

Of the many teas produced by private businesses that are now known as "antique teas," those that surpass Red Mark Round Cakes are so few that you could count them on your fingers. On the Taiwan and Hong Kong market, Red Mark Round Cakes are the standard for differentiating aged teas—anything older than Red Mark

is considered "antique tea." Personally, I refer to any of the privately-produced teas younger than Red Mark Round Cakes (whose production period overlaps with Red Mark) as "antique-like teas," meaning that the packaging style resembles that of the antique teas. Some examples are Fu Lu Gong Cha Tribute Tea, Tongchang Huangji Blue Round Cakes and Sipu Gongming Tribute Tea, all of which are somewhat younger than Red Mark Round Cakes.

They are also priced lower than Red Mark Round Cakes, which goes to show that the market is quite fair—if you're thinking of buying some cheap "antique-like" tea, it's really more

worthwhile to buy a Red Mark Round Cake instead, thanks to their consistent quality. This tea is rich and robust in flavor, with an enchanting hint of orchid emerging through its strong plum-camphor aroma. Just as robust is the bright and rousing red of the liquor, an image of steadfast passion and vitality, reminding us of the hardships and chaos that the China Tea Corporation survived through. This moving color, the red of the rising sun, carries a lot of memory and emotion.



THE MASTERPIECE ERA

BLUE MARK

This section is also from Master Chen Zhitong's book "The Pro-found World of Chi-tze (深邃的七子世界)," which is one of the most important books on puerh in the tea world. There is a great depth of wisdom here, and a window into another era of tea, both in terms of the Red and Blue Mark cakes, but also to the time the book was written, in the early 2000s, when such teas were more readily available,

茶人: *Chen Zhitong* (陳智同)

Blue Mark tea cakes, like Red Mark Round Cakes, were named after their packaging. The term "Blue Mark," as it is currently used, does not strictly denote only Blue Mark Grade A & B Round Cakes—rather, it's a blanket term used on the market to refer to a range of teas that came into circulation after Red Mark Round Cakes. It really just refers to the general category of Blue Mark teas, rather than distinguishing in detail between the different types of packaging.

The name "Blue Mark" (*lan yin*, 藍印) originated from the consumer market. Unlike the term "Red Mark" which came from the Hong Kong market, the "Blue Mark" name came from the Taiwanese market (in fact, in the early Hong Kong market it was called "Green Mark," which is actually a slightly more accurate description because of the green "tea" character in the Eight-Zhong logo on the packaging). The main reason for the name is that the majority of teas that entered the early Taiwanese market were Blue Mark Grade A & B, which are different from other products in the Blue Mark tea category. Blue Mark Grade A & B Round Cakes have the words "Grade A (*jia ji*, 甲級)" or "Grade B (*yi ji*, 乙級)" printed on them, and the characters have been stamped over with a rectangle of striking dark blue ink.

But the blue color has faded with the passing years, and the characters underneath stand out as clearly as ever, as if mocking this futile cover-up attempt that only succeeded in making them even more conspicuous.

The name of these Blue Mark Grade A & B Round Cakes got around quickly, and from then on, any teas in the Blue Mark family that were imported from Hong Kong's tea houses were collectively called "Blue Mark" (some examples are Artistic Font Green Mark Round Cakes and Song Font Green Mark Round Cakes). In my view, since the collective "Blue Mark" term is already well established on the market, we might as well honor the existing usage while also adding a definition and a more detailed classification system to contribute toward improving the transparency of information available on the market.

The teas in the Blue Mark family include Blue Mark Grade A & B Round Cakes, Artistic Font Green Mark Round Cakes and Song Font Green Mark Round Cakes. To start off, here are the common features of the packaging of these three teas:

1. All Blue Mark tea cakes have the words "China Tea Corporation Yunnan Branch" (中國茶業公司雲南省公司) printed in red characters. The Eight-Zhong logo is different from

the all-red one that is featured on Red Mark Round Cakes: in the center of the circle of red *zhong* (中) characters (meaning "China"), the *cha* (茶) character (meaning "tea") is green instead of red. Similarly to Red Mark Round Cakes, there is no Roman Pinyin/English lettering, only Chinese characters.

