

An Analysis of the Social Functions of the Tea-Drinking Custom in Southwest China During Tang-Song Dynasties

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Abstract

Tang-Song dynasties are an important period in the formation of the Chinese tea custom and culture. During this period of time, immensely flourishing culture and arts, integrated with the tea-drinking custom, gave birth to a tea culture that had distinct characteristics of Tang and Song dynasties. The history of tea-drinking in the southwest region, the first tea-drinking region in China, can be traced back to the pre-Qin period. Influenced by the tea culture of Tang-Song dynasties, the tea-drinking custom in the southwest region carried out many social functions. This essay offers an analysis of the cultural factors inherent in the tea-drinking custom in the southwest region, starting with an examination of its social function.

Key words: Tang-Song dynasties; Tea-drinking; Function

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous ethnic groups share China's vast lands. Due to their differences in geographic environment, history and culture, as well as ways of life, these ethnic groups have different tea-drinking customs. During Tang-Song dynasties, the tea-drinking custom in the southwest region had its own unique characteristics and relatively mature

social functions. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the social functions of the tea-drinking custom in Southwest China during Tang-Song dynasties and analyze the embedded cultural factors, adding new content to the burgeoning tea culture in contemporary China.

1. A MEDIUM OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

In traditional Chinese culture, reciprocal courtesy is customary practice prescribed by propriety. According to the *Book of Rites, Record of the Dykes*, "the rules of propriety recognize these feelings of men and lay down definite regulations for them, to serve as dykes for the people"; that is, "propriety" is social norms created in accordance with human feelings. During Tang-Song dynasties, the tea-drinking custom was quite popular. In the process of tea-drinking, a set of corresponding etiquettes were formed. Liu Zhenliang of Tang Dynasty noted the "ten virtues" of tea; that is, "tea can be used to alleviate depression, disperse drowsiness, boost vitality, ward off illness, cultivate courtesy and benevolence, show respect, delight people with rich flavor, nourish the body, practice Taoism, and solidify aspiration" (Zhuang, 1988, p.23). Thus, apparently, Liu Zhenliang has elevated "tea" in its material sense to "tea" as etiquette; the functions and nature of tea have changed accordingly. Huang Shang of Song dynasty stated that "tea is something that is capable of warding off illness and dispersing drowsiness. It can be offered to guests to express love and respect. Tea should be an integral part of life for all people...it is not specific to any human feelings but is manifestation of propriety in general."¹ Thus, it can be inferred that tea is a bond between the host and the guest; it is an instantiation of Chinese

¹ Huang, S. (Song). Tea customs. In *The Collection of Yanshan*, Vol. 46.

etiquette. These characteristics made tea a medium for interpersonal communication, favored by people from all walks of life in Tang-Song dynasties.

1.1 Serving Tea to Guests

The custom of serving tea to guests originated in Tsin dynasty. During Eastern Tsin dynasty, Lu Na, the prefecture chief of Wuxing, welcomed guests with nothing but tea and pastry. But before Tang-Song dynasties, tea-drinking was not yet a national custom, and serving tea to guests was popular only in some regions and social classes. It was not until Tang-Song dynasties that serving tea to guests became a fashionable means of social interaction. Zhu Yu of Song dynasty in his *Anecdotes of Pingzhou* noted that “when tea appeared in Tang dynasty, it tasted bitter at first and then turned sweet. Tea picked late was called Ming. Nowadays when guests come, they would take a sip of tea. ...Serving tea to guests has become common practice everywhere.” (Zhu, 2007, p.85). During Tang-Song dynasties, the custom of serving tea to guests in the southwest region among members of different social classes displayed different characteristics. The scholar-officials were very meticulous about the quality of tea and the atmosphere of tea-drinking. Li Deyu, once appointed the military governor of Xichuan, was very fond of famous tea in Szechuan. As described in a poem of his titled “*Tea Sent by an Old Friend*”, “To the south of Jiange (note: part of Szechuan) is where Jiuhuaying (note: A kind of Szechuan tea) grows; sealed in an envelope and sent to Yujing. Upon opening the envelope under a crescent moon, I was grinding this Szechuan tea, enjoying the sound of rippling spring. I invited a monk friend over to brew the tea in a bamboo forest; together we recited poems in a spirit of sharing.”² Apparently, this anecdotal poem about Li Deyu inviting a friend to share “Jiuhuaying” tea with him in a bamboo forest depicted the custom of serving tea to guests practiced among scholar-officials in Tang dynasty. During Song dynasty, scholar-officials in the southwest region inherited this custom from their predecessors. Su Zhe brew tea outdoors for his guests in a small pavilion, which was described in a poem titled “Using the Rhyme Sequence of the Poem by Han Zongbi, a Government Official Hosting Sacrifice Ceremonies, on Sending Me off to a Tour of Mount Tai”. “[...] looking back on the mundane world where I enjoyed my readings, I brew tea and asked my guest to stay with me in this quiet pavilion...” (Peking University Ancient Chinese, para.3, 1991, Vol. 852, p.9883). It is not hard to see that during Tang-Song dynasties, drinking tea with guests in a quiet environment such as a bamboo forest or a pavilion was a refined fashion pursued by the social class of scholar-officials.

