

AN INTRODUCTION TO AGED AND AGING PUERH

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In general, most people would prefer to buy fresh, new teas over aged ones. Consumers sometimes regard old tea as bland, tasteless liquor that has lost its original fragrance. However, in some periods and places, aged tea has been regarded as a kind of herbal medicine. In Taiwan, contemporary oolong tea farmers' tendency towards greener oolong and *tie guan yin* has too often disappointed connoisseurs, who have then begun turning to other kinds of tea, like Puerh. Puerh had been known to many Chinese as “the smelly tea”. But now, Puerh and other kinds of aged teas have found their way into mainstream tea circles—teas like *Hao Ji*, *Yin Ji*, “*Chi Tse Beeng*”, *Jin Cha*, *Tuo Cha*, brick teas, aged *Liu An* and *Liu Bao* as well as aged oolongs are becoming more and more popular. The increasing recognition for these aged teas has led to a surge of Puerh tea production and appreciation. Over the last few years, this growth has been like an army sweeping the tea world, on its way to conquering all other kinds of tea.

Few collectors of old tea are willing to sell the better vintages, even at the exorbitant prices teas like *Hong Yin* fetch nowadays. They know that the price will continue to grow each year as fewer cakes exist in the world. Still, the financial opportunity available through storing Puerh attracts new collectors and investors and sets market prices. Whether for collection or investment it is important that one has a basic understanding of such tea and its fermentation when beginning a collection; knowing about the aging process itself will help inform one's purchasing decisions.

There is a common saying amongst tea experts that “age doesn't mean quality”. Of course, we forgive many problems in aged tea nowadays, as quantities are scarce, but with more varieties of new tea available than ever before—and many of it created using very new and innovative materials and processing methods—we must take care when buying tea for storage. Investing in aged tea requires knowing how to appreciate a good tea, recognizing quality and having at least a basic understanding of the aging process itself.



The tea that has risen in price so rapidly, and become so famous is aged *Qing Pu* (Raw, *Sheng* Puerh). These are mostly the “*Chi Tse Beeng* Era” of twenty or so years, from the 70's to the 90's. However, when *Qing Pu* is new its essence is cold (in the sense of Chinese medicinal philosophy) and its taste bitter and puckery. Except for the highlanders of the Tibetan plateau, who use raw Puerh to aid in the digestion of their all-meat diet, very few consumers have any interest in drinking young *Qing Pu*. Traditionally, the aboriginals of Yunnan would roast it before drinking, calling it “slab stone-roasted tea” (*Zhi Kao Cha* or *Guan Guan Cha*). The Tibetans traditionally mixed it with butter before drinking. These methods of preparation are done to change its cold essence to warm, and get rid of the negativities in the liquor. Although many of these people might not have understood the theory behind roasting or mixing their tea, their ancestors left them their experience and wisdom. The owners of tea houses in Hong Kong came



up with their own solution to the problems inherent in new *Qing Pu*: they stored the Puerh tea cakes for some time in hills and basements where the humidity was high and fermented it through wetter storage. They found that this method of storage removed the bitterness and improved the flavor and liquor dramatically, and if the “storage smell” was too strong, they mixed the tea with chrysanthemum flowers, creating another way to enjoy Puerh, today called “*Ju Pu Cha*.” There is often a common misunderstanding that wet-stored Puerh is bad, or “smelly”, but actually it can be quite delicious, and furthermore all the old vintages, now worth so much money, at one time passed through wet storage—or storage in a location where the humidity is high. If you aren’t sure about wet-stored Puerh tea, you should see the process that makes its counterpart “*Shou* (Ripe)” tea!

As I mentioned before, the craze for aged Puerh in Taiwan has been for *Qing Pu*. This is the tea that has become famous both for its rich flavor, enjoyable experience, comfortable feeling, as well as for financial appreciation. Of course, its value is in part determined

by the fact that there is less stock each year, but nonetheless, the more important reason vintage Puerh is worth so much is because of its mellow, thick, soft and elegant flavor that is beyond any other kind of tea. Its liquor is like the depths of a ruby, and shimmers as such, attracting any tea lover’s attention. But how did the tea change so drastically? Once a cold, bitter tea that puckered the mouth, it has become smooth and deep. How did this miraculous transformation occur?

While *Qing Pu* ages, it is almost constantly in a state of change caused by cellular breakdown. All cells are protected by a cell wall. Some of the cell walls in plants are very thin and fragile, like those of most vegetables, fruits and cereals. Just cooking releases the valuable nutrients inside the cells, which is also why these plants rot quickly and easily. Some cell walls, on the other hand, are not so easily broken down. Some herbs and spiral algae must be treated using a high-tech process in order to get the most out of consumption. Another way for firmer cell walls to break down is time, and aging of Puerh occurs in this way.

