

Tea Drinking Customs from Ancient Chinese Books

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Abstract

In the history of Chinese classical literature, the Dream of the Red Mansion is the most comprehensive work reflecting the feudal society and culture of our country. The relationship between the characters is the most complicated, and the storyline is the most dramatic. Therefore, it is known as the first of the four masterpieces. The poems, tea names, and even tea songs in the Dream of the Red Mansion contain rich tea cultural significance, which can be described as a model of the combination of tea culture and literature.

Keywords

Chinese literature, tea, cultural connotation.

1. Introduction

The ancient Chinese gave tea different names. Those that were picked early were named *cha* while those that were picked later were named *ming*. Lu Yu of the Tang Dynasty classified tea into five types: *cha*, *jia she ming* and *chuan*. The tender tea leaves were regarded as the first-class tea. They were called *chasun*, *chaqi* OR *chaqiang*.^[1]

At the same time the ancient Chinese were particular about the water which was used to boil tea. Zhang Youxin of the Tang Dynasty once wrote a book *On Boiling Tea Water*, discussing the merit and demerit of the spring water used to boil tea.

2. Abstracts from Famous Book

It was described in detail in A Dream of Red Mansions:

As soon as they had finished this collation the Lady Dowager took Granny Liu to Green Lattice Nunnery. Miao-yu promptly ushered them into courtyard, luxuriant with trees and flowers.

"it's those who live the ascetic life, after all, who have time to improve their grounds," observed the Lady Dowager." These look better-kept than other places.

As she spoke, they were walking towards the hall for meditation on the east side, and Miao-yu invited them to go in.

"We've just been having wine and meat," said the old lady." As you've an image of Buddha inside, it would be sacrilege, we'll just sit in the outside room for a while and have a cup of your good tea."

Miao-yu at once went to make tea.

Pao-yu watched the proceedings carefully. He saw Miao-yu bring out in her own hands a carved lacquer tea-tray in the shape of crab-apple blossom, inlaid with a golden design of the cloud dragon offering longevity" On this was a covered gilded polychrome bowl made in the Cheng Hua period, which she offered to the Lady Dowager.

"I don't drink Liuan tea," said the old lady "I know," replied Miao-yu smiling "This is Patriarch's Eyebrows."

"What water have you used?"

"Rain water saved from last year."

The Lady Dowager drank half the bowl and passed the rest with a twinkle to Granny Liu, urging her to taste the tea. The old woman drank it straight off.

"Quite good, but a bit on the weak side," was her verdict, which made everyone laugh. "It should have been left to draw a little longer."

All the others had melon-green covered bowls with golden designs of new Imperial kiln porcelain.

Having served tea, Miao-yu plucked at the lapels of Pao-chai' and Tai-yu's clothes and they went out with her, followed surreptitiously by Pao-yu. She invited the two girls into a side room, where Pao-chai sat on a couch and Tai-yu on Miao-yu's hassock, while the nun herself fanned the stove when the water boiled brewed some fresh tea. Pao-yu slipped in then and accused them teasingly:

So, you are having a treat here in secret!"

The three girls laughed.

"What are you doing here? There's nothing here for you."

Miao-yu was just looking for cups when an old nun came in bringing the used bowls,

"Don't put away that Cheng Hua bowl," cried Miao-yu hastily. "Leave it outside."

Pao-yu knew that because Granny Liu had used it, she thought it too dirty to keep. Then he saw Miao-yu produce two cups, one with a handle and the name in uncial character: Calabash Cup. In smaller character, it bore the inscriptions "Treasured by Wang Kai of the Tsin Dynasty and in the fourth month of the fifth year of the Yuan Feng Period of the Sung Dynasty, Su Shih of Meishan saw this cup in the Imperial Secretariat." Miao-yu filled this cup and handed it to Pao-chai. The other, shaped like a small alms-bowl, bore the name in the curly seal script: "Rhinceros Cup." Having filled this for Tai-yu, she offered Pao-yu the green jade beaker that she normally drank from herself.

"I thought that according to Buddhist law all men should be treated alike," said Pao-yu with a grin. "Why give me this vulgar object when they get such priceless antiques?"

"Vulgar object!" retorted Miao-yu. "I doubt if your family could produce anything half as good, and that's not boasting either."

"As people say, other countries, other ways, here with a person like you, gold, pearls, jade and jewels must all count as vulgar."

