The Other, the Hobby, the Sign: a study of tea culture in British literature

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Abstract: The phenomenon of tea and tea culture in British literature contains traces of the reinterpretation and rewriting of the imported Chinese tea culture by British native culture, which is of great significance for the derivation of a unique British tea culture. In British literature, the cultural identity of tea has been successively constructed as an exotic luxury, a luxurious necessity, and a ritualized beverage, or in short, the other, the hobby, and the sign. The fluid change in the identity of tea is attributed to the openness of the cultural differences between China and the UK. In an open situation, British culture gazes and desires Chinese tea, eventually possessing and assimilating it. Tea is also mixed into the British dietary structure and social culture from top to bottom, and finally transcends the cultural differences between China and the UK, generating a new meaning and constructing an independent British tea culture.

Keywords: British Literature, British Tea Culture, Hybridity, Third Space

1. Introduction

Afternoon tea is a very British tradition and national custom. The act of drinking tea as a whole lifestyle has been embedded in the fabric of daily life in the UK. Tea is an indispensable value element in confirming British national identity and can be called a synonym for Britain, as George Orwell said, "Tea is one of the important pillars of our country's... civilization." [1]

Literary works are an important medium for the writing of tea culture, and the study of British and American literary works offers an emerging perspective on the tea culture of these regions. Current research is focused domestically, with representatives such as Ma Xiaoli, Yuan Tao, and Wang Lulin who have pioneered this field of study. Ma Xiaoli has studied the role of tea and tea parties in the works of Austen and Mrs. Gaskell; Wang Lulin has explored the tea-related events in literature through the works of authors such as Austen, Dickens, Lawrence, and George Gissing; Yuan Tao has interpreted the tea elements and their implications in American novels like "The Teahouse", "Three Cups of Tea", and "The Portrait of a Lady".

Domestic scholars have focused on the role and symbolic meaning of tea in character development, plot advancement, and thematic expression. This paper, building on the research of predecessors, attempts to examine British tea culture through the identity fluidity of this ordinary daily object in literature. "As Georg Simmel pointed out, 'Even the most ordinary and inconspicuous forms of life' are expressions of a more universal social and cultural order." [2] By studying some classic literary works from 1658 to 1952, the paper clarifies the trajectory of tea culture development. The consumption of tea has gone through a complex cultural process from top to bottom, from the periphery to the center. In 1658, the earliest text recording tea appeared in Britain, and within a century, Chinese tea was praised in British literature while maintaining its identity as an exotic import; from the mid-18th century to the mid-19th century, tea was ubiquitous in British literature, becoming a national hobby and a mass consumer product; in the mid-19th century, the British pioneered the Victorian afternoon tea, which as a ritual was repeatedly depicted in literature. In 1952, the tea rationing system, originating from the WWII period, was finally abolished, and the sales of tea bags began to increase, making the era of loose tea dominating the market a thing of the past, and the traditional cultural role of tea underwent a tremendous change.

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Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's (1949-) discussions of hybridity, the "third space," and cultural difference, this paper analyzes the evolution of tea's cultural identity and the formation of British tea culture. In British literature, the cultural identity of tea has been successively constructed as an exotic luxury, a luxurious necessity, and a ritualized beverage, or in short, the other, the hobby, and the sign. The fluidity of tea's identity is attributed to the openness of the cultural differences between China and the UK, and its transformation is an inevitable result of its nature as a cross-cultural construct. Tea, from being an alien other, gradually hybridizes into British native culture, becoming a national hobby and the national drink, and rising to a symbol of British culture.

2. The other as a luxury good

Homi Bhabha introduced the term "hybridity" into the field of cultural studies, stating, "In terms of cultural identity, hybridity means that cultures are not separate and distinct, but always in collision with each other, and this collision and exchange lead to cultural hybridization." [3] Hybridity arises from a reversal of the self/other binary opposition, "and should be seen as something more than the phenomenology of cultural difference and conflict." [4] As an expensive imported item from the distant East, tea has an inherent otherness, which, before being recognized and assimilated, led to "nearly a century of social debate" [5] characterized by the self/other cultural differences and interactions between Britain and China. Amidst the clamor of support and opposition and the collision and exchange with British native culture, tea took root in the upper class, was endowed with local characteristics, and became a hybridized beverage when served with milk and sugar. It also became intertwined with British literature, bringing a faint fragrance of tea to literature. However, the exotic identity and otherness of Chinese tea remain prominently present.

