Puerh Storage
AGING AND AGED TEA
PART II

BY AARON FISHER

In Part I we discussed why it’s important to seek out the wisdom of those who have actually been storing Puerh tea for long enough to have experience worth sharing. We also explored some of the myths surrounding vintage Puerh and ended by discussing “pen shui” teas and the difference between them and wet stored teas. We mentioned that a lot of these rumors are founded in marketing and business. Now let us turn to wet storage, the market and what we know about proper Puerh storage.

**Wet versus Dry**

Traditionally, all Puerh tea was aged “wet”; and for that reason, Chinese people often call wet storage, “traditional storage.” There are some well-aged teas that were dry stored, but most of them were accidental, like the famous 88 Qing Bing which was kept on a floating shelf near the ceiling due to a lack of storage space. The whole concept of intentionally dry storing Puerh is therefore a relatively recent development, especially when you consider that people have been aging Puerh tea for centuries.

As Robert Heiss so poignantly pointed out in his article for the second issue of this magazine, there is an important difference between oxidation and fermentation—often confused by the fact that there is but one Chinese term for both, “fa xiao.” While fermentation also utilizes oxygen, it relates more to cellular breakdown caused by the presence of bacteria. Puerh tea is unique in that it is covered in bacteria: the jungle trees themselves are teeming with it, as are the villages where the tea is processed. When the cakes are steamed and compressed, more bacteria and other microorganisms make their home in the cakes. As a result, Puerh cakes are truly alive—teaming with colonies of fungi, bacteria and mold. *Penicillium chrysogenum*, *Rhizopus chinensis* and *Aspergillus clavatus* are just a few examples of mold colonies natural to Puerh tea. All Puerh tea is moldy, in other words. Puerh tea has always been fermented, and throughout history many ways of going about this have been developed, though storage for long periods is the oldest and best method.

In order for the bacteria to do their work, Puerh needs a humid environment, some oxygen and also heat. Mr. Chan Kam Pong so insightfully pointed out in his two articles for The Art of Tea Magazine that one of the reasons Puerh was always stored in Southeast China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Viet Nam and Malaysia is the seasonal fluctuation of these variables. In the spring, the humidity goes up and the tea absorbs more moisture, the heat of summer then encourages the fermen-
healthy, which is why I actually prefer the term "well stored" to calling such tea "dry stored"; and many experts have also begun saying "clean (gan jin)". Given the choice, though, I would take a tea that was too wet over a tea that was too dry any day of the week. We'll get into why in a minute.

Traditionally, teahouses and collectors kept tea in basements and beneath hills to speed up the aging process. This is called "wet storage." Most experts agree that a relative humidity of between 70% and 80% is ideal for Puerh, though it may go higher seasonally and still be "dry." Longer exposure to higher levels of humidity will speed up the fermentation and make it a "wet" tea. Wet stored tea has always been subdivided into mild, medium and heavy wet. Even those who prefer wet stored tea will agree that the first two are almost always the best, though I have seen rare examples of heavy wet teas that were excellent.

Sometimes, tea and fruit in this part of the world develop a seasonal, white mold. Finding this on vintage Puerh is very common, and while it does usually signify the tea was wet stored for at least some time, depending upon the amount of mold, it is not necessarily an indication of its overall character. A short period of wet storage followed by a couple decades of drier storage might create a tea that still bears some white flakes from its period in wet storage, even though it has an overall dry profile. Unless the cake is very seriously wet, these conditions can be overcome with time, and often only affect the surface of the cake, depending on the degree of mold and how tight the compression is. I have little experience drinking any of the other kinds of mold—red, green, yellow, black, etc.—but I have heard from several different teachers that all of them are potentially unhealthy and to be avoided. I have, however, drank tons of the white stuff—and eaten it on fruit—and so have teachers of mine for decades, without any harmful side-effects. Moreover, several scientists in Taiwan have concluded that all mold is killed in waters of eighty degrees. Anyway, if the idea of drinking bacteria, fungi or mold makes you squeamish you should get out of the Puerh (and cheese) genre categorically. Even experienced, Raw (sheng) Puerh is covered in bacteria, and often fungi and mold as well.

