

Tea as Nature, Tea as Power in Early Modern China: Tea and the Literati in the Ming Dynasty

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural meaning of tea drinking for the literati in the later part of the Ming dynasty (around 1500-1644), using the pair ideas of tea as representing a lifestyle close to nature, and tea as a powerful representation of tasteful life in the society. The dual meanings of tea reinforce each other for the Ming literati, giving them the means and outlets to bolster their self-expression and to distinguish their identity in the social-cultural context of limited career opportunities. I examine the role of tea in tea books, tea-themed paintings, and Ming literati's engagement in tea clubs and other related activities. This paper contributes to dialogues at the intersections of nature, culture, and history by treating tea as a nature-culture object, highlighting that the pursuit of nature is itself a form of cultural power.

Keywords: tea, nature, power, literati, identity, Ming dynasty, China

1. Introduction

Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), a renowned artist in the Ming Dynasty, painted *Tea Gathering in Mt. Hui*, in which he depicted a tea drinking scene based on a gathering on the day of Qingming in 1518, the 13th year of Zhengde's reign. Wen and four literati friends came to the site of Mt. Hui spring, one of the best-known springs for tea since the Tang dynasty, to enjoy tea, taste the water, and write poetry. Three servants came along to help prepare tea. The painting shows a peaceful natural environment with mature pine trees, under which the party gathered and conversed leisurely; two sat around the spring well under a simple hut. One literati participant, Cai Yu, wrote the introduction, and the painting was attached with poems composed for the occasion. (Note 1) Wen's painting, a celebrated work of art, became an important record of tea culture in the Ming dynasty.

What was the cultural role of tea for literati like Wen Zhengming in the later part of the Ming dynasty? This is the central question for this article. Tea became an important cultural beverage in China in the Tang dynasty (618-907) with Lu Yu's *Book of Tea (Cha Jing)*, and Tang poets such as Jiaoran and Li Bai helped establish tea's cultural place in Daoist, Buddhist and Confucian traditions (Liu, 2011; Benn, 2015). By the Ming (1368-1644), tea had accumulated an array of cultural meanings symbolizing a close connection with nature, an elevated cultural taste steeped in poetry, paintings, and intellectual conversations, thus an important marker of literati identity (see also, Du, 2013). Tea's material nature as a pleasant drink is inseparable from its cultural meanings, and this makes tea an ideal nature-culture object for the study of nature-culture relationships, a perspective that informs this exploration of tea's cultural role (see Cronon, 1996; Castree, 2005).

I argue that tea drinking for the Ming literati was both a search for a natural lifestyle, which was about distancing from the society, and a way of reasserting themselves into the society with the cultural power of self-expression. These two roles, tea as nature and tea as power, seemingly contradictory, reinforce each other in interdependent ways: one relies on the other for its perpetuation. Literati's assertion of self-expression is set in the large cultural background of growing cultural enterprises, including fashion, collection of antiques, knowledge of the exotic, and various forms of connoisseurship, that emerged in the social fabric in the later part of the Ming (Clunas, 1996; Brook, 1999).

Several key features of the Ming provide the social context for tea consumption. First, since the Tang dynasty tea had been seen as a refined natural and cultural object, and this continued in the Ming and was particularly attractive for the Ming literati. Second, limited career opportunities for the Ming literati led to a crisis of their

identity. Thus, elevation of taste, appreciation of refined things, and knowledge of objects, as informed by the late Ming writings including *Zhang Wu Zhi (Treatise on Superfluous Things)* and garden manuals, were increasingly taken up by the literati to mark their distinction. If tea connoisseurship helped mark individuality among the intellectuals in the Tang and Song (Hinsch, 2015), it became an even more pronounced cultural marker for the Ming literati. Third, with economic growth and commercial development, consumption became widespread in the Ming society and came to mark personal power (Brook, 1999). It is in these multifaceted social and cultural contexts that I explore the culture of tea and its role for literati identity in the later Ming (roughly during 1500-1644). I will focus on literati tea connoisseurs such as artist Wen Zhengming and authors of tea books in the Ming.

As a cultural-historical exploration, this article utilizes first-hand records such as tea books, paintings, and other written works, as well as secondary sources from works of other scholars. My focus is on cultural meanings of tea consumption, so I omitted tea production technologies and tea's medicinal functions. I pay particular attention to socio-historical context in which to situate tea culture and Ming literati's engagement with tea. My knowledge of tea culture since the Tang dynasty assists in my assessment of historical continuities and breaks in tea culture in the Ming dynasty. Historical analyses are open to new insights as historical interpretations are often partial and tentative. My particular perspective in this exploration is to treat tea as a nature-culture object, through which to examine the tea's intertwining meaning as nature and as power for the Ming literati.

