

A Quintessential Invention: Genesis of a Cultural Orthodoxy in East Asian Tea Appreciation

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The practice of gongfu cha 功夫茶 is popularly considered as a key element of Chinese tea consumption methodology, and a unique product of an indigenous cultural repertoire spanning several thousand years. However, upon closer examination of its historical ancestry, one can discern aspects of this practice which have their origins in the Japanese tea tradition mixed in with native Chinese practices, re-invented through interpretation, and incorporated, but commonly unacknowledged, as a type of Chinese ritual service and potation of tea. Gongfu cha has subsequently been adopted by a multi-national group of tea aficionados as a long-standing Chinese custom and adapted in South Korea as an influence on contemporary renditions of the tea ceremony (darye 茶禮) that evolved in the Joseon dynasty (CE 1392–1897).

This paper will trace the historicization of gongfu cha, from its origins in the Chaozhou region in China to its adoption as a pan-China practice of tea drinking. Particular attention will be paid to how this custom has been endowed with a synthetic and national-specific history that imbues it with greater longevity and homogenous descent from older forms of Chinese tea service, while dissociating it with possible influences from foreign practices which are themselves products of earlier Chinese influence in the Song and Ming dynasties. Furthermore, this paper will explore how the propagation of gongfu cha heritage simultaneously illustrates and challenges the assumption of unidirectional cultural transmission among China, Japan, and Korea. Rather than essentializing what may be considered uniquely Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, or as simple adaptations of customs originating from one of the three civilization zones, practices such as gongfu cha epitomize the organic synergy of beliefs and behaviors that can be assessed holistically as Asian and whose origins lie in much earlier times than the twenty-first century.