

THE TEA SAGES OF KOREAN SACRED MOUNTAINS

BY JEFFREY MCCLOUD

In 1992, at the age of 18, I grew disillusioned with my studies in America, and left seeking experience beyond the dusty books and stuffy classrooms. I moved to Chuncheon, Korea, to learn from Lee Wei Soo, a Korean national treasure, writer, artist and thinker. I was there to study writing, art, philosophy and culture but what I discovered changed the direction of my life forever: the Way of Tea, Cha Dao.

I've since traveled enough to see that Cha Dao steeps in the quiet places of most all nations, though no fragrance seems to perfume my sessions as strongly or reminiscently as the place where I first encountered tea, Korea. The variety of tea and tea culture in Korea may seem less than elsewhere in Asia, but what they lack in selection, they make up for in spirit, Dao.

Cha Dao, not to be confused with Cha Yi, the art of tea, has survived since ancient times in the sacred mountains of Korea. People there have preserved the original traditions handed down from their elders, practicing and living tea as a Way, an herbal shamanism—medicine and meditation extending back to ancient China and Mongolia. With an unassuming manner they have kept the spirit of tea alive, even as it has retreated deeper into the mountains over the ages, to escape foreign invasion, political and cultural changes and even modern innovation.

Korean history begins as far back as 2333 BCE, when a tribal chieftain named Dangun united the warring tribes, forming East Asia's earliest united nation, which he called "Go-Chosum." In ancient Chinese texts, Korea was referred to as "Rivers and Mountains Embroidered on Silk", and/or "Eastern Nation of Refinement". In 108 BCE the Han Chinese took over Go-Chosum, influencing every aspect of aboriginal culture, including tea.

The Korean peninsula came into contact with the Leaf on a larger scale in trading with China during the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE), which was the middle of Korea's Three Kingdoms Period. Koreans have



Lee Wei Soo, a Korean national treasure, writer, artist and thinker.

always had a close relationship with China, whether in trade or battle, like the wars waged through the Sui and Tang times. Tea was introduced earlier with China's Yan and Qi tribes, but trade really started during the Tang Dynasty. At that time, Korea's Manchurian outposts reached as far south as the outskirts of Beijing itself. Once these fell to the Chinese, and things pacified, a trade route connecting Korea all the way to Persia via the Silk Road was established. Trade eventually reached as far south on the Peninsula as P'yŏngyang and Seoul. Persians wrote in 845, "Beyond China is a land where gold abounds and which is named Silla. The Muslims who have gone there have been charmed by the country and tend to settle there and abandon all idea of leaving."

The three main kingdoms during this time were Koryŏ (Goguryeo), Silla and Baekje, together forming the peninsula and some of Manchuria. The name 'Koryŏ' is what 'Korea' was anglicized into. These early Koreans' long-standing connection with Mongolian cul-



The three ancient kingdoms of Korea

They are said to have brought with them riches from their land, including tea plants from northern Thailand. The similarities of Korean and Thai celadon, among other things, suggests there may be some truth to the story. The princess is known historically as Queen Heo Hwang-ok, wife of Kim Suro, emperor of the Gaya Kingdom (42-562). The seeds she brought with her dowry are said to have been planted in the Jirisa Mountains, in what is now Hadong County. This is still the farming capital of Korean green tea.

In tracing the development of Cha Dao in Korea, we can divide its evolution into three stages, discussing each one in further detail: First, there was the traditional shamanism, called “*San-Shin*”; secondly, the arrival of Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, which would of course affect all manners of life—cultural, spiritual and aesthetic; and finally, the development of a characteristic Way of Tea that is individually Korean in taste and design, amalgamated from traditional and borrowed influences, and for the most part still practiced today.

