

Feature Story



MASTER TSAI YI TZE

LOST, TRAINED, FOUND

-Wu De

Many of you who have been to our center know about the great influence Master Tsai Yi Tze has had on all that we do. He is a teacher, a brother and a great tea sage—one that will surely constellate our sky along with the tea masters of ages past. He shares tea and wisdom with the kind of hospitality that most of us tea lovers have encountered in kindred spirits, as freely shared as the crown of leaves on a tea tree. When you begin to understand how lovingly tea longs to be human, you more easily recognize its spirit shining in the eyes of tea brothers like Master Tsai.

Master Tsai has studied tea for close to thirty years now. During that time, he has become a champion of the environment and very much a hero to all of us here in the Hut. He would bow and humbly step out of the way of our praise, not realizing how deeply we admire all he does, or how often his example is a beacon guiding us onwards.

If ever there was a tea master I long to emulate, it would be this man. His influence on organic farming and sustainable tea preservation has never ceased to inspire me. Master Tsai has done a lot to promote organic teas, helping farmers get certified, convincing them to change to sustainable agriculture, and even buying trees in Wuyi to protect them. He does a lot of work in sustainable tea production that we, as foreigners, could never do. And he does it selflessly and with a modesty that fills the room. We hope that all of you have the chance to meet and learn from him—to be changed by his wisdom and loving-kindness the way we have been.

Master Tsai donated this month's Old Man Dong Ding for all of us to share, so let's raise a cup to him as we are inspired by his life's work...

蔡奕哲





Hints of a Master

Master Tsai was born in Taipei in 1965. Both his parents were teachers at a primary school, and actually met and fell in love through teaching. He has one younger brother, who is also a teacher. But like most Chajin, any conversation about his background quickly shifts to tea. The only part of the story that matters is his beloved Leaf. He still recalls his first tea memory, and recalls it with the far-away-look of someone still crazy after all these years...

At around the age of five, as the seventies were just beginning to hint at a very different Taiwan, a young Yi Tze was spending a lot of time with his grandmother, as many young people do. She was a devout Buddhist, and would take her grandson with her to a small temple in San Xia. He loved the monks there, saying that when he grew up he realized that those monks were actually quite cultivated, with clear hearts and a compassionate selflessness that made everyone feel welcome. He recalls that his grandmother respected them, and that through her he learned to as well.

At the temple, they were offered tea while the adults spoke about Buddhism—a tradition that goes back more than a millennium. You have to wonder how many tea and spirit stories start with such a vignette: a young boy taken out into the mountains to meet monks, tea and quiet, heightened senses, a feeling of a sacred reverence in the ceremonies detected but not fully understood. And that sacred mystery peaking around the edges of his experience so invitingly, like so many adult things, enticed the young boy. Such a scene sets the stage for the life of Tea that follows in a very powerful way, and my imagination begins painting the gaps between his words with all kinds of detail: the old monk's smile, his grandma's weathered hands, the play of light from the

window, the humid forest around the temple...

Master Tsai must have been quite precocious, as he went on to tell me that even at five years old he noticed that the monks served tea with the same grace and kindness to every guest, regardless of their background. We all cherish the memory of a time adults respected us as equals; it's a sentiment that influences all children. But beyond that, there is a deep and powerful insight in the fact that such a young boy even noticed this. There is a very important *koan* in Zen in which the Zen master Zhao Zhou offers tea to different guests alike. (You can read a more in-depth commentary of the *koan* in my book, *Zen & Tea One Flavor*.) It conveys a lot of truth, but most obviously the equality of the tea space, where all our differences are set aside and we can all be monks and nuns for a short while. Master Tsai said that the monks' hospitality still inspires him today.

But let's not forget the tea! Though it is poignant to find out that Master Tsai was introduced to tea in a more sacred setting, it should also come as no surprise that he loved the tea as well. He said that his grandmother would use two bowls to serve him, worried that he'd burn himself the way any good grandmother would. She would add cooler water or tea to a hot bowl and let him drink it. He said that the fragrance was incredible, and helped him settle down. He also quickly noticed that the second, empty bowl held the fragrance longer and deeper, like a sniffing cup; and remembers spending a minute or two closing his eyes and taking deep smells of the fragrant oolong from the empty bowl.

In a montage of a tea master, we have to move from bowl to bowl, skipping over many aspects of a life to get to the leaves once again falling into another pot years later... This time it was when Tea began to speak



to the heart, inviting him to find his destiny.

