



26 MOUNTAINS, FIFTY CAKES

A REVIEW

BY ETHAN THOMPSON

Like any market, the changes in Puerh production, distribution, advertisement and consumption have followed predictable economic patterns. As the industry grew in scale, for example, the production increased manifold. What was once all high quality tea, became a few trees of great tea in a forest of garbage; and marketing all that low-quality tea required gimmicks. Traditionally, Puerh tea was all old-growth, arbor trees grown organically and in ecologically sound ways. With economic expansion came more plantations, pesticides and other chemicals that increase yield and decrease quality. There were now commemorative cakes, cakes with exaggerated or blatantly fraudulent claims to “old-growth”—so much so that the real old-growth tea became a rarity—and many other schemes to sell people a much lower quality product. And for that reason, all my teachers always advised me to generally try to avoid large factory productions, since they almost always were inferior—necessarily so due to the fact that the factory had to source their raw material in larger quantities. At best, most of them may have some good tea blended in. There are obvious exceptions, of course, especially the further one goes back in time. Also, my teachers always warned me to avoid purchasing cakes or sets that were sold on the basis of some marketing device beyond quality, like the anniversary of that or this, the seven mountain set, the Tea Horse Road cakes, etc. As I experimented with many cakes, and their storage, I verified that it was in fact better to stick to small private companies producing in small amounts, usually owned by true tea lovers bent on producing as high a quality of tea as possible.

Over the years, I did pay my tuition, buying plenty of gimmicks and low-quality teas that mostly ended up as gifts for friends beginning their quest—friends who I wished to help with their own tuition fees. I came to understand the fallacy of buying a big box of garbage rather than one cake, overcoming the psychological delusion of the modern age that more is better. I realized that for the same money I was spending on a huge box of market-floor garbage, I could even get a great cake of vintage Puerh that would last me years, coupled with a cake or two of really great old-growth tea to store myself. I would also find a few different marketing ploys that were the exception to the rule, and provided either great tea or an excellent chance to learn.

In 2004, Chang Tai produced a set of 16 cakes from as many regions in Yunnan. I was fortunate to not only be able to buy one before they sold out and reached drastically inflated prices, but to also write a review for Issue One of *The Art of Tea Magazine*, which somehow forced me to focus on the set and articulate more of what I learned from it. The article helped crystallize much of my insights at the time and made the whole project quite a learning experience. In that article, I discussed the positive and negative aspects of the set, which I won't repeat here, and went on to conclude that for the most part I was happy with the money I spent.

I am fully aware of the criticism that such a set can't really work due to the variation within each growing region, garden and even season of harvest. I still disagree, though. In a market that is dominated by

so many exaggerated claims and outright forgeries, it is really important that those of us who cannot afford to travel to Yunnan regularly to have some reliable basis to compare these claims against. Without a local tea master—hard to find in America—or several trips to each region in Yunnan, how else can we learn? And how else can we be sure that the premiums we’re spending for “authentic old-growth” tea from a single region are in fact genuine? Some may argue that blended tea is in fact better, but even if you think that way the raw material blended together is still from various regions, and is still fake or authentic. The set provided me the chance to explore what Yiwu tea might taste like were it completely genuine, not only new but as it ages. The set conveniently came with two cakes from each mountain for that very purpose. Asking many experts about antique teaware I have similarly found that they all agree that you have to start learning with a single, verifiable piece of genuine origin to start your education and begin making comparisons.

Since I reviewed the 2004 Chang Tai set, however, more serious accusations have been leveled against it. Some experts have reported that in fact some of the cakes in the set were outsourced, rather than collected in person by factory representatives themselves. This has led some people to make the convincing argument that we cannot really be sure that each of those outsourced teas are genuine, especially since the farmers themselves are often as much involved in gimmicks and immoral business practices—like switching teas—as any factory that retails to consumers. For that reason, I put my small Chang Tai cakes up on the shelves and