Shamanism

Traditional “Shamanism” existed in Korea before the arrival of other Asian spiritual traditions and philosophy. The shaman is called ‘*mudang*’ in Korea, and was greatly respected within the social structure. This “*San-Shin* (Mountain Spirit)” philosophy underlay all Korean thought, aesthetics and daily life. As Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism arrived from the Mainland, each was slowly incorporated into the native shamanistic practice and thought, creating a new syncretic spiritual philosophy. Koreans were open-minded and accepted any foreign thoughtways that harmonized well with their traditional ideals, and this has kept the “*San-Shin*” traditions alive even up into the 21st century. While so many modern countries were abandoning their ancestral ways, Korea continued to embrace its innate wisdom.

ture can be seen in Korean architecture, design, clothes and color and the local shamanism that was practiced by the different clans. Each kingdom, made up of these smaller clans, all vied for power but shared a common cultural and ethnic background. The Chinese tried to use this to their advantage by backing various coups throughout history. At one point the kingdoms were forcefully united by the Silla with the subversive help of China’s Tang military (660’s). The unity lasted only a short time. Korea was truly nationalized by the Koryŏ in 918.

There is a legend about how tea arrived in Korea: Princess Ho Hwang-ok and her older brother Po-ok came from Ayutthaya, the Ancient capital of Thailand, with an envoy in order to marry the prince of the Gaya Kingdom, which was on the Southern tip of Korea.

Shamanism is often seen as “nature worship”, and viewed as a crude or backward faith. Much of what is done in *San-Shin* is actually “nature acknowledgement” and respect for the laws that govern our world. The simple ceremonies to be had in rock, waterfall, under trees or on a cliff may not have the grandeur of elaborate festivals held in large temples, but the practitioners may cultivate a deep affinity with Nature. They understand the Earth in ways modern society needs more than ever, especially with all the environmental issues pressing contemporary civilization. The ancient shamans knew of energy, and the places it is focused through internal geomancy (*Feng Shui*). They were Korea’s first conservationists, with a wisdom that the Earth itself affects our consciousness and health as beings. The Earth’s energies were represented in *San-Shin* as animistic: human or natural forms such as tigers, turtles, cranes, flowers or rocks. This wasn’t meant to be literal, but a language created by observing life, with shared images used to describe the energy of a particular area or phenomenon.

The preparation of local herbs steeped in bowls was common amongst the shamans. These mountain sages were adept healers, practicing traditional medicine, *qi gong*, natural sciences like geology and astronomy, and art—later with the “*wabi-sabi*” aesthetic of Korean and Japanese tea cultures. When people needed healing or sage advice they went to the mountains to seek guidance from such mystics.

When tea arrived with Chinese monks and scholars of Daoism and Buddhism, such recluses sought out the same places that the shamans were inhabiting, both because they shared the same understanding of *Feng Shui* and because such secluded mountains offer everything such ascetic forms of spirituality wish for in a monastery. When the native mountain sages drank the Leaf, they understood its character immediately, and added it to their traditional pharmacopeia. In fact, the different naturalistic aesthetics we see in the tea cultures

of China, Korea and the Japan are similar because they were all influenced by such traditional shamanism as that found in Korea, blended with localized culture and the philosophical ideals of Daoism, Confucianism and/or Buddhism.

The Three Religions

Buddhism was introduced to Korea in 372 when the Qin ruler, Fu Jian, sent a Chinese monk by the name of Shun Dao and his fellow acolytes to King Sosurim of the Northern Kingdom of Koryŏ. The King received their gifts, statues, tea, incense and scrolls and built temples for the monks to reside in so they could spread the teachings. This early form of Buddhism was less dogmatic, and more easily accepted by common-



Korean Buddhist master



ers who's shamanistic beliefs were naturally concordant with some of the teachings of the Buddha, such as the law of cause and effect (*Karma*) and the search for inner peace through meditation. Buddhism came to Korea at a time of cultural and political instability and people were searching for peace. The two other Kingdoms would be converted as well in the centuries to come.

