Paper Essay, Research Paper

History has recorded that England and China used ceramic ware to drink their tea and those records go into great detail, showing contrasts and similarities between each culture’s ceramics. The vast ideological differences between England and China show how social, political and ritualistic issues were reflected in the developments and changes made to the ware visually, as well as its functionality. Were the issues in each culture a result of external or internal influences, exchange, inspiration or necessity? A brief history of the origin of tea as a drink and how the very nature of these issues affected ceramics will be included. Perspectives formulated by developments and changes resulting from various oddities inherent in each culture will also be discussed. Rather than a lengthy exploration, a vignette of the author’s opinions and impressions will be presented.

There are many similarities and few differences in the development of tea ware between China and England. However, one particular difference is the evolution of the teacup handle, and saucer or cup plate. In order to understand the significance of tea ware in the cultures under discussion, one must first understand how the beverage was discovered and what made it so important. What brought about the inception of tea ware in China and England for the drinking of tea?

The earliest tea cups in China were beautiful handle-less bowls of delicate stature. They varied in size averaging 4.4×9cm (1 3/4 x 3 1/2 in.), just large enough to hold cupped in one palm comfortably. They had gentle sloping shoulders, and tiny feet, and in some the lips were flared in such a fashion as to make the liquid float out of the bowl into the mouth without effort. Teapots came into existence later than the bowl and were truly an innovation attributed to the differences between taste. Those who liked certain types of tea made from powdered tea leaves preferred bowls and those who liked to boil the leaves (steep) in a small pot before pouring the liquid into a tea bowl.

With the exception of the teapot, the evolution of tea cup handles and saucers must be attributed mainly to European influence, although there is some connection between these elements and the bowl holders the Chinese had been using since the Tang dynasty. China held a monopoly on trade and quickly took advantage of this in the exportation of tea ware. The time period ranges from the first century A.D. to the late 1700’s. Looking at a map of China, we see that many of the original names do not appear as they have been changed over the years by the prevailing government so that many are unfamiliar to us today.

From the Song to the Qing dynasties the major tea vessel was the tea bowl, therefore, the majority of teacups exported were the lovely handleless tea bowls the Chinese used. With the increase in exportation, they were quick to copy European vessels to please their customers and many styles were duplicated from prints and actual samples of silverware. Early export ware became a booming business and surprisingly, the English, although the last of the European countries to embrace tea as a drink, became the largest export customers of tea and tea wares.

Early English tea ware could not compare to the beautiful porcelains and stoneware that were being produced in China, but it didn’t take them long before they were making a high quality imitation in softpaste or slip painted earthenware with various types of salt and tin glazes. However, once porcelain was discovered in Meissen, Germany, in the 1700’s this changed and the Chinese monopoly was broken.

There is no actual written history supporting the many legends and stories regarding tea’s discovery and subsequent development. There were two major legends and it is safe to conclude that the events depicted in the second one may actually be closer to the true events. One says that about 2700 B.C. Emperor Shen Nung of China discovered tea. Believing that water should be boiled as a hygienic precaution, he observed a new beverage when tea leaves were blown into his boiling water. Being scientifically minded, he tested this new brew and found it refreshing (World Book, Inc. 19: 6364). The second legend is placed in the later Han dynasty, somewhere around 25-221 A.D., where it is mentioned that when Gan Lu returned from Buddhist studies in India, he brought back tea plants which he then planted in the Meng mountains, in the district of Szechwan (Ukers l: I 2). However, the first credible mention was by Liu Kun, a general of the Chin dynasty in the fourth century A.D. who wrote to his nephew, the governor of Yenchow in Shantung province, saying “. . . that he felt aged and depressed and wanted some real t’u” (Ukers 1: 3). The first recognizable definition of tea was about 350 A.D. in the Erh Ya, an ancient Chinese dictionary annotated by Kuo P’o, a celebrated Chinese scholar. It says that “a beverage is made from the leaves by boiling” (Ukers 1: 3).

Historically, all cultures were using herbal drinks for medicinal purposes and tea was just one more added to the multitude of infusions and concoctions the Chinese used for a variety of illness, and realigning bodily humors. Originally formed into cakes which were then pounded to produce a fine powder, this tea was put into a tea bowl where boiling water was poured over it and such additives as onion, ginger, orange and salt were used to flavor it for drinking.

Tea was so popular a beverage that not only the imperial court, but scholars extolled it’s virtues. Later, during the Tang dynasty, Yixing became noted for its tea tribute and the court established an imperial tea factory at Yixing. This tradition gave rise to the versatile development of tea implements. Tea powder was used in the Song period and the appearance of brewing tea leaves in a pot didn’t occur until the Ming dynasty.