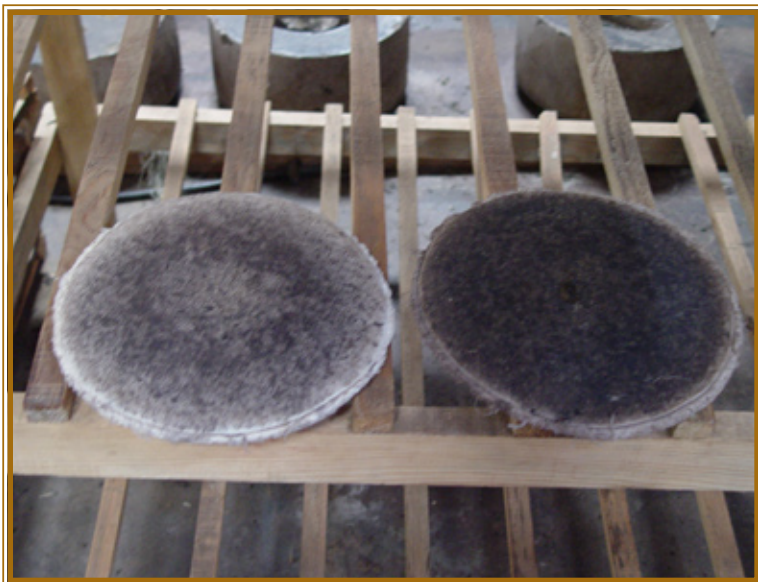
turned to other things, letting them age and perhaps become useful again later. The set also came with a dysfunctional wall-hanging unit that is beautiful, although faulty, so at least I could display half the cakes in my tea space.

I was then very excited when I heard about Jing Mei Tang’s project for 2007 and 2008. They decided to revisit the concept that Chang Tai had developed and also to rectify its mistakes. One thing that they realized was that the 12 regions represented in the earlier set did not clearly reflect the modern Puerh milieu. Jing Mei Tang decided to instead make a set incorporating all 26 tea growing regions in Yunnan. I must admit that the sense of being overwhelmed that I reported when I reviewed the Chang Tai set was magnified by this, but I was still very intrigued. Also, the owners of Jing Mei Tang were fully aware of the problems that Chang Tai faced in outsourcing a few of the cakes in their set. They knew that it wouldn’t be enough to purchase any of the teas from a distance. Every step would have to be monitored. As a result, they took a team of Puerh experts from China, Taiwan and Japan around to all 26 of the regions and personally supervised the harvest, production and purchasing of each of the teas, effectively guaranteeing the authenticity of each cake.

They also responded to the argument that having but one example from each region does not, in fact, allow one to develop any kind of acumen with its profile. They did this by including fifty unique cakes from the 26 regions, so that many regions have more than one sample coming from different areas and farms. Again, one cannot help but feel a bit overwhelmed. Still, I was intrigued by what such a resource could provide.

As I began saving for the new set, anxious to approach it with a few years more wisdom than I had when reflecting on the 2004 set, a very fortuitous coincidence occurred—if there is such a thing. My friends at *The Leaf* contacted me asking if I would review the set, offering to send me small samples from each of the cakes. I was overjoyed to get the chance to try the set out before I splurged on one for myself. I spent the next two weeks hovering over the mailbox, as I usually do when an exciting batch of tea is on the way.

When the samples arrived I laid them all out on a table and marveled at the extraordinary effort that went into driving up and down all those mountains to select and purchase these teas. I decided to completely abandon the techniques that I had used to research my review of the 2004 set. At that time, I had sat with the





teas and taught myself to pick out the Yiwu and Youle with relative consistency, passing blind tests with the help of a friend who switched them around. I think wisdom has taught me that this isn't the greatest use I could put such a set to: as I mentioned above, variations within the growing regions themselves as well as climatic differences from season to season, and even garden to garden, make knowing any one region a very difficult task. I think for producers or tea shop owners with a vast amount of experience under their belts, as well as several trips to Yunnan, such a set can indeed be used in this way: They can further demarcate the regional distinctions and attune their palates to the nuances of real old-growth tea from any one of them. But how can such a set be worth the money for a consumer such as myself?

I had seen many pictures of the set itself before the samples arrived. The cakes come in two tiers within a large cardboard box with cutouts (I've heard that the cakes can sometimes rattle around, unfortunately). Of course, this set is missing the faulty—though beautiful—wooden wall rack that was a part of its earlier counterpart. Though I myself would pay more to display the teas so elegantly, I could also understand why Jing Mei Tang decided to leave that element out

and make the set cheaper, especially considering the amount of cakes. The set retails for around 400USD, which I personally feel to be a very fair price, considering how much work went into going around and physically gathering all the tea. Also, when I compared it to the high-quality newborn cakes that I often buy for one hundred dollars or more, it is actually cheap.

