

NOTES ON TEA



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Wen Long (聞龍, 1551–1631) grew up in a family of high officials, but he refused to work for the court and preferred to live a life of leisure in southern China. Even though his “Notes on Tea” is very short, it shows how many literary figures enjoyed tea during the late Ming Dynasty, and how deeply and spiritually it affected them. At that time, the general population could afford to drink tea prepared by street vendors or even in sit-down taverns. But well-to-do gentlemen could afford a lot of effort in the quest for the best tea or water to savor the subdued liquor while chatting about the Eternal Dao. Since Wen could afford to stay home all day comfortably without even trying to win an official title, he claimed autonomy over his life, though he was privileged to do so by his family. This little treatise is a collection of his random thoughts on tea, from production to paraphernalia, to anecdotes. One can almost hear the fragments of quiet conversations over tea echoing in these words about everything in those gentlemen’s lives from tea huts to Nature to the entire Cosmos.



When picking tea, one plucks only the new leaves, not the stems nor the old leaves. In addition, the tips and the bottom parts of the leaves are not to be used because those parts tend to get burned during roasting.

This is how *Songluo* (松蘿) tea is made.

When roasting *Songluo* tea, there should be one person standing on the side to fan the tea and drive off the humidity. I've personally experienced what happens if the humidity is not fanned away while roasting: the finished leaves turn yellow and lose their fragrance. After being roasted in a cauldron (*dang*, 鑪), tea leaves will be transferred onto a large ceramic plate, while the fanning continues at high speed all throughout. After the leaves cool down, they will be kneaded heavily and then scattered into the cauldron again. The second roasting will then be done at a lower temperature. When the leaves are dry, they are ready to be brought to the drying pit (*bei*, 焙). The purpose of kneading the tea is to bring the essence, juices and aromas to the surface, so they are readily available when brewing in the dian tea (*dian cha*, 點茶) fashion. Leaves that have not been roasted nor kneaded and are but sun-dried, are the best. However, I have not had the opportunity to try it before.¹

According to the *Tea Sutra* written by Lu Yu (陸羽), the drying pit is two feet deep, two and a half feet wide and ten feet long, with two-foot-high clay walls above ground. There is a two-tiered, one-foot-high wooden rack built on top of the pit. After the tea is roasted long enough, the half-dried leaves are placed on the lower shelf while the fully-dried tea is moved to the top shelf. Most humbly, I would suggest that we modern people do not really need to follow the structure Master Lu promoted, at least not entirely. I once made a square drying pit not higher than eight *xun*² with sides less than three meters long. I then sealed all four sides, and the top, tight with cotton paper. I put three to four jars to hold the coals within in the pit.³ I then placed new bamboo sieves inside of the fire jars, well above the coals. Before scattering leaves on top of the sieves, a layer of new, pre-washed linen was placed on them. I then closed the door when roasting and kept the leaves uncovered, as the moisture content in the leaves was rather high, especially in the beginning stages of processing. If the jars were covered while roasting, then the leaves would turn yellow. After four to six hours of roasting, when most of the moisture was evaporated, I let the leaves stay in the jars and covered them with a large, shallow bamboo winnowing basket. After the leaves were totally dry, then I took them out of the jars to cool off.⁴ When the leaves cooled to room temperature, I placed them into storage. If the leaves need to be re-roasted later, the same procedure can be employed. Re-roasting tea in the same way will not change its color, fragrance nor aroma much.

Most famous teas are roasted, while Luoqi tea⁵ tastes better steamed. The flavor of this tea is so genuine and fulfilling that people consider it a great treasure. Among the tribute teas,⁶ Guzhu,⁷ Yangxian⁸ and Dongshan teas all emulate Luoqi tea in the way that the leaves are steamed rather than roasted. In fact, steaming is only suitable for *Jie* (芥) tea,⁹ and not suitable for others. Lu Yu says in the *Tea Sutra* that "there are two different ways of processing tea leaves: to steam them or roast them. Since ancient times, people from the Wu area¹⁰ value *Jie* tea. However, it is such a pity that there are usually some yellowish, dark-bamboo-shell-colored impurities in the leaves."¹¹ Before I put any tea into a

storage container, I always ask the timber man for some narrow bamboo shells from the mountains.¹² The shells have to be cleaned and baked dry. I use half of the dry bamboo shells to line the inner surface of the jar. The other half of the shells I chop into small pieces and then mix them with the tea leaves. The mixture of tea leaves and minced bamboo shells can be re-roasted for years to come, remaining as brisk and green as freshly-roasted tea that has just cooled down.¹³

Notes

1) The author is most likely referring to white tea, which the emperor also says is the best, and one of the rarest teas in the *Treatise on Tea*. From a modern perspective, it is easy to wax poetic and wonder if the author is also alluding to wild tea from old trees (perhaps even from Yunnan), simple and unprocessed in order to connect to Nature more simply and clearly.

