Wuyi Cliff Tea was my first romance, and much of why I fell in love with the Leaf. I have traveled to Wuyi every year since, and written and spoken extensively on the subject. Here in this guide I have gathered together interviews, translations and excerpts from several articles friends, as well as experts and I myself have written over the years. Together it forms a nice collage of Wuyi and its famous Cliff Tea. I’d like to thank all of those interviewed as well as the authors that allowed their writing to be translated and/or reprinted herein.

-Wu De
For hundreds of years tea lovers have followed a journey leading into the northern wilderness of Fujian province, where cliffs and rivers touch the sky with a dancing grace that is otherworldly. The rocks here are covered in calligraphy, carved to commemorate dignitaries who came to pay respect to this land above the clouds, poems written by famous scholars and unknown travelers—each compelled beyond constraint, overflowing with the emotions such beautiful rivers, cliffs and bends in the sky inspire. And of course, there is the tea, called “cliff tea” for its liquor has within it all these elements.

Undeniably sacred, Wuyi is one of the only mountains in China where Daoist, Buddhist and Confucian temples abound in such close proximity. The powerful connection these mountains have to Nature, the incredibly rich mountain waters and the old tea bushes growing amongst these cliffs have gathered saints, sages and seers since time immemorial. There are Daoist caves that were once essential stops on meditation tours that led to immortality, and unknown travelers—each compelled beyond constraint, overflowing with the emotions such beautiful rivers, cliffs and bends in the sky inspire. And of course, there is the tea, called “cliff tea” for its liquor has within it all these elements.

The environment here produces tea like no other on earth. It is called “Cliff Tea” or “Rock Tea” (pancha) because the old bushes cling to the rocks in beds and valleys between natural gorges. Today, many of the beds that host these small gardens are manmade, but a deeper trek into the park will yield plenty of natural settings, with very old bushes, wizened to hundreds of years. These cliffs work together with the tea bushes in an amazing variety of ways, surging all the forces of Nature through this channel towards us humans.

The cliffs on both sides protect the trees from wind and other natural dangers, as well as shielding the bushes from too much sunshine. Many of them allow the morning and evening light to gather on the bushes, and studies have shown that the reddish-orange light of the morning causes the trees to produce more sugars, while the more purplish light of the evening results in more amino acids and various kinds of proteins. The unique environment here at Wuyi has resulted in a tea with very unique hydroxybenzene, amino acids, catechins, caffeine and other elements which all affect the nature and quality of a tea.

Wuyi tea is, to me, the richest variety of tea—with thousands of kinds and varieties of quality, processing and grades. Not only that, but the way in which the flavors, aromas and Qi change from steeping to steeping, session to session means Wuyi tea is always inviting me to explore it further. Then, as your tea age, they also transform completely so that after five years or so they are no longer recognizable as the same tea.

The World Cultural and Heritage site of Wuyi Mountain has been regarded as a national treasure since the Han Dynasty. The many gorges, rivers, cliffs and other scenery have inspired countless poets, painters and authors. The park itself is around seventy square kilometers and most of the famous “36 peaks and 99 crags” are around 400 meters above sea level. There are numerous waterways, the most famous of which is the “Nine Twist River”, whose nine bends have been eulogized countless times throughout history. Its source is around two-thousand meters higher and to the east in another park, the Hang Gang Mountain.

The cliffs on both sides protect the trees from wind and other natural dangers, as well as shielding the bushes from too much sunshine. Many of them allow the morning and evening light to gather on the bushes, and studies have shown that the reddish-orange light of the morning causes the trees to produce more sugars, while the more purplish light of the evening results in more amino acids and various kinds of proteins. The unique environment here at Wuyi has resulted in a tea with very unique hydroxybenzene, amino acids, catechins, caffeine and other elements which all affect the nature and quality of a tea.

The cliffs here also aid in tea production, as they funnel daily mist into the valleys, assuring that the tea trees are always humid and moist. Locals have for centuries called this the “Breath of Heaven”, claiming that the tea trees breathe in the Qi of the mist and rocks, lending them their “rock flavor”. Water is always such an essential aspect of tea, both as it flourishes in Nature and in preparation. And as one strolls through the park, the crystal streams and dripping falls that highlight every turn also emphasize the coursing pulse of the mountains, flowing through the earth to the trees and on to us. The water that flows down these cliffs is full of rich minerals, not only from the countless rocks within the park, but also from the higher mountains to the east. This irrigation has also helped to create the rich, gravelly soil that tea sages have said is most suitable for tea since long before Lu Yu made that claim famous.

