

Tea Culture from the Song Dynasty: Aesthetic Divergence in China and Japan

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Abstract. The tea-drinking culture that flourished in the Song dynasty, after being transmitted to Japan through Buddhism and elite exchange, gradually developed into two distinct aesthetic traditions and spatial configurations in China and Japan. This paper asks why tea practices that shared a common origin in Song culture eventually evolved into significantly different tea cultures and aesthetics in the two societies? Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the "production of space," this paper argues that this divergence does not simply arise from differences in material form but from fundamental discrepancies in the logic of spatial production and structures of everyday practice. Through analysis of literati painting, historical tea treatises, and tea manuals, this paper points out that Chinese tea spaces developed into open and continuous places closely linked to garden culture, literati social gatherings, and self-cultivation. By contrast, the Japanese tearoom evolved into a compressed, enclosed, and ritualized "heterotopic" space that emphasizes bodily discipline and spiritual purification. Chinese tea culture tends to aestheticize daily life through tea practices, whereas Japanese tea culture transforms the tearoom into a spatial Gesamtkunstwerk. By tracing an analytical axis from space to everyday life, this paper offers a new framework for understanding cross-cultural aesthetic transformation in the history of East Asian art and ritual.

Keywords: Tea Culture, Lefebvre, Production of Space, Tea Practice, Gesamtkunstwerk

1. Introduction

Tea culture, as a distinctive spiritual symbol of East Asian civilization, gradually formed a unique aesthetic system during the Song dynasty. With the rise of literati and scholar-officials from the Northern to the Southern Song, tea activities were transformed from mere culinary enjoyment into practices that embodied personal character, enacted Zen Buddhist thought, and mediated social etiquette. As a cultural activity, tea gatherings also constituted a particular aesthetic space, whose distinctive features were transmitted to the Japanese archipelago through maritime exchanges among monks. What is noteworthy, however, is that tea gatherings derived from the same matrix of Song-dynasty culture developed into almost entirely different tea cultures in China and Japan—two geographically proximate societies—thus producing divergent aesthetic spaces and contrasting spatial forms. Chinese literati tended to favor open tea spaces situated in natural settings and adjacent to studies or gardens, whereas Japanese tea culture placed greater emphasis on ritual, with

tearooms typically enclosed, dim, and grass-hut-like in style. This transformation reflects not only differences in aesthetic taste but also deeper distinctions in modes of spatial production and structures of everyday life.

Existing scholarship has focused mainly on the material forms of teawares, philosophical differences between tea traditions, and the formation of wabi-sabi aesthetics. Comparatively less attention has been paid to how tea culture, at the spatial level, reflects social interaction patterns, bodily discipline, or shifts in sensory experience. Tea activities do not occur in a vacuum; their meanings are shaped by the construction of sites, the organization of rituals, and embodied modes of participation. Tea culture should therefore be understood as a form of "spatial practice" unfolding simultaneously on visual, material, behavioral, and spiritual levels.

For this reason, the present study introduces Henri Lefebvre's theory of the "production of space" and uses its threefold framework—spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces—to comparatively analyze Song literati tea practices and the Japanese tea ceremony. By doing so, this paper aims to answer why tea culture originating in the Song dynasty diverged into different spatial poetics and aesthetic systems in China and Japan and to offer a spatial perspective on cross-cultural aesthetic transformation in East Asia.

2. The "everyday production" of Chinese literati tea spaces and an open aesthetic

Chinese literati tea practices are not simply acts of drinking tea but the production of a cultural space through social interaction among friends, corroboration of poetry and prose, and spiritual attunement with landscapes. From the Song to the Ming, this spatial form gradually developed into a cultural structure endowed with order, emotional connotations, and aesthetic qualities. Its core characteristics are everydayness and openness, making it a spatial practice that coexists with nature. Lefebvre points out that space is not merely an occupied physical field but a generative process of social relations with material, practical, and symbolic dimensions [1]. Viewed from this perspective, the literati tea environment is not simply a study or a garden; it is a living space that is continuously shaped and renewed.