In the early 17th century, through overseas trade, the "fine tree of the south" native to China, tea, entered the British cultural context. It had both the identity of a beverage and a medicine, and was slowly spread through coffee houses and pharmacies. As an exotic import, the continuous narrative of tea in the UK began with an advertisement published on September 23, 1658, in the London "Political Gazette": "An excellent Chinese drink recognized by all physicians. The Chinese call it tea, while people from other countries call it Tay or Tee." [6] This is the earliest record of tea with a specific date. The association of tea with literature originated with the "Queen of Tea," Catherine of Braganza. In 1662, when the Portuguese princess Catherine married King Charles II of England, she brought a large amount of tea and Chinese "tea utensils and porcelain tea bowls." [7] In 1663, the poet Edmund Waller (1606-1687) composed a poem to celebrate her birthday, which is the earliest tea-themed poem in England: "The moon god has bay leaves, and the god of love has myrtle; both are excellent trees, but my queen's tea is the best." [8] Catherine pioneered the fashion of tea tasting in the British royal court, leading the upper class to follow suit. Pope recorded the royal tea-drinking scene in "The Rape of the Lock": at Hampton Court Palace by the River Thames, "the great Anna who ruled three countries (referring to Queen Anne), sometimes governs here, sometimes drinks tea." [9] At that time, tea was as precious and scarce as green gold, popular in the royal court and the upper class, and became an important medium in social spaces. Fielding stated in the comedy "Love in a Masquerade" that "love and gossip are the best sweeteners for tea," [10] pleasant chat accompanied by tea, using tea as a medium, forming a social circle for discourse exchange and information dissemination in the upper class.

The example set by the nobility and the influence of the novel exotic items made tea gain more recognition. Certain groups, especially the elite living in the metropolis at the center of the empire, were the first to enjoy foods from distant foreign lands beyond their own. The literati living in London were such a group; they were deeply interested in other cultures and had an open-minded attitude towards the experimentation and integration of tea culture. Tea was praised for benefiting the thoughts of scholars, inspiring literary works, and was acclaimed as the "king of all plants," "friend of the muses," and "nectar of the gods." However, the heterogeneity and unfamiliarity of tea led to opposition, with the anti-tea faction opposing it head-on. At the beginning of its introduction to England, tea was culturally constructed as having a specific gender—tea seemed to possess feminine qualities, and drinking tea was considered effeminate. Jonas Hanway (1712-1786), an anti-tea advocate, wrote in 1756, "On Tea," vehemently denouncing tea as "harmful to health, an obstacle to industrial development, and a cause of national poverty." [10] Later, Johnson specifically wrote a response, "A Review of Tea in Jonas Hanway's 'Eight Days Tour'," [11] refuting Hanway's article point by point. However, he also acknowledged in his article

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that tea was suitable for those who were leisurely, relaxed, and scholarly, and in Veblen's terms, tea drinking was still a form of "conspicuous consumption of goods" by the leisure class. [12]

In the context of a multitude of interwoven voices, tea has been integrated into British literature, while the regional origins of tea in China are still faintly discernible, with Chinese tea culture following closely like a shadow. The "traveling food" from China—tea, remains an objectified otherness in British literature. As Pope noted in his poetry, in the far north of England, "no one has tasted Bohea tea." [9] Bohea is the British transliteration of the place name Wuyi, referring to the black tea produced in the Wuyi Mountain area of China, making the Chinese origins of tea clear and evident. The poet also frequently depicted "fine Chinese porcelain" and "shining enamel," and vividly portrayed the image of a teapot, "Here stands the living teapot, with two arms, one bent as the handle, the other extended as the spout." [9] From the 17th to the mid-18th century, Chinese tea and tea sets in British literature maintained their regional identity. As an expensive luxury, tea was an exotic flavor enjoyed only by the elite social and cultural class, with semantics implying status, power, fashion, and elegance.

