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Cultural and Philosophical Beliefs in Tea Poetry

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Cultural and Philosophical Beliefs in Tea Poetry

Abstract

Tea is a commodity that has greatly changed the course of history. One example of the influence of tea is in poetry. This project analyzes some examples of tea poetry from China and Japan to understand how tea in poetry conveys cultural and philosophical beliefs of given time periods. China and Japan are looked at collectively because their histories are very entwined. In the two Chinese poems, tea is tied to hierarchical relations and the importance of Taoism. In the Japanese poems, tea is greatly related to nature and appreciating simplicity. Three of the four poems are a reaction to living in times of turbulence; thus, tea was used as a means of escape. Lastly, tea is so valued by these poets for its positive connection to physical and mental wellbeing.

Keywords

Tea, philosophy, culture, China, Japan

Disciplines

Asian History | East Asian Languages and Societies | Philosophy

Comments

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Cultural and Philosophical Beliefs in Tea Poetry

1 INTRODUCTION

Tea is a commodity that has greatly changed the course of history. One example of the influence of tea is in poetry. This project analyzes some examples of tea poetry from China and Japan to understand how tea in poetry conveys cultural and philosophical beliefs of given time periods. China and Japan are looked at collectively because their histories are very entwined. In the two Chinese poems, tea is tied to hierarchical relations and the importance of Taoism. In the Japanese poems, tea is greatly related to nature and appreciating simplicity. Three of the four poems are a reaction to living in times of turbulence; thus, tea was used as a means of escape. Lastly, tea is so valued by these poets for its positive connection to physical and mental wellbeing.

2 METHODOLOGY

Books, magazines, and scholarly articles were the main sources of information used for this research project. Every poem that was analyzed came from some sort of grander text or narrative. One important note to make is that there is less information on the older poets because their material has had more time to be lost. Another limiting factor includes the language barrier. Every poem analyzed was either translated from Chinese or Japanese into English. Therefore the translation affects how different words in the poetry emphasize different themes.

3 "SEVEN CUPS OF TEA" BY LU TONG (790-835 CE CHINA)

The first bowl moistens my lips and throat.
The second bowl banishes my loneliness and melancholy.
The third bowl penetrates my withered entrails,
Finding nothing there except five thousand scrolls of writing.
The fourth bowl raises a light perspiration,
As all the inequities I have suffered in my life,
Are flushed out through my pores.
The fifth bowl purifies my flesh and bones.
The sixth bowl allows me to communicate with immortals.
The seventh bowl I need not drink,
I am only aware of a pure wind rising beneath my two arms.



Lu Tong and Servant (1788)
painted by Min Zhen

From a cultural and philosophical perspective, Lu Tong's poem interweaves the spiritual with the natural. Through his poem, Lu illuminates that Chinese culture in the ninth century centered around religious ideals. In this case, an important Taoist ideal is finding purity in oneself. Another important aspect in Lu's poem is how he is writing this poem to his superior, Censor Meng, to thank him for sending him quality tea. This reflects that tea was a prized gift that meant respect between individuals. In glorifying the Imperial Tribute Tea he received, Lu honors his superiors and thus makes tea elite which consequently helps the spread.

4 "TRANSCENDENT'S PALM TEA" BY LI BAI (701-762 CE CHINA)



Li Bai 李白 (1833-1834)
diptych print by Katsushika
Hokusai

I once heard of the Jade Spring Mountain,
Many of its mountain caves are stalactite caverns.
There, transcendent bats as big as white ravens,
Hang upside down, reflected like the moon in the clear streams.
Tea plants grow from rocks in the midst of this,
While the Jade Spring flows, never ending.
The roots and branches are doused with fragrant juice.
Once picked and consumed, the tea will nourish the muscles
and bones.
Old bushes, their green leaves curled up,
Their branches intertwined.
When the tea is dried, it makes the shape of a transcendent's palm
With which one might pat Hongya on the
Shoulder.
Such a thing has never been seen in the world,
Indeed, who has ever even passed on its name?
You, Nephew Ying, the dhyana master,
Have sent me this along with fine verses.
Your clear mirror reflects Wu Yan,
I look at myself, put to shame by Xi Shi's beauty.
In the morning I sit with ample delight,
Sending up a long chant to all the various deities.

Similar to the "Seven Cups of Tea" that Lu Tong writes, this poem is receiving tea as a gift. Li's poem addresses a Buddhist monk (his nephew) to thank him for giving him tea. One important theme in Li's poem is longevity which is a Taoist belief. Taoists did not focus on the afterlife but rather on how to lengthen their life on Earth and purify the world. They used elixirs, such as tea in Li Bai's case, to reach their goal. Li goes so far as to claim that tea is the holy elixir to immortality. Many Taoists began drinking tea because tea is known to have many health benefits.

5 TEA MASTER SEN NO RIKYU (1521-1591 JAPAN)

The court is left covered
With the fallen leaves
Of the pine tree;
No dust is stirred,
And calm is my mind!

The moonlight
Far up in the sky
Looking through the eaves,
Shines on a mind
Undisturbed with remorse.

Rikyu's poem reflects the 16th century culture of Japan because he shows that people came to the tearoom as a sanctuary to find refuge from the turmoil. In Rikyu helping develop wabi, he can appreciate the outside view from the tearoom without being distracted by the inner tearoom. Therefore, culturally Japan began to move towards tea practices that were simpler, less grandiose. Additionally, Rikyu is commenting on the philosophical and religious beliefs of the time that many Japanese held. Zen was very popular in a time of unrest (just like the tearoom) because it gave people the resources to mindfulness.



Portrait of Sen no Rikyu with his
Death Poem by unknown

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6 HAIKU MASTER MATSUO BASHO (1644-1694 JAPAN)

Fuji's shape: a tea grinder
covered with a cloth
on the back of a flea.

In this simple haiku, Basho is commenting on Toyotomi Hideyoshi (as the flea) who tried to rule Japan and yet his goals were too great. The importance in this haiku culturally is that it comments on how tea was used for power in 16th and 17th century Japan. Philosophically, there is not much in this poem, but Basho's style is a commentary on the simplistic.



Portrait of Basho (late 18th century)
by Hokusai

7 CONCLUDING ANALYSIS

In conclusion, three of the four poets lived in unstable time periods where they used tea as a means of escape. Lu Tong and Li Bai highlight the importance of hierarchy and relationships in China because they both wrote about receiving tea from a superior and thanking them. Both Chinese poets also greatly mentioned Taoism, striving for purity, and the health benefits of tea. China influenced and shaped Japan's love for tea. In Japan, Sen no Rikyu was a tea connoisseur who practiced Zen and Matsuo Basho believed in Taoism. Sen no Rikyu used tea poetry to show how tea helps lead to a pure state of mind. Both Japanese poets also connected tea with nature. Matsuo Basho then adds how tea can be an instrument of power, but what is beautiful about tea is the simplicity in it. Tea has been handed down generation after generation for a range of purposes. In modern times, tea continues to be used for physical and spiritual health, gift giving, and connecting with others.

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