There was an infinite variety of tea bowls made between 960-1912 A.D. The Song dynasty (960-1279 A.D.) offers North Chien tea bowls with a variety of glazes, Southern Song Cizhou stoneware with a Temmoku glaze and a mulberry leaf design, Guan octagonal stoneware with a white crackle type glaze, and Jizhou porcelain with reserve and Temmoku tortoiseshell glazes.

Overlapping the end of the Song dynasty was the Jin dynasty (1115-1234 A.D.). The tea bowls of the Jin dynasty varied from the black stoneware, which were decorated with brown slip and black glaze giving it an oil spot appearance, to the Jun ware of simple form and value.

During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) tea bowls differed according to where they were made and the prevailing preferences. As in most things, human beings tend to copy others in preference of styles, and tea ware was just one more area. Depending upon which group of people a person was influenced by, the Chinese used either porcelain or stoneware. Some said the porcelain ware was more visually pleasing because the froth from the whipped tea did not clash with the more delicate surface of the bowl, however, others, especially those drinking brewed tea, said the darker liquid was more pleasing in a stoneware bowl. The lovely tea bowls of this time included delicate Xuande porcelain with a cobalt/copper dragon and wave motif; Chenghua teacups in the toutsai style with overglazed enamels; Jingdezhen porcelain with underglazes in the doucai style; while some Jingdezhen porcelain was decorated with gold painted enamels; and a great many porcelain tea bowls with blue underglazes.

Examples from the Qing dynasty (1644-1912 A.D.) included porcelain enameled tea bowls with the Yonzhen reign mark. We also find sets of cup, saucer and bowl with Famille rose enamels, probably produced with the European market in mind.

The people of the Ming dynasty began favoring tea brewed from leaves in pots instead of power brewed in bowls, and the most highly regarded teapots became the Yixing teapots. Since these wares were in high demand, the Yixing district and their potters became dedicated to the manufacture of their special teapots to meet this need (Flagstaff 7). There is no actual documentation covering the development of a “teapot” but is can safely be assumed a natural evolutionary step, and became important during the Ming dynasty where the brewing of tea leaves in a pot were the habit of the time (K.S. Lo 16).

Very likely the forerunners of the tea pot were hot water pots, sauce pots and wine ewers. This probable evolutionary step seems as obvious as their design. Since they were already in use, it would have been a simple matter making the transition and using their design to create a vessel in which to brew tea. In comparing the body designs we can see a similarity between a Northern Song Yingqing ware wine pot with warmer, which had a white body with impressed designs and blue glaze, and the forms of the many teapots produced. If you view a selection of teapots dating from the early 11th to the early 20th centuries, it is not difficult to see intriguing similarities in the shape of the Jingdezhen porcelain ewers as well as the Ming dynasty porcelain hot water pots with blue underglaze.

All the wonderful Chinese teapots were made either of porcelain or a variety of stoneware clay bodies. There was considerable information pointing to the disagreements between different factions within China as to which clay body was best for use as tea ware. Some purported to say the Yixing clay was best because of its ability to maintain the fragrance and taste of the tea. While others extolled the virtues of porcelain. One can get caught up in the debates between the form of the tea ware from thick body to thin; however, you must keep in mind that the visual was as important to the Chinese in their tea drinking as was the fragrance and taste of their tea. It was a warm exhilarating and restful break to take tea and to share the moment with friends and honored guests…so all aspects of the moment were appreciated. This developed into more than just a tea break — it became a ceremony and a sign of civilized manners. Tea was always offered to guests and was more than just courtesy. The Chinese used this as a means to show respect. Also, in very ancient times when a girl was getting married, it was offered as a gift. At that time tea was a very expensive commodity and it was understood that if she accepted this “gift” the match making ended meaning she was engaged (Chow 39).

The earliest recorded European to personally encounter tea and write about it was a Portuguese Jesuit, Father Jasper de Cruz who was a missionary on the first commercial trade mission from Portugal in 1560 A.D. (Ukers vol. I 24). Portugal was the first country to gain trade with China and the developed trade route went first to Lisbon where Dutch ships then transported trade goods to France, Holland and the Baltic counties. Great Britain was the last of the European countries to obtain trade with China. The earliest samples of tea reached England somewhere between 1652 and 1654 when King Charles II ended his exile in Holland and reestablished the English Monarchy.

In China, tea was initially considered an excellent prescriptive for about any ill, but quickly became a highly sought after beverage and then considered a “treasure.” Society embraced it with enthusiasm making it not only a subject for poetry, but esteemed worthy of fine vessels in which to prepare and partake of its benefits. Its exclusivity died out as it became more affordable to all classes of people and soon it became an established social custom all over China.

In contrast to the Chinese, the English were more inclined to view it as a beverage for only the very elite. The English embraced the drinking of tea with enthusiasm. But they differed from the Chinese in that they used the “tea ceremony” more to show wealth and elitism than the enjoyment of the moment, or the fragrance and taste of tea. Witness the addition of milk, sugar and lemon. These additives destroy the delicate flavor and fragrance of the tea brew.

