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# The Authentic Taste of Puer Tea and Transnational Interests

**Shuenn-Der Yu**
*Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica*

What is real Puer tea? This question has been a great concern in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong since the mid-1990s, when Puer became a highly sought-after commodity among consumers in East Asian and Southeast Asian markets. Like Puer's fascinating history, in which enormous changes in its value and market have taken place, the debate about just what is Puer tea has shifted many times. It has involved actors at both the local and national level across Asia who try to define authentic Puer in order to control its meaning, taste, and value—and consequently its markets and future development. This paper will analyze how the "problem of Puer" actually engages global issues and historical processes.

Keywords: authenticity, taste, transnationalism, Puer tea, globalization

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Authenticity always tops the list of concerns when people talk about Puer tea. After all, who wants to spend big money on a piece of so-called "aged Puer tea cake" (*chennian puer chabing* 陳年普洱茶餅) that might later prove to be a young specimen artificially fermented to simulate the taste of aging? Nor would one be happy if his or her pricey "big-tree Puer" (arbor tea, *qiaomu cha* 喬木茶), supposedly made with leaves harvested from trees hundreds of years old and processed by traditional manufacturing procedures, is later identified as industrially produced using leaves from normal bush (or terrace, *taidi* 台地) tea plants. Unlike other similarly valuable objects like precious stones, which are identified and appraised under a clear classification system, Puer, the most costly tea in the world, has led a complicated social life since it became popular in the mid-1990s. And the question of just what Puer tea is has remained at the center of discussion.[1] This lack of a clear definition derives partly from the fact that the tea is named after a small township in China's Yunnan Province, Puer Prefecture, a tea distribution center in Qing dynasty (1644 to 1911), instead of its method of manufacture. Other teas identified as "green" or "semi-fermented" at least allow us to understand their natures directly from these method-defined descriptors. But Puer, named for a locality in southwest China but now renowned as a global commodity, presents its producers, traders, and consumers plenty of room for debating all aspects of its identity. Confusion derives also from the fact that Puer tea itself is undergoing tremendous transformations. These derive in no small measure from the transnational competition to define its authentic form and control its meaning, taste, and value—and consequently its markets, profits and future development. This paper considers the recent history of Puer and argues that the issue of authenticity involves not only material culture and political-economic forces, but also information about tasting experiences that crosses national boundaries.[2]

Chinese concern with authenticity, *chunzheng* (純正) or *daodi* (道地), is not a recent issue stemming from the craze for Puer tea. Since at least the Northern Sung (960-1127), brand names and trademarks have been used to distinguish commodities

1 Generally speaking, Puer tea is made of leaves from Yunnan's large-leaf breed and manufactured with a process similar to that of green tea, i.e., harvesting, panning, and then drying (under the sun) with no or very little fermentation. For transportation purposes, Puer tea is often steamed and pressed into various shapes. Puer tea production was industrialized in the late 1940s, but the craze for aged tea that began in Taiwan in mid-1990s and the subsequent global Puer tea fad have all complicated the simple issue of what constitutes true Puer.

2 Data collected for this paper ranges from 2002 to 2015. I have done multi-site fieldwork in Taipei, Hong Kong, Kunming (the capital city of Yunnan Province), as well as Simao and Yiwu, which are Puer tea distribution centers in southern Yunnan.

from different production regions, firms, or merchants (Lai, Chi-Kong, and Gary G. Hamilton 1986). This institution of branding evolved in the context of a fluid society characterized by vigorous commodity transactions and indistinct class segregation, which facilitated a consumption economy termed "Chinese consumerism" or "commercial capitalism" by China specialists (Hamilton, Gary G., and Chi-Kong Lai 1989; Ho 1954). These trademarks served as one of the keys for identification and authentication, and their use was common practice in Chinese society. With respect to Puer tea, firms typically used various kinds of "trademark tickets" (*neifei* 內飛) or "description tickets" (*neipiao* 內票) in their tea cake packaging as a way to promote and authenticate their product. Tongqin hao 同慶號, the biggest tea firm in Qing times, placed its description ticket between the cakes of pressed tea inside the packaging paper; each one stated that "Tongqing hao has been a trademark for one hundred years. It uses fine white bud tea leaves from Yiwu Mountain to make its Puer tea. These leaves appear golden when brewed and provide a natural rich flavor and abundant fragrance." The insertion of *neipiao* tickets to encourage buyers to trust the trademark and packaging as containing the real Tongqing hao tea is also widely practiced today.[3] This example demonstrates that there has been a history of concern with Puer's authenticity from at least Qing times, and Chinese consumers are used to thinking about the issue of authenticity on a daily basis. What is particularly interesting about the issue of Puer's authenticity is not its relation to modernity per se, but instead, the flows of information, interests, and discourses across Asia and beyond that contend to determine its value and meaning in the search for potential profits.

Puer's case deserves particular attention because Puer, no matter how it is manufactured or talked about, is a kind of drink; how its qualities as a beverage register in sensory experience has always been the major concern, if not a key force, behind the processes of its globalization. Just what *chunzhen* aged or arbor Puer tastes like has always been the central concern embedded in transnational flows of information and economic interests in it as a commodity. Promoting or debating what constitutes authentic Puer involves establishing tasting standards as well as teaching and learning tasting skills across national boundaries.

