

# THE SEVEN CLASSES OF TEA

## *A Map to the Land of Tea*

Perhaps a friend brought you to tea, or you were passing by a tea shop on some trip and your eye was drawn to a certain pot or cup; maybe the Eastern exoticism enticed you to tea—the rich flavors, aromas and sensations. And nothing has been the same since that first sip. The doorway cracked and you saw opened before you a vast and clear world waiting to be explored.

For thousands of years we've been ensorcelled by the Leaf: it has built and destroyed empires, been the currency of nations and wars, spanning the vast human spectrum from greed and selfishness to the highest of spiritual states. And when you include the hundreds of generations devoted to the farming and processing of tea, the creation of myriad teapots, cups, whisks and scoops, you can appreciate just how immeasurable the tea world is, as if looking into this new world you first only noticed that there were beautiful flowers and trees in the vicinity of the doorway, but later looked further and saw mountains and rivers, villages and cities beyond.

Amongst the many genres of tea, there is one called Oolong. Continuing our metaphor of tea as a land you've begun to explore, we might say Oolong is a city in this foreign place. Oolong is a great and bustling city, one of the biggest in Tea. It is grown on several mountains, one of which is the famed Mt. Wuyi province of Fujian, China. The Oolong tea produced there is called "Cliff Tea" or "Rock Tea" and is one of the brightest and richest of all Oolong teas. And there are hundreds of kinds of Cliff Tea, each with its own distinct bush, flavor, aroma, etc. The point being that one kind of tea, Oolong, is grown on dozens of mountains, and that any one of those mountains produces a plethora of teas, each an adventure in and of itself. We discuss this only to demonstrate just how huge the tea world is, encouraging you to develop an appreciation for the rich history, culture and spirit in tea, as well as a patience in your exploration, since there are lifetimes of tea to be drunk.

We know that many of you are just starting this journey into tea and thought it might be helpful if you had a rough map of the terrain to help guide you. Before we give you that, though, we thought the more poetic description of Her grandeur would inspire you to travel on. It is also important to note that the map is not the terrain, and the categories of tea we are using here, and their descriptions, are only general overviews. You'll need a more detailed map when you get to each of the tea cities, in other words. Some teas rest near the borders of one category or another, whilst a few defy all

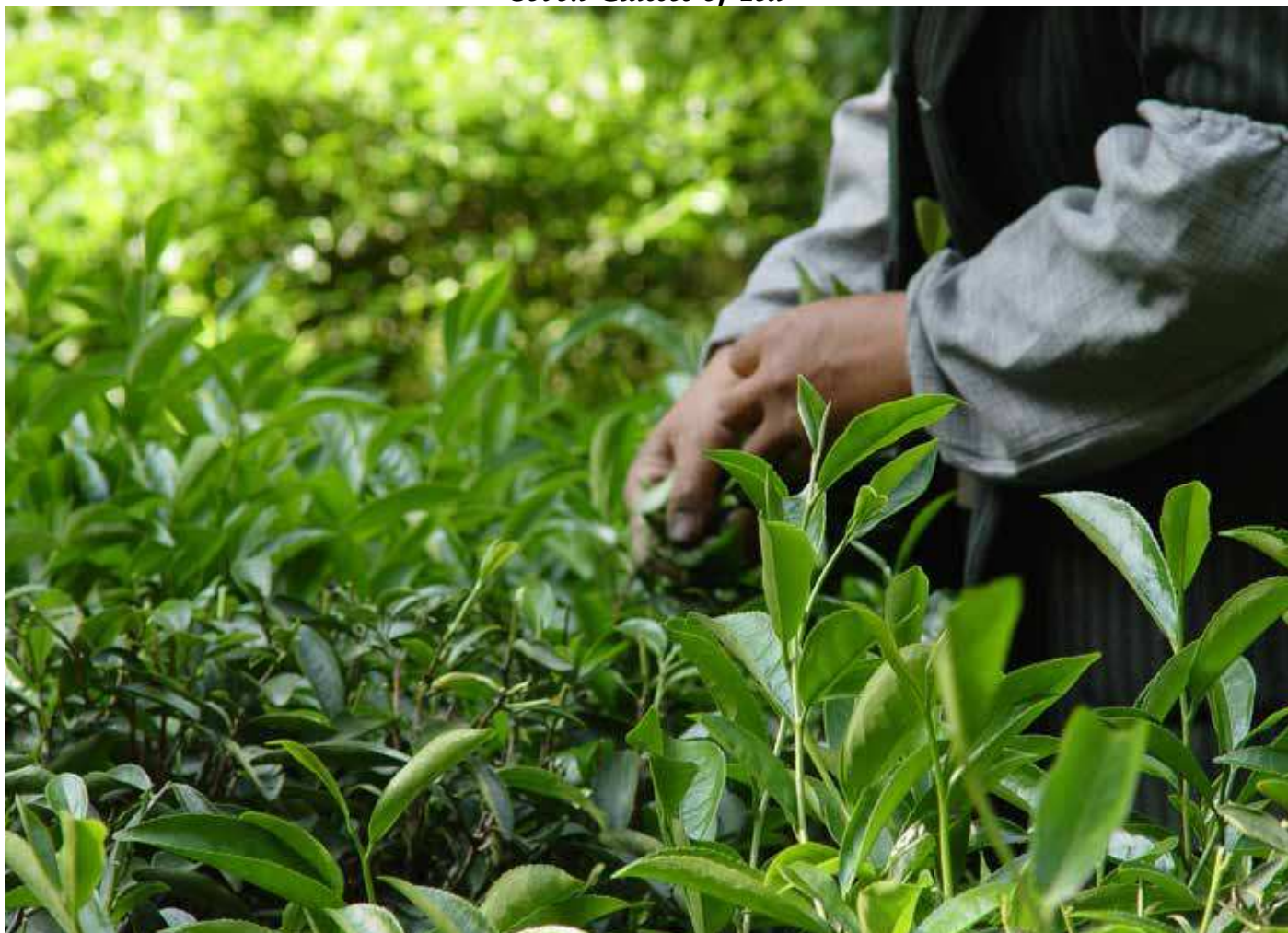
categorization, especially with all the experimentation that goes on in modern tea production. Nevertheless, knowing the different tea processing methods and the basic categories of tea can help start you off in the right direction.

