



LIU AN TEA THROUGH TIME

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This historic tea, prized for its aged fragrance and rich, enchanting flavor, was once loved by Chinese Chajin everywhere. After a half-century of obscurity, its popularity was revived and it once again began to spread throughout China. The older generation of Chajin who still remembered the tea were overjoyed, and new tea drinkers were smitten; you could almost say it spread like wildfire. Across the channel in Taiwan, however, the tea has still not truly re-entered the market—there is hardly a trace of it. So, many An tea lovers across the strait can still but daydream about drinking this magical tea.

I first learned of Liu An tea in the early 1990s. At that time it hadn't been very long since China had opened up its economy to the outside world, and the tea industry was flourishing. Since I had been born into a tea family and had long lived in a tea-growing region (my hometown is the birthplace of Qimen red tea), and I had some experience of growing and making tea, I felt that I needed to do something to further the cause of tea. So, I started to dabble in all things tea-related. At that time, my neighbor, a fellow by the name of Huang You, happened to have an old tea-label stamp that had been passed down from his wife's family, and didn't know if there was any particular significance behind it, so he asked me to come and take a look, which I gladly did. The stamp was about the size of a cigarette box and was carved from camphor wood, with detailed pictures and script. At the top was a picture of two deer, with the character for longevity—*shou* (壽)—and the words "First-grade An tea" set in between. At the bottom were two phoenixes facing the sun, and between them were the words

"Genuine goods at a fair price." Along both sides were patterns representing the god of longevity, like those you see on old copper coins, surrounding the following words:

"This is Longevity brand tea, made with secret knowledge passed down through generations for well over a hundred years. This is the genuine article, famed throughout Guangdong, Hong Kong and trading ports everywhere across the oceans. The branches of the tea plants multiply day by day; each batch is slightly different. The leaves are carefully selected from trees that grow at Shouzhuo Mountain Lodge, irrigated generously until they flourish. Our label is always made with buds picked before the rains; when selected and processed with the right methods, the tea has an exceptional fragrance that lingers in the memory. Its benefits include dispelling dampness; it truly is a wonderful tonic, a pearl among An teas. Dear reader, you may inspect this product with your own eyes and take note of the authentic labels; this is a genuine top-grade tea. This is the solemn declaration of Li Xiaofeng, the proprietor of Shouzhuo

Mountain Lodge, Xin'an, Southern Qimen."

I asked Huang You where the stamp had come from; he told me that his father-in-law was from the south of Qimen, and that their family had once been involved in the tea business; their tea label was called Xiang Yang Chun (向陽春). Though I was baffled by the stamp, I was sure there must be more to the story behind it, so I asked Mr. Huang if he'd be willing to sell it to me. "It's a family heirloom," he responded, "I can't sell it." I saw that he meant it, so even though I longed to take the stamp with me, I couldn't bear to part him from his prized possession. Safeguarding history and culture to pass down to future generations is the mark of a person gifted with humility and honesty, and ought to be supported. So I asked if I could make a copy of the stamp's inscription to keep and Mr. Huang happily agreed. In those days, we weren't equipped with digital cameras and the like, so the best I could do was to take a rubbing of the inscription and illustrations. Ever since that day, I've felt a special connection to An tea.



Tracing the History of Liu An Tea

I started reading up about An tea in my spare time, and discovered that it was a famous historic tea produced in Qimen County's Changjiang river valley in Anhui Province. It had its heyday during the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties. It rose in popularity during the reign of Qing Emperor Yongzheng, flourished during the reigns of the Daoguang and Xianfeng emperors, then began to decline during the reign of the Guangxu Emperor, the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty, who reigned around the turn of the century. Then, during the period of unrest, beginning with the Sino-Japanese war in the 1930s and 1940s, An tea was lost altogether. The elegance and charm of this tea saw it make an appearance in several literary classics, including *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, and *The Scholars*. It continued to sell reasonably well up until the 1930s. In 1932, a volume entitled *The Qimen Tea Industry* was published, detailing forty-seven An tea

businesses that were active at the time. Most of their brand names were based around one of two words: either *shun* (順, meaning “favorable”) or *chun* (春, meaning “spring,” as in the season). There were about thirty brands with names incorporating *shun*, and about six with *chun*.

