

Compilation 3 from book – Chapter 6 – “Simao to Lijang: Sleep Between Slurps”

Our attention was directed to a round tea cake – a form known as *qizibing* – of *sheng*, unfermented Pu'erh. Our hostess noticeably softened as she handled the light green and dark green buds with tender hands. “This is Pu'erh in its original form,” she purred. “It will ferment or age naturally in this form with no artificial means, no speeding up, no disturbances.” Each time she said the word *artificial*, her face darkened, and it occurred to me that beneath her rigid discipline and unsmiling seriousness, she was more than just a tea drinker: she was someone who appreciated and savored each stage of development of the green leaf, from the snipping off at the stem by a pair of fingernails to its eventual infusion in hot water.

She gently handed us the tea cake to smell, but only after demonstrating the proper technique: pressing her nose onto the leaves, she took two long inhalations and then, surprising us both, released her breath onto the dried leaves and took a third long sniff. The humidity of her breath released the tea's essential oils, revealing its character. Dakpa laughed, until he, after breathing on it, discovered that the fragrance has revitalized in the process. He had, I could see, become a convert. Our *sifu* looked pleased with herself.

She continued on with her instruction. “Fermented tea is aged artificially. This process speeds the fermentation process time to months or even weeks. It is not a natural process, and that makes the tea inferior.” Her stiff, formal body language told me that black Pu'erh – force - fermented Pu'erh – was a contentious issue in tea circles.

As the theanine, tannins, catechins, minerals, vitamins, and antioxidants roared into our blood streams, Dakpa and I sat back to watch in a state of wired enthusiasm. Tea's long history hadn't complicated the serving process. The tools and supplies involved were simple: clay pot, cups, water, and tea leaves, and, of course, a thirst. Our *sifu's* hands and tea instruments were now flashing in a dexterous show of proficiency. Another one of the teapots was being readied. Tiny clay pots from Yixing, in Jiangsu Province in eastern China, were used only for Pu'erhs or oolongs, teas that could handle the high heats that the pots were designed to maintain. A lighter, unfermented tea would simply cook too fast, destroying the leaves' delicate essences. Hot water swelled the clay of the Yixing pots slightly, letting its pores absorb the essences, and sealing the fate of the pot. The pot, after this “initiation,” would know only this type of tea for the extent of its life, or that of its owner.

Cross-brewing – mixing types of teas brewed in any one clay pot – is considered a great crime among tea traditionalists but this detail was scarcely registering with Dakpa who's smile quivered in the ‘heat of the high’.

“The beauty of Pu’erh is its ability to sustain repeated infusions. I can make up to fifteen pots using the same leaves,” the *sifu* said. She paused to make sure we were paying attention. The thought of an afternoon of no-stop shots of tea and the ensuing feelings of bliss gave me no end of pleasure.

“The better the tea, the more infusions it can bear. No other tea can make such a claim.” Pu’erh tea continues to age and improve even after it has been steamed into a cake or ball shape, whether in its green unfermented form or in its dark brown fermented form.

“These leaves” - she took off the tiny teapot lid to reveal the shiny unfurled leaves - “can be used tomorrow.” No other tea, we were assured, could be conserved this way, as it would begin to rot.

“So many lie about tea; about its age, about where it comes from, about the manner in which it is fermented,” our tea master sighed, and I was concerned that this was a signal that our supply of tea had come to an end. Thankfully, she began to prepare our next pot, and while pouring took another swipe at *shou cha*, telling us that at one time, tea always fermented naturally. The black Pu’erh in its forced-fermented form started being produced only in the 1970s. In her mind, it was an intruder in the world of tea.