The remainder of this article is divided into three parts, followed by a conclusion. The first part offers a brief background of tea in the Ming dynasty. The second part analyses key components of tea culture from Ming tea books, focusing on tea's cultural meanings expressed by the authors. The third part discusses the practice and meaning of tea for the literati in the Jiangnan (lower Yangtze) area, especially around Suzhou, an important center for culture and tea in the Ming. The conclusion highlights a central theme of this article: the connection of tea as a symbol of nature and the power of tea for the enhancement of literati identity. By focusing on the culture of tea for the Ming literati, this article presents a topic that has not been explored in depth in the English literature. There is a rich list of Chinese-language literature on Ming dynasty tea, from authors such as Wu Zhihe (1996, on Ming tea practitioners and their social life), Liao Jianzhi (2007, on Ming tea culture and art), Cai Dingyi (2016, on Ming tea books), and others. This article draws on these rich studies in my own examination of Ming documents for the English-language readers. Furthermore, I adopt an analytical framework not explored in previous writings of tea in the Ming dynasty: that of nature-culture relationships. I will summarize insights gained from this framework in the concluding session.

2. Tea in the Ming: A Brief Background

Tea in the Ming dynasty underwent two major transitions: from powdered tea to tea leaves, with which came new ways of tea making and drinking; and a renewed cultural development of tea after a century of eclipse in the Mongol-controlled Yuan (1271-1368), culminating in what some consider a peak of tea culture. In 1391, Emperor Hongwu decreed loose leaves for tribute teas collected by the imperial court, and this led to a major shift in tea processing and drinking practice. While loose leaf teas were used in the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279), and more in the Yuan, the standard was powdered tea by the early Ming. After the Hongwu decree, it took about a century for loose leaf tea to take over powdered tea. Tea books flourished after 1500 and a major development of tea culture appeared, as will be explored in the next two sections.

There were three categories of teas in the Ming. The first was fine teas, such as Huqiu and Tianchi (both from Suzhou), Songluo (from Huizhou), Luojie (from Yixing in Changzhou), Longjing (from Hangzhou), Liu'an (from Anhui), and Wuyi (from Fujian). The first four in this list were from the Jiangnan area. There was an expansion of the best tea areas. The Song court established the tribute tea garden Beiyuan (Northern Garden), in Jian'an of Fujian in the Southeast, to produce the best tea cakes; teas in the Jiangnan ranked behind Jian'an during the Song. But in the Ming, with the popularity of loose-leaf tea, top teas emerged from the cultural center of Jiangnan, where literati helped refine and promote teas. These teas were finely processed and limited in quantity, while generic teas (used in the next two categories) went through simple processing of drying and roasting. Two kinds of consumers got to enjoy fine teas: the court that collected tribute teas and the elites (including the literati) who had the financial and cultural means. According to *Zaolin Zazu* written by the Ming salt official Tan Qian, the Jian'an area in Fujian still provided the most quantity of teas to the court; other tribute tea areas included Zhejiang (which is in the Jiangnan area), Southern Zhili, Jiangxi and Huguang provinces. Literati tea connoisseurs included in this article engaged more often with teas from Jiangnan, and some even invented their own teas.

The second category was tea for domestic trade. The Ming court monopolized tea trade, following the practice in

the Song and Yuan. Merchants had to buy permits called *chayin* in order to trade tea, one *chayin* per 100 *jin* (59.7 kg) of tea to trade. Private tea trade was illegal and heavily punished, especially in the early Ming. Tea producing households were designated by the court, and they paid taxes (*chake*) at the rate of 10 percent, or two *liang* (74 grams) of processed tea every ten tea trees. Many tea merchants came from Huizhou, a district of fine teas in the Jiangnan area during the Ming.

The third category was tea for horse-tea trade at the western borders, which was important militarily and strategically as the Ming needed fine horses in frequent wars with the northern nomadic peoples, especially the Mongols. Each year, the Ming bought in about 10,000 horses, and one medium-quality horse was traded with 40-70 *jin* (roughly 24-42 kg) of tea (Liao, 2007). Every aspect of the tea trade at the border was strictly controlled by the court. Teas produced in the Southwest, including Sichuan, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Yunnan and Huguang were used for tea-horse trade, while teas produced in the Southeast were for domestic trade.

3. Culture of Tea from Tea Books in the Ming

The Ming had more tea books than any other dynasty. Existent Ming tea books totaled 50 (Cai, 2006). This included books on tea, as well as on water (used for tea), tea rooms, teapots, and tea-horse trade. In comparison, the Tang had five (5) tea books, and the Song had 12. Later, in the Qing dynasty, the number of tea books decreased sharply. (Note 2) Based on the flourishing of tea books, some authors assert that the Ming dynasty reached the peak of tea culture development, and after that, tea culture waned (Tao, 2009). In my brief exploration of Ming tea books below I use the compilation edited by Ye (2001).