Throughout history, different tea scholars have categorized tea into different groups—some have five, some six and some seven. It isn't important how many we use. For the purpose of this article, we'll be discussing tea in seven main groups: White, Green, Yellow, Red, Oolong, Black & Puerh.

Especially in the West, we find that there is sometimes a slight confusion in written tea materials about the nature of these categories. It is often said that all tea is a single species, *Camellia Sinensis*, and that the differences in the categories of tea are all to do with *how* the tea is processed. There is some truth in this, which is why it is so published throughout the tea world, but it is also potentially misleading as well. Let's clarify some of this before we map out each of the kinds of tea and their processing.

As we mentioned in previous articles, there are essentially two kinds of tea trees: small leaf and big leaf. The big leaf trees are the original tea trees. They have roots that extend very deep and straight down, and have a single trunk leading to their crowns. Small leaf tea, on the other hand, is more like a bush, with roots that extend outwards and many trunks. As tea migrated north and east from its birthplace in Southwest China—whether naturally propagated or carried by man—it, of course, adapted to the new conditions and climate (*terroir*) it was transplanted in. This movement towards a bush with smaller leaves was mostly to do with the colder and colder climates; and in fact, you can see that the leaves actually get smaller and smaller the further north tea migrates, until you reach Japan where the leaves are so small that when rolled they look like tiny threads or needles.

It can be confusing when tea people say that the categories of tea are strictly defined by processing methodology because the seven kinds of tea weren't invented at once, but rather evolved over time *in response* to the variations in the plant as it changed *terroir*. It is a very modern, and in many ways unhealthy practice to tell Nature what to do. Traditional farming was always about accepting the bounty of Nature with gratitude, rather than coercing her to give certain kinds of foods in certain amounts. Consequently, ancient tea farmers were conversing with their trees and adapting their skills to suit the tea they plucked. Cliff Tea processing



was developed in response to certain bushes, in other words. And while you could potentially process any tea in the world in the same way you process a Wuyi Cliff Tea—and some people are doing that very thing, even right outside Wuyi province—it will never be the same as genuine Wuyi Cliff Tea. So is Cliff Tea a kind of tree or a kind of processing? It's hard to say, which is why the issue is complicated.

In this day and age, farmers are more and more trying to set themselves apart by processing tea in unique ways: taking tea from trees that have been used to make Puerh for hundreds of years and processing the leaves like Red Tea, for example. And sometimes the results of these experiments are amazing—even beginning whole trends in the industry, like the movement towards greener Tie Guan Yin in Anxi province, as well as in Taiwan, over the last two decades. For the most part, however, these experimental teas rarely compete with the traditionally processed teas of a region. The fact is that the processing of each particular kind of tea evolved over hundreds of years by skilled craftsman who were conversing and listening to the local leaves and refining their skills to produce the tea in the way that best suits it. There are exceptions, however, and it is important for innovation to continue, especially when the adaptation occurs in the true spirit of tea.