Besides rich oxygen, protection and minerals the cliffs also participate in tea production in one other important way: during the day, the rocks and cliffs absorb the sunlight in the form of heat, which they then release throughout the night, comforting the old bushes with a consistent temperature at all times. This is especially important during the harvest season, when slight temperature fluctuations can affect the quality and abundance of the harvest.

While we can explore the different elements of Wuyi tea production, the harmony of sun, rocky soil, water mist and air is really not something maintained or controlled by the hands of men. The best teas are created by Nature first, and man second. Besides the qualities pointed out here, there are a million subtle ecological relationships between other plants, insects, animals, the mountains and sky, which we’ll never understand. But is there any need? A quiet hike through the park trails to an undisrupted garden, quiet these hundreds of years, leaves you with an impression a thousand, thousand poems could never capture—in awe of Nature and your place in it. Perhaps there is no need to know why Wuyi tea is like none other on Earth, especially when you can accept it so easily as that same sunshine warms your skin, you reach down and scoop up some of the smooth, soft water with a refreshing coolness. Eating the amazing local vegetables and walking a bit more, you realize that you’d be healthier living here as well.

Like some other regions, Wuyi people also take great pride in their tea processing skills, developed over centuries. One of the problems that you can encounter with other regions of tea that have become popular, like Pu’erh, is that the booming

Terroir

“Wuyi mountain stands like the imposing pillars at Heaven’s gate, supporting all the East. To live is to know the infinite universe, though its creative forces remain forever unknowable.”

—Zhu Xi—
tea industry attracts farmers who were previously growing other crops. They then learn the “standard” method of processing for their region and stick to that, day in and day out. Many of the “flaws” in recent Pu'erh production are as a result of this formula, which fails to account for all the subtle changes that need to be made for each batch—based on temperature, humidity and many other factors. Watching the ancient wisdom unfold in hand-processed yancha is amazing, as slight adjustments are made all day and night to balance factors that are often felt, rather than analyzed. It is an art, in other words. And if you’ve ever tried even the simplest aspect of the process, like shaking the leaves for example, you’ll see that it is no wonder it takes decades to master—like any art.

But not all Wuyi tea is high-quality; not all of it is environmentally protected or processed by hand (or even with any skill). It is therefore important to understand a bit about the four grades of Wuyi (or even with any skill). It is therefore important to understand a bit about the four grades of Wuyi yancha and some guidelines for identifying them:

**Zhen yan**
The highest grade of yancha all comes from within the protected park itself. Trees here tend to be older and grow with the proper distance between each tree so their roots have room to breath, growing deep and wide to absorb all the wonderful nutrients of the soil. Some of these small, terraced gardens are surrounded by vegetation that the tea is not easily discernable to the untrained eye. Of course, these trees are almost entirely organic and harvest by hand once a year.

There are, however, several qualities of zhen yan starting of course with the trees themselves. It is a big park and different locations are better for tea growth than others: places where the trees are older, the water and minerals better, or perhaps the mist and sunshine’s is perfect. As mentioned above, the cliff walls absorb the day’s sunshine and release it at night, so many locations in the park stay at a constant temperature and humidity during the growing seasons.

Another important factor relates to the fact that the park is such a famous tourist destination. Thousands of people walk through there every day, following the clear and defined paths constructed by the government. Consequently, the tea gardens near these paths are all inferior. The noise, cameras and even the breathing of thousands of people all affect the quality of these gardens. The best gardens, on the other hand, are several kilometers deep into the park—down dirt paths that take you well away from all the crowds to silent places. Like all plants, tea also responds to human interaction, emotion and even the human voice itself.

Before the strict ban, put into effect around 2002, some friends picked some of the famous Da Hong Pao from the original bushes, processed it and drank it a few days later. While the tea was amazing, coming from such old and powerful bushes, their guide, Mr. Wang, said that compared to earlier years when he had drunk it, the quality had slightly diminished. When I asked him why, he responded that it was definitely because of the thousands of people who come and take photos and make a lot of noise around them each day.

