



# A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and British Tea Cultures Base on Social Structure Differences and Mainstream Philosophy Influence

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**Abstract.** This paper adopts a comparative analysis method to compare the tea-drinking ceremonies, the aesthetics of tea tea and the purpose of tea drinking, and to understand the differences in tea culture between China and Britain after the spread of tea culture. In addition, based on the historical background of the development and tea culture in the two countries, the social structure and the philosophy of thought, the paper explores the differences between Chinese and British tea culture. From the analysis, the British tea culture is mainly influenced by the aristocrats, now still retains a lot of related aesthetic characteristics, and also reflects the spread of tea culture through the integration of local culture. China is the origin of tea culture with a diversity of characteristics, but at the same time also shows the unity, that has been affected by the philosophical thinking of Chinese Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, so the philosophy behind the tea ceremony is similar. Although tea culture spread from China to the UK, due to the differences in cultural development and social development between the two countries, tea culture was eventually localised as it developed in the UK. While traditional Chinese philosophy has always influenced the Chinese people, combined with the influence of regional culture, Chinese tea culture still retains more traditional and local characteristics. This is the reason why the difference between Chinese and British tea culture later developed more and more.

**Keywords:** Tea Cultures, British, Chinese, comparative analysis

## 1 Introduction

“There is something in the nature of tea that leads us into a world of quiet contemplation of life.” — Lin Yutang in *The Importance of Living*. Although drinking tea can be viewed as a simple pleasure, it carries a much deeper significance, embodying the cultural intricacies and traditions of the societies that cherish it. The ritual of tea drinking spans across continents, yet it holds unique places in British and Chinese cultures, both steeped in rich histories and customs. At the beginning of the 17th century, Chinese tea through the "New Route" into the European countries, tea in the United Kingdom has undergone a process of localisation and improvement. These two tea traditions offer a

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M. F. b. Sedon et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2024 3rd International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities and Arts (SSHA 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 851, [https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-259-0\\_87](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-259-0_87)

fascinating study in contrasts, particularly when examining the aesthetics of their tea sets and the specific preferences for tea leaves.

British tea culture, with its elegant afternoon teas, has an air of formality and social function, often featuring ornate porcelain with delicate patterns. In contrast, Chinese tea culture prioritizes the spiritual connection and the art of tea-making, favoring more simplistic and naturalistic designs in their tea ware. Furthermore, while the British have traditionally preferred strong black teas, the Chinese spectrum of tea is vast, ranging from delicate green teas to complex oolongs. Such preferences not only reflect the different palates but also the varying philosophies towards life and leisure that each culture espouses (Pos, 2021, pp.30–290).

The tea culture has been differently spread and developed in various regions, which is not only manifested in the tea-tasting behaviour and the choice of tea leaves but also in the aesthetics of the tea set design, this might be influenced by social development and Mainstream ideology and culture (Gao & Li, 2023).

The purpose of this paper is to compare and analyse Chinese and British tea cultures in terms of tea-tasting ceremonies, tea set aesthetics and tea drinking purpose, and to explore how following three major factors, namely, philosophy, social structure and art, influence the differences between Chinese and British tea cultures.

## **2 Comparison of Chinese and English Tea Drinking Ceremonies**

British tea culture is an etiquette to show the British gentleman style and an important rite for major social events. Early British tea culture is the Victorian aristocratic life of the comprehensive artistic reflection, and it was initially exclusive to the upper class and evolved into a social tea gathering of friends, later has extended a variety of red tapes, such as tea set selection, flower arrangement, candle-holder decoration and a series of furnishings, added to this should be a matching milk jug and sugar bowl, most likely holding sugar cubes and serving tongs (Ma, 2010, pp.12–140; Zhang, 2023). All this is finished off with a silver teaspoon resting on each saucer. Today British tea-drinking mannerisms still emphasize politeness and formality. This is shown by gently stirring tea to avoid the clink of the spoon against the cup. These actions reflect a subtle attention to orderliness. Such refined elegance reflects a tradition of luxury and higher social class gathering.