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Over the course of many years, the plant will ferment and decompose, resulting in cellular breakdown. When the cell walls of Puerh leaves break down, the material inside the cells is released. The more of this “vegetable fat” released, the smoother the tea will be. The more cellulose that is released, the sweeter the tea will be; and the more scented oil is released, the more obvious the fragrance will be. Besides these flavor enhancements, amino acids and other trace elements are released from the broken-down cells, all of which benefit the human body. Likewise, harmful ingredients found in tea, like caffeine and tannic acid, are volatilized by the decomposition. The jerky taste and puckery sensation are gone, and the bitter coldness has turned into soft warmth in terms of Chinese philosophy. As the tea ages the molecules shrink, making it smoother and more pleasurable to drink.

Temperature, humidity and oxygen levels play a significant role in the decomposition of Puerh tea. If any of these factors are slowed or sped up too much, the tea will not be as good. The same *Qing Pu* that has been aged in a way capable of attracting attention and investment can turn people away if it is stored improperly. Collectors must study the proper procedure for storing their tea to ensure that it will maintain its quality over time. While we forgive problems in older tea today, because as I mentioned there is so little of it and it is so valuable, we can be choosier about the new tea we choose to store and how we go about doing it. More is understood about storage than ever before, and an increased amount of information is becoming available to the consumer.

People often ask what makes Puerh tea so different from other teas like *Long Jing*, Assam tea, or oolong tea as far as its “age-ability” is concerned. One of the major differences between Puerh and these other kinds of tea is that they are all single breed. No matter how long these other teas are stored, it is still easy to distinguish which kind of tea they are and from where they came. One might even be able to predict

their flavor in the future. But Puerh tea is not nearly as simple; it is variant and difficult to ascertain. The flavor of Puerh may change the next day. Sometimes every steeping is different than the previous one. A cake of Puerh will have completely different flavors two years from now, and again in five and so forth. Why? Well, a big part of this mystery is answered in the origin of Puerh tea. Puerh tea comes from a different type of tea plant than other teas: arbor trees. Trees have bigger leaves with more variation in size, even on the same branch. Puerh tea is propagated sexually, rather than by cutting, which means that every single tree is a unique breed. Although some genetic reproduction via cuttings is found on modern plantations, this isn't the way higher quality Puerh teas, past or present, have been grown. Much of these plantations began as a result of the rising demand and price index of the material used to make Puerh tea cakes. In the traditional way, tea is picked from a garden and placed together in a pile. The average *Qing Pu* cake may contain about 1000 leaves—





and that variety, combined with the fact that every tree is an independent and idiosyncratic breed, means that a cake could have anywhere from 1 to 1000 different breeds in it! If one tea garden produces 9000 cakes, it would be impossible to find two cakes that are, strictly speaking, identical in flavor or fragrance, though they would share the common characteristics of tea from that area. Only if all the raw material was taken from a single tree would the cakes be truly the same, and even then there would be slight differences depending on the height the leaves were harvested from and their relationship to the sun, depending on which direction they face. However, to help maintain regularity in production, many cakes contain a blend of raw materials. Tea masters choose different raw materials, some with strength of fragrance, some of flavor and some of sweetness, perhaps, and blend them together. Not only do they compliment each other, but they bring a kind of consistency to the production not otherwise possible.

Whether blended or not, it is very difficult indeed to predict what kind of changes will occur in a cake over time, though blended cakes are even more difficult. Even if all the storage factors are perfect, the differences from cake to cake make any prediction near impossible. Generally, if tea is composed in a skillful and knowledgeable manner, using higher-quality raw material, its essence will get better and better over time, as long as the storage environment is relatively healthy.

The difficulty in ascertaining what in fact will be a good tea years down the road has flooded the market with tons of very poor quality *Qing Pu*. Producers take advantage of this difficulty and lack of consumer knowledge, selling large quantities of poor quality Puerh tea. This is also leading to a degradation of the environment that is similar to what occurred with Taiwanese oolong. Consequently, many tea masters recommend that beginners start by learning about *Shou* Puerh.

Shou tea is produced using a process called “*Wo Dui*” which artificially ferments the tea leaves in a relatively short period of time. One needs to be careful that the process was done hygienically, as poor quality *Shou* tea can have harmful microbiotic activity within it. Still, determining which *Shou* tea is good and healthy is a relatively easy endeavor, especially when compared to the job of determining which *Qing Pu* to store for later consumption. Since *Qing Pu* is not really healthy or enjoyable when it is too new (one should wait until it is sufficiently aged), and so difficult to purchase given the tidal wave of low quality tea that has flooded the market recently, it is important that beginners buy in small quantities as they develop their palates.

Knowing how and why vintage Puerh tea ages helps inform the consumer about how to purchase tea for storage. The increased interest in Puerh has caused a rise in information and research globally, and we can only hope that this trend will continue. As we learn more about aged and aging Puerh tea, this genre of tea will continue to improve, ensuring that future generations are left excellent quality teas to inspire them—just as we inherited the great teas of our ancestors.

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