



Something You Don't Know About China's Tea Culture: A Case Study of *Honglouloumeng* Translated by David Hawkes

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Abstract

Tea is a favorable drink for most of the people in the world, but for Chinese people, it is more of a medicine and a magical thing. As the origin of tea, China has enjoyed a long history of drinking tea that helped to form its own unique tea culture. By exploring the tea culture revealed in ancient time through the examples taken from David Hawkes' version of *Honglouloumeng*, we came to discover that Chinese people take the drinking of tea to be a way of improving the health and even gaining an eternal life while offering tea to the dead one is a way to show one's sincerity, filial piety whereas offering tea as a gift to the living one is a way to symbolize friendship and marriage commitment. For most of the foreign readers, the above-mentioned medical, social and religious functions of tea in ancient China are seldom revealed to them.

Key words: Tea; Tea culture; *Honglouloumeng*; Medical function; Social function; Religious function

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the discovery of tea by Shennong about 5000 years ago, tea has always been the national drink in China.

Drinking tea in daily life has become an indispensable part of Chinese people. In the long history of growing, drinking tea, China has formed its own tea culture that is different from other tea-drinking countries. Nowadays, Chinese tea is not only a favorable drink both at home and abroad but also a symbol of Chinese culture.

In ancient time, ordinary people believe in drinking tea to keep good health and regard tea as a rite to entertain guests. Followers of Chinese Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism take drinking tea to be a way of self-cultivation. Therefore, in literary works, you will read about scholars discussing academic things over a cup of tea and literary men spending their time in a tea-house together. Rich or poor, educated or not, Chinese people favors drinking tea as a must in life. Therefore, research on Chinese tea culture will give the western readers a better understanding of Chinese culture.

As we all know, China boasts of four famous masterpieces in ancient Chinese literature. Among the four, *Honglouloumeng* is praised as a garden of Chinese culture. In the book, Cao Xueqin, the author, gives a vivid description of the costume, architecture, transportation, drinking, eating, and traditional Chinese herbal medicine in Qing dynasty. By exploring the tea culture revealed in the book, this paper aims at discovering something that western readers seldom know about.

1. THE MEDICAL FUNCTION OF TEA

Originally, tea was first acknowledged by people for its medical function. A legend in China says that tea is discovered by Shennong, one of the ancient three kings, who is also worshiped as the king of medicine. About 2700 years ago, Shennong always walked a long way to the deep mountains for the picking of traditional Chinese medicinal herbs. In order to experience and distinguish the function of each herbal medicine, he even risks his life to have a taste personally. One day, after tasting a piece of

poisonous grass, he felt his tongue become numb and his head dizzy. Leaning against a tree to rest, he happened to see the fall of some green fragrant leaves in the blowing wind. Then, he put two pieces of the leaves into his mouth and chewed. Out of his expectation, all the discomfort immediately disappeared. Out of curiosity, he took some home and gave it the name "tea" later. Similar record is found in *The book of Tea* (《茶经》), which says that Shennong starts the history of drinking tea. (《茶经》: “茶之为饮, 发乎神农氏.”) (G. S. Lin & X. F. Lin, 2011)

In Chapter 3 of *Honglouloumeng*, the author described the custom of Manchu people drinking tea after meals. The special part is that before the drinking of tea, tea is firstly used to rinse the mouth. Here goes the description told by Daiyu, who is one of leading female characters in the story:

When they had finished eating, a maid served each diner with tea on a little tray. Dai-yu's parents had brought their daughter up to believe that good health was founded on careful habits, and in pursuance of this principle, had always insisted that ***after a meal one should allow a certain interval to elapse before taking tea in order to avoid indigestion.*** However, she could see that many of the rules in this household were different from the ones she had been used to at home; so, being anxious to conform as much as possible, she accepted the tea. But as she did so, another maid preferred a spittoon, from which ***she inferred that the tea was for rinsing her mouth with. And it was not, in fact, until they had all rinsed out their mouths and washed their hands that another lot of tea was served, this time for drinking*** (Hawkes, 1973-1986, p.30.)

From the above description, we can see that Manchu people are accustomed to drink tea after meal for the purpose of rinsing teeth while Dai-yu believes in drinking tea after meal some time later is good for improving digestion. In the time when the author lived, toothpaste has not been invented yet. For the cleaning of tooth, rich people will use salt to wipe their teeth. However, salt is much more expensive at that time. Comparably, tea is a good and practical way to clean the tooth. The medical function of using tea to rinse mouth lies in two aspects: first, tea can rinse off the food residue in the mouth and drive away the bad smell; second, the fluorin contained in tea is quite effective in preventing the decay of tooth for the reason that it can promote the mineralization of tooth. In addition, the tea polyphenol has a function of scavenging free radicals which can inhibit the growth of streptococcus mutants and decrease the chance of getting decayed tooth.