The other unfortunate thing that this set lacks, which the previous one had, is a second cake of each of the samples to keep for storage. I liked the fact that Chang Tai provided two cakes of each sample, so you could explore one new and another as it aged—adding one more dimension to the utility of the set. Obviously, the amount of cakes in the Jing Mei Tang set would make that too expensive. Perhaps, those who are inclined to might have to buy a second one before the prices go up.

Also, this set comes with an informative book that actually has text in English as well. This is a big step up from the simple, uninformative Chinese booklet that came with the Chang Tai set. I was able to get the information for the 26 mountains from my friends at *The Leaf*, which they have so graciously posted freely [here](#) (it is definitely worth looking at).

About the time that I heard that some of the cakes in the 2004 set were dubious, I had unfortunately just realized how it could best serve me. Though the set returned to the shelf, the idea hadn't left my mind, and was piqued by the arrival of the new set. I began comparing the tea from the set with other cakes I had previously purchased. My friends only sent me 2-3 small brewings, so I had to put each one to good use. Using neutral gaiwans, and identical cups, I started by brewing a tea side by side with a cake that I knew was either fake or at least blended, trying to focus on the differences between old-growth and plantation teas. I then went on to compare the teas with more expensive cakes that I assumed were indeed high-quality, single region teas. Finally, I tried to use the teas from the set to determine whether a questionable cake was in fact what it claimed to be. It was really great to have two different examples from important growing regions so that I often ended up comparing two from the set with one of my own, creating a broader comparison.

I don't intend to go into the details of each of the cakes I tested, as I think this would be pointless since each of us has our own collection of garbage teas, teas we consider to be high-quality and then questionable cakes. I will say that I did find the new

26 mountain set to be incredibly useful in this way. I affirmed that some of the best cakes I have collected (if you absolutely cannot stand it unless I give you one example, Zhou Yu's 2006 Long Pa Youle tea is one) were in fact better than the single-region cake from the set. I also was able to begin to distinguish more of the flaws in market-floor teas, whether they claim to be "old-growth" or not, many of which my teachers had taught me back when I was living in Taiwan: for example, plantation tea tends to cause more sensations in the front of the mouth and the astringency is puckery, whereas old-growth tea is usually more focused on the back of the mouth and throat, as well as upper palate; and the astringency of old-growth tea tends to transform. There are other differences, including the way the Qi of old-growth tea slowly rises throughout a tea session. Drinking these genuine teas from each region side by side with Kunming/Guang Zhou/Beijing market-floor garbage, I was not only able to reify and consolidate some of my notes, as well as my experiential wisdom, but I also began noticing other differences—especially between a few fake teas that claimed to be "Yiwu" and the real samples I got from the set.





I really feel that the comparison of these teas against the different qualities available in the Western market makes the set worth buying. I think it will improve my ability to purchase tea and further discriminate low-quality teas, with the hope that more high-quality teas will begin to reach the vendors and then consumers in the West. I plan to do more and detailed comparisons against the teas already in my collections, as well as future purchases. I think one of the things so transparently missing from any Westerners perspective is a standard to which we can compare our purchases. Without local tea shops or tea masters, it is very difficult to progress. I feel fortunate that I got to live in Taiwan for some time and develop a bit of a palate to use, though it definitely was not enough for my memory to be clear enough in all instances. Consequently, like most other Americans I am without an avoirdupois to measure my purchasing decisions. I feel like this set can become that, not only for me personally but at least potentially for all of us to have meaningful discourse on available Puerh cakes. Since we can rest assured that the cakes are indeed old-growth and from the region they claim to be, we are given a unique standard of quality that we can use as we explore the mostly polluted waters of the Puerh industry.

I must say, however, that the tea in the set has little value beyond these educational qualities, so if you are looking for a tea to drink, your money would definitely be much better spent elsewhere.

I feel that this set is an improvement to the one Chang Tai produced in 2004 and I am excited to get mine. I think that it is once again the exception to the



rule that all gimmick Puerh teas are garbage. This set does indeed provide useful learning tools to producers, vendors and consumers alike. Having already developed some new insights with the samples I kindly received, I know that the set itself will provide me with hours of entertainment and increase my ability to discriminate quality in Puerh tea. Like I did when I got the 2004 set, I will imagine myself on a metaphoric journey around Yunnan—drinking myself through each of the mountains, closing my eyes now and again and imagining the mist-enshrouded green fading to a new morning sky, and tasting the old trees connected to it all.

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