“Tea flourished with Zen Buddhism; Tea and Zen Buddhism are in seamless fusion.” The custom of tea-

drinking is intricately intertwined with Buddhism. During Tang-Song dynasties, Buddhists practiced a standardized ritual of serving tea to guests. First, a Buddhist monk well versed in the art of tea-making would “make the tea”. Then another monk would pass the tea out to guests, which was called “offering the tea”. Guests would then take the tea cup offered to them and open the lid, observe the color of the tea, smell its fragrance, and then taste its flavor and make a comment. Further, some eminent monks had their own unique way of tea-serving. The scene of monks serving tea to their guests was depicted in Liu Yuxi’s poems. In “Tasting Tea at Lanruo Temple on the West Mountain”, he wrote,

on the mountain behind the temple, tea trees grow. Across from
bamboo trees, new sprouts of tea bloom in the spring...Tips of
fresh leaves not yet unfolded, to be brewed soon after picked.
Such wonderful taste can only be enjoyed in tranquility, says the
monk, and by guests deserving to be well served...³

Monks served to their guests brewed tea made from freshly picked tea leaves, which reflected a refined taste in tea-drinking. The tea-drinking ritual of monks in Song dynasty is comparable to that of Tang Dynasty. When he was serving his terms as an official in Szechuan, in a poem titled “*Writing on Joy*”, Lu You recorded in writing how the monks welcomed him with the tea-serving ritual: “[...] this recollection of calling the monks, to brew tea for me and serve me pastries” (Peking University Ancient Chinese, para.3, 1991, Vol. 2172, p.24682). The monks served tea with pastry, which showed hospitality as well as compliance with the taboos and commandments of Buddhism.

Taoism also has a long-term relationship with tea. Under the deep influence of the Taoist tenet of “tranquility and non-action”, Taoist priests served tea to guests in a unique manner. In the poem “*Seeing*”, Li Shangyin wrote, “brewing tea in a small Ding (note: A traditional cooking vessel used in ancient China), facing the pond with a zigzagging bank, sits a Taoist priest with a white beard, playing chess with me by the bamboo forest...”⁴ The Taoist priest described in the poem was brewing tea and playing chess with the poet by a pond surrounded by bamboo forests, which demonstrated the elegant and unusually refined style of Taoism. Serving tea to guests remained popular among Taoist priests in Song dynasty. Fan Zhen’s poems were a written record of this practice. In his “*Jinlian Spring*”, he wrote, “the Taoist priests chiseled a river channel ardently, allowing Jinlian spring to come through. The spring water they used for tea-brewing, remained cold and clear, following the path of the bamboo.” (Peking University Ancient Chinese, para. 3, 1991, Vol. 345, p.4259). The Taoist priests in the poem used clear and cold water to brew tea for the poet deep in the quiet and secluded bamboo forest, which

² Cao, Y. (Qing). *A Complete Collection of Tang Poems*, Vol.475.

³ Ibid. Vol.356.

⁴ Ibid. Vol.540.

is manifestation of the Taoist reverence for nature and inclination toward living in seclusion.

