



Spring and summer always have quite a few tea expos. Unfortunately, the Asian tea market is in a slump this year. I'm no economist, but the general consensus seems to be that the overall economic problems and the rising cost of oil have led to personal cutbacks in people's expenditure; consequently, tea is one of the commodities that people sometimes buy less of when the economy is unstable. Despite the reduction in sales, the Malaysian Tea Trade Fair wasn't a depressed scene, which is a testament to one of the reasons I love coming each year: A lot of the vendors here don't come to scoop up quick profits, they have a genuine interest in promoting tea awareness; and if there was ever any doubt, this year proved it. Although the fair was quiet compared to previous years, there was still the same conviviality, sharing of tea and smiles, making and reuniting friends that makes Malaysian tea culture so wonderful.

This is not to say that the fair was completely empty. Being held in the huge shopping center called Times Square assured a steady stream of people who were at least walking by. However, there definitely was less response than in previous years. Still, as I mentioned, so many of the vendors here sell tea out of a true love. Of course all vendors the world over say that, but all too often saying that "we really do love tea" is just part of a marketing ploy. Even a cursory survey of the internet will reveal tons of shops pretending to do business only for the sake of tea, claiming that they don't have any concern for money at all or that they are just "sharing information", sometimes hiding their shops behind blogs or informative websites. The tea market here isn't like that at all. There is no pretension. The tea vendors aren't claiming to "love tea". They are simply doing business. If you ask them, they would



answer you straightforwardly that they earn a living as tea merchants. Nonetheless, the love of tea is there, unstated and honest, which is usually the case for things that are genuine—they are blatant, without the need of words.

The desire to actually enjoy some tea, rather than just sell it, translates into the very set up of Malaysian trade fairs. Each of the booths has a large table with many chairs, inviting anyone who would like to come and have a cup of tea. Most of the booths aren't heavily pushing their own teas all day, either. When you come you can share some of your tea, join in with others, as well as taste some of the teas being sold. There is never any of the pressure to buy so prominent at other trade fairs in Asia and even the West. Many



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fairs just- have booths, handing you info and a paper cup and then shuffling you along. Sometimes in China, even when the exhibitors do have tables and chairs, the emphasis is so heavily on sales that the owner will ignore you, and stop pouring, once he or she realizes you're not going to buy anything, moving on to the next customer. I even have had the experience of watching the vendor's attitude completely change because the amount I was buying was below what he had hoped for. The ambience at Malaysian trade fairs always reflects the easy-going politeness of Malaysian culture in general. I noticed this trip that even after I returned to the same booth after having come three times without buying anything, I was still welcomed with the same smile. I wasn't offered lower-quality teas because I wasn't going to buy any. Instead, the owners break out special teas and ask you what you have, sharing in the true spirit of tea.

Many of the booths rent antique, or antique-looking, Chinese furniture. Strolling around from booth to booth, one meets many of the same people over the course of the fair. I always make a ton of new

friends, also recognizing old friends with a smile. The causal, laid-back atmosphere is really great. It always reminds me more of a Sunday afternoon in any given tea shop, rather than a large trade fair in a bustling shopping center.

The conversation at many tables was of course related to the relative collapse of the Puerh market. Mostly, it is the brand names that are in the greatest danger, as all the speculation and storage of tea as a financial investment is halting. It is only in the places where people are actually going to drink the tea that many shops will survive. Other markets, like Kunming, that are driven more by buying and trading tea as a commodity, rather than a drink to be enjoyed, will face many more problems. Most people agree that this is a good thing. The Puerh industry is destroying Yunnan's environment, industrializing what has always been a traditional method of manufacturing tea. The old-growth teas that are processed in the traditional way won't struggle with as much of the issues the branded, plantation teas will because there will always be a market of tea lovers interested in buying that tea to drink.



Many of the experts at the fair spoke about how the withdrawal of all this speculation from the market is a good thing, returning to the days when tea was bought and sold by those that want to actually *drink* tea.

As evidence of that fact, the only two booths that did extremely well financially were both selling old-growth teas. The number one seller at the expo was Chen Hua Yuan from Taiwan. His 2008 teas were actually remarkably above other old-growth private productions I tasted. I'm not currently buying any newborn teas, but I could see why so many people were purchasing his teas. As one of the leading experts in the field, Chen Hua Yuan was part of the original movement in the 90's to return to traditional processing and stone-pressed Puerh from old-growth tea. His experience definitely shows in the tea he produces as well. I talked with him for some length about the current Puerh trends. He said the collapse of the Puerh market was caused mainly—though not exclusively—by two causes: “First of course is speculation. This driving of prices up to unheard-of rates was more the fault of Chinese who have a lot of newfound wealth and were a bit crazy for Puerh. The tea drinkers in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia and elsewhere have been drinking tea

longer and are a bit more sensible in their approach.” He went on to add that old Puerh tea should be expensive, though not as crazily through-the-roof as it has become. “The price of old Puerh, driven up by Chinese willing to pay such outrageous prices, then affects the price of newborn Puerh as well.” The rising prices then not only cause a huge increase in production from existent factories, but also the establishment of many new factories; and just as happened in Taiwan and elsewhere, quality is lost as soon as production is increased. “The second reason, then, for the collapse was a slight depression in the global economy due to rising oil prices and other factors.” As the quality of tea decreased to below what people want to consume at all, and a depression arrived, the whole market collapsed. Master Chen said that it was more complex than this, but that was his take on the dramatic decrease in prices.