2) About 2.5 meters.

3) Many Asian countries traditionally used such big wide jars, with a diameter that is longer than the height, to burn coal and heat their houses in cold weather.

4) In this case, there is no need for the two-tiered wooden rack above ground. In addition, since the leaves are inside of the jars, they are closer to the heat, which probably means they takes less time to roast dry.

5) This tea originated from Mt. Luoqi (羅齊山) in Changxing County (長興), Zhejiang Province (浙江).

6) All feudal lords, states, and even neighboring countries and colonies needed to pay tributes to the emperor by presenting the best local produce or novelties annually. While the earliest tribute to the court was in the third century BCE, the system of tribute tea was established in the eighth century, during the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

7) Guzhu (顧渚) is a town in Changxing County (長興), Zhejiang Province (浙江), famous in tea circles, because this is where Lu Yu (陸羽) wrote his famous *Tea Sutra*.

8) Yangxian tea (陽羨) originated in Yixing County (宜興), Jiangsu Province (江蘇). It is a *Jie* (芥) tea. (See footnote #10.)

9) *Jie* tea is a special varietal that grew mainly in the Yixing area. "Jie" means the narrow valley between mountains. *Jie* leaves look paler than most tea leaves. The liquor looks milky-white, and the tea is said to have the fragrance of fresh milk. As a result, it was much sought after, and eventually became a tribute tea during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). However, *Jie* tea has been extinct for several hundred years. Fortunately, there is a group of people in Jiangsu who have been trying to revive the cultivation and production of *Jie* tea in recent years.

10) Modern-day Jiangsu Province (江蘇) area.

11) This may be referring to larger, older or improperly-processed leaves which are called "huang pian (黃片)" in the modern day.

12) Bamboo sheds its skin as it grows. The relationship between bamboo and tea is ancient, and many kinds of tea, like puerh, Liu Bao and Liu An, are even stored in such bamboo shells. Bamboo shells protect the tea from humidity and absorb the aroma of the tea, re-infusing it with its own smells over time. Many tea lovers, ancient to modern, also suggest that the bamboo shell or leaf's fragrance is beneficial to the tea.

13) As we discussed in the March issue on Liu An tea, that tea is often brewed or boiled together with bamboo leaves. We are going to do some experiments mincing bamboo shells with tea to see what happens. Exciting!

My hometown is surrounded by mountains, so there are plenty of fresh water springs in the neighborhood. However, almost all the springs taste bland, lacking in flavor and aroma. The only exception is the Ta Spring,¹⁴ which flows slowly out of a cave, winding back and forth among the hills and rocks ceaselessly, without ever a dry spell. A Tang Dynasty official, Wang Yuanwei, built an artificial bank on that river to create an additional tributary that flows into the ocean.¹⁵ The Ta River is more than 300 *li*¹⁶ long, from the cave spring to his bank. The sky-blue water is so clear that one can admire the pure white pebbles at the bottom. The spring is cool, brisk, sweet and smooth, and is the best water for brewing tea in the area. Alas, it's a shame I cannot live on a houseboat, ever floating on that river, scooping my retirement brews from the boatside. Whenever I visit that river, I find I can spend weeks there before I even realize how much time has passed. Eating the vibrant food of that place, and sipping tea in such a scenic place is always the highlight of my visit. The closer to the origin of the spring, the better the water is for brewing tea. Due to its remote location, this water has long been missing from most maps, and even modern scholars and maps neglect this stunning place.

It is difficult enough for hermits living in the mountains to carry teaware with them, not to mention those crafted of silver. After lots of tea, one would think that even iron pots end up working as well as silver ones, and silver teaware oxidizes black like iron.¹⁷ After the teaware is cleansed, it is best to simply hang them upside-down on a bamboo rack to dry. If you want to dry them with a towel, only dry the outside of the tea ware, without wiping the inside. Even if the towel is clean, once it is handled by human hands, any odor on the hands will get in the towel and be transferred to the utensils. Furthermore, it is not much of a problem if your utensils are not completely dry.

Uncle Yao of Wuxing once told me that the more times the tea leaves are roasted, the less flavor the tea will have. My experience is in agreement with his. However, if I roast the leaves mixed with minced bamboo shells to an extremely dry state in the first place, and then seal them very tightly in a good storage container, I find they remain dry through even the plum rains.¹⁸ The only way excessive humidity affects such tea is if the storage jar is opened too frequently. In that case, the tea leaves will have to be re-roasted. Consequently, throughout April and August, one should refrain from opening one's tea jar too often. Since the air tends to be dry after September, it is not that bad to open the jar more often at that time. Even so, it is always a good idea to keep one's tea tightly sealed at all times.