Tea had already influenced the myriad temples, hermitages and monasteries throughout China, and since temples in Korea were built

for the same tradition of monks to practice and spread teachings, the Way of Tea was spread too. In fact, tea has long been an inherent part of the spiritual and daily monastic life everywhere in Asia, and continues this tradition even in modern times. This explains the popularity of a Way of Tea, as tea and spirituality drifted on the currents of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, beloved to most all the scholars, monks and nuns of these traditions. In light of that we have such sayings as “Teism is Daoism in disguise” or “The taste of Zen and the taste of tea are the same”, expressing that tea is the perfect allegory for deeper spiritual thought and practice—in its taste, ability to inspire dialogue with Nature, as well as the lessons and preparation that come with learning the Way of Tea. Ch'ungdam, a monk and poet who lived in Korea during the reign of King Kyongdok (742-765), is said to have started the tradition of the Buddhist tea rite by making regular offerings of tea to Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, on Samhwaryong Hill on Mt. Namsan in Kyongju.

Confucianism reached Korea about the same time as Buddhism, though it wasn't as widely accepted until the nationalization of the peninsula by the Koryŏ Kingdom. As I mentioned above, Buddhist ideas of suffering and cause and effect were not only more aligned

with the existing shamanism, they also appealed to those living in the political distress before unification.

The first schools and universities were founded by the new kingdom in the hope of raising the standard of “refinement” and understanding amongst the populous. Since tea was the drink of monks and royalty both, it quickly became popular amongst scholars, artists, and literati as well, many of which were immersing with more Confucianist ideas. An exchange of tea and tea culture had already been happening earlier

through travelers, wandering monks, soldiers, nomads and merchants, though not as much as what would occur once the scholarly class started drinking a lot of tea and then promoting it through their writings/paintings.

Daoism arrived in 624 CE and with it, more ideas about tea. This time, the Chinese Emperor Gao Zu, founder of the Tang Dynasty, sent a Daoist preacher with the writings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu to the Koryŏ

Kingdom. The Daoist teachings were welcomed just as Buddhism had been earlier, mostly by the Koryŏ king and the ruling class. As with Buddhism, it would seem that the traditional Korean shamanism shared a lot of commonalities with Daoism, and acceptance therefore came easily. Many Buddhist temples were converted into Daoist temples over the next 30 years, mostly through royal support. It was the King's hope that the religious ideals of Buddhism and later Daoism, as well as the refinement and morality of Confucianism would help unite the warring clans and nationalize the peninsula. The royal support of Daoism was just an extension of this trend.

The royal support of Daoism didn't last for long after those thirty years, but the effects of Daoist thought can be seen throughout Korean culture even today. The most obvious example is of course the Korean flag/ensign, with the “Taeguk”, which is the symbol of Tai



Ji, “The Supreme Ultimate” or *Yin Yang*, with I-Ching hexagrams flanking each direction, ||| Force, || Field, || Radiance, and ||| Gorge.

In the end, the cultural development of Korea—its spirituality, art, tea and ways of life were all dramatically impacted by an amalgamation of Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian thought with a traditional shamanistic base. The same can be said for much of East Asia in fact, including China and Japan.

Korean Tea

In 918 CE, when the largest of the ‘Three Kingdoms,’ the Koryŏ, of the northern peninsula and Manchuria eventually nationalized the country under one flag, they absorbed the other, smaller kingdoms. A time of relative peace followed, encouraging the development of Buddhist, Confucian and Daoist arts, crafts, writing, thought and trade. This period could be called the birth of ‘Teism’ in Korea, though earlier traditions and ways of tea did exist with herbalist shamans and borrowed traditions of China. The incorporation of the teachings and ways of Confucianism, Daoism and especially Buddhism swept across the peninsula and prospered more than ever, backed by the wealth of royalty and aristocrats.

Tea and tea culture quietly began to take root in the kingdom, mostly in the southern mountains. Though the Koryŏ of the north were earlier introduced to tea and became one of China's first importers, it was the Silla of the South that began to cultivate the trees deep in the foggy hills of their sacred mountains. Early envoys from the Tang Dynasty had also come to visit the Silla Kingdom, bringing tea there before the nationalization occurred. Later Kim Daeryeom, a Korean envoy to the Tang court, smuggled back seeds from China sewn into his robe, since, at that time, China desired to maintain a tight monopoly on the tea industry. They were looking to Korea for tea trade, not for independent production. Though tea was often given as a gift, seeds were not. According to legend, the seeds Kim Daeryeom

brought back were planted by order of the Silla King on the southerly hills under Jiri-Mountain's revered “Three-Spirit Peak (*Sam Shin-Bong*)”, in what is now Hadong County. The seeds were planted near temples and cared for by the monks or nuns there. As with China, tea had an affinity with the high mountain climates ascetics also preferred. Later, small agricultural villages formed around the native tea industry, and the place became known as “Tachon.”