The social class of common folk was the main group of tea drinkers in Tang-Song dynasties. Their way of serving tea to guests was simple yet refreshing. In *"The Thatched Hut of Hermit Si"*, Du Fu wrote, "by the thatched hut of Mister Si, we wrote new poems. Laying a bamboo mat in the secluded woods, he detained me with tea and fruits..."⁵ For the common folk, welcoming a guest with tea and fruit showed not only hospitality of the host but also respect for the guest. This custom among the common folk in the southwest region gained even more popularity in Song dynasty. Tang Geng's poems such as *"The Miscellaneous"* provided a snapshot: "tea came with visitors from the East, medicine was shipped here by merchants to Guangzhou" (Peking University Ancient Chinese, para.3, 1991, Vol. 3483, p.41473). The fact that welcoming guests with tea became a custom among the common folk in Tang-Song dynasties in the southwest region suggested that serving tea to guests was well incorporated into the daily lives of the common folk.

1.2 Using Tea to Make Friends

Tea-drinking is a popular leisure activity. Tea parties have come a refined and sophisticated trend among the literati. During Tang-Song dynasties, scholar-officials, Buddhist monks, and Taoist priests often hosted tea parties for socializing purposes. Yan Zhenqin, a calligrapher in Tang dynasty, often held tea parties for the literati to recite poems and wrote poetic verses when he was serving his term as the prefectural governor of Huzhou. At one of his tea parties, the poets collectively wrote a poem titled *"A Five-Character Octave on Drinking Tea Under the Moonlight"*: sitting with guests and watching tea leaves forming flower-shaped patterns in the tea cup, let us express our feelings by drinking not wine but tea (by Lu Shixiu); sobering up after drinking tea, the monk would rather meditate in isolation (by Zhang Jian); drinking tea and reciting poems with beloved friends, we appreciate the beauty of a moonlit night—no need to fly to the moon or grow fancy plants in the yard (by Li E); the moonlight sheds on the tea cup, refreshing our mind; tea increases the blood flow throughout the body, purifying our spirit (by Yan Zhenqing); not as intoxicating as spring wine, tea is worthy of the effort of leave-picking from green, bushy trees (by Jiao Ran); the aroma of tea came out of the white porcelain cup, spreading out all over the quiet yard (by Lu Shixiu).⁶ As portrayed in the poem, Yan Zhenqing invited friends to come over on a moonlit night, drinking tea and reciting poems, which were an instantiation of the refined trend of idle conversations among the literati. The trend continued and gained even more popularity in Song dynasty. Tea parties, which originated in Tang dynasty,

were venerated in Song dynasty; they were widely popular among the common folk. As noted by Fang Hui in *"The Prelude to 'On Huizhen Taoist Church'"*,

Yuan Yaolong, Shi Dexiu, and Yuan Shunlong from Meishan, along with Mou Rong from Anyue, Wang Shenlu from Zitong, as well as Jin Jiuding and Fanghui from Gushe visited the Taoist priest Jing Yuxian in Fuling. The nine of us drank tea together. "Eight guests seated with one Taoist priest, the nine of us drank tea together, raising our cups of tea to the wind..." (Peking University Ancient Chinese, para.3, 1991, Vol. 1991, p.15008).

It can infer that the Taoist priests' practice of inviting the literati to attend a poem-reciting tea party in Song dynasty was an indication of their shared taste in tea-drinking. Tea is in essence an object of purity, well aligned with the purifying commandments of Buddhism and Taoism. The literati would see the true meaning of life in the plain, mild nature of tea. Hence, it is no surprise that the literati, Buddhist monks, and Taoist priests would host tea parties for one another and attend tea parties hosted by one another.

1.3 Presenting Tea Leaves as a Gift

During Tang-Song dynasties, presenting tea leaves as a gift to friends became a means of social interaction. The literati loved tea; sending tea leaves to friends as a gift was a customary practice for them. Bai Juyi was a prototypical representative of his tea-loving peers in Tang dynasty. Of all tea-related poems included in *A Complete Collection of Tang Poems*, 47 of the poems written by Bai Juyi were related to tea. In these poems, he frequently mentioned receiving Szechuan tea from friends. "Upon receiving the surprisingly fresh tea leaves from Szechuan, such a precious gift, I used water from Wei River to brew it..." (excerpt of *"Fresh Szechuan Tea Leaves Sent by Ministry Councilor Xiao"*).⁷ "[...] you sent tea to me out of all people; this is because I am good at distinguishing different varieties of tea" (excerpt of *"Gratitude to Assistant Minister Li Liu for Sending Me New Tea from Szechuan"*).⁸ These poems suggested that Bai Juyi's friends often sent him Szechuan tea as they knew that he was an avid tea lover. The custom of presenting tea leaves as a gift became even more popular in Song dynasty. Su Shi gave tea to the Buddhist hermit Bao: "[...] thirty leaves of Jian tea, their flavor yet to be tasted. Presenting them to the Buddhist hermit Bao, for him to disperse drowsiness in his meditation abode" (excerpt of *"To Mister Bao Anjing"*) (Peking University Ancient Chinese, para.3, 1991, Vol. 830, p.9603). Apparently, Su Shi offered tea as a gift to his friend in order to help him dispel drowsiness during Zen meditation. He sent only 30 leaves of Jian tea, which was indicative of the rarity and preciousness of this variety of tea. Buddhist monks also followed the custom

