

THE CONSCIENTIOUS TEA CONSUMER

BY
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The linguistic and cultural barrier from East to West gives tea vendors a degree of control over information that is unprecedented with most other exported commodities. Too many of them try to come off as unbiased bloggers or those who freely share information, when in fact they are tea salesmen. This is not to say that they don't love tea, many of them do, but as long as the information they share with us passes through the medium of a website, article or speech that ends with us giving them money to profit by, we can't develop with any kind of certainty. For that reason, many of the greatest masters I've met refuse to be involved in the sales of tea for fear of losing their voice and influence over their students.

Living in Taiwan these few years, and learning Chinese has provided me with an inside view into the tea culture and industry that Westerners who haven't traveled here extensively will rarely see. For that reason, I thought it would be useful if I shared some of my experience and discuss the guidelines I personally follow when purchasing tea. Some of these strategies are just common sense, but others are specifically related to the tea industry itself.

Firstly, I think it is important for Western consumers to understand that the amount of tea available in shops, whether physical or online, in the West is actually a very small fraction of the tea in Asia. Obviously, the Asian market is a much larger one in terms of fine loose teas. This can be a good or bad thing. If you allow it to limit your focus, and create standards based completely on what is available from online or local vendors, then of course you have reduced yourself to that smaller portion of actual tea. If, on the other hand, you remain open to the vast world of tea, recognizing that the learning curve is a lifetime, then the potential is there to develop.

When I began drinking tea, I also lived in the West (Canada not America). However, at that time there weren't any online shops or information. I mail-



ordered some teas and bought the rest in China Town. I got cheated, but I quickly realized that I was only viewing the first stroke of a huge scroll painting. That introduction, however, enticed me to keep unraveling the work, and each roll revealed deeper and more refined figures and impressions—a process that continues even today.

One of the most difficult aspects of learning for many of us Westerners is humility. Being humble is so important for all aspects of personal and spiritual growth as much as it is for tea. If you think that you found *the* Way or the answers then growth will stop. If you listen humbly, on the other hand, you will go home and experiment, trying out new methods, approaches, teas, etc. Of course, you won't find all of these methods to fit with your practice. You might



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even disagree with some of them outright. Some people's approach may not suit you at all, but again humility must reign. I sometimes find in my own experimentation that a certain method, approach or practice of brewing is better than the one a different teacher taught me. This doesn't mean I would ever go to the teacher I didn't agree with and tell him he was wrong. Even thinking that hinders me, because it means that the next time I visit that teacher I may think that because he was wrong about that one point he therefore doesn't have anything else to show me. Nothing could be further from the truth. I once had a very real experience proving how important this is: I learned from Teacher A that it was better to shower the Yixing teapot both before and after steeping the tea. At the time I thought the process a hindrance and didn't notice the difference. I preferred Teacher B's way of simply reheating the pot only if it sat for a long time. Later, when I became more sensitive, I realized that Teacher A's method was better for me. If I had thought myself big enough to tell him he was wrong, not only would I have made a fool of myself, but I would have cut myself off from all the great information he has taught me since. We need to be open to the "beginner's mind" and always be willing to try and experiment; and even when we find a comfortable practice, to recognize that it may change in the future as we develop. Emerson said it took him five years to learn to speak the English language and fifty to learn to hear it.

Another useful thing is to remember to be open to information from many sources. I am always wary of those who have only one teacher who they claim to be the supreme master of tea. I am very fortunate to have so many different teachers who have taught me many different aspects of tea. They each have their specialty, their own expertise. Also, in learning from many different teachers we quickly learn how much difference there is between the brewing of two equally-skilled masters, both with decades

of experience. One isn't better; just different. And in the end, you will have to create your own Way, your own Cha Dao, and for that it is better to have exposure to varied approaches. Neither does this mean that one should treat any of these teachers with anything but reverence. When I am with any of my teachers I am completely open to receive information, and try anything new or old, no matter how many times I've tried it before. I try to leave my ego outside and absorb as much as I can.

The problem with buying tea is that many of those that teach us are also tea merchants, and how do we know whether or not what we're learning isn't just setting us up to prefer their tea? Of course the vendor with a lot of old tea will say old tea is the best, and those who don't have access to as much aged tea are always coming at you with the "Old doesn't mean good" line, sometimes even saying that their new tea is better than the old tea they have had.

