

Literati Gatherings and Tea-Tasting Competitions Literature in the Song Dynasty

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Abstract: Tea-tasting competition refers to assessing tea quality and tea-tasting skills through competitive means, involving steps such as boiling water, warming bowls, preparing tea paste, and pouring water. Centered on tea-tasting competition, the relevant literature not only reflects the social conditions and social interactions of the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties but also adopts rhetorical devices like exaggeration and metaphor, presenting distinct styles in literary genres such as poetry and prose. Through the use of imagery and discursive, prose-like expressions, these works create unique aesthetic experiences, embodying the Song people's perceptions of social life and pursuit of aesthetic artistic conception. Tea-tasting competition literature emerged during the Renzong reign of the Northern Song Dynasty, reached its peak in the Huizong reign, declined rapidly in the Southern Song Dynasty, and ultimately perished in the Hongwu reign of the Ming Dynasty. This paper first sorts out the phased development and era characteristics of tea competition in the Song Dynasty. Secondly, it analyzes the writing objects and spiritual reflections of Song Dynasty tea competition literature: tea science research and leisure tastes, network images of literati gatherings, and pictures of economic customs. Finally, it explores the artistic perspective through diction, imagery, and the aesthetic implications contained in tea competition literature, depicting the life patterns and social perceptions of Song Dynasty literati. Literati gathered in tea competitions, forming friendships and mutual understanding.

1. Introduction

Focusing on the integration of literati gatherings and tea competition literature in the Song Dynasty, this paper emphasizes the occurrence and role of tea competition in literature, confirms the close connection between tea competition and literati, showcases the phased development and era style of Song Dynasty tea competition literature, and puts an insight into literati's pleasure in feasting and their sense of crisis. Though named "competition", tea competition was actually an excellent way for literati to unwind, make friends, and cultivate their moral character. By exploring the exchange of tea ceremony among literati, we can glimpse the trends and fashions of the Song Dynasty, summarize the connection of literati gatherings and tea competition literature in the Song Dynasty, and promote the in-depth study of Song Dynasty tea literature and the understanding of the contribution of tea ceremony to literati gatherings. Emperors of the Song Dynasty generally loved tea and took the lead in drinking it, fostering a social trend of tea consumption. Tea gradually became part of literati's daily life and social interactions. The prosperity of tea culture in the Song Dynasty can be seen from this^[1].

This paper explores the value choices of Song Dynasty literati, analyzes why tea competition thrived in the Song Dynasty, and examines the gains and losses of Song Dynasty literati in tea competitions.

2. The Development Track of Tea Competition Literature in the Song Dynasty

The most significant feature of tea-tasting literature is its rapid rise and maturity. Literati of the Jiayou period has witnessed its rapid development, while Su Shi and his contemporaries has experienced its maturity. It reached its peak during the Huizong reign. After the Huizong reign, it declined rapidly in the Southern Song Dynasty-though tea competitions still existed, relevant literary works became scarce. A second notable feature is its discursive nature, emphasis on imagery, and prose-like writing style, which are prominent in tea competition works. Tea competition was also closely linked to responsive poetry; most tea competition works were associated with literati gatherings. Finally, tea competition literature was connected to the integration of elegance and vulgarity in the Song Dynasty-even mundane matters like tea picking and tea making were elevated to elegance by literati.

2.1 The Rise and Development of Tea Competition in the Song Dynasty

Tea competition literature flourished unprecedentedly in the Song Dynasty. In terms of the development of tea poetry, there were already examples of tea literature emphasizing imagery and symbolism in the Tang Dynasty. After entering the Song Dynasty, tea competition literature was initiated by the literati of the Jiayou period, promoted continuously by Su Shi and his disciples, and reached its zenith during the Huizong reign-at this point, its characteristics of emphasizing imagery, discursiveness, and prose style were fully developed. Meanwhile, with the development of prose in the Song Dynasty, works on tea competition emerged as a new force and matured in the late Northern Song Dynasty, demonstrating the charm of Song Dynasty tea competition literature.

Existing tea competition works can be traced back to the Renzong reign, so tea competition literature is defined as starting from this period. Judging from the literature, the earliest and most famous tea competition works were created by the literati of the Jiayou period, which retained some echoes of the Xikun style, featuring a sense of prosperity and luxury. Later, Su Shi's school and his contemporaries strived to avoid this, emphasizing detailed descriptions and personal experiences, embodying the demeanor of a flourishing age^[2]. Their works conform to the definition of tea competition literature, with a strong emphasis on imagery, discursiveness, prose style, and the prominent integration of elegance and vulgarity.