I then asked Master Chen about why his tea was selling more than anyone else's at the expo. He said that first of all he has always focused on quality above quantity. He said that he only makes one ton of tea a year, never more. He never allows greed to affect the quality of his tea. "Secondly, I have always worked very hard to keep the prices of my brand stable. I haven't kept increasing prices as my tea became more famous,

as many owners do." With a large grin, he also said that one of the main reasons for the sales at the expo, however, was that he was running a promotion. The idea is that you buy seven cakes (one *tong*) of his tea and it comes with a certificate guaranteeing that he will buy the tea back in five years time for three times what you paid. I thought it was a good idea as well, and understood more clearly why he sold so much tea.

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There was also a lot of discussion about antique teaware at the expo. It was great to hear some of the experts' takes on how to find an old Yixing, how to spot the fakes, and the recommendation to look at several examples to help improve one's skills. Master Ling spoke at length about old pots. He said that the best way to appraise an old pot is to look at many pots, preferably in natural lighting. He said the old clay shines from within, with a gentle luster that seems to radiate from within the pot; while newer pots are glossier, shining more on the surface. There are, of course, other helpful indicators, like the craftsmanship, the seal on the bottom, etc. When looking at the seal, one should remember that the older clays were more malleable so the seal is smoother and flatter and the lettering clearer. Newer clay is stickier and less malleable, so the artists had to press the seal down harder, pulling up the clay with it. These guidelines, however, are not as accurate as just holding lots of pots and getting a feel for old clay, the way it shines, breathes, looks and feels. Master Ling did smilingly warn that old pots are

getting rarer and rarer. He said that an expert in Hong Kong had recently suggested that there may be as few as 2000 genuine Qing and Ming teapots left on earth, and many are accounted for. I told him there were vendors selling Qing pots for thirty US dollars on Ebay that even come with "certificates of authenticity" and he laughed and laughed.

There were some nice old teapots on display at several booths. The lectures and the chance to hold some of these pots and recognize the discrepancies between different periods was a very rewarding experience. I asked my Master if we could one day write an article on distinguishing antique Yixing and he said it would be impossible. "The bottom line is that you have to hold a lot of pots. It's all about experience." Admittedly, I can always see the differences in the clay when the pots of different ages are all right before me and I can handle them. When they are not there, however, and you're relying on memory, it's a lot more difficult.



Master Ling teaching us about antique teapots.





My speech was about the “Benefits of Drinking Tea in the Modern World” and covered much of what my forthcoming books will discuss. I also got the chance to display some of my artwork, and even sold a few pieces. The new artwork can be seen [here](#). Other highlights of the overall program included my Master’s speech on the “Tea Grown by Immortals”, which is of course his favorite tea, Wuyi *yancha*. That speech is available in its entirety at the [Artwork](#) section of this site.



This time I had a brewing and a speech. My brewing went pretty successfully, and I was later told that the turn-out was good. I brewed four *yanchas* and discussed the differences in those teas. I discussed how the criteria used to determine quality in the genre of *yancha* are much the same as with any kind of tea: firstly, the *terroir*, or soil and climate, in which I also include the kind of tree or “source”; secondly, the processing; and thirdly, the age. In the case of *yancha*, there are four kinds, three within the scenic area of Wuyi mountain: the first being the real old-growth trees up in the cliff valleys, the second grade being genetic cuttings planted lower down—sometimes on man-made terraces; and lastly the cuttings planted on the flatlands down by the river. The fourth kind of *yancha* is then that which is planted outside the scenic area, or “*wei san*.” As with most kinds of tea, the method of processing is almost as important as the *terroir*. With *yancha* it is equally important. Wuyi oolongs are some of the most difficult and most complex teas to process, taking a lifetime to master. Slight variations can spoil the tea. We drank teas that expressed these variations in quality and I discussed them as we went along.



The best part of any casual trade fair like the ones in Malaysia is that the reunion of old friends is always a great excuse to bring out some great teas. I drank some really great aged Liu Bao and Puerh and many other great teas as well. Moving around from table to table, you stumble upon some great sessions of tea. In my speech, I spoke about how tea promotes what I call “calm joy”, which means that when together with friends the relaxing atmosphere tea promotes helps us to set our egos aside and be ourselves—to rest comfortably in each other’s presence and enjoy the moment, as we only have this one chance.

The Malaysian expos are always more tea gatherings than they are trade fairs, especially if you avoid the more business-oriented booths and steer to the many, many booths owned and operated by true

tea lovers. And for that reason, they are they only trade fairs I attend with real enthusiasm, finding calm joy in the friendship and growth of learning about tea together with others who share my passion.

The Leaf