Actually, Ripe (Shou) tea is the wettest of the wet. It is effectively the real "sprayed water" tea, as it is indeed covered in mist, raked into piles and left to ferment under thermal blankets—and often in extremely unhygienic conditions (though that has improved a bit recently), far more so than any traditional wet storage warehouse. Some of the rooms I've seen, where they do the piling (wo duwei) that results in Ripe (Shou) tea, were dirty enough to turn me off from this whole class of tea, for the most part.

Amongst those who haven't really drunk a lot of vintage Puerh, there exists this idea that wet stored tea is bad; and you'll even hear lots of people who reject vintage Puerh because of this, claiming that wet stored teas are all scams: "terrible tea", "not worth the money", etc. However—and that's a big fat "however"—you never hear this from people who have been drinking vintage Puerh for many years. People who love aged Puerh, living in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia are all quite accustomed to drinking wet stored Puerh and do not consider it to be a scam, or in any other way unworthy of attention. The fact is that since wet stored tea represents the majority of vintage tea, you might consider it a genre in and of itself—and within that genre there are both excellent and poor quality examples, exquisite wonders and garbage. Furthermore, as I said, there is a huge range of wetness, from mild to heavy. And I have never, ever been to a shop, through-out all my tea travels, with any amount of aged Puerh or expertise therein that did not carry some amount of wet stored, primarily loose-leaf Puerh. Never.

While most of us who have tried dry stored teas agree that they are indeed better, this doesn't mean we don't like wet stored tea or that we store all of our own tea in that way. Of course, people like Zhou Yu dry store all their best teas (or "store well"). No one is disputing that at all. However, we can do nothing to drastically change the state of all of the vintage teas that are in existence now; and therefore learning to enjoy them is, in part, learning about wet stored tea. As I've mentioned repeatedly, every lover of aged Puerh I have ever met drinks wet stored teas. Since so many vintages are wet stored to some degree or another, how could they not?

Furthermore, not every newborn tea warrants the care and attention needed to properly store a tea. Most of the collectors I know still keep some loose teas or cakes in wet storage to speed up the process and make the tea ready for enjoyment sooner. This is not
to say they dump a bucket of water on it. Who would want to ruin their tea like that (besides the aforementioned arch-villains of Part I)? It just means the tea is put in a more humid part of the warehouse or room and left alone for longer.

One thing that I think many people with little experience drinking vintage tea sometimes don't understand is that 99% of the people you meet who drink old tea do so for its Qi. Zhou Yu has said to me dozens of times that "you'd have to be a fool to spend thousands of dollars on a flavor. You could buy a plane ticket to Switzerland and eat some of the best, fresh and warm chocolate on earth for that price." I would have to agree. If you are just after a flavorful tea, there are other, more rewarding and cheaper genres, like oolong for example. And this is what I was hinting at earlier when I mentioned that I would take a tea that was too wet over one that was too dry—Teas that are stored in places that are too dry in a sense die, losing all their Qi.

On the other hand, I have had plenty of wet stored teas that don't taste great but have awesome Qi—leaving the whole body enveloped in warm, comfortable vibrations of bliss. This is not to say there aren't incredibly delicious flavors to be had in the world of Puerh: there are, and I've had plenty of delicious wet stored teas as well. Still, no flavor is worth spending such amounts. And when Qi becomes the predominant criteria for evaluating a tea—which it is for almost every single drinker of vintage Puerh I have ever met—then we often forgive some bit of mustiness, or other problems with the flavor.