We wanted to clarify that Taiwan Oolong tea, for example, is a kind of bush as well as a processing method (actually many kinds of bushes) before we begin exploring the different categories of tea. In this article, the seven kinds of tea we are discussing relate only to the processing methodology and therefore do not take into account all of the regional variations or the different kinds of trees there are in the world. We could easily have a hundred or more categories of tea, and this would then turn into a book. We think the analogy of a map is perfect here, as you can then think of this article as the most general of aerial views, showing only major mountains and big cities. As such, it is a good place to start if you are just getting to know the country, but eventually you will also want to get some more detailed maps that explore all the roads and lanes of all the big cities, and even the small hamlets as well.

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*White Tea*

White Tea is the simplest of all tea. All tea starts oxidizing the moment it is picked, but white tea is traditionally thought of as the least oxidized of all tea. There is, at least, no intentional oxidation. The tea is picked and dried. It is most often dried in a controlled way, though traditional White Tea was sun dried in the province of Fujian, where they say White Tea began. Like Green Tea, which we will discuss next, the highest quality white teas are often all buds, while lower grades contain a mixture of buds and leaves. The tea is called “white” because the buds of certain tea varieties have white hairs on them, which lend the small buds a whitish silver appearance. As there is no processing to break down the thick cell walls, the only way to get at the real juice of this tea would be to boil it, which no one does these days. Instead, we steep this tea at lower temperatures. This produces a light-yellow, golden to clear liquor that is often floral and fragrant. The Qi often enters the body through the aroma and/or mouth.

*Green Tea*

Green Tea has a bit more processing than White Tea. It is processed in many different ways depending on the region. Basically, though, it is picked and then goes through some form of heat to arrest oxidation. This could be steaming, baking or most commonly pan-frying. It is then dried. The best Green Teas are often also only composed of buds. If the Green Tea also includes leaves, it will be fried and then rolled before drying. The rolling breaks down the cell walls and oxidizes the tea slightly. The rolling for a Green Tea will always be significantly less than for other teas. The liquor of this tea can be clear to yellow or even vibrant green, depending on local variations. The Qi often enters the body through the aroma and/or mouth.

*Yellow Tea*

Yellow Tea is only produced in a few places and is therefore one of the rarest kinds of tea. It is almost always made of buds alone, requiring much more work than leaf and bud teas. It is processed a lot like Green Tea, with the added step of “sealing the fragrance”. This entails draping a wet cloth over the tea and steaming it. Tea is very sensitive to aromas around it, so the tea is in



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essence releasing and reabsorbing its own fragrance, or “sealing” it in if you wish. The liquor is golden and fragrant. Great Yellow Tea can be amazing. The Qi often enters the body through the aroma and/or mouth.

### *Oolong Tea*

Oolong Tea is the pinnacle of tea processing. It is the most involved of all the methodologies, and requires the greatest skill. Oolong is partially oxidized tea. As it requires the most complicated processing, there are also greater variations—minor and major—from region to region. Basically, Oolong Tea is picked and then goes through indoor and outdoor withering in order to dehydrate/soften the leaves and oxidize them. The most distinguishing feature of Oolong occurs during the withering, in which the leaves are shaken in bamboo trays to bruise the edges. The best Oolongs have a red ring around the edges of the leaves, as a result of masterful shaking. The shaking oxidizes the tea in a particular manner. The tea is then pan-fried to arrest oxidation and kill various green enzymes that make tea bitter. (Since green tea doesn't usually have this “kill-green” stage, it is often more bitter and astringent.) The fried tea is then immediately rolled to break down the cells and further oxidize the tea. Finally, traditional Oolong is charcoal roasted, though there are many greener, unroasted Oolongs around these days.

Oolong is either striped or balled. If it is balled Oolong, it is rolled into tightened balls of three or more leaves using a cloth wound up into a tight, round shape. This tradition began in Anxi, Southern Fujian and then spread from there to Central Taiwan. If it is striped, the rolling occurs across ribbed bamboo mats, which creates long, twisted stripes of tea.

There are many levels of oxidation in Oolong tea. It is a vast and populated city of Tea. There are so many varieties: from greener to traditionally roasted, striped to ball Oolong, and even Oriental Beauty, which we all drank together two months ago. Oolong is the most refined and elegant of teas, and best prepared gongfu style. It can be light or dark, and the Qi almost always flows through the aroma and mouth, rising upwards.

### *Red Tea*

Red Tea is what people in the West mistakenly called “Black Tea”. Of course, names aren't important. Tea is called many things in different languages—a rose by any other name... But in this case calling Red Tea “Black Tea” will cause you problems as you explore the world of tea, for as you can see below there is another genre of tea called “Black Tea.” And so if you call Red Tea “Black Tea” then what do you call Black Tea itself?