3 In 1920 the Tongqing hao tea firm announced that because there was too much fake Tongqing tea on the market, a new description ticket was designed, which the firm hoped would allow customers a sure means to identify their merchandise.

## The Taste of Aging and the Definition of Puer: Taiwan vs Hong Kong

The recent history of Puer tea began in Taiwan as aged tea that had long been stockpiled in Hong Kong began to be imported into Taiwan starting mainly in early 1990s. This eventually created a fad for the tea that spread from Taiwan back to Hong Kong, Guangdong, and to Puer's production site, Yunnan, in China's southwest. By the mid-1990s all of China, plus Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia, had joined in the consumer fray. That the Taiwanese had known little about the tea, and it had not been popular even in China before the 1990s, makes Puer's recent history particularly interesting.

Taiwanese merchants had begun to promote Puer tea as early as the late 1970s. At that time, cross-strait relations remained tense, but a trend toward establishing communications was beginning to take shape. Puer tea, along with other Chinese teas, were still considered *feihuo* 匪貨, that is, "bandit merchandise" from Communist China. As such, they were not allowed to enter the Taiwan market. The merchants who brought them back tucked the teas into their luggage but had to get rid of all the packaging for fear of violating the strict regulations of the time. They mostly brought back semi-fermented teas from Fujian Province to satisfy a small group of Taiwanese tea lovers' curiosity and interest in comparing Taiwanese oolong teas to their counterparts in mainland China. Puer, on the other hand, was little known and often disliked due to its bracing earthiness, which was often described as stinky（*choupu* 臭脯）. It took more than fifteen years for Taiwanese merchants to successfully promote this favorite Hong Kong tea in Taiwan, through organizing tasting parties, exhibitions and various forms of publications. They were most effective with the aged Puer and established a tasting standard that allowed Taiwanese consumers to appreciate/imagine its values.[4] Starting in the mid-1990s large amounts of aged Puer stockpiled in Hong Kong warehouses were shipped to Taiwan. The uncertainty in Hong Kong just before it was returned to China in 1997 also bolstered Puer's export since many tea merchants sought to convert their stored tea into cash before reunification. The conjunction of these historical factors created the conditions for the Puer fad of the late 1990s, with prices of aged Puer skyrocketing, which in turn spread the tea's popularity back to its original consumption regions in Hong Kong and Guangdong, and then back to its production site, Yunnan.

I have documented elsewhere how and why Taiwan played a key role in Puer's

4 A detailed explanation of this process can be found in Yu 2013.

globalization (see Yu 2013). What I would like to focus on here are the debates over Puer's authenticity in conjunction with its globalization. As Taiwanese merchants successfully introduced Puer to their customers, they also effectively established—perhaps even invented—a taste for aged tea that has become a key factor in evaluating Puer's authenticity and value.

Taiwan's part in this process was no accident. As mentioned earlier, the aged tea had been stored in Hong Kong and the merchants there certainly knew that Puer tasted better when it had aged. However, Hong Kong did not have the flourishing tea-tasting culture that Taiwan did, and so merchants had trouble persuading Hong Kong consumers to purchase aged Puer at higher prices. They were surprised and even laughed at the crazy Taiwanese merchants who imported large quantities of the aged Puer. This allowed the Hong Kong merchants to cash in on what they were unable to sell to locals. Meanwhile in Taiwan a sophisticated tea-tasting culture had been developing since the 1970s; this provided fertile ground for the development of a mature appreciation of aged Puer and a strong market for the tea. As the craze for Puer took off, Korean merchants began to import it from Taiwan at even higher prices, at which point Hong Kong's tea merchants finally realized that they probably should not have laughed at Taiwanese ambitions to profit from the product they had once owned. In short, collaboration between Hong Kong and Taiwanese tea merchants turned to competition as the Puer fad spread.

Competition also arose around the definition of and standard for the "taste of aging." If we compare Taiwan and Hong Kong styles of tasting the aged Puer, they actually appear to be rather similar. After all, Taiwanese learned how to judge and appreciate aged Puer from the Hong Kong merchants. Both tasting styles emphasize the aroma transformed through aging, a subtle mature scent called *chenxiang* 陳香, and the smooth-water texture of the tea, called *hua* 滑. Both also stress the effects of consuming aged Puer on bodily *qi* circulation, which is seen as a positive factor beyond taste that extends its attractions into the realm of health. These three criteria are the basis for appreciating the aged tea and also for appraising its quality and value. However, along with these three principles, Taiwanese also stress a standard called "pure-dry storage" (*chungancang* 純乾倉), which refers to the dry environment in which Puer should be stored, allowing the tea to age in a natural and healthy condition. Taiwanese highly favor Puer that has been aged in this fashion, and they have developed criteria for determining just what meets this categorization.

Hong Kong merchants contest even the existence of pure-dry storage and consider this claim to be all imagination on the Taiwanese side. They emphasize that the moist environment in Hong Kong does not permit consistently dry storage conditions. One famous tea merchant named Ye has dismissed the so-called dry

storage claimed by Taiwanese merchants as nothing more than the doors of the warehouses being left open, but when the doors are closed, that's the wet-storage the Taiwanese pretend not to see. Nevertheless, Taiwanese dealers explain that it is not that they do not understand the actual conditions of storage, but they have developed this criterion to distinguish tea stockpiled in a "natural" environment from that kept in artificially humid conditions to speed up the aging process. The so-called wet storage（*shicang* 濕倉）, often produces certain negative effects in the tea, creating a moldy funkiness and reducing the tea's effects on bodily *qi*; in addition, the "enhanced" aging process is done with the help of introduced humidity-loving microorganisms, such as fungus and bacteria.

