

# An Exploration into the Elegant Tastes of Chinese Tea Culture

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## Abstract

China was the first to produce tea and consumed the largest quantities and its craftsmanship was the finest. During the development of Chinese history, Chinese Tea culture came into being. In ancient China, drinking tea is not only a very common phenomenon but also an elegant taste for men of letters and officials. Chinese tea culture is extensive and profound and it is necessary for foreigners to understand Chinese tea culture for the purpose of smooth and deepen the communication with the Chinese people.

**Keywords:** tea culture, elegant taste, cultural communication

## 1. Introduction

Chinese tea culture is a unique phenomenon about the production and drinking of tea. There is an old Chinese saying which goes, “daily necessities are fuel, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar and tea” (Zhu, 1984: 106). Drinking tea was very common in ancient China. Chinese tea culture is of a long history, profound and extensive. It involves material culture as well as spiritual civilization. In the Tang Dynasty, Lu Yu wrote a book entitled *Canon of Tea*, which summarized the techniques of production and drinking of tea and marked the peak of Chinese tea culture. Since then, the spirit of tea has penetrated into palace and the countryside, exerting almost all fields including poetry, painting, calligraphy, religion and medicine (Chen, 2008: 38). Over thousands of years, the Chinese have not only accumulated a lot of knowledge concerning the planting and production of tea, but also cultivated the spiritual culture of tea. This special phenomenon is unique to China and it belongs to culturology.

## 2. Origin of Tea

Reputed as the home of tea, China was the first to produce tea and consumed the largest quantities and its craftsmanship was the finest. Lu Yu of the Tang Dynasty said in his *Classic of Tea*: “Shen Nong was the first to drink tea, and tea became popular during the reign of Duke Lu of Zhou” (Gang, 1995: 221). It is clear that Chinese tea culture has a long history. In ancient times, there was no the Chinese character of “茶”(tea), which was substituted for by “荼” and it did not come into being until the Tang Dynasty. In *Guo Feng, Bei Feng*, a section of *The Book of Odes*, there is a sentence: “Who said “荼”was bitter? It is as sweet as shepherd's-purse” (Gang, 1995: 248).

At first, tea was not a kind of beverage but medicine. It was said that when tasting various medicines, Shen Nong was poisoned seventy times and every time was saved by tea. Later on, with the deeper research of the nature of tea, tea was separated from medicine and became a kind of beverage to quench people's thirsty. Consequently, tea culture came into being. In Wang Bao's book entitled *Tong Yue*, there are recordings about the making and selling of tea. In the Three Kingdoms period, the practice of drinking tea was already very popular. There were records about drinking tea instead of wine in *The Biography of Wei Yao, The History of the Three Kingdoms*. In the Tang and Song Dynasties, the practice of drinking came into fashion. At that time, people not only attached importance to the origin, picking and processing, but were critical about the tea sets and approaches to tea-drinking. People continuously created new approaches to drinking tea. In the Tang Dynasty, a person named Lu Yu was keen on tasting tea. He lived in the Tea Mountain and grew tea by himself. His self-styled name was “Minister of the Tea mountain”, and he was later reputed as “God of Tea”, “Master of Tea” and worshiped as

“Spirit of Tea”. He was the first one to invent produce tea and white a book entitled *Classic of Tea*, which was divided into three chapters. As the first monograph about tea, *Classic of Tea* elaborated upon the nature, the origin, the picking, processing and making of tea. Cai Xiang, a person of the Song Dynasty, wrote a book entitled *The Record of Tea*, which fell into two parts. The first part was about tea. The second part was about tea sets and the ways of drinking tea. In a Yuan Play entitled *Liu Xing Shou*, the poor and old character began with the sentence: “You shirk the responsibility of managing the household, / so that it came into a disorderly mess./ Everyday, the first seven things to be settled should be daily necessities/-fuel, rice, cooking oil, salt, jam, vinegar and tea” (Chen, 2010: 136). In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the ways of drinking tea were innovated and the habit of drinking tea was similar to that of our modern society.

In the Tang Dynasty, tea was introduced into Japan and Japanese tea-making appeared. In the early seventeenth century, tea was introduced into Europe and became one of the most popular beverages among the local people.