Among the *chun* brands was Xiang Yang Chun—the same name that my neighbor Mr. Huang mentioned in connection with his wife's family. According to the records, the Xiang Yangchun brand was situated in the southern village of Rongkou, not in the fabled “Shouzhuo Mountain Lodge.” I also learned that traditional An tea has three different labels: one on the top of the packaging, one in the middle, and one on the bottom. The stamp that Huang You's family had was for printing the bottom label. Discovering these details made me realize how much depth there was to this tea—it was certainly worth the time to explore its origins! It wasn't long before I also found out the story of how Luxi Village had set out to revive the lost art of An tea production. The initiative behind this began with one Mr. Guan Fenfa

(關奮發), a well-known tea master from Hong Kong. He sent a basket of old An tea to mainland China, as a token of the fervent hope of tea lovers throughout Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and Southeast Asia that this revered tea might be produced once more. Upon hearing this story, I got the feeling that I was definitely putting my energy in the right place, and my enthusiasm redoubled. From then on, I threw myself wholeheartedly into pursuing knowledge of An tea, determined to get to the bottom of its fascinating story.

The first time I encountered An tea in person was in May of 2002, at Anhui Province's first Tea Expo, held in the city of Wuhu. I lead a group from Qimen to attend the Expo. Among them was an An tea merchant who, upon seeing me gazing longingly at the baskets of An tea, promptly gifted me a basket. I was so attached to this basket of tea that I placed it on a bookshelf so I could stare at it lovingly from time to time, and couldn't bring myself to open it. Finally, one day, the allure of the tea got the better of me and I opened the bamboo basket.

As soon as I tasted that rich, red liquor with its faint scent of bamboo, I was instantly captivated, and surrendered myself willingly to its charm. Afterwards, I found out that these small baskets of An tea, with their bamboo lining are supposed to be stored for two to three years before they're considered suitable for drinking. It's a tea that becomes richer and more fragrant with age, and won't spoil or go moldy. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, it's considered to have cooling properties, which means it's good for dispelling excess dampness and internal heat. As well as being brewed for drinking, it can also be added to medicines as a "guiding drug" to aid efficacy. In Southern China and Southeast Asia, people have even honored it with the title "sacred tea." All this made me realize that my knowledge of An tea was still not deep enough. I was trying to understand An tea without ever witnessing the manufacturing process firsthand; if you don't have a feel for the tea on an emotional level, how can you hope to gain a deep understanding of it on a rational level?

My Dedication to Exploring An Tea

Finally, there came a day when I had the opportunity to visit Luxi Village, the home of An tea. The village leader greeted us warmly and took us to the Sun Yishun Tea Factory. There, surrounded by bulging bags of tea and brimming baskets suspended from beams, I finally experienced the rich smell of An tea firsthand. The tea master who greeted me was named Wang Zhenxiang (汪鎮響). He told us that he had worked in the village administration in the early years, and had a hand in the revival of An tea production. After many years of hard work, in 1992, he finally obtained an official certificate of approval from the Ministry of Agriculture, and from 1997 onwards, he served as the registered agent of the Sun Yishun Tea Factory corporation.

When I enquired about the factory's current output, Mr. Wang told me that the yearly output of the whole village was around 200 tons, of which his factory produced about

50 tons. He also told me about the five different grades of tea: *tegong* (特貢) or "special tribute" grade, *gongjian* (貢尖) or "tribute tip," *maojian* (毛尖) or "downy tip," then first grade and second grade. I asked about the manufacturing process, and he explained that there are two main phases to it: initial processing, then refining, with fourteen different steps altogether. As for the raw tea leaves, Mr. Wang explained that An tea is not, in fact, made from leaves harvested from old mountain trees, as folk wisdom erroneously purports, but rather, from top-quality buds and leaves harvested in the ten or so days around the *Guyu* solar term, which falls in late April to early May. He also told us a story about the bamboo baskets that An tea is packaged in. Legend has it that Yan Xishan, a warlord who ruled in Shanxi Province for most of the early half of the 1900s, was particularly enamored by these baskets, and would drink a basket's worth of An tea every month, which is why people designed this type of packaging.

