

# *Study of Bai Juyi's Tea Poems*

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**Abstract:** Bai Juyi was the first poet of the Tang Dynasty to introduce tea in his poems in large quantities, making tea and wine of equal importance in the poetry world. Tea witnessed the twists and turns of Bai Juyi's life, the ups and downs of his career, and the transformation of his state of mind and played an extremely vital role in Bai Juyi's life. Bai Juyi created more than sixty tea poems, which can be roughly divided into three categories: worrying about the country and the people, lamenting his career, and meeting friends with tea. His tea poems have not only various genres, which synthesized almost all kinds of forms of the Tang Dynasty and brought to higher development and great success but also are rich in the creation of artistic conception and rhythmic beauty. In addition, through Bai Juyi's tea poems, philosophy can also be clearly explored, like Confucianism's 'the middle' and 'harmony' ideas, Buddhism's thought of 'tea and Zen' and 'forgetting the gains and losses', Taoism's 'natural inaction' and 'happy to know life' view about life. Besides, through the study of his poetry, it is noticeable that Bai Juyi specialized in myriads of genres, often created unique moods through the use of special imagery in his tea poems, and focused on the rhyme end of the verse and the standard unity of the format to enhance the sense of poetry rhyme.

**Keywords:** Bai Juyi, tea poetry, philosophical thought

## **1. Introduction**

Bai Juyi was a famous poet of the Middle Tang Dynasty, and more than 2,800 of his poems came down. Bai Juyi was a great aficionado of wine, with more than 900 of his poems on wine. He loved wine but did not mind tea, and the phrase 'the cauldron of tea and the ladle of wine is never far from each other' is the best description of his love of both tea and wine. Bai Juyi was the first poet of the Tang dynasty to introduce a large amount of tea into his poetry, which made wine and tea go hand in hand in poetry [1].

The concept of tea poetry has a narrow sense and a broad sense. The narrow sense concludes the tea chanting poems whose themes are specifically about tea, and the broad sense refers to all tea poetry related to 'tea', covering a wider range. The tea poems mentioned in this essay belong to the latter category. On this basis, this thesis has consulted the 'Collection and Annotation of Bai Juyi's Poems' and found out that there are eight poems by Bai Juyi on the theme of tea, and a total of 64 poems mentioning tea food, tea art, and tea fun [2]. These tea poems help to understand Bai Juyi's life, character, and the tea culture of the society at that time. The rise and fall and interesting

experiences of Bai Juyi's life can be seen in these tea poems, as well as his changing state of mind and reflections on life.

The research method adopted in this paper is mainly textual analysis. Firstly, this study consulted the 'Collection and Annotation of Bai Juyi's Poems' written by Xie Siwei, from which all of Bai Juyi's tea-related poems were collated, and a total of 64 poems were counted. The poems were then sorted and classified in chronological order to correlate the tea poems with the poet's general life experiences. The paper then adopts a textual analysis method to read Bai Juyi's tea poems meticulously, summarize their content and themes, analyze the poet's intentions and state of mind at the time of composition, and finally discuss and draw conclusions on the themes, artistic techniques and philosophical ideas of his tea poems in the context of the poet's time and life experiences.

By reviewing the current academic literature on Bai Juyi's tea poems, this thesis finds that there is still much space for researching Bai Juyi's tea poems. On the one hand, the amount of relevant literature is relatively small, and most of which have stayed on his most famous tea poems without paying attention to other tea poems. In this case, there is still much unknown knowledge about exploration and excavation. On the other hand, the study aspects of the existing research for Bai Juyi tea poetry are relatively diverse, but each aspect is only slightly involved and did not continue to analyze and studied in depth. Therefore, the study of Bai Juyi's tea poetry still needs solid groundwork and detailed analysis, classification, and summary of the content involved. Moreover, as the first poet in history to introduce a large number of tea poems into his poetry, Bai Juyi's tea poems are numerous and carry significant weight in Tang Dynasty tea poetry. Thus, a study of Bai Juyi's tea poems can help to understand the tea culture of the Tang dynasty and the life of the literati and scholars in the political context of that time.