The devotion of his youth never left Master Tsai, so it should come as no surprise that when we find him next he was in a college Buddhist study group. He studied engineering, which he says has influenced his thinking even until today. "I often have a logical, scientific outlook," he says. Despite the very linear career choice, he often considered becoming a monk. Whilst at his Buddhist study meetings, there was, of course, always tea. Master Tsai found that the tea upset his digestion, which was always sensitive. This would later become a very important fulcrum on which his whole tea journey shifted, but in college it meant that he couldn't join his brothers and sisters in drinking tea while studying. In order to feel a part of the group, he began serving the tea, and found that he loved pouring for the others. Like the monks that inspired his childhood, Master Tsai developed a deep love for the service



Master Tsai was given the first ever certification from the Taiwanese government as a protector of tea mountains. He tirelessly travels the island, and across the Strait, educating farmers and tea lovers on the importance of organic, sustainable farming.





“Tea is waiting for me.
Nature is waiting for me...”

aspect of tea. That spirit still shines now, though much brighter. There is an even greater joy in sharing tea than there ever could be in drinking it. As we always say, “we aren’t here to learn how to *make* tea, but rather *serve* it.” And though Master Tsai didn’t use our motto when telling us about his past, he embodies it, and obviously has for decades.

Behind Every Teacher

After college, Master Tsai worked for some years as an engineer, got married and had two lovely daughters. But we are Chajin, so our conversation once again returns to Tea, pausing only long enough to steep another cup... In the third important tea session of Master Tsai’s life, his lifelong commitment to environmental protection was born. In

1996, Master Tsai was visiting with a tea producer who offered him tea. He balked, describing how he got sick to his stomach whenever he drank tea, even a little bit. The farmer insisted that *this* tea was different, but Master Tsai knew that his digestive system was very sensitive to tea. After some time, he realized that it was very important to his host that he share some tea, and so he decided to have some out of courtesy, even if it did make him sick. To his shocking surprise, he didn’t feel uncomfortable at all—not even a little bit! Had he changed? Was this tea really special? After a few wonderful cups, each bringing back to him some of the sentiments of the lost fragrance he’d reveled in as a boy, he looked at the farmer in wonder. I imagine a deep smile of satisfaction as the farmer leans back in his chair to tell Master Tsai, “This tea, my friend, is *organic*!”

Master Tsai leans in towards me, smiling: “You see, when I had first started drinking tea in college, the Taiwanese tea industry was going through big changes. In the late seventies and early eighties they started using large quantities of pesticides, weed-killers and chemical fertilizers. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, many of the chemicals sold to Asia were suspect. Some were even found to be incredibly harmful later on. Furthermore, farmers always use such chemicals improperly when they first start out, applying too much of them or too often.” He says that the chemicals in the tea were the source of his discomfort. I agreed, having met many people myself who complain that drinking tea keeps them awake, gives them headaches or upsets their stomach. Oftentimes, these symptoms will completely vanish when they drink clean, organic teas.



With a new passion for tea, and the possibility of enjoying it once again, Master Tsai spent the next four years from 1996 to 2000 casually drinking tea on a more regular basis. He now knew what kind of tea he could drink, and set out on many journeys to various tea mountains seeking out organic farmers. He was surprised by the complete lack of organic tea—from Muzha in the north to Dong Ding and other areas, he couldn't find any clean teas, and many of the teas for sale in shops made him uncomfortable like before. When he would ask the farmers about it, they would scoff, telling him that organic farming was unrealistic, difficult or in many cases emphatically "impossible." He knew this wasn't entirely true since he had friends making organic tea. As he traveled, he felt a growing urgency to do something about the situation. In 2000, he started to become seri-

ous about tea, drinking more and discussing clean tea with his friends who grew organic tea. He says that he started thinking about leaving his job. As the thoughts increased in frequency and urgency, he started discussing it with his wife, until he finally made the leap in 2002.

For the first two years, Master Tsai didn't do very well in tea. "I am not much of a businessman," he says, and we'd agree—his heart is too big, especially in a competitive market like Taiwan. "For two years, until 2004, I also worked in a restaurant cooking. It was a lot less money for me and my family, but somehow felt closer to what I really wanted to be doing." He says that at that time, he focused a lot on the aspects of the restaurant that were related to his dream of opening a tea house. He learned a lot about the role of aesthetics in restaurant décor, food presentation and other arts that

would greatly encourage his mastery of tea and *chaxi*.

For many years, Master Tsai dreamt of a place where he could share his bliss with others. He knew that wisdom is nothing if not shared with the world. Of course, the Dao made way for him and his *Long Cui Fang* (龍翠坊) teahouse was created. The two characters "Long Cui (龍翠)" come from the classical novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. It was the name of the place where one of the characters, Miao Yu, lived. Miao Yu was the one who understood tea best. Amidst the hustle of Taipei, *Long Cui Fang* is a gem. There is no sign or billboard outside. It is tucked away in a small alley, and known only to those who seek it out. Tea is by appointment only, and when you arrive there is not any tea for sale on display, only spirit. His experience studying aesthetics is definitely evident



when you visit *Long Cui Fang*. Like any great tea space, full of spirit, you are immediately calmed upon entering. Everything is understated and so tastefully decorated to encourage a powerful tea session. And as a result, so many of our guests have had transcendent sessions here.

