



Liquid Gold

Exploring Banzhang Tea

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In just seven years the tea from Banzhang has gone from 8 RMB to 1800 RMB per kilogram, becoming one of the most valuable commodities in Yunnan and the impetus for a whole market of tea, with all the positive and negative consequences associated with it. What exactly can be properly called Banzhang tea is, however, a confusing dilemma in and of itself. The real “Lao (old) Banzhang” is said to have a bitterness that gradually transforms in the back of the throat, with a lasting *huigan* that entertains for many breaths to come—a treasured experience for any tea drinker, indeed. But does such a tea exist?

Banzhang is located in the Bulang Mountains of Menghai County, Xishuangbanna. It is at an altitude of 1800 meters above sea level, and is situated perfectly for old-growth gardens. The name is Dai and refers to the fragrance of *Osmanthus* flowers that also grow there. Banzhang is divided into two villages, Old and New. The people are all Hani, and the newer village only split from the older about sixty years ago. The population of both is relatively small. Another village, called Wei Dong, also split from the older Banzhang around 40 years ago, further complicating the definition of genuine Banzhang tea. All three villages produce large quantities of tea, and the government’s demarcation of the area

also includes the village of Lao Man’e and the 600 acres of trees the Menghai factory planted between the old and new Banzhang villages in 1988. The tremendous value of this tea has also led to the creation of many new tea plantations around the villages. Scrambled facts like these are all parameters in an equation that adds up to the confusion of Banzhang tea.

Strictly speaking, “Banzhang” tea should only be that which comes from the old and new village, but with such incredibly high prices, even that has become a problem since villagers are wont to bring in tea from other areas like Lao Man’e and process it in Banzhang to sell it for more. In many trips to Banzhang—amongst all of us combined—we’ve been impressed by the fact that each household has a variety of teas far more dissimilar in quality and flavor than any other area of Yunnan we have been to.

The village of Lao Banzhang only produces around 50 tons of tea annually, and only 10 tons of that is spring tea. However, the markets in Kunming or Guang Dong both sell more than 5000 tons of spring “Lao Banzhang” each! Some of this tea is cakes blended with small amounts of genuine Lao Banzhang, while most of it is completely fake. The village has tried to deal with the problem by fencing themselves in and



coordinating production with Chen Sheng Hao Tea Factory, who has in turn helped the village by securing its authenticity and initiating social services like the construction of a million-RMB road. The guards at the gate help prevent outsiders from bringing in or taking out unauthorized tea, but aren't enough to solve the problem completely. In fact, Cheng Sheng Hao's tea processing plant within the village may be the only source of what can assuredly be called "Lao Banzhang" tea. And having drunk some of that, one will firstly be amazed at the quality and flavor, and secondly at the distinction between that highest quality tea—selected first by the factory representatives each season—and the other teas one encounters walking around and visiting farmers' homes.

If you get the chance to drink some genuine Lao Banzhang tea, it quickly becomes apparent why the tea has become so famous. The bitterness is strong, but not puckery like lower-quality newborn teas. The jerkiness quickly transforms into a sweetness that lingers in the back of the mouth, relaxing the palate and throat. The *huigan* is amazing, lingering for several minutes. When

fresh, the leaves are large, with whitish, hairy buds. When it is new spring tea, there are also hints of a citrus flavor mid-sip.

Most of the New Banzhang teas we've tried, including much of the higher-quality products we were sure were either blended or completely fake, were extremely bitter with a Qi that rushed to the head and was uncomfortably like a caffeine rush, similar to drinking a double-espresso. We have even heard several vendors claim this to be characteristic of genuine "Lao Banzhang". However, the real tea we have drunk with Cheng Sheng Hao's CEO, Mr. Chen Sen He, as well as the few other times we've drunk what was more positively "Lao Banzhang" all confirmed that this heavy bitterness and rushing Qi weren't in fact traits of legitimate Lao Banzhang. The authentic tea is definitely quite bitter, but the bitterness transforms immediately and does not pucker the mouth at all. And every time we've had it—unanimously—we have found the Qi to be like most old-growth Puerh: calm and comforting, rising slowly over time as the session continues, not rushing to the head uncomfortably.



This month, Jing Mei Tang hosted a tea gathering to explore the nuances of genuine Lao Ban Zhang, both current and through time. We drank fresh, spring Old and New Banzhang teas brought directly from China by senior editor Lou Ying Yin, who received the tea as a gift from the vice-president of Chen Sheng Hao while on a visit to Lao Banzhang. We then proceeded to drink several other Banzhang teas from each year, going back to the first, famous cake that was produced by Menghai Tea Factory in 2002—the cake that started Banzhang on its rise to fame. By drinking each year’s Lao Banzhang, from 2009 back to 2002, we were afforded the rare opportunity to watch how this famous tea ages; and by having different examples of the tea from some of the years, as well as starting with what was guaranteed to be authentic, we could better distinguish which of the cakes were blended.

Starting with the fresh spring Lao Banzhang was an excellent way to create a standard for the whole session. The tea was everything that has made the genuine tea so famous: delicious, full-bodied, clean with great Qi, as well as exciting *yun*—offering various flavors that transform in unique ways, enticing one to keep drinking. The New Banzhang some of us had drunk earlier in the day was bitterer, on the other hand, and puckered

the mouth, with a more rough and uncomfortable Qi—though still not as bitter or unpleasant as many of the blended cakes we’ve tried from the market floor. It was a nice-quality tea, and a good candidate for aging, though not terribly pleasant for drinking newborn.