## 2. The Stages of Bai Juyi's Tea Poetry

Bai Juyi was a great lover of tea, and tea played an indispensable role in his undulating life. The essay attempts to divide Bai Juyi's life and the 64 tea poems he composed into the following five stages, based on 'Collection and Annotation of Bai Juyi's Poems'.

The first stage was from Bai Juyi's birth to the first year of Yuanhe's reign (806) when there was only one poem about tea, namely 'The Wild Residence of Shi Shanren'. Bai Juyi was born in the first month of the seventh year of the Dali reign (772) of the Tang dynasty in Xinzheng, Henan Province, to a medium-sized bureaucratic family. Shortly after Bai Juyi's birth, war broke out in Henan over the issue of feudalism. In those days of war and chaos, Bai Juyi followed his mother around and suffered from the hardships of being displaced every day, going through famine and cold, and sleeping at night without peace. Therefore, Bai Juyi studied hard since he was a child and was full of motivation. In the sixteenth year of Zhengyuan (800), he was admitted to the Imperial College, and in the first year of Yuanhe (806), he became a lieutenant of Shaanxi County (now Zhouzhi County, Xi'an). At this time, Bai Juyi was full of ambition and had the political ideal of serving the people and ruling the country and the world. However, as we can see from his poem 'The Wild Residence of Shi Shanren', written shortly after his enrolment, Bai Juyi had a desire inside to return to seclusion. Although he had just embarked on his political career, he had a longing for a life of seclusion, which would later provide the basis for his 'hidden life' in his old age.

The second stage was from the second year of Yuanhe (807) to the ninth year of Yuanhe (814), during which there were six tea poems. In this period, Bai Juyi began his career as a government official. He was not afraid of the rich and powerful and was more than concerned about society. He attacked the dark side of society and the imperial court through his admonitions and satirical poems, doing justice to the people and also offending the powerful people in the imperial court. At this time, Bai Juyi returned home due to the death of his mother and was gone for four years. Bai Juyi's tea poems during this period were mostly used to satirize the behavior of the powerful and the wealthy,

who valued fame and fortune over the scholar and to record the relaxation and leisure of his hibernating life. If his discontent with the court and the powerful and influential at this stage prevented him from quietly tasting tea, his life after his relegation to Jiangzhou turned a new chapter in his life of tea.

The third phase was from the tenth year of Yuanhe (815) to the fourteenth year of Yuanhe (819), during which Bai Juyi composed eighteen tea poems, most of which were written during his relegation to the post of Secretary of State in Jiangzhou. In the tenth year of Yuanhe (815), there was an assassination at court, and Bai Juyi was impeached when he wrote a letter requesting that the culprit be pursued. At this time, someone took the opportunity to falsely accuse him of disrespectful poetry during the death of his mother, leading to the result that Bai Juyi was reluctantly deported to Jiangzhou. The deportation to Jiangzhou was a momentous turning point in Bai Juyi's career and a dividing line in his thinking from 'concerning himself with the world' to 'focusing on himself without others' [1]. He recorded his grievances and resignation in 'Song of the Pipa', but he had no choice but to succumb to reality. After his deportation, Bai Juyi devoted his energy to tea, which became an indispensable spice to his boring life. When he was in the throes of relegation and the aggravation of being falsely accused, reciting poetry or drinking a cup of tea became a special way for Bai Juyi to relieve his sorrow. Inevitably, after the deportation to Jiangzhou, Bai Juyi's official ambition gradually diminished, but his affection for tea gradually deepened during this period.

