



Further Discussions of Quality

By Thomas Leons & Wu De

Quality is always central in any aesthetic pursuit, including tea. Some people dismiss all discussions of quality, arguing that it is subjective and there is therefore no true “good” but only “what is good for you”. Others would say that there are surely points to which we can all agree, “objective” statements of quality that anyone, anywhere could verify. Are there teas, teaware or methods of preparation that are applicable to everyone or is all tea art just subjective whimsy? If there is no such thing as true quality in tea, teaware or preparation, then what is it that we pursue in our dialogues?

Whether arbitrary or not, there are materials that seem to have a greater quality than others. Sometimes this is because they are beautiful, like precious metals or gems; other times it is due to their rarity. Rare and exclusive things are often considered higher quality. This is sometimes a shallower version of quality, where the image and exclusivity far exceeds the actual material value of the object. Designer products are often valued in this way—using similar materials and construction as cheaper models, people buy into being viewed by some as elite for having a brand only certain people can afford. Other forms of quality, however, relate to genuine function. Certain more expensive cars, for example, may

indeed have better engines, are composed of better parts and therefore run better, faster and longer than their cheaper counterparts.

In art it would seem that quality is much more elusive. At the end of a group tour through a museum several people may rank the paintings in very different orders. This relative quality is perhaps related to the background of the observer, their origin and what emotions, memories and ideas they are looking at the painting through. There is a sense, then, in which quality will be determined, at least in part, by each individual and their background.

Some philosophers have even suggested that quality is outside the subject/object dichotomy—that it precedes the split between the object perceived by the subject and is therefore akin to the sacred. Perhaps quality is what drives our reason and emotions both, the road which our artistic and scientific inquiries follow. Perhaps the real problem is with the word “just” in statements like, “quality in tea is *just* subjective.” After all, what is really wrong with subjectivity? Is something truly less real or fundamental because it proceeds out of our feelings rather than our rationality? Doesn’t the

same quality govern the application of science as well? Do we not need values to determine which hypotheses to test and to recognize whether the results are applicable to observed phenomenon, Nature? And should some form of ethics also not govern our research?

There is a very real sense in which humankind's overemphasis of dialectical reason, logic and the scientific method have served us well: we have designed and invented so much, literally uniting the globe and expanding our material world beyond the wildest imagination of our ancestors. But in this great proliferation of scientific intelligence, we have also sacrificed another, more ancient wisdom, which might be called "a feeling of being a necessary and meaningful part of the world", or more simply "connection" or "intuition".

But where then is the quality in tea? How do we improve and what are we improving towards as we learn and develop our gong fu—our skill in tea preparation and appreciation? If good tea is subjective, can there be any progress at all? If we look at each aspect of tea—the leaf, ware and preparation methodology—a pattern begins to emerge, and this pattern offers a tremendous insight into what high and low quality tea may be all about.

Quality in teaware craftsmanship vs. technology

While there are differences in the materials used—which kind of metal, clay or bamboo is chosen—most of what makes a tea utensil high-quality comes through the skill of the maker. The low quality in most consumer goods these days relates directly to the absence of any real craftsmanship in today's world. In the days of our grandfather's grandfathers, people bought one or two pairs of shoes for their entire adult life: with pride, these shoemakers could design high-quality, lasting shoes and then repair them when the soles wore out. While the materials are the same today—and some may have even been improved upon through scientific advancement—the attitude and mastery are decidedly missing. And as things are produced by people who don't care, or machines that *really* don't care, a philosophy of quantity has rapidly replaced quality. More and more of us, however, are beginning to second-guess quantity as a philosophy, realizing the impact this waste has on our environment, and movements towards higher quality products are therefore increasing—perhaps less really is more!



Yixing pots are stoneware, and therefore made from a mined ore, which is then processed into clay. The ore itself is millions of years old, and in the later part of the 1980's and early 1990's, before the mines were shut down, most of them had reached deeper strata and therefore older ore. And yet, antique pots from the Qing and Ming Dynasties not only look better, they make better tea. Obviously, a few hundred years is not relevant to the material—meaning nothing to ore that is millions or maybe even billions of years old. Looking at two pots of the same shape and design, we can see that while many of the designs of yesteryear can be mimicked, only the greatest masters can make identical curves, lines and designs. And even when the rare master today is equipped with the skill needed to make the exact same curves, handles, spouts, etc. the clay still looks decidedly different and all-too-often makes inferior tea. Obviously, then, the methods used to process the ore into clay, use the clay to form pots and then fire them have all changed and some loss of quality has resulted.

While there is a skill in appraising antique teaware, in which the differences in material, production method and other factors can be demonstrated and learned over a period of time, the true measure of a teapot is in its ability to improve our tea.

In the hands of a master craftsman, inferior materials still become more valuable—aesthetically and functionally—than excellent materials in the hands of a novice. One Yixing master I know summed this up with the profound wish for, "just one hour with the ghost of Mr. Xiao Da Heng (a famous master of the Qing Dynasty)." Some of this skill is inborn talent, some is cultivated, while another big part comes from the attitude of the craftsman: if he or she reaches out from the stillness at the center of their being, dropping the ego and allowing the Dao to work through them, the pieces that result are always of higher quality.

