

Reinventing Chinese Tea Rituals

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“An old Chinese saying goes; when you open the door in the morning [you] are confronted with the task of providing [the] seven daily necessities; wood, soy, rice, salt, sauce, vinegar, and tea.”¹ Tea has been a main focal point within Chinese culture for centuries, shaping and developing Chinese culture as a whole. Tea within China tends to be associated with medication, rituals, religion, and the economy. The complex customs behind culture have been molded by the progression of tea in China. This paper aims to review variances between the historical tea background and current tea culture in China. Looking at the historical background and present experiences of tea within Chinese culture, we are able to understand that tea has retained its social centrality. Although tea has been manipulated and transformed through many dynasties, it still remains a central focal point of Chinese society.

As we magnify the origins of tea cultivation, we begin to understand the importance of how tea culture has been adapted to play a major role as a focal point of society, both socially and culturally. Not only has the idea of tea influenced all aspects of society for commoners and emperors, it has also captured the attention of artists, writers, and philosophers.² Their attention has been enthralled by the philosophy behind the spiritual aspects of tea culture. The hidden philosophical meaning behind tea culture has been discovered over multiple generations of Chinese culture.

¹ Ling Wang, *Tea and Chinese Culture* (San Francisco: Long River Press, 2005), 1.

² Ibid.

Health and Tea

According to *Tea and Chinese Culture* by Ling Wang, the health benefits of tea can be traced back to the ““God of Medicine, Yan Di (眼底).””³ Yan Di was known as the “holy farmer”, who discovered the “medical virtues of plants.”⁴ According to Wang, the early and highly advanced agricultural sciences during this time allowed Yan Di to understand multiple “wild plants and their effects on the human body.”⁵ In reference to tea, Yan Di discovered the process of brewing tea leaves and felt that he had found a way to rid the body of toxins, leading to purification. Ever since this innovation, the Chinese have taken tea into their lives as a cure to societies “health and well-being.”⁶ Its medical uses of detoxification were used by both commoners and nobles. During the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD), the interest and use of tea grew considerably, it had created a foundation for itself comprehensively throughout China. After many medical properties were found during the Han Dynasty, tea soon became the communal aspect of society. This new emergence of the idea of tea drinking among the gentry elite had officially begun.

As previously mentioned, the influence of tea captivated many different scholars and elites. It is often mentioned by Blofeld that, “the art of tea drinking originated in the company of scholars.”⁷ Many emperors were captivated by its unique fragrance and

³ Ling Wang, *Tea and Chinese Culture* (San Francisco: Long River Press, 2005), 2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John Blofeld, *The Chinese Art of Tea* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 186.

⁶ Ling Wang, *Tea and Chinese Culture* (San Francisco: Long River Press, 2005), 10.

⁷ Ibid, 11.

aesthetic. The emperors commonly referred to it as, “xing sha ren xiang”⁸ which translates to “an astounding fragrance.” Emperors were consumed by its rich aroma and warm presence on many occasions. Tea was used in many fine occasions including festival tea parties. During this time, tea was not only a source of drink, but it became a pastime and form of relaxation.

Over many years, tea emerged as an inspirational and spiritual agent. Scholars went from drinking liquor to tea for two main reasons; it was detrimental to health and tea was way more available to everyone rather than only the affluent individuals.⁹ Eventually, many advocated for drinking tea rather than liquor; these people symbolized the spirit of tea. When Taoism emerged in China, they essentially believed in the aspects of nature and natural law; relationship between all living things. Tea advocated these material and spiritual effects that were unified in Taoism.

While tea abided by the oldest Chinese philosophy of keeping and maintaining good physical health, it also aligned with the ideal of spiritual health. Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are the best sources to depict and explain the philosophies behind tea culture. Out of the three, Taoism is said to hold the oldest spiritual principle. “Taoism represented the idea that one can overcome mortal failings by tapping into special resources through training of one’s body and mind.”¹⁰ Within the

⁸ Beatrice Hohenegger and Terese Tse Bartholomew, *Steeped in History: The Art of Tea* (Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2009).