2.2 The Prosperity and Decline of Tea Competition Literature in the Song Dynasty

Emperors of the Song Dynasty treated literati favorably. Forming cliques was common in the Song Dynasty, and responsive poetry gatherings became the best way for literati to gather friends. Faced with deep-rooted realities such as frequent partisan strife, political conservatism, and bloated bureaucratic institutions, Song Dynasty literati found it increasingly difficult to realize their ambitions and achievements. As the saying goes, "When one is wronged, one speaks out"-tea competition literature gradually became a way to express emotions and convey the ideological tendencies of the Song people. For example, Ouyang Xiu wrote "Shuangjing Tea" to express his views on the world through tea, Su Shi wrote "Yuetu Tea" to convey longing through tea competition, and Huang Tingjian wrote "Ruan Lang Gui Tea Ci" to place his emotions in tea competition.

After the Southern Song Dynasty, the quality and quantity of tea competition poetry declined sharply. Lu You only had two works explicitly about tea competition, and there were few other works related to it. Unlike the Northern Song Dynasty's tea competition poetry, which indulged in

landscapes and trivial complaints, the works of Southern Song literati were filled with the sorrow of a declining dynasty. At the end of his poem "Written on the First Day of the Fourth Lunar Month, More Than Ten Days After the Start of Summer", Lu You made a direct comment, expressing his frustration at being entangled in mundane affairs, plagued by illnesses, and witnessing the dynasty's decline-he longed to retire to seclusion. Huang Chongzhi's "Lu Yuanjun (Prefect) Sends Rizhu Tea" was not originally a reflection on tea competition but an expression of his views on the changes of the times, not a criticism of tea competition. Similarly, Wang Shizhen's statement that "tea competition was favored by nobles" indicates that tea competition had gradually deviated from its original path, pursuing novelty and luxury^[3]. Literati also expressed many criticisms-what we need is not necessarily the most expensive, but the most suitable. Tea is inherently mild and distant; forcibly adding ingredients only provokes dislike.

This article focuses on the characteristics of tea competition literature: emphasis on discussion, prose-like expression, and imagery. Imagery provides detailed descriptions of tea competition, discussion allows authors to express their views, and prose style adds charm. Naturally, the rise and fall of tea competition literature in the Song Dynasty had its own reasons.

2.3 The Driving Forces behind the Evolution of Tea Competition Literature in the Song Dynasty

The prosperity of tea competition was a product of the times, and its decline also conformed to historical trends-literati's elegance laid the foundation for its prosperity.

Reasons for the prosperity of tea competition include: (1) the popularity of the tea competition method; (2) the perfect combination of diancha and Jian tea; (3) the pursuit of literati; (4) the ruling class's investment of manpower and material resources; (5) the attention of local people; (6) the Little Ice Age in the Song Dynasty.

The prosperity of tea competition originated from the local customs of the people in Jianzhou. Jian tea was the top-quality tea at that time and was loved by the ruling class. It declined due to changes in tea-making methods and the decline of national strength. Although tea competition in the Southern Song Dynasty had declined to a certain extent, it had not completely lost its status. When the Southern Song Dynasty was first established, the north was occupied by the Jin people, the south was plagued by bandits, treacherous ministers held power, and local stability was lacking-making it impossible to provide a foundation for tea production.

Reasons for the gradual demise of tea competition include: (1) the decline of diancha and the popularity of stir-fried tea; (2) the ruling class's extravagance and demand for the highest quality at all costs, imposing a heavy burden on tea farmers, leading to hardships and resentment; (3) the prevalence of low-quality products; (4) the cumbersome and time-consuming procedures of tea competition; (5) the ruling class's gradual loss of interest in diancha; (6) constant criticism from literati.

The timeline of tea competition in the Song Dynasty started with the Renzong reign, represented by the Luoyang literati group led by Ouyang Xiu and Fan Zhongyan. The works of literati at this time retained some echoes of the Xikun style. Later, it matured in the hands of Su Shi and his contemporaries, who strived to avoid this style and developed their own characteristics-emphasizing imagery, discursiveness, prose style, and embodying the atmosphere of a flourishing age. Tea competition literature reached its peak during the Huizong reign and then declined. The characteristics of tea competition literature thus include: emphasis on imagery, expression of emotions, development of discursiveness and prose style, breaking the boundary between elegance and vulgarity, and elevating vulgarity to elegance.

3. Writing Objects and Spiritual Reflections of Tea Competition Literature in the Song Dynasty

The writing objects of Song Dynasty tea competition literature were all-encompassing, mostly related to tea. Tea science research was extensive, covering everything from tea production and tea competition utensils to tea tax principles and tea regulations. Literati also expressed their views on tea competition and the joy derived from it^[4]. Of course, people also made friends and maintained emotional connections through tea competition. Common people integrated tea into their daily lives, and tea was closely linked to people. This paper explores these aspects through tea science research, the leisure tastes of tea competition literature, literati friendships, and the relationship between tea and economic customs.

