

CHAPTER

1

THE WISDOM OF TEA

Behind the big wooden doors tucked away in the maze of *hutong* streets, Datangchun (大唐春) near Nanluoguxiang (南锣鼓巷), just off East Gulou Street (鼓楼东大街), is a haven of quiet and wooden buildings. Professor Zhao Weimin is the director of Peking University's Culture Research and Development Centre. He is revered amongst the intelligentsia of Beijing, if not China, as a thinker and teacher on traditional Chinese culture and the private courtyard is an invitation-only centre of contemplation and policy debate.

We gather around a long wooden table in a traditional Tang dynasty-style room of books, calligraphy and teapots. At the centre of the table seems to be one of the oldest tea tables I have ever seen. Delicate tea cups neatly arranged beside an old tea mixing utensil and small handmade teapot.

Professor Zhao is dressed in traditional clothing modelled on the end of the Qing dynasty, as far as I can tell, and carves a lump of 100-year-old *pu'er* (普洱) tea from a tea 'cake' to mix with a 20-year-old one. He moves with flowing arcs of hands to cut and mix tea, boil water, warm pots and bowls, at the same time as explaining the art of tea.

"The main function of *pu'er* tea is to lower the blood fat. But now it has become a cultural phenomenon amongst Chinese scholars. In the process of making and drinking tea comes the essence of Chinese traditional culture. Our ancients always talked a lot about tea and we are now reviving this tradition."

Professor Zhao empties the mixed tea into the delicate earth-red, enamelled pot. It is dark, almost black in colour. His actions are slow and methodical, almost reverential. This is a process which is not to be hurried. The very consistency and tight twisted leaves of the tea create an impression of timelessness and dignity.

"There are four levels to drinking tea. Firstly, of course, we drink when we are thirsty, to refresh the palate and the body. Secondly, we taste the tea and determine its quality from its aroma and its effect on the palate, the lingering aftertaste and

satisfaction of the senses. Thirdly, is the talking about tea. Tea is a carrier, a vehicle for our thoughts and words and contemplative reflections. This is a focus on the tea itself, its origin, its provenance, its journey and its history to arrive with us as the drinker. Fourthly, people do not just talk about the tea but about life, society and the world. This is the philosophical level. When drinking tea, people must think and share deeply about their own life, society, the Zen and appreciate the doctrine of Daoism and Buddhism to connect themselves to the higher dimensions, the fourth and even the fifth dimension. Generally, the first two levels are about the experience of drinking tea. The second two are about wisdom.”

He grunts with satisfaction as he pours the second pot, the first having been used to wash the tea and warm the serving chalice and cups. Then he slowly fills an ancient tea cup before him. It is a simple ceramic wide-topped shallow bowl-like container. The dark liquid first swirls around the sides then fills the cup.

“Watch the surface of the tea.”

We all lean forward. It is almost like worshipers at the altar, bowing to the chalice. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, the tea shimmers and starts to become opaque. Across the surface a delicate white film forms.

“The tea chi is being released,” whispers Professor Zhao.

I have never seen this before. But I have never taken tea with a tea master before. The white vapour rolls, almost boils, across the surface of the liquid. It has no texture and almost no form at all, reminding me of stories from my youth of the ‘Will-o’-the-wisp’, or ‘fairy fire’ and the moment hoar frost forms on the surface of a high mountain pool in the first light of a sharp frosted winter dawn. We are transfixed, all hold our breath. The room is utterly silent. Then it is gone.

“That, is the chi,” Professor Zhao says quietly.

“In the ancient times of the Song dynasty, scholars held competitions as to who could make the best tea. They would put hot

water and the tea powder into a bowl and then stir it in their special way. The one who could create the most tea chi foam was the winner.”

He studies me intently.

“This shared experience draws us together to form philosophical considerations in the moment of contemplation. The development of human beings in different countries has much in common but nowadays people do not come together to discuss the ultimate goal of human existence. If this is discussed well and accepted by human beings from all countries across the tea table, then there would be no conflicts in this world.”

He gazes at me thoughtfully. We are sitting directly opposite each other and our eyes lock. Suddenly there is no one else here. We slowly consider each other. There is no need for an exchange of words. His deep dark eyes are quietly penetrating and inescapable. After what seems like an eternity of scrutiny, he speaks again.