The fourth stage was from the fifteenth year of Yuanhe (820) to the second year of Baolian (826), with nine tea poems. Bai Juyi returned to the political center of Chang'an in the 15th year of Yuanhe (820), but the long years of negative relegation and the indifference of the court to his advice made Bai Juyi more and more depressed. On the contrary, his desire to return to seclusion became more and more intense. Soon afterwards, Bai Juyi asked for a transfer and was appointed to the post of governor of Hangzhou, Dongdu, and Suzhou. By this time, Bai Juyi's ambition to level the world and his youthful enthusiasm had vanished. Nevertheless, the good news is that Suzhou and Hangzhou were economically affluent areas at the time, contributing to the flourished tea industry and abundant tea production, which was a blessing for the tea-lover Bai Juyi. His life with tea gradually removed the gloom of his unpromising career and the frequent ostracism of villains, bringing a refreshing touch of lightness to his life. Consequently, the tea poems at this stage are mostly a reflection of Bai Juyi's peaceful and leisurely life filled with tea. Besides, the tea poems at this time also reflected the tea events, tea culture, and tea art activities in Suzhou and Hangzhou.

The fifth stage was from the first year of the Dahe era (827) to the sixth year of the Huichang era (846), a period in which as many as thirty tea poems were written, showing the significance of tea to Bai Juyi in his later years. Bai Juyi returned to Chang'an from Suzhou in the first year of the Dahe era (827), but the chaotic situation at court at this time made him frequently depressed. The deteriorating health, the early death of his young son, and the demise of his close friend Yuan Zhen cooled Bai Juyi's political enthusiasm completely, thereby leading to the passive situation that wine and tea became his solace to ease his sorrow and briefly escape his pain. It can be easily seen from the verse 'Taking the medicine after three spoons of rice in a day, thirsting for a bowl of tea after wine in spring' that Bai Juyi was physically and mentally exhausted and yearned to return to seclusion. As a result, the state of 'mid-retirement', which lies between officialdom and reclusion, became Bai Juyi's main way of life in his middle and later years. For example, 'Taking a sleep after a trip, tasting a cup of tea after a sleep' is an impeccable description of Bai Juyi's life in his later years.

### **3. Literary Writing Techniques in Tea Poetry**

#### **3.1. Theme and Emotion**

##### **3.1.1. The Solicitude for the Country and the People**

In Bai Juyi's tea poems, there are not many poems concerning people, but we cannot ignore his early ambitious ideals of asking for the people's lives and his patriotic sentiments of longing to serve the court. Among his tea poems that speak for the people, the relatively famous ones are his satirical poem 'The Spring Water of Kunming is Full' and the sentimental poem 'Sending Zhang Shanren Back to Song Yang'. At this time, Bai Juyi had just entered the civil service and was full of political enthusiasm and ambition. Under this circumstance, when he saw injustice or impropriety in the imperial court, he would advocate justice and offer advice. When he saw the people suffering from hunger and cold, he was eager to change their plight of theirs. The poem 'The Spring Water of Kunming is Full' seems to praise the imperial court, but in fact, it is a satire on the imperial court's arbitrary expropriation and tyranny, making the people suffer. 'Sending Zhang Shanren back to Songyang' satirizes the extravagance and arrogance of the dignitaries, revealing the hardships of the lower-class people. Therefore, we can summarize from these tea poems the poet's love for the people and his patriotic feelings for the country.

##### **3.1.2. The Resentment of the Rocky Career**

Although he had brilliant talent, Bai Juyi's career path was not that smooth. After the ostracism of his courtiers, the false accusations of villains, and the deportation to Jiangzhou, he was involved in depression for several years, writing many poems in a mixture of sadness and grief. The most famous of these poems is the poem 'Song of the Pipa', which conveys the poet's feelings of helplessness, resignation, and indignation at his innocent deportation.

##### **3.1.3. The Friendship between Gentlemen with Tea**

The tea is a crucial link between Bai Juyi and his friends, and the gentlemanly friendship between Bai Juyi and his friends is just as elegant, pure, and light as the tea. The themes of Bai Juyi's tea poems include sending tea as a gift, treating guests with tea, and making friends with tea.