2. There are two different fonts that can appear on the packaging: Song Font and Artistic Font.

3. The wrapping is all made of hand-made cotton paper, of which there are two types: thin handmade cotton paper and thick-fibered paper.

4. In terms of the printed text, the tea cakes can also be classified into two editions: Peach and Vermilion editions.

After Blue Mark tea cakes had appeared as a successor to Red Mark Round Cakes, teas produced by the state-run tea factories gained the most market recognition. However, Blue Mark Grade A & B Round Cakes, Artistic Font Green Mark Round Cakes and Song Font Green Mark Round Cakes are completely different in terms of vintage and blend style; they were produced over different time periods and have their packaging styles.





藍印





Artistic Font Peach Edition



Vermillion Edition, Grade B

茶 All the Blue Mark cakes have the “China Tea Corporation Yunnan Branch” (中國茶業公司雲南省公司) printed in red characters, but the “Eight-Zhong” at the center changes from the red mark cakes of earlier in the period to a green one. There is no Roman Pinyin or English, which is one of the characteristics that distinguishes the Masterpiece Era cakes from the later Chi Tze Era cakes. There are two different fonts: “Artistic” and “Song.” There are also Peach and Vermilion ink styles.



茶 The paper is handmade cotton, like Red Mark, but is divided into thick and thin styles. Above left we can see the blue stamp from which this tea is named. To the right is Red Mark for comparison. Below left is thin paper, and to the right is the thicker version, which has apparent fibers in it.



So there isn't much consistency or continuity in the quality of Blue Mark teas; this is also an important characteristic of the Blue Mark family of products, and has afforded the subsequent generations of tea lovers the added delight of predicting and imagining what a certain tea will be like. Beneath the fragrant, curling tea steam, this anticipation really brings out the joy and warmth of tea collecting.

The products in the Blue Mark tea family can be classified according to two different types of paper wrapping, four categories of text and two different printing styles. Here is some more detail on these distinctions:

1. Four categories of text on the packaging: Blue Mark cakes can be divided into Blue Mark Grade A Round Cakes, Blue Mark Grade B Round Cakes, Artistic Font Green Mark Round Cakes and Song Font Green Mark Round

Cakes. Later in the article we will look at them one by one for a more comprehensive understanding of each.

2. Two printing styles: The cakes can basically be categorized into the Peach/Pink Edition (*taohong ban*, 桃紅版) and the Vermilion Edition (*zhuhong ban*, 硃紅版). According to my years of experience drinking these teas, the Peach Edition teas tend to be of an earlier vintage, while the Vermilion Edition teas tend to be somewhat later, so we can use this feature to make a rough classification.

3. Two types of paper: The paper type can be roughly divided into thin cotton paper and thick-fibered paper. The majority of Peach Edition wrappers are printed on the thin cotton paper, while the Vermilion Edition teas tend to have the thick paper. In reality, the thickness and fiber density of hand-

made paper doesn't necessarily follow a regular pattern, but we can still make a basic analysis based on the examples we have. It shouldn't be very controversial to include paper type as an element to consider when attempting to classify these teas.

Vintages of Blue Mark

The production period of Blue Mark teas basically stretches from the time of the re-opening of the Hai Tea Factory in 1950 until 1958, the time of the trial production of Seven Sons tea cakes (*Chi Tze Bing*, 七子餅) for overseas sale. The Peach Edition cakes date to the earlier years, so before 1955, while the Vermilion Edition cakes are likely from the later years, 1955 onwards. (This is being proven by new information uncovered through shipping receipts.)