Of course, much of the mastery of oolong tea is in the complicated processing, so this is a major factor in the end-product as well. The best zhen yan is completely hand-processed, though there is also semi-hand-processed and machine-processed tea. It is easy to differentiate the hand-processed or semi-hand-processed from the machine-processed variety by appearance alone, as the latter produces more uniform leaves, all about the same shape with the same kind of twist, whereas the hand-processed and semi-hand-processed yancha display a variety of sizes, shapes and twists unique for each leaf. Discriminating between completely hand-processed and semi-hand-processed yancha is more difficult and takes a bit of practice under the guidance of the trained eye.

Even zhen yan from a single garden will be sorted several times, and a variety of grades will eventually be packaged. A lot can go into the distinction. The tea processed by the hand of the master, for example, may be the smallest quantity each year, as his job is mostly to teach and supervise his younger relatives and employees.

Genuine zhen yan from within the park is almost never, ever roasted heavily. A lot of people have only ever tried heavily-roasted yancha and therefore have probably not tasted much zhen yan, which is produced in much lower quantities and more expensive as a result. Each of the thousands of varieties of yancha, like Shui Jing Gui or Lao Jing Mei, has a very distinct flavor. Tie Lious Han, for example, is known to taste of burnt bamboo, while Bai Ji Guan tastes of lychee. If the roast was too heavy, these flavors would be lost. In fact, almost all zhen yan is stored for six months to a year before drinking so that whatever roast there is will mellow out, leaving behind the flavors of the leaf. Like all oolong, mastery in roasting is when the roast affects the flavor in a positive way without leaving behind any traces of itself. The exception to this rule is the “mistaken” zhen yan tea, which is heavily roasted. As each variety of tea is hand-processed some of it is lost due to all kinds of mistakes, natural and human. This tea is set aside...
with all the “lost” tea. At the end of the processing period, there is then a bulk of this tea all mixed up—with Shui Jing Gui, Tie Liou Han and all the other varieties processed that year all mixed together. This pile of mixed tea is then heavily roasted, to cover up the differences in the leaves, and sold under the generic, all-encompassing “Da Hong Pao” that denominates all low-quality tea from Wuyi. Many of the best heavily-roasted teas are of this variety, as they at least come from zhen yan. A look at the wet leaves can show if the tea was blended.

**Ban yan**

This is what you could call “Halfway Cliff Tea”. It grows on the hills and cliffsides immediately outside the park itself. A lot of these gardens are planted in the traditional way, though—on terraces with a meter or so between each tree, which is left to grow strong and old. Some of these gardens are actually quite old as well and many are organic, though much less than in the park.

Ban yan can be a shady area because some of the gardens that are just outside what the government has demarcated as the park produce better tea than some of the worst locations within the park. Also, a lot of ban yan is right on the border, and there are trees just on the other side of a cliff that could be called zhen yan. For the most part, though, these trees lack what the best quality yancha has: cliffs on both sides, which not only absorb and release heat, as we discussed earlier, but also drain minerals down from both sides into streams of nutrient-rich waters for the trees. This water also keeps the soil aerated, loose and gravelly.

As with zhen yan, processing will play a huge part in determining the quality of a ban yan as well. Much less of this tea is hand-processed, however, as it does not warrant the attention and cost in energy. Hand processing oolong tea is very labor intensive, and during the harvest season many of the masters get very little sleep indeed.

**Zhou Cha**

Down in the flatlands between the park and the river that separates the village, several plantations of tea have been created. The soil there is rich and the humidity is adequate. Some of these trees are also very old, though less than the previous kinds of tea.

In this category, much of what makes different varieties of yancha special is lost. The distinct flavors of certain varieties of yancha have as much to do with their special location in the park as they do with the genetics of the trees themselves, which is why tea masters in Wuyi only really refer to the six original trees as “Da Hong Pao”, for example, since even grafting clones and planting them elsewhere will eventually result in a new variety of tea as the trees adapt and interact with their new surroundings—like the first generation Da Hong Pao planted in the now-famous Bei Dou area.

Also, the farming by the river ceases to be about quality and starts to march to the economic drum. For that reason, very little of it is organic and it is often harvested year round, like in other tea-growing regions around the world. All of this tea is heavily roasted, which—as we discussed—is almost always a means of covering up inferior quality leaf, and sold as the generic “Da Hong Pao”. Most of this tea is sold raw to large factories that machine process it. In fact, some farmers have even begun to sell their zhen yan to the factories rather than process it themselves.