According to the modern scientific study, the 3%-5% caffeine contained in tea has the function of refreshing, improving digestion, diuresis and discharging poison. Therefore, people believe that drinking tea late at night will make you stay awake whereas drinking tea after

meal is a good way to help digestion. It is common to see people drinking tea after the meal for better digestion but it is no common to see people eating rice in tea soup. In *Honglouloumeng*, eating rice in tea soup is one of Jia Baoyu's favorite diet habit, who is one of the leading male character in the story. In chapter 49, there is a description about Baoyu's eating of the rice in tea soup. It goes like the following:

The other cousins joined them shortly after. ***Bao-yu kept telling everyone how hungry he felt*** and grumbling because the servants were so long in serving. When the food at last arrived, the first dish to be put on the table was ***unborn lamb stewed in milk.***

"That's a health food," said Grandmother Jia. "It's for old folk like me. I'm afraid you young people couldn't eat it. It's a creature that's never seen the light. There's some ***fresh venison*** today, though. Why don't you wait and have some of that?"

The others agreed to wait, but Bao-yu professed himself unable to hold out, and helping himself to a bowl of plain boiled rice, poured a little tea over it and shovelled it straight from the bowl into his mouth with one or two collops of pickled pheasant-meat to help it down.

"I know you've got something on today," said Grandmother Jia. "That's why you've no time to eat properly." She turned to the servants. "Save some of the venison for them to eat in the evening." (Hawkes, 1973-1986, p.526)

From the above, we can see that compared with the unborn lamb stewed in milk and fesh venison, rice in tea soup is a better choice for Bao-yu to satisfy his hunger. By Grandmother Jia's words that she knew Bao-yu had got something on today, we can also infer that rice in tea soup is Manchu people's favorite food that can be eaten quickly in times of hurry. In one word, rice in tea soup is China's fast food in Qing Dynasty. Then, from the following description in Chapter 62, we can get to know the digestion function of rice in tea soup:

They had been walking back to the summerhouse throughout these exchanges and were now re-entering it. Aunt Xue had come back again for the meal, so they reseated themselves in order of seniority with Aunt Xue at the head. ***Bao-yu poured a little tea onto some rice and merely pretended to share the meal with them. When they had finished eating, they sat talking over their tea or playing game*** (Hawkes, 1973-1986, p.666),

Before sharing the meal with Aunt Xue, Bao-yu had already helped himself to a pine-kernel roll and a bowl with some rice and shrim-balls in chicken-skin soup brought by a woman arrived from Cook Liu. Therefore, Bao-yu was not hungry at that point of time. For the sake of being polite, Baoyu poured a little tea onto some rice and pretended to be eating together with others. From the above, we can see that rice in tea soup is supposed to be easily digested otherwise Bao-yu's stomach will suffer.

On the other hand, we can also tell that Bao-yu was quite fond of rice in tea soup.

Eating rice in tea soup has been a tradition in Jinling where Baoyu was born. Jinling is the ancient name of Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu Province. It's recorded in the ancient food of *Chinese Cooking Books* that a woman cook named Dong Xiaowan (A.D. 1624-1651) favors eating rice in tea soup, which is a tradition in Nanjing that can be traced back to Six Dynasties period (A.D. 229-589). (《中国烹调大全·古食珍选录》：“冒妾董小宛精于烹饪，性淡泊，对于甘肥之物质无一所好，每次吃饭，均以一小壶茶，温淘饭，此为古南京人之食俗，六朝时已有。”) (Huang, 2009) The readers may wonder why such a man rich as Bao-yu likes to eat the meager food that poor families can afford. The reason lies in three aspects: First, the taste of rice in tea soup is quite refreshing and easy to digest; second, it helps to soften the blood-fat blood vessels, reduce blood fat and prevent the happening of cardiovascular disease; third, the gallic acid of tea is effective in the prevention of stroke and its TP works better for the prevention of digestive tract tumor. In Japan, rice in tea soup is called as “the food of warrior” for the reason that it can ease the hunger and get people refreshed in a very short time. Nowadays, rice in tea soup is a homely dish that is favored for its function of alleviating hangover, improving digestion and nourishing stomach. In a word, tea has a very strong medical function.