Tea, as an integral part of the eastward spread of Chinese culture, represents the otherness in British literature, which is a microcosm of the "China Craze" in 18th-century Britain. At that time, the "China Craze" was "marked by a separation between the everyday life level and the ideological and cultural level. On the one hand, the fashion of Chinese style prevailed in daily life, with items such as porcelain, screens, and tea filling the living rooms, drawing rooms, and dining tables; on the other hand, the literary and intellectual circles' comments on China were mixed with praise and criticism." [14] The Chinese tea culture, which embodies the philosophy of "tea is life," encountered reinterpretation in the British cultural context. The Chinese-style light and clear tea drinking was rewritten as a blend of milk and sugar from the West Indies to cater to the unique taste and calorie needs of the British upper class. The interaction of tea, milk, and sugar fits perfectly, but the blended drinking method has not yet spread throughout British society, making tea an" other" that occupies a position between the two cultures.

3. Necessities of luxury

During the Industrial Revolution from the mid-18th century to the mid-19th century, as Britain became wealthy and powerful, Chinese tea became a major commodity in trade. The consumer group of tea expanded across all social classes, from cities to villages, transcending the boundaries of time and space to become a national hobby and a necessity on the tables of the people. Tea was integrated into the structure of British cultural life, and a tea ceremony and culture with distinct British characteristics began to take shape. However, the huge demand for tea in Britain and the contradiction between the export volume of tea restricted by the "Late Qing consensus of 'using tea to control the barbarians'" [15] led to a continuous trade deficit with China, making tea a " luxuriated " demand for the British public. The desire for the other and the subsequent denial present a contradictory and complex psychological moment, which is the site where division occurs. Chinese tea, with multiple identities (a popular drink, a weapon to restrain trade with Britain, and a top national commercial secret), splits into a luxury necessity in the gap of cultural differences between China and Britain. This contradictory and complex state, as Homi Bhabha said, "appears as a cultural property of a complex global experience..." [4] At this time, British tea culture is precisely positioned in this gap, interstitial, full of contradictions and conflicts, and unstable hybrid area, which is the "third space" advocated by Bhabha. In this space, the colonial desire for Chinese tea and the object of the tea plant species gradually evolved and eventually possessed.

The British public integrated the acquired behaviors into their daily lives, familiarized the unfamiliar, and endowed the material world with new meanings, forming a heritage of tea-drinking habits. From the initial acquaintance with the fragrance of tea to developing the habit of drinking tea, the development process of tea drinking has been just like this. As Byron wrote in "Don Juan," "The next morning, tea, toast, and breakfast were laid out in the dining room, these are eaten by everyone, but not seen written in poetry." [16] Once tea preferences are established, they are usually not easy to change and form a continuous and stable force. Dorothy Wordsworth recorded in her diary on June 21, 1802, about a family who spent all their savings on tea, "His wife has to prepare four or five times of tea every day, asking for white sugar from others! She wants to buy a new teapot... She always makes tea for her husband and son." [17] Lamb described a mixed drink with milk and sugar - Shropshire tea, in "Essays of Elia," which is the favorite of the

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flower seller, the gardener who gets up early also loves to have a cup, and the chimney-sweeping children are excited and fascinated by it. Lamb called out, "If you happen to encounter this situation, see him stretching his head towards the tempting rising heat, please let him have a large basin." [18] This kind of drink is called "tea," but it is actually made by boiling the wood of the plane tree, imitating tea to meet the desire and demand for tea by the most impoverished groups in society. The demands of the lower class for tea reflect that tea on the dining table has become a daily necessity in life, it is the bottom line, below which there is only hunger.

