

The way of serving “Gong-fu Cha” and its cultural background.

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The people who live in FuJian MingNan, and GuangDong ChaoXian prefer Oolong-tea, as well as the associated style of tea ceremony method of being drunk. The name “Gong-Fu Cha” originates from the method of making tea in that particular area. The reason why “Gong-Fu Cha” has attracted people’s attention as a kind of “art of drinking tea”, is that, serving it requires special techniques and high spiritual attainment.

It is said that “Gong-Fu Cha” originated in the WuYi Mountain area around the Ming Dynasty, and became popular in the FuJian and GuangDong area after the Qing Dynasty. However, if we consider it in the context of Chinese history and where OoLong-tea originated, this does not seem very convincing. The reason is that people only serve “Gong-Fu Cha” with OoLong-tea which originated in the “FengHang Mountain” in GuangDong ChaoXian, and in the AnXi area of MingNan. Moreover, a legend, dating from the Yuen Dynasty, describes how people began to get accustomed to drinking “Gong-Fu Cha” at that time in the FuJian MingNan, and GuangDong ChaoXian areas. According to this legend, the defeated nobles of the former, Song Dynasty, fled to FuJian MingNan and GuangDong ChaoXian, and popularised the drinking of OoLong-tea. Therefore, the hypothesis that “Gong-Fu Cha” originated from GuangDong ChaoXian during the Young Dynasty seems preferable.

“Gong-Fu Cha”, which is a unique method of serving OoLong-tea, comprises three essential principles.

1) Through the strict use of OoLong-tea and Zisha Pottery, the nature of ordinary people may be observed.

The “Gong-Fu Cha” method uses only OoLong-tea. Historically, certain types of OoLong-tea are regarded as top quality and appropriate for “Gong-Fu Cha”: such as, in the FuJian area: WuYi Yan Cha, WuYi-Rou Gui, WuYi Shui Xian, AnXi Tie GuanYing, Huang Jing Gui, Mao Xie, etc. In the GuangDong area: Feng Huan Dang Cong, Ling Tou Qi Lan, etc. In the TaiWan area: Dong Ding OoLong, Wen Shan BaoZhong, etc.

The tea-making equipment which is suitable for OoLong-tea when served according to the “Gong-Fu Cha” method, has been devised, based on long years of

experience. With reference to the quality of utensil material for “Gong-Fu Cha”, people tend to choose clay obtainable in the YiXing area to make pottery called “zisha”. Concerning the shape of the tea set (tea-making equipment), miniature tea sets tend to be used which are seen only in “Gong-Fu Cha”. This tea set, of which they are four types, is called “Si Bao”, and is considered to be essential for serving “Gong-Fu Cha”. The following four types of “Si Bao” tea sets are regarded as appropriate for the tea-ceremony, Chao Xiang Feng Lu, Yu Shu Cha Nian, Meng Chen Guan and Ruo Cheng Ping.

The descriptions of the “Gong-Fu Cha” tea sets have been recorded in various manuscripts: “Xia Meng Zhi” (1832), “Sui Yuan Shi Dan” (Qing, Yuan Mei), and “Ming Zha Ji” (Shi Hong Bao). For example, in “Sui Yuan Shi Dan”, a tea set which was popular in the FuJian WuYi Mountain area in the Qing Dynasty is described as follows: “The teacup is as small as a walnut, and the teapot as small as a pomander.” This kind of description also appears in the “Xia Meng Zhi” and “Ming Zha Ji” documents. Today, the tea set used for serving “Gong-Fu Cha” in the WuYi Mountain area, Ming Nan, and Guang Dong Chao Xian still retains this tradition. However, nowadays, the tea sets displayed during the tea ceremony in commercialized tea houses have become more diverse and complicated. These include sets such as: Dian Lu, Jiu Jing Lu, Shui Shou Pao, Gong Dao Bei, Wen Xian Bei, Cha Tuo, Cha Dao Yi Shi, Cha Chuan, Cha Pan, etc.

Compared with the “Dou Cha” method of serving tea, which was popularized by the nobles in the Song Dynasty, “Gong-Fu Cha”, served with OoLong tea, and using ZiSha pottery, was claimed to be “just right” for the “common” people. “Dou Cha” was seen to be an extravagant consumption product for the upper-class, and “Gong-Fu Cha” was enjoyed only by so-called common people. First, the tea they used was different. Tuan Cha was very expensive, and could be afforded by only a few members of the nobility. However, OoLong tea was inexpensive, could be enjoyed by the common people. Secondly, the tea sets they used were very different. As is clearly recorded in the document “Cha Lu” (Cai Xiang), “Dou Cha” only used tea sets made from gold and silver, whereas those using the “Gong-Fu” tea-making method were of pottery. Moreover, concerning the tea-ceremony itself, the “Dou Cha” method was regarded as an opportunity for competing and ostentatious flaunting, whereas the “Gong-Fu Cha” method was intended to release mental fatigue, and enable one to commune with nature.