From the above-mentioned habit of rinsing mouth with tea and eating rice in tea soup of the leading characters in *Honglouloumeng*, it is safe to say that tea is not only served as a drink but also works as herbal medicine.

2. THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF TEA

Apart from the medical function, tea also plays an important role in the society. In daily life, tea is served to entertain guests and presented as a gift as well. However, tea is not only regarded as a token of friendship and respect but also a betrothal present in ancient China. It's recorded that Princess Wencheng had carried tea to ancient Tibet as her betrothal gift in A.D. 640 of Tang Dynasty. Ever since that, tea had become an indispensable part of betrothal gift especially in Tang dynasty and Song dynasty. When it comes to Qing dynasty, some families still follow the tradition. According to the wedding custom at that time, a rite of “三茶” (serving tea for three times) must be followed. To be specific, firstly, a woman must serve tea with sugar to the matchmaker for expressing her thanks about the proposal, which is called as “下茶”; then, a woman must serve green tea to the man she liked during the date and the man leave some money or valuable things as a token of engagement, which is called as “定茶”; lastly, the future man and wife must drink tea with red dates, peanuts and the laurel blossoms for wishing the coming of a baby after the wedding ceremony, which is called as “合茶”.

In *Honglouloumeng*, there are also some descriptions about the custom of Manchu people treating tea as betrothal gift. In chapter 15, Bao-yu and Qin Zhong asked Sapiaientia, a nun in Water-moon Priory, to pour tea and teased her as the following:

Qin Zhong and Bao-yu were amusing themselves in the main hall of the priory when Sapiaientia happened to pass through.

“Here's Sappy,” said Bao-yu with a meaningful smile.

“Well, what about it?” said Qin Zhong.

“Now, now, stop play-acting!” said Bao-yu. “I saw you holding her that day at Grandma's when you thought nobody else was about. You needn't think you can fool me after that!”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“All right then. Never mind whether you know what I'm talking about or not. **Just ask her to pour me out a cup of tea, will you, and then we'll let the subject drop.**”

“What sort of joke is this? **Why can't you ask her yourself? She'd pour it out just the same for you. Why ask me to tell her?**”

“**I couldn't do it with the same feeling as you. There'll be much more feeling in it if you ask her.**”

He finally prevailed upon Qin Zhong to make the request.

“**Oh, all right! - Sappy, pours us a cup of tea, will be you?**”

.....omitted

Sapiaientia hurried out and returned with a cup of tea.

“Give it to me, Sappy!” said Qin Zhong.

“No, give it to me, Sappy I” said Bao-yu.

She stood between them, pouting prettily, and gave a little laugh:

“**Surely you're not going to fight over a cup of tea? I must have honey on my hands I**”

Bao-yu snatched the cup before Qin Zhong could do so and began (Hawkes, 1973-1986, p.140).

In the above-mentioned dialogue we can see that Bao-yu has discovered Qin Zhong's feelings for Sappy and he wanted Qin Zhong to admit that. In order to prove his words, he asked Sappy to pour a cup of tea. Pouring a cup of tea for guest is an ordinary way to entertain guests but for a young girl to pour a cup of tea for a young man is regarded as a way of expressing one's liking for the other. This custom has something to do with the betrothal rite in Qing Dynasty. That's the reason why Bao-yu teased Sapiaientia for pouring a cup of tea for Qin Zhong, the boy that she had fallen in love with. The following is another vivid example to prove this custom. In chapter 25, Bao-yu had stopped going out of doors because of the injury to his face and Dai-yu spend a good deal of time in his apartment talking to him. One morning after lunch, she drifted out into the garden after being bored by reading:

Almost without thinking where she was going, she made her way to the House of Green Delights. A group of maids had fetched some water from the well and were

watching the white-eyes in the gallery giving themselves a bath. A sound of laughter came from inside the house. Li Wan, Xi-feng and Bao-chai were there already. Their friendly laughter greeted Dai-yu as she entered:

"Another one! Come in! Come in!"

"What is this?" said Dai-yu, joining in the good humour. "A party?"

"I sent someone round to you the other day with two caddies-full of tea," said Xi-feng, "but you were out."

"Yes," said Dai-yu. "I'm sorry: I forgot to thank you."

.....omitted

"If you really like it," said Bao-yu, "you're welcome to have mine."