茶 These are all Grade A Blue Mark cakes. The top version is the Peach Edition and the bottom is the Vermilion Edition. The top is thin cotton paper, and the bottom is thick with visible fibers. Blue Mark tongs are softer and thinner than Red Mark, but, as you can see, the bottom Vermilion Edition has a much thicker bundle than the Peach Edition above.



The general market opinion is that Blue Mark Grade A & B and Artistic Font Green Mark cakes are of an earlier vintage, with the added distinction between the Peach and Vermilion editions, and that Song Font Green Mark cakes were produced later. Although the Peach Edition teas are really quite good, they didn't appear on the market until later so don't have as much market recognition; likewise, the "brand power" of Song Font Green Mark cakes has suffered largely due to their inconsistent blend quality. But it's important to consider the changing production environment of the period in a discussion of Blue Mark tea vintage. Here are some of the relevant points:

1. From 1951–1956, when the People's Republic of China was newly established, manufacturing conditions were poor, so the factory subcontracted private tea producers to bolster pro-

duction volume. Because the tea was all handmade, the output wasn't high, and after production resumed, the factory's technical and management staff had all changed. To get back on track to large-scale production would of course take some time, so it's easy to see why output wasn't high during that period.

2. The private enterprises stopped producing tea in 1956, which indicates that production at the state-run factory had stabilized. Since the unstable production conditions of the preceding years had gradually been overcome, output was naturally higher at this point than in previous years.

3. The production period of earlier Blue Mark teas overlaps with that of late-period Red Mark Round Cakes, and it's generally recognized that Peach Edition Blue Mark Grade A & B

Round Cakes and Artistic Font Green Mark Round Cakes are of the same vintage as late-period Red Mark. These teas all display very similar qualities; one only needs to taste them to recognize this prevalent system of classification has a well-considered foundation. Of course, this well-established classification system has had an influence on the market status of these teas, and on their price.

In summary, throughout the early market when there was a lack of clear information, Blue Mark cakes did not have nearly as stable a value as Red Mark tea. This was partly because Blue Mark teas were more numerous, and partly because a dozen or more years ago, the Vermilion Edition Song Font teas had not yet aged for long enough to lose their green, astringent quality. Only a few seasoned tea enthusiasts knew of the Peach Edition Blue Mark.

They had aged for longer. And, on top of all this, the blend quality of Song Font Green Mark was quite inconsistent. Thus the category of Blue Mark teas took shape, but only Blue Mark Grade A & B Round Cakes and Artistic Font Green Cakes really flourished on the market. Today, however, all teas in the Blue Mark family have now graduated past the green, astringent stage, and as a category they are already quite rare; because of this, Blue Mark teas have now established an enduring reputation among aged teas.

Blue Mark Grade A & B

According to the recollections of Hong Kong's tea house owners of the era, Blue Mark Grade A & B tea cakes were born out of a need to differentiate new tea from the existing Red Mark teas. After the establishment of the People's Republic, when director Tang Qingyang (唐慶陽) oversaw the factory revival (including resuming production of Mount Nannuo Tea), the factory focused on producing tea using raw leaf from the area around Mount Nannuo and Mount Bada. So, to distinguish this tea from Red Mark, they made the “tea” character (茶) in the center of the Eight-Zhong logo green instead of red. Later, market prejudice between the grades caused some complications, so they stamped dark blue ink over the Grade A & B characters to conceal them and packaged the cakes up for sale with both grades mixed together. Given the circumstances at that time—the tea house owners recall that only those who were sufficiently left-wing in their political leanings were even able to purchase tea—it's quite believable that this sort of thing might happen.

So, from observing the teas themselves and using information from other sources, we can reach the following conclusions:

1. The processing method used for Blue Mark Grade A & B Cakes was very likely that of the first batch of tea in the early days. There are two possibilities: (1) that it was made using an experimental processing method, and (2) that it was a made-to-order tea commissioned by Hong Kong tea merchants from the provincial branch of

the China Tea Corporation, but later on the packaging paper still remained even after the tea was no longer in supply. So, although there are Grade A and B versions of this tea, there isn't much difference between the two. In his book *Puerh Tea* (普洱茶), Mr. Deng Shihai (鄧時海) expresses the same view. I can also endorse this opinion based on my own experience of drinking Blue Mark teas over the years.

