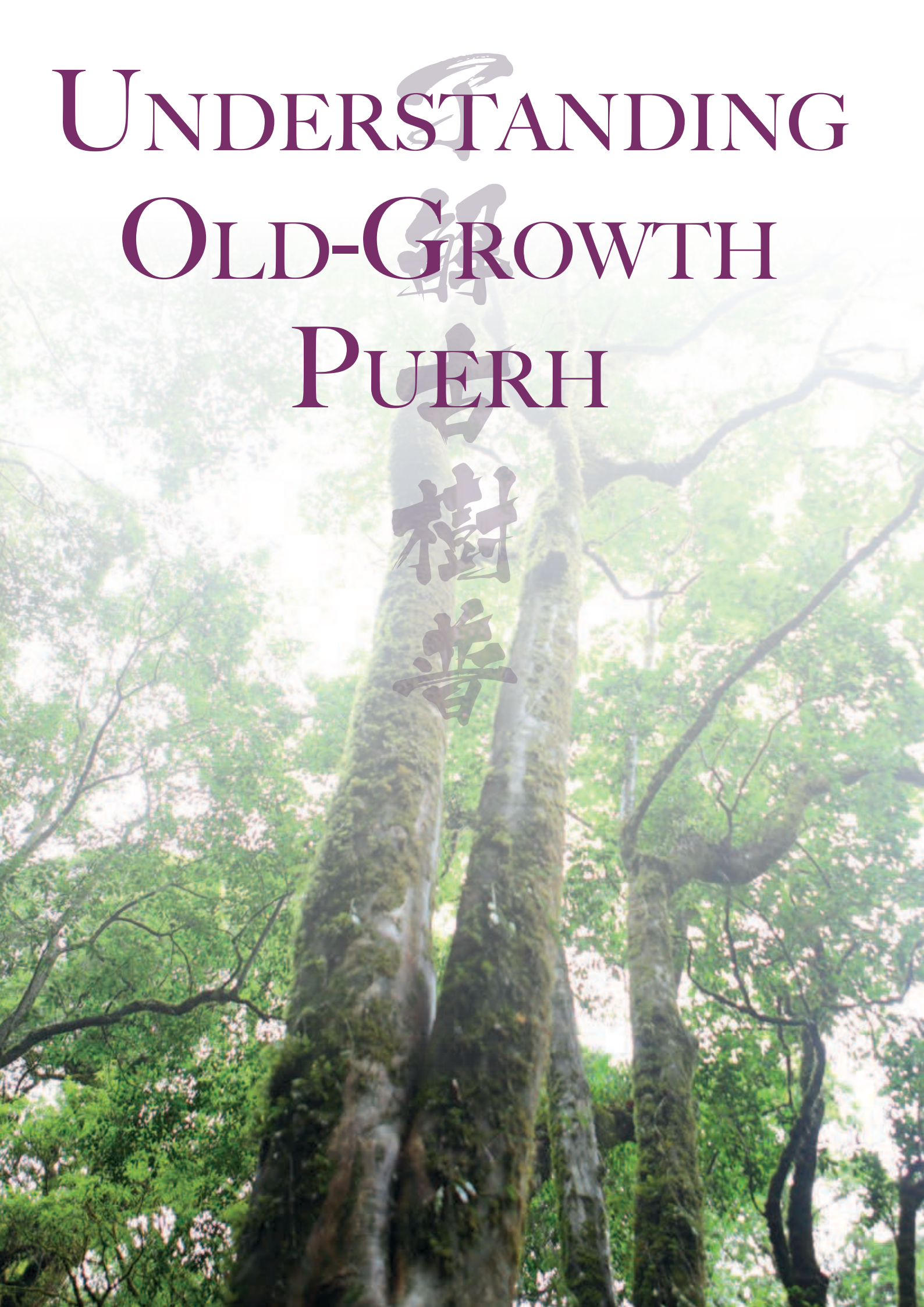


UNDERSTANDING OLD-GROWTH PUERH

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The puerh world is rife with misunderstanding. The age of the trees, the kind of garden and the region a puerh tea comes from all make up its quality. For that reason, an understanding of the controversies and the nature of what defines “old-growth” puerh tea is essential for exploration of the genre. Knowing the details of this one aspect of puerh helps you become a more informed customer and wiser Chajin.