As mentioned above, hermitages were often built in places of serenity that could sustain the monks, with a climate that allowed them to be self-sufficient, growing vegetables, herbs for medicine, incense, flowers and of course tea. The vast array of wild tea trees still found in the mountains of Korea is testament to the many gardens Daoists, Buddhists and earlier Shamans planted while living there. Tea was planted and sometimes later abandoned. Some of these uncultivated, “wild” trees are being discovered again now.

Korea's constant tribulations with foreigner invaders, and its colder climate weren't conducive to commercial tea production. What kept Korea's tea and tea culture alive was the spiritual practitioners in the mountains, whose lives were too distant from the world to be affected by the chaos below. In times of peace, this Way of Tea would come down from the mountain to be shared with the people, as evidenced in South Korea today. The tea plants in the Hwagae area of Jiri mountains have survived for over 1,100 years. Fields of tea trees and local “tea villages” have withstood the adversity of Korea's climate, wars, political turmoil and hardship. Local monks, nuns





and villagers alike feel that it is their duty and honor to maintain tea production. At one point in the mid 1800's the fields were said to be as large as 20 square kilometers, though they dwindled over time. Recently, since the 1980's, many of these feral plantations have been rediscovered and popularized because of their unique flavor and special Qi.

Korean Teaware

We have seen how the political instability of Korean history affected tea culture by pushing it further from civilization and maximizing its relationship with the spiritual recluses that inhabited the mountain hermitages far away from the war and chaos of the kingdom. The teaware of Korea, on the other hand, benefited from the cultural exchange of such conquest, which brought about a constant sharing of aestheticism, artistic techniques and technology.

The Mongols took control of Koryŏ, invading from Manchuria in 1238, and ruled for a century. Kublai Khan forced the Koreans to invade Japan twice. Both attempts failed, as tens of thousands of Koreans perished in typhoons at sea. After many years of constant warring, Korea and the Mongols signed a peace treaty, and in 1392 the Joseon Dynasty was begun, resulting in one of the longest ruling dynasties in the history of East Asia. The new king established Confucianism as the official religion, which meant the other traditions lost much of their sponsorship.

Later, after the new kingdom was attacked by Japan and then the Manchu's, the king swore allegiance to the Qing Dynasty in exchange for protection.

Historically, this account is brief and sweeping, but my point is only to

show the ways in which Korean art, aesthetics, technology and even philosophy were affected by the cultural exchanges that resulted from such wars. Though Korea would ultimately develop its own aesthetic and teaware, the influence of Chinese, Japanese and Mongolian culture on the development of said teaware was very significant.

Most early Korean teaware comes directly from the tea ceremonies held by Buddhist monks and Daoist recluses, in which they offered tea to the Buddha, Daoist deities or entertained esteemed guests, like perhaps Confucian scholars or literati from the city. The most important aspect of this teaware was the tea bowl. Bowls were commonly used in many kinds of ceremonies, to drink one's daily tea or water, eat, and as part of an offering to the saints or deities. Boiling water poured over a bowl of leaves, roots, seeds, stalks, or flowers is natural



amongst human cultures worldwide, and the bowl was among the first pottery ever made. Moreover, bowls were important symbols in both the Buddhist and Daoist traditions, and it makes sense that they would translate to the Way of Tea so readily, serving as the focus for endless creative expression and experimentation among artists creating tea bowls for the monks (sometimes by the monks), and the artists in the cities copying the aesthetic of the monastery for the aristocracy that had been introduced to tea culture there.