**Wei San**

Literally “Grown Outside”, this tea is grown in the flatlands surrounding the park and shares in none of the richness that makes Wuyi tea special. This tea is all grown at a lower altitude, inorganic hedged and pruned little trees that are harvested into the ground, like in most tea-growing areas around the world. This tea is all about mimicking Wuyi tea, and heavy roasts to cover up any trace of flavor that could possibly infuse from the tea itself. Basically these are farms that have, over the years, jumped on the “Da Hong Pao” bandwagon and converted their land to tea production to cash-in on the growing interest. I have some of this tea from a trip in 2001 that to this day still has not lost its roast, so that when you open the jar or brew the tea the roast-flavor and aroma is as strong as it was the day it was roasted.
At the start of the season local monks hold a large ceremony. They make offerings, burn incense and place fruit upon the altar before chanting through the morning. The Master Guide, the tea-pickers and porters are all blessed in turn before they set out. They often remain silent as they walk to the tea bushes for the first time. This comes perhaps from a tradition of keeping the locations secret or out of respect for the spirits of Nature so that they help make the harvest more plentiful. They sometimes hike for miles in order to reach the tea bushes, which are often high up amongst the cliffs. When they arrive at the destination they can begin to speak. Even before the leaves are ever seen there is a reverence—a sense of spirit even amongst the lowest porter.

The Master Guide’s second job is to direct the pickers, showing them exactly which leaves to pick. Tea leaves grow alternately on their stems, not opposite from one another. Traditionally, only the first three leaves of each branch were taken. However, the increased demand for Wuyi yancha has made the Master Guides more lenient. Nowadays, the leaves are picked down to what is called the “fish eye” (yu yen 魚眼), a small curled leaf residing about five leaves down the stem. The leaves below the fish eye are reserved for the next season. Despite the increased yield in recent times, the leaves that are lower down, between the fish eye and the third leaf, are lower quality and later downgraded in the sorting, so that even today the first three leaves are separated and packaged together to create the highest quality Cliff Tea.

The picking process can become extremely complicated. Even the placement of the bush must be taken into account. The side facing east will be blessed with more morning sunshine and therefore grow larger leaves that are opened more. The backside, on the other hand, will have more buds. These teas must be separated. Sometimes blends are made, if the mixture will have a better flavor, but all of this must be conducted by a master with years of experience.


After shaking, the bruised leaves are placed on shelves to oxidize. The shaking and withering will be continued at regular intervals until the master who oversees the production declares that the tea is sufficiently oxidized to move on to the next stage. It is this keen eye which distinguishes the masters from the skilled apprentices.

Shaking and Oxidation

The shaking part of the process is the very thing that separates Oolong from all other varieties of tea. A round, woven bamboo tray is held firmly in two hands and the leaves are vigorously shaken. Shaking requires great skill. There is a rhythm to the process. It takes strength and endurance to shake the leaves and wisdom to know when they are finished. The shaking bruises the leaves, which encourages oxidation at this stage and fermentation post-production. The master producers try to bruise only the edges so that they will later develop a reddish hue that makes the leaves beautiful to look at and more delicious to drink. It is quite difficult to achieve this by hand.

Frying

When the tea has finished withering it is time to fry it. The frying of tea serves two purposes: First the frying arrests the oxidation process. If the leaves were allowed to oxidize any more, they wouldn’t taste and smell the same. Secondly, the frying destroys certain enzymes in the leaves that give them a bitter, grassy taste. For that reason, the frying of the leaves is often called the “kill-green stage (sa cheen 殺綠).”

Drying and Reduction

When the leaves arrive at the village they are gently placed on round bamboo trays. Sometimes a tarp is laid on the ground if the leaves are of lower quality or higher yield. The leaves are arranged neatly in a single layer, using as many trays as necessary, then left to dry. The leaves are dried because the moisture in tea leaves makes them too fragile for processing; they would only break. The drying, accordingly, prevents breakage by making the leaves slightly limp in preparation for the rest of the procedure. There is never a moment where they aren’t monitored. If it is too sunny or too hot the leaves could be burned, which would ruin them. Also, if they are left to dry for too long, they will become overly-wilted and must be discarded. The leaves must reach the desired level of flexibility, no more or less. Oxidation is also a factor.