⁹ Ling Wang, *Tea and Chinese Culture* (San Francisco: Long River Press, 2005), 15.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Chinese culture, these special resources refer to self-sacrifice as “immortals.”¹¹ This act of selflessness allows one to possess special wisdom and powers of high esteem. This application of high esteem was represented within Buddhist and Taoist “immortals.” For example, the association of magical powers and tea are believed to have allowed many to live longer than usual. So, why did the Chinese people connect tea with their belief in immortality?¹² According to Taoist theory, a very common goal was to achieve immortality instead of an afterlife.¹³ This would allow them to be one with nature. Tea was considered a filter, “absorbing impurities while helping clear away channels of energy while also relaxing the body,”¹⁴ and thus being one with nature.

The Philosophy Behind Tea

Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism

“Through all the philosophical contrasts between Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, they all relied on tea and tea drinking as a promotion of their respective ideals.”¹⁵ “The evolution from herbal medicine to a favored drink took

¹¹ Daniel P. Reid and Chris Janzen, *The Art and Alchemy of Chinese Tea* (London: Singing Dragon, 2011).

¹² Ling Wang, *Tea and Chinese Culture* (San Francisco: Long River Press, 2005), 16.

¹³ Daniel P. Reid and Chris Janzen, *The Art and Alchemy of Chinese Tea* (London: Singing Dragon, 2011).

¹⁴ Ling Wang, *Tea and Chinese Culture* (San Francisco: Long River Press, 2005), 15.

¹⁵ Ibid, 16

another step in 59 BC, within the Northern and Southern dynasties.”¹⁶ During this time Buddhism became more prevalent and the practice of tea became very popular among the monks. The monks have used tea as a source of refreshment after meditation. The adoption of tea among the monks lead to widespread practice of drinking tea in temples. After this widespread practice had branched out, the monks themselves began to cultivate and study all of the characteristics of tea. In the beginning of the tea cultivation, the leaves were solely used as herbal medication. Monks felt tea was one with nature, that could be used to concentrate on peace and tranquility. Monks mastered the properties of the herb. They thought that tea could stimulate the brain, which led to tea as an inspirational stimulant.

The phrase ““way [*dao*] of tea””¹⁷ originated with the monks, began to allow people to understand the underlying meaning of tea. On a day to day basis, most found tea as a standard drink, yet when the monks referred to it as “way” it began to reflect a deeper meaning of *dao*. Within Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, *dao* was a key term which reflected moral and spirituality. The Chinese tried to identify this underlying meaning by focusing on simplicity and intellectual discourse. Although tea had multiple meanings in different regions of the globe, the Chinese interpreted it as relating to social issues.¹⁸ The moral question behind their findings was, “how can someone have a good life within the

¹⁶ Ibid, 2-3.

¹⁷ Beatrice Hohenegger and Terese Tse Bartholomew, *Steeped in History: The Art of Tea* (Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2009), 89.

¹⁸ T Solala Towler, *Cha Dao: The Way of Tea, Tea as a Way of Life* (London: Singing Dragon, 2010).

context of society?”¹⁹ The basics behind their search came from Confucianism. Confucius believed that our true goal in life was to understand morality. This direct immersion in tea culture provided an outlet for frustration.²⁰ Scholars not only felt that tea provide an escape and deeper insight into life priorities, but also deeper insight into ethics as a potential tool of refinement.

Morality and Ethics

When Confucianism became popular, customs shifted away from luxury and moved more towards appreciation of simplicity. According to confusion followers, tea was known as a simplified way of life, time to seek self-understanding and virtue. This association between virtue and simplicity caused it to be the new fundamental principle; which began the new realm of moral philosophy behind tea. The ethics behind humans and nature were inspired by Confucian. Confucian claimed that this connection was the key to moral insight behind “investigating things.”²¹ The philosophy behind “investigating things” was thoroughly explained by Neo-Confucians.²² “They reflected that close examination of their natural surroundings and physical reality along with a proper mindset, would lead them to

¹⁹ Beatrice Hohenegger and Terese Tse Bartholomew, *Steeped in History: The Art of Tea* (Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2009), 90.