Tea, as a meaning and value in daily life, is undoubtedly a general expression of social relationships. Tea inevitably conveys meaning, and cultural practices are based on the significance generated by tea. People make friends over tea, which is culturally constructed as a symbol of friendliness and hospitality. In a family's hall, room, corner, or nook, a tea table is specially set up, becoming an important space for communication among family members and with guests. Everyone sits around the table, chatting about daily life or engaging in heartfelt conversations, enjoying a warm and harmonious atmosphere. At this time, the tea ceremony requires the hostess to keep the tea and brew it for everyone. Brewing tea is both a craft and an art. In "North and South," when the mother falls ill, Margaret takes on the role of the hostess to make tea for the guests. Her elegant and skilled brewing technique fascinates John Thornton, "She wore a light cotton dress with a slight touch of light pink, standing by the tea table, fully focused on brewing, with quiet and graceful movements, completely outside the conversation." [19] Tea is also in the public social space, creating opportunities for close communication among people. In "Northanger Abbey," Catherine attends a ball in Bath, "Although there was no time to talk while dancing, when sitting down for tea, Catherine found Mr. Tilney as amiable and approachable as she had expected." [20] Tea represents the fashionable and leisurely life style of gentlemen and ladies. When a person drinks tea alone, the person and the tea are the object of each other's gaze, and the person's emotions of joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness are also closely related to the tea. In "Oliver Twist," the female director of the poorhouse is alone at home at night, sometimes hearing "the kettle singing a cheerful tune in a sharp voice," and sometimes sighing "this small teapot, the lonely teacup," [21] which evokes inner sadness and creates a unique experience between the individual and the tea.

The popularization of tea did not affect its " luxuriated " of demand; the Eastern attributes of tea have aroused "a passion that can make people forget to sleep and eat," [22] British consumers are eager to get more tea at lower prices. Strong desire is always related to lack, and lack always points to the existence of otherness. The huge demand for luxury has created the UK's desire to seize the secrets of Chinese tea. Through the two Opium Wars, the UK forced the Qing government to open trade ports, and then secretly stole. The UK possessed and assimilated Chinese tea, and as the other, Chinese tea has lost its last mystery. After the Opium Wars forced the Qing government to open trade ports, the British botanist and "tea thief" Robert Fortune came to China twice (in 1843 and 1848), went deep into the hinterland of China, and finally stole the two top commercial secrets of tea plant cultivation and tea processing, making tea "this luxury completely civilianized," [23] moving towards mass consumption. He hoped that the Chinese would "reduce the price of tea, at the same time, our own tariffs can also be correspondingly reduced, so that all the British people can afford this delicious and healthy drink." [24] Fortune was also the first British person to discover that green tea and black tea come from the same kind of shrub, which dispelled the British's two-century-long misconception that the two come from different tea trees. Tea has changed the British people's diet and lifestyle, and the Chinese porcelain used in combination is both an object of use and an aesthetic object. Their shapes, patterns, and decorations carry a wealth of Chinese cultural information, and their exotic cultural characteristics inspire the British to weave an imagination of foreign lands. Lamb in the article "Ancient Porcelain," detailed his preference for ancient Chinese porcelain, but "really can't remember when these porcelain bottles and plates began to enter my imagination." [18] Since the 1760s, "a large number of mass-produced British goods have been used, the quantity of plates, cups, saucers... has also greatly increased. These mark the transition from public use to personal use." [25] By the early 19th century, British craftsmen finally made a breakthrough in porcelain-making technology and invented high-quality bone porcelain at the level of art, and the myth of Chinese porcelain was finally demystified.

During this period, as a necessity of luxury, tea was shrouded in a moral critical hue. Although the controversy caused by tea had ended, the anxiety still remained. "At that time, there was a widespread outcry

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in Britain that the country was in a state of moral decay, mainly based on two concepts: the increasing trend of luxury; and the other was Defoe's 'great law of conformity' was dying out." [26] Wearing bright clothes and eating delicious food was criticized until Fortune demystified tea, dispelled the wrong cognition, and built recognition. The anxiety caused by a vague and different other gradually dissipated. Tea also won its place in the long-term mutual game with beer, wine, coffee, cocoa, and other forces. The narrative of tea culture began to have local color and flavor, which paved the way for "tea to lead the trend" [27], becoming the national drink and a symbol of British culture, and opened the myth of tea writing national collectivity and cohesion.