Periodically, the trays will be brought inside and placed on shelves, where the temperature and light can be controlled more precisely. This stage is sometimes called, “reduction.” When the leaves come inside out of the sun, they begin to stiffen again slightly. This is called “huan yuan (還元)” in Chinese, which literally means “alive again.” A master watches the leaves and moves them in and out of the room as many times as necessary to reach the desired flexibility. Much of this depends on the weather for that day, the time of day, the strength of the sun and the nature of the leaves themselves. Like any aspect of life, it’s about finding the right degree—in this case not too limp nor too stiff—just right. Masters know by sight and touch when the leaves are ready for the next stage. The harvest day is usually chosen at a time when there won’t be any weather issues that could potentially disrupt production. Contingencies are there, like charcoal stoves to control temperature and humidity, though subtle changes would result if the tea were to be processed on a rainy day, and therefore dried indoors.

When the process is done in the traditional way, by hand in a large empty wok, the person frying must know when the leaves are finished by touch alone. It takes many years of practice before a student is allowed near the best quality teas. The fingers must remain firmly closed so that no leaves get caught between them. The leaves are pushed to the center and then stirred outwards again. If the leaves are slightly damp, the person frying will gently pull them up from the center and drop them to evaporate any excess moisture. The leaves must be pulled because they are too hot to reach under. The leaves are also occasionally turned in a circular fashion to keep them in motion, ensuring that they don’t scorch. Besides the heat and moisture, a lot of things are going on at once during this stage. The person frying must concentrate. A lot depends on this phase of the process.
The shaping of the leaves must happen immediately after frying. The temperature mustn’t decrease at all. This often requires the cooperation of more than one worker. The leaves are quickly carried to bamboo trays that have raised ribs woven into them. The shaping (rou nian 搓捻) is done with rolling, kneading motions. It is for that reason sometimes called “rolling” or “kneading”.

The shaping is done for several reasons: Firstly, it causes the leaves to dry in a curled shape that is both pleasing and saves on packaging space. More importantly, rubbing the leaves across the bamboo ribs bruises the cellular structure of the leaves. The combination of the curled shape and bruised structure will cause the leaves to slowly release their essential oils, flavors and aromas when they are steeped. The bruising also changes the way in which the tea will oxidize during the rest of production as well as ferment when it is finished.

Roasting
When the tea is shaped properly, it is ready to be roasted (hong bei 烘焙). Smaller factories that produce Wuyi tea by hand do not have time to complete the roasting during the harvest season. There isn’t enough space or people to complete all the other steps and roasting on the same day. For that reason, only the best teas will be roasted start to finish on the same day. The greater bulk of the tea will go through a short initial roasting, called “zhou shui bei (走水焙)”, or “temporary roasting”, which stops the oxidation process completely and puts the tea “on hold” for a short time. It is then carefully stored until all the tea has been gathered for that season. This could take days or even weeks depending on the factory and farm. When all the tea has been picked and processed, they are roasted together. The second roasting, referred to as “zhu bei (足焙)” or “completing the roasting” is then conducted under the supervision of the master. All of the laborers cooperate in this longer roast, which requires constant supervision. Any stage of the process can damage the quality of a tea, but errors in the roasting are perhaps more evident than at other stages. A poor roast is immediately noticeable in the first sip.

In order to roast the teas compact charcoal is placed in wells. Rice ash is used to cover the coals, reducing the temperature to inhibit any flame. The roasting must be through heat alone—a flame would cook the tea. The tea is stirred and spread out regularly throughout the roast.

Sorting, Heating and Packaging
The teas are sorted on large tables, usually by the same nimble hands that picked them. The first three leaves, which are of higher quality, are separated into piles. The sorting is very time consuming, and done very carefully to maximize the amount of higher-grade leaves for the market. Sometimes a winnower is used to remove dust particles from the lower quality leaves.

Because the process takes a long time, the leaves will again be exposed to moisture in the air. For that reason, when the sorting is finished, the leaves are then roasted again for a very quick spell. This dries them out. The best Wuyi teas are packaged while they are still hot from this final, swift roasting.

Shaping and Bruising
The shaping of the leaves must happen immediately after frying. The temperature mustn’t decrease at all. This often requires the cooperation of more than one worker. The leaves are quickly carried to bamboo trays that have raised ribs woven into them. The shaping (rou nian 搓捻) is done with rolling, kneading motions. It is for that reason sometimes called “rolling” or “kneading”.