²⁰ Ibid, 91.

²¹ Ibid, 93.

²² Ibid, 92.

detecting the fundamental patterns that gave the material world both physical and moral order.”²³

Although Confucian theory believes societal organization emulates from the environment, many other theories have emerged to explain the philosophy of tea and its impact on ethics. Besides the Neo-Confucian ethics, others felt tea had a ritualistic aspect that offered another link to morality. The word “ritual” had many different concepts, from formal ceremonies to everyday formalities. Once the ritualistic concept was implemented, the Chinese believed that that the dimensions of logic were expanded. The experts and other scholars felt that there were ceremonial aspects of tea that embodied the idea of rites as central virtues. For example, tea parties and festivals were thus seen as a ceremony due to its expression of “ritual propriety.”²⁴

Furthermore, tea was used in place of wine in most cases, giving it the moral prestige, and insinuating that tea was a significant aspect of rites. After tea was implemented in place of wine, tea became associated with filial piety and filial sentiments. Filial Piety was the main determining factor of the moral value of a person within society at this point in time.²⁵

²³ Ibid, 93.

²⁴ Ibid, 96.

²⁵ Warren V. Peltier, *The Ancient Art of Tea: Discover the Secret of Happiness in a Perfect Cup of Tea* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Pub., 2011).

Not only was tea a significant aspect of everyday rites and ceremonies, but it also became a standard aspect of religious ceremonies and rites.

From profound religious rituals like marriage to everyday rites, tea became the customary feature that held sophisticated civilization together. Beyond the tea's significance within rituals, it also provoked an ideal of family values, maintaining family harmony. Family harmony promoted respect, therefore enforcing filial piety within the family.

As mentioned previously, the evolution of tea has provided a deeper insight into ethics, yet it has also provided us a potential tool of refinement indicated through simplicity. Absolute simplicity and purity was an essential way of life provided by tea. This idea reduced society to absolute basics rather than the materialist facets of life; just as tea is a simple form of nature. Confucianism and Taoism were the influences behind the essential ideal of purity as a quality of life. Confucianism stressed the embodiment of purity as link nature, thus “emphasizing the link between humanity and nature, which embodied heaven.”²⁶ Through all the different aspects of morality that tea represents, most importantly it is said that seeking out tea drinking would bring you closer to heaven. This link not only represents embodiment, but also unity. Within the Chinese culture, unity is best represented through the unity of two families through marriage. Not only has tea been able to unify families and cultures, it has also bonded society as a whole.

²⁶ Ibid, 100.

The Spread of Tea Culture: Rituals and Ceremonies

Marriage

Although tea was originated in China thousands of years ago, it has spread to other Asian countries due to its spiritual and physical benefits; inspiring artists and philosophers. Tea culture has adapted to modern day culture, while still being a main focal point in Chinese society. While tea culture has continued to abide by the oldest philosophies of the Chinese culture, it has also impacted many commonly known traditions. Tea has been adapted into modern-day culture; including teahouses, entertainment, customs, traditions, philosophy, and rituals. Within China, tea is associated with not only medication and religion, but also with traditional ceremonies; more specifically the traditional tea ceremony within marriage. This association between tea and marriage is a very significant formality of respect. This ceremony is very important in the Chinese culture, representing the “moment in which members of both families become relatives of each other.”

Despite the changes in tea culture over thousands of years, tea still retains its significance and centrality within Chinese culture. Just as tea has made its way through modernization, so have traditional wedding ceremonies. Tea has been adapted to the ways of culture today to continue to play an important role. Due to these adaptations of tea within society today, the traditional aspects of the Chinese wedding ceremony have been slowly disappearing. In modern day China, the wedding traditions are significantly different in comparison to ancient times.