In Hong Kong the techniques of "wet-storage" have become common practice. Puer's strong nature produces a bitter astringency when brewed. Because it is the most popular drink in Hong Kong's tea-house style restaurants, the demand has always been high. To meet the demand for drinkable Puer, Hong Kong merchants developed wet-storage techniques and know-how to speed up aging and systematically apply these in Puer production, which allows them to achieve the flavor that "natural" aging would take decades to accomplish. Contrast this to Taiwan where Puer is considered a special commodity enjoyed only occasionally. The claims about pure-dry storage emerged when Taiwanese merchants largely controlled the market for aged Puer previously stored in Hong Kong. They also suggested that Taiwan had the best of the aged Puer. The insistence on the validity of the "pure-dry storage" claims was hence a way to position in themselves in the Puer market and claim that their product brewed up the "right" and "authentic" taste of the tea.

Therefore, a determination of authenticity is based not only on whether a tea cake is the real Tongqing hao tea shipped to Hong Kong decades before the Communist regime took over Yunnan, but also on the quality of its taste and aroma. If the tea has gone through the "unnatural" aging, any claim to authenticity is diminished. This criterion is especially crucial since many aged Puer cakes do not retain their original packaging; it was taken off either because Taiwanese merchants needed to hide the tea's *feihuo* identity when importing it, or because the tea went through some period of wet-storage and the original paper packaging was destroyed in the process. Taste, hence, becomes key in authenticating aged Puer. Experts generally begin by visually inspecting the tea cake to see whether there are any signs of unnatural or poor storage on its surface, and then steep the tea to appraise its age and quality. Although pure-dry storage may be an invented category on the Taiwanese side, it nonetheless points to the level of anxiety over Puer's authenticity.

Taiwanese merchants' successful investment in aged Puer has had far reaching effects. A "taste of aging" has been established through transnational collaborations

as well as competitive exchanges. It not only serves as a criterion for appreciating Puer, making it an enjoyable item of special quality; it also functions as a standard in discriminating the value of a specimen of the tea, making Puer a commodity worthy of investment since it can be aged or stockpiled, an activity that promises potential profits. Puer, never before listed as a notable commodity in Chinese history, has become the most sought-after tea in China. Its aging, or the fact that it can usefully be aged, has become an indispensable element in Puer's definition.

While this case is interesting for having emerged from the complicated relations across Greater China, as well as Hong Kong-Taiwan collaboration and competition, its central question "What is an authentically aged Puer tea?" soon became the even more intriguing problem: "Just what is Puer?"

## Puer Raw or Cooked? Taiwan vs Yunnan

Once Puer tea became a hot commodity, debates about its definition flared in the early 2000s. As mentioned earlier, Puer was named after a locality, a Qing-era prefecture, thus it was loosely identified as a manufacture from Yunnan whose leaves came from a Yunnan large-leaf variety（*daye zhong* 大葉種）.[5] However, as the tea became popular and its trade lucrative, there has been demand for a tighter classification to bring the controversies to a halt. For one thing, the large-leaf variety has also been planted in Guangdong and Sichuan provinces, and those teas also share a degree of the fame and profit that have followed Yunnan Puer, since they are also often called Puer. Kunming wholesale dealers I interviewed often refer to the unique character of Yunnan's natural environment to explain that tea's special taste, one that no other "Puer" fully achieves. Using Yunnan's large-leaf tea as the raw material for Puer has been listed as a necessary criterion by some Puer specialists (e.g., Deng 1995). However, Puer cannot be defined solely by the tea species used because the same Yunnan leaf is manufactured into different kinds of tea; thus some tea books have simply defined Puer as "a tea other than the green and black teas produced in the Xishuangbanna and Simao areas" (Huang 2003). Additionally, some places close to the Yunnan-Sichuan border, such as Yanjin, also produce tea called Puer, and the tea industry has endeavored to explore new areas for wild tea trees from which to produce Puer. Some Yunnan-produced green teas were even billed as "Puer

5 The border areas between Yunnan and Thailand are likely the original terroir of *Camellia sinensis*. Its sub-species, the large-leafed *assamica* and small-leafed *sinensis*, are widely under commercial production. Yunnan is famous for the large-leaf variety.

green tea" in the early 2000s. All these factors have only complicated the problem of determining just what is the true Puer.