⁵ Ibid. Vol.224.

⁶ Ibid. Vol.788.

⁷ Ibid. Vol.437.

⁸ Ibid. Vol.439.

of presenting tea as a gift. Shi Baotan, a Buddhist monk from Szechuan, sent tea to eunuch Chen:

On the infertile lands of Mount Lu, plants are hard to grow.
Messengers of spring, birds chirping in the whispering breeze.
With little embellishment, the beauty of the snow-capped top
of the mountain is not appreciated. The tea from the mountain
tastes bitter at the first sip, just like protestations, hard to take.
Picked from tea trees growing on top of the mountain, where the
cloudy sky meets the earth, these leaves are rare and precious.
Just like the meat of precious animals does not appease hunger,
drinking such costly tea does not quench thirst. Sitting by the
window in a chilly afternoon, listening to the sighing winds in
the pines. Lipping open the packet of tea leaves, you will find
the best medicine. Drink this bitter yet remedial tea for me, and
farewell to other varieties of sweet tea. (excerpt of “*Sending Tea
from Mount Lu to Eunuch Chen as a Gift*”) (Peking University
Ancient Chinese, para.3, 1991, Vol. 2360, p.27089)

It is not hard to see that Shi Baotan believed in the remedial function of tea from Mount Lu, so he sent it as a gift to eunuch Chen, out of love of his friend and as a way to maintain their friendship.

Drawing upon these historical records, we may conclude that in the southwest region during Tang-Song dynasties, people viewed the act of serving tea to guests as a fundamental component of the tea-drinking custom, regardless of their identity or social status. Using tea to make friends and presenting tea leaves as a gift was quite popular in the cultural circle of scholar-officials, Buddhist monks and Taoist priests; whether these practices were popular among the common folk, however, remained inconclusive due to the lack of relevant historical records. What can be concluded here is that during Tang-Song dynasties in the southwest region, serving tea to guests, using tea to make friends, and presenting tea leaves as a gift to guests were instantiations of the tea-drinking custom and illustrated its social functions.

2. SACRIFICE OFFERED IN RELIGIOUS RITUALS

The religious culture is an integral component of traditional Chinese culture. Offering sacrifices are an important element in religious activities. As stated in *The Book of Documents* (also known as *Shangshu*), “offered as sacrifice, tea delivers messages about human affairs to the deities.” In ancient China, tea was believed to be a messenger leading the path to gods and spirits and was hence endowed with strong religious connotations. Wei Yingwu, a poet in Tang dynasty, wrote a poem titled “*Tea Growing in the Garden of Happiness*”: “clean and pure, tea cannot be tainted by filth and foul. When ingested, it alleviates all mundane worries. Growing on mountains and plains, this is truly a holy object.”⁹ This suggests that tea enjoyed a status of holiness in Tang dynasty; hence its natural integration with religion. Tea was

offered as sacrifice in religious rituals. During Tang-Song dynasties in the southwest region, the social function of the tea-drinking custom mainly manifested itself in two aspects: the worship of Buddha and sacrifice to the deceased.

2.1 The Worship of Buddha

Worshipping Buddha with tea became a sacred Buddhist rule in Tang-Song dynasties. Tea is believed to be a “holy object” in Buddhism. It is offered to Buddha first before it can be tasted by the Buddhist monk. A sketch of the custom of worshipping Buddha with tea in Buddhist temples was offered in the poems by Lyu Congqing, a poet in Tang dynasty. “[...] the elderly monk offered freshly brewed tea first to Buddha” (excerpt of “*A Tour of Duobao Temple*”) (Wang, 1982, p.238), which means that the monk offered tea to Buddha before he drank it himself, showing his reverence for Buddha. In “*Miscellaneous Notes of Yunxian*”, Feng Zhi further elaborated this ritual of worshipping Buddha with tea.