Traditional Wedding Ceremony

In ancient China, traditional wedding ceremonies were a long and elaborate process, in comparison to modern Chinese weddings. Traditionally, there are six protocols that must be completed before the actual wedding ceremony. Before these protocols are preformed, a young couple must be matched. This match is usually performed by the parents as an arranged marriage. During this time, marriage was not an act of love, but rather a union of two family to continue a family line. The couple was required to obey their decision of the union. Many aspects such as wealth and social status were taken into account when choosing a suiter. The traditional protocols then began after the couple was matched. The six protocols included; proposing, birthday matching, betrothal gifts, wedding gifts, picking a wedding date, and the final wedding ceremony.²⁷

For the proposal, the parents of the male would go with him to the female's house, along with the matchmaker to successfully propose. For the next protocol – the birthday matching – the male's family would see if a fortune teller could predict if the female matches their son, and if the marriage would be happy. Presentation of betrothal gifts, occurs when the matchmaker presents the females parents with multiple gifts (ie. tea and food) to indicate the continuation of the marriage process. Presenting wedding gifts, this was a very important part of the process; this would symbolize respect towards the female's family. Selecting the wedding date, a fortune teller would predict a date of proper prosperity. Usually, the dowry for

²⁷ C. Ou and D. Norman. Geary, *Life in a Kam Village in Southwest China, 1930-1949* (Leiden: BRILL, 2007), 140-149.

the bride is sent to the male's family prior to the official wedding day.

The wedding ceremony: here the male meets the female at her house. Before the females can leave her home to attend the party, she must put her hair up, wear her red outfit, and cry to her mother. The process of crying is to represent that the female is reluctant to leave her family and home. Finally, the female would be carried by her older brother to the venue. The wedding day consists of traditional ceremonies, inclusive of the Chinese tea ceremony. There are traditionally two tea ceremonies; the first occurs the morning when the groom arrives and the second occurs when at the groom's home after they are officially married.²⁸ Although these specific characteristics of marriage are seen within the ancient Chinese practices, they are not the overall defining characteristics for all Asian cultures. This "traditional" wedding for the Chinese differs very much from other "traditional" weddings within the Asian culture. Tradition is seen to be very specific to its individual culture, thus having diverse defining characteristics; it can differ from place and time to status and wealth.²⁹

Modern Wedding Ceremony

The majority of modern day Chinese weddings tend to be based off of tradition. In modern day China, the process of picking your suitor is generally not decided by the parents. More so, tradition Chinese arranged marriages are no longer a popular practice. The reconstruction of Chinese weddings has allowed the couple to be married for love rather than

²⁸ Ibid, 139-145

²⁹ Ibid, 149.

and a meaningless union. The process of birthday matching and analysis of a happy marriage tends not to be associated with non-traditional weddings within China today.³⁰

Tea Ceremony

This ceremonial ritual has been a part of the Chinese wedding process since ancient times and has gone through many different forms of modernization to have reached modern day. This ritual is one of the most significant occurrences, due to its underlying meaning of respect. The ceremonial ritual has been around for over 1200 years, when it was traditionally known as the “way of tea” or *cha dao* (茶道). This practice originated in China, yet has been brought to many other Asian cultures. The original step by step process included; “the bride would have served tea privately to her own family that morning, then the couple would serve tea to the groom's family after exchanging vows.” Although this is the first documentation of the process, it is very rare. The new tradition after the first account is reversed; the groom's family is usually served in the morning, while the ceremony for the bride is always done in the afternoon after the ceremony. The tea ceremony not only represents respect for each family, but also represents purity, fertility, and stability. The process of serving is also very specific as to order; representing respect of their seniority and positions in which the bride (left) and groom (right) stand/kneel.

³⁰ Ibid.

Although these traditions are rapidly changing, there are some aspects that retain their origins. Even though different aspects of tea have been modernized the tea has maintained its originality in the marriage aspect. The traditional tea ceremony still retains its significance and meaning, yet has been slightly altered and condensed. The process of the tea ceremony, celebration, and traditional garments (red) are still included. The most relative activity is the tea ceremony. Both traditional and modern day Chinese weddings include the tea ceremony. In modern day China, the tea ceremony is not split into two teas, but rather is condensed for both families; which is performed either the morning of the wedding or at the wedding. The traditions of wedding change depending on location, laws, and influence. “The evolution of Chinese Tea Ceremony mirrors the development of tea culture in China” the ceremony focuses on the natural way of life.”