After exploring the Sun Yishun factory, we also paid a visit to Jiangnan Spring; established in 1992, it was Luxi's earliest An tea factory. It's quite a large-scale factory, and very orderly: upstairs were row upon row of An tea baskets stacked neatly, waiting to be shipped—it seemed that sales were doing well. The factory head, named Wang Shengping (汪昇平), was the nephew of Sun Yishun himself, the originator of the well-known brand name. I had learned of Mr. Wang quite a while ago, as he had earned quite a lot of recognition in relation to An tea, including the official approval of the Ministry of Agriculture, as well as industry awards. He patiently answered all my questions, all the while bringing out one tea vintage after another to satiate my curiosity. I found that the two-year old An tea was slightly sweet, whereas the four-year-old tea was richer in flavor; there was also a noticeable difference in the color of the liquor. I asked Mr. Wang whether he thought my impressions were correct. Rather than answering directly, he informed me that the fragrance of An tea was usually likened to the scent of camphor, or sometimes ginseng. All in all, the visit left a deep impression on me. I gained a lot of knowledge and



self-confidence—and became even more infatuated with An tea!

Not long afterwards, an old village leader from Qimen learned that I was researching An tea, so he recommended that I write an article on behalf of Luxi Village, introducing An tea. He also lent me some reading material. It was an issue of a Taiwanese tea magazine called *The Art of Tea: Puerh Teapot*, with a special feature of more than a hundred pages all about An tea. In the colorful and detailed spread of articles, various Taiwanese Chajin evaluated and reflected on An tea. From those pages I learned that this tea variety has many different names: Taiwanese people called it Liu An basket tea; overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia knew it as Anhui Liu An tea, or Hui Qing, or "a distant relative of puerh;"



茶 Finished Liu An tea waiting to be packaged into baskets.

people in Hong Kong and Macau called it Anhui Liu An bamboo rain hat tea, or aged Liu An tea, or old Liu An; while people in Southern China sometimes referred to it as “dwarf tea.”

Reading all these fascinating stories, so rich in detail, opened my eyes and moved my spirit. I gained a deep appreciation for the influence and appeal that An tea holds in Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau. It really represented much more than just a tea—it carried with it a deep sense of history, culture and feeling. I could feel that An tea—with its hundreds of years of history and its warm amber color, its flavor similar to puerh and its profound cultural significance—had the power to soothe my organs, heighten my perception, and move me deeply. With the

changing times and the overturning of tradition, the An tea we drink now is both the same and not the same as the An tea of days gone by. The people of An tea’s birthplace are very conscious of its cultural significance, and have fought hard to preserve it. I still remember that first article that I wrote to promote An tea—it was written in 1994, for the *Overseas Cantonese News*, and was entitled: “Old Guangdong Leads the Revival of An Tea.”

Looking back, those early days of enthusiastically penning articles about An tea were a sort of honeymoon period: as the saying goes, “newborn calves are not afraid of tigers.” As I came to understand more about An tea, I started to feel that it was more important to make use of the help of more influential people to promote the

tea, so I jumped at any opportunity that came along. In 2002, for instance, the producers of China Central Television Channel 9 wanted to film a documentary about the tea industry in the Huangshan region, called *Tea: the Story of a Leaf*. They invited me to help scout for locations, so I seized the opportunity to recommend An tea, and took one of the production heads to Luxi to interview the bosses of the Sun Yishun and Jiangnan Spring tea factories. Sadly, he told me afterwards that while An tea had its merits, it was too much of a niche variety, and not famous enough, so in the end, the director didn’t include it in the final cut. I was deeply disappointed. I felt it should have made it.

In the summer of 2013, the China Tea Expo was held in Hangzhou,

and the boss of the Jiangnan Spring tea factory asked me to find someone to design a leaflet promoting An tea. At the Expo, I got up on stage to speak and piqued the interest of quite a few of the attendees, so I felt somewhat consoled after that. In the winter of that year, Liu Ping, a cultural representative from Anhui's Huaibei City, came to Qimen and fell instantly in love with An tea. After a few initial forays, he came to an agreement to enter into a business partnership with Wang Zhenxiang, the head of the Sun Yishun factory. Mr. Wang would be in charge of production, while Mr. Liu would oversee sales. Mr. Liu soon invited me to write a book about An tea, and offered to take care of the publishing. I thought long and hard about his offer, and decided that, although it was a challenging task, the pressure would also provide good motivation—so, in the end, I gladly agreed, and threw my heart and soul into writing.

I examined materials, I interviewed experts, I pored over ancient records and chatted with Chajin, until finally, after a year of questions, answers, exploration and investigation, I finished my 160,000-word book, entitled *Tracing the Revival of An Tea*. It was printed by the Taihai Publishing House in 2015; I was pleasantly surprised to learn that it was well-received enough to warrant a second print run a year later.