When teaware comes out of a love for tea and tea preparation, rather than any financial motivation, it always functions better and pleases the senses more. Only a tea drinker can make the best pot or cup. And the fact that so many teaware producers these days don't really love or drink tea should, therefore, come as no surprise. They are attracted to teaware because the market has created demand, not because they love tea and want to produce the highest quality teaware they can.

The attitude of the producer of any given teaware is paramount. You might even argue that it is of greater importance than the skill he or she is born with. Some talents do indeed come with us into the world, but no amount of technical information or training can trump a love of tea, of the craft and an ability to be at

peace during the creative process, allowing the heart to work through the medium rather than the mind. And this doesn't just apply to the arts, but the sciences as well. The best machinists are also craftsmen, and the best scientists are connected deeply to an intuition out of which all their great ideas are drawn. A brief survey of the memoirs left behind by those scientists who truly expanded our knowledge, like Einstein for example, unanimously confirms how intuitive, artistic and even spiritual the process of formulating theories really is.

Quality in the leaf Nature and craftsmanship

Within the very center of the Chinese character for tea, between the radicals for grass and wood, is humankind. Quality with regards to tea leaves is also in part related to the energy of the mountain and the climate. But even the best, old-growth teas on the perfect mountain can be ruined by human greed.

When teaching about tea, we always tell students we should never compromise on two issues: firstly, that the tea is organic; and secondly, that the relationship between the farmer and his or her land is one of love and respect—pride and a love of tea, which means

that the farmer wants to create the best possible tea he or she can, not earn as much money as possible. Usually, the consumer need only worry about the first issue, as organic farming requires more work and so almost always demonstrates the second principal as well. We also look for traditional, hand-processed teas as well as those from old-growth trees rather than plantation rows, but in this day and age we sometimes have to compromise to have any tea at all.

It is important to remember that not all that is delicious in this world is good for you or healthy for the environment, so what may be considered quality to a single person or small group of people may not be such when viewed from a larger ecological perspective. For centuries, Chinese people farmed tea without upsetting the balance of Nature—a balance that is being destroyed by so-called “modern, scientific agriculture” in just decades.

Quality tea must make you feel comfortable, be environmentally sustainable for the long-term, as well as be delicious and sensual. It therefore also represents an attitude of love and devotion for tea—between the farmer and his or her land, and then between you and the tea you're drinking.

Just as with teaware, so much of the value in tea is in the relationship between the spirit of the one that produces it, the one that transports and sells it—pres-



ents it—and finally the one that brews it. Of course, quality tea starts with Nature: the mountain, water, cloud, sun and moonshine. After that, though, its end result lies in the hands of humans, and the quality of the liquor will be greatly influenced by whether the people farming, buying, selling and preparing the tea love it and are sharing it with a pure heart, or whether it is just a means to an end. As a cash crop, tea just replaces any other plant that may come and go as the market dictates prices.

Just as with teaware, when quantity becomes the focus, tea quality invariably drops, as was demonstrated most recently by the Puerh market—though every tea-growing region has such examples. When money becomes paramount, more trees are planted closer together, land is bulldozed into a plantation and forests are cut down. In competition with each other, the tea trees cannot afford to contend with undergrowth for the increasingly inadequate amount of minerals in the soil. Then weed-killers are needed. But tea loves loose, gravelly soil and weed-killers tighten and compact the earth. Eventually, chemical fertilizers will also be needed. Finally, since all the trees and undergrowth have been decimated, the local bugs have no choice but to survive on tea. This means pesticides of course. When you add all this together with over-harvesting, you get a sad, low-quality story—no matter what tea produced on

this land tastes like! Traditionally, tea was harvested once a year in Spring, with the occasional Autumn harvest as well. Many regions harvest as many as five or six times nowadays.

Such changes from traditional farming are all done in the name of money. And the plantation owners are developing personal wealth, for the most part, rather than devoting their increased profits to quality improvement, environmental sustainability or preservation, or even the passing on of tea traditions. While we can speak of quality relatively and compare such teas, they will never represent quality leaf in the truest sense.

Even if the tea is delicious, would you want to drink it, knowing it was unhealthy for the environment in this way, destroying millennia of pristine mountain environs? Could such a farm ever really produce something of high quality? Isn't the quality as much in the people involved as it is in the tea itself? Of course, a salesman could argue that his whale oil was the highest quality on the market, harvested from the rarest whales in the sea, but is it really such? Isn't the real quality of that which we harvest from the earth as much in the product as it is in the relationship between the product and its environment, locally and globally? As aspects of this earth, we are more and more coming to understand that all of what we do to our environment reflects back onto ourselves. A big part of the shift in consciousness



required on this earth, in fact, is just this: the re-inclusion of *relationship* into our value system, so that there can't be "quality" anything without a good relationship between the product and Nature, as well as the health of the people that produce and consume it.