茶人: Wu De

There is now and has ever been a teahouse full of gossip, rumors and misinformation swirling like leaves in a bowl around the tea world. Secrets abound: traditional brewing methods, processing skills held by families, lost clay-refining secrets master potters only taught their best students and miles of scroll covered in stories, legends and marketing tall tales. And as time has passed, with a greater commoditization and recreationalization of tea, the latter marketing misinformation has spread like the tea clones planted on hills and in valleys all over Asia and beyond. Discussing the issue of misinformation in the tea market can be insightful or depressing. I thought if we had an issue to focus on, we could use this example to explore some very important tea wisdom, learning together in the process.

Through some emails from within this community, it came to my attention that Western tea lovers were beginning to have discussions around the misinformation in the modern puerh market, specifically in relation to claims about the age of trees used in puerh: A lot of vendors claim their tea is “old-growth” or comes from “ancient trees” when the tea, in fact, does not. I thought this was then the perfect opportunity to start a dialogue on the issue of marketing tall tales in general, focusing on claims about tea tree ages specifically. I always like to converse from the general to the specific, so let’s put a kettle on and brew up some nice puerh, sharing some cups and ideas over a nice, relaxing session. I say “relaxing” because these are potentially polarizing topics that are best discussed

calmly, and over cups of tea. Please be sure to read all the way through for that reason, as reading only parts of this discussion may leave you with unintended impressions.

Rivers & Lakes

One of the larger puerh magazines in China is called “*Jianghu*,” which literally translates to “Rivers and Lakes.” The “*Jianghu*” the magazine is named after is the setting of kungfu movies and novels—the land beyond the reach of the empire and its laws; the place where might is right and nothing else stands. In other words, the Eastern equivalent of the “Wild West” (the analogy is perfect, truly). In the tea market there are also no regulatory bodies, and information travels the way it did in the Wild West, and tales grow in the telling, especially where marketing is concerned. The fact is, the tea world is rife with misinformation and marketing ploys.

Like the gunslinger or kungfu master, you have to be skilled to avoid being tricked. *Jianghu* is a place where skill is the only currency, in fact. And let’s be clear, *you will pay tuition to get to that level of understanding!* You will buy tea and teaware that isn’t what it should be, or that you will grow out of on your journey. A teacher can help, but there is always some learning done the hard way, no matter how good a student you are. I’m not sure how good a teacher I am, but I am a decent student. I am humble and listen to my teachers, but that hasn’t helped me—I’ve still paid my share of tuition. And so has every teacher I know!

With the growth and globalization of the tea market, these problems have only grown and also deformed through mistranslations and cultural misunderstandings. One of the main reasons this issue exists is that vendors are the primary source of information for tea these days. Tea teachers are either farmers growing tea for money or merchants selling it. And vendors are *never* ideal sources of information. This is true in any market. It isn’t the camera store’s job to educate you. As a consumer, you are responsible for your own research. The camera store tries to supply lots of gear for many different kinds of photography, and if you go in without an idea of what you want or need, you will indeed buy things you don’t want or need, spending tuition. You wouldn’t want to attend a photography school created and sponsored by Sony, for example, no matter how great their cameras are. A photography school should teach photography, not promote certain products. The issue isn’t really this simple, but in general, it helps to understand that vendors are not great nor trustworthy sources of information. But as the bard and sage Leonard Cohen so beautifully sang, “The dealer wants you thinking it’s either black or white. Thank God it’s not that simple...” I’ve learned a lot from tea merchants over the years—Master Tsai, Master Lu and Zhou Yu just to name a few—but I also understand why my teacher, Master Lin, has refrained from such a career and suggested that schools and/or teachers exist alongside and in cooperation with tea merchants. (This kind of free and unbiased school is what we are trying to build here in Taiwan.)