Most authors of the existent tea books were members of the literati, except for two from the royal Zhu family and two monks. About half of the literati authors held official positions. The majority of the authors came from the Jiangnan area. Two of 50 tea books were written during mid-late 1400s; the majority 48, were written in the later Ming (1500-1644) (Cai, 2006, pp. 52-53). This trend speaks to the trajectory of tea culture experiencing an accelerated growth from the mid-Ming to the late Ming.

The lone tea book written in the early Ming was by Zhu Quan, the 17th son of the Hongwu emperor Zhu Yuanzhang. To alleviate any suspicion of his political ambition, a threat to the throne, Zhu Quan indulged in literary activities. In addition to the tea book *Cha Pu*, he also wrote a manual on how to use plants while living as a hermit in the mountains. In his *Cha Pu*, he followed Lu Yu of the Tang and Emperor Huizong of the Song to elevate tea to the level of cultural refinement: “Tea is an object that can assist the mood for poetry, immediately enliven clouds and mountains; it can subdue the demon of sleep, so one is unconstrained by forms in Heaven and Earth; it can enhance pure conversations, give cool clarity to the myriad phenomena—how great is the effect of tea!” Quoting Tang dynasty poet Lu Tong who wrote on reaching the divine realm by drinking “seven bowls of tea,” Zhu Quan claimed “just one bowl is enough to send me to the land of immortals.” He proposed a ritual-like procedure for tea drinking with scripted conversations, the only one of its kind that I am aware of in the Chinese tea practice: Once the servant brings the tea to the host, “the host stands up, holds the tea bowl and presents it to the guest, saying ‘I am pouring purity for you.’ The guest stands up and receives the tea bowl, replies ‘Only this can break loneliness;’ then sits down.” The 17-chapter *Cha Pu* offers a comprehensive description of tea, including tea picking, tea processing (including flower-scented tea), tea water, and various tea utensils. Chapter 17 recorded water ranking, including Tang dynasty ranking that listed the 2nd-ranked Mt. Hui spring, which was depicted in Wen Zhengming’s painting referred to at the start of this article. Written between 1430-1448, *Cha Pu* still followed the Song technology of powered tea.

The remaining tea books in the Ming were all written after mid-Ming. Technical information found in these books included methods and knowledge on the planting of tea trees, and loose-leaf processing techniques, especially in drying and pan roasting. Many tea books mentioned tea’s health benefits, as was the traditional knowledge on tea. Content on tea rooms and Yixing clay teapots emerged for the first time. Evaluation of tea quality also changed from assessing foams (color, texture, how long they lasted, etc.) of powdered tea to assessing color, aroma and taste of the tea broth from loose-leaf tea (Chen, n. d.). Tea drinking practice also became more nuanced and artful. For example, various methods of tea steeping, using either in a tea bowl or a teapot, were described. *Cha Shu*, written in 1597 by Xu Cishu, even detailed when to put tea in hot water: “First hold the tea in hand, and once the water is poured into the pot, drop the tea into the pot, place the cap. After three breaths, pour out all the tea water into a container, then pour it back to the pot, so the stirring can bring out the flavor, and its color will not be heavy. Take three more breaths for the tea to settle, and then pour it out to offer to the guests.”

Xu Cishu’s *Cha Shu* is among the most comprehensive tea books in the Ming. Coming from a literati background, Xu wrote poetry and essays, and also collected rocks; he loved tea and made many friends,

including Yao Shaoxian, a tea expert who had his own tea garden in Zhejiang Guchu mountain's Bright Moon Gorge (Yin, 2004). In *Cha Shu*, Xu referred to tea as "divine plant (*lingcao*)," following Tang and Song literature, and explained tea roasting and steaming for the production of loose-leaf teas. (Note 3) In addition to spring tea picking that was promoted in the Tang and Song, Xu also included fall-season picking of grown tea leaves. He stated tea can be steeped twice. In the following ways he described the tea room (*chaliao*): it should be placed to the side of the main house, and should be "dry and bright, not closed off," and the room should have one table with tea utensils, two stoves, and a rack for drying towels. Charcoal should be stored away from the house to reduce the risk of fire. He described occasions that were suitable for tea drinking: practicing calligraphy, watching a play, writing letters, or reading books; on a rainy or a snowy day, at a banquet, or during busy times. During tea drinking, some of the activities that could take place included playing the zither, appreciating paintings, long conversations at night, burning incense, or visiting a quiet temple. For Xu, the most fitting companion of tea drinking was nature itself: "pure wind and bright moon, natural bed-screen and beddings, bamboo bed and stone pillow, and beautiful flowers and trees."

Tea was not only a symbol of nature, but also a connection with artful activities of the literati. Tu Benjun, a native of Zhejiang and a one-time officer in the Salt Transportation Commission in Fujian province, authored the tea book *Ming Ji*. Tu's friend Xu Boxing wrote the book's preface, in which he associated tea drinking with pure literati (*qingshi*) and related that every time he visited Tu they would drink tea and discuss literature and poetry. "When tea was finished but our conversations were still ongoing, Tu would ask the servant to boil more water, and this happened often." Another author Tu Long also said in his *Cha Shuo* that tea is suited for pure conversations.