Because of the tremendous variation in water quality, brewing methods and even the effect of the one who is brewing the tea, it is possible for a teacher to make their competitors' tea taste worse than their own. For that reason, it is often better to do comparisons at home and never use a vendor's brewing-





This 80's/90's brick has sat in the shop for years because I'm the only one who seems to like it, and that is just fine with me!

-parameters. Instead, use the ones that make you feel like the test will be natural and as unbiased, at least relative to you, as is possible. After all, you're the one who is going to be drinking the tea every day. Therefore, in the end, it is only your opinion that matters. I think there couldn't be any one single maxim more useful to the teaist than this: You drink your tea, and so your method, understanding and taste outweighs anyone's when it comes to your own enjoyment of tea in your personal life!

This brings us to another important point: Don't ever buy tea because it was sanctioned or produced by teacher or master X. Their opinion is theirs, and yours is yours. Of course, if you respect a teacher then that in itself is reason enough to try the tea that they think is good, especially if that master isn't a vendor. But you still must try the tea before purchasing it and judge it in terms of your water, your brewing parameters and your taste, no theirs. Since ancient times it has been the Chinese way to increase the value of a thing because such and such a venerated teacher said he or she approves of it. When said teachers are unbiased critiques, such a system can work fine, but when they are the same people you are buying the tea from, such information is specious. I never allow my affection for any of my teachers to influence

my purchasing decisions. I am the one who will take the tea home and I am the one who will drink it. I sometimes buy teas that they don't like as much as I do. Sometimes we agree and sometimes we don't. Of course, I am always polite and never reveal that I have seen other sources that I like better at equal prices, or whatever reason I have for not purchasing a particular tea. As I mentioned briefly before, I find that those who get their teas or their information from only one source progress the slowest, often just acting as spokesmen for the philosophy or even sales pitch of a particular teacher's teas.

I must stress again that this kind of thinking only relates to the tea I am buying for personal use—if you are a collector or if you are sharing tea with others, then of course other factors enter the equation. When I am drinking tea with any friend or teacher, I allow the one brewing to select the tea and do my best to enjoy it no matter what it is. Unless you're a millionaire, though, the amount you can take home is limited, and therefore our purchasing decisions must be less free. I would never apply such selfish cynicism to learning or growing in tea, only to purchasing it.

It goes without saying that you have to learn to get beyond the marketing and advertising surrounding any shop or tea. Too many vendors take misleading pictures of plantation tea, and Westerners who haven't been to many tea farms will think that the tea looks "green" and healthy when in fact it isn't. Generally, plantation teas are never the highest quality in any genre. Other vendors take photos of the loose tea surrounded by orchids, Buddhas, etc. and then use flowery verse to describe how "ethereal" the "nectar" is, or how remote a location it came from. There aren't any exotic, remote secretly-sourced tea *plantations* in the world! Farmers who create inorganic plantations are almost exclusively in the business for money. They pack the land as densely as possible, sometimes with multiple crops like betel nut, oranges, etc., because they aren't really tea lovers, but grow tea because it has a higher value per yield or because it is what they know. They aren't interested in keeping their farm remote or secret. They are interested in more and more customers buying larger quantities of tea from them; in more convenient roads carved from the mountains to increase the efficiency of getting the tea to market.

There is no flower or lotus leaf you photo next to a tea—no beautiful cup or pot—nor any poetic story that will increase the quality of a tea. It is what it is, and the best way to find that essence is to drink it. The best way to evaluate tea is not to learn how to read about or collect information, but to develop your own sensitivity so that you can discriminate quality by yourself. Far too many tea drinkers, teachers and students alike, become librarians rather than masters, gathering all kinds of historical or wrapper-ological information without ever mastering the gong fu of tea.

In the world of Puerh, more than any other genre of tea, there is so much false information, advertising ploys and otherwise dubious business practices. One must learn to develop one's own perspicacity. Still, there are a few guidelines that one can follow, though they also require a degree of discrimination. As I mentioned earlier, plantation teas are always lower quality, usually inorganic, and derived from less healthy trees than old-growth. This applies to all genres of tea actually, but especially Puerh. Puerh tea has always been special because of the fact that the trees are old-growth and the processing simple, organic and ancient. For that reason, very little of the big factory tea produced in the last decade has been worthwhile. Of course this is just an opinion, and there are some notable exceptions. Generally speaking, though, larger factories use plantation teas, not old-growth. Either that or they blend in some old-growth for the sake of marketing. Old-growth tea isn't available in the kind of amounts they require. Therefore, I very rarely buy large factory or market-floor teas.