Taiwan's dealers and aficionados were surprised at the assertion that "cooked Puer" was the real thing, manufactured using "traditional procedures" (*chuantong gongxu* 傳統工序). Cooked Puer (*shoucha* 熟茶) is produced through a process called *wodui* 渥堆, a type of fermentation developed in Guangzhou in the 1950s and transferred to Yunnan in the mid-1970s. As part of this process, workers create piles of the tea leaves, sprinkle them with water, and cover them with plastic. The combination of moisture, high temperature, and microorganisms facilitates fermentation. *Wodui* is considered a "post-fermentation" (*houfaxiao* 後發酵) technique because water is added to tea leaves that have already been processed and are therefore marketable as a finished product. Since the leaves reach a high temperature during post-fermentation, *wodui* tea is called cooked tea to distinguish it from the original Puer tea, which is now referred to as *shengcha* (生茶 raw tea). The purpose of developing the *wodui* technique was to transform the flavor of Puer from strong and astringent to soft and smooth, similar to that produced by the wet-storage process but at an industrial scale and so involving great profits. *Wodui* made Puer tea more acceptable to consumers in Hong Kong and Guangdong especially, and from the mid-1970s on, a large portion of Puer tea was made in the cooked style. In fact the *wodui* method is not actually new: Guangxi's Liubao tea and Hunan's Qianliang tea, two famous *heicha* (黑茶 dark tea) types, have long used similar methods. Despite the fact that Puer's original style was closer to a green tea, it has since been re-classified as a kind of *heicha*. Many Chinese consumers who began drinking Puer in the 2000s got to know the tea mainly through the cooked style, and for that reason, as Zhang Jinghong points out, "Puer was categorized as a fully fermented dark tea." (2014:89)[6]

Taiwanese merchants and consumers alike learned about Puer in both its raw and cooked styles but had a strong preference for the aged raw Puer. Many Taiwanese dislike the ammoniac flavors in the cooked style. Hence, from the very beginning of their exposure to the tea, Taiwanese consumers learned to distinguish the two styles in both conceptual and experiential terms; they understand that the two result from dissimilar manufacturing procedures and have learned to recognize the difference in their flavors. That experience has made Taiwanese incline to the aged *shengcha*

6 Zhang's book *Puer Tea: Ancient Caravans and Urban Chic*, published in 2014, was the first academic book on Puer tea and focused mainly on analyzing this phenomenon within China. This article emphasizes that Taiwan, despite its peripheral position in Puer trade after the mid- 2000s, has been a defining and probably the key player in establishing the standard for Puer's authenticity.

which they define as the authentic Puer developed through a natural aging process, and they consider *shoucha* to be an artificially fermented/aged dark tea, which should not be confused with the former. This was why Taiwanese are irked by the assertion that "the *shoucha* taste is the 'special characteristic of Puer tea.' "[7]

Yunnan traders and consumers adopted a rather different discourse in the early 2000s. They stressed that producing *shoucha* involved artisanal knowledge and technique; *wodui* required skillfully executed procedures that significantly transformed Puer's taste. This distinguished it from the raw Puer produced by a procedure similar to that of green tea involving little knowledge and skill. Yunnan's wholesale market also reflected this contention; cooked Puer tended to fetch higher prices than the raw tea, because the former involved greater effort and cost in its manufacture. In other words, ignoring the tea's longer history and adopting the common Yunnanese conception of Puer, this discourse used the sophistication of local artisanal skills to legitimate the characterization of the cooked style as "real Puer."

Other arguments support this position. Lei Pingyang, author of *Puer cha ji*（A Record of Puer Tea 普洱茶記）, stresses how the Menghai tea factory, the biggest in Yunnan, experimented with artificial aging processes and named the product of those experiments "Yunnan qing" 雲南青, that is, Yunnan semi-fermented tea. But once the *wodui* skills had matured, this producer relabeled its tea as Puer. In other words, Lei argues, "Puer tea" has acquired new meanings in recent years (and thus it is legitimate to redefine it as a cooked tea). Huang Gueishu (2003), a Puer tea historian, in his book *Puer cha wenhua* (The Culture of Puer Tea), lists *wodui* as one of Puer's "traditional" and "standard" production procedures, that is to say, *wodui*-processed tea is now an authentic Puer, but he does not explain his claim.

This argument for what constitutes Puer does not really hold up if it is examined from a transnational perspective. Taiwan, once the center of the Puer fad, has played a key role in its globalization through the establishment of tasting and value standards for aged Puer and in marketing Puer tea, especially to Korea. Since Taiwanese owned most of the Puer that had aged over decades in Hong Kong warehouses, they took the lead in setting standards and pushing the Puer tea fad. This drive for standards is deeply rooted in Taiwanese tea culture and it has been

7 For example, Huang Gueishu 黃桂樞, *Puer cha wenhua* 普洱茶文化 (Taipei: Yengji Tangren gungyi chubanshe, 2003), 114. Tea books have been important in defining Puer partly because its mythical stature created a strong market for information about it, and partly because books were still the major means of circulating information in China in early 2000s. Of course, these books also generated more myths.

the key to success in the Puer trade. Consequently, tea exporters, collectors, and consumers alike have agreed that raw Puer tea should enjoy better prices, and their major concern with respect to Puer's authenticity was whether artificial techniques were used to speed up the aging and whether the effects of the "natural" storage could be replicated to produce the authentic taste of aging found in the famous tea cakes from Hong Kong.

