

## **A Universe in a Leaf**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of *A Universe in a Leaf* originates from how the modern day people value the formalities of tea drinking over the true essence of tea. Tea master, Chow Yu will share with the participants how to enjoy tea based on the perspectives of oriental aesthetics and philosophy. In the tea tasting process, it is hoped that the audience will draw from their imaginations and the wonders of nature will be experienced.

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“Return to your original nature,” is a commonly used Chinese phrase which is applied when one comes to a certain realization. The saying originated two thousand and six hundred years ago, from the ancient Chinese philosophy of Laozi. Laozi's beliefs or you can say philosophies, include some crucial keywords, such as Tao, nature, inaction, emptiness, truthfulness, simplicity, modesty, and so on. These concepts are all inherited by the Chinese and are deeply rooted in their lives.

What can people do to help themselves to return to their natural state when their lives are in discomfort, sorrow, tainted, or even twisted? Our first choice is to return to Mother Nature, our second choice is to bring nature to us by drinking a cup of good tea, which is probably the most direct and convenient way for most of us sitting here. What effects does tea have on us? Please allow me to quote the two paragraphs below:

Many tea lovers have had a delightful experience of savoring good tea. The tea that is sipped into your mouth travels slowly and gently down the throat. The sensations of the smooth sweetness and fragrant aroma of the tea are accompanied by an expanding bliss in your heart. And as you lift your head, you see your friend sitting in front of you smiling innocently. At that instant, not only warmth and ease will flow through your body, but the whole space around you is also filled with heavenly vibes. The possible impurities nearby all seem to be negligible.<sup>1</sup>

Tea lovers alike can relate to the feeling that, while drinking tea brewed from tiny pieces of tea leaves can often lead us to the mountains and rivers that are surrounded by pleasant climate where the tea tree grows. But how can a mouthful of tea fill your body with such serenity and joy? We can assume that it delivers a certain biological energy to you – the aromatic tea is encoded with a rich, elegant, and harmonious message from the world of precious plants. The same tiny piece of tea leaf sprouted from a branch with the energy of life provided by the tea tree stretches itself towards the blue sky, the white clouds, the fresh air, and the sunshine. How happy it must have been! Wasn't it the tea leaf that transferred the energy of life to you, that filled you with happiness from the bottom of your heart? To bring such joy to you, the land which this tea leaf came from had to be healthy; therefore, the tea has to be categorized either as natural and ecological tea or semi-wild tea.<sup>2</sup>

Now, it needs to be clarified that there are three different types of organic tea

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<sup>1</sup> Yu Chow (2015). *Taiho*. Tea magazine, Vol. 10, P.45.

<sup>2</sup> Yu Chow (2015). *Taiho*. Tea magazine, Vol. 10, P.45.

cultivations. First of all, there are the “organic” tea plantations, where pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and herbicides are all prohibited, only organic fertilizers are permitted. Secondly, there are the “natural and ecological” tea plantations, where absolutely no fertilizers are introduced. Such tea plantations allow only weeds, fallen leaves, dead insects, and bird manures as fertilizers, therefore, a natural ecological circulation is formed. Last but not least, there is the “semi-wild tea,” which come from tea plantations or tea tree clusters which have been long abandoned due to remote locations, small scale cultivations, and becoming unpopular after falling out of fashion. The abandon tea trees are hidden among the vegetation and have become wild and unattended. These semi-wild tea trees can usually grow quite tall, even with the Taiwanese tea trees, which are mostly bush-like with small leaves, can also grow up to two, three, or even four meters tall. The taller the tea trees grow, the deeper the roots go. The tea trees not only absorb the abundant nutrients in the soil, but also dig into the minerals buried deep under the bedrock.

Farmers in the past considered the sky as the Father and the earth as the Mother, they were “the God of the Heavens and the Goddess of the Earth” respectively. In one of our oldest classics – *I Ching, or the Book of Changes*, the Qian Hexagram (乾) represents the sky, while the Kun Hexagram (坤) symbolizes the earth. The virtue of Kun is like a loving mother, as the earth bears and tolerates everything that grows on her. The soil in an untainted piece of land that is covered in grass and trees, inhabited by birds, and trodden by animals, thus, the earth is filled with various microorganisms. How many microorganisms can there be in a gram of soil? Modern scientific research has found an answer to that question. Quite recently, Dr. Vandana Shiva from India, a world renowned agro-ecologist, gave a speech at National Taiwan University. She said, “In every gram of soil there are thirty thousand protists, fifty thousand algae, and tens of thousands of bacteria.”<sup>3</sup> And chemicals, herbicides in particular, cause mass destruction to these microorganisms in the soil. Experience teaches us that a chunk of soil, when exposed to chemical fertilizers and herbicides, will turn hard and lifeless after many years. In contrast, a lump of natural soil is always soft and distributes fragrance and energy.