Zhi Chong of Juclin temple had a collection of tea in three varying degrees of quality: the low-quality xuan-cao-dai for himself, the mid-quality jing-lei-jia for guests, and the high-quality zi-rong-xiang for Buddha. In other words, he saved first-class tea for worshipping Buddha and third-class tea for himself to drink. (Feng, 1986, p.825)

The Buddhist monk Shi Chongxian from Szechuan in Song dynasty wrote a poem titled “*Offering Freshly Picked Tea Leaves*”: Lu Yu knows the power of nature, which produces the wonderful Qiangqi (note: a pattern formed by a specific variety of tea leaves when they are being brewed) tea. Saving some of the freshly picked leaves for Buddha to be used in a worship ceremony, to whom should I send the rest except for my poet friend?...” (Peking University Ancient Chinese, para.3, 1991, Vol. 148, p.1658). The monk in the poem offered the freshly picked tea leaves to Buddha first before he sent it the rest to his friend, demonstrating faithfulness to Buddha. As specified in *Sacred Buddhist Rules by Baizhang*, “to celebrate the birth of Buddha on April 8th, [the abbot of the temple] should lead a group of monks in a worshipping ceremony that involves careful preparation and serving of incense, flowers, candles, tea, pastry and other valuable offerings. Accordingly, April 8th was set as the day for picking the famous Gan Lu tea from the top of Mount Meng of Yazhou during Tang-Song dynasties. On this day, Buddhist monks from the 72 temples in Mingshan county of Yazhou would gather on the top of Mount Meng. They would start the ceremony by taking a bath and burning incense, in preparation of offering the “heavenly tea”. Then a well-respected prestigious abbot would bite a tea leaf and gargle. This process would be repeated 365 times until he could be allowed to climb up the mountain to pick tea leaves (Xu, 1995). Thus it can be inferred that during Tang-Song dynasties, the custom of worshipping Buddha with tea among monks in the southwest region shared

⁹ Ibid. Vol.193

much in common with similar customs in other regions, which suggest that this religious ritual is a universal form of the tea-drinking custom among Buddhists.

2.2 Sacrifices to the Deceased

The practice of using tea as sacrifice to the deceased has a long history. According to *Rites of Zhou, Official of Civil Affairs*, “[designated officials of tea-related affairs] are responsible for collecting tea leaves at specific times in preparation of funerals.” Offering sacrifices to the deceased is a way for the living to show their respect and mourning. It was believed in ancient China that humans, upon death, would enter another world in which they would continue to live in the same way as before. Selection of sacrifices reflected what the deceased favored when they were alive. If they liked to drink tea when they were alive, then they would remain tea lovers in the world of the dead. Thus the act of offering tea as sacrifice to the deceased, which started in Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern dynasties, became an important element of the tea-drinking custom. Emperor Wu of Liang Dynasty of the Southern dynasties mentioned the following in his ante-mortem statement: “Do not offer animal sacrifices to me. I would only take such offerings as pastry, tea, rice, wine and preserved meat. All my people should follow this custom regardless of their social status.” (Xiao, 1972, p.62) The custom of offering tea as sacrifice to the deceased remained in practice in the southwest region during Tang-Song dynasties. Du Fu offered tea to a deceased friend: “I offer, with respect, sweet wine, wine, tea, lotus root, water-shield (a kind of aquatic plant), and crucian (a kind of fish) as sacrifice to the deceased Prime Minister Mister Fang from Qinghe” (excerpt of “*Sacrifice to the Deceased Prime Minister Mister Fang from Qinghe*”) (Du, 2008, p.475). Apparently this deceased friend of Du Fu’s was a tea lover when he was alive; that’s why tea was included in the sacrifices offered to him. Tao Dian in Song dynasty offered tea as sacrifice to his deceased wife, as described in one of the eight poems titled “*Eight Poems of Mourning*”:

Burning long stems of incense, adding boiling water to milled tea leaves, this silent afternoon, I sat in dismay. Watching the crows flying across the sky, I thought of the beauty who had left. Nothing came from her ever since; even the flowers in the yard were mourning with me in the spring breeze. (Peking University Ancient Chinese, para.3, 1991, Vol. 908, p.10681)