Chinese pottery and porcelain influenced Korea, but native potters introduced subtle and distinct variations. Koreans designed teaware to harmonize with the spiritual thought and practice they were used for. Gray stoneware was common during the Silla Kingdom, for example. Such ceramics were often made in local kilns only. At that time, porcelain was rare, and imperial quality porcelain featuring dragons, was the rarest and reserved for the very rich or noble. In the local kilns, glazing, color, thickness and texture variations were all changed according to purpose of the piece and the season in which it would be used. The glaze could look like bamboo, river stones, bark, skin, likened to tiger's eyes, peaches, snow-drifts or sometimes etched white porcelain. Like all Asian ceramics, they sometimes came with poems, reflections, Chinese characters for good fortune, and stamps showing the artisan or kiln from which they came. A unique kind of Celadon became prized in Korea, and later abroad. Chinese Song-style Celadon-ware was favored in the Koryŏ Dynasty; though it was the unique technique developed later by local Korean potters that would go on to receive the recognition of the local aristocracy and eventually some fame in Japan and China as well.

Later, the Koreans would develop their own unique bowls that became greatly coveted in Japan. Over time, Koreans also created their own styles of cups, pots and other utensils based on an amalgam of the Chinese and Japanese aesthetic of simplicity, or "*wabi-sabi*" mentioned above. Today, there are hundreds of interest-

ing kinds of teaware only found in Korea, though one can see reflected in it the influence of Japan, China and Mongolian aesthetic, depending on what kind of tea and the manner in which it is being prepared.

Korean Tea Preparation

Generally, following nature, Korean tea ceremonies flowed with seasons much like those in Japan, and expressed the surroundings, with undercurrents of spirituality suggested in the way the space is decorated, the art displayed and the tea drunk. Throughout the Korean tea ceremony different themes may surface, as 'royal', 'Buddhist', 'Confucian', 'Daoist', 'Shamanistic' or the many combinations of these and other motifs. These styles mimicked those of China, but had a more pronounced equality in Korea.

Tea was brought to Korea by men of refined, subdued stature, not men of excess—those practicing humility and self control. The aristocracy first experienced tea in its most simple, austere form. Their tea was not made in gold vessels like one would normally design for the royal or rich, but in humble bowls. Such extravagances as gold were not condemned, but their tea was based on a simpler philosophy that the best is what is around at the moment, and rather than searching continually outside of "oneself", Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist ideals all suggested that one take up what was here and now and find pleasure in the simple, the rustic—that which appeared more natural. This aesthetic would influence many aspects of Korean and Japanese thought. Their vessels and ways of preparing tea were austere, simple, naturalistic, subdued, calm, and harmonizing. As such, the tea ceremonies of Korea and Japan in some ways parallel the life of a common farmer, emphasizing the natural, and an acceptance of simplicity rather than a desire for excess. In Japan and Korea both, there were periods in which the humble, simple and honorific theme expressed in tea cut across all classes, and perhaps ameliorated some of the stress that strict

“Tea grown in a rocky valley is the best; the tea fields of Hwagae are crowded with rough rocks in a deep valley, and therefore the quality of Hwagae tea is quite excellent. Sacred roots were entrusted to this sacred mountain (*Jiri-san*). These tea plants have the appearance of Daoist hermits and the disposition of *Seonbi* (noble scholars). The green shoots and sprouts reach the clouds; they sway in the breeze like the ripples on the water.”—Cho Eui Seonsa—



social stratification had created.

Historically, many average Koreans coveted tea as a medicine to be used only when needed. A traditional pot used for this had a hollow side-handle, round bottom and high spout. It was typically used to slowly boil herbal medicine or soup. Tea was to them one potent herb amongst many, to be used in their traditional medicine to cure a variety of ailments.

With the arrival of less expensive tea, more people began to drink tea casually or for refreshment. The side-handled tea pot for making loose-leaf tea was then invented. The earlier version of this had been used to boil herbs, but these new, smaller pots were used to steep and pour the tea liquor itself. Part of this was a result of the changes in tea processing throughout Asia, from bricks that were ground to powder and boiled or whisked, to whole leaf teas steeped in ceramic tea vessels.