“Now the conflicts are small. Even the wars. They are but family quarrels. If everyone can rise above the detail to the level of principle then they can be solved, just like a quarrel between brothers. This is because almost every human being actually wishes to live in peaceful harmony. It is not known how long human beings will exist in this world. What is important is the meaningful things that people do in the allocated span of their lives. Let me tell you about history.”

He pours more tea and we breathe again.

“Every person in every country is making their own contribution to the world, to the development of the human race to be strong and rich. China was strong once because of the inventions it created and nurtured in the times of ancient history. The civilization of the world was pushed forwards through Chinese enlightenment. Then, with the Industrial Revolution, the UK went up and made significant contributions to the world and humanity. Later, in the Electronic Age, the US grew up and its peoples pushed global development and the pace of human

progress. Now it changes again. The world will progress in an orderly manner and on the basis of mutual understanding, mutual respect and learning, then hatred will have no space amongst us all.”

He locks eyes with me again. I have a feeling of deep mutual respect and our conversation enters a higher level. Perhaps the tea chi is working

“If we consider traditional Chinese culture to be a bird, then Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism are the bird’s body. Traditional Chinese medicine and tea are the two wings and *Guqin* (古琴 (the ancient Chinese musical instrument)), playing chess, calligraphy and painting are the feathers. Tea culture dates back to the Tang dynasty (618–907). It was at its highest point in the Song dynasty (960–1279). Many emperors from the Song dynasty liked tea very much and so did the scholars. Tea culture went to Japan from the Tang and Song Dynasties.”

He reverentially prepares another pot of tea and I am aware that time has passed. In that small panelled room with its wooden floor, history seems very close. As I handle the ancient cups and sit at the ancient table I feel transported to a different era. It is exactly as Professor Zhao desires.

I am intrigued by the delicate dark-red enamelled pottery teapot he is using.

“I started to design this type of pot about 15 years ago. I believe I have a mission in life to create the perfect pot. Some years ago, when one of your Prime Ministers, Mr Tony Blair MP, came to China I designed, made and gave him one of my teapots. I did so not just because you English have a tradition of tea, but also as a sign of the fraternity between our nations.” It dawns on me that I am at an audience with one of the top and most influential people in traditional Chinese cultural studies.

“When I first started to think about the design of this teapot I went to consult with Professor Zhang Shouzhi. Professor Zhang was one of the first ceramic artists after the founding of

the People’s Republic of China. Now he is over 80 years old. One day Professor Zhang invited me for lunch and he explained that from a design perspective, the form of the dark-red enamelled teapot had reached its peak. This ancient design had never been improved upon and had reached a bottle neck. He felt the design could be improved if it was accompanied in the design phase with a deep insight from culture. The old professor hoped that I could study the teapot design and extend the scope of knowledge and design to perfect it further. Then Professor Zhang bought two train tickets for us both. We travelled to Yixing (宜兴) city in Jiangsu (江苏) Province, the centre of dark-red enamelled teapot design in China and the source of Yixing clay used for these special teapots. We visited many teapot masters. As a result of that visit and the faith in me shown by Professor Zhang I resolved to design the perfect teapot.”

“Beautiful,” I muse.

Professor Zhao recalls his time as a youngster in Fujian Province.

“As a boy I used to like reading. I never thought I’d be a university professor. I just wanted to get a good job that would give me the spare time I wanted so I could read and study. As I grew up I liked to read the Chinese classics. I really liked the quiet to contemplate what I had read. My father was a government officer in Zhangzhou (漳州) city, near to Xiamen (厦门) on the coast.”

It didn’t seem right to quiz Professor Zhao on his past but he proffered a little explanation as to how he had come to be one of the foremost Chinese scholars of traditional culture.

“I was a student at PKU at the end of the 1970s. My major was in literature and I studied under some of the most famous professors of the day, such as the curator of the Research Institute of Culture and History. I stayed on after graduating and have been here ever since, now over 40 years. I am the Director of PKU’s Cultural Research and Development Centre, as well as the Director of the PKU School of Journalism and Communication. I believe it is essential that the contribution of PKU to society is

through education and thought, not business and the creation of Chinese millionaires. I wrote a paper to PKU leadership on this matter and they agreed with me. As a result, we set up this centre of contemplation and study.”

“You have had many students in all your years as a professor. Do you believe they have listened to your thoughts and adopted any of your teachings of traditional Chinese culture?” I asked.