4. Ritualized beverage

In the mid-19th century, with the temperance movement and the national promotion of drinking "a beverage that excites without intoxicating" (a British promotional slogan for tea, a line from the poet William Cowper), in the British cultural context, tea generated its own code and order, creating a unique and distinctive new meaning. The hybrid of cultures "is ultimately uncontrollable because it breaks the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside." [28] British tea culture is no longer a hybrid culture in the third space but has become a truly localized independent culture—the quintessentially British Victorian afternoon tea, where tea has taken on the dimension of ritual. "Once people come together, there is a process of reinforcement of shared experiences, which Durkheim called collective effervescence, that is, the formation of collective conscience or collective consciousness." [29] Through the ritual of afternoon tea, people overcome social differences, construct social order and a sense of common belonging, and the ritualization of tea has become engraved in British society. Symbols are the core of rituals, and rituals create cultural symbols. With the popularity of afternoon tea throughout the British Empire, "tea has gained universal respect," [30] and has risen to become a symbol of British culture.

"Nine times out of ten, British traditions originated in the second half of the 19th century," during which British social ways were reforged... A unique British worldview was formed in the cauldron of social thought in mid-Victorian times. [31] The tradition of afternoon tea was first established in the 1840s by the Duchess of Bedford, Anna Maria (1783-1857), who was a close friend and lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria. The time for afternoon tea is relatively fixed, with exquisite tea delicacies, high-grade tea sets, and a complete set of standard brewing procedures and drinking etiquette, making it easy for most people to master. Ritual is constructed through the combination of various elements. Afternoon tea is paired with tea delicacies to enrich the sensory feast, combining baking, brewing, and blending to create a cultural field of a picturesque life, and afternoon tea was quickly imitated by people from all walks of life. Queen Victoria had tea every day at half past five. In "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," Alice encounters a mad afternoon tea party, and the Queen of Hearts has frozen time at six o'clock, "It's always time for tea." [32] British society is heterogeneous and complex, with too much diversity and fragmentation within, and there are differences in afternoon tea culture among different classes and community cultures, with both normativity and spontaneity coexisting in afternoon tea. In "Sons and Lovers," Paul invites Miriam to have afternoon tea at home, "They got home around four o'clock. It was a Sunday, and the house was spotless... Paul helped his mother prepare the tea delicacies... The China was exquisite, and the tablecloth was very beautiful." [33] The "afternoon tea" in the novel appears repeatedly, although the working class does not have exquisite tea sets or exquisite etiquette, the custom of relatively fixed time for afternoon tea has also been written into their daily life. As a secular life ritual, afternoon tea is a kind of rest, giving life a structure and a quiet moment, allowing people to transform space and transcend from routine behavior.

Rituals typically occur within a social community and are a form of "social imitation." The regularity and repetitiveness of ritualized culture are the formal guarantees for the transmission of cultural memory. As a cohesive structure, ritualized afternoon tea fosters a sense of belonging and identification with this cultural system among members, thereby defining themselves and the collective. In "Rebecca," the de Winter couple has afternoon tea every day at half past four, adhering to conventions, and the servants place the tea set according to the same routine. Mrs. de Winter, who comes from a commoner background, serves guests throughout a high-society afternoon tea party as the hostess, "In the drawing-room, the full set of tea service was laid out... The huge silver tea urn and kettle, as for when to use boiling water to brew tea, how to just hit the mark, I found it really difficult to grasp... I was busy with the kettle in the living room, sweating

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profusely." [34] Ritual is a procedural activity that expresses meaning; Mrs. de Winter's lack of proficiency in the afternoon tea brewing process and her lack of belonging and identification with the upper class are interrelated.

