

A Study of Differences in Tea Culture between UK and China

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Abstract

Tea is a kind of beverages from China. It was introduced into Europe and became very popular in the UK. Both China and UK are the tea-drinking countries. Each represents a unique tea culture in different styles, and a manifestation of their traditional civilization and culture. Tea is an essential daily necessity in China and UK. So, this thesis is going to discuss historical origins, customs of drinking tea, differences in “teahouse” culture, its influences, and so on. It aims to find the differences in tea culture between the two countries from the cultural view, and discover the cross-cultural communication differences in a deep way.

Keywords

Tea culture; difference; cross-cultural communication.

1. Differences between Chinese Tea and British Tea

1.1. Customs in the Two Countries

1.1.1. Chinese

Since time immemorial, tea has been the major drink of the Chinese people and has been indispensable in life. Tea, in the past, was admired by the upper-classes for its pure and elegant quality. Tea-tasting was considered a refined cultural activity and an artistic preoccupation for Chinese literati and officialdom. Tea and tea-related activities have penetrated various aspects of social life and take on unique cultural characteristics.

China is a big country with numerous nations. The history, culture, geography and environment of all the nations vary, and so their habits, customs of drinking tea vary, too. The people of Dai Zu drink bamboo tube fragrant tea. The people of Miao Zu drink the oil tea. Almost every nation has its own favorite kinds of tea.

The Han Nation: They usually prefer green tea, black tea or oolong tea. They like the pure taste. However, the Tibetans like butter tea best, which has a rich taste of sweetness. The Tibetans think that this kind of tea can warm up their body and resist the cold. Moreover, butter tea is a special product in that area, which has a symbol of a happy marriage in a wedding ceremony. Yet, the Mongolian people prefer salty milk tea. This kind of tea is made by mixing tea, milk and salt. It seems simple, but in fact it involves several techniques.

In China, offering tea has several typical meanings. First, show respect to other people, for example, the younger generation usually shows their respect to the older generation by offering a cup of tea in China. Besides, when guests arrive, the hosts will immediately offer tea. Serving a cup of tea is not only a means of showing politeness, but also showing respect to visitors. Second, apologize to others, when we want to make an apology, which is beyond words, we may pour tea and apologize. We can invite the person to our home or a teahouse. Third, show gratitude to the elders on the wedding day. In Chinese wedding custom, bridegroom and bride would serve tea to both parents to show their gratitude and respect. They would say, “Thank you for bringing us up.” or something else. And the parents will drink a small portion of tea and then give them the red envelopes, which mean good luck to the younger generation.

Offering tea to guests is one of our Chinese traditional virtues of hospitality and courtesy of the Han people. Until now, when visitors visit other people, the hosts also brew a cup of tea for the guests. At festive activities, they like to offer the refreshments.

“The friendship between gentlemen appears indifferent but is pure like water”(“君子之交淡如水”). Here “water” means “tea”. The tea ceremony was a grand etiquette in the ancient weddings. The tea tree only grows up to adulthood in the seeds, which can not be transferred, otherwise it will die. So the tea is regarded as an unwavering symbol. Therefore, the tea offering is still used in today’s wedding ceremony.

1.1.2. British

In the UK, black tea is always served with milk and sometimes with sugar. Strong tea is often served in a mug with lots of milk and usually two spoons of sugar. Actually, British people drink as many as six cups of tea every day.

For British, tea is not only a name of beverage, but also a “meal”. For the upper class people, tea is an afternoon meal, usually with sandwiches, cake and some biscuits. However, for the working class people, tea is often served as an evening meal. It is served after the family arrive home from work or school. But for working people, they have the “tea break” in the afternoon. At that time, the employees can have a break and talk with each other for relaxation.

In the middle of the 18th century, the most popular custom was to have sumptuous breakfast, simple lunch, and abundant dinner after eight o’clock in the evening. The time between two meals was very long. Some aristocrat women liked to eat some dessert at about five o’clock in the afternoon, and then drink tea very slowly. So afternoon tea as an upper-classed manner prevailed gradually and quickly spread to the civilian society. Soon, it became a distinctively ethnic characteristic, named as “the British Dim Sum Way”. In the late 19th century, tea became very popular due to falling prices of leaves. Because of that, leaves also officially became a British drink. At the end of 19th century, it was hard to distinguish between “tea” and “British”. You could not take them apart and find the real meaning.