2. The emergence of policies such as the compulsory mixing together of Grade A and B teas for sale goes to show that tea production during the early days of the Hai Tea Factory operated according to a production-driven model, and market demand couldn't exert any influence on the production unit. This environment was very different to today's situation, where every aspect of production—from the style of tea to the blend and even the shape—is dictated by market demand.

As we discussed earlier, the paper wrapping of Blue Mark Grade A and B Round Cakes comes in Peach and Vermilion versions; the bamboo outer packaging of the Peach Edition cakes is softer, while the Vermilion Edition has a more rigid bamboo bundle (*tong*). Since the Peach Edition cakes have soft bamboo wrapping of the same style as Red Mark Round Cakes, we can infer that the Peach Edition cakes are of an earlier vintage, since this was likely a result of adapting to the production methods already in use at the time—then as now, this is a natural rule of saving on production costs.

The blend style of Blue Mark Grade A & B Round Cakes is actually quite similar to that of Red Mark Round Cakes, but they are made using raw leaf from the coastal regions and display an excellent blend. The blend and leaf texture of the Vermilion Edition cakes is not quite as good as the earlier Peach Edition, and the ratio of buds is less pronounced; all in all they make for just slightly inferior drinking in terms of vintage and quality.

When drinking Blue Mark Grade A & B tea, the aged plum aroma is strong and singular, and the medicinal aroma is no less prevalent than in mid-period Red Mark; however, the flavor is a little one-faceted and not quite as rich and complex as Red Mark Round Cake

tea. However, as the tea has aged and grown out of the green and astringent stage, this singular character has gained a certain richness, adding to its full, robust flavor and heralding the emergence of another enchanting tea to enjoy in addition to Red Mark.

Blue Mark Grade A & B Round Cakes are the current market leaders in terms of value, mainly thanks to their unique packaging and comparatively early vintage. Peach edition Grade A & B Blue Mark is the market leader within the Blue Mark category, so in Taiwan the Peach Edition teas are valued about 10% higher than the Vermilion Edition. This also indicates that as transparency of information has improved, today's prices really are representative of the quality of the tea. I believe this is an inevitable market trend.

Artistic Font Green Mark

Artistic Font Green Mark Round Cakes (美術字綠印圓茶) are named for the artistic calligraphic script used on the packaging, which is the same font that appears on Blue Mark *Tie Bing* (“iron discus”) Round Cakes. It's generally thought that this has some connection to the Xiaguan Tea Factory—a theory that is worthy of discussion.

Up until 1984, all tea orders were handled by the Yunnan Province branch of the China Tea Corporation, which meant that the provincial tea corporation was also in charge of the packaging. So the “artistic font” used on the packaging likely represents the prevalent style when the tea was produced, and probably wasn't unique to the Xiaguan Tea Factory; however, it is very likely that the raw leaf did come from the Xiaguan area. This is also the reason why when I visited the Xiaguan Tea Factory in 2003, all the early-vintage teas in their collection didn't have any paper wrapping.