Cha Dao

Aside from the tea brewed by average people in society, Korea has always had an abundance of “*cha-shen* (tea sages)” that have kept the early traditions of tea as an aspect of spiritual life alive in the mountains. Over time, many of these sages would record and teach their practice, passing it on down through the generations. The Korean version of the legendary Lu Yu, the monk Ch’o-Ui, first wrote about all aspects of tea in Korea, including its cultivation, production, preparation, ingestion and its essential nature in his books *Tongdasong* (Ode to Korean Tea) and *Tashinjon* (Lives of the Tea Gods). Chong Yag-yong, another tea lover whose pen name was “Tasan (Tea Mountain),” formed a fellowship called the “Tea Lovers’ Society”, during his exile in Chollanam-do province by the Japanese occupying forces. Its objective was to grow tea, passing down agricultural methodology as well as philosophical ideals for tea preparation to future tea lovers, and their work continued long after Chong was released from exile and left the area.

Because of the unique way in which much of Korean tea culture was preserved by the spiritual traditions it began amongst, even today ancient traditions of practicing tea as a Way are thriving in Korea, though they have suffered neglect, vulgarization and even became commercial in other parts of the world. Having been influenced by the philosophies, aesthetic and culture of China and Japan both, Korea has a tea history that is rooted in gardens that extend beyond itself, sharing with us remnants of ancient traditions from all over Asia. While China closed its monasteries and Japan modernized, many of the rural mountains in Korea went on changing but little. And it was this simple purity that first attracted me to tea...

At the young age of 18, I found myself living in Korea with my teacher and friend, Lee Wei Soo. One early morning a mutual friend came by and said we were to go on a trip to the mountains to visit some “*San-Shin*”. I was happy to go, even though I really didn’t understand what “*San-shin*” meant. We traveled from Chuncheon by car, then by bus, and then on foot, up into one of Korea’s most sacred mountains. We were dropped off by the bus in a small village in the mountains, from which we proceeded to hike up into the mountains on a small trail.

We walked until sunset and my legs were weary, though the spirit of the mountains invigorated me. We finally arrived at a courtyard with a simple, one-room temple at its center. The faint glow from a candle revealed the incense drifting out its open sliding door. Inside, I could just glimpse a worn cushion resting before a large hanging scroll on the wooden floor. To the right of the temple, there was a small hermitage with a tiny guest house attached to it. Its dark wood and stone roof exterior blended into the surrounding environment, making it almost invisible from a distance. In the center of the courtyard there was a stone basin, through which a stream of water from a diverted river flowed, and a calabash scoop twirled in circles, held in a dervish-like

trance by the moving water. The river itself was a distant hush that blended with the wind through the pines.

As we moved into the courtyard, the front door of the hermitage slid open and the bright eyes of a middle-aged monk welcomed us, followed by a smile and silence that said more than one would think possible in a facial gesture. Living up here alone for most of the year, he had not much use for words. His open heart communicated everything that needed to be said. Waving us inside, he turned around and began to prepare water for tea.

We both took off our sandals and stepped inside, as he pushed open the other side of the door revealing a view down the path we had come up and the sun setting behind the valley. With deftness and love he prepared tea. As the leaf steeped, its perfume of sweetness mingled with the traces of incense coming in from the temple next door. With both hands he offered and with both hands I received the bowl, our smiling eyes meeting in the exchange. I pulled its fragrant steam into my being and time stood still. After my first sip, smells, sounds, vision, touch and taste all became heightened from drinking tea in the calmness of this place with such people as this.

I have visited many tea places since then, throughout Asia and the rest of the world, and found many who have invested themselves in the art of tea, or the business of tea, but so few who offer the Way of Tea—in which price, fame and excess aren’t near, only sharing, humility and content in simplicity. In the present day, the experience of such sacred mountain hermitages has gained popularity, as more and more people begin to understand why they really desire tea and the peace behind it.

The free spirit of Cha Dao is still evident in modern Korean tea culture, demonstrated in the many different tea houses, hermitages, temples and even homes where tea is an expression of Nature. We can only hope that some of the history that mingled and steeped in Korea, creating unique yet primordial expressions of drinking tea in the spirit of Truth, might return to other parts of Asia and from there expand, fragrant as the cup shared with a silent monk, to elsewhere in the world.

The Leaf