2.1. Spatial practice: the aestheticization of body and everyday life

Lefebvre's notion of "spatial practice" concerns the order and rhythms of bodily actions in space. In literati tea practices, walking along mountain paths, crossing bridges into studios, boiling spring water, whisking tea, and sitting in conversation constitute a slow, deliberate, and rhythmical aesthetic. In *Huishan Tea Gathering* (Figure 1), the winding path snakes up the mountain; literati stand midway up conversing, servants descend carrying bundles, and groups of people gather in the distance—the image reveals the correspondence between the flow of human movement and the veins of the landscape. Here, space is not a mere backdrop but a field "activated" by walking and conversation; it thus becomes an extension of the body.



Figure 1. Ming Dynasty Wen Zhengming Huishan Tea Party Picture Paper Colour, 21.9×67cm, Beijing Palace Museum

Similarly, in Huxi Cottage (Figure 2), the lakeside cottage is open, with literati seated facing one another in conversation while a young attendant prepares tea at the side by boiling spring water. Scenes of this kind embed "tea drinking" in the everyday and lack any religious overtones. Space is cyclically renewed through repeated gestures of boiling water, adding fuel, and offering cups—just as Lefebvre notes, space acquires existence through repetitive practice [1]. By selecting springs, arranging mats, sitting on rocks, listening to the wind, and boiling water, the bodies of literati "activate" the natural environment into a tea setting. The tearoom is not occupied by architecture or nature alone; it is produced by bodies that walk, pause, gaze, and raise their cups. Hence, Chinese tea spaces are first and foremost processes of aestheticizing the everyday: life activities themselves become aesthetic acts.



Figure 2. Ming Dynasty, Wen Zhengming, Huxi Caotang Picture (Partial), Paper Colour, 26.7×142.5 cm, Liaoning Provincial Museum

2.2. Representations of space: confucian-daoist ethics and the system of elegant gatherings

As "representations of space," literati tea environments contain explicit ethical structures and cultural norms. The Confucian ideal of "harmonious moderation" is expressed not only in the balance of tea flavor and water and fire, but also in an ethics of sociability that emphasizes moral character in hospitality and shared aspirations in friendship. Ming literati extracted tea practices from general elegant gatherings and resituated them specifically in natural landscapes or small study spaces, thereby establishing, at the level of design principles, a minimalist and tranquil aesthetic norm. This is not merely a matter of taste but a spatial ethics centered on virtue and character. For example, who may join the gathering, how people are seated relative to one another, and which utensils are used—all of these endow space with moral expectations [2].

Historical documents also show that tea drinking was considered a means of discerning character and forming friendships with like-minded individuals: "Drinking alone is called spiritual; with two guests it is excellent; with three or four it is delightful" (Ming tea treatises) [3]. Xu Lin notes that tea activities symbolize "relationships of lofty and unsullied moral fellowship," and Wu Zhihe argues that tea gatherings "employ tea as a medium to fulfill the aims of cultural life" [4,5]. Thus, the institutional and ethical dimensions of Chinese tea spaces appear in a form that is open yet bounded. Literati ideals of "clarity," "elegance," and "simplicity" are not merely aesthetic preferences but together form a spatial ethics: Plain utensils signify freshness and purity; the choice of mountain-water environments expresses reverence for nature; the order of host and guests maintains ritual and propriety.

This ethic is also given explicit spatial correspondence in Wen Zhengming's tea paintings. In his works, visitors often appear on bridges or slopes, walking along paths at the water's edge or through wooded areas, creating a transition from the mundane world to an elegant realm. In terms of pictorial space, the paths break the enclosure of the studio and produce an open spatial structure. The study and the world are both separated and faintly connected; the literatus can shut out worldly disturbances within the study, yet by stepping just outside can re-enter the mundane world, thus fulfilling the literati aspiration of "reclusion in the marketplace." Moreover, the host who waits for friends while savoring tea embodies an attitude of openness and welcome.

2.3. Representational spaces: landscape symbolism and spiritual geographies

In Lefebvre's sense, "representational spaces" are carriers of social imagination and symbolic systems; they intersect with experiential space and permeate the everyday through emotions and ideas [1]. After the Wei and Jin periods, tea gradually transformed from a simple act of drinking into a cultural symbol that bore the cultivation of the mind, under the combined influence of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism [6]. Confucian "harmonious moderation" shaped ethics of sociability; Daoist "emptiness and stillness" formed aesthetic orientations; and Buddhist "forgetfulness of worldly concerns" offered a path of spiritual practice.