It is important to understand that I am not saying that tea merchants are untrustworthy *people*, merely that their *information* is such, and that it is thus in a huge spectrum of hues from black to very light gray. In a way, this is just how things are and should be. We consumers must educate ourselves and learn to judge tea and teaware on our own. Once you understand tea, you aren't susceptible to misinformation anymore. In the meantime, we do our best to seek out honest vendors who are trying their best to help educate us. Also, we need to create more schools and publications like this that are not endorsed by anyone, trying to promulgate information without financial motivation. We aren't the only ones, of course. There are other programs, blogs, scholars and tea teachers working towards the same goal of tea education. And let me state clearly that I am not trying to malign tea vendors. As I just said, some of the most important teachers in my life are tea merchants, and without merchants where would I

get tea? I don't think the solution is to stop the tea market or ban teachings from vendors, but rather that more ad-free publications like this, schools and teachers that aren't vendors can *cooperate* with tea merchants to create a healthier environment for students. I think that medicine is an apt analogy for this, because the development of Western medicine necessarily separated doctors from pharmacists, understanding that so long as doctors have a vested interest in selling medicine, we won't be able to regulate medical care or ensure that doctors are prescribing the best medicine, rather than the most profitable. Doctors give prescriptions and pharmacists supply the medicine—that is how it's always been. And since this gap between pharmacist and doctor has closed, more corruption has influenced healing in the West. In the same way, ad-free magazines and unendorsed tea schools can cooperate with merchants. We work hard to uphold these principles here at the Hut. You won't find advertisements in these

pages, nor gimmicky machines or silly teas we were paid to review, nor shills (hidden advertisements) disguised in articles that are intended to promote a product, business or merchant. At the Tea Sage Hut, we do our best to educate guests, and also take them out to various tea shops we find to be more honest, so they can learn other perspectives and also purchase the tea and teaware they need. I wouldn't say that we are perfect in providing good tea education, but we do our best.

Leaving out the obviously "black" information, and vendors who use outright scams to sell tea, which aren't really worth discussing, I think there are still three important reasons why merchant-based information should always be second-guessed. Even if the merchant is an honest one, with a love for tea and a true and honest desire to share tea wisdom, there is still reason for us consumers to always take a step back and double-check, research on our own and develop our own skills. Healthy skepticism is required, in



✿ Old-growth trees and tea cake of Jingmai: “Forest Bridge.”

other words. Before discussing these three reasons individually, however, let me say that this skepticism has to be *healthy*. Being too critical can really get in the way of any learning. Whenever I am with a teacher I respect, even a vendor, I do my best to stay humble, receptive and open to receive anything. I try to be a good student, in other words. I can be skeptical later, after class. Over the years, one of the most important lessons I have learned is that being too critical in the classroom (or any setting where learning is possible) frustrates my own education. It limits how much I learn, in other words. I don't want that. And I hope you don't either, so I would suggest staying open-minded and receptive when learning and then cultivating your healthy skepticism at home—double-checking facts, doing experiments and making your own conclusions. True wisdom is always experiential, and a teacher who isn't suggesting you experiment and find out for yourself is robbing you of the skills you need to grow. Anyway, let's

move on to the three reasons that even honest tea merchants must, ultimately, be light gray at best.

Drink Your Tea

Firstly, I think one of the biggest sources of misinformation in the modern world, let alone the tea world, is what we could call “talking when you should be listening.” This has to do with the caveat I just gave about keeping a “beginner's mind” in any learning environment, and doing so for your own sake, since being too critical frustrates your ability to learn, as well as how much you take in and digest. The Internet has given everyone a voice and that can make things confusing. Anyone can make a blog or YouTube channel and start blasting information. Imagine if you showed up for the first day of class at college and walked into a huge lecture hall where hundreds of people were mingling, chatting and roaming around like a party.

