

GONG FU TEA TIPS WITH MASTER LING PING XIANG



To truly master any art one must go way beyond just technique, creating the “artless art” as it has been called—that streaming place of freedom that comes from a place beyond anything learned. And so much of tea should be joyous, free and fun. One of the sad things we often see with beginners is that they make their tea into something way too serious, as if it were a college course and one had to read books and articles with the utmost scrutiny, analyze and debate them and then pass examinations to become a “master”. Yet, the whole idea of a certified “master” of any art is absurd. There are no tests. There are no books that teach the Way of Tea. There is no need to scrutinize, develop a working vocabulary, analyze, dissect, record serious sessions and then use notebooks full of reviews to further categorize them. As an art, tea is best expressed joyously from the soul, free and spontaneously.



Instead, try learning through experimental play, the way you once did as a child. The greatest masters always have a childlike grace, and continue to play with tea and life in general despite their age. There is no real need to study. There aren’t any levels to attain. Tea is a Dao because it can’t ever be taught in words. One has to make tea and drink it, and experience comes only after years of practice. And yet, I could never overemphasize the fact that while it may take time to achieve mastery of tea, it takes no time at all to experience the joy in a cup of tea.

A much better place to begin from is the desire to enjoy yourself. Spend time with your friends and loved ones, enjoying a shared passion for tea together. Also spend time getting to know yourself better, steeping a friendship that pours more aromatic cups than all others combined. Don’t be afraid to grow through play. Try different ways of brewing, amounts, waters, temperatures, etc. without any attachment, willing to make mistakes and grow experientially. In other words, it is okay to study the technical skills involved in painting, but if you lose the passion for art because you make it too tedious, your paintings will always lack. If you never learn to connect to the tea intuitively, you’ll always be painting by numbers.

Sometimes when we try the suggestions of our teachers we don’t notice what they are saying at all. We should never adopt a practice simply because others say so. Instead, make tea in the way that makes you relaxed and happy. However, always stay open-minded to the possibility that somewhere down the road some of the subtleties the teacher was talking about will somehow make sense. Usually the path through any art is a Dao from the gross to the subtle, and as you make more tea over the years and become more sensitive, you’ll find that you recognize more and more clearly what was indistinct earlier. For example, a teacher tells you that

Experiment One: To *zisha* or not to *zisha*

For this you'll need two identical porcelain cups for each participant, a decent quality handmade Yixing Purple-sand teapot (as opposed to one made using clay from other regions or one that is slipcast—if at all possible) and a porcelain gaiwan of approximately the same size/capacity.

Try putting 1-2 grams of the same kind of tea leaves into both the gaiwan and the Yixing, steeping them at the same time. It is better to use such a small amount so that the tea liquor is light and doesn't interfere with your ability to focus on the sensations in your mouth and throat. Master Ling also suggests using a tea you are comfortable with, so that you can better recognize differences from your normal brewing, and also so that your mind isn't too enticed by new or exciting flavors.

Then, pour the tea liquor directly into the porcelain cups, one from the Yixing and one from the gaiwan. It is important that you don't involve any kind of pitcher in the process. By pouring directly from the

gaiwan or Yixing you are evaluating them unambiguously, on their own terms and without any interference from an intermediary substance.

While the different flavors of the tea are unavoidably present, Master Ling asks that you instead focus more on the way the liquor touches your mouth and throat. It is helpful to close your eyes and take a deep breath before beginning. Make sure everyone is quiet if you're doing this together, so you can really focus on the tea. You can always discuss your findings afterwards.

Is it coarse? Does it slurp down roughly? Sluggishly? Or is it smooth? Does the liquor feel soft in your mouth, as if the liquid is all tightly bound together, or does it splash in an uncomfortable way? Does it slide down your throat smoothly? Where in your mouth does it touch and are those sensations pleasant?

Continue to dance from cup to cup each steeping, recognizing the differences between the Yixing Purple-sand clay and the porcelain.

one tea is better than another. In the beginning, you try both and find them to be the same, or even disagree completely. Then, years later, after you have more experience drinking, you revisit that tea one more time and find out that what the teacher was discussing was in fact true.

And yet we mustn't regret the time we spent with the tea or teaware that brought us joy, even if we outgrow them. A life seeking out the perfect cup would not be wasted, to borrow the Zen cliché used in the movie *The Last Samurai*, of all places, but when one's eyes are opened, one poignantly realizes that "they are all perfect." The Dao is a journey and we all are always students—even the master never ceases to learn and grow.

I sat down with my master, Ling Ping Xiang, and asked him for some simple and practical experiments that beginners could try to improve their tea drinking and he came up with four, discussed below, which he often teaches to beginners himself. We hope that you won't just read them, but actually try them.

Perhaps you also will find that they improve your ability to brew tea. If not, set them aside. Maybe later you'll find that you appreciate them more. Maybe not. The joy and consciousness of those preparing and enjoying the tea is far more important than any technical knowledge of this kind could ever be.

We are not here to present any conclusions based on these experiments. The wisdom, technical skills, opinions and discrepancies are all *yours* to find. We are merely setting up the field, the results of the game are yours to decide. In other words, we aren't trying to promote one way of brewing, as blindly following any teacher without direct experience never leads to wisdom. This is not to suggest that masters like Ling Ping Xiang don't have a preference, they do. But don't be attached to the outcome. These aren't tests. They are just games to play and have fun enjoying the experience. You must make your own inferences and cultivate your own tea, and in that way a true master is also always a great teacher.