The shaping is done for several reasons: Firstly, it causes the leaves to dry in a curled shape that is both pleasing and saves on packaging space. More importantly, rubbing the leaves across the bamboo ribs bruises the cellular structure of the leaves. The combination of the curled shape and bruised structure will cause the leaves to slowly release their essential oils, flavors and aromas when they are steeped. The bruising also changes the way in which the tea will oxidize during the rest of production as well as ferment when it is finished.
**Varieties**

There are thousands of kinds of *yancha*, some dating back hundreds of years. Every year I find new places and exotic new kinds of tea. Many of the more unique varieties are limited to a few bushes only. They are special mostly because of the differences in their locations, sunlight, minerals, soil and water. I have one small canister of a *yancha* made from a single bush, called “Lao Shou Shin”, that is more than three hundred years old.

The four most famous varieties of *yancha* are *Da Hong Pao* (The Emperor’s Crimson Robe), *Tie Liu Han* (Iron Arahant), *Shui Jing Gui* (Golden Water Tortoise), and *Bai Ji Guan* (White Cockscomb).

*Xui Shian* (Water Fairy) and *Rou Gui* (Cinnabar) are also quite common varietals. Each has a history and legend surrounding its name, a special leaf-shape and even subtle nuances in processing and drinking. Perhaps a brief exploration of the “Four Legendary kinds of Cliff Tea” will be useful here:

*Da Hong Pao*, The “King of Tea” is the best known of all Wuyi Cliff Teas. It is also the best of the bunch, admired near and far in both the modern and antique age. It was often a favorite tribute of the royal court. The origin of this marvelous tea is the cliff of Tian Xin Yan, Jiu Long Ke of Wuyi. It received its name of “Emperor’s Long Red Cape” in the Qing Dynasty.

Since the 1980’s, *Da Hong Pao* farms have spread down into the inner mountains of Wuyi. *Da Hong Pao* grows from a medium-sized bush with leaves that belong to an asexual reproduction based on late-grown seeds. The plant has a half-open shape with thick branches in close proximity. Its leaves are elliptical, bright and dark-green in color. There is a slight bulge on the surface and sharp, dense teeth around the edges. They give the impression of being thick and yet fragile at the same time. The buds are tender, showing a carmine color with lots of little hairs, and their fertility is strong and dense. The diameter of the corolla is approximately 3.5cm with six petals. Late in April the blossoms display themselves with the most luxuriance.

Overall, *Da Hong Pao* is of medium output compared to other Oolongs. The dry tea is tight and solid with mixed greens and browns throughout. The tea is full-bodied and has the fragrance of osmanthus flowers. It is especially famous for the sensations (*cha yun*) it brings, especially to the upper palate, and a rich, long-lasting aftertaste (*hui gan*).

True *Da Hong Pao* is said to taste and smell of the citrus spray that flies off an orange as it is peeled. I have often smelled and tasted this when drinking high-quality, second-generation tea from the Bei Dou area. There are several grades of *Da Hong Pao* that are mostly evaluated in terms of their genetic proximity to the six original bushes—four actually; two came later.

Some tea masters suggest that since *Da Hong Pao* has become such a generic term, often labeling the low-quality tea grown by the river and outside the park itself, as well as the mistaken tea that is all lumped together at the end of the season, perhaps it is more akin to a brand name than a variety of tea. Consequently, some masters only use the term “*Da Hong Pao*” to refer to the original six bushes, calling other varieties by the location in which the grow and their genetic approximation to the original bushes, like “Bei Dou First Generation” for example.
Shui Jin Gui (Golden Water Tortoise)

This tea originates on the Du Ge Zhai Peak, Niulan Keng of Wuyi. It has played an important part in the culture and economy of the region since the 1980’s. According to legend, it received its name in the Qing Dynasty, though the plant is much older.

Like Da Hong Pao, Shui Jin Gui is a medium-sized bush and leaf cultivated asexually from late-grown seeds. The main distribution of Shui Jin Gui is in the inner mountains of the Wuyi region. The branches are dense and the leaves elliptical. They too are dark green in color. The surface also bulges. These leaves appear even more delicate than the other varieties. The buds are all a bright yellow color with miniscule hairs. The older leaves appear white in the sunshine and together with the buds look similar to a cockscomb, which is where the tea gets its name. The diameter of the corolla is 3.5cm with seven petals. They also blossom fully at the end of April.