Now, we shall use a simple way, which is also a way that will help us “return to our original nature” to enjoy and appreciate a cup of tea brewed from the semi-wild tea leaves harvested in the mountains in northern Taiwan. It is a popular semi-fermented oolong which is called Pouchong tea and is made into a cord shape by tea farmers in the north of Taiwan. With this type of tea, we normally put at least three grams of

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<sup>3</sup> Yi-Hsin Liu, *A Master’s Speech – Be Humble to Soil, Only Biodiversity Can Bring Truly Nutritious Foods* by Dr. Vandana Shiva, News & Market, May, 11, 2018 <https://www.newsmarket.com.tw/blog/109225/>

tea leaves if we use a porcelain or glass cup. For a small stoneware pots, we will probably need to put in six or seven grams, or even more. How are we going to drink this tea today? As you can see, everyone here has a small tea bowl in your hands, this tea bowl were specially made for this occasion by an outstanding ceramic artist from Taiwan, whom I will introduce later. Now, how many tea leaves do we put into each tea bowl? We will only be placing one tea leaf or a pair of leaves with a terminal bud, which are two leaves attached to the same stem in each tea bowl. How much will this tea leaf weigh? The average weight is between 0.15 to 0.2 grams, which is approximately one twentieth the amount of tea we normally buy. Even a ground powdered black tea bag, which can easily release the flavors of the leaves, weigh at least two grams. Is it possible to get any taste out of a tea leaf that weighs only 0.15 or 0.2 gram? What can we taste from it? I'm sure everyone is curious. Let's have a taste of a single leaf of semi-wild tea and experience its charm.

Ordinarily, I enjoy taking the time to develop the mood to naturally engage with the participants over the tea tasting course. However, since I am required to submit my conference paper in advance, I will quote from my previous speech, titled *A Universe in a Leaf*, which was a talk given in Beijing a few years back.

“Now everyone has a tea bowl in your hands. Inside each bowl is a cord-shaped tea leaf which is either only one leaf or two leaves with a terminal bud. This is a semi-wild Pouchong tea from Pinglin, Taiwan, weighing roughly between 0.15 to 0.2 grams. Let's add boiling water to it. Please look! The tea leaf is slowly stretching, please go ahead and smell it.” There is no aroma yet, only the presence of a little steam. “This is just like what ancient Chinese people would refer to as ‘the State of Nothing.’ Ah! Someone can smell the aroma now!”

A light aroma is slowly emitted, from nothing to something. “This is ‘one.’ Some of you have started to drink, you can gradually sense the flavors and sweetness, subtle but very long-lasting. This is also ‘one.’ Tao generates one, which is the state of Taichi.” Some of you have started to have a “sense of chi” and feel the warmth, “this is yang.” The flavors and sweetness start to stimulate your taste buds, your mouth secretes saliva. Saliva is a liquid, which is ying. This is a manifestation of the concept of Taichi, or ying and yang. Step by step, some of you detect a stronger sense of chi in your body, while others develop a slight numbness in their fingertips, someone even just belched. You can enjoy the tea quietly as the aroma grows stronger and the tea turns sweeter. Take another look at the tea leaf that is stretching in your bowl, it was originally only 0.15 to 0.2 grams!

In this way, a tiny piece of tea leaf switches on our receptors for the mysterious, rich, and beautiful messages from Mother Nature. The power of “life” in the tea leaf facilitates our imagination, which unleashes our imagination and provokes incredible creations within our

thoughts and speech.

The water used today is pure and mellow spring water. As the light tea starts to flow into our mouths, we are able to capture the “flow” of time; we can also feel a sense of “tranquility.” At this moment, it is possible for us to understand what the philosophers or the Buddhists refer to as how the “movement is no different from stagnation.”

If you hold the tea in your mouth without swallowing and close your eyes, the warmth of the tea will gently work its way up. An image of natural scenery or perhaps an “expressionist” picture may appear in your mind, and the image will constantly change. The fragrance and aroma of the tea is like “music from the heavens,” while the illusions in your mind is the beauty that belongs to you. In ancient China, tea was identified as medicine; its properties and effects have been recorded and described in Chinese herbology books. Based on years of experience, I have come to the conclusion that the Chinese people understand more of the medicinal properties and effects of tea than what was defined in *the Compendium of Materia Medica*. As of now, the fragrance and aroma of the tea as well as our body have together composed illusions in our minds to relieve us from our sufferings, moreover, to heal our distorted bodies and minds, which are caused by the excessive tension and logical reasoning due to historical influences and modern lifestyles.<sup>4</sup>

With that in mind, we are about to approach the conclusion of today’s experience with a leaf of tea. I believe that everyone here has enjoyed the enduring tea aroma left in your mouth, which will linger on for a long while. Literati, artists, Buddhist monks, and Taoist priests in ancient China all have often mentioned the ultimate state of tea drinking – light yet far. When we consume food or drinks with rich or strong flavors, what we enjoy in our mouths is the texture. In contrast, when we take a sip of tea, the taste is not special but the lingering aroma induces imagination in our minds. I believe that all the ceramic artists and ceramic enthusiasts here today have had similar feelings or experiences like this before. You all work with the modest clay every day, which you understand how a simple material can create unlimited imaginations, once you initiate a dialogue with it.

Lastly, I would like to extend my gratitude to Chang, Ke-ming, an extraordinary Taiwanese ceramic artist who has made the tea bowls we used today. Chang made an effort to visit me at my place in the mountains a few months ago for the production of these tea bowls. He brought along several types of tea bowls which we made tea and together and used it to admire the beauty of a tea leaf soaking and stretching in each bowl. The tea bowls you are holding in your hands today have

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<sup>4</sup> Yu Chow (2015). *A Universe in a Leaf – a Discovery of Nature, History, and the Future by a Person and Tea*. Sanlian Lifeweek Magazine, Vol. 835, P.71.

been designed according to the experience of tea drinking we shared that day. Thanks to Chang, each of you can take home this tea bowl and continue to use it afterwards; this is a gift not only from Chang, but also a souvenir for attending the IAC New Taipei City 2018 Congress. I hope that, after you return home, you will remember the vision and the world that “a Universe in a Leaf” has revealed to you.

## **Bibliography**

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## **Internet Resources**

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