Unlike tea culture, which is exclusive enjoyment for British aristocracy, different social classes in early China had different tea customs, from top to bottom is divided into five tea custom, respectively, royal tea customs, refined scholar tea customs, monk and Taoist tea customs, secular tea customs, lower class tea customs (Lu, 2017). All these traditional tea-making ritual and customs are various, but all associated with traditional philosophy and school of thoughts (Li, 2015). Regardless of the diversity of Chinese tea customs, Chinese tea culture's essence and Tea Drinking Ceremonies lies in the harmony it embodies—a seamless blend of art, philosophy. The preparation, serving, and consumption of tea is a meditative practice, deeply ingrained in Chinese local customs and daily life. For example, considering the importance of hospitality and

the elaborate etiquette of the refined Chinese culture of Chaoshan district, the etiquette of 'Gongfu' tea, as a fusion of refined scholar tea customs and secular tea customs, involves 8 steps of tea making, each containing multiple etiquette notes, but all based on the development of Confucianism (Lin, 2020, pp. 5–138). The Confucian culture of ritual principle has permeated the daily life of the Chaoshan people, and the unique 'Gongfu' tea culture combines mainstream Confucian ethics of harmony and friendship with local characteristics of hospitality (Lin, 2020, pp. 5–138; Li, 2015).

### **3 Analysis of Factors Influencing the Differences in Tea Drinking Ceremonies between China and the UK**

In China, as early as the Song Dynasty, tea tasting was popularised in all classes of society and has been influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism in traditional Chinese culture, forming the unique spirit of the Chinese tea ceremony, simultaneously showing unity and segmentation, which is based on the tea ceremony, incorporating philosophy, ethics and morality into the tea activities to achieve spiritual satisfaction. Until now, China's tea culture has been characterised by diversity based on traditional thought and culture (Wang & Yang, 2012, pp. 20–123; Li, 2015).

At the beginning of Chinese tea culture was introduced to UK, drinking tea was a way of demonstrating wealth and status, and the Chinese tea sets purchased through the overseas trade provided a new way of "ostentatious consumption" for the British aristocracy (Zhang, 2023). Therefore, in the process of integrating tea culture into the British society, tea drinking became a luxury event; tea culture was spread from the upper class to the lower class, and even though it was popularised to more common families later on, the tea drinking ceremony still retained the characteristics of the refined life of the aristocratic culture. By reviewing the development of tea culture, it can be inferred that the The localisation of tea Drinking ceremonies in the UK was influenced by the social structure of the time, such as the life and aesthetics of the aristocracy.

### **4 Comparison of Chinese and English Tea Sets Aesthetics**

British tea culture often features elegant tea sets. These sets comprise teacups each typically holding 175- 235 ml with matching saucers, and a teapot all made from glazed fine china, often decorated with traditional floral patterns and sometimes gold trimmed around the rim (Pos, 2021, pp.30–290; Wilson, 2023). Early British tea set patterns were moulded and re-created based on Chinese exported blue and white porcelain landscape patterns (Pos, 2021, pp.30–290). Because of the British tea culture prevalent among the aristocracy, gradually tea sets design away from the Chinese characteristic instead of incorporating European artistic features (Zhang, 2023).

The traditional small teacups holding 20 - 50 ml, are small, simple cups without handles with beautiful designs etched onto their unglazed surface (Wang and Yang, 2012, pp.20–159). The material used has its own characteristics, altering the taste and the smell of tea. Chinese tea sets are more minimalist, commonly made from materials

like Yixing clay, jade, glazed porcelain, or ceramic, focusing on the natural beauty and quality of the material. Traditional Chinese teacups, or Gaiwans are somewhat larger than small teacups holding 100-180 ml (Lu, 2017). The unique qualities of various types of material such as porcelain, jade, or glass influence the taste and the aroma of the tea (Xu and Huang, 2023). Gaiwans made from Yixing clay are highly prized, however the most popular Gaiwan are made from porcelain which because it absorbs heat makes it easy to handle. Gaiwans comprise 3 parts of a bowl representing humanity, with a lid which represents heaven, and a saucer which represents Earth (Wang and Yang, 2012, pp.20–159). Thus, a Gaiwan reflects the harmony between nature and man that is at the heart of tea rituals in China.

## **5 Analysis of Factors of the Aesthetic Differences between Chinese and British Tea Sets**

The reason for the aesthetics of tea sets difference is mainly due to the difference between Chinese and British art and life habits and hobbies. The aesthetics of Chinese tea sets are more related to the traditional philosophy of harmony between human and nature, with a focus on comfort in the hand, incorporating poems, calligraphy, and a variety of landscapes, bird and flower carvings, and other favourite elements of Chinese art (Xu and Huang, 2023). In contrast, the cultural and artistic characteristics of the Victorian era demonstrated strong romanticism and glamour, which largely influenced the tea culture prevalent among the aristocracy at that time, including the design aesthetics of tea sets. For example, British tea set design aesthetics focus on modelling details and the creation of life interesting, mainly showing soft visual aesthetics with curve and arc, which is in line with the British aristocracy gorgeous art features.