Yunnan had to challenge this standard by redefining Puer. Even though this tea has been produced mainly in Yunnan, Yunnan has played only a peripheral role in its trade. Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Guangdong were the major players in the early 2000s. Having neither aged Puer nor control over Puer's market, Yunnan could only promote its cooked Puer as the norm, since the knowledge and skills of manufacturing *shoucha* were mainly controlled by the government tea factories there. The impact of this push to promote the cooked tea as the Puer is hard to gauge because concern quickly shifted to a new argument.[8]

## Taiwan's High-Mountain Tea and Yunnan's Arbor Tea: Taiwan plus China

Arbor tea again became fashionable after the mid-2000s, after years of producing Puer mainly with tea leaves harvested from industrial tea gardens. Its re-emergence was readily embraced since the most famous tea firms of the Qing and early Republican eras had all used leaves harvested from Yunnan's arbor (or forest) tea trees. The most famous tea cakes, the Red Mark（Hongyin 紅印）brand, were produced at Menghai, Yunnan's first state-owned tea factory in the late 1940s to mid-1950s and are believed to use arbor tea from Mengla County (Chan 2008:17), while the "antique Puer" cakes or bricks manufactured by private firms in Yiwu, the Puer distribution and production center in Qing times, listed their raw materials as sourced from the legendary Six Tea Mountains located in Xiwhuangbanna, a state close to the Yunnan-Burma border. What is surprising about the arbor tea fad is that it was again initiated by Taiwanese merchants. Since at least the mid-2000s, arbor Puer has consistently been the most expensive new Puer product on the market and has been breaking records each year. Today, a cake of authentic arbor Puer costs

8 There was another attempt at redefining Puer, in which it was reclassified not as a dark tea but as a new tea category that was listed as the seventh kind of Chinese tea. This effort resulted in two official definitions issued in 2003 and 2006. Since it was important only within Yunnan and has little to do with the transnational forces, it is not discussed in this paper. Jinghong Zhang's book presents a detailed discussion (2014:89-93).

from a few hundred to a few thousand RMB, a price unimaginable ten years ago.

It all began in 1993 when a few Taiwanese tea merchants and exporters attended the First International Conference of Puer Tea in Simao, a city nearby the famous Puer Township. Conference organizers were surprised that after the meeting, the Taiwanese team asked to visit Yiwu, located in the eastern area of Xishuangbanna close to Yunnan-Lao border. But the situation in Yiwu was bleak, since the famous private tea firms like Tongqing and Tongxing hao had all been disbanded during the Land Reform era, and Yiwu had not produced Puer tea for decades. The trip was arranged nonetheless.

Still, the Taiwanese were surprised that none of descendants of the old private tea firms or tea artisans could be found. They were only able to interview one old man who had once worked in a tea firm as a shop assistant. Before leaving Yiwu, one of the Taiwanese merchants asked the Yiwu county magistrate if he might collaborate with locals to produce a small amount of arbor Puer tea cakes using techniques he learned from the literature as well as his observations from visits to state-owned tea factories. The first batch was successfully sold in Taiwan and others followed. Since prospects looked good, arbor tea production gradually spread to other locales like Nanruo, Bulang and the Gingmai Mountains where arbor tea trees also grow. Today merchants go to great lengths to search Yunnan's remote mountains for wild arbor tea trees in hopes that the tea from such virgin areas will bring great profits.

Yunnanese have long harvested tea leaves for a variety of uses. There are reports that the earliest arbor tea tree cultivation by human beings might have been as long ago as four thousand years, and that cultivation likely started in Yunnan. Today, minority communities living in tea regions still use tea leaves to make a beverage, as medicine or for food (Huang 2003: 178-187). In Qing times, when Puer was an important local tribute item to the imperial house, bud leaves collected from arbor tea trees were used to produce the tribute Puer tea. Tan Cui, in *Dianhai yuhengzhi* （滇海虞衡志 Notes on Yunnan）, states that hundreds of thousands of people were involved in tea production and trade across the Six Tea Mountains region, indicating a flourishing tea business at the time.

Today, arbor tea is known by various names since traders have managed to create more new categories for the materials used to make it. It is most commonly called *qiaomu cha* 喬木茶, but other common names include big-tree tea（*dashu cha* 大樹茶）and ancient-tree tea（*gushu cha* 古樹茶）. In the mountain villages that produce arbor tea, tea trees can be seen close by the village or in adjacent areas; some are mingled with the forest and some are set out in special tea gardens. They are privately owned by individual families in the village and have been cultivated for centuries. The tea trees deep in the forest but inside village territory are owned in

common by the villagers and whoever passes these trees may harvest their leaves. If the trees have been cultivated by the villagers, tea made out of their leaves is often called *huangshan cha* 荒山茶 (tea from remote mountains); if they are wild trees, the tea is called *yesheng cha* 野生茶 (wild-grown tea).These modern terms, i.e., terms that have emerged since the mid-2000s, are used to point to arbor tea's organic, natural, and even mythic status, with a strong implication that wilder is better and probably also more authentic.

Wild ancient trees have also become an object of worship, especially those more than 1,500 years old. All Puer tea books have pictures of their authors standing by such trees as though to tell readers that their personal observation of the existence of these giant tea trees in some way bears witness to the origins of Puer tea, and this should make their books more convincing. The presence of these old wild trees has allowed Yunnan to proclaim itself the place where tea originated. Tea lovers from different parts of the world visit these trees the way religious pilgrims visit famous shrines. Some merchants even claim that their highest quality arbor tea is produced only with laves collected from one of these trees.[9]

All these mystifications make it difficult for modern Puer lovers to understand that for a number of decades, before arbor tea became popular, tree tea leaves were classified as "not meeting the standard" of state-owned tea factories. Once the state-owned tea firms began industrial operations, modern tea-tree plantations, garden management, and tea leaf standards were put in place. The original big-leaf variety was continued in the modern gardens but the trees were trimmed into bushes to increase the number of buds and the harvest—a typical practice seen worldwide. Manufacturers also adopted a standard of classifying tea leaves similar to that for green teas, i.e., the smaller and the more tender leaves were ranked higher. Tea leaves were systemically ranked into eleven grades, from 0 to 10, with leaf buds listed as the best. Arbor tea leaves come with different shapes and sizes, and despite their better quality, they were hard to classify and so did not meet the standard and earned the lowest prices. During the Cultural Revolution, many arbor tea trees were chopped down or trimmed into bushes or completely replaced by terrace tea plants.