The yellow, bright buds and leaves together make a very unique Oolong tea that often has a fragrance of lychee fruit. Some masters say Bai Ji Guan also tastes of mushrooms. The sensations should be crisp and slightly dry in the mouth.

Tie Luo Han (Iron Arahant)

Tie Luo Han received its name long before any of the other traditional teas of Wuyi, in the Song Dynasty. It is the earliest of all known Wuyi teas. It originates in the Nei Gui Can of Hui Yan, Wuyi.

The tea trees are planted on a long, narrow belt beside a small ravine with cliffs on both sides. The trees are therefore taller and bigger than the other varieties, with a half-open shape and crowded branches. The leaves are also elliptical, though slightly longer. They are dark green, bright and thick with dull, shallow teeth around the edges. The buds are reddish-purple with a lot of hairs. They are also very fertile, yet tender. The diameter of the corolla is 3.5cm and shines brightest in the middle of April. The buds yield a very high harvest, and are the raw material for this tea.

Because Tie Luo Han is almost all bud, the tea is sweeter and thicker than the other kinds of Wuyi tea. It has a rich fragrance with a very fresh aftertaste that quenches the thirst and offers a very characteristic sensation of cleanliness in the mouth. It is known to taste and smell a bit like roasted, or even burnt bamboo.

Bai Ji Guan (White Cockscomb)

This tea originates at the Bat Cave (not the secret lair) on Yin Ping Peak, Wuyi. According to legend, it was given its name in the Ming Dynasty.

Bai Ji Guan is perhaps the most unique of all yancha varieties. Like the other teas discussed here, it is farmed asexually from late-grown seeds. It too is mostly found in the inner mountains, and has also been propagated in larger amounts since the 1980’s. The bushes are medium-sized and have very thick, dense branches. The leaves are dull and shallow with average teeth around the edges. The surface also bulges. These leaves appear even more delicate than the other varieties. The buds are all a bright yellow color with miniscule hairs. The older leaves appear white in the sunshine and together with the buds look similar to a cockscomb, which is where the tea gets its name. The diameter of the corolla is 3.5cm with seven petals. They also blossom fully at the end of April.

The yellow, bright buds and leaves together make a very unique Oolong tea that often has a fragrance of lychee fruit. Some masters say Bai Ji Guan also tastes of mushrooms. The sensations should be crisp and slightly dry in the mouth.
of meditation and life, sought out by travelers who traversed leagues of mountains, plains and rivers in search of their legendary golden sutras, whispered in quiet cups directly to the spirit.

To drink yancha in the park on some quiet rock with clear water scooped from one of the ever-present streams is one of the finest joys under Heaven, and brings a lasting peace that you carry in your heart long after leaving. The surrounding hills are covered with meditation caves, temples and monasteries built on the foundation of such calmness. Even across the Taiwan straight, lifting my cup, I close my eyes and return to those vistas, now forever imprinted on my soul.

Wuyi tea changes far more quickly and more dramatically than other aged teas like Pu'erh. In just five years, a yancha reaches a whole other world of flavor, especially the good ones. Most yancha is allowed to rest for at least six months, so the roast cools down, and the original flavors of the leaf swell up. Also, unlike Pu'erh, aging yancha requires no special environment, humidity, etc. A good container with a nice seal is all that is needed. Every time I open my yancha jars, the tea inside has transformed and opened up new doors of experience.

Similarly, I have found no tea in the world that changes as much from steeping to steeping as yancha does. The flavors, aromas and mouthfeel all transform with each brew, and as you get down into the later steepings, a mineral flavor—called “yan wei” in Chinese—continues for many steepings to come.

The world of yancha is deep and profound, and you could spend lifetimes brewing this tea without ever plumbing its depths. Such a life would not be wasted. Wuyi tea has been called the “Tea of Immortals” for centuries, drunk by Buddhist and Daoist mendicants alike. The wizened bushes deep in these scenic gorges have ever been brewed into elixirs of meditation and life, sought out by travelers who traversed leagues of mountains, plains and rivers in search of their legendary golden sutras, whispered in quiet cups directly to the spirit.

The Leaf