Rituals are the driving force for changes in a society's cultural system. Ritualized afternoon tea not only reinforced British culture of gentlemen and ladies but also influenced the colonies. Starting from the 1840s, India began large-scale tea cultivation under British discipline. From the time it took root in India, tea started to flow across the lands of the British Empire, expanding its natural space to Ceylon, Kenya, Malawi, and other imperial territories. It became another economic crop that was disciplined and cultivated on a large scale within the narrative framework of the empire, with the consumption of black tea becoming increasingly popular across the empire's territories. Since then, the production of Assam black tea, Darjeeling, Ceylonese tea, Kenyan tea, and so on, has greatly increased, gradually replacing Chinese tea in the world trade market. By the end of the 19th century, 93% of the tea imported by Britain came from India and Ceylon. The semantics and reference of "tea" have undergone historical changes. In British literature, the reference to tea is blurred; its precise meaning, if it successively refers to tea from different producing areas such as Chinese tea, Indian tea, or Ceylonese tea, or to a certain type of tea such as green tea or black tea, is more a reference to a kind of beverage, a global beverage alongside coffee and cocoa. In the era of the empire, tea drinking accompanied the footsteps of the empire. Along with the rise of the British Empire, by the early 20th century, the British Empire became the world's largest tea-producing country, with domestic tea as the national drink. British tea-drinking culture also spread across the colonies such as India and Ceylon. In "A Passage to India," it is a common life for Indians to drink tea, and some are fortunate enough to be invited to tea parties held by the British. Aziz said, "How lucky we are that all the complicated etiquette is eliminated! Today's tea party is indeed a 'novel' gathering." [35] In the 1920s, almost at the same time, E.M. Forster traveled to India, and Maugham embarked on a trip to China. The tea industries of the two countries they experienced were already quite different. In "On a Chinese Screen," Maugham depicted many Chinese scenes, one of which recorded the desolate scene of the Chinese tea export dock at that time, "This port once prospered by exporting tea, and the shift of tea taste from China to Ceylon ruined its economy. Over the past thirty years, the port has gradually lost its vitality." 1361075 Disappointed captains and sailors reveled in the attic of a tavern, reminiscing about the good old days, referring to the end of the era of Chinese tea foreign trade, with Britain becoming the world's tea culture center leading the periphery.

In British literature, the act of drinking tea is a recurring motif, which is also one of the most iconic faces of the United Kingdom. "The homogeneity of these activities endows the group with self-awareness... Once this homogeneity is established and these activities take on a standardized form, they will symbolize the corresponding representative objects." [29] With the United Kingdom leading the world in tea trade and tea culture, tea has become one of the symbols of the British nation. The two World Wars have made the status of tea as the national drink and national symbol unshakable, symbolizing the cultural centripetal force of the nation. Symbols have emotional significance; a cup of hot tea is the hope and expectation of people in the brutal war years. Churchill praised "tea is more important than bullets," and for historian A.A. Thompson, "tea is Britain's secret weapon, it is tea that unites the soldiers." [10] In 1946, Orwell, in his article "A Good Cup of Tea," described the poor life and hard times after World War II, when even black tea was limited by the rationing system. He put forward various reveries for the ideal black tea and scientifically summarized eleven best brewing methods to soothe the war trauma. "The intrinsic values of culture can guide the people," [37] tea, people, and the country are no longer independent existences but a unified system.

5. Conclusion

The narrative of tea culture is woven into British literary works and constitutes one of the mainstream narratives of British national identity. By analyzing the textual forms and practical records of tea culture, the narrative of British society's tea-drinking behavior and conceptual pattern has been reconstructed. Tea culture is shared by the masses who produce and consume these texts and practices, just as the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies in the UK "emphasizes the ability of the masses to take the initiative and creatively construct meaningful shared practices," [38] it is the British public from generation to generation who have collectively created the globally renowned British tea culture. The fluidity of tea's identity in British literature is a representation of the different stages of collision and hybridization of heterogeneous

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Chinese and British cultures. The formation of British tea culture is a cross-ethnic and cross-regional process of meaning production, and it is the result of more than two hundred years of cultural hybridization between China and the UK. In the era of globalization, the collision between diverse cultures has become normalized, and cultural exchange requires the construction of a "third space" with cultural differences and hybridity, transcending the self/other cultural duality, and achieving cultural integration and sharing of cultural resources.

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