Experiment Two: Heavy showers predicted

For this experiment you will need one porcelain cup per participant, a decent quality handmade Yixing Purple-sand teapot (yet again, not slipcast and not made from cheap ore if possible) and finally a small, slightly indented dish or even a bowl. This dish should ideally be ceramic, preferably porcelain, rather than plastic. It need not be made especially for tea—a nice porcelain bowl from your tableware is acceptable.

Again, Master Ling suggests using only 1-2 grams for the same reasons mentioned earlier, forcing us to focus as much on the sensations as the flavor. He also emphasizes, as before, that it be a tea you are comfortable with—even the same as the first experiment.

Rest the Yixing in the bowl or dish. For this experiment you will do three successive steepings. You will have to pay close attention each time, though, as you'll only get one "real" chance (we'll explain why later). It isn't critical that you follow our order, but it may be the easiest way to experience the discrepancies: First, steep the tea by showering the pot with hot water before you even open the lid, filling it up, and then showering it again after you have replaced the lid. We'll call this "showers before and after." Again, Master Ling

asks that you pour directly from the Yixing into your porcelain cup, without any pitcher. Like the previous experiment, drink quietly and try to focus on the sensations in your mouth, upper palate and throat as much as you do on the flavor. For the second steeping, shower the pot before you fill it, but not after. We'll call that "showers before." Again pour directly into the cup and drink fully. For the final steeping, fill the pot and only shower it with hot water afterwards—obviously "showers after." Then try that cup.

You won't be able to repeat the experiment as accurately as the first time. This doesn't mean that we suggest you quit, but the differences just won't be as pronounced in later tries as they were the first time, since the different methods will have affected the tea. An alternative that solves that problem, though in a cumbersome way, would be to have three pots, dishes and cups and relegate one to each kind of "showering". That way, you could drink of them together as well, rather than consecutively. That isn't necessary, though.

How did the different ways of showering the pot affect the tea liquor?

Experiment Three: Pitchers and strainers

For this experiment you will need an Yixing teapot (yes, same as before: handmade if possible), three identical porcelain cups for each tea lover, a strainer of any kind and a pitcher (*cha hai*) of any make or design. For this experiment, Master Ling suggests a pot with a larger capacity so that you can comfortably fill the three cups.

Just as with all the experiments here, we suggest using a lesser amount of a tea you are more familiar with for experimenting. After you steep the tea with water, pour directly from the Yixing pot into the first cup. Then, hold your strainer over the second cup and pour the liquor through it. Try pouring a bit onto the

inner walls of the strainer as well. Finally, pour the remaining tea into the pitcher. Since your liquor is so light—as you put so few tea leaves in—it won't matter much that the three cups are coming from the top or bottom of the pot. Afterwards, pour the tea in the pitcher into the third cup.

Quietly sip from each of the cups, focusing as much on the way the liquor interacts with your mouth, palate and throat as you do to the flavors and aromas. Are the teas very different? If so, how?



Experiment Four: The vast world of cups

For this experiment you need a larger Yixing teapot (dare I say it? Must I?) and as many different shapes and sizes, makes and models of cups as you can get your hands on. In ideal circumstances, you could also include at least one antique porcelain cup to add the dimension of age to your experiments; but if that isn't possible, just use different kinds of ceramics in different shapes.

Again, the idea is to brew a tea you are familiar with in a very light way, so the texture can shine as predominantly as the flavors and aromas. What is "light" will depend on the size of your pot, but nothing much more than 2 grams. After you steep the tea, pour directly from the Yixing into the different cups you have aligned in a row. As we mentioned above, we don't want a pitcher to interfere in our perception of the effects the cups are having. (Ideally, we'd even steep

the tea in the cups themselves like the ancient Daoists mendicants, eliminating all interference—even from the pot—but, we'd need bowls for that, so let's keep it simple and just pour directly into the cups. There is, after all, no objectivity in art; and even if there were we'd just suggest another experiment called "with or without objectivity".)

Try noticing the differences the shape, size, make and/or age of the cup have on the color, flavor, aroma and the feeling of the tea in your mouth. Sit quietly and focus on the amazing world of differences caused simply by the differences in your cups. Which one is best and why?



We hope that you found these experiments rewarding, and—more importantly—*fun*. Most of us enjoy our tea in our free time; and it therefore shouldn't be anything more than pure joy to drink it, even when we are experimenting for the purpose of learning. The idea wasn't to learn how to be overly-critical, but just to recognize differences so that you can go on to find the style of brewing most suitable to you. Of course, there are a thousand other ways to play and learn, even without the wonderful guidance of such a renowned master as Ling Ping Xiang. At the end of the day, though, we have to learn to enjoy the tea before us no matter how

it is prepared, for it is all we've got right now. If you stop loving the process and enjoying the learning, even the botched teas and mistakenly broken teaware that comes along the way, you'll never travel as far.

I once asked Master Ling why his tea always tastes so much better than others', including mine. His answer was so beautiful that it moistened my eyes. He simply said, "I just love tea."

The Leaf