Linking tea with virtuous, peaceful and tasteful living was a common theme in Ming tea books. Quoting Lu Yu that "Tea is most suited for those who refine their actions and build their virtue," Tian Yiheng, author of *Zhucha Xiaopin*, said "one drinks tea and forgets about the clamor of the world." This also connected with Tao Yuanming's poem on peaceful rural life: "I made my home amidst this human bustle / Yet I hear no clamor from the carts and horses," which represents a long tradition of seclusive life in nature away from human troubles and social ills. (Note 4) Ming writer of tea room Lu Shusheng described the exquisite method of tea making by the Buddhist monk Mingliang from the Zhongnan Mountains, then stated "Drinking tea is not a casual affair; people have to match the quality of tea for mutual attainment. Therefore he [monk Mingliang] often passed his methods to superior people and recluses, those with clouds, springs, and rocks in their bosoms." For Chen, suitable tea companions included literati, monks, recluse, and gentry. (Note 5) The four groups shared the same affinity with nature. These descriptions of tea coincide with Xu Cishu's. In his tea treatise *Ming Tan*, Xu Bo called tea drinking "the purist thing," only enhanced by incense and graceful companions.

Worth noting are writings on tea rooms. In the early Ming, Emperor Hongwu issued strict rules restricting officials to build home structures for entertainment, and forbidding the building of private gardens. After the Zhengde reign (1491-1521), however, these rules were relaxed, and tea rooms started to emerge, followed by a period of popular growth (T'an, 2009). This explains the inclusion of tea rooms in the tea books in the late Ming.

To summarize, in two ways Ming tea books set the parameters for the culture of tea in the Ming. First, these books provided detailed descriptions on tea planting, harvesting, processing, tea making, water, tea rooms, teapots, and tea's health benefits—refined knowledge of tea itself was a marker of cultural refinement in the Ming. Second, the tea books presented tea as an elevated cultural object, a refined symbol of nature and culture, through the retelling of historical stories from the Tang and Song, and by connecting tea with literature, a natural way of living, and with contemporary appreciation of art and pure conversation. This gave tea connoisseurship an added importance. Ming tea books placed tea securely in the cultural sphere of meaning and history. (Note 6)

4. Tea for the Literati: As Nature and as Cultural Power

The flourishing of tea books in the later Ming was accompanied by increased presence of *charen*, literally "persons of tea," or tea enthusiasts and connoisseurs. Three kinds of people were the mainstay of *charen* who shaped the taste of tea in the later Ming. The first was literati who chose a reclusive lifestyle either because of failure in achieving examination degrees and official positions, or due to decision to refuse official posts. Wu Zhihe (1996) calls them *yinyi charen*—*yinyi* meaning carefree hermits. The second group was what Wu calls *jihuai charen*, those literati degree holders and government officials who were seeking a peaceful and natural lifestyle, using tea to "lodge their heart (*jihuai*)." The third group included monks from the Buddhist or Daoist traditions – this last group was smaller in number, but they were important in locating tea as a practice for spiritual enlightenment: they followed the footsteps of Tang-dynasty writers Lu Yu, Jiaoran, Lu Tong, and Monk Zhaozhou who connected tea with Daoist or Buddhist traditions. These three groups of *charen* shared their

outlook of tea as an object and practice of profound meanings.

According to historian Brook (1999), as literati were known for seeking refined taste and means of self-expression, merchants also joined in cultural pursuits in order to enter the more prestigious literati class. Yet Ming tea culture was dominated by the literati, joined by Buddhist and Daoist monks, but without a visible merchant presence. This is telling: it suggests that tea marked a cultural position distant from the pursuit of economic and material accumulation, thus a more elevated form of culture and taste. This is probably why tea practice was often disassociated with conspicuous consumption, a trend prevalent in the rich echelon of the Ming society. In a way, tea was a marker of a *qinggao* (pure and lofty) cultural style. (Note 7) This followed Emperor Huizong of Song who associated tea with cultural achievement of *gaoyuan* (high and far), or Zhu Quan's description of tea as embodying *zhi*, high aspirations.

The tea party introduced in the beginning of this article, as recorded in a painting by Wen Zhengming, was attended by four literati friends, all of whom were well-known men of letters. They were civil service examination candidates, and most failed to achieve degrees after multiple tries. In the Ming, civil service exams were offered once every three years, and for Cai Yu, the friend who wrote the introduction for Wen's painting, to fail the examination 14 times meant he was trying for 42 years without success. Wen himself failed the examination nine times. Only one friend at this tea party, Wang Shou, received the *jinshi* degree later, in 1526 (Wu, 1996).