Artistic Font Green Mark cakes are easy to recognize amongst other Blue Mark cakes. The packaging of Artistic Font Green Mark tea cakes is all of the same style, design, printing and color, with the following features:

1. Thin cotton paper
2. Peach edition printing
3. Soft bamboo outer wrapping



Grade B Peach
乙級藍印桃紅版



Grade A Peach
甲級藍印桃紅版



Song Font Peach
藍印宋體字桃紅版



Artistic Font
藍印美術字



Song Font Vermilion
藍印宋體字硃紅版



Grade B Vermilion
乙級藍印硃紅版



Grade A Vermilion
甲級藍印硃紅版



茶 On the left is the Artistic Font Blue Mark, Peach Edition. It has handmade thin cotton paper, and a softer tong. To the right is the Song Font Blue Mark. The top is the Peach Edition and below is the Vermilion Edition. The top version has thick paper with fibers and a soft bamboo tong. The bottom also has thick paper with fibers, but has a harder bamboo tong. The Song Font Blue marks are considered lower quality for Masterpiece Era tea, falling somewhere between the Grade A and B Blue Mark cakes and Chi Tze Era cakes.



The uniform packaging of Artistic Font cakes reflects the early-period style, and the leaf and blend are different from most Blue Mark Round Cakes. They have a rich flavor, much livelier than that of Blue Mark Grade A & B cakes. However, they are also the rarest product in the Blue Mark family. Any of you who have tasted Artistic Font Green Mark Round Cake tea will no doubt have been drawn in by its unique sandalwood aroma (a variant of the camphor fragrance), and will know that it more than lives up to its artistic reputation.

The Artistic Font Green Mark Round Cake tea blend is reddish in color with quite a high proportion of buds, similar to Grade A Red Mark Round Cakes. The character of the tea is strongly evident in its mouthfeel, and it has a richly layered flavor. The leaf used for Artistic Font tea is probably from the Yibang area. Aside from its unique camphor/sandalwood aroma, it also has a faint medicinal fragrance. It's clear from drinking it that it differs in style from classic Yiwu teas; however from my long experience of drinking privately-produced teas, I've found that Artistic Font Green Mark

Round Cake tea has a similar flavor to Tongchang Huangji ("Yellow Mark") teas. It also bears similarities in aroma to Chen Yun Gui Mark tea—the only difference is in the degree of aging. This indicates a certain amount of continuity in tea-making in Yunnan; in the same vein, the packaging bears witness to the changes in the market and production environment over the years.

People generally like collecting rare treasures, and Artistic Font Green Mark Round Cakes certainly fall into this category. Minimal quantity and maximum quality guarantee a stable position on the market, and Artistic Font Green Mark tea is priced just as high as Blue Mark Grade A & B. What's more, it's also much rarer than Blue Mark Grade A & B, so on today's market, any Chajin who wishes to buy a cake of Artistic Font Green Mark tea will require a great deal of luck and tenacity.

No change in any element of tea production happens by chance; it's always due to some aspect of the manufacturing conditions or a shift in the market. It's for this reason that we endeavor to collate and make sense of the

available knowledge on these old teas, in the hope of offering a clear, calm spring amid the chaotic torrent of information.

Song Font Green Mark

Song Font Green Mark Round Cakes (宋體字綠印圓茶) are considered a fairly "standard" product within the Blue Mark family of teas. It's generally agreed that these teas, both Peach and Vermilion editions, were produced by the Hai Tea Factory between 1954 and 1960. Back when Song Font cakes first hit the market, they hadn't yet passed the green and astringent stage. In particular, the later Vermilion Edition cakes with thick-fibered paper wrapping fell well short of the earlier Blue Mark Grade A & B and Artistic Font cakes in terms of the aged flavor that comes out in drinking.

In my experience, Song Font Green Mark tea falls somewhere between the masterpiece-era "Mark" teas and the later Seven Sons *Chi Tze Bing* cakes. On today's lively market, Song Font tea is gradually gaining acceptance, irrespective of price or vintage. On the



early Taiwanese market, due to a lack of transparent information, Song Font Green Mark tea had a somewhat negative effect on the market value of Blue Mark teas as a whole. In fact, Peach Edition Blue Mark Grade A & B and Artistic Font Green Mark teas, as well as Red Mark, not only overlap in vintage, but also have a unique style; it's true that they were undervalued on the early market. However, there's one big difference between Red Mark and Blue Mark teas on today's market, namely that early-, mid- and late-period Red Mark Round Cakes are all very consistent in terms of quality and aging, and all fetch a similar price.