Stories of Tea Culture Today: A Look at Two Weddings

Using tea as a contributing factor to nature and becoming closer to the natural way of life was examined through a series of interviews. Through the interviews I was able to take a closer look into how tea culture has made individual impacts of people’s lives as a whole. Who introduced them to tea? Why do they drink tea? Was tea a traditional aspect of their culture growing up? Is tea a significant aspect of their current lives? The interviewees are only a small part of a larger research project, which raises questions as to why and how tea has made a significant impact on culture today. I began my search of the changing tea culture within my family and then expanded to my own friends.

The Wedding, Take One

The marriage ceremony is meant to be a sacred one that is a union representing purity, prosperity, fertility, and harmony. In the early 2000's, Dave Chan married Margret, a Chinese woman. He was experiencing the life of a normal couple within a modern day Chinese wedding, with the exception of a few rituals and/or traditional protocols. Every wedding has its own personal style, and his wedding was very extravagant and more so resembled an American style wedding. One could easily see that family and friends were the focus of the event, whereas Chinese weddings are more reserved with their own traditions intact. Margret was a very lavish woman, and she yet wanted her wedding to resemble a more modern style rather than traditional. When the time had come to plan the wedding, she had little to no respect for Dave's family when making important decisions. She saw her wants and needs as the only ones that mattered. When it came to her relationship she felt she was the superior rather than Dave due to their language differences. The fact that she speaks Mandarin and he speaks Cantonese made her feel as if she belonged on another level. This entitled superiority she felt she had was seen clearly on their wedding day when each element just as extravagant as the next – her dress, her shoes, her flowers, everything was hers. As any Chinese women would perform the tea ceremony out of respect and love for her superiors and family, yet she refused to. Another Chinese tradition ignored, as she tried to embrace this modernity that shocked every guest. Although she followed other traditions, she would not serve his family tea. By serving them, she would ultimately be changing the tradition instead of upholding it considering their standing, and she felt that it would be a

disgrace to herself and her family. In the end, the tea was never served, but the marriage was completed. Over a span of 12 years, they had two children and are now divorced due to cultural differences.^[1]

The Wedding, Take Two

In 2017, Dave got remarried to a Columbian woman, his current wife. Being a multicultural union was a unique twist to what was only considered a traditional wedding. The groom, a man who came from a traditional Chinese family and the bride, a woman who came from a traditional Chinese family tied the knot under the cultural agreement. As I think back to that invitation my family received last summer, I begin to remember the ceremony as it was yesterday.

It was that time of year, wedding season. The sun shining, the birds chirping, and the weather as warm as could be. As we begin to approach the venue, after a four-hour drive, we are able to overlook the water onto the New York City skyline. The sun is just about to set, as we approach the venue waiting for our car to be valeted. As we walk up the spiral stairs to a completely glass building our eyes are astonished by the view. Here I am a small part of a large picture, as a “cousin” not by blood but by relationship, attending a wedding that seems to be a fairytale. The large glass doors open to what couldn't be anything other than a dream. Decorations covered the walls from ceiling to floor, sparkling in the reflection of the setting sun. As I make my way through the very lavish and well decorated halls, I find myself approaching a seating arrangement, listing “DeSantis Family Table 7.” Before the seating for the reception could occur, the ceremony of vows must commence. As a family, we made our

way into the chapel of this reception hall and sat in silence. Soon after music began, indicating our bride would soon be arriving. The musician played harmonious sounds of love as the bride made her way down the aisle. Her dress enticed the crowd as it sat perfectly on her body like a glove. The white dress with a candy-pink satin trim around its neckline, plus pink lace on the off-the-shoulder straps, was mesmerizing. She slowly yet gracefully made her way to the man of her dreams. Not long after, the bride and groom tied the knot in front of their close family and friends, thus further celebrating the excitement with the reception to follow.

