

The Fourth Cup of Tea

Tea Drinking as a Ritual

In ancient China, the birthplace of tea, the processing of tea leaves and the methods for preparing tea evolved over the centuries.

"Just as preferences for different wine brands distinguish the ages and nationalities of Europe, tea ideals characterize the varying moods of Oriental culture. Tea cakes that were boiled, powdered tea that was whisked, and leaf tea that was steeped—all reflect the distinct emotional impulses of China's Tang, Song and Ming dynasties."

—Kakuzō Okakura, *The Book of Tea*

The earliest advice on proper tea preparation is found in the famous *Book of Tea* by Chinese scholar Lu Yu, dating back to the 9th century. At that time, pressed tea was used, and Lu Yu provided detailed instructions on how to prepare tea cakes, select water and monitor its temperature, choose appropriate utensils and avoid certain practices while enjoying tea.

Tea and Kung Fu

The patience and diligence at the heart of kung fu extend beyond martial arts, influencing all aspects of life, including the preparation and serving of tea. The tea ceremony that can still be experienced in China today dates back about 500 years, originating in the Fujian and Guangdong provinces, where oolong and pu-erh teas are popular. These teas are brewed multiple times using carefully pre-warmed tea ware. Traditionally, Yixing clay teapots with small cups or a porcelain gaiwan are used. Gaiwan is a lidded cup that retains the necessary temperature and strains tea leaves.

From Monastery to Palace

In the 12th century, monks returning to Japan from Buddhist monasteries in China introduced the tradition of powdered tea. For them, tea served both as a valuable medicine and an aid to enhance focus during meditation. Later, the imperial and shogunate courts embraced this tradition, hosting exclusive tea gatherings known as *chaji*. At these lavish events, a select few sipped rare, imported tea in luxurious halls, using exquisite tea ware. Esteemed guests would savour the tea, attempting to discern its origin through its aroma and flavour.

Tea and Zen

Perhaps as a reaction to the extravagant tea gatherings of Japan's elite, Zen-inspired tea ceremonies emerged in the 15th century. These ceremonies emphasized beauty in simplicity, silence, harmony and the purity of space. The basics of *chanoyu*, or "hot water for tea," were established by Japan's most renowned tea master, Sen no Rikyū, as follows:

"Make a delicious bowl of tea. Carefully place charcoal to heat the water. Arrange flowers as they appear in the field. Create a sense of coolness in summer, warmth in winter. Prepare everything ahead of time. Be ready for rain. And show consideration to everyone you meet."

—Sen no Rikyū (1521–1591), tea master and founder of wabi-cha, the "tea of subdued taste." *Wabi* embodies a core principle of Japanese culture and etiquette, finding joy in voluntary simplicity and calmly embracing life's inevitable flow.

Poetry of Movements over Words

The modern Japanese tea ceremony traces its origins to the traditions of China's Song dynasty, where powdered tea was prepared by whisking. In this ceremony, every movement and gesture carries deep meaning, embodying harmony, respect, purity, and tranquillity. Guests bow upon entering the tearoom—a sign of respect and humility mirrored in each action of the tea master. Harmony permeates not only the design of the tearoom and the preparation of tea but also the unspoken understanding between host and guest. Each tea gathering is a singular, unrepeatable moment.

"In my hands, I hold a bowl of tea. Within its green hue, all of nature is contained. As I close my eyes, I find green mountains and clear waters filling my heart. Alone, I drink, feeling the tea becoming a part of me. The most beautiful experience along the Way of Tea is the union of host and guest in this heartfelt moment, sharing a single bowl of tea."

—Soshitsu Sen XV, tea master of the Urasenke school