Bai Juyi was so addicted to tea that he was thrilled whenever he was presented with new tea from distant friends and relatives [1]. In 'The New Shu Tea from Mr. Xiao', the poet was so surprised by the tea sent by Mr. Xiao that he could not wait to have the tea decocted in water from the Wei River. Another example is the poem 'Thanks to Li Lulangzhong for sending new Shu tea' in which the feeling of gratitude and surprise of the poet can be gained. When the poet was bedridden, he was extremely jubilant and moved to receive new tea from his friend Li Xuan, so he wrote this poem to express his appreciation.

It was also commonplace in Bai Juyi's life for tea to be served to guests [3]. For example, 'Calling the children to move the bamboo, leaving the guests to taste tea' from the poem 'Two Songs of the New Residence in Early Spring'. When Bai Juyi's friends came to visit him after he moved to his new residence, he hastened to ask the servant to prepare a cup of tea for the guest. Moreover, the two of them sipped tea and talked until the sun went down outside the window. 'Treating guests with tea and fruit' from 'A Visit from Koji-sheng' appropriately shows that even though life was poor and the conditions were simple, tea was Bai Juyi's choice of hospitality. In his later years, Bai Juyi came into contact with the ideas of Buddhism and Taoism and also began to interact with monks. In 'Recruiting the Zen Master Taoguang' is another felicitous instance to show the habit of

entertaining friends with tea, from which the case that the poet and the Zen Master Taoguang had a meal together and then invited him to taste tea can be known.

Additionally, as an 'identifying tea person,' Bai Juyi was often invited to attend tea parties and tea banquets and met many like-minded tea friends [4]. For example, in 826, Bai Juyi was invited to attend the tea mountain banquet, but he could not go for the reason that he was injured when he fell off his horse. Therefore, he could only write down a poem with envy to record the lively and grand tea feast.

Tea and poetry are the media that bind Bai Juyi and his friends together, and the deep and sincere friendship between gentlemen and the sympathy between literati and scholars can be read in these tea poems.

## 3.2. Artistic Features

### 3.2.1. Poetry Genre

Bai Juyi's tea poems are rich in the genre, and it is no exaggeration to say that Bai Juyi's tea poems set the greatest form of tea poetry in the Tang Dynasty [4]. Bai Juyi's tea poems involve flexible ancient poems, strict and standard recent poems, lively and varied miscellaneous poems, ancient tunes, choral poems, and more [5].

The ancient form of poetry is more flexible and freer, with no fixed requirements for structure or word count. Bai Juyi's tea poems include several five-character poems in the old style, such as 'Winging Ideas' and 'Occasional Hinging on the Mountain Road'.

Near-style tea poetry, also known as 'present-day tea poetry', is a kind of metrical tea poetry. Thus, its meter, rhyme, and structure are more rigorous. Near-style tea poetry mainly includes two forms stanzas and rhymes. Bai Juyi's tea poetry is both short and concise five-line stanzas 'Frying tea by using mountain spring with thoughts', seven words a sentence of two rhymes, seven-line stanzas 'New Shu Tea from Mr. Xiao'; and there is incisive language, rhyming strong five-line rhymes 'Recruiting the Zen Master Taoguang' and 'Camping leisure', strict meter, neat lines of seven-line rhymes 'Chin Tea', regular and well-formed five-verse prose rhyme, 'Late Rising', and more.

In addition to this, Bai Juyi's tea poems also include the five-line old tune 'After the Eclipse' and 'The Moon at the Blue Stream', the five-line poem 'Where to Take Shelter', and the choral poem 'Rewarding Mengde's Sleeplessness on Autumn Eve'.

### 3.2.2. Context and Imagery

The poets of the Tang Dynasty all longed for the pleasant surroundings of the spring and rocks under the moon and the mountains and fields when drinking tea in order to find spiritual sublimity [6]. Therefore, when creating tea poems, poets often use imagery such as pine, bamboo, Guqin, calligraphy, painting, and cranes to portray a serene and leisurely image and construct a quiet and elegant mood. In addition to the above common imagery, Bai Juyi also used the special imagery of 'tea smoke' to create an ethereal atmosphere [7]. For example, in the poem 'Imminence', the author uses tea smoke to depict the ethereal aura of the house, reflecting his pursuit of a transcendent realm.