The most famous type of tea time must be “afternoon tea” in the United Kingdom. Afternoon tea is a very British tradition. A famous American writer, Henry James, once said, “There are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea.” Anna, the 7th Duchess of Bedford is often credited with the invention of the tradition of afternoon tea in the early 1840s. Traditionally, dinner was not served until 8:30 or 9:00 in the evening and the Duchess often became hungry, especially in summer when dinner was served even later. She ordered a small meal of bread, butter, and other niceties, such as cake, tarts, and biscuits, to be brought secretly to her boudoir. When she was exposed she was not ridiculed, as she had feared, but her habit caught on and the concept of a small meal, of niceties and perhaps tea, became popular and eventually known as “afternoon tea”.⁷It is obvious that the origins of afternoon tea can not be credited to only one woman.

Nowadays, The British people are accustomed to have three meals and two teas every day. After people work or study for some time, they need to stop and have a rest for about fifteen or twenty minutes. Have a cup of tea, eat some muffins and relax. There exist unshakeable British tea breaks. Tea break is generally twice a day: morning tea and afternoon tea. Morning tea is at eleven in general (equivalent to 10 o’clock in the morning in Asia). In UK, people have morning meal at eleven or “drink a cup of eleven’s”. Afternoon tea is always at four or five o’clock in the afternoon.

1.2. The Comparison Between the Two Countries

1.2.1. Similarity

From the introduction to tea culture in both China and Britain and the customs in the two countries, we can learn that these two nations have both similarities and differences.

In terms of the former one, in my opinion, it can be separated into 3 parts, and every part is closely connected with each other. First, tea is very important to both nations. Both countries have a very long history and they almost drink the same kinds of tea, such as green tea, oolong tea, black tea and so on. Second, every day, people from the two countries drink tea at some certain time. Although the traditional drinking tea time in Britain and China is different from each other, they still share the same feeling and fancy on tea. Third, both countries put emphasis on drinking tea. The old people in China have a cup of tea every morning, and instead, the younger generation will have it when they come to offices. However, in Britain, people have a tea-break during their busy work. On weekends, they have afternoon tea with friends.

1.2.2. Difference

Now let's turn to the latter one. It seems that difference is always more important than similarity, for it is difference that distinguishes one from another. I think differences can be divided into 4 parts.

First of all, the people of both countries share the different tea time. As every Chinese person knows that people in Guangdong Province or Hong Kong have the habit to drink morning tea in a typical restaurant. Lots of people sit there, most of whom come with their families. Usually, the busiest time is at eight or nine o'clock in the morning. They talk with each other and choose whatever they want to eat. It is very relaxing and comfortable for them. They enjoy the pleasure there very much. However, in Britain, they usually have afternoon tea with some cakes, sandwiches or biscuits. In terms of the working and farming people, afternoon tea usually becomes high tea. As the main meal in a day, high tea is served between the afternoon meal and dinner at seven or eight in the evening.

Secondly, people's tastes are different. The Chinese people like to drink bitter taste of green tea and are particular about tea flavor. But British mainly drink milk tea and they add milk and sugar in the tea. Some people even like to add lemon juice in pure tea. Most Chinese people like to drink green tea, and the British drink black tea. It is said that green tea is hard to keep in a long distance journey, while black tea is fully fermented tea and easy to mold. But another reason is that green tea is cold and black tea is warm. The United Kingdom is surrounded by seas in nature and it is cold and wet all the year around. They drink warm black tea, therefore, the climate determines the people's choices.

Third, utensils are different. In China, in line with my own childhood memory, every morning my grandfather would make tea in his own special teapot instead of in a glass. A few minutes later, when the tea was ready to drink, my grandfather would drink from the "mouth" of teapot directly. The famous Chinese pop song singer Jay Zhou wrote, "The tea made by grandfather has a smell named 'home'."¹² In the UK, what I saw in the movies is the beautiful and elegant cups and teapots. In Shanghai, I went to a very famous and native teahouse to enjoy afternoon tea. There, the utensils are so beautiful, and the small cupcakes, biscuits are so delicate that I am not willing to drink or eat them. This is the upper class tea time. I enjoyed it very much.