Tea was associated with poetry, as in the Tang. Wen Zhengming wrote a number of tea poems, and I quote one below, titled *Poem on Tea Making to Fulfill a Promise*:

Simmering water awaits fish eyes to appear
 Boiling leaves dance showing flags green
 In Jiangnan the Grain Rain Fest is approaching
 From below the Mt Hui spring, boats are returning
 A mountain folk in his yarn hat enjoys tea
 His hairs flicker amid the Zen bed and the tea fume flurry
 Wine drinkers understand not the awakening from mundane dreams
 Lying down, watching my pine door lit up by the spring sun (Note 8)

This poem demonstrates nicely the continuation of the Tang and Song literary tradition of tea. In the first two lines: "fish eye" was used by Lu Yu in *Cha Jing* to describe the bubbles of boiling water; "flag" was used in the Song to refer to the tea bud. The 3rd and 4th lines refer to Mt. Hui spring, which was rated as a top water for tea since the Tang. In the last four lines: the image of "a mountain folk in his yarn hat enjoys tea" and "pine door" both came from a famous poem by the Tang dynasty poet Lu Tong, commonly known as "Seven Bowls of Tea." Buddhist enlightenment was implied in "mundane dream," "awakening" and "Zen bed," and tea was praised over alcohol—both themes were established in tea poetry in the Tang dynasty. Wen's poem helped perpetuate the well-established tradition of tea culture since the Tang time.

Landscape paintings were a suitable match with tea, and the pairing also helped set the proper place of tea in the Chinese culture (Lopez, 2013). Wen Zhengming painted other paintings of teas, including *Tasting Tea* in 1531, *Painting with Ten Tea Poems* in 1534 after missing an annual tea gathering to taste the spring tea, and *Painting of Eastern Garden* based on the estate of his friend Wu Kuan, an official who owned a large garden estate in eastern Wu County. Other artists during the Ming, including the Wu-school artists Shen Zhou, Tang Yin and Qiu Ying, all of whom painted tea themes. Most of these paintings situated tea under a simple hut in the forests. A small number of tea-themed paintings depicted life of hermits, such as Wen Zhengming's *Brewing Tea by a Tall Tree*, Tang Yin's *Lu Tong Making Tea*, and Li Shida's *Sitting by the Pines to Listen the Wind* (which depicted tea making in the woods by the water). In Wen's *Brewing Tea by a Tall Tree*, he included a poem:

Having not seen Old Man He for years
 I hear his divine bones are thinner than ever
 Just to respond to Lu Yu's high spirit
 He sits under a tall tree, cooking tea with mountain spring

The poem referred to *He*, meaning crane, and *xiangu*, divine bones, both Daoist expressions. The one enjoying tea in nature in the painting was Old Man He, but it could well be the author himself.

Wen Zhengming was perhaps the most prominent artist in the Wu School. The school's earlier inspiration came from Tang dynasty's Wang Wei, whose paintings and poems focused on natural elements, harmony with nature and transcendence of nature through his Buddhist practice. The school also took inspiration from Yuan dynasty painter Wang Meng, who retreated into the woods in his later years; Wang painted "*Boiling Tea*," a landscape of commending mountains, at the bottom of which was a small thatched-roof tea hut with three figures sitting inside. The Wu-school was a tradition of depicting harmonious nature with the finest skills. When tea became an important cultural drink in the Tang, it started to enter into poetry. In the Song, tea became a more important object for poetic expressions, and the renowned Song poet Su Shi wrote numerous poems with tea, with his famous verse "the fine tea is always like a fair lady." Tea ventured into landscape paintings in the Yuan, and flourished in the Ming, with Wen Zhengming's paintings among the most celebrated tea-in-landscape works.

In later Ming, taste became one of the important literati skills, which included "commenting on literature, assessing paintings, tasting tea, burning incense, playing the zither, and selecting stones" (Wen, n. d.). As part of the tasteful lifestyle, "tea washes over the divine with its fragrance and clarity, and it should not be abused in situations other than reading literature and discussing the Dao" (Li, n. d.). The volume *Zhang Wu Zhi*, a well-known book of objects in the Ming, included items such as calligraphy and painting, water and rocks, studies and retreats, and incense and tea. Worth noting, the volume's author, Wen Zhenheng, was the great grandson of Wen Zhengming, whose tea paintings are featured in this article.

Ability to discern tea became a celebrated skill for Ming scholars. Zhang Dai, a renowned late Ming writer, loved tea and was an expert on it; he even invented his own *Laxue Cha* (Orchid Snow Tea). He frequented the well-known tea house in Shaoxing, *Luxiong*, a name he gave that referred tea as "brother of sweet dew," following a poem by the northern Song artist writer Mi Fu. In his book *Tao'an Meng Yi*, Zhang recorded an encounter with Min Wenshui, a renowned tea connoisseur at the time. He heard about Min's fame in tea and wanted to meet him. He waited for a long time at Min's home. Min returned, but seeing a visitor at home, he found an excuse to leave immediately. Zhang waited longer till Min returned, and explained he would not leave till he tasted tea made by Min. Zhang passed the initial test as a potential disciple. "Min Wenshui was pleased, and he started the stove, and made tea so fast as if the coming of a storm." His tea room had "Yixing pot, about a dozen of tea bowls from Chengxuan kiln—all items were extremely refined." Min's tea was incredibly fragrant. Zhang impressed Min with his knowledge of tea and water, and the two became fast friends.