"I've still got quite a bit left," said Xi-feng. "If you really like it, you can have it all."

"Thank you very much," said Dai-yu. "I'll send someone rounds to fetch it."

"No, don't do that," said Xi-feng. "I'll send it rounds to you. There's something I want you to do for me. The person I send round about it can bring the tea as well."

Dai-yu laughed mockingly:

"Do you hear that, everybody? Because she's given me a hit of her old tea, I have to start doing odd jobs for her."

"That's fair enough," said Xi-feng. You know the rule:

"drink the family's tea, the family's bride-to-be".

Everyone laughed at this except Dai-yu, who turned her head away, blushing furiously, and said nothing.

.....omitted

Xi-feng laughed:

"What's so irritating about it? Look at him!"—She pointed at Bao-yu — **"Isn't he good enough for you? Good looks, good family, good income. There are no snags that I can see. It's a perfect match!"**

Dai-yu rose and fled. (Hawkes, 1973-1986, p.252-253)

From the dialogue above-mentioned, we can see that it's a custom to give guests or friends some tea as a gift, but under certain circumstances, the acceptance of tea will be regarded as a commitment to marriage. Therefore, Xi-feng amused Dai-yu's acceptance of her tea as a symbol of wanting to be the family's bride-to-be. During the time when Daiyu lived, a woman drinks the tea of the man's family is an action of accepting the proposal, which is called as "吃茶". And, the gift of engagement is called as "茶金" whereas the betrothal gift from the bridegroom's family to the bride's family is called as "茶礼". Therefore, whether it is a man or woman, drinking tea takes on a different connotation when it comes to the topic of marriage. That's why Xi-feng teased about Dai-yu for eating the tea of Jia family as a token of agreement to marry with Bao-yu. On hearing these teasing words, Dai-yu blushed for her feeling toward Bao-yu being discovered by others.

Then, why Chinese people prefer tea to be a token of love and marriage? It has something to do with

the symbolic meaning of tea. For a long time, tea is worshiped as a sacred magic grass. Tea grows in high mountains and presets a noble character. It is believed that tea absorbs the essence of sun and moon, sending out a fragrant smell. These characteristics of tea resemble ancient Chinese woman's purity and dignity. Therefore, women are compared to be tea. By the description given in *Honglougong*, these noble girls are not just beauties but also good tea makers. For different kinds of tea, they have different symbolic meaning and stand for different types of woman. It is said that green tea, simple and light, stands for scholastic woman; black tea, mild and reserved, is regarded as rather ladylike woman; Oolong tea, warm and persistent, resembles to perseverant woman; dark tea, with its lingering aftertaste, symbolizes wise old woman, and so on and so forth.

From the above, we can see that tea is not only a drink, a medicine for Chinese people but also a symbol of love and marriage. In a word, drinking tea began to take on a spiritual dimension, containing deep cultural meanings.

3. THE RELIGIOUS FUNCTION OF TEA

Buddhism and especially Taoism also played an indispensable role in the spreading of tea. Buddhists liked tea because it prevented dreariness and languor while Taoists believed that tea helped people to stay young and to be immortal. In ancient time, Taoists even store tea in brick or cake form. When they wanted to make tea, they ground the cakes into powder and put this, along with other condiments, into hot water. Therefore, the discoverer of tea, "Shennong", is worshiped as the God of Agriculture by Taoists. Owing to the medical function of curing illness and religious function of becoming immortal, tea is regarded as magical medicine by Taoists. As time goes on, tea is not only a must for Taoists in daily life but also a sacrifice in worship ceremony.

The history of using tea as sacrifice can date back to the North and South Period of China. It's said that Emperor Wudi of South Qi left a posthumous edict that in his worship ceremony, no animals are to be sacrificed but fruits, cake, tea, cooked rice and wine. Then, such a tradition is passed down from generation to generation. When it comes to the Qing dynasty, the story goes like this, "The mother of the minister both in charge of Revenue and Military died and was worshiped by the mandate of the Emperor. Then, the other highly ranked officials granted tea and wine for further grace." (萧奭《永宪录》中就有记载：户部尚书兼兵部尚书蒋廷锡生母曹氏卒，诏予祭卹，追封一品太夫人。上谕大学士张廷玉、散秩大臣都统佛伦等赐祭茶酒，加恩谕祭二次。) (Hu, 1994) Therefore, the practice of offering tea as a sacrifice is followed by the emperor as well as the ordinary people. In *Honglougong*, there are also some descriptions about using tea as a sacrifice. In Chapter 14,

when Xi-feng was put in charge of holding Qing Ke-qin's funeral, she gave the following order to the servants:

These forty. Again, two shifts. Your job is to look after the shrine: lighting fresh joss-sticks, keeping the lamps in oil, changing the drapes. **You will also take turns by the spirit tablet, making offerings of rice and tea, kotowing when the visitors kotow, wailing when they wail.** That is your job and nothing else besides (Hawkes, 1973-1986, p.128).