3.1 Tea Science Research and the Leisure Tastes of Tea Competition Literature

Tea science research was extensively conducted in the Song Dynasty, with people from all walks of life diligently engaging in it and finding joy in it. Masterpieces from this period have been passed down to later generations for reading. Leisure tastes lie in the ability to temporarily relax the mind through tea competition, escape from the world, express unique understandings of tea competition through imagery, and entertain oneself through writing.

Tea science research in the Song Dynasty focused on tea production, appreciation, utensil observation, as well as relevant tea principles, tax benefits, and records of tea people-covering all aspects of tea. It emphasized tea making, appreciation, preservation, and transportation.

The leisure tastes brought by tea competition literature were also prominent. Authors first expressed their love for tea competition through creation, carried unique experiences through imagery, expressed their views through discussion, and then gained peace from the tea competition process. They first described the time, place, and characters of the tea competition. Li Weigong valued water quality; Ouyang Xiu, though holding the high official position of Shaofu, only obtained one piece of tea, which he kept and circulated for seven years without using it. Fresh tea and living water were emphasized, indicating the importance of both. He believed that tea stored for too long would deteriorate, yet he could use the nearby Longtang water with tea obtained within three months to express his views on tea competition. Tang Geng recorded one of his tea competition experiences in a prose style, expressed his insights, and concluded by advising people to cherish blessings. His unique experiences of life and tea competition brought him joy, reflecting his optimistic attitude of adapting to circumstances and living freely despite adversity-such literary works could not have been created without a certain sense of leisure. Leisure tastes were subtly reflected in tea competition literature.

3.2 Network Images of Literati Gatherings and Scholar Friendships

From Qian Weiyan's shogunate to Ouyang Xiu's disciples in the Jiayou period, and then to Su Shi's school in the Yuanyou period-this was the heyday of tea competition in the Northern Song Dynasty. After Qian Weiyan became a minister of the Song Dynasty, for various reasons, a large number of literati gathered under his door, and the Xikun style was born there, leading a literary trend of the era. Later, Ouyang Xiu became the leader of the literary world. His tea competition works initially retained some echoes of the Xikun style, and then he strived to express tea competition in his own way-using imagery and a prose style. Subsequently, Su Shi's works promoted tea competition literature to maturity with its emphasis on imagery, discussion, and prose style. This section explores tea competition through the network of literati-friendship leading to mutual understanding, and friendship expressed through the exchange of tea and responsive poetry among literati.

Song Dynasty literati formed friendships through various means, mainly including family

friendships, mentor-disciple relationships, and marriage ties. The Luoyang literati group mentioned by Fang Jian was based on mentor-disciple relationships. Professor Wang Shuizhao estimated that the Luoyang literati group had more than 20 members; here, only 11 famous figures of the time are recorded.

3.3 Economic Prosperity and Vivid Customary Scenes

Literati used tea in their friendships, but tea's role extended far beyond this. Overall, tea permeated all aspects of life-serving as universal equivalent, a daily necessity, a way to treat guests, and even part of betrothal ceremonies. Tea played an extremely important role in social life, serving the needs of both the royal family and common people in the Song Dynasty.

When used as universal equivalent, tea had economic value equivalent to money, demonstrating its widespread utility. In treating guests, it was customary to brew tea for visitors in the Song Dynasty. In daily life, there was a verse: "Wrap tea and buy cakes to rent an ox"-under the economic conditions of the Song Dynasty, tea was also an important economic product, and exchanging tea for ox rental was a notable example. Even among the lower classes, tea was an important means of communication, as seen in a poem "The east village sends tea on the wedding night"-tea was involved even in major events like betrothal, indicating its importance and widespread in life. The line "By the door, the sound of weaving echoes through the night; over the earthen stove, soy straw boils local tea" reflects the hardships of common people-they could not stop weaving at night and could only boil local tea over an earthen stove to sustain themselves, highlighting their hardships.