Because of tea’s extremely high importation cost, it was introduced in small quantities and, as usually is the case with high demand products, was initially available only to the very wealthy. Just as important were the unique wares in which this beverage was prepared and consumed. Tea soon became a status symbol among the upper class and nobility; even portraits were commissioned portraying a family sitting down to take tea showing their wealth and good taste. The portraits also note porcelain cups with silver tea service (Emmerson plate 2)showed how the tiny tea bowl was held depending upon individual preference. Some were held by the thumb and fingers with the thumb on the foot ring, while others held it only by the foot ring, and another position showing an individual holding it as a bowl cupped within the hand.

Many of these portraits show only porcelain cups with full silver services while others show a complete porcelain tea set without the silver. The later was the result of the wars during the reigns of both French kings, Louis the XIV and Louis XV. These monarchs ordered the melting down of all silver in order to fund their foreign wars (Emerson, 1991 28). The population was left with one alternative, porcelain to replace the lost silver pots and other equipage for tea services.

Chinese porcelain or Yixing stoneware were beyond the ability of the English craftsmen. Due to the status afforded this ceramic ware, the English craftsmen were determine to imitate them, however, the only material worthy of this status was silver, and handleless silver tea bowls were unacceptable. Patrons, therefore, preferring not to burn their fingers, used porcelain or stoneware tea bowls in conjunction with silver pots (Emerson, 1992 2-3). Export ware from China altered somewhat once the Chinese realized the potential of this market. There were many variations of the tea bowls but the most interesting fact was that the Chinese craftsmen began to imitate the silver ware of Europe. Another influence to the teapot design, which came later as exportation with Europe evolved, were the silver vessels used as patterns by the Chinese. They conscientiously duplicated the many European silver body styles as the exported tea pots became popular.

In viewing all the lovely tea ware one can see that the decoration preferences ranged from the beautiful white with blue underglazes to the Ming dynasty Swatow ware porcelain bowls with flower and bird designs with glazed enamels and gold. The reproduction of European figures on porcelain saucers was a favored scene along with the beautiful flowers and other designs done with the Famille rose overglazed enamels and gilt of the Qing dynasty. In conjunction with porcelain cream jugs, cups, saucers, and dishes in violet and yellow glaze enamels, there were demands for more of the white porcelain and “red” porcelain. These “red” porcelain wares were actually Yixing red stoneware (Honey 63). All these were produced for export for the European market.

However, the British were enamored with the Oriental exotic and promptly adopted the Chinese styles in tea ware. These were very expensive and like nothing they had available locally. It mattered little that the tea bowls had no handles, in fact, very probably the uniqueness of the lack of a handle added to the allure. The pots and tea bowls initially imported along with the tea found an avid consumer at the other end. The English had never seen such beautiful ceramics before and although porcelain was highly prized, it was the “red porcelain” or Yixing stoneware that were the first teapots imported for use with tea shipments. Ironically, these Yixing pots were not considered valuable by the shippers because they came with the tea trade goods and it was discovered that these dark stoneware ceramics were better than the European earthenware. When hard paste porcelain was developed at Meissen, Germany, the oriental monopoly on porcelain wares was finally broken (Sandon 11-12).

As for the use of handles on cups….the importers found that the handleless cups were excellent ballast for their tea. It took up very little room and held the precious tea cargo above the water lines of the ships during the voyages. These tea wares were far superior to anything the Europeans had and the shippers found that they were as valued as the tea when society latched onto the “strange” ceramics accompanying their tea. The English clamored for the imported tea ware, which probably gave rise to the importers placing orders with the Chinese for more.

As usual, supply and demand economics was a strong incentive for the Chinese to provide more tea ware for import. Due to the increase in demand, they took to duplicating the silverware pots of Europe in making the teapot bodies, even though they maintained their own design in the tea bowl. It is necessary to mention that as they imitated European wares for importation, the cup underwent a change and received a handle reminiscent of those silver coffee and posset cups used throughout Europe. This typical merchandising cycle is what lead to the duplication of the silverware and drinking cups of Europe by the Chinese. The variations in designs are from the fanciful to the very plain, but in the tea ware that was imported there was also included many beautiful Chinese porcelain tea pots and bowls.

In contrast, the English never really developed their own style for the tea ware until after porcelain was discovered in Meissen, Germany. There are several observations that need to be made here and one was that once tea ware was popular in England, many English potters or guilds began duplicating them. One such duplication is the Elers StokeonTrent teapot of 1695. This particular teapot was probably reproduced in earthenware and a dark brown slip applied to make the surface appear similar to the unglazed glowing surface of the Yixing teapots.