Today's fashion for arbor tea flies in the face of all these past standards, including the criteria for tribute tea. Unlike terrace tea, whose branches are trimmed to increase budding, arbor tea trees are managed not to increase the harvest but to increase the (chemical) contents in each leaf. It is believed that since arbor tree

9 Tea produced from leaves harvested from one tree is called *yikouliao* 一口料 or *dushu cha* 獨樹茶, that is, tea from a single tree.

branches are not trimmed, fewer side-branches and hence fewer buds should mean each leaf receives more nutrients, and the greater nutrient content in each leaf increases the potential for good quality aged Puer in the future. With the potentiality of future aging in mind, merchants are not so interested in bud leaves, which do produce better fragrance, but are not suitable for aging. The unique leaf shapes seen in *huangshan* and *yeshen* cha are now preferred, since wildness implies strong body in the leaf and the eventual quality of the tea. In other words, because the taste for aged tea is well established and remains an important concern, the potential for successful aging is also increasingly preferred in leaf quality.

This preference affects expectations regarding the taste of arbor tea. A smooth and elegant taste does not necessarily mean better quality as was the case when Puer raw tea was tasted with the standards of green tea in mind—for example, in Qing times by the Qianlong emperor (Yu 2010). Puer consumers on both sides of the strait have developed a higher tolerance for bitterness and astringency as both qualities are now considered to indicate the tea's strong character. Yiwu's arbor tea, once famous for its fine smooth taste, is now less preferred than teas from Bulang Mountain, where one village, Laobanzhang, is particularly famous. It is said that Laobanzhang tea is favored by Guangdong consumers, especially by collectors who enjoy not only its strong taste but also its potential for aging. The authenticity of Laobanzhang tea has become an issue, since it fetches a great price and the demand for it has encouraged counterfeiting by all sorts of means. Despite the fact that its entire production is supposed to be monopolized by a Yunnan tea merchant, tea claiming to come from Laobanzhang can be found for sale everywhere. The term "greater Laobanzhang tea," i.e., tea produced in nearby villages, has also emerged in recent years.

The arbor tea fad has led to claims about "pure-substance tea" (*chunliao cha* 純料茶), which means all the leaf in a tea cake comes "solely" from the same village, with no mixing of leaves from other villages or areas. Arbor teas are now ranked and priced according to locale. Once this was based on which mountain the tea came from, but now it focuses more narrowly on the producing village. Village names have become like brand names, added to the usual tea firm or factory names and logos. This phenomenon, again, runs counter to traditional practices and standards. In the Qing and early Republican eras, prominent private firms developed unique recipes for blending teas from different mountains to create distinctive flavors; this was how they differentiated themselves from other firms. Blending (*pinpei* 拼配) was a kind of expertise, requiring long-term training and experience similar to that of blending whiskey. Blending is a technique that has continued into the modern era in the production of terrace Puer raw teas as well as cooked teas, in both state-owned

factories and in today's big private tea firms. But this process has been completely dispensed with in the production of arbor teas. Using materials from a single village to signify purity and as a claim to taste and value is similar to the French wine industry's use of the concept of *terroir*, or the taste of locality; but in the case of arbor tea there is nothing like the refined French tasting system or knowledge of the natural environment behind this concept, not to mention a sense of the history of the classification system and tradition (for details please read Ulin 1996). The term *chunliao* functions more like the opposition of single-malt to blended whiskey, where the former is considered to have a distinctive flavor and the designation proclaims the greater authenticity of the product.

And again, Taiwanese influence is very much present in this new trend toward "pure-material" tea. As mentioned earlier, it was Taiwanese merchants who initiated arbor tea production and trade, which was based on claims similar to those for Taiwanese high-mountain tea, which emphasize that "good tea is grown in the right environment." It is not clear whether Taiwanese merchants came with the idea of imposing Taiwan's high-mountain tea standards upon arbor tea production and trade, but there is evidence that certain key elements were introduced.

Standards established for Taiwan's high-mountain tea highlight altitudes and localities. High-altitude environments allow tea leaves to develop rich chemical contents that produce high-quality teas; those teas embody the unique local features of their natural environments—climate, sunshine, and soil. The tasting of high-mountain tea thus emphasizes the *shantou qi* 山頭氣 or unique flavors derived from different mountain environments. Taiwanese consumers are very particular about altitudes and where the teas are grown and produced, e.g., the west or eat side of the mountain. Consequently, the names of the mountain or a particular locale on it have become important brand names. For example, consumers not only look for Lishan tea (Taiwan's highest elevation tea production area) but also tea from Tianchi, located at the highest altitude within the Lishan area. Since locality is considered the main factor in producing a tea's unique characteristics, consumers are particular that Lishan teas use leaves from that region only and are produced by a single tea artisan. Blending teas from different altitudes, localities, and artisans, is regarded as a practice of the big firms that provide teas for the general public and blend teas of different qualities and prices to generate profits. Even though Taiwan's high-mountain tea industry does not employ terms like *chunliao cha*, content purity is very much a prerequisite of authenticity. In other words, all the key elements of concern with authenticity in high-mountain tea also apply for Yunnan arbor tea.