### 3. Varieties of Tea

The evolution of tea is synchronous with traditional culture. Up to now, Chinese tea has evolved into six major series: green tea, black tea, scented tea, Wu-lung tea, white tea and compressed tea. In daily life, other kinds of tea are also enjoyed, such as date tea, fruit tea, chrysanthemum tea, broadleaf holly leaf, lotus nut tea, buttered tea, milk tea, etc.

In China, green tea and black tea are the most common. Green tea is produced without fermentation and the name came from the color of green of the tea leaf and tea water. Green tea tastes fresh and clean and promotes the production of body fluid to quench thirst. There are varieties of green tea. Famous-brand green tea includes Pilochun green tea of Dongting mountainous areas of Jiangsu Province, Huangshan Maofeng Tea of Anhui Province, West Lake dragon well tea of Zhejiang Province, Lushan cloud-fog tea of Jiangxi Province, etc. West Lake dragon well tea is first class for the bud of the tea leaves are very tender and delicate. Especially, the tea made of the tea buds before Tomb-Sweeping Day and the tea made of the tea buds the Grain Rain are tenderer. When the tea leaves are marinated in boiled water, the tea buds will stand up to be stretched open, like color flags, which was given a charming name of “flag spear”. The green color, sweet taste, refreshing aroma, pretty figure are called “the four unique features of West Lake dragon well tea”.

Black tea is produced through fermentation and the name came from the red color of the tea leaves and the tea water. Drinking red tea can establish the yang function and clear off greasiness in alimentary tract. Famous brand of black tea are Keemun Black Tea of Anhui Province, and Sichuan Black tea.

### 4. Elegant Taste of Tea

When it comes to drinking tea, Chinese people emphasize the character of “品” (taste), namely “tasting tea”. “Tasting tea” not only means assessing the quality of tea but also means the injection or releasing of feelings. As for refined scholars, tasting tea is a lofty activity, bearing elegant cultural feature. Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty wrote a book entitled *Treatise on Tea*, in which he wrote: “The well-dressed gentlemen have the elegant taste of drinking tea” (Chen, 2008: 138). There were numerous tea ceremonies, which had different procedures. Men of letters valued the character of “品” (taste), and were particular about the three elegance, namely the drinking surroundings and tea sets, the way of making tea, the smelling and tasting of tea, which became a cultural phenomenon.

#### 4.1 Elegant Environment

“Elegant environment” comes first. Chinese scholars always chose to drink tea in an elegant, peaceful, and secluded place, which enables the drinker to appreciate scenery, taste tea, and seek after inspiration. It was considered a pleasures to taste tea among flowers, under the moon, in secluded pavilions, and in the company of the qin-lute, the game of go, calligraphy and painting. These three elegant and peaceful environments help cultivate the elegant personality of tasting tea.

The first pleasure was to taste tea among flowers and under the moon. Tasting tea among flowers would disperse the scholars’ heavy burden in mind. Huang Tingjian ever composed a group of five poems entitled *Five Poems on Flower in Reply to My Twentieth Younger Brother* which was as follows: “Catkins float in the sky in spring,/ In wind and rain flowers blooming. /Fine is the wine bought from the east of town/ But how can it compare with my Guyu tea (Gang, 1995: 208)?” During the days of late spring, poets were inclined to taste tea with friends among flowers, indulging themselves in wateriness and serenity. A poem by Zou Hao entitled *Drinking Tea with Changqing under a plum Tree* is as follows: “Not a cup of wine was prepared,/ But two bowls of tea were served./ Here, I bade you farewell,/ Tasting tea in the presence of the plum tree”(Chen, 2008: 182). Tasting tea under a plum tree highlighted the scholars’ elegance all the more.

Tasting tea under the moon, scholars often sighed for the changes of the world and recalled the memory of the past. Wen Yanbo wrote a poem entitled *Reply to Gongyi's Poem Entitled Making Fresh Mengding Tea*, which went as follows: "The fresh tea from Mengding tastes so fine, /And I intone pomes in the hotel by moon-lit lake. I drank refreshing tea one cup after another, / Throwing away worries and regaling on transient delight"(Chen, 2008: 105).