Within the Blue Mark category, on the other hand, Grade A & B Blue Mark and Artistic Font Green Mark have their own unique quality, while Song Font Green Mark is noticeably lower in quality. That said, given the rarity of these old teas, a lower price still has a certain appeal of its own, does it not?

The packaging of Song Font Green Mark Round Cakes is fairly uniform in style, with the printed wrappers displaying the typical features of "Green Mark" teas: namely, they are

made of handmade cotton paper, are hand-printed in the woodblock style, only have Chinese characters and don't contain any product information slips. However, we can certainly still make a few points about the characteristics of Song Font Green Mark Round Cake packaging:

1. Other than the fact that the lettering appears in Song-style font, the content is the same as on the Red Mark cakes. However, the colors of the Eight-Zhong logo are different from those of Red Mark cakes, with the central *cha* character printed in dark green instead of a uniform red.
2. Song Font Green Mark packaging can be classified into Pink/Peach and Vermilion editions, with the Peach Edition teas generally acknowledged as belonging to an earlier vintage. Although they are not as old as the Blue Mark Grade A & B and Artistic Font Green Mark teas, judging from the vintage and packaging they are still similar in style.
3. The paper wrappers are made of either thin cotton paper or thick-fibered

paper. Most of the Peach Edition Song Font cakes tend to be wrapped in the thin cotton paper, but be aware that this isn't true of all of them; in my experience there isn't necessarily a correlation.

Song Font Green Mark Round Cakes are the most readily available tea in the Blue Mark category, so they are more easily purchased than the other masterpiece-era "Mark" teas. Because of this, they are priced around 10–20% lower than Blue Mark Grade A & B Round Cakes and Artistic Font Green Mark Round Cakes—a reliable market response. But despite the greater volume of Song Font Green Mark, its quantity is still limited; in my opinion, Blue Mark teas were previously subject to significant undervaluation. Then, in 2003, when demand for old puerh (especially these masterpiece-era Mark teas in their original packaging) surged in Malaysia, Korea and large Chinese cities and people were buying it up at any price, the value of Blue Mark tea quickly stabilized.



TeaWayfarer

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 Gordon Arkenberg.

I was introduced to Tea through chance when offered the job as cinematographer on the documentary *The Meaning of Tea*. I was two years out of college and there is no amount of understatement to the fact that my professional experience was minuscule. On the other hand, there is no amount of overstatement to the fact that I was desperately in need of work and talked my way onto the job. The beauty of filming a documentary is that the work is a total immersion in the subject. So, what began as just another job in a freelance life, became a great treasure to me.

From afternoon tea in England, through the mint green tea in Morocco, to the whisked tea ceremony in Japan, there arose a common thread: a love for a plant and the compassion to serve it to others. Every country revealed a new historical facet and each person served a beautiful cup, but Taiwan is where I found the practices that resonated most. Each day we filmed in a new location and each night the sound recordist and I would stay up late into the night reconstructing that day's gongfu ceremony from memory and scrutinizing over the differences from the previous sessions. Even though we both lost valuable sleep, there was a childlike wonder to the tea practices we witnessed, and it took all our attention to grasp every detail. (If you are wondering why I didn't just review the footage each night, I should mention that all our tea ceremonies were filmed on 16mm film.) Returning to New York, I began meager steps towards looking for a community and serving gongfu tea to friends with all the unnecessary accoutrement foisted on me by the tea industry.

While working on the *The Meaning of Tea* was a fast and expansive introduction to tea, there was an unresolved question on my mind. While collecting and drinking tea with others is enjoyable, I didn't particularly enjoy the social preening involved in discussing, but more often arguing, over subjective qualities such as aroma and flavor. So, from where arose this oceanic calm I felt in preparing tea and the deep and intractable pull to serve others? Returning to Taiwan for another project in 2008, I had the great fortune of meeting Wu De and filmed him drinking tea up in the mountains. At this time, when Global Tea Hut was still a future dream, the stark difference between tea as a way of life and tea as a beverage reoriented everything I had learned.