In Chinese literati tea spaces, this dimension appears as a spiritual structure of landscape imagery and self-discipline of the Daoist heart-mind. The tea space is not only a place for drinking tea, but also an externalization of inner states and a concrete manifestation of self-cultivation ethics. Visual elements such as mountains and forests, winding bridges, and rocks and springs are depictions of the natural setting, but at the same time external signs of withdrawal from vulgarity, moral integrity, and a clear mind. The "symbolism" of Chinese tea spaces does not aim to purify space by excluding the secular; rather, it creates a pure realm within the mundane world. Here, the essence of space shifts from separation to connection and transition. As some scholars have put it, Chinese tea culture "lodges the cultivation of the mind and focuses on clearing the heart to contemplate things" [7].

Furthermore, Lefebvre emphasizes the mutual constitution of space and time: rhythm determines the experience and meaning of space. The rhythm of Chinese tea practices is slow, gentle, moist, and extended, resonating with the "blankness" and "vital resonance" (qiyun shengdong) in landscape painting. The sounds of boiling springs, pine winds, and bamboo shadows, together with the aroma of brewing tea, form a sensory rhythm that turns space into a site where the mind can settle. This temporal experience serves to prolong the everyday and to soothe worldly cares.

3. Introspection and restraint in Japanese tearoom spaces

3.1. Rikyū's institutionalization of spatial practice: bodily discipline and spiritual equality

Sen no Rikyū pushed the grass-hut tearoom to its extreme: the low nijiriguchi entrance forces entrants to bend down and bow, symbolizing the temporary effacement of social rank and withdrawal from worldly power structures within the tearoom [8]. The four principles of "wa-kei-sei-jaku" (harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility) became the fundamental norms of the tea ceremony, requiring host and guest alike to participate in the ritual with an attitude of reverence, purity, and stillness [8]. More importantly, behavior within the tearoom was thoroughly systematized: entering, bowing, arranging charcoal, performing the temae (tea-making procedures), and serving tea—all followed fixed rhythms and codes of etiquette. This constitutes a kind of "politics of the body": through repeated bending, kneeling, waiting in stillness, and slow, controlled movements, the body is trained into an organ of humility, concentration, and introspection.

Japanese tea culture seeks to realize "spiritual purification through everyday practice" by means of the tea ceremony [9]. At this point, Lefebvre's "spatial practice" becomes very concrete. Unlike in the Chinese tea environment, where the subject moves and converses freely in nature, here the subject must passively contract the body and be compelled into regulated motions. The body is step by step "folded," and in this sense Japanese tea practices achieve the effect of being set to a strict rhythm [10].

3.2. Representations of space: ritual and a spatial order of leveling

At the turning point of Japanese tea culture, Sen no Rikyū transformed the grass-hut tearoom from a contingent aesthetic preference into a rigorously codified spatial-ethical system. He compressed the scale of the tearoom to four-and-a-half or even two tatami mats so that the extreme contraction of space turned the very act of entering into a form of spiritual training: guests must bend their bodies and diminish themselves, crawling through the nijiriguchi—an opening just large enough for a person to bow and pass through—symbolizing a religiously inflected gesture of "abandoning worldly status and authority." This low entrance is intended to "dissolve differences in rank, requiring both warriors and aristocrats to humble themselves equally within the tearoom," thereby accomplishing a kind of "ritual equality" [11]. Yet such equality does not arise naturally; it is an ethical field forcibly imposed through spatial design. In Lefebvre's terms, power is not merely abstract domination but is naturalized as a universal ethical order through the planning of space and the regulation of bodily posture and movement [12].

In this context, Lefebvre argues that power operates first by planning space and prescribing paths of action; space becomes the material bearer of a logic of domination [1]. Rikyū's tearoom embodies precisely this: its geometric proportions, platform arrangements, placement of the hearth, and even the distances between seats are brought under strict regulation, forming an "ethical-geometric" environment. The four principles and seven rules of the tea ceremony define the rhythm and gestures of tea activities. "Black walls, dim light, coarse pottery, and plain wood" together create an atmosphere of sensory restraint and inward contemplation, where "spiritual cleanliness is perceived within simplicity, and the light of the mind is sensed within darkness" [9]. Darkness and smallness, lowness and narrowness, thus become necessary conditions for training the mind.