No matter how careful you are, it isn't easy to store anything well all the time. And many experts argue that Puerh only reaches excellence at around seventy or more years, though it may be "drinkable"—well-fermented, in other words—in as little as 20-30 years, depending on how it is stored. Still, keeping anything in mint condition for decades is not easy, as any collector of antiques can testify. Just as we must forgive a dent or scratch in a hundred-year-old kettle or silver, we must also excuse some slight misfortunes in a hundred-year-old kettle or silver, as it is stored in places that are too dry in a sense die, losing all their Qi. Even a lover of vintage Puerh would of course find the tea amazing! All the worst parts of the wet storage had gone—the musty flavor and smell—and what was left was a clear, bright tea that tasted so much older than it was; with strong Qi to boot. This is just one example of many of the awesome wet stored vintages I have had. Also, this is not the only method of "cleaning" and "revitalizing" wet stored Puerh. There are others. We paid only 18USD per tuoicha, buying the whole jar's worth, and the tea turned out way better than a dry stored Xiaguan tuoicha we have from the same period that costs almost 100USD.

If I were going to spend a few thousand dollars on a well-aged cake of tea, I would of course find the cleanest, best stored cake I could find. Nonetheless, reading or hearing such evident truths has led some people to the mistaken notion that all wet stored tea is therefore bad. If you hand me a cheap wet stored, loose-leaf tea of 50 years with awesome Qi I would be just as thrilled as with an expensive, well stored cake. And accordingly, in all my years in Asia, I've never met a lover of vintage Puerh without some wet stored teas in his or her collection. This cannot be overstated.

We must all, therefore, make a very real distinction between the way we wish to store our tea from here on out and the way in which we evaluate vintage teas that are already old. They are completely different areas of study, though you can't have true knowledge of the one without understanding the other. We will store our newborn teas properly, which for the most part means "drier" than they were "traditionally" stored, and care for them more thoroughly—especially since now newborn tea costs many times more than what it once did when most vintage teas were stored—but this does not mean that we should evaluate all vintage tea using these same criteria, or that some of those wet stored "gems of yesteryear" did not in fact turn out way better than our "dry stored" cakes ever will. Also, if you are storing your tea naturally, which, as we'll discuss a bit further on, is really the only way, it is nigh impossible to store Puerh in any real amount without some percentage of it getting at least mildly wet. The only environments that could truly prevent this are too dry for Puerh and will cause it to die.

The saddest thing about dismissing wet stored tea entirely is that you are missing out on all the vintages of old Puerh that are actually affordable, even today. I know a vendor in the West who has access to a wide variety of cheap, wet stored Puerh and knowledge thereof, who told me anonymously: "I can't sell it in the West, at least not online. Too many people would ask for a refund. They've been misinformed and I wouldn't know how to combat that. It would seem, sometimes at least, that some of my customers don't really like aged Puerh, as they were very critical of teas that were only very, very mildly wet and easily corrected. Still, things are getting better. I keep such tea in the shop, and when people come in, and I show them how to brew it properly and explain aged tea and Qi, they get along fine." I have heard tons of similar testimony from people who have traveled to Taiwan, tasting properly brewed wet
stored tea, and learning about Cha Qi for the first time. While there are garbage wet stored teas, there also dry stored teas that aren’t very good, either. Doesn’t this hold true for any genre of tea? The first, last and only question of relevance is not whether the tea is wet or dry stored, but in fact, whether it is good tea or not!

The marketing game

How and why did wet stored tea get such a bad reputation? Actually, almost all the bad publicity that has fallen on wet stored tea—the entire vintage Puerh market, as a matter of fact—is rooted in business: plain and simple. When the Puerh boom developed in the early 2000’s, tea shops sprung up like monsoon frogs all throughout China and beyond. Entire shopping centers that extend for city blocks were filled with hundreds of shops, each one with tons of tea inside. And all of it was newborn Puerh. Virtually all the vintage Puerh was in Hong Kong, Taiwan and/or Malaysia at that time. A few shops, therefore, began buying it back—mostly to put up on their walls as a status symbol, promoting the sales of their newborn tea; though some very few did begin selling aged tea.