Min came from Huzhou's Xiuning, home to the well-known Songluo tea; he made his own Min Tea that became well-known, and he opened a tea house in Nanjing called *Huaru Zhai*. Qing dynasty writer Liu Luan wrote in *Wu shi hu* (Liu, n. d.) that Min Wenshui was a recluse, and his tea was "dew of samadhi." Liu described Min's tea this way: "It was white as snow, and its fragrance was like orchid, with favor beyond flavors. At the time, there were two or three seekers of style who tasted Min's tea, and said its Zen-like quality was like Songluo tea, its gentleness like Luojie tea, its stability like Liu'an tea, and its smoothness like Beiyuan tea—nothing can surpass it, and one won't be tired of it even after a hundred bowls." Liu Luan also mentioned that Min Wenshui became the leader of a tea club.

Tea clubs or tea societies flourished in the later Ming, as did literary societies. During the Tang and Song, the literati were increasingly engaged in tea connoisseurship, but more as individuals instead of identifying with *charen* groups. Starting from the mid-Ming, cultural groups and group identity became important for the literati, including those who lived a reclusive lifestyle (Clunas, 2004a). Most tea clubs integrated tea with other activities. For example, *Dan She*, the Tranquil Society, formed in 1602, was a tea club combined with poetry and pure conversations. The society met once a month, and at the meeting, they started with tea and sat quietly, and when topics for conversations emerged, they would create poetry. Their meeting place "must be chosen at the most wonderful spot on the lake or in the mountains, on a beautiful sunny day" (Wu, 1996, p. 161). Society members included Chen Jiru, a renown painter and writer at the time, also a tea enthusiast and author of tea books. The society was chaired by the tea connoisseur Feng Mengzhen, a *jinshi* degree holder with various official posts (including Chancellor of the National Imperial Academy) and a Buddhist layperson. There were also seasonal ad hoc groups that met during particular seasons, such as during the Chongyang Festival in September when traditional mountain climbing was combined with wine and tea drinking. Tea parties among literati friends, such as the one portrayed in Wen Zhengming's painting, happened often in the natural environment of waters and woods, or in private tea rooms.

Later Ming development of tea culture has to be situated in the literati life circumstances and their crisis of identity. Lack of advancement and career opportunities was a major factor. In the year 1500, there were about 30,000 civil examination candidates out of a population of 65 million—a ratio of 1 in every 2,200. Only 14 percent of all candidates become *juren* (provincial level degree), and 4.8 percent gained *jinshi* (national level

degree). The Ming kept a small government, with between 20,000-25,000 civil posts, and new positions were very limited (Clunas, 2007, p. 42). This meant that the majority of the literati did not have the opportunity to gain a degree, let alone a government post. Many tea connoisseurs and tea party members were at one point in their lives aspirants of civil examination degrees and government positions, and they retreated from those pursuits only after repeated failures. Wen Zhengming tried nine times without success, and he once held a minor position in the court but was disappointed. For these people, retreating from the society and into arts and tea was a meaningful option left for a self-fulfilling and reputable living. According to Clunas, “the traditional elites saw their social position threatened and hence turned to the ‘invention of taste’ as a mechanism to stress not just the things possessed but the manner of possessing them” (Clunas, 2004b, p. xiv). This assessment fits well with tea.

Consumption, along with taste, was another marker of social status. Later Ming was a society of conspicuous consumption, as some merchants used their consumptive power to gain recognition among the literati, and corrupt officials lived an extravagant life. Pursuit of material wealth spread to all strata of the society, including commoners and women. In fact, since the early Ming laid the foundation for the empire’s growth in economy and trade, prices for once luxury products dropped in later Ming so even common people could afford better food and clothing. Women’s fashion and style filtered from rich families through their servants to the common people, and the new word *shiyang* (contemporary style, or fashion) appeared in late Ming (Wu, 2018). Books on a variety of consumptive items were widely available. In such a society one way to stand out was through tasteful consumption.