Nature Bodhisattva

In his quest to champion organic tea, Master Tsai went out into the fields, meeting farmers and their families to make changes. The next part of his story is a montage of him climbing mountains, driving the length of Taiwan and spending endless hours drinking tea, talking to locals about the importance of organic farming for the health of their families, their customers and Taiwan's beautiful mountains. For those of us who know Master Tsai, it's very easy to see him hiking trails, picking tea and laughing with farmers, as they become fast friends. He has worked tirelessly to make shifts in the Taiwanese tea industry, out of his deep love for Tea and Nature.

In 2013, the government of Taiwan proclaimed Master Tsai the first ever Protector of Tea Mountains (社團法人茶山保育協會); it is a well-deserved honor. In Sanskrit, "*bodhi*" means "enlightenment" and "*sattva*" is, amongst other meanings, a "warrior." Master Tsai is definitely a champion of Mother Earth, and a peaceful warrior we can all be inspired by, especially when it comes to his greatest creation, the masterpiece of love that won him this very award...

When we turn the conversation to what I believe to be Master Tsai's opus, his eyes light up like his even brighter smile. "Making organic tea is hard work, and farmers often have difficulty in the beginning." In 2013, Master Tsai began the Tea Mountain Preservation Society (茶山保育協會), which is a brilliant model for sustainable tea production that has the potential to

influence a lot of environmental work worldwide. He said the real insight for the TMPS began years earlier when he was traveling the breadth of Taiwan trying to convince farmers to try organic farming: "I realized very quickly that the key is and always will be the farmers' families. You see, if a farmer struggles to make fine organic tea it won't sell. And if the tea doesn't sell, the farmer's wife or father will question the change. They will criticize him for listening to a city person from Taipei, arguing that they don't understand the farmer's life." Master Tsai said that farmers often have trouble making as much tea for the first few years after they switch to organic farming, and that the quality often suffers as well. "With organic farming they could lose part, or even most of their crop to bugs, especially if their neighbors are spraying, which means more insects will come into their fields." And it takes more skill to process fine organic tea. "Facing the criticism of friends, family and neighbors who are succeeding with inorganic practices requires a much stronger determination than a lot of farmers have, and that means that many of them won't continue even if we do offer to buy their tea!" He says emphatically.

In 2012, Master Tsai had the idea for the Tea Mountain Preservation Society. "I knew that I had to think of a way of changing the farmers' minds. There had to be a way to make them try organic, sustainable tea production that would also satisfy their families, so that we wouldn't have to worry about them going back to conventional farming during the first few years, and the stress of the transition period which may result in less or even lower quality production." The TMPS works on a brilliant system that is so inspiring, and, as we said, has the potential to change a lot of environmental programs around the world: Master Tsai and the other members find a farmer willing to participate and measure



their acreage. They then determine an average amount of tea produced each year, both from interviewing the farmer about past harvests and through the amount of trees per acre. With that data, they can then determine the average amount of money he will earn per year producing tea. After that, they find twenty-five to fifty participants who like that kind of tea, from that area, and divide that amount of money amongst them, signing a five-year contract to contribute that amount every year. Then, they divide the harvest amongst the members based on whatever amount is produced that year. At the end of the five-year period, they can renegotiate with the same or different members. In this way, the farmer is being paid to steward the land, as opposed to earning money based on the weight of tea he or she produces. "Because of this payment system,



the farmer's family can rest assured that he will be paid the same amount, even if there is a drought, pest infestation or if the tea is not processed as well. They also don't need to worry about finding a market for their tea. Their money for the next five years will be secure. Such stability will bring peace of mind and the farmer can then focus on improving the quality of tea. And their family will also be happy!" Master Tsai says with the grin of an inner child.

The brilliance of Master Tsai's program is that it encourages farmers to get away from thinking in terms of amount/weight. Traditional farmers had sacred bonds with Nature, and were grateful for whatever they were given. When we demand an amount of produce from Nature, we often use unhealthy agricultural practices to get what we want, like spoiled children. This

often comes at a price that is detrimental to our Mother Earth. Paying farmers to be stewards of the land, and contractually obligating them to care for it in an organic, sustainable way for five years is a radical shift in philosophy and worldview that can effect amazing changes in the way the farmers relate to their work, and to the way that tea lovers purchase tea. For the farmers, it is a chance to have more stability and the financial freedom of a steady income no matter what amount of tea they produce each year. Master Tsai says that "once they are free of the whole concept of 'pay by weight' they can focus more on the land, and on the quality of the tea." And the tea lovers who support such a project will, of course, feel more connected to the tea they receive by participating in the story of change, visiting the farm and connecting with the farmer personally. They also will

be grateful for whatever amount of tea they receive, and treasure it all the more for the positivity that it represents. Such a tea is not only healthier for the body and the environment; it's healthier for the soul!