This consensus may have derived from joint ventures between Taiwanese and Yunnanese merchants. A Kunming tea merchant I interviewed who began producing

Yiwu arbor tea in 2000 explained that he collaborated with a Taiwanese merchant who was good at differentiating teas from different altitudes by taste, while he himself was good at discerning teas from different locales within Six Tea Mountains. Their different areas of know-how made them a good team for finding the right arbor teas from the right places. Similar stories are abundant. Since collecting arbor tea from different locales requires considerable manpower, Taiwanese merchants often reply on local merchants to gather and evaluate village teas for them. Taiwanese merchants' demands in terms of quality and authenticity naturally penetrate the local tea culture.

It is also possible that the technique of blending tea was dropped by both Taiwanese and Yunnanese merchants because the skills and expertise to do so no longer exist even in the legendary arbor tea center of Yiwu. No recipes from the private firms of early Republican era survive, nor can any local artisan with skills in blending arbor teas be found. Moreover, hiring the skill needed to blend different arbor teas with divergent properties has turned out to be expensive. One of my informants told me that he and his friends hired a master from a state-owned firm to blend tea and had to pay him with 40 percent of the tea they brought in from the mountains in exchange for his work. To legitimize the current pure-material tea production, merchants also invented a story, saying natives told them *chunliao cha* was the finest tea and reserved by villagers for special gifts offered to local leaders, a story that is hard to substantiate from the historical record.

Arbor tea "produced by traditional procedures" (*chuantong gongxu* 傳統工序) is the slogan often seen on description tickets and Puer advertisements today. This is clearly a claim for authenticity, referring to tradition, customary procedures, and hand-crafting to highlight arbor tea's special character in contrast to teas industrially produced. Nonetheless, whether such a thing as "traditional procedure" exists is highly questionable. We often see villagers producing tea in accord with orders from outside merchants; this is to say, they manufacture tea according to market demands, not tradition. A common criticism heard in Yiwu among serious tea merchants is that authenticity is being jeopardized by the market economy. Just what constitutes a "traditional procedure" and whether there have ever been such procedures is not clear.

Questioning the notion of "traditional procedures" is itself a modern phenomenon, one Kunming wholesale merchant has argued. His parents are retired researchers from the tea research institute affiliated with the Menghai factory. Having no unified standard was the norm in the past, since tea was produced by local villagers who applied similar but hardly identical procedures. This actually allowed private firms of the past to rely on blending teas of different characters to

create their own distinctive flavors. A uniform traditional production procedure is a modern fantasy that never existed, the Kunming merchant stressed. It was only with the establishment of state-owned tea factories and the concept of the production line and large-scale operation that we saw standards, in terms of qualities and production methods, being instituted. The most we can say about "traditional procedures" is that arbor tea in Yiwu was produced by a process similar to that of green tea[10]—it was sundried, and pressed with a stone mold This is a rather rough definition, but it reflects the facts nonetheless.

The issue of authentic arbor tea has been further complicated by the fact that to increase demand, merchants now also encourage drinking newly produced arbor tea. Arbor teas, especially those from the Yiwu area, do have a smoother and more fragrant flavor than do terrace teas, partly because arbor tea trees tend to be grown at higher altitudes and often mingle with other forest trees that provide shade, which helps to reduce the bitter astringency of the leaf. Although arbor teas' greater potential for aging is already well recognized, its better taste when fresh is being strongly promoted these days. When promoting Yiwu teas, merchants now use terms like "tasting the ecology" (*he shengtai*, or 喝生態) to emphasize that the tea's quality comes from its favorable environment. Since enjoying fresh arbor tea has become a fashion and prices go up each year, tea merchants have also become particular about production procedures and the tea-making skills of the producers. They have even tried to teach villagers how to manufacture tea and claim that they adapt strengths from their skill at making green and semi-fermented teas to develop standards they believe will improve the quality of Puer arbor tea. This again challenges the definition and notions of authenticity around Puer—i.e., is arbor tea so produced still Puer if skills at producing semi-fermented teas are involved? Despite this problem, merchants still promote the tea as being made using "traditional procedures."

In Taiwan this became a hot issue once arbor tea was recognized as being "good to drink." Rumors about transposing skills developed making Taiwan's oolong or semi-fermented teas to the making of arbor Puer are rampant. Consumers and traders do not care about arbor tea becoming better to drink these days; rather they are worried that the process used to improve its near-term consumption decreases its potential for successful aging. Since aging is a complex process, some argue that consumers should get that full future potential, the entire materiality of the leaf,

10 Green tea production is the simplest. Tea leaves are panned without letting them ferment. However, in the production of arbor tea, due to a lack of strict quality control, leaves are often left to wither and ferment, before being panned, resulting in different degrees of light fermentation.

without any portion of it being exhausted in the process of partial fermentation. This has many consumers and merchants suspicious that raw Puer whose flavor is too smooth or soft is the result of forging（*zuoshou* 作手, literally "working with extra hands"）. They instead look for teas whose flavor exhibits bitterness, astringency, and *qi* quality. It is thus interesting then that the quality of being good to drink (presumably a positive) is with arbor tea often believed to jeopardize its value.