Tea politics was an extremely important part of the entire Song Dynasty. Tea permeated all aspects of people's lives, as reflected in Huizong's "Xuanhe Palace Ci", which showed the emperor's love for tea competition. Tea was closely integrated with the economy. The Song Dynasty was a special era in the development of traditional Chinese society-politically and militarily weak, yet achieving tremendous progress in social economy. Mr. Deng Guangming once said: "The Song Dynasty was the highest period of development in China's feudal society. The material civilization and spiritual civilization achieved during the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties can be said to be unprecedented and unrepeatable in the entire feudal social history." For the Northern Song Dynasty, despite constant internal and external troubles, the overall situation was quite stable, with agriculture, handicrafts, and commerce gradually flourishing. As an important part, tea made significant contributions to economic development. The tea economy was quite active, with tea-producing areas and output steadily expanding, forming two major producing areas (Southeast China and Sichuan) and two corresponding tea political systems. The extensive use of the tea monopoly system alleviated conflicts between the Song Dynasty and the Liao and Jin dynasties, and promoted the spread of Central Plains tea culture to northern ethnic minorities. After the Jiankang chaos, the early rule of the Southern Song Dynasty was extremely unstable-many tea-producing areas were in war zones, local forces rose, and the Jin army pressed the border. Therefore, to relieve pressure, the imperial court abolished the official tea tribute several times. Tea output and producing areas shrank drastically, and the tea market declined significantly. As recorded in "History of the Song Dynasty", during the Jianyan first year of Emperor Gaozong's reign, the Transport Commissioner of Southeast China was in charge of tea and salt affairs in the southeast; it was not until the Shaoxing fifteenth year that a special institution was established for management, experiencing a long period of turmoil. Tea was scarce and expensive. After the Southern Song Dynasty stabilized, it basically inherited the tea system of the Northern Song Dynasty, but it never regained its former prosperity.

Tea competition literature was widely created and used by literati to express emotions. People from all social classes used tea for their own purposes. Tea competition also had its own unique language and imagery, allowing authors to create unique aesthetic experiences for readers.

4. Artistic Perspective and Essence of Tea Competition Literature in the Song Dynasty

Whether in terms of diction or imagery, Song Dynasty tea competition literature is an outstanding achievement. Song Dynasty literati expressed their emotions and deep friendships with friends through depicting tea competition, all conveyed through tea-related language. This section first analyzes the diction and imagery of tea competition through literati's works, and finally explores the aesthetic implications constructed by them.

4.1 Diction and Imagery Closely Aligned with Tea Language

When Song Dynasty literati wrote about tea, it seemed that tea permeated all aspects of their works. Judging from literary works, no matter what they wrote about, they ultimately put their own emotions and ideas into their works. Thus, literary works can be seen as an extension of human emotions. Overall, tea competition was an excellent way for literati to relax, connect with friends, and enjoy life. They enjoyed the joy of victory in tea competitions, expressed it through works, and cultivated their temperament in the process.

4.2 Aesthetic Implications Contained in Tea Competition Literature

Diction and imagery are means of expression, through which unique aesthetic implications are conveyed. Tea competition is the climax of diancha activities. Every step of tea competition is a manifestation of art-from warming bowls to preparing tea paste and boiling water, each step requires meticulous attention to detail. Each step is also an expression of buddhist mood, the essence of diancha in terms of aesthetic implication, and the unique charm of tea competition itself.

In Su Shi's "Responding to Jiang Kui's Gift of Tea", he toughly distinguished Beiyuan tea and Shaxi tea, then directly stated that tea is not the only factor in tea competition-water is the most important at the moment of observing the water stain. How water "competes for priority" depends on the skill of diancha. In other words, tea, water, and tea competition skills are all indispensable. These two short sentences synthesize the elements of tea competition, demonstrating remarkable literary talent. Tea competition and diancha are inseparable; the success of diancha determines the outcome of tea competition. Literati summarized a set of models in the process of tea competition. First, objects and processes in tea competition with rich natural images; second, they integrated their own emotions and other factors. The steps and objects of tea competition themselves have no inherent connotations-only when people integrate their emotions into them and view these images with an aesthetic perspective can they perceive their aesthetic value. Each creator of tea competition literature also has a unique understanding of imagery^[5]. They use the diction of tea competition literature to organize language, express imagery, and construct unique aesthetic experiences, bringing readers sincere personal emotions through words.

5. Conclusion

Overall, tea competition literature spanned from the Renzong reign of the Song Dynasty to the establishment of the Ming Dynasty, mainly concentrating in the Northern Song Dynasty-roughly from 998 AD to 1400 AD, lasting about four centuries. Except for the early works that retained some echoes of the Xikun style, works of other periods did not have this feature, but instead emphasized the imagery, discursiveness, and prose style of tea competition. Countless literati left their works-the Luoyang literati group, Su Shunyu, Cai Mo, Su Shi and his disciples and friends, all these literary masters made important contributions. Of course, the support of the ruling class was also indispensable. Their social interaction literature contributed to Song Dynasty literature, making a

significant contribution. The widespread popularity of tea in the Song Dynasty also indicates the importance of tea competition literature. With its unique diction, emotional experiences, and emphasis on imagery, Song Dynasty tea competition literature allows us to quickly understand and immerse ourselves in its writing, experiencing unique aesthetic experiences. Authors also gained their own peace through creation.

Although tea competition and diancha skill have been eliminated, its spirit and literature are still vividly living in people's heart. It offers a unique perspective on life, living through tea.

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