From the order given by Xi-feng, we can see that it's a custom to offer rice and tea to the dead one at the funeral. As for the reason why Chinese people favor tea as a sacrifice for dead people, it mainly lies in two aspects: First, Chinese people believe that a person's soul still live in another world even if the body is dead, therefore, tea remains to be an indispensable drink in daily life; second, Chinese people regard tea as pure thing that can absorb smell and keep the air fresh, thus, it is good for the preserve of dead body and the maintain of good environment. Similar practice can also be found in Chapter 58 when Bao-yu tried to persuade Nenuphar into not burning paper stuff for Pivoine who had just died, he said the following words to Parfume:

Tell her never, never to use that paper stuff again. "Spirit money" is a superstitious invention of modern times: You'll find nothing about it in the teachings of Confucius.You see that burner on the table over there? Whenever I want to remember someone dear to me - it doesn't necessarily have to be on a feast-day or any particular day, by the way - **I light some incense in it and put out a cup of fresh tea or water, or sometimes some flowers or fruit if I have any. You can even use "unclean foods"- as long as they're devoutly offered: That's the important thing. Tell her not to go burning that paper stuff any more** (Hawkes, 1973-1986, p.632).

From Bao-yu's words, we can see that burning paper money for the dead is disapproved by Bao-yu, which is also going against Confucius teachings. On the other hand, he advocates a cup of fresh tea, water, flower and other ordinary things as offerings as long as it is devoutly offered.

The above-mentioned two examples are living proof of tea offered as sacrifice for the dead one. In ancient time, there are three forms of offering tea as sacrifice: First, pouring tea into a tea cup or tea bowl; second, offering dried tea only; third, presenting tea bowls or teapot without tea as a symbol. As time goes to Ming dynasty, the burning of tea leaves for the worship of ancestors is practiced by the royal court. Mostly, the best tea leaves are selected for the burning, which is regarded as an expression of one's sincerity. Such a practice is also followed by the Jia family. In Chapter 53 of *Honglouloumeng*, the sacrifice to the ancestor's temple on New Year's Eve is described as the following:

By ancient custom the menfolk were divided in ranks to leave and right of the hall so that each generation was

on a different side from the one which followed it, fathers and sons separated, grandfathers and grandsons together. Jia Jing presided over the sacrifice with Jia She acting as his assistant; **Cousin Then held the drink-offering**; Jia Lian and Jia Cong the silk-offering; Bao-yu carried the incense; Jia Chang and Jia Ling unrolled the kneeling-mat in front of the great incense-burner. Then the black-coated musicians struck up and the ceremony began: **The threefold offering of the Cup, the standings, kneeling and prostrations, the burning of the silk-offering, the libation—every movement precisely in time to the solemn strains of the music** (Hawkes, 1973-1986, p.578).

From Jia family's sacrifice to the ancestor's temple, we can see that silk, incense, tea and wine drinks are offered. At the beginning of the ceremony, tea was offered for thrice. It's said that if the dead one favors drinking of tea when he is alive, then the offering of tea would be a big comfort for him.

In a word, the belief of drinking tea to be immortal, offering tea to the dead one and one's ancestors imply the religious function of tea played in Chinese people's daily life. Therefore, tea is closely tied to Chinese people not only for its physical function but also its spiritual function.

CONCLUSION

The history of tea in China is a long and complicated story. By the above-mentioned examples taken from David Hawkes' version of *Honglouloumeng*, we discovered something that is unique about China's tea culture. From the tea drinking habit of Chinese people in ancient time, we come to know the medical function of tea in preventing the decay of tooth, helping the digestion and curing of a variety of ailments; from the giving of tea as a gift, we come to know the social function of tea in bringing in a happy marriage; and from the offering of tea as sacrifice, we come to know the religious function of tea in memorizing the dead one and enjoying eternal life. To summarize, tea is not only a drink and a medicine in Chinese people's daily life, but also a magical thing that will make people immortal, to comfort the dead one.

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