And so, much of what goes into high-quality tea is in the skill, mastery and pride of the farmer tending the trees and processing the leaf. While some of this is inborn talent, much of it is learned—passed on from generation to generation. In order for the next generation to continue these ancient skills, there must be a devotion to the Leaf, or else quality is corrupted in the name of so-called "progress".

Quality in preparation perfect the brewer

There can be little doubt that tea preparation is an art. Quality tea sessions are just there, in your face, like the best paintings or sculpture. There may be the staunch, fault-finding critic who can exaggerate the problems in even a masterpiece, but such people are rarely artists themselves, and rarely enjoy the art they have often devoted so much of their time studying. In looking back,

most people will relate that their greatest tea sessions are spread out through different countries, amongst very different people and brewing methods.

There are some techniques and parameters that seem to be objective in the sense that they can be taught and easily recognized by most people. Using the proper vessel, the correct water temperature and even the way one pours from the kettle all have different effects, and if they are pointed out in the proper way most anyone can notice the difference. But do such skills really make a tea session higher quality?

I think much more of what makes an art great comes from within the artist, and has little to do with the medium or technique. Basquiat was famous for using ordinary materials in miraculous ways, like a bit of charcoal and old cardboard. Similarly, we have often discussed in this magazine how some of the most magical tea sessions of our lives were just a handful of leaves in a bowl, or simple green tea brewed in ordinary pots at some temple in the mountains. And we have also had really expensive tea that wasn't as good of an experience, perhaps because of the atmosphere, the people present or other unknown factors.

In studying Chinese brush painting, you learn that the best art flows naturally and spontaneously and is completely unaffected. The best tea is brewed in this way also. Focusing too much on the parameters,



teaware or other aspects of methodology is like painting by numbers. Art critics never make good art, they just talk about other people's artwork. Those who practice hyper-critical gong fu rarely enjoy their tea—too worried about all the 'this and that' to actually be with the tea. Merchants are often a bore to drink tea with, as they often cluck their tongues, discuss all the faults the tea has and then go on to talk about better teas they have had, own, want to sell you or other uninteresting market gossip.

One calligraphy master we know often says something that is very akin to what the Japanese tea masters of old used to preach: "If you want to make the perfect painting, just perfect yourself and then paint naturally." No one could really describe why their master makes better tea in a way that would be more accurate than this. Drinking tea with Master Lin or Master Zhou Yu leaves you feeling good, relaxed and refreshed. And we don't think it would matter if either of them adjusted their method, teaware or even changed teas.

Tea and Zen are one flavor

Zen is, in its most essential nature, the art of living. The Zen master does everything in the highest quality way, according to its nature and presence. When you yourself are perfect, you just need to brew tea naturally, in other

words. As we survey all the tea masters we know, we realize just how accurate this philosophy is. Similarly, the master farmer lives simply, in love with his tea, land and tradition and this spirit translates to higher quality tea. The best pots and cups are made by similarly open hearts and gentle hands, in love with the clay, stone or bamboo and the tea that pours over or through it.

You could say that quality tea is in part objective and part subjective. We can most often agree that a certain tea or teapot is of high or low quality. Other aspects of tea, teaware and preparation are entirely up to the brewer, like choosing the decorations, music, where the guests will sit and how, etc. The line between certain brewing techniques also fluctuates between the objective we can all agree upon and the completely subjective fancy of the people involved.

In the end, though, it doesn't matter how objective the quality of a tea, teaware or method is. Nobody is drinking tea in a laboratory strapped to some kind of machine that measures this or that. Even a thousand, thousand studies with double blinds and apparatuses would never get at the truth of quality in art, as it is really beyond the realm of the reason and logic upon which the entire scientific method is founded. We wouldn't stop using our favorite teapots no matter how many studies showed that they had no effect on the tea, for the simple reason that you cannot study art, only technique. Art, on the other hand, must be lived.





The truest source of quality in tea is beyond subjects or objects. It rests in the stillness behind the actions of the brewer. The real master just brews tea naturally. He or she isn't following any technique or tradition, rule or internal monologue of do's and don'ts. The master has done enough work and reached a state that brewing the best kind of tea comes naturally, no matter what kind of tea or teaware are put before them. Whether there are three or thirty people, a small or large pot, this or that kettle, the master will make great tea because the quality comes from within them. I am sure, Michelangelo could have done a lot with the back of a menu and some crayons while waiting for a meal at a restaurant.

And this is why the taste of tea and Zen are the same, for it is your internal growth that makes better tea. Mastery of tea cannot be learned. You cannot get it from a thousand books on tea, or even a thousand cups. True mastery of any art comes from mastery of the self. When the ego is set aside and the stillness that you really are pours forth into your art, you have but to pick up the pot and cups and the liquor will leave all those that drink it feeling good about themselves. In the meantime, we can learn about different teas and kinds of teaware, but without neglecting the higher truths to which all quality is pointing—the place beyond the you and I, subject and object; the silent place where words

and cups can only ever hint at. And that is the true source of all the best teas, teaware and tea brewing.

As you develop mastery over yourself, you won't need to listen to others' ideas about quality tea, teaware or preparation. You will naturally recognize quality in tea and reach for the proper vessels at the proper time.



The Leaf