The famous eleventh century poet and statesman Su Dongpo¹⁹ said, "Mr. Cai Mo²⁰ enjoyed drinking tea his whole life. However, when he got old, he grew ill with digestive problems and could no longer drink tea, so he continued preparing tea every day for his own cultivation, without drinking the results. That was the joke of the day for many people. Who knew a thousand years later, I'd contract the same ailment as Mr. Cai did." I also wrote a poem: "In my old age, I still indulge in tea even though I cannot handle its cooling effect on the spleen meridian.²¹ Unfortunately, most people are so addicted to tea itself that few can emulate Mr. Cai Mo, who prepared tea only for self-cultivation."²² I remember my old friend Zhou Wenfu (周文甫),

who brewed and drank tea every day religiously. Many Buddhists practice at six fixed times a day, but he drank tea instead: at dawn, lunch time, afternoon, dusk, sunset and dinner time, not to mention serving tea to his guests. He lived to a ripe old age of 85, and passed away peacefully without any illness to speak of. If such peace and prosperity does not come of lifetimes spent cultivating magnitude, as well as pure and good deeds, how could he have enjoyed such a wonderful life? Most people who truly love tea, yet find that they cannot drink tea for one reason or another, would look upon whatsoever teaware they own and see it all as superfluous.²³ Zhou Wenfu once owned a famous Gongchun teapot²⁴ that he treasured immensely. He carried it with him everywhere, caressing it all the time, as if it were the "pearl in his palm."²⁵ After a long period of tea passing through the pot, the outside glowed with a purplish jade hue, while the inside looked like the softest cloudy celadon. What a spectacular pot that was! Zhou cherished that pot so much that he was buried with it, so that he may enjoy it for eternity!

According to the *Tea Sutra*, one should save some of the first boil of tea for later, to pacify the crashing, splashing water and to cultivate the essence of later boils.²⁶ The liquor that is set aside is called "*juanyong* (隽永)" which means "savored forever." If you have five guests, it is better to serve three bowls of tea for them to share. If you have seven guests, then make five bowls and pass them amongst the guests. If you have six guests, then make three bowls as if you are serving five guests, and use the tea saved from the first boil, the *juanyong*, for the sixth guest. In that way, you won't need to worry about the extra bowl of tea.²⁷



STORY OF THE YIXING POT IN CHINESE

東坡雲：蔡君謨嗜茶，老病不能飲，日烹而玩之。可發來者之一笑也。孰知千載之下有同病焉。余嘗有詩雲：年老耽彌甚，脾寒量不勝。去法烹而玩之者，幾希矣。因憶老友周文甫，自少至老，茗碗熏爐，無時楚廢。飲茶日有定期：旦明、晏食、禺中、鋪時、下春、黃昏，凡六舉。而客至烹點，不與焉。壽八十五，無疾而卒。非宿植清福，烏能舉世安享。視好而不能飲者，所得不既多乎。嘗畜一龔春壺，摩挲寶愛，不啻掌珠，用之既久，外類紫玉，內如碧雲，真奇物也。后以殉葬。

14) The Ta River runs near modern-day Ningpo City (寧波), Zhejiang Province (浙江).

15) Wang started the construction of this project in the year 833. He made a dam upstream. During the dry season, the water in the reservoir made irrigation possible in the neighboring areas. On the other hand, the position of the dam forced the river to change its course and split the waterway into two tributaries. Whenever there was a heavy rainstorm, the excess water could then run towards the nearby ocean through the artificial tributary.

16) It is roughly 150km, or 93 miles.

17) Lu Yu and other tea masters of ancient times suggested that silver teaware was best. The author is arguing for simplicity, which is also in the spirit of tea. Ultimately, what is simple depends on the person, place and situation in which a tea is served.

18) In China, the first rainy season usually starts in mid-April and lasts until mid-June, which is also the season for the plum harvest. Therefore, the spring rains were often called the “plum rains.”

19) Su Dongpo (蘇東坡, 1037–1101) was *the* most influential literary figure during the Song Dynasty (960–1279). He was not only well-versed in all literary genres from poetry, prose, *ci* (a new genre developed in the Song Dynasty, which is a very complicated style of poetry, on a grander scale than previous kinds of poetry and with many possible, complex meters in each poem), and *fu* (a revival of an old genre from the third century BCE, which is a rhyming prose), he was also a pioneer in painting, single-handedly creating a brand-new kind of “literati painting.” And, last but not least, he was a master of calligraphy as well. The only drawback to this multi-talented artist and official was his rigid and lofty moral sense of righteousness. Three times too many, he solicited the emperor with critical and straightforward essays that caused his political downfall. Consequently, he found himself exiled for the third time—this time to the end of the world: Hainan Island, the southernmost frontier of China at the time. He ventured into a new territory among the “barbarians,” facing a different culture, language and food. Su’s health deteriorated quickly as a result. A large proportion of his communication with his old friends in the Mainland turned to food and medicinal formulae over the last five years of his life. After years of his friends at court lobbying for his return to civilization, he was finally pardoned and started to head north. However, he was so sick that he did not survive the hardship of the journey and passed away on the way back to the capital. Despite his ill fortune in politics, for more than a thousand years, every generation of Chinese people has admired his integrity and strived to emulate his ingenuity in the arts.