The second pleasure was to taste tea in tranquil and peaceful pavilions. Most pavilions were located either against mountains and or near waters and so they had tranquil surroundings. While tasting tea in pavilions, scholars could command the view of the mountains, taking delight in the scenery of pine trees and bamboos, and appreciating the exquisiteness of the springs and brooks. Shi Dehong wrote a poem entitled *Mengqing Pavilion* which went as follows: "The hut is seldom visited by men./ And the bamboos grow higher than the wall./ Tired, I close my book and have a rest,/ Carefree life incurring sweet dreams./ Cozy breeze blowing past gently, /Glowing fire is heating the pot full of tea./ I am entranced by a reverie, in which I have a sound sleep,/ hearing the pitpat of raindrop beating leaves"(Chen, 2010: 302). The poem expressed the elegant pleasure brought to the poet by tasting tea in a tranquil pavilion. As spot-patterned architectures, pavilions are mostly built on mounds, near waters, in the center of lakes, under pine trees, among flowers, and by pathways. They can serve as resting places, lookout point, and shelter from rain. Tasting tea in a pavilion, not only could the drinkers enjoy the beauty of the nature, but also they could create life pleasures. Wei Xiang's poem entitled *Mounting Buyun Pavilion in August* could be evidence of this: "Nine out of ten days are busy, / Pleasant is the gathering of the pals. / Autumn wind being strong on height,/ The day seems longer when one is at leisure./ Pals chat about Dhyana for fun,/ Drinking tea cup after cup./ For us who are endowed with official mission,/ It is wise to forget trifles by chatting and poetizing"(Chen, 2010: 102). Postponing trifling official affairs, the poet took a brisk walk up to the Buyun Pavilion and making tea there. Commanding a panorama of charming landscape in four directions, the poet transiently neglected the success and failure in officialdom. Pavilions could not only serve as resting places, lookout points, libraries and shrines but also as important places for scholars to taste tea and appreciate landscape. There is a Song poem entitled *Making Tea at Zhuyuan Water Pavilion*: "The plum trees are abloom near the water,/ So crystal and green is the gurgling river./ Admiring the beauty of spring and plucking flowers to wear,/ Flowers' reflections in water make me feel shamed./ Staying to wait for the tea to be made, /So long is the day I feel"(Chen, 2010: 37). Zhuyuan Pavilion was surrounded by plum blossoms, through which running a crystal brook. The poet appreciated the fascinating scenery as he made his tea, carefree and content.

The third pleasure was to taste tea in the company of the qin-lute, the game of go, calligraphy and painting which were considered the four elegances of scholars. During the course of tasting tea, scholars would play the qin-lute, the game of go, great calligraphically works, or paint, which added to the elegant taste.

The essence of tasting tea in the company of the qin-lute lies in "harmony" (Yao, 2004: 42). In *The Canon of Yao*, there is a comment: "The eight different tones can make harmonious music without undermining each other's timbres, and the pleasant music results in the harmony between man and God" (Chen, 2010: 242). Melody is designed to realize the harmony of man and nature. There are comments in *Treatise on Tea*: "Tea calculates the delicateness of the Oumin area and the nimbus of rivers and mountains. It is salutary and refreshing" (Chen, 2010: 212). The aim of tasting tea was to realize calmness and mildness. In the mind of scholars, drinking tea and playing the qin-lute added pleasure to each other and they both helped to purify people's mind and cultivate people's personality. Wang Yucheng ever wrote a poem with the title of *Reply to Mr. Tian's Poem Entitled Detainment*, which went as follows: "The ice thawing, the budding wickers green,/ Countryside customs are rustic, spring noisy and fine. /Receiving order from the court, I make farewell at the city gate./ Persuading peasants to avail themselves of the timing to do farm work. /Wisps of steams from the tea mist the cran./ And light rain wrapped the farmers hoeing the cornfields./ The impulse of potetizing occurred to me, parting the valance/ To let my carriage be filled with fallen catkins" (Lu, 2007: 108).