The emphasis that Tao Dian placed on the act of “adding boiling water to milled tea leaves” had deep cultural connotations. Two methods of tea-making were popular in Song dynasty: “brewing tea in a kettle” and “adding boiling water to milled tea leaves in a tea cup”. The latter placed a higher demand on quality of tea leaves used and manner of drinking tea. Therefore, it was considered a more refined way of drinking tea, favored by the literati in Song dynasty. The fact that Tao Dian used this method to make tea offered to his deceased wife was indicative of

both her social status while alive and his deep mourning of her.

The religious activities described above the suggested that the act of worshipping Buddha with tea illustrated commonality between tea culture and the sacred codes and commandments of Buddhism; similarly, offering tea as sacrifice to the deceased was illustrative of their love of tea while alive. Thus, selection of sacrifices in religious rituals has profound connotations, with which the characteristics of tea are well aligned, making tea an ideal sacrifice in religious rituals.

3. CULTURAL FACTORS INHERENT IN THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE TEA-DRINKING CUSTOM

In Tang-Song dynasties, the social functions of the tea-drinking custom in the southwest region were closely related to traditional Chinese culture. In the evolution of Chinese culture, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism have made a deep impact on traditional Chinese culture. The social functions of the tea-drinking custom are reflections of traditional Chinese culture in the domain of tea culture. In essence they resulted from the combined influence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. “The tea-drinking custom has been historically intricately intertwined with Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, without all three of which tea culture would not have emerged. These three schools of thought in Chinese history have both each individually and collectively in an integrated manner impacted the tea culture. The Taoist perspective on nature, the Confucian perspective on life, and the Buddhist Zen talk laid the foundation for the Chinese culture in terms of style and form (Lai, 1999, p.1, 132).

3.1 The Influence of the Confucian Thought of the “Mean”

Confucianism has played a dominant role throughout the history of Chinese culture and has had the deepest and most lasting effects. Its core philosophies are reflected in the cardinal virtues of benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom and so forth and are grounded in “the mean” in particular, operating under the premise of reciprocity. As stated in *The Doctrine of the Mean*,

while there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in the state of Equilibrium. When those feelings have been stirred, and they act in their due degree, there ensues what may be called the state of Harmony. This Equilibrium is the great root from which grow all human actions in the world, and this harmony is the universal path which they all should pursue. Let the states of Equilibrium and Harmony exist in perfection, and a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish.

That is to say, when the heart is in its natural state, free from extreme expressions of various human emotions, there ensues the state of Equilibrium. When emotions are being expressed in a moderate manner with propriety, there ensues the state of Harmony. In Tang-Song dynasties, under the deep influence of Confucianism, the literati examined the functions of tea from different perspectives when participating in tea-related activities. Cai Wen of Tang dynasty noted in his *“Statement on Tea”* that “[tea] has an exquisite nature, a plain and pure taste, a function of alleviating depression, and a function of helping one reach the state of Harmony” (Cai, 2010, p.75). Emperor Hui of Song dynasty stated in his *“A Broad Discussion on Tea”* that

there is hardly anything comparable to tea...with the functions of cleansing one’s spirit and steering one toward the state of Harmony, functions unfamiliar to the uneducated and the young. Tea has such characteristics as a plain and simple flavor, a refined quality, and a sense of tranquility, none of which can be appreciated in panic or distress. (Zhao, 2010, p.124)

Thus, the characteristics of tea are consistent with the Confucian doctrine of the “mean”; tea is embodiment of Confucian ideas and emotions. The Confucian idea of “propriety”, integrated with the tea-drinking custom, resulted in the emergence of tea-related rituals. By incorporating “tea” into the culture of “propriety”, all three acts discussed previously—serving tea to guests, using tea to make friends, and presenting tea leaves as a gift—illustrated the instantiation of the Confucian culture in the tea-drinking custom through its social function.

3.2 The Influence of the Doctrines of Zen Buddhism

Tea-drinking among Buddhists promoted the popularization of the custom. According to Lai Ougong (1999, p.108),

For Zen Buddhists, the function of tea-drinking shifted from dispersing drowsiness and nourishing the body to steering one toward a quiet, worry-free state, and eventually taking one to the transcendental state of “self-understanding”. In Zen Buddhism, these three tiers of functions are being carried out almost simultaneously. Zen Buddhism unintentionally integrated two separate, distinct things, thereby adding new content to traditional Chinese culture, namely, the seamless fusion of tea and Zen.