## **6 Comparison of Tea Drinking Purposes in China and the UK**

Now, tea culture has permeated all levels of UK society, symbolizing a shared cultural heritage. The tea-tasting table is a space where people from varied backgrounds can come together over a pot of tea, underscoring the unifying nature of this cultural practice. The purpose of British tea drinking is no longer only to show wealth, but also with social attributes, tea parties have become a social activity, and people participate in the party to exchange information and make friends (Pos, 2021, pp.30–290; Ma, 2010, pp.12–140). The methodical process of brewing tea, from warming the pot to allowing the leaves to steep, reveals a culture that values precision and patience. It speaks to a broader societal appreciation for taking time out of one's day to pause and engage in a practice that is both comforting and steeped in tradition. It is this very adaptability and inclusivity of the tea-drinking tradition that has ensured its enduring presence in British life. In addition, the most famous tea culture in Britain is the afternoon tea at 4 to 5 p.m. British normally eat dinner later, from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m., which leaves a gap between lunch and dinner, so afternoon tea is chosen to make up for this gap and relieve the stress of life (Wilson, 2023).

For centuries, tea has been served as medicine in China, known for its myriad health benefits and therapeutic properties. The earliest textual reference to the medicinal use of tea is found in the "Shennong Ben Cao Jing" (The Divine Farmer's Herb-Root Classic), dating back to the third century CE, which classifies tea as a medicinal herb. By the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), tea had become a staple in Chinese culture, not only for its flavour but also for its ability to improve mental alertness and aid digestion, as documented in Lu Yu's "The Classic of Tea" (Cha Jing) (Wang and Yang, 2012, pp.20–159). Moreover, during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE), the renowned physician Li Shizhen described tea in his compendium "Bencao Gangmu" (Compendium of Materia Medica) as a substance that promotes health, lessens the desire for sleep, and benefits the urinary and digestive functions (Wang and Yang, 2012, pp.20–159; Lu, 2017). Additionally, Chinese tea leaves are often loose, allowing them to unfurl in hot water, which is believed to release their true essence. This reverence for the natural state of tea leaves also underscores a broader philosophical stance that values the authenticity. It is a tradition that sees the act of drinking tea not just as a means to quench thirst, but as an opportunity for communion with nature and friends. The therapeutic benefits of tea have been recognized in Chinese medicine for centuries.

## **7 Factors Analysis of differences in the purpose of tea drinking between China and the UK**

The purpose of tea drinking for most Chinese people is influenced by traditional philosophies. For example, influenced by Confucianism's ideology of "mediocrity and harmony", one of the purposes of tea drinking in China is to harmonise interpersonal relationships through tea party (Li, 2015). In addition, Taoism advocates meditation, through the drinking of tea can improve their meditation. The Buddhist tea culture advocates that tea can make one's mind quiet and have fun, but with moderation, which is compatible with the Zen Buddhist precepts. It can be seen that the tea drinking culture is highly related to the mainstream Chinese ideology and philosophy, and the Chinese create a mood through tea drinking in order to perceive a higher philosophical spirit (Li, 2015). Finally, Chinese drinking tea for improving health has been validated by the accumulated experience of the ancients and modern science and influenced by the concepts of health maintenance in traditional culture.

## **8 Conclusion**

In conclusion, tea cultures in Britain and China, while differing vastly in their aesthetics and rituals, both represent a profound historical and cultural significance that transcends the simple act of drinking a drink.

Today's British tea culture spread to all levels of society, has been very different from the origins of the Chinese tea culture, in the process of cultural change and development, tea drinking ceremonies, the aesthetics of the tea sets and the purpose of tea

drinking is mainly affected by the characteristics of the British aristocratic life, art development and the values of the upper class, which is greatly related to the characteristics of the social structure and is the sign of cultural integration.

In contrast, the Chinese tea culture embodies a minimalist purity, emphasizing the meditative process of tea preparation and the philosophical alignment with nature. This approach highlights a deeper, spiritual connection to tea, where the material of the tea set and the type of tea consumed are integral to the experience, reflecting the harmony between humanity and the natural world. The development of Chinese tea culture over the years always relative the traditional Chinese philosophies, which reflects its unity, in addition to China's vast geographical area, cultural customs are diverse also led to the different tea culture and different tea customs of class.

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