In this sense, Rikyū's tearoom is a premodern paradigm of "disciplinary space." In other words, space here is no longer the backdrop of life but an apparatus of spiritual politics: a constructed

machine that, by weakening the body's expansive presence and intensifying interiority, uses aesthetics to internalize external discipline as social morality.

3.3. Representational spaces: cosmic order and inner spirit

If the nijiriguchi and cramped room bring the tea practitioner into an ethic of bodily compression, then the hearth, ash, and numerological system inside the tearoom further push this spatial ethic to the extreme of symbolic order. In Rikyū's time, the sunken hearth was not merely a device for heating water; it was a "ritual node" endowed with cosmic symbolism and religious meaning. The arrangement of the four-and-a-half tatami mats and the hearth corresponded to the post-Heaven Eight Trigrams of the Yijing, and the hearth's dimension of "one shaku four sun" was connected with the symbolic system of Daoist alchemical furnaces. Its function was not simply to boil water but to "materialize cosmic order, calm the mind, and pacify the soul" [13].

The operations of the fire, the shaping of the ash, and the sequence of charcoal placement in the tea ceremony thus become an interface of dual training—bodily and symbolic. "Charcoal must be added according to established procedures and fire patterns," and "ash must present a still and orderly form"; as sources state, "one must not disturb the remaining white charcoal," because it symbolizes the undiminished spiritual flame and should not have its "stillness" disrupted [13]. In this way, the tea space acquires the quality of a "miniature cosmos": hearth fire as heart fire, ash patterns as states of mind, and charcoal shapes as Daoist bones. The smaller the scale of space, the greater the depth of symbolism.

In contrast to Chinese tea spaces, Japanese tearooms establish an inward, symbolic cosmos that cuts off direct continuity with nature. Power domestically tames both body and imagination through space [1]; Rikyū's tearoom, via a symbolic structure formed by fire and ash, completes a circuit of control from bodily space to the spiritual realm. This explains why the tearoom is called a "heterotopic space": it is not simply a site of escape from reality, but a second reality constructed through symbolism.

4. The flow of tea arts: difference and interpretation

Within Lefebvre's theoretical framework, space is not a simple physical container but a social product generated by power structures, cultural imaginaries, and bodily practices [1]. From this perspective, the divergence of Chinese and Japanese tea cultures first manifests in a fundamental difference in spatial order. Chinese literati tea practices are rooted in open spaces; their sites often extend across gardens, studies, and landscapes, forming "living spaces" that coexist with nature, that can be entered by walking, and that afford social interaction [4]. Walking, sitting, watching springs, and boiling water constitute the chain of tea activities, allowing individuals to achieve spiritual cultivation in the transitions between movement and stillness. This corresponds precisely to Lefebvre's "spatial practice"—producing space as a spiritual field through bodily movement and everyday behavior [1].

First, this divergence in spatial order sets the direction for subsequent development. Although Chinese tea culture originated in elite circles, it gradually spread to commoners from the Wei and Jin periods onward, following a trajectory from practicality to spiritual aesthetics [6]. Since the Wei and Jin, Chinese tea practices have been integrated into literati life through the ideas of thinkers such as Lu Yu and later Confucian and Buddhist scholars, with their spaces rooted in landscapes, gardens, and modest studies that permit walking and conversation, thereby forming an open and elegant spatial chain [4]. This spatial logic reflects the fusion of Confucian "harmonious moderation" and

Daoist "nature," transforming tea into a medium of self-cultivation and friendship rather than a mere ritual instrument [7]. Whether for quenching thirst, health maintenance, or refined conversation, tea drinking never departs from the bounds of everyday life.