Practicing Zen and meditating the doctrines of Buddhism require that the Buddhist monks should abandon all distracting thoughts and stay focused in order to enter the realm of “emptiness and tranquility”. Only by doing this can they each the state of ethereal peacefulness and forgetting all that there is. The simple, moderate, mind-purifying, and desire-quenching characteristics of tea share much in common with the principles of Zen Buddhism. Buddhist monks incorporated their styles of tea-drinking and the sacred rules and commandments of

Buddhism into the tea-drinking custom, forming a tea ritual with distinct Buddhist characteristics. Acting as liaison in the social hierarchy between different social classes, these monks had a wide social network. While maintaining close contact with the upper class, they also interacted frequently with the common folk. With such wide influence, they were able to easily spread out their tea ritual to every segment of society. Therefore, it can be said that the Buddhist tea ritual is one of the cultural origins from which the social functions of the tea-drinking custom developed.

3.3 The Influence of the Taoist Tenet of “Tranquility and Non-Action”

Taoism has had a centuries-old influence on traditional Chinese culture. Taoism is grounded in the basic belief and principle of “Tao”, proposed by Laozi; it centers on the pursuit of life in heaven through Tao (the path). Taoist priests conduct this pursuit by means of various Taoist magic arts and medicine for longevity (Ren, 1963, p.368). Having tried out a wide variety of medicines over a long period of time, Taoists discovered that tea seemed to be a good source of nourishment that could be taken frequently for years. Thus, tea became the drink for Taoists. The essence of the Taoist culture can be summarized as “tranquility”. For Taoists, “the heart is the master of the body and the teacher of all spirits. Following tranquility of the heart, there ensues wisdom. Following turbulence of the heart, there ensues imbecility.” Drinking tea can tranquilize the heart, dispel distracting thoughts, clear the mind, guide one toward reflection on life so as to eventually lead one to the state of “promoting and circulating Emptiness and Tranquility between heaven and earth and among all things”, as described by Zhuangzi, making one reflect on the relation between man and Tao. The plain, natural, and simple characteristics of tea are implicitly aligned with the Taoist tenet of “tranquility and non-action”. Thus, Taoists embraced and promoted tea-drinking. Based on the analysis of the tea-drinking custom in the southwest region during Tang-Song dynasties, it can be argued that the Taoist culture has impacted in varying degrees not only Taoists’ tea-drinking ritual but also the tea-drinking custom among the literati as well as the use of tea in religious sacrifices.

To sum up, the social functions of the tea-drinking custom in the southwest region during Tang-Song dynasties were mainly carried out in two ways: using tea as a medium for social interaction and as sacrifice in religious ceremonies. Any one of the social functions of the tea-drinking custom—is it serving tea to guests, using tea to make friends, presenting tea leaves as a gift or worshipping Buddha with tea and offering tea as sacrifice to the deceased—was the result of the combined influence of and interaction among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Of course, these three cultural traditions

influenced the social functions of the tea-drinking custom in different ways, prioritizing different elements. Confucianism placed much emphasis on the harmony and stability of the relationship between tea and society; Buddhism stressed the inner relation between tea and Zen Buddhism; Taoism paid more attention to the relationship between tea and “Tao”. Despite these differences, while adjusting the relationship between man and society, all three cultural traditions served their function of regulating the social behavior of people.

CONCLUSION

The social functions of the tea-drinking custom in Southwest China during Tang-Song dynasties have significant social connotations. Once this custom was endowed with social functions, the social attribute of tea superseded its natural attribute. In human interaction and communication, the formation of tea-related rituals carried out the functions of regulating human behavior, coordinating interpersonal relationships, and promote the harmonious development of society. When tea became sacrifice offered in religious ceremonies, tea rose above the material realm to the spiritual realm, which demonstrated a greater degree of maturity of its social functions. Tea bridged the gap between the mundane culture and the religious culture. In summary, the messages inherent in the social functions of the tea-drinking custom in the southwest region during Tang-Song dynasties were rooted in the interaction among the three cultural traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

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