20) Cai Mo (蔡謨, 281–356) lived in a period of political turmoil due to the invasion of the northern nomadic tribes. As a result, the first wave of massive migration in Chinese history, comprised of aristocrats and officials, fled to the deep south to seek a safer environment. In general, there is not much seafood in northern China, so many northerners encountered a huge variety of seafood for the first time in their lives when they crossed the Yellow River to the south. Other than the fact that they both had bumpy political careers, Su identified with Cai because they were both forced to southern China for political reasons, and became ill from the food there. It was recorded in popular prose by northern aristocrats living in the south that Cai once mistook an amphibious crab for a sea crab and ate it. He quickly vomited and had terrible diarrhea afterward. Another fellow northerner teased him that he had neglected one important passage in one of the classics canonized by Confucius, which said that all hard-shelled crawlers with eight legs and two claws are edible. Unfortunately, this incident made Cai famous, or rather infamous, throughout history.

21) (足太阴脾经) According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, the spleen meridian affects digestion and the absorption of food in general as well as the endocrine systems. This doesn’t refer to the organ called a “spleen” in the West, which rests between the stomach and kidneys. Since the tea of the time was all green, it was more cooling and therefore, without the variety of teas we have access to nowadays, many people with cold systems couldn’t enjoy tea.

22) This recalls Master Rikyu’s statement, which Wu De often discusses, that you “imagine your life without tea, and if it is any different, you have yet to understand tea.” Ask Wu De what that means next time you see him. His answer may change your life!

23) The author is implying that most would quit, but not Zhou whose tea spirit was so strong that he continued to serve tea even though he couldn’t drink it. This reminds us of Master Tsai’s story: He also couldn’t drink tea for many years due to digestive issues, but continued to brew it for friends whenever he got the chance. Eventually, he discovered that he could, in fact, drink organic tea and it wouldn’t upset his stomach, so he quit his job and opened a tea house (which only sells organic tea, of course). Even though all tea was obviously organic long ago, as we mentioned, the processing and/or lack of variety in tea may have prevented some people from enjoying tea who may have been able to had they had access to more and different kinds of tea, but that really isn’t the point. The point is that the spirit of tea extends beyond the leaves, water and preparation.

24) It is said that Gong Chun (龔春) was the first famous potter to make purple-sand teapots (*zisha*, 紫砂). He is famous for making pots in the shapes of fantastic tree galls. Later generations have simply come to call them “*gongchun* pots.” The story is that he was a servant of a lord who traveled to Yixing often. While his master was busy with business, he would spend time at the local monastery meditating with the monks. He saw that the monks made teapots by hand and asked them to teach him. Like most Zen teachers, they declined to teach him until some years had passed and he proved himself diligent and determined to practice, at which point they did teach him. According to legend, his pots were so good for tea, and beautiful as well, that his lord showed them to all his friends and Gong Chun then became famous, leaving his master’s service to spend the rest of his life making teapots.

25) The Chinese say “the pearl in one’s palm” the way we say “the apple of one’s eye.” However, the author is punning, suggesting that Zhou literally kept the teapot in his palm, caressing it all the time. Therefore, it seemed fitting to try and stick to the literal Chinese here, even though the phrase loses some of its meaning and power in English.

26) The edition of the *Tea Sutra* we translated for the Extended Edition of September 2015 says the “first boil” instead of the “second boil,” as quoted here. This may be a transcription error.

27) The summation the author gives here is not exactly the same as the edition of Lu Yu’s *Tea Sutra* we have in the modern era. In some ways, Wen Long’s version makes more sense. We actually spent *days* pondering Lu Yu’s version when we translated it and had to do some guesswork and use our intuition in the end. Perhaps Wen Long understood Master Lu more deeply than we could (we don’t make much tea in the ways these ancients did) or our command of ancient Chinese is not as good. Whatever the case, this important point once again emphasizes that these translations we are doing in our Classics of Tea series are not meant to be definitive, but rather to encourage more translation, commentary and writing on tea from dynastic times so we can all better understand the history and heritage of our beloved Leaf.