Where to sit? Whom to listen to? What's going on here? Where is the syllabus? Who is the professor? This is a very real analogy for the modern day, especially the online tea world. Just try searching for tea information online if you don't believe me.

Having experience as both a student and teacher has taught me that good teachers are *always* good students. This seems so obvious to me, but sometimes the simplest truths that are right in front of our faces are actually the hardest to see. How can you have anything to say if you haven't first learned? How can you tell me about a book you haven't yet read? Why would you want to talk when you should be listening? Even after fifteen years of daily tea practice, I still didn't feel ready to teach anyone. Sometimes I still feel that way now, ten years further down the road. I wonder how I can help anyone with anything when I still have so much development left in myself. You can see where this is going, I think. It is obvious that you must learn to teach.

This is a modern issue: Young man gets interested in tea on Tuesday and starts writing in an authoritative voice on Friday—talking when he should be listening, teaching when he should be learning. And while you can do both at the same time (I am still learning tons every day), it is much better to have the beginning of our education devoted to just learning. A doctor needs some medical schooling before working in a hospital. This doesn't mean he can't help out while he's still in school or that he stops learning when he starts practicing, but that an extended period devoted exclusively to learning is essential in any practice.

This doesn't mean beginners' voices shouldn't be heard. I have learned a lot from listening to beginners around the world share about tea. We encourage all of you to write for this magazine. Even beginners can share their learn-

ing process, experiences and more as they travel. But the modern tea world is definitely confused by people speaking authoritatively about things they have not studied deeply enough to talk about in such an assertive way.

Language & Culture

The second issue with vendor-based information has to do with language and culture. The fact is that there is only so far you can go in learning about something via a translator on annual trips to China, Japan or other parts. People are people, and they aren't always as open with foreigners with whom they cannot communicate. When you couple this with translation issues, a lot of misinformation can spread from East to West. Vendors often deal with middlemen or travel to

tea countries once a year and communicate indirectly with farmers or other vendors. Even if they are fluent, this can cause unintended problems, as tales grow when a tea passes hands—trees get older with each sale, loose-leaf aged puerh gets older, and so on. I suspect that most of the misinformation in the Western tea world falls into this category—caused by naïveté on the part of good-hearted tea vendors who believe what their sources have told them. The road to Hell can, indeed, be paved with good intentions.

Intention

The final reason why we consumers have to learn to stand on our own two feet is the source of one's tea education. This is the subtlest influence of the three. Basically, it boils down to



the way that our intentions affect our choices, which then affect the roads we travel in life. Those roads then become our education, which then becomes the source of what we share with others. Our orientation towards a practice will definitely determine how and what we learn.

The fact is that if I head to Yunnan with the sole intention of learning about tea and honoring the aboriginal people there, and then my friend George goes there to learn, but also to network and find sources for tea to sell in the West, George and I will have very different trips—meeting different kinds of people and having very different experiences along the way. Last year on our annual Global Tea Hut trip, the farmers in Jingmai were completely blown away by the fact that twenty-five people from around the world had come to their village just to

honor them and to learn. They said it was the first time ever that a tea person had visited them without any business intentions. And, of course, they showed us things that they hadn't ever showed any of those guests as a result. You may remember from her article that Snow cried at the end of our trip, saying how our genuine desire to learn and honor her home and its people had really touched her.