You will be pleased to know that we are working on developing a cooperative effort between Global Tea Hut and the Tea Mountain Preservation Society. We are hoping to start two five-year contracts with farmers: one that will be a tea of the month once each year, coming to you all with this magazine; and a second sponsorship that will be open to the participation of all our members, so that those of you who feel inspired to do so can have a more intimate connection with a farmer and receive some special tea as well. Stay tuned for more details about this in the coming issues and on our website!



Four Chapters

Master Tsai divides his life's work into four phases, each of which was important in his journey, and the creation of an organic legacy. The first phase was from the mid to late nineties to the early 2000's. During that time, Master Tsai was traveling the length and breadth of Taiwan trying very hard to convince tea farmers that organic, sustainable tea farming is not only possible, but that there is a market for it. "This was an uphill journey. Many places I went, farmers would sneer at the 'city man' who didn't understand, complaining that it would be impossible to make a living in an organic way." He says with great emotion. Through much effort, Master Tsai did win over more farmers than you would think one man could, but then again that man has one of the most heartfelt, infectious smiles I've ever known.

The second chapter in Master Tsai's tea journey is all about quality. He says that once he found some farmers who would make organic tea, he set out to improve the quality of the tea. He puts it quite plainly: "If organic tea is not as good, or even better than the alternative people still won't buy it." This meant educating himself on tea farming and processing, helping farmers to produce the kind of tea that the customers want to drink. This also meant a deep devotion to the aesthetics of tea and the preparation of fine tea. Master Tsai told me many times that his work in a restaurant to supplement his income helped teach him about décor, ambience and presentation, all of which lend beauty to a *chaxi*. "When guests have a better experience, and the tea is presented well, organic tea is respected the way it should be." We couldn't agree more!

Tea leaves are an unfinished product, which is where a lot of the charm lies; and the reason so many of us are seated around this Hut. Therefore, a lot of the quality

in the final cup depends on the skill (gongfu) of the one brewing. Training himself in tea brewing was also critical. Master Tsai has successfully created a beautiful, tranquil space in Taipei where people can drink fine organic tea prepared by master hands, fulfilling this part of his journey in the process.

The third bend in the road is tea mountain protection. Master Tsai has figured out exciting, progressive ways to protect tea growing areas in Taiwan, Yunnan and even Wuyi Mountain. As we discussed earlier, his preservation efforts have since resulted in the creation of the Tea Mountain Preservation Society (茶山保育協會), which now boasts several members. Master Tsai has recently handed over management of the organization to students so that he can focus on the most recent chapter of his tea book.

Master Tsai has made education the focus of his current work, teaching regular classes to local Taiwanese. He says that this is extremely important, "For as organic tea becomes more popular, and the market for it becomes more and more evident, sharks will be attracted. People will use 'organic' as advertising to sell tea. And some of it will be fake. We must therefore learn to distinguish what real organic tea is." When we asked him the best way to discern organic versus inorganic teas, his answer was simple, but resonant: "meditation." He said that meditation leads to the sensitivity needed to discern what is in tea. He teaches tea brewing classes, along with more detailed courses on appreciating and understanding organic tea.

Master Tsai has begun giving courses in Mainland China, Taipei and sometimes even on the radio in Taiwan. His influence on Chinese tea lovers is great. Though he can't teach most foreigners, he says that Global Tea Hut is one of the most powerful influences on sustain-

able tea in the world, and that as its support grows he sees a real chance for change through the impact this global community can make. He wanted you all to know what an honor it is to share this month's tea with you, and that you are always welcome to come visit him for a cup of tea if you are ever in Taiwan!

The Sage Becomes the Ordinary Man

Master Tsai's card expresses his philosophy best: "Lost, Trained, Found." In his words: "In this loud world, full of such dust, we all lose our heart (*Lost*), after cultivation (*Trained*), we again find our heart (*Found*). One day we naturally breathe in and then out, realizing that we actually never lost anything. Our Heart was always with us!" Sometimes Master Tsai and I have a deep connection, eye to eye. I think we both see Her in the other. During one such meaningful moment his eyes grew deep and far away: "I still have so much left to learn," he said with a heartfelt falter in his voice and the now moist eyes of a deep and lifelong Dao, "Tea is waiting for me. Nature is waiting for me..."

That She is waiting for us to show up more fully, train ourselves and be better people was one of the greatest lessons he'd ever taught me, reminding me just how much I love him and the Tea spirit that shines through him. She is, indeed, waiting for us...





*Watch Master Tsai at his
tea house now!*



www.globalteahut.org/videos