Meanwhile, Mr. Liu was also busy gathering the resources to invite China Radio International's television production center to film an episode of their documentary *Tea Without Borders*, entitled "The Story of An Tea." The documentary covered everything from the story of Mr. Guan Fenfa sending the basket of tea and the letter to Hong Kong, to on-location footage of the relics from the original Sun Yishun tea factory. They filmed the beautiful scenery of Luxi Village, An tea's birthplace, as well as the mysterious manufacturing process and the humble, unassuming people who have handed down this knowledge. They also filmed some scenes re-enacting parts of the traditional process as it would have been in the past, including hand-picking the tea, transporting it down the river by boat, loading and unloading at the docks, and storing the tea in caves—it really

was wonderful to have this kind of footage. From the beginning, I was involved with writing the script, and also appeared on screen in the capacity of a scholar—I was very pleased to see it broadcast and to have been part of the experience.

A year later, a documentary film entitled *Tea Bandits* was produced in Hong Kong, and they asked me to look over the script. Around the same time, some people from Shenzhen arrived in Qimen to establish a brand of organic An tea called Chun Ze, and asked me to advise them, which I was happily able to do. Meanwhile, Mr. Liu was throwing his energy into expanding the local market through holding tea tastings to recommend An tea. I, on the other hand, traveled to a number of cities and provinces around China to deliver dozens of lectures about Liu An tea, which received a pleasing reception from audiences.

So, in China, the market was gradually warming up to An tea—but what about overseas? Across the strait, Taiwan had been at the forefront of An tea culture in the past, particularly at the turn of the last century, and had a strong foundation in the study of traditional Chinese culture. So what was the situation regarding An tea in modern-day Taiwan? This was something that I wondered about a lot. In the fall of 2016, the chief editor of the Taiwanese magazine *The Art of Tea: Puerh Teapot*, Ms. Luo Yingyin (羅英銀), came to mainland China on a research trip, together with veteran tea master Mr. Liang Mingzong (梁明宗). I had the good fortune to meet them and ask them a bit about the state of An tea in Taiwan today. However, I found this didn't satisfy my craving to know more—what I really wanted was to go there and find out for myself.

As luck would have it, I received an invitation from the Huangshan Hu Xing Tang Culture Company to visit Taiwan in winter, at the beginning of this year, to do some research. What a heaven-sent opportunity—I was giddy with excitement! From the moment I stepped off the plane, I went into every tea shop I came across, chatted with every Chajin I met, and investigated anything tea-related I saw. Everywhere I went, from Taipei to Yilan, Taiyuan, Nantou and

Taichung, I had the chance to immerse myself in the vibrant local atmosphere, and experience for myself the rich tea culture that has grown over the years.

I was delighted to find that in many places I went, the tea sellers not only knew of An tea, but also knew a thing or two about its history. One experience in particular stayed with me: while I was in the city of Taoyuan, I quite fortuitously came across the general director of the Tea Industry Trade Association, Mr. Qiu Guoxiong (邱國雄). Not only did all three members of his family, who were at their store, know of An tea, but they even said they had some old An tea hidden away somewhere in the store, and went straight off to look for it. They searched for nearly half an hour, and even called up one of the staff who had already gone home for the day to ask where the tea was located. I was very moved that they would go through the trouble of searching so tirelessly on my account. When I asked why An tea wasn't available on the Taiwanese market, Mrs. Qiu explained that the Chinese export authorities only allowed puerh to be brought into Taiwan, and hadn't yet permitted the import of other tea varieties. As she spoke, I could sense a hint of sorrow behind her words. In that moment, I finally truly understood the long search for An tea, and the longing that all those Chajin must have felt when this special tea vanished from the market.

When I returned from Taiwan, I continued mulling over An tea and its journey through time. After a half-century of obscurity, tea drinkers in China are once more able to enjoy its rich, enchanting flavor. But as for our tea brothers and sisters across the strait in Taiwan, many of them are still left to dream of An tea. When will its fragrant steam, long separated by time and distance, once again drift across the channel to the beautiful island of Taiwan? I await that day with great anticipation.



茶 1930s or '40s Liu An Tea. (We aren't sure how old it is.) It tastes like Chinese herbal medicine, especially ginseng. And it has a Qi that knocks you into next week!