The last difference is the tea manners. A passage from Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, first published in 1853 describes a typical English tea time around the tea table: "How pleasant it was in its air of perfect domestic comfort! How warm in its amber lamp-light and vermilion fire-flush! To render the picture perfect, tea stood ready on the table—an English tea, where of the whole shining service glanced at me familiarly; from the solid silver urn, of antique pattern, and the massive pot of the same metal, to the thin porcelain cups, dark with purple and gilding. I knew the very seed-cake of peculiar form, baked in a peculiar mould, which always had a place on the tea-table at Bretton. Graham liked it, and there it was as of yore—set before Graham's plate with the silver knife and fork beside it."

We can see that the British people place importance on drinking tea. However, Chinese pay more attention to the procedures when they are drinking tea. Gongfu chadao is very famous in

China. It is a tradition in Chaoshan. The Chinese people often go to a formal teahouse to enjoy tea time on weekends. It is a kind of tea art to welcome the guests. Here I describe the procedure of the Gongfu tea: First, boil water and rinse teapot with hot water. Second, fill the teapot with leaves up to one-third of the height of the pot. Third, rinse the leaves by filling with hot water up to half full and so on. Gongfu Chadao is a very difficult and complicated art in China. The Gongfu tea smells good and it is different from the tea we drink at home or made by ourselves. More important, it is also an enjoyment when you watch all the procedure ritual in Gongfu tea. You will feel more peaceful and relax yourself during that time.

2. Some Suggestions on Cross-Cultural Communicatio

2.1. Mutual Respect Between Each Other

Cross-cultural differences are not only limited to language, food or dance, but also in a variety of human interactions between international tourists and local hosts, including their non-verbal behavior, religious beliefs, time orientation, and attitude to privacy, their manners, customs, and forms of address, body language or gestures.

So when learning in different cultures, we must pay attention to the cross-cultural communication. When we have no idea how to deal with it, we should study their culture in a polite way. For example, when we have a meal in a foreign country, maybe the food is not as delicious as that in the home town. We may not like the tastes or making methods, but we can have a try to eat them. After that, if the food is exactly not as good as we think, we can give it up. Otherwise, we may learn a new style of food there. It is a very interesting try.

2.2. Consideration about the Locals

Actually, the true benefit is for the government, and the direct victims are the locals, because it is locals who are intruded. So local people's benefit or loss should be taken into serious consideration. And it is good if the development can make contributions to their living standard. As we all know, many minority nationalities in China have their own tea varieties, so it is also a good way to develop their own tea business in their areas. These businesses can not only increase their income, but also they can be developed into scenic spots for people.

2.3. Combination with Culture Itself

Culture variety is now the hot topic all over the world. Tea culture is an essential part. We can learn as much as we can from tea culture between China and Britain. From the thesis above, the differences between the two countries are closely connected with their own national culture. So by learning one nation's culture, people should select the essence and discard the dross.

3. Conclusion

In the long history of human being's evolvement, tea culture has developed dramatically varying from country to country. Basically, tea has been a popular non-alcohol drinking in the world, of which the birth place is China. In the 21st century when the tea has been a fashion, there is a unprecedented development and improvement of tea culture. However, there exist big differences between China and British in drinking time, person who drink tea, tea ceremony and tea house culture. The tea refers to some culture, some spirit and some aesthetic sentiment in China. This also reflects the discrepancy between China and British. To Chinese people, people who really know the exact process of making tea are become less, even some kinds of tea-making have already missed. As the intercommunication between countries and nations is becoming frequent and convenient, the idea that tea makes the world become better is desired by more and more people. Reform and creation of the traditional culture of our country not

only makes our country more diverse, but also make the whole know the traditional Chinese culture. Tea culture will become a forever brilliant flower in international catering culture.

From all the materials I have collected and all the analyses I have made, I can conclude that: first, Chinese and British tea culture are different in many aspects; second, these differences can reflect the differences in origins and customs; third, based on many researchers who probe into the question what causes the differences, I put forward a new perspective of social transformation with examples to explain; fourth, according to the cultural differences, I make some suggestions on the cross-cultural communication. Tea is becoming more and more popular in the world. So a study of differences of tea culture in the two countries is necessary and helpful for us to ease friction, promote friendship between Western countries and China and boost the development of tea culture.

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