Traditionally, Puerh tea was never drank Raw. It is considered cold and astringent according to Chinese medicine, as well as unhealthy for all but a few types of constitutions. Its acidity is not good for the stomach, causing ulcers and other complications, unless one eats a lot of meat. Even the Tibetans and Mongolians, with their predominantly meat-based diets, still enjoyed slightly fermented tea, since the journey was on foot and took a long time; besides which they then mixed the tea with warm milk or butter to counteract its cold nature. Aboriginal peoples in Yunnan all had methods of altering the cold nature of the tea as well. Such widespread, commonplace knowledge left all these thousands and thousands of tea from China! There are so many tons of fake tea, especially since people weren’t faking Puerh anymore. I have heard several experts say that perhaps more than half of the Puerh tea in any of the large markets in China is either blatantly fake, exaggerated or falsely labeled. Others suggest that half is way too conservative a number. Also, most all other large tea-growing areas were busy growing “Puerh” during the boom. Any given cake could, therefore, not even be from Yunnan, but a cheap plantation in Anxi. There is no way all of the fake vintage Puerh that has ever, ever been created, ever approaches that staggering amount of fake tea, especially since people weren’t faking Puerh long ago! Consequently, if you haven’t bought any
The storage of Puerh; what can we really know?

The problem with over-analyzing the storage of Puerh tea, trying to seek the right parameters that can lead invariably to “well stored” tea, is that this tacitly assumes that the transformation of Puerh tea over time is somehow controlled, or potentially controllable, by human beings. In fact, so many of our modern social and environmental crises revolve around similar delusions. In my view, the idea that the storage of Puerh tea, trying to seek the right parameters that can lead to “well stored” tea, is that this tacitly assumes that the transformation of Puerh tea over time is somehow controlled, or potentially controllable, by human beings. In fact, so many of our modern social and environmental crises revolve around similar delusions. In my view, the idea of letting the fermentation happen naturally. There was a recent article in a Chinese magazine with a detailed comparison of some semi-aged teas. One batch had been watched carefully in the natural environs of Hong Kong and the other had been stored in a small room with an expensive machine that controlled the humidity and temperature day and night. The author argued that the natural cakes were much better than the ones stored in an “artificial” way. It makes sense to me that too much machinery, humidifiers and dehumidifiers, this-and-that-conditioners, would harm the tea—and definitely dampen the amount of Qi it would accumulate. No man-made anything ever compares to the creations of Nature (computer versus brain, for example). Furthermore, can you imagine the cost of such machinery? And the electricity bill for maintaining the perfect humidity and temperature in a room for fifty years! If you think vintage Puerh is expensive now, what do you think the cost of tea stored in that way would be? Wouldn’t it have to reflect the atrocious cost of the machinery, electricity and/or maintenance over such a long period?

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I guess if you’re willing to help participate in this global experiment, then keep some tea and make sure to share your experience. But as of now, the only conclusive, factual results we have all come from Southeast Asia; so if you want to be really, completely sure, I’d just buy vintage tea stored there. Unlike any other, newer kinds of Puerh tea, stored in other places, the vintage teas floating around are the only proven ones; and the differences in their value are relative to the original quality of the tea and the care with which they were stored in such an environment, rather than differences in the environment itself.

Above all, we need to continue sharing our experiences, and in that way grow as the world of Puerh itself has done. Let us then steep another pot, call for more water; and after a few more bright cups, a smile and a laugh, fill the teahouse with more conversation, dialogue and wisdom.

Does this mean that all tea stored outside Southeast Asia will be lower quality? I don’t know. No one does. We won’t know for a few decades. The fact is that the Puerh boom has taken this backwater tea from Yunnan all around the globe, to places it never before dreamed of going. Furthermore, the gardens being utilized for production, the processing methods—the amazing variety of raw material (mao cha) used—all have added innumerable facets to the world of Puerh that weren’t pertinent when all the current vintage Puerh was produced or aged. Will these new kinds of tea age the way the great vintages did? Will they be better? Can Puerh tea be aged in France? In Canada? Who knows! Many of the legendary teas, like Hong Yin for example, were notoriously disgusting when young, only to be transmuted in the cauldron of time, fueled by the fire of Nature herself. Will your teas similarly transform?