Some say that the reason for this error lies in the fact that Europeans carried the Red Tea back to Europe by ship, which took a long time and the environment in the cargo holds further oxidized, or even fermented the tea. Actually, the primary reason for the confusion comes from the fact that European traders were only allowed within two hundred meters of the dock during early trade with China. Consequently, they never saw the tea trees, processing, etc. and all they knew about tea came from the broken pidgin of the dock merchants that sold it to them. This, of course, caused all sorts of confusion.

Red Tea is picked and then goes through pre-processing piling. The tea is withered in deep piles for anywhere between twelve and twenty-four hours. This greatly oxidizes the tea. Then the tea is rolled for a long time—up to ninety minutes—which produces a thick paste on and around the leaves, further oxidizing the tea. Sometimes the tea is re-piled at this point to fully oxidize it. Red tea can be oxidized to various degrees depending on the region, but it is almost always the most oxidized of all teas, and often fully-oxidized. There are other variations in some regions, like smoking the tea to add flavor.

Much of the Red Tea in India, Sri Lanka and other places outside China is processed by machine in what is called CTC (Cut Tear Curl). This low-quality tea is shredded up and oxidized in machines, primarily for use in tea bags which are meant to release all the tea has to offer in a single steeping. We wouldn't recommend buying such tea, though.

The long rolling really breaks down the cell walls, which means they can release more of their essence. This is why Red Tea is richer, darker and has a more full-bodied liquor. Because of this, Red Tea is often best drunk in the morning. The Qi is often more in the body.

### *Black Tea*

Up until recently there weren't many kinds of Black Tea left in the world, and only three famous ones: Liu Bao, Liu An and Hunnan “Thousand Tael” Tea. Recently, however, a few older kinds of brick tea processing from other regions have been revitalized. The main characteristic of Black Tea is a post-production piling. Unlike the pre-production piling of Red Tea, this is more like composting and involves bacteria. It is therefore “fermentation,” rather than “oxidation.” The tea is usually processed by picking, withering, pan-frying and rolling. The methods of piling vary in each of these teas, but all require moisture and temperature to facilitate bacterial growth. The liquor of black tea is dark and rich, with a warming Qi that spreads out from the chest.

*Puerh*

Puerh Tea is sometimes put into the Black Tea category, but it should actually have a category all its own. Traditional Puerh is made from large-leaf, old-growth trees in Yunnan province, the birthplace of all tea. The tea is picked and then withered to soften the leaves and oxidize them a bit. This withering can be done indoors or outdoors, depending on the weather. Then, tea is pan-fried to kill the green enzymes and arrest oxidation. It is next rolled to break down the cellular structure and further encourage oxidation. Finally, traditional Puerh Tea is sundried. At this stage it is called “rough tea (*mao cha*).” Puerh Tea is then often compressed into cakes, but can remain loose as is.

Puerh tea is unique because the trees in the jungles of Southwestern China are covered in hundreds of species of molds and bacteria before the leaves are even picked. The relationship Puerh Tea has with these microbes is magical, allowing it to ferment over time as it ages. All tea can age, and improve over time, but none like Puerh. Puerh Tea transforms completely over time, changing from a bitter, astringent liquor to a deep and dark brew that is full of more Qi than any other kind of tea. Nowadays, tea drinkers mostly feel that even twenty or thirty-year-old Puerh is ancient. But there was a time, and not so long ago, when tea drinkers only drank Puerh Teas that were above seventy!

In the 60’s, and then officially in 1972, several Puerh factories were working to try to speed up the fermentation of Puerh artificially. Of course they weren’t successful. How could science ever create the magic of seventy or a hundred years? What they did do, however, was create a new kind of tea, called “Ripe Puerh (*shou*).” Ripe Puerh is processed like traditional “Raw Puerh (*sheng*)” only with the added step of post-production piling. They moisten piles of rough tea (*mao cha*) and then cover the pile with a thermal blanket, trapping heat and moisture and speeding up the bacteria’s work. This is much like composting. This idea to artificially ferment the tea post-production came from the Puerh factory owners’ and researchers’ trips to Black Tea factories. Because Ripe Puerh was developed out of Black Tea production, many authors put all Puerh in the Black Tea category. The problem with this, however, is that it ignores all the Raw Puerh (*sheng*), which is nothing like Black Tea; and is furthermore the traditional, and by quantity and quality the greater kind of Puerh Tea as well. It is, therefore, much more logical to give this unique tea its own category altogether.