The recent emergence of "traditional" arbor tea has only further confused the issue of just what Puer tea is. Arbor teas are supposed to be the most authentic Puer since they are produced from materials that are natural and pure, and are manufactured by natives who have allegedly been producing arbor Puer teas for centuries. But history shows its hand through this arbor tea fad. Once the private firms were confiscated and large-scale state-owned tea firms forced tea-producing villagers to conform to industrial standards, any semblance of "traditional production procedures" essentially disappeared. This gap has allowed Taiwanese influence to transforming the earlier emphasis on "blending to create distinctiveness" into "single-village *chunliao* teas that feature the taste of the locality."

The return to arbor tea production initiated by Taiwanese merchants has never been challenged by the Chinese Puer tea industry; instead, it has been expanded by mainland merchants. The craze for Laobanzhang tea initiated by Guangdong merchants and consumers has provided an important validation of the new fad for *chunliao* Puer. Laobanzhang's record-breaking prices each year have become an index of the Puer tea market. Merchants continue to explore for remote tea production villages, implying that "the less connected to market economy, the better and more authentic" the product. Some of these finds—for example, Bingdao village in Mengku township, Shuangjiang County—have become traders' and consumers' most recent enthusiasms, with many others waiting to be discovered. Recently a book titled *Yunnan shantou cha*（雲南山頭茶, Mountain-top Tea in Yunnan）was published with detailed introductions to Yunnan's most famous tea mountains, old and new, and their distinctive flavors (Lin 2013). Although arbor tea has never been the largest share of the market, it is certainly the most significant trend in Puer today.

## Conclusion

The above discussion focuses mostly on the aspects of Puer's authenticity and how those are conceptualized and negotiated by transnational forces pursuing profits. I would argue, however, that the concern for Puer's authenticity goes well beyond the mere question of how it should be made or aged, and whether Taiwan or Hong Kong should be credited with the key contribution to the emergence of the

Puer tea fad. What we see is a tradition, one focused on defining good, authentic, and valuable tea, in the process of being invented. For tea merchants and governments at different levels and localities, at stake is the establishment of a system of valuation that consumers will take for granted but which in turn will legitimate those categories and ensure that profits continue to flow for particular players and regions. Despite continuing debates around the specifics of Puer's authenticity, consumers in different parts of the world have now widely accepted the notion and the system of evaluation by which Puer tastes better after aging, and tea aged longer should taste better and deserves a higher value—to the extent that it considered reasonable that a sixty-year old tea cake, weighing around 350 grams, could be worth as much as 100,000USD. What remains to be determined are issues minor or peripheral to this "tradition," epitomized by debates about the existence of pure dry storage or authenticity of pure arbor tea, both of which actually deepen the now well-established knowledge system around the "taste of aging." In other words, what remains to be settled are arguments by transnational forces over the particulars of profit allocations.

This is to say that ideas about the taste of aged Puer and its value are a recent example of "invented tradition," in the Hobsbawm and Ranger sense (1983). Though *terroir* functions as a major criterion in classifying and valuing French wines, people tend to disregard the fact that the criterion itself was invented in a political-historical process. Similarly, concerns about Puer's authenticity disguise the fact that "what is often regarded as 'authentic' tradition is itself a product of global political and economic processes" (Ulin 1996: 44-45). In the case of wine, this has been often described as "naturalization," that is, a transfer of critical attention from the socio-political formulation of a scheme of value and benefit allocation to concern with natural factors as legitimate criteria for value. In the case of Puer tea, this naturalization has focused on the aging process, exemplified by "pure-dry storage," and now increasingly highlighting the natural environment (good ecology produces good tea), as in the case of arbor tea.

Since the mid-2000s Taiwan has been on the periphery of the global Puer trade compared to Guangzhou, which has the largest tea market in China, and even Beijing, which serves as an important transit point in the trade with Korea. Despite China being the center of the Puer market today, we continue to see that transnational exchanges, especially those from the peripheries, shape its dynamics; this is similar to Taiwan's impact on popular culture across Chinese-speaking Asia (Moskowitz 2011). Debates about authenticity—this process of tradition invention—is likely to continue for years to come, as long as there is a prosperous Puer market to fuel it and transnational players have divergent interests to pursue. Ironically, the story of Puer tea demonstrates that the concern for authenticity may have reached

a state where no one cares what Puer really is, so long as the current version of the tradition generates profits.

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Yu, Shuenn-Der
Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica
128 Academia Road, Section 2, Nankang, Taipei 11529, Taiwan
yusd5644@gate.sinica.edu.tw

# 純正的普洱茶風味與跨國利益的追逐

**余舜德**
中央研究院民族學研究所

「何為純正的普洱茶？」，一直是1990年代中期於東北及東南亞興起普洱茶風潮以來，消費者所密切關注的問題，就如同普洱茶歷經價值與市場巨大變動所呈現之豐富的歷史一樣，「什麼是普洱茶？」的爭論也未曾有定論。兩岸三地的行動者積極參與普洱茶定義之爭以控制其意涵、風味的標準與價值，並進而影響市場與未來的發展。此篇論文將深入分析「何為純正普洱？」的議題是如何牽涉著這值得探討的全球化課題與歷史過程。

關鍵詞：純正，風味，跨國現象，普洱茶，全球化