Of course, people treat a student different than a business associate. I can right now buy vintages of tea that a vendor could not, and for cheaper, because my friend would know that I would be buying the tea to drink and share, not to sell. Tea merchants often say as much, sometimes even asking, "For you or to sell?" as that will determine the price, and sometimes, if they will sell it at all. In the end, what I am saying is that if George takes business trips to tea-growing regions every year for twenty years, those experiences will form the basis of his tea education, which will in turn be what he passes on when he teaches about tea. And those perspectives may be super for those interested in becoming tea merchants, but maybe not ideal for those interested in learning tea above and beyond its market. Maybe George will become jaded, for example, dealing with many tea merchants who aren't always honest, whereas the student may avoid that altogether. A commercial photographer who focuses more on the business of photography than the art would be an ideal mentor for earning money as a photographer, but maybe not the best teacher if you are interested in the art itself (Matthew London is best for that).

Gotta Love 'Em

Now, before we move on to the specific issue of "old-growth" tall tales in the puerh market, I want to repeat that all this criticism is not meant to ostracize or insult tea vendors. I love tea vendors. I love you, I do. Don't be offended. I strive to be oriented towards positivity and optimism, and I hope that will come through in this discussion. The only positive reason for discussing all this is to help promote a healthier cooperation between tea lovers and merchants, and between

tea schools and merchants. We all want to help educate people on tea; it's in everyone's interest to do so. In other words, I hope that vendors and consumers alike find this discussion to be constructive criticism, as opposed to just tearing people or merchants down, which serves no purpose and certainly was never my intention.

Old-Growth Puerh

From one consumer to another, I can honestly say that merchants are merchants, and they will make business in any condition if they are good businessmen. And while there are a tremendous amount of false "old-growth" puerh teas in the market, there are also a lot of vendors who use the consumer's fears to promote their products by exaggerating the limitedness of such tea, and trying to promote themselves as safe and honest when others are deceptive. This is one of the oldest marketing tricks in the world. For example, you go into a lens shop in a camera market and the owner pulls out a fake lens, showing you the details of what makes it fake and warning you that many shops in the market are selling such fake lenses. In this way, he makes you scared to shop around the market and inspires trust in him, since he was the one to show you the trickery. Conscious or unconscious, intentional or otherwise, this is a marketing ploy.

Merchants the world over have been using scare tactics to sell products for millennia. Recently, some friends of mine showed me examples of this in the West. There was even an article on some blog, obviously written by a Westerner who had traveled little if at all in Yunnan, claiming that the oldest tree in Yunnan was only 800 years old and there was only one. He or she then went on to proclaim absolute faith in some vendor who had clued him or her into the fact that "all old-growth tea is fake." And now he/she was a trusted supporter and customer of that vendor, due to their "honesty." But anyone who has traveled to Yunnan could tell you that this claim is false. There is a very famous 3,000-plus-year-old tree in Lincang, a 2,700-year-old tree in Ai Lao and many other ancient trees. They certainly aren't as abundant as all the claims on cake wrappers,



but neither are they “nonexistent” or “impossible to come by.” Old-growth tea is very real.

Also, it should be noted that Chinese people often value relationships as much as or more than financial gain. This means that while there are relative market prices for commercial goods, especially those that are imported, products made by an artist, farmer or craftsman really can be bought for any price, depending on one’s relationship with the maker. If a farmer values your friendship, they may sell you tea at a “local” price, or even give it to you for free if the friendship means enough to them. This kind of dealing exists the world over, of course, but is more pronounced in China. One should not, therefore, assume from a distance that one knows how much a tea should cost, as it is truly relative to who is doing the buying. Several aborigines in Yunnan, for example, have told me that there is a price for locals and a price for the fortune hunters and city-slickers.

My experience over the decades reminds me of the saying in our tradition: *As the person seeks the Leaf, the Leaf seeks the person.* Tea has a destiny. And be they vendors or tea lovers, people share tea in very different ways, depending on the energy you bring. If I visit Auntie Ai, for example, trying to do business and make money, she will sell me one kind of tea for one kind of price, but if I visit to get some tea to share through this nonprofit with tea lovers around the world and she understands these educational aims, I get another tea at a very different price. And, of course, if I visit her without the intention of buying anything, but rather just to drink tea with my sister whom I love, then she shares a whole other kind of tea. I have had friends who own tea shops and large collections of aged puerh ask me bluntly before if a tea I was interested in was for “drinking or selling.” And not only would the price be different for “selling,” but they often may not choose to sell the tea at all for that purpose. Some aged puerh teas are very valuable and selling it at a “friend’s price” doesn’t make sense if that friend is just going to go resell it at the retail value you yourself could also sell it for.

