



TRACING THE HISTORY OF LIU BAO TEA

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Looking into future issues about Liu Bao, with a goal of moving deeper and deeper into the topic, including planning some trips there ourselves to cover spring processing, we thought it best to include as many articles as possible on the history and production of Liu Bao through time in this issue, exhausting all the different perspectives and accounts of the history of Liu Bao. Having learned about the history and processing methods from many angles, we'll be ready to travel there together next time. This article is one of our favorite summaries.

Liu Bao tea is renowned both in China and abroad for its rich history. It got its name from the place it was originally produced: Liu Bao Village (六堡鎮) in Cangwu County, in the Wuzhou City area of Guangxi province (“Liu Bao” means “Six Castles” or “Six Forts”). The mountainous region of Liu Bao is located near the Tropic of Cancer and has a unique natural environment with strong sunlight—wild tea plants have grown there for a very long time and were recognized and used by the early inhabitants of the region. A well-known tea expert from mainland China, the late Professor Zhuang Wanfang (莊晚芳), has determined that the history of Liu Bao tea production can be traced back more than 1500 years, based on studies of historical texts including the *Tong Jun Records* from the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Born in the embrace of Liu Bao Village’s beautiful mountains and rivers and destined to become prized around the world, Liu Bao tea was created through a union of nature and human culture.

The *Cangwu County Records*, published in 1697, the 36th year of the Qing Emperor Kangxi’s reign, contain the following excerpt: “The Liu Bao tea produced in Duoxian Village in Cangwu has a rich flavor that does

not change even when left overnight; the color and fragrance are excellent.” During the reign of the Qing Emperor Jiaqing (1796–1820), Liu Bao was classified as one of China’s 24 famous teas of that period, owing to its unique betel nut aroma. The following record appears in the *Guangxi Tongzhi*, a geographical reference book: “The production of Liu Bao tea is flourishing in Cangwu, especially the Six Castles (Liu Bao) and Five Castles (Wu Bao) teas from Duoxian Village. Liu Bao tea is particularly famous, and is selling in great quantities at ports in Guangzhou, Fujian, Hong Kong, and Macau.” Liu Bao tea was traditionally compressed into tea bricks using bamboo baskets, and the most highly regarded teas were produced in Gongzhou Village and Heishi Village within the Liu Bao township.

There’s a poem by famous scholar Cheng Yuandao (程遠道) from the late Qing Dynasty that goes: “The mountains are piled high with Liu Bao tea; it regulates digestion wonderfully. Drink a cup tonight while entertaining a lord; tomorrow the scent will linger on your teeth and cheeks.” In the past, since land transportation routes were not yet very developed, Liu Bao tea had to be transported to Guangzhou via waterways. During the late Qing Dynasty and the early years of the Re-

public, Liu Bao Village was producing bamboo, wood, and charcoal in addition to tea, and trade was flourishing. Guangdong tea merchants set up on Liu Bao Village’s Hekou Street to purchase Liu Bao *maocha*—unprocessed tea leaves—and then steam them in baskets to compress the tea. They used small boats to transport the tea leaves from the dock at Hekou to Cangwu County’s Li port, then packed them onto large wooden galleys to Fengkai County. From there the tea was taken on motorboats along the Xijiang River to Guangzhou, and finally exported to places like Hong Kong or Kuala Lumpur. This route became known as the “Ancient Tea-Boat Road.”

After 1951, when large-scale land reforms came along, farmers found themselves in possession of land. At this time, many farmers started planting tea bushes again, and the area of the tea plantations grew rapidly. By 1953, Wuzhou had more than ten privately-owned tea enterprises, large and small, with Liu Bao tea as their main product. For a long time these were mostly family-run tea processing workshops, which limited the growth of the Liu Bao tea industry. In 1954, the state began rapidly expanding the tea production industry and started to prohibit privately-owned tea businesses from purchasing the raw tea leaves.



茶 Qing Dynasty Liu Bao Production.

The state began to regulate the grade and sale price of the tea leaves and the Supply and Marketing Department was in charge of purchasing the raw *maocha*, which was all shipped to the Wuzhou Tea Factory for final processing. So it was that the production methods of Liu Bao tea in Wuzhou shifted from the traditional hand-processing that had been the norm for a long time to large-scale industrialized production.

The characteristic steps in traditional Liu Bao tea production are “heaping” (a process known as *wodui*, 渥堆, which involves fermenting in moist piles), compression by steaming, and aging—the longer the tea is aged, the better the quality. Liu Bao is widely described using a well-known set of words: “red, rich, pure and mellow” (*hong, nong, chen, hou*—紅, 濃, 陳, 醇). The traditional manufacturing process consists of the following steps:

raw leaves → *sifting to separate* → *heaping* → *initial steaming* → *steaming in piles* → *breaking up the piles* → *spreading out the leaves to cool* → *second steaming* → *packing into bamboo baskets* → *aging in storage*

The finished Liu Bao tea is divided into grades from one to five. The required qualities for a first-grade Liu Bao tea are as follows: the tea leaves should be tightly twisted and of even size and shape, of a blackish-brown color with a glossy appearance. The flavor of the tea should be mellow and rich with a betel nut taste, the liquor bright red, and the brewed leaves tender and evenly sized.

In recent years, Chinese black teas (as distinct from red teas) have become popular throughout the world and are increasingly sold overseas. Liu Bao tea has earned the esteem of many a tea lover thanks to its health benefits and distinctive character. The well-known general director of the Guangxi Tea Institute, Mr. Liang Yongliang (梁永良), compares Liu Bao tea to “black gold, with many health benefits.” The people of Wuzhou have a particularly high regard for aged Liu Bao, and have expressed their admiration with this verse: “When it touches your mouth you’ll have worries no more; when it lands in your stomach your spirit will soar.” With the enthusiastic support of both the Guangxi Autonomous Region and the Wuzhou City governments, the Liu Bao tea industry developed quite rapidly, and this ancient tea once again began to glow with youthful vigor.

In 2009, the Wuzhou municipal committee and city government published a document entitled *Decisions on promoting the industrial development of Liu Bao tea production*, which marked the beginning of a favorable period of rapid development for the industry. The consumer market expanded from the original two provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi to include more than ten provinces, cities and regions throughout China, including major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, and Xi’an. Both Liu Bao tea and some travel destinations connected to Liu Bao production were selected as part of Wuzhou City’s “Top ten fine foods and beautiful landscapes,” and the Wuzhou Tea Factory’s “Three Cranes” trademark was officially recognized as one of Guangxi’s famous trademarks. This treasured black tea from Guangxi has traveled a long path throughout history’s many seasons, and it seems Liu Bao tea is now welcoming a flourishing spring!