### 3.2.3. The Sense of Rhythm

Bai Juyi's tea poems are mostly in five or seven lines with neat, uniform, and standardized couplets, rhyming at the end of the lines and alternating levels and tones between lines, making them extremely harmonious and perfect in sound and rhyme. In the poems 'During the Sicknesses of the First Summer' and 'The Moon at the Blue Stream', for example, the words 'time', 'day' and 'fit' all

rhyme with 'i', while the words 'head', 'mouth' and 'behind' in 'The Moon at the Blue Stream' all have the sound 'ou', all of which rhyme perfectly.

Bai Juyi's tea poems also pay great attention to the use of superlative words [8]. Taking the 'The big string is as noisy as the rapid rain, the small string is as cut as a whisper. The noises are played noisily, and the pearls fall into the jade tray.' from 'Song of the Pipa' as an example, the two syllables are the same, making the rhythm more harmonious and the melody more visual and concrete, highlighting the beauty of the piece.

The rhythmic tea poems are accompanied by a lively, staccato musical score, making the poems more catchy, easy to sing, and long-lasting.

#### **4. Philosophical Ideas Reflected In the Tea Poems**

Tea has been a bridge and medium to communicate Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in history [1]. Taoists use tea to meditate the mind, Buddhists use tea to calm nature, and Confucians use tea to cultivate virtue. Cooking tea and tasting tea can help to quieten the mind and purify the heart, so Tang and Song poets also often used tea to calm the mind and nature and pursued philosophy from it.

##### **4.1. Buddhism**

Zen Buddhism advocates quietness to clear the mind and enlightenment amid mortality, which is highly compatible with the natural properties of tea. The tea is bitter, light, and elegant, which is suitable for monks to refresh, meditate and eat while sitting in meditation [9]. Moreover, Zen Buddhism advocates 'the ordinary mind is the way', which means practice is in taking water and firewood, food, clothing, and housing and does not need to hold special religious rituals. Consequently, tea has become an ordinary way for monks to participate in Zen and enlightenment. - This is also known as 'tea and Zen'. In his later years, Bai Juyi studied Buddhism and sought spiritual liberation and self-enlightenment in 'tea and Zen' [5].

Bai Juyi's indissoluble bond with Buddhism can date back to the time before he entered the civil service. Even before he entered the civil service, Bai Juyi was interested in Buddhism [3]. After being falsely accused and deported to Jiangzhou, Bai Juyi was in a miserable mood. In search of spiritual relief, he began to get deeply involved with Buddhism and interacted with monks, and likened his home to a monk's dwelling- He compared his home to that of a monk's. In his later years, he even called himself 'Jushi of Fragrant Hill'. Drinking tea helped Bai Juyi to keep his mind clear. Therefore, during his relegation to Jiangzhou, Bai Juyi often recited poems and tasted tea, relieving his worries in tea, gradually accepting life's hardships and gradually liberating his spirit, and cultivating a state of life where he was happy with life, content with life, and forgetful of gains and losses.

##### **4.2. Taoism**

Taoism advocates nature and the unity of nature and man. Taoism's 'Unity of nature and humans' is expressed in the tea ceremony by gradually connecting one's state of mind with the spirit of tea when cooking and by quietly feeling the beauty of nature when tasting tea, getting close to nature, and returning to nature [10]. The Taoist idea of purity and indifference, avoiding the world and retreating, largely influenced Bai Juyi's choices in his middle and later years.

After the deportation to Jiangzhou, Bai Juyi eliminated the remnants of his dreams and replaced his ambition. His political enthusiasm gradually receded, while he yearned more for a return to nature and a life of leisure and relaxation in seclusion. During this period of idleness, tea became a necessity for him to pass the time and relieve his worries. It was also because of this period of

meditation and enjoyment of tea that the poet experienced the beauty of nature and had the idea of retiring. After being falsely accused and deported for no apparent reason, Bai Juyi chose to escape the cages of the world and return to the mountains, embracing nature, which is the embodiment of Taoism's unity of heaven and man and its admiration for nature.