What I am saying is that how you journey—with what attitude and what experiences you are looking for—

will determine your choices. Your choices will determine which road you take, which people you meet and which kinds of tea you find. Yes, old-growth puerh is rare, and yes, it will most often be expensive. Master Lin has a cake from a single 1,800-year-old tree that was given to him when he was named one of the ten “Puerhians” of our time. I have a small jar of tea from the oldest tree in Ai Lao, gifted to me by Auntie Ai, and other small gifts I have received over the years. These are examples of very special and precious old-growth teas given for free.

Stay True of Heart

It is easy to get jaded as a consumer when facing a market without regulation or honesty—*Jianghu*. And then, over time, you want to throw out all the stories. You so yearn for facts that you become skeptical of anything that is unproven conclusively, and the more times you face dishonesty, growing more jaded, the more cynical you become. I understand this propensity. I, too, have faced such feelings. But it is important to not throw out one of the greatest joys of tea just because some of the people who sell it are dishonest, or allow other vendors to use your fears to sell you other products.

The fact is that if you visit almost any tea lover on Earth and they decide to share their favorite tea with you, it will be one with a story: a trip they took to Asia, a good friend, a magical shop or encounter, a beautiful farm or some glorious old trees they sat beneath in Ai Lao. This is true of most all human possessions. Your most valuable possessions most likely have some sentimental value. Even if your favorite thing is valuable financially, like a diamond ring, it is valuable to you because it was your grandmother’s or your engagement ring, etc. We invest our treasures with meaning. And the most meaningful things are always because of stories that mean something to the heart. I watched an interview with the author Michael Pollan recently in which he expressed a sentiment I agree with wholeheartedly. He said that being a consumer of mass-produced foods or products was the part of his identity of which he was the least proud.

In one of the first English books on tea, the author John Blofeld talks about how the tea space restores the deep mythology and poetry of legendary times, and how important that is for us modern people. Tea comes from distant lands, often enshrouded in mist, literally and figuratively. And after a few bowls or cups of tea, poetic words like “black dragon,” “cinnabar,” “alchemy” or “green mists over the isle of immortals” all start to make sense in a way they didn’t before. Let us not throw out the mysticism or magic of tea because of naughty vendors. Magic need not be interpreted as entertaining card tricks or special effects in a Marvel movie. Magic can be regarded simply as when an experience is more than the sum of its parts, inexplicably so.

The problem is not stories. The problem is stories used to sell us things, whether those are stories of “old-growth” tea at impossible prices or in impossible amounts, sometimes sold dishonestly, and at other times because the merchant is naïve or stories of how no tea trees are old and I’m the only honest person in the market willing to tell you so—therefore, buy from me. A good story over a nice cup of tea shared freely between friends, new or old, is a magical experience, and one that no tea lover should be without! But if the story is told in a shop when you are considering buying a tea, you’d be better to focus on your ability to evaluate the tea and drink the liquor, not the story. And that means you will have to gather some experience learning to taste the difference between regions, kinds of gardens, ages of trees and also ages of the tea itself. In *Jianghu*, only skill matters. But once you leave the market, invest the tea with love and joy and let go of the marketing, or tell another story that makes the session more enjoyable for you and your guests: maybe about the wonderful session you had under the Guardian Tree in Yunnan, just after sharing some Forest Bridge.



✿ This is a 2,700-year-old grandfather tree at the top of Ai Lao Mountain, near where Auntie Ai lives.