To say tea was connected to a lofty *qinggao* cultural style does not mean tea practice was not matched with material possession. In fact, Wen Zhengming owned an impressive private garden in Suzhou (Guo, 2013). Fine teas were pricey as tea brands were recognized empire-wide. The tasteful life of nature happened to be expensive. In addition to fine teas, tea utensils were also objects of desire. With loose-leaf tea came a change in tea utensils. In the early Ming, popularly used were fine ceramics, especially the white-blue wares, and pure-white tea bowls were recommended by Xu Cishu (in *Cha Shu*) for their matching with light-colored tea. In Later Ming, purple-clay teapots from Yixing area were recognized for their superior quality for steeping loose-leaf teas. In *Yangxian Teapot Series (yangxian minghu xi)*, Zhou Gaoqi attributed the origin of the Yixing clay teapot to a monk in Jinshan Temple. Famous teapot makers were Gongchun, Shi Dabin, Li Zhongfang, and Xu Youquan. Teapots were large-sized in the beginning, became smaller over time as teapot makers interacted with literati members such as Chen Jiru, a tea club member and tea-book author mentioned earlier. At the end of *Yangxian Teapot Series*, Zhou attached two writings on a prized teapot made by Xu Youquan, once owned by Ruan Guanlu, a court official who was known to be spineless in shifting affiliations to seek favors and once followed the infamous corrupt eunuch Wei Zhongxian. Ruan gave the teapot to Feng Jinwu, the head of the royal bodyguard. Feng was overjoyed, and he named the teapot *Taobao* (pottery treasure), and had a portrait of it made. Teapots from famous makers fetched very high prices toward the late Ming.

While some literati opted for a reclusive life because of failure in seeking examination degrees and official posts, there were also voluntary hermits. Take Chen Jiru, mentioned above as a tea club member and for his influence on teapots. He could have had the opportunity for an official position, being supported by Xu Jie who was a leading member of the Grand Secretariat under Jiaqing’s reign. But Chen chose a reclusive life at the age of 29 and lived in the mountains. Reclusive life was popular for the Ming literati who renounced the pursuit of official posts. Yet at the same time, most did not exit the society—in fact, reclusion served as a cultural choice for being part of the society. “Great recluse takes refuge in the city,” as Tang-dynasty poet Bai Juyi wrote; and some speak of “taking refuge in tea” (Yichasanpin, 2017). Tea’s connection with reclusive life started in the Tang (Guan, 2019), and the Tang tea sage Lu Yu was recorded in the *Book of Tang* under Recluses (*yiying*). The tea-making scene depicted in Li Shida’s painting, *Sitting by the Pines to Listen the Wind*, matched well with the description of another Ming literati Zhu Cunli of his tea retreat under two pine trees: he “brought a bundle of books, a zither, a pot of wine, a bamboo matt, a stone cauldron, and settled under two pine trees, reading his books everyday” (Wu, 1996, p. 158). When visitors came, they would discuss books and paintings; after drinking wine, tea would be provided. Aside from being a recluse, Zhu was a scholar, a collector of books and a connoisseur of arts. Tea for Zhu Cunli, as well as for Li Shida, became a symbol of seclusion, like Tao Yuanming’s chrysanthemum flower.

I wish to highlight tea’s connection with Daoist and Buddhist monks, which is related to the cultural attitude of rejecting the society’s norms and seeking meaning in nature and peacefulness. The sage of tea Lu Yu grew up in the Jingling Buddhist temple in today’s Hubei; some famous teas in the Song dynasty were produced in Buddhist temples. The Japanese tea was intimately connected to Zen Buddhism since the pair’s transmission from China to Japan around 10th-12th century. In the Ming, the renowned Songluo tea and Yixing teapot were both created by

Buddhist monks, and the renowned Tianchi tea was produced by the Tianchi Temple. Monks interacted with the literati frequently, and they were some of the best *charen* and frequent participants of tea gatherings. This connection helps sustain the cultural image of tea as symbolizing a natural and enlightened way of living.

5. Conclusion

This article has reviewed tea culture in the Ming dynasty in the context of later Ming literati's identity building, elevation of taste, and culture of consumption. I situate expressions of tea culture in the long-held cultural tradition of tea as a symbol of nature and natural way of living, and connect that with literati pursuit of connoisseurship and self-distinction. I argue that the value of tea as nature and as power of literati identity are consistent with each other, albeit their seeming contradiction. The limited scope of this discussion will need to be expanded in future work on related cultural practices of nature in the Ming, such as fascination with nature objects (such as plants and rocks) and knowledge about them, and the surge of landscape gardens, in the context of Ming literati's search for self-expression and identity.

Tea as a symbol of nature is culturally valuable in society exactly because of its rejection of the society's dominant values, and this is also the case in the modern society, where nature and wilderness have become symbols of goodness and morality (Robbins, Hintz, & Moore, 2014). Yet Cronon (1996) insists that our valuation of nature is a cultural preference, and Tuan (2000) states that our society's drawing close to nature has been a dictate of culture and history—both authors criticize the modern pursuit of nature's pristineness. In the Chinese culture, nature is not appreciated in its pristine form separate from the human realm, but has been treated as a refined cultural form. When the recluse Tao Yuanming of the Jin dynasty lived in the agricultural garden away from the clamor of the world, and when hermit Lin Bu of the Song dynasty planted plum trees around his mountain dwelling to appreciate the pure beauty of plum blossom, it was in fact ordered nature and culturally symbolic nature that they relied on for their self-expression, both in their lives and in their poetry. The gardens that flourished in the Ming were designed nature of agricultural plants for aesthetic appeal. Tea fits in the category of designed nature, and it is precisely its associated cultural values and practices that help perpetuate its symbolization as nature.