### 4.3. Confucianism

The Chinese tea ceremony embodies the Confucian spirit of being moderate, gentle, respectful, and frugal in many ways and incorporates the core Confucian ideas of 'moderate' and 'harmony' into the process of tea tasting. For instance, be calm and collected when making tea, be quiet and peaceful when drinking tea, and pay attention to the harmony of water and fire when frying tea.

The 'doctrine of the mean' occupies an essential place in Confucianism, which means impartiality, harmony, and compromise. Reflected in the way of conducting oneself and treating others, it means advocating balance and harmony, unity of opposites, and avoidance of extremes. Bai Juyi's life as a 'half-recluse' is a true reflection of the idea of the 'doctrine of the mean'. After the shock of his relegation, Bai Juyi's political ambition changed from 'concerning himself with the world' to 'focusing on himself without others'. He had already seen through the court, so he did not remain as active and enterprising as Su Shi did in his later years. He also realized that he could not live a poetic and spiritual life but also needed a material life with plenty of food and clothing. In this case, he could not follow Tao Yuanming's example of total seclusion. As a result, in his extreme contradiction, Bai Juyi chose a kind of lifestyle between half-official and half-hidden [11]. The balance he struck between his career and reclusion is his application of the theory of 'doctrine of the mean'.

Tea is a natural harmony between the bitter and the sweet. 'Harmony' has a rich connotation in Confucianism, and it is also the highest requirement of the Chinese tea ceremony [9]. For example, when cooking tea, attention should be paid to the compatibility of water and fire. The tea sage Lu Yu created a theory based on this in the Tea Classic. In accordance with this theory, he created the eight gossip cooking tea wind stove to illustrate the principles of natural harmony contained in cooking tea [12]. Confucianism believes that there will be a harmonious vibe between people when drinking tea and that interactions over tea can promote friendship and harmonize interpersonal relationships [10]. Bai Juyi often made friends with tea, as well as invited them to taste tea together after getting good tea. He was also invited by friends, even tea banquets - such as the tea banquet in the Huzhou tea mountain realm meeting pavilion, tea banquet in the boat in Taihu Lake, and more. Bai Juyi's approach to tea and friendship in a harmonious atmosphere is his interpretation of the Confucian idea of 'harmony'.

## 5. Conclusions

To summarize everything that has been stated so far, it can be gained from the analysis above that the changes in the theme and style of Bai Juyi's tea poems, to a certain extent, reflect his life experiences and changes in mentality. From the satirical poems that begin with the people in mind and criticize the powerful to the poems of sentiment in middle age with the theme of resignation and depression, to the leisurely poems of friendship with tea in later years, this series of changes also reflected the change in his mentality from 'worried about the country' to 'indignant' and ultimately to 'alone'. In the convoluted course of his career, Bai Juyi also studied and applied the ideas of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, using tea to relieve his worries and regulate his mind. Moreover, in his later years, he even came into contact with Buddhism to relieve his worries. Therefore, many philosophical truths can be found in Bai Juyi's tea poems. The Taoist 'natural inaction' can be read from his late choice to return to the mountains, and the 'middle' and 'harmony'

of Confucianism can be read from his later years of 'hidden' life and the habit of making friends with tea. The most obvious of the philosophical truths in his poems is the Buddhist idea implied behind his 'happy with life' and 'contentedness and contentment'. Not only do Bai Juyi's tea poems contain profound philosophical truths, but their artistic techniques are also of great research value. His tea poems are rich in genres, and all the common genres of Tang poetry can be found in Bai Juyi's tea poems, which can be described as a collection of Tang poetic forms. Bai Juyi often used a variety of imagery in his tea poems to create a leisurely and relaxed artistic conception. However, in addition to the common imagery in tea poetry, Bai Juyi also used the more unusual imagery of 'tea smoke' to create an ethereal and wispy ambience. In addition, Bai Juyi's tea poems are often set to specific music due to their strong sense of rhythm, which has been passed

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