2) The rationale behind the manner of serving is based on the quality of tea used.

It is commonly known that deliciousness of tea depends greatly on the temperature and quality of water. This is equally true for "Gong-Fu Cha". An acceptable "Gong-Fu Cha" serving method, based on the quality of OoLong tea, can be described in 8 characters: "Shao Bei, Re Guan, Gao Chong, Di Zhen". The "Gong-Fu Cha" method follows 4 principles: Zhu Shui, Chong Pao, Ping Min, Qing Jie, necessary to perform the process of serving. Today, the standard manner of serving "Gong-Fu Cha" includes 10 stages as follows: Huang Huo, Xia Xiu Shui, Jian Cha, Zhuang Cha, Re Guan, Shao Bei, Gao Chong, Di Zhen, Gai Mo, and Lin Ding.

The above stages are described as follows:

"Huang Huo, and Xia Xiu Shui" are the first stages of serving "Gong-Fu Cha". These Chinese characters literally mean "low flame / gently simmering water". According to the "Gong-Fu Cha" method, important factors are: good quality of water, special kindling, and the method of boiling water. It is considered that the spring water from mountains and valleys is the best type of water to make tea. However, laying stress on the good quality of water is not enough to make delicious tea. According to Cai Xiang, the author of "Cha Lu" (mentioned above), the method of boiling water is the most important and difficult point for making tea. If the water has not boiled properly, the scum will rise, and when the water is overboiled, the tea will sink completely. The best method of boiling water is considered to be to allow it to reach only a very early stage in boiling, commonly called "Xia Xiu Shui", (moustache of shrimp) because the surface of the water resembles the wavy lines of a shrimp's "moustache". Moreover, the kindling is another most important factor. Ideally, the residue of sweet cane, charcoal, and olive-pith are the best materials for making tea.

"Jian Cha Zhuang Cha & Re Guan Shao Bei" are the second stages of serving tea, which take place while the water is being boiled. The process is described as follows. Firstly, the guests are allowed to savour the fragrance and colour of the tea. Secondly, the tea cups are dipped in boiling water to warm them, and hot water is poured onto the lid of the tea pot. Thirdly, the tea is put into the tea pot in three layers: (from the bottom to the top) tea dust, tea leaves, and tea stems.

"Gao Chong and Di Zhen" are the critical stages of serving "Gong-Fu Cha". "Gao Chong" is the first action of pouring boiled water from height to make the tea "dance". It is said that "Gao Chong" is the most effective method of releasing OoLong tea's special delicate fragrance, and creating a delicious taste. "Di Zhen" is

a description of the second action of pouring tea into tea cups from a low height, with the spout of the tea pot touching the cup. By using the “Di Zhen” method, overflowing can be prevented, and the fragrance of OoLong tea retained in the cup for maximum enjoyment.

“Gai Mo and Lin Ding” are the final stages of removing tea scum, and pouring hot water on the surface of the tea pot. As OoLong tea requires a high temperature to achieve a delicious taste, it is necessary to use the “Lin Ding” method (pouring water) repeatedly.

3) Aestheticism is achieved through knowledge, education and grace.

“Gong-Fu Cha” has evolved a kind of elegant, aesthetic ideal of tea-drinking culture, and “Cha Yi” (art of drinking tea) has become popular in China today. Pursuing education, grace and knowledge through drinking tea has become a goal for all tea masters. Especially, in the old days, the custom of drinking tea became popular among artists and literati who developed tea culture from an event of daily life to the realm of an art form. Many works concerning the art of tea making (tea ceremony) can be found in Chinese history. For example, poets of the Tang Dynasty: Li Bai, Du Fu, and Bai Jiu Yi, the painter Tan Ying, poets of the Song Dynasty, Shu Dong Po, Lu You, and Zhu Xi, all depicted the culture of tea drinking in their works.

In fact, those poems and artists’ works concerning tea not only describe dining habits, but also depict higher mental pursuits beyond mere drinking. “Gong-Fu Cha” furthers this tradition, and displays inner beauty by using poetic language during the process of serving. This use of poetic language indicates that “Gong-Fu Cha” has developed into a refined culture.

In general, through the three characteristics of “Gong-Fu Cha” discussed above, it is clear that it has been developed into a unique culture by past tea masters. The reason why “Gong-Fu Cha” has become popular in China today, is that, as well as being enjoyable, tea-drinking is also considered to be a crystallization of classical Chinese Culture, indicating education, knowledge and high manners. Especially, the poetic language used when serving, reflects Chinese history and culture.

“Gong-Fu Cha”, is a time for reflection... Reflection on our history, our traditions, and our culture. A time to recall old friends and great masters of the tea-ceremony.