Very gratified by this remark, Miao-yu produced a huge goblet carved out of a whole bamboo root which was covered with knots and whorls.

"Here is the only other one I have," she said. "Can you manage such a large one?"

"Of course, I can!" declared Pao-yu delightedly.

"Even if you can, I've not so much tea to waste on you. Have you never heard the saying: first cup to taste, second to quench a fool's thirst, third to water an ox or donkey?" what would you be if you swallowed such an amount?

As the three others laughed, Miao-yu picked up the pot and pured the equivalent of one small cup into the goblet. Pao-yu tasted it carefully and could not praise its bland purity enough.

"you've your cousins to thank for this treat," observed Miao-yu primly. "If you'd come alone, I wouldn't have offered you tea."

"I'm well aware of that." Pao-yu chuckled. "so, I'll thank them instead of you."

"so, you should," said the nun.

"is this made with last year's rain-water too?" asked Tai-yu.

Miao-yu smiled disdainfully.

"Can you really be so vulgar as not even to tell the difference? This is snow I gathered from plum-blossom five years ago while staying in Curly Fragrance Nunnery on Mount Hsuanmu. I

managed to fill that whole dark blue porcelain pot, but it seemed too precious to us so I've kept it buried in the earth all these years, not opening it till this summer. Today is only the second time I've used it. Surely you can taste the difference? how could last year's rain-water be as light and pure as this?"

Tai-yu, know her eccentricity, did not like to say too much or stay too long. After finishing her tea, she signaled to Pao-chai and the two girls left, followed by Pao-yu. (Taken from A Dream of Red Mansions Chapter 41)

3. Modern Methods of Making Tea

If tea picking, tea making and tea boiling were conducted improperly it was called *tea sickness*.

The ancient Chinese drank tea in a way different from that of today. Tea

was first used as a kind of medicine, so the way to drink tea at that time was almost the same as the method to boil traditional Chinese medicine today. Before the Tang Dynasty the method for drinking tea was as follows: first, tea leaves were crushed to powder by *tea mill*,^[2] then add ointment and rice flour into it, thus the tea cake was made, then pound the tea cake to pieces and boil it together with onion, ginger, salt, tangerine peel, date and peppermint.

From the Yuan Dynasty the baked tea leaves were boiled directly without anything else, hence the method of making tea. Later the ancient Chinese got to know the appropriate time for drinking tea and the taboos of drinking tea. Feng Zhengqing of the Ming Dynasty put forward the twelve appropriations came, when one was and the seven taboos for drinking tea in his *On Tea* [3]. It was appropriate to drink tea in the following twelve cases: when one was free, when good friends came, when one was alone, when one read poems, when one wrote something, when one wandered about, when one awoke after taking a nap, when one got up in the morning, when offering sacrifices to gods or ancestors, when listening to Buddhism in Buddha hall, when one contemplated on something and when one appreciated something. The seven taboos for drinking tea were as the following: Not to drink it when the tea was not properly made; or when the drinking vessels were not clean, or when the drinkers were rude, or when one was at the party of official circles, or when the tea was mixed with something else, or when one was in a hurry or when the environment was not good.

The ancient people were increasingly particular about the art of drinking tea, so the requirement for tea culture was increasingly fastidious.

In ancient China the public place for drinking tea was called *chafang* or *chasi* meaning *teahouse*, where there were some calligraphy and paintings of eminent people. The waiter in the teahouse was called *tea doctor*. The private place for drinking tea was called *chaliao*.^[4]

The appliances used to boil and drink tea were called tea set. Those used to dry tea were called *chaqian* and those used to bake tea were called *chabei*. The utensil used to grind tea was called tea grinder. The stove used to boil tea was called tea stove; the utensil used to boil tea was called tea tripod. The appliance used to stir tea was called *chaxian*. the tea spoon was also a kind of utensil used to stir tea.

4. Conclusion

Growing tea and drinking tea does not mean that there is a tea culture. It is only a prerequisite for the formation of tea culture. It must also have the participation of literati and cultural connotation. The ancient Chinese paid attention to tea drinking utensils, drinking water and tea-making arts, and blended with philosophical ideas of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist, gradually brought people into their spiritual world, laying the foundation of Chinese tea culture. Tea leaves shine for the Chinese tea scene. Tea is the symbol of China and will be shining on the world stage.

References

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