Most everyone at the meeting commented that the teas from 2006-2008, which we drank in reverse chronological order, were not the best of the bunch. One of the teas from 2007, the Pu Ming Xuan Tea Factory cake, was collectively exclaimed to be blended. In all, it was suggested that these teas might have suffered from climatic conditions that resulted in a lower quality *mao cha*. That said, this comparison was only made by juxtaposing what were all really nice teas—any one of them was better than a lot of newborn Puerh out there. Furthermore, many of the characteristics of the great 2009 spring tea were also present in these cakes to a lesser degree.

The small *bing* from Jing Mei Tang’s 2007 set of 26 mountains was the purest, and showed the potential to age very nicely. It also had the characteristic bitterness that transforms almost immediately upon entering the mouth, as well as the rising Qi. The 2006 cake from Yang Ching Hao was another nice one, but we thought it was perhaps blended with some New Banzhang or other tea.

The famous “Three Yins” cake made by Cheng Sheng Hao in 2008 was also very good, but was unfortunately placed immediately after the fresh 2009 spring tea. Later, many of us took some of it home to have another session, since this tea after all is in some sense the paragon of Lao Banzhang tea. Afterwards, we discussed the cake by email, and all agreed it was much better this time. It showed the beginnings of slight fermentation, lending it a bit more depth; but when brewed with a bit less leaves, shown as brightly as the 2009. This also goes to show how much brewing parameters, differences in the one steeping the tea, as well as teaware all play a role in one’s experience of any given tea.

The 2005 Gan En Tea Factory Lao Banzhang was an amazing cake and up until that point grabbed the spotlight of the tea gathering. It was smooth and bright, clean and pure. The liquor sparkled in the cup, and the bitterness had mellowed out a bit over the four years of storage, allowing for new transformations and interesting nuances brought on by the age of the tea. It was deeper in the throat and the *huigan* was stronger in this tea than in all the others so far, lasting so long we had to take a break and have some snacks. The Qi was also smoother and rose more slowly. This tea started



2009 Lao Banzhang *maocha*



2008 "Three yins" Cheng Sheng Hao



2006 Yang Ching Hao



2005 Gan En



2007 Jing Mei Tang



2002 Menghai "Two Stars Chinese Cabbage"



umbra that engulfs all the aged tea that has ever been forged, and scamming more money per year than fake aged teas do in several years as well—such immorality and overall confusion cannot be ignored in any discussion or evaluation of the region’s tea. The fact that every vendor claims to be the one with the “real stuff”, and the different opinions as to Lao Banzhang’s flavor profile, dissuade all but the greatest fan of this tea—and even then, we concluded that it is only after several trips to the area itself accompanied by experts, as well as gatherings such as this one, that we have begun to understand what real Lao Banzhang is like. The fact that the villagers themselves bring in tea from surrounding areas to make a greater profit only further complicates everything. We are pretty confident, though, that the common market-floor profile that “this tea is Banzhang because it is very, very bitter and gives you a caffeine headache” is not true. The real thing is indeed very bitter, but the bitterness transforms immediately and has no puckery sensation at all. While the Qi is strong, it follows a pattern characteristic of all old-growth tea, and is comforting, not a caffeine rush (actually, the effects of

to reveal that perhaps Lao Banzhang’s strength when young might be the key to great aging, in the way that the famous *Hong Yin* was said to be bitter and strong when it was young.

Finally, we drank the famous 2002 Menghai “Two Stars Chinese Cabbage” Lao Banzhang—the cake that began the whole fad that turned Banzhang tea into liquid gold. The tea was excellent and the age has only made it all the better. The fruitiness of the 10-yearish stage had just begun to show, complimenting the bitterness that, even after all this time, still transformed in the same way, enlivening the mouth with *yun*. It had the Qi of an older tea. The aged flavors, however, make it impossible to tell if this cake was blended or not. Some of the experts present suggested that at that time, when the tea was so cheap, they probably would have used the older trees; while others argued that Menghai had planted their own trees in the area and definitely would have made the cake completely or in part from that *mao cha*. Whatever went into the blend, it is no wonder it started a trend—it shows why Banzhang tea really is so unique, adding to that the obvious possibilities it shows for long term storage.

Though we all learned that there is a real treasure behind all the hype that surrounds Banzhang tea, the tremendous amount of fraudulence—casting a vast





Cha Qi should never be confused for grosser sensations like those caused by caffeine).

To get some real unblended Banzhang and be absolutely sure that it is just that is an impossibility in the current market, for all but a few of us. Therefore, it is best to just drop the whole idea of authentic versus inauthentic Lao Banzhang and just evaluate each tea you propose tea buy in terms of quality, once you've established that it probably has at least some Banzhang tea in it, that is (Otherwise, the higher price will not be justified by the tea, in most cases anyway). What tea you purchase to drink, though, is really up to individual taste; and if you, therefore, love a tea commensurately to its price, it doesn't really matter what went into it in the end. If you're searching for provenance, you're better off with another region (Though many of the others also have such issues, to lesser or greater degrees, which is why Lao Banzhang so characteristically represents newborn Puerh's problems).

Like most things "South of the Clouds", the Banzhang market is a bit topsy-turvy. Many masters nowadays are suggesting we back off and let the market right itself, as it has already started to do in the last couple of years. We consumers can indeed impose environmental standards, push towards more honest

and regulated labeling, further the work factories like Cheng Sheng Hao have begun to protect and authentic Banzhang tea, and of course sip lots of tea and discuss our opinions and ideas to help further the education of other tea lovers like ourselves.