There are many examples of fine tea ware but some of the most notable were the Delftware such as the Frazackerly type out of Liverpool in 1750 which boasted cups without handles and saucers, toy tea services in tin glazed earthenware, brown salt glazed teapots; Lowstoft softpaste tea ware out of Chelsea; Jasper tea ware sets which were from Wedgewood out of Staffordshire; Worcester enameled porcelain teapots and, not to be left out, the unusual such as the famous Cauliflower ware teapots from Wedgewood in Whieldon.

The Chinese tea bowl never had a handle but in Chinese literature, the Yanfanlu (or Elaboration on Luxuriant Dew), there is a paragraph that states that a tea bowl stand appears in the Tang dynasty when “the daughter of Cui Ning drank tea, she was often disgusted by the hot tea bowl which scorched her fingers. She took a plate and melted wax in it,” (K.S. Lo 15) placing the tea bowl into the melted wax. The simple expedient of fitting the tea bowl into the wax not only allowed the holding of the tea bowl without burning the drinker’s fingers, but also stabilized the tea bowl preventing spillage. It followed soon after, that lacquer bowl holders were made and a new tea implement was born (Ukers II: 447). It wasn’t long before these bowl holders were reproduced in clay and became a part of the design of the tea bowl.

The bowl holders are the forerunners of the teacup handle and saucer if viewed from this perspective. The Chinese developed the bowl holder in lacquer ware, they put a ring on the bottom of the tea bowl and once this was accomplished it wasn’t long before many different styles of holders came into being. The variety is endless and we see it as early as 960 A.D. in the various Ting Yao porcelain cup stands from the Song dynasty. There were Ru ware bowl stands from the Northern Song dynasty, Yongle cup stands with white glazes, Yingqing porcelain cups with stands and many more than can be included here. It is an easy step from this cup stand to the handle and saucer. We see saucers, as well as handles on teacups, as part of the tea ware the Chinese reproduced for export.

Handleless cups in English tea cup designs were evidence of the desire of the English to emulate the tea bowls of the Chinese. Chamberlain’s factory at Worcester made a porcelain tea set around 1795-1800 where none of the cups had handles but the saucers were reminiscent of small bowls with cup rings in the center to hold the cup steady. There is a an account offered about the idea of tea being drunk from a dish or saucer in Robin Emerson’s British Teapots and Tea Drinking which says:

The saucer seems to have perplexed our ancestors at the time of its first introduction; its first use was believed to be merely to cool the tea, and then it was unfashionable to drink from the cup; at a later time the use of the saucer was understood to be confined to saving slops, and thence forward the cup alone was to have the honour of being raised to the lips (19).

Regardless of the developments, we can deduce that the adoption of tea by the Chinese was an outside influence changed to fit their own society. Likewise we see the exportation of tea to England adopted from an outside influence. Both societies developed tea “ceremonies” to ritualize the drinking of this beverage and because of its beneficial nature, tea became more than just a medicinal concoction. Although each society viewed the taking of tea differently, and the initial motivations were at opposite ends of the scales, both had high regard for the beverage and the vessels used. Similarly, in the very early stages the high cost of the tea plant gave access to only the very elite and wealthy.

China mass produced tea for all her society and as the prices fell, the lower classes benefited. However, in England, the nobility and wealthy were highly agitated over the fact that the lower classes could have access to something they regarded as theirs alone. The decrease in price brought about a major change in how the English viewed what became their national beverage. Not surprising their societal infrastructure also changed and followed in the footsteps of the Chinese…open to all their people.

The English went a step farther by developing their own tea plantations in British India, Java, Sumatra and Ceylon and with the enterprising opportunities being seized by their ceramists, the exportation prices of tea and tea ware dropped, as mass production and new ceramic materials were developed.

As the English took this tea issue to a different level, strictures regarding women taking tea in public changed when industrious individuals opened new types of establishments such as “Tea Gardens” and the strict codes changed. As did the character of the tea ceremony. Britain developed afternoon tea and a different social activity sprang up around this.

In reviewing the styles, shapes and decorations on the variety of tea ware it is obvious that when mass produced the ware underwent a dramatic change and was no longer the high quality of the earlier, individually made pieces. This is not surprising as it occurs in all areas that go into mass production. We can even see it in the blends of the teas that came about when the various British exporters attempted to create a tea that would be lower in cost to the black and green teas of China but maintain the quality of the leaf. This took time and eventually, although a very good blend of teas emerged, they could not compare to the original teas exported from China.

The English, however, were able to improve on their own ceramic industry, especially after porcelain was discovered in Germany. We can see an improvement in their ware over time. There will always be those pieces unique and wonderfully crafted, as well as the mass produced ware, and these will always be in high demand among those who cherish fine ceramics no matter the form. We still see evidences of fine craftsmanship coming from China but not of the quality of those very early beautiful ceramics that held the world in awe. Much of this change is probably due to the change in the economic, political and social atmosphere within the country over the years.