What tea and the qin-lute have in common are "carefreeness and calmness" (Yao, 2004: 18). Calmness is indispensable to chess-playing and tea-tasting helps calm people down. (Lu, 2007)Shi Dehong ever wrote a poem entitled *Hearing Someone Playing the Game of Go When visiting a Small Temple with Si Yu in Chongren County*: "Through the wall I hear the sound of playing the game of go,/ The room is cool under the heavy shade of the tree./ Nice to be in the company of an expert poet, Registrar Wang, /It is pleasant to taste tea made with spring dew" (Chen, 2010: 308). Tasting tea and playing the game of go reflected the spiritual cultivation of scholars and the elegant connotation of Chinese culture.

The relationship between tea and painting and calligraphy mainly lies in two respects. First, drinking tea adds to the pleasure of painting, just as Wen Tong, a painter famous for painting bamboo, wrote in his poem entitled *Ziping Lost the Game of Go and I Wrote a Poem to Dun for Tea and Painting*: "I often remember the ripples in

the teacup when sleeping,/ thinking of you writing and drawing when I am painting” (Chen, 2010: 318). Wen Tong believed that tea-tasting could stimulate his impulse for painting. Secondly, scholars appreciated paintings after tasting tea. Su Dongpo wrote a poem entitled *Invite Li Fan'an to Visit the Tianzhu Temple in Rain and Wrote Two Poems*: “In front of the eaves, raindrops beat the flowers and splashed, /A wisp of vapor curls upwards from below the bamboos. /Availing of a little leisure to come here with paintings to appreciate /In front of the incense burner in serenity” (Chen, 2010: 127). In the poem, the poet appreciated painting while tasting tea, the pleasure of the two being closely associated.

#### 4.2 Elegant Techniques

The second elegance referred to the way of tea-making. “Water is the mother of tea” (Lu, 2007: 116), because high quality water enabled tea to fully display its charm of color, fragrance, taste and form. As far as the water used to make tea, scholars attached importance to three elements. The first was clarity, because clear water can make tea leaves display their pretty appearance clearly. Mei Yaochen ever wrote a poem entitled *Reply to Yongshu's Poem Entitled Tasting Fresh Tea*: “Both tea and pots are fine, /No need to be critical about the spring./ Making tea in stone pots and stirring with silver spoon, /Water beads cover the surface of tea in the cup, which surprises me./ My empty stomach defies attempts to compose a poem, /The tea growling inside to help me”(Gong, 2006). The second was “sweetness”. Cai Xiang wrote a poem with the title of *The Holy Spring*: “The spring water, clear, sweet and pure, /Really tastes very refreshing. / Fine is the color of the tea made with spring water, /which can also be used to irrigate farmland.” The third was “flowing”, referring to make tea with the “flowing water” of a water source. In *Pleasures of Tasting Tea*, Tang Yu pointed out: “wherever water is drawn, it must be flowing water” (Lu, 2007: 208).

#### 4.3 Elegant Sentiment

The third elegance referred to “sentiment”. Tasting tea reflected the drinker’s gracefulness and the procedure of smelling and drinking mirrored the realm of his cultivation. The ways of tasting tea were various. Tasting tea alone was thought to be experiencing life of scholars, which was the highest state of tasting tea. After being expelled by his political opponents, Su Dongpo wrote a poem about tasting tea entitled *Visit Taoist Qian, Made Xiaolongtuan Tea, Crest the Hill and Overlook the Taihu Lake*: “After visiting all the mountains of the southern land,/ I hate leaving so soon all the more whichever mountain I visit. / Coming here with the unique tea compressed in round lump, / I'd like to try making tea with the water from the second spring under the sun”(Gong, 2006: 214). Tasting tea with a friend was a kind of spiritual communication of scholars.

### 5. Conclusion

As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese tea culture is in nature the culture about how to conduct oneself. As the development of history, Chinese tea culture elucidated different life values, which formed the core contents of tea culture. The life values reflected by Chinese tea culture are closely associated with practical experience of life (Chen, 2010: 116). Natural environment and human history are both embodied through the development of Chinese tea culture. It is a shortcut to understand the Chinese people better by exploring Chinese tea culture.

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