



Every few years a new version of the most coveted vintage Red Mark (*Hong Yin*) is produced by a different brand, and most are but vain attempts to ride the reputation of the legendary 1950's cakes to profit. Beyond the wrapper, very little of what goes into these new teas could be said to even resemble their ancestor. Recently the Chang Tai Tea Group decided to follow a similar objective, and though motivated by the same business principals, they decided to invest some time looking into the possibility of making something that had more than a wrapper in common with the original teas. Their plan was to produce a whole product line labeled as modern versions of many of the great teas from the Masterpiece Age. Their search, of course, led them through the currents of Puerh literature to Zhou Yu, one of the most knowledgeable tea sages alive.

Of all my many trips to Yunnan, this most recent excursion was the most enlightening for several reasons: I had the honor of staying at

Chang Tai and meeting several other tea lovers, as well as the chance to have a peek at their production. But all of that pales in comparison to getting the chance to visit Yunnan with one of the most important tea teachers in my life. Chang Tai couldn't have been more fortunate. There aren't too many people who have drunk Red Mark or Blue Mark tea as much as Zhou Yu has these past thirty years that he has collected tea.

For Zhou Yu the opportunity had nothing at all to do with business. He took the whole process very seriously, bringing several versions of Red and Blue Mark with him to drink again and compare with the notes he had made decades ago when he bought his first pieces for as little as 30 USD per cake. Zhou Yu is a legendary figure in the world of Taiwan tea, founder of the national historic landmark Wisteria teahouse, as well as a teacher and collector of Puerh tea with such vast wisdom and experience.



On the flight to Yunnan, Zhou Yu told me that he wouldn't just blend these old teas for the sake of business. If he felt that he was unable to find something that approximated the experience and nature of these great teas, he would rather just make a new product without any false association. In the end, his integrity was founded on more than words since the factory had hoped for him to blend several cakes from the Masterpiece Era and he only ended up making two: Red and Blue Mark, ordinary grades.

Zhou Yu says that making the exact same tea as what was produced fifty years ago isn't possible for several reasons. All of the blenders from that period are gone and no one is certain where the raw materials were sourced exactly, though there are some prevalent theories. Secondly, since these teas are now fully mature it is difficult to know exactly what they tasted like



**The original Menghai building, established in 1940, is now abandoned. We stopped to try to get the feel for the old cakes.**

when they were very new. Zhou Yu, however, did drink them when they were still very much active. He says that Red Mark, for example, was very astringent, so much so that many Puerh aficionados at that time avoided it. "Furthermore, the world, including Yunnan, was a different place at that time," he smiled, "People were cleaner, the Earth less polluted, and the trees were healthier... organic and natural gardens, etc." One has to wonder, then, if there is really any point in recreating these masterpieces. Zhou Yu patted my arm and said that he wasn't "recreating" anything, "just *creating* something based on experience." It reminded me of the artistic tradition of using the great masters of long ago to teach the students of the present. Most painters and sculptors, East and West, passed through periods of apprenticeship where they learned to mimic the style and skills of those that had come before them; and I couldn't help but wonder if some other tea factory some fifty years from now

would be hiring some other expert to blend a tea resembling the by then legendary "Zhou Yu Red and Blue Mark Tea Cakes".

If thirty years of collecting Red and Blue Mark, as well as having one of the largest collections standing today weren't enough to qualify Zhou Yu for the trip, one's doubt would be completely alleviated as soon as he ventures near some raw Puerh tea. The first night we arrived from our trip to the mountains of Xishuangbanna, the owner of Chang Tai, Mr. Lei Guang Yue had tea with us in his office. First, we drank some of the Blue Mark that Zhou Yu had brought. After that, Mr. Lei politely asked if he might share a tea with us. He brought out a newborn raw cake and Zhou Yu switched seats to let him brew. After the second cup, Zhou Yu slurped and commented "Not bad....tastes to me like Bulang Mountain tea from this spring" then he paused and rubbed his head, "but there's something else..." Mr. Lei's face lit up. In fact, we were drinking the 2007 Yi Chang Hao that was blended by a famous blender from Hong Kong, who incidentally bought the entire stock



**Zhou Yu discusses the future of his cakes with the plant manager at Chang Tai.**

himself before it ever even went to market. It took a while for Mr. Lei to even finish his sentence, "Amazing...truly amazing!" he said "It really is about 90% Bulang tea. The other 10% is Yiwu tea." Zhou Yu shrugged off the compliment and instead just responded with an "ahhh... I knew it was Yiwu." Mr. Lei went on to say that they had obviously hired the right person. He was still muttering "amazing" under his breath when he showed us out an hour later.

The next few days that we spent in the blending room, tasting hundreds of kinds of raw material from all over Yunnan, Zhou Yu's "amazing" sensitivity would be displayed enough to become ordinary. He often would sip teas once or sometimes even just smell them before declaring the mountain and season. He and the renowned Taiwanese oolong farmer Mr. Chou Hsien Pang were busy having conversations about the recent humidity in spring tea, rainfall and even fog—and not from the perspective of weather reports or a trip to the farms, but in the way these factors related to the teas that they



**Going to any length, Zhou had to go inside the old factory at any cost :). I'm sure the spirits that inhabit the old, abandoned building didn't mind the disturbance.**



**Zhou Yu in the Chang Tai factory patting his blend of tea, which is awaiting its turn to be pressed.**



**Zhou Yu, as master, in the act of performing the magic that will bring these legendary teas back to life, bringing enjoyment to thousands and thousands of tea lovers.**

were drinking. It was inspiring to see the intensity with which Zhou Yu would approach each cup of tea, and the sensitivity and perspicacity that would follow, no matter how many rows of tea they put before him. Many of the characteristics he would describe were curiously available to me as well if I drank the tea a second time and concentrated, perhaps having missed it the first time around. I, myself, was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of samples, reaffirming the conviction that I still have far to travel in the World of Puerh.

In the end, the world is once again graced with a Red and Blue Mark tea cake, not identical to the original ones and not attempting to be, at least in the eyes of the one that blended them. And still, I personally couldn't help but feel that these cakes had more than just a marketing gimmick behind them. Whether or not they actually do resemble Red and Blue Mark teas when those cakes were young is hard to

say, and perhaps really just a matter of opinion. However, seeing the passion, spirit and science that went into their production I have no doubt at all that they are cakes that I myself would love to collect. I'm also pretty confident that their future will be bright. Who's to say if any of the original Red or Blue Mark will even be around in fifty years to compare. Nevertheless, I'm sure that these teas will have found their way into history as well. I think everyone there, from the people preparing the water and tea to the reporters from Taiwan, all felt that Zhou Yu was making history before our very eyes.

*The Leaf*