I believe my attraction to tea is rooted in the way I approach photography and teach my Science of Cinematography course—as a practice with an emphasis on process and attention to both the general and particular. I learned to make photographs with analog technology, which has humorous parallels to Zen discipline. For instance, you only get a fleeting opportunity to expose a few frames of film so your attention



茶人: Gordon Arkenberg

must be attuned to every moment. The fact that one's images are not revealed until after film processing and printing requires a strict discipline and intimate understanding of the imaging chain. And yet, one must also learn the hard lesson that when you see a great image but your camera has the wrong type of film, you must let go of your attachment. There is even an alchemy to developing film and photo paper that has obvious parallels to brewing a cup of good tea.

There is so much to share through tea, most importantly the interconnectedness of all things. This is why I don't mind stories about Zen masters serving tea and perhaps even a well-placed koan to appear in the middle of my science class. Serving my students a bowl of tea at the break in class is an important pause in their hectic academic schedule and perhaps teaches them more than I did in the previous hours. My partner, Erika Houle, and I shared tea and our love at our wedding. With Global Tea Hut, we share a community that is as deep and wide as the sky. I could go on, but enumerating all the lessons I've learned from Tea would be akin to fitting an infinite universe into a finite space. Best to go have another cup of tea...

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Global Tea Hut is looking for an SEM and Facebook ad professional to help us set up and optimize evergreen SEM and Facebook campaigns in order to reach people we might not otherwise reach. We want to work with someone who is deeply experienced in this field, and who will be thoughtful and loving. Volunteers have done a great deal of the groundwork already. We need the right person to take their efforts the last mile. For compensation we can offer tea and a small monetary consideration. Let us know if you can help!



Wu De will be in Estonia and Holland this coming February. We hope to see some European friends at these events. The events will be in the second half of the month. Stay tuned to our website for details!



Check out our live broadcasts on Facebook, Instagram and soon YouTube, which we do every month. Also, check out our "Life of Tea" podcast on Soundcloud and "Brewing Tea" video series on YouTube!



We have created a vast array of teaware for this community, both for bowl tea and gongfu tea. There are also some amazing Light Meets Life teas this year, including a gorgeous shou puerh, some dian hong cakes, a sheng puerh and an aged Liu Bao as well!



We are looking for a PR person with experience who can help us spread the word about Global Tea Hut. The job entails contacting blogs, magazines and other periodicals to send sample issues to review, and trying to facilitate interviews for articles, radio, television, podcasts, YouTube channels, etc. Also, if you know anyone with a podcast or video channel who would fit us and would be interested in interviewing Wu De or another student, please let us know. Help us get the word out and grow this amazing community!

Center News



Before you visit, check out the Center's website (www.teasagehut.org) to read about the schedule, food, what you should bring, etc. Make sure you apply early for courses as they fill up fast. This is why we need a bigger, more awesome Center.



The schedule for the first half of 2019 is already posted on the website. There is no need to rush, though, as we will be using a new method for selecting participants in ten-day courses, considering for Global Tea Hut membership and duration of membership.



We have been contemplating a big decision for the last year, finally coming to a conclusion: Starting next year, in 2019, all ten-day courses at the Hut will be 100% tech-free, meaning no computers, cell phones or other devices for the duration of your stay!



We are saving up to buy or lease a van to drive you around during service periods and to take you to the tea farm and mountain to fetch water during courses.

December Affirmation

I am awake

Every day, I fall into an automatic zone, where I am acting based on the force of habit. I choose to be present and awake, to make time to be present and aware and to enjoy being present and aware so that my decisions are conscious.

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GLOBAL TEA HUT

TEA & TAO MAGAZINE