The grand ballroom was sparkling as we entered for the reception, and we made our way to our designated seats as indicated by the seating arrangement. Here we are waiting for the newlyweds to arrive, and make their debut as an officially unified couple. Here I thought to myself, not only did this wedding resemble modern wedding it also had its traditional features. The newlyweds emerged from the large glass doors, greeting their guests as a couple. Over the next few hours there was dancing, eating, photos, and many ceremonies of celebration. One thing that specially stood out to me was the Chinese tea ceremony. Here I was able to witness the bride's greatest performance of respect for the groom's family. Although not of Chinese culture she performed the tea ceremony. She changed out of her white wedding dress and changed into a red traditional Chinese dress, where she (behind the scenes) served Dave's parents and knelt in front of them out of respect. Although the dress had sparkle and a few alterations, it was a twist off of the traditional dress, which gave great indication that the bride was respectful of the groom's culture. All dressed in red, the bride and groom presented tea to their parents in exchange the parents presented the couple with

little red envelopes after drinking the tea. These red envelopes decorated with gold characters are gifts of money for the couple. The Chinese custom of money giving is meant to help the couple pay for the wedding. The tea ceremony not only represents respect for each family, but also represents purity, fertility, and stability.

Now looking back on this day, I am able to realize how tea has impacted culture and tradition, but also the unity within family. Tea is a small aspect of a much larger picture, just as I was as a guest at this wedding. Although tea was a small part, it has impacted more than one aspect of society both traditional and modern.

Tea Beyond Weddings

As previously mentioned I was intrigued by the intervention of Chinese tea within everyday life today, so I conducted these interviews to convey information about how tea culture has impacted individuals based on their personal experiences. To get a sense of their experiences with tea, and the context behind it, I questioned why they drink tea, when it became a part of their lives, and how did their interest begin? With these questions, Furman student Allison King explained that in her personal experience, she likes tea mainly because of the health benefits. She claims that it is a detoxifying experience, especially when she is feeling under the weather. Her interest in tea began years ago when she was in high school, she was introduced to an article about tea by one of her favorite teachers. After reading about tea, she wanted to know more. More about tea, the culture of tea, and then it became a part of her daily life – something she could always use to relax. She read about why it is people do

not like green tea, as well as other types of tea, and she discovered that it is an ancient substance known to have healing properties. Her involvement in the ROTC program has greatly influenced her health focused life style, and further explains why tea plays a large role in her daily life. This is just one example of how tea culture takes an influence, and there are other instances where an interest in tea stems for a completely different reason.³¹ Another Furman student, Halley Cleary, was asked the same questions about her experience with tea. Unfortunately, she has struggled with digestive pain for a large portion of her life. She was first introduced to tea as a method to reduce her stomach problems, ginger tea specifically has played a large role in aiding her digestion. Halley is also in the ROTC program, and her interest in tea is similar to Allison's in that the interest is primarily based on the health benefits that it provides. However, Halley's background of health issues provides another example of how tea culture can impact individuals differently.³²

Conclusion

The explanation of cultural provisions and variances between the historical tea background and current tea culture in China, has allowed for a better understanding of how tea has changed. Although tea has been manipulated and transformed through modernization,

³¹ Allison King, interview by Amber DeSantis.

³² Halley Cleary, interview by Amber DeSantis.

it still remains a central focal point of global society. It has also been enjoyed as a health benefit as well as contributing to a simpler way of life. “The evolution of the Chinese Tea Ceremony mirrors the development of tea culture in China” the ceremony focuses on the natural way of life.”³³ Tea has played an important role in all aspects of society; morally and ethically. Through looking at the historical background and present experiences of tea within Chinese culture, we are able to understand that tea continues to retain its social centrality today not only within the Chinese society, but globally as well. Not only has my research provided supporting background information for my topic, but it has allowed me to expand my search to individuals within society. My quest for more information incorporated interviewing individuals as a basis for how tea culture and tea itself has impacted their lives as a whole. Overall, tea culture has expanded itself way outside the walls of China and into the global population as a whole. Next time you think about drinking tea and/or how it has impacted culture remember that it is one of the oldest drinks in history. It has made its way through the strenuous path of globalization to be where it is today

³³ Warren V. Peltier, *The Ancient Art of Tea: Discover the Secret of Happiness in a Perfect Cup of Tea* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Pub., 2011).

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