By contrast, Japanese tea culture bears more clearly the imprint of elite domination. Initially practiced among aristocrats and monks, it was later institutionalized as a tool of political and spiritual governance during the warrior regimes of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi [14]. Tea was first brought back by monks returning from China and spread within temples and the court but for a long time remained confined to the upper strata, only gradually entering common society in the late Muromachi period [9]. More importantly, Japanese tea culture maintained a pronouncedly elite and power-laden character. It was "closely tied to the political system from the very beginning"; during the time of Nobunaga and Hideyoshi, rulers used the granting of tea utensils and access to tea gatherings as a means of patronage, incorporating tea into a system of rewards in order to consolidate power and form a culture of ritualized rule [14]. Thus, the tearoom is not an extension of natural everyday life but a site where bodies are politicized and a mechanism for enacting spiritual obedience.

This logic of power is also reflected in bodily discipline and ritual practice. Sen no Rikyū proposed "wa-kei-sei-jaku" and devised the "four principles and seven rules," bringing spatial order and everyday behavior under strict measurement: the grass-hut tearoom is narrow, the entrance is low, participants kneel, and all movements—stillness and motion alike—are governed by rules [11]. Tea drinking is no longer merely an activity of tasting and enjoyment but becomes a dual training of mind and body that cultivates a spiritual posture of "quietude, humility, and entry into stillness" [8]. This spiritual orientation, evolving from the Song-dynasty Zen idea of "tea and Zen as one," ultimately leads Japanese tea culture toward a uniquely Japanese sensibility of world-withdrawal and solitude.

At the same time, the transmission of material culture further corroborates the reasons for these divergent paths. Starting in the Kamakura period, Japan imported large quantities of Chinese black-glazed tea bowls. Even after such wares declined in China during the Yuan and Ming, Japan continued to uphold them as material supports for its tea-tasting system and aesthetic preferences [15]. This indicates that the Japanese tea ceremony did not simply inherit Chinese traditions but selectively absorbed and solidified elite styles within its cultural mechanisms—forming a sharp contrast to the Chinese trajectory in which tea wares moved from court tribute to literati use and finally to popular dissemination [7].

Thus, in Lefebvre's terms, Chinese and Japanese tea cultures present two different modes of "spatial production": China constructs spaces of self-cultivation through openness and continuity, while Japan creates wabi-sabi spaces through enclosure and severance. The former takes everyday life as its path and nature as its container; the latter takes separation as its method and discipline as its core. From embracing landscapes to illuminating the inner flame of the heart, both paths ultimately point toward spiritual concerns, yet they proceed along radically different spatial logic and generate distinct cultural crystallizations.

5. Conclusion

The divergence between Chinese and Japanese tea cultures is not merely a matter of differences in utensils or formal variations; it is rooted in two fundamentally different logics of "spatial production." Chinese tea culture arose from a tradition that fused Confucianism, Daoism, and literati Buddhism, emphasizing an everyday dwelling characterized by leisure, elegance, and harmony. Literati tea practices in China take everydayness as their foundation: through bodily experiences of

walking, visiting friends, watching and boiling springs, and through spatial forms of dwelling in landscapes, they generate an aesthetic practice that "poeticizes life." The tea space is not an enclosed ritual field but an open landscape in which nature, friendship, and self-cultivation are interwoven, embodying a cultural ideal of "refining the everyday through tea and transforming the everyday into an elegant realm."

In contrast, the Japanese tea ceremony is shaped by Zen Buddhism, bushidō, and wabi-sabi aesthetics and pursues a ritual practice of "stillness, respect, and discipline." Centered on the grass-hut tearoom, the tea ceremony constructs a closed, compressed, and disciplinary "heterotopic space." Through scale, light, materiality, and ritual, it folds the body into stillness, turning tea drinking into a path of contemplation and spiritual training. Here, the tearoom becomes a kind of "spiritual apparatus," a Gesamtkunstwerk in which architecture, behavior, utensils, and mental state are unified.

Thus, starting from the common matrix of Song-dynasty tea culture, tea practices develop into refined sentiment and atmosphere in China, while in Japan they are transformed into ritual and introspection. Employing Lefebvre's perspective of the "production of space," this study proposes an analytical framework that moves from space to everydayness and reveals the mechanisms behind the cross-cultural transformation of tea culture: culture is not simply copied but is deconstructed and recreated within different social rhythms, power structures, and bodily practices. The "way of tea" therefore becomes an important window for understanding the aesthetic and spiritual history of the East.

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