To esteem the natural is deeply cultural (Tuan, 2000). Starting from the time of Laozi when nature marked a counter-culture to Confucianism through the ages as seen in poetry, literature, and lives of hermits, nature has been an important symbol of cultural identity. Tea as a symbol of nature is in no way contradicting with tea's importance in marking the literati's cultural identity and distinction.

I wish to argue that there is no such a thing as tea's innate cultural function. Tea means different things for different cultures. From British tea's colonial connection to Turkish tea's social role, we can see that the Chinese meaning of tea is similarly culturally fashioned, enhanced by historical accumulation of built-up themes, stories, and continuing applications. While culturally constructed, the meanings of tea are no less real, as they carry significant personal and cultural power. I shall also add a qualification for role of tea for the Ming literati: the literati did not *need* tea for the articulation of their identity. They had books, poetry, paintings, incense, and the woods. Yet tea became a fitting object, both historically and culturally, to be added to this group of objects to help enhance literati enjoyment and identity, symbolizing refined taste and close affinity with nature. It is not so much that tea made literati, but that literati made tea, that is, literati's engagement shaped profoundly what tea became in the Ming.

Persons of tea, *charen*, became a cultural category in the Ming denoting cultural achievement in nature and art. This is similar to the Japanese category of *meijin*, persons who have reached the highest achievement in tea: skills in tea preparation, discernment of tea utensils, and the Way of tea (Sen, 1998, p. 135). The highest realm of *charen* is their enlightenment to the Dao - this follows the traditional Chinese notion that "objects carry the Dao (or the Way)." To doubt this deeply rooted cultural connotation of tea as itself authentic and meaningful would be falling too deeply into the post-modern trapping. At the same time we should not neglect the political role of tea drinking for its marking of literati cultural power. In other words, we need to appeal to the multiplicity and interactions of different perspectives in historical processes, instead of fixating on any single angle in understanding tea's cultural role. The Chinese-language literature on tea has largely viewed tea as representing pure nature and a peaceful life, while critical-theory informed analyses of the Ming art in the English literature tend to highlight the power-seeking political or money-seeking economic goals. I posit that both aspects, tea as nature and tea as power, are valid, and each only tells a partial story. It is in recognizing both aspects, and in highlighting their mutual enhancement, that I locate my locus of tea's cultural meaning for the Ming literati, recognizing close nature-cultural connections.

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Notes

- Note 1. The painting can be viewed on <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/228278.html>. Worth noting is that most tea books in the Ming were written after the time of Wen's painting, which attests to the important role of Wen in tea culture of the Ming dynasty.
- Note 2. Depending on the source, the number of tea books cited are different. Zhang, Zhu and Li (2006) listed 16 tea books in the Tang and Five Dynasties, 47 in the Song and Yuan, 79 in the Ming, and 42 in the Qing. Zhu, Shen and Zen (2010) listed 57 for the Ming.
- Note 3. In the Tang, Lu Yu described tea tree in *Cha Jing* as "fine tree (*jiamu*)" and likened tea to *ganlu*, sweat dew, in refreshing human health; *ganlu* was seen as divine. Tang poet Lu Guimeng called tea "divine plant (*lingcao*)." Continuing this tradition, tea was described as "divine plant" or "divine leaf" in Ming writings.
- Note 4. Tao Yuanming (pp. 365-427), a recluse in the Jin dynasty, wrote this well-known poem to describe a peaceful rural life of a recluse, "Drinking Wine" (translation from Meng, X. 2022, retrieved from <https://poemhome.net/poetry-of-tao-yuanming/>).
- Note 5. The connection of tea and religion started in the Tang. Lu Yu, who wrote the first tea book *Cha Jing*, grew up in a Buddhist monastery, and Buddhist monk and poet Jiaoran wrote formative poems on tea. Lu Tong's famous poem "Seven bowls of tea" linked tea with Daoist enlightenment. For more, see Benn (2015).
- Note 6. The flourishing of tea books was aided by the rapid increase after the mid-Ming era in the commercial publication of books, including those guiding tastes and fashion. See Chia (2003) for more.
- Note 7. This *qinggao* was also reflected in the kinds of tea considered fitting for literati consumption. According to Tu Long's *Cha Shuo*, tea's pure fragrance and taste would be overshadowed if mixed with fruits, flowers and nuts. This "pure" style of tea was different from teas used among the common folks. The Ming novel *Jin Ping Mei* depicted common life in the city, and teas described in the novel were mostly those flavored with the exact items Tu Long said not to use. This literati pursuit of tea's purity was a sign of *qinggao* that set the literati apart from commoners.
- Note 8. Revised from translation by Jiang (2015), retrieved from <https://blog.wykontario.org/?p=20504>

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