You have to get beyond the brand. There is no consistency in any factory, especially the larger ones. They access different raw materials each season, and even the raw materials (*mao cha*) from the same exact farm will be different from the spring to the fall. When you add to this the fact that teas are blended and that there are so many fakes copied from all the larger factory teas, one needs to be careful. Wrappers can say anything. They can be copied. Some say "Old-growth" when they have little or no old-growth tea inside. For me personally, I find the small, independent producers of tea to have a much greater consistency in quality, though their teas of course vary as well. In the end, one must learn to gauge the tea and discriminate

organic/inorganic, old-growth or plantation tea by oneself. I would say this applies equally to all kinds of tea. The best oolongs also come from large, organic trees like those in Wuyi, Phoenix Mountain or even a few places in Taiwan.

Old-growth tea is divided into three categories: the first is large, old trees that are wild, propagated naturally and have never been tended by men. These rarely produce good tea. The second are gardens planted by locals some time in the distant past and then abandoned, many of which are being rediscovered and used to make tea today. Finally, some gardens were planted more recently and have been continuously tended since, but are still a balanced part of a natural, organic ecology. Anything not basically falling into these three categories I would consider 'plantation tea', which for me more defines an agricultural philosophy than a kind of tea—tea grown for money rather than for its own sake.



Plantation versus Old-growth tea as seen from the ground, not misleading camera angles. Isn't it obvious? I think it always has been!





Pictures don't change a tea. Look here: Beautiful picture I just took, but of a tea I really don't like at all and would never buy!

I think that Westerners have the chance to impact the whole tea industry in a positive way. Our rigorous standards, pressing always for more unbiased information, will hopefully open up more opportunities and avenues of expression like this magazine.

While I enjoy reading many tea magazines, English and Chinese, you have to keep a kind of intellectual distance from them as much as you do from vendors. Most of them are writing articles about teas that are also made or sold by clients of theirs. Many of the authors are tea vendors as well and will generate interest in teas they wish to sell or increase the market value of. The same goes for some blogs out there. By writing or reviewing a particular tea the price can be driven up, especially if you arrange the review in a way that places said tea in competition with other lower quality teas that it will surely beat out, making it seem greater than it actually is. Other vendors only review their own teas, giving poor marks to other teas if and when they drink them. I once had tea with a vendor who was protesting a tea that everyone present thought was excellent, arguing that it was lower quality than his version.

Consequently, vendors are equally suspect. You may protest that such and such a vendor is different: He or she treated you so kindly, offered you this or that, or provided you with some useful information. Of course they are kind and polite in their emails and phone calls! They send you free samples and give you all kinds of "free" information because they "only want to help promote tea culture." This is rarely true, at least not completely. It is called 'customer service', and having good service is great for

a business person, though not that good as a source of information or cultural promotion. I even saw a vendor posing as a blogger that posted a short bio in which he said his interest in tea had absolutely nothing to do with money and only with a genuine desire to share information, when the post below it was offering a 'buy one get one free' marketing ploy. I couldn't believe the blatant discrepancy!

In the end, we must learn to develop our own sensitivity and ability to evaluate tea, as well as become willing to express our opinions in a polite and humble way. It is not in the spirit of tea to bash anyone personally or hurt a vendor for being a businessman. Much of the things I have discussed above are normal business practice: marketing, advertising, customer service, etc. It isn't the fault of the vendor if one is led astray by wishy-washy language or flowery pictures, brand name or other stories of how this tea is a "rare production that only teacher X has because he or she bought the whole stash." I can't say that I wouldn't do the same if I was in the tea or any other business. Unfortunately, in this world, it is the consumer's responsibility to seek out more accurate information, not the vendors' to provide it.

As I understand it, one of the goals of this poignantly *free* magazine is to remain as absolutely unbiased as possible, so that all of us English-speaking tea lovers all over the world can develop independent of those that would sell us tea. Just because I live here in Asia doesn't mean I don't face advertising ploys, flowery language or any of the other pitfalls those in the West do. I often visit a shop where the owner reminds me every time I come that "all the best tea on Earth is in this room." And if this magazine lives up to said ideals, I will be the first to be impressed.

Sometimes you might feel like giving up in light of all the airs surrounding the sales and distribution of tea—I know I have felt that way before. At any of those times, I focus on the quiet of the tea room, the smile of a good tea companion or the steam rising from an antique Yixing and I'm reminded why I drink tea, and why it's all worth it.

The Leaf