“My students have all been intelligent people. PKU is the foremost university in China. My students have gone on to become government officers, the highest of government policy makers, university professors and school headmasters, as well as leaders at the top of state media operations. I am privileged that many return to seek my guidance and opinion. Every evening people gather in this courtyard, equal before each other, regardless of external rank, to debate and discuss the important matters affecting society in China today. A good student can make a contribution to society if they hold in equal measure the three values of truth, beauty and virtue.”

Among the gatherings of the great and the good in this courtyard are the main people driving socio-political change in China today. The reason the courtyard has become a crucible of contemporary Chinese thinking is down to five cultural features, which Professor Zhao explains.

“First is respect. Anyone who enters this courtyard is already special. We require all who enter here to recognize that they cannot operate in isolation of their fellows. So, people cannot be selfish. We should show respect to the heaven, the earth, our parents, our elders, our friends and all who enter the courtyard. All are equal in personality.

“Second, tranquillity. The courtyard is located in the centre of Beijing. Nanluoguxiang is a very busy area but the courtyard is very quiet. Not only is the environment quiet but we have reconstructed the courtyard in the old way so that it inspires tranquillity and quietness of spirit in the hearts of those who enter

here. When people are not blundering around being utilitarian then they can judge the world objectively, impartially, with tranquillity. Tranquillity is important to people’s growth. One should give one’s self the time to think about life. The courtyard is an enabler for that. People can give themselves over to one route in their lives without consideration. They can spend their whole lives doing the wrong thing and then find out, too late. That is a shame. People all over the world are pursuing unlimited material things in a life which has finite limits. Is it good or bad to pursue unlimited materiality? For what end? For what good? Balance and moderation are good.

“Third, purity. I want this courtyard to be pure of spirit. This is designed to be the spiritual home of society. It is the gathering ground of the culturally rich and famous. When people come here they do not talk of love or business. They talk of culture, literature, history, life and soul.

“Fourth, ideology. People should develop an ideological level of existence while they live in this world. The ideological level of human existence relates directly and proportionally to social development. The richer the society, the higher the ideological level it needs to attain. If it fails to develop a high ideological level, then society cannot attain a level of tastefulness and refinement that is required to move it to the next level. We espouse and encourage the development of refined ideological thinking here.

“Fifth, mirror. To be able to look into or consider the future one has to understand the mirror of the past. Everyone who comes to the courtyard must look at themselves and at society honestly and purely. They must become each other’s mirror. Success and failure are all reference points for human beings. This is the real meaning of friendship around the courtyard; honest reflection of each other and to each other will allow the creation of enlightenment here.”

We sit in reflective silence for a moment until interrupted by a small bell. Professor Zhao crosses the room to a discrete but

high-tech entry phone system. A few words are exchanged. A student will join us shortly.

We wait.

The student turns out to be a high-ranking government official from a southern Chinese province. We exchange bows and business cards.

“I will continue.”

All sit before the teacher. Regardless of external rank, the rules of the courtyard are to be respected. Our discussion turns to the development of classical Chinese writing and the need to create the new classics of the future, including the highest level of thought in Chinese arts and academic circles. Poetry.

“Poetry is an important part of an experts’ life. In ancient times people could not go to school or be government officials unless they could write poetry. Poetry is an essential skill of the past and of the present. If people can express themselves through poetry and through the use of the right words, then the true essence of Chinese character can be espoused.”

Professor Zhao is completing a book of poetry to be published this year. This is no mean feat, requiring as it does the highest level of ideological thinking to be accepted by his peers and so be worthy of dissemination.

We have almost overstayed our welcome but Professor Zhao has a few more thoughts for us before we leave.

“The open-door policy of China comes after many years of economic development. Now China is going out into the world consciously with a better and wider understanding. There are four sayings of a very eminent PKU professor, Professor Fei Xiaotong. First, different people’s cultures and civilizations all have their good points. Second, we should respect other peoples’ culture and their good points. Third, different cultures may blend and exist at the same time. Fourth, then there will be one peaceful world.”

Professor Zhao continues, “Chinese people can now accept different cultures and will no longer reject Western cultures

as in the past. We must not criticize the West all the time. We should remember the old Chinese saying: ‘If you want to correct others, first correct yourself.’ The Chinese culture is conservative and self-disciplined, so we Chinese will never do anything wrong. Some peoples’ culture is to fight but ours is harmony. This is at our core. To judge a country, one should learn its history and development to have an objective judgment. We are agriculturalists and have developed, after thousands of years, a culture enshrined in an agrarian experience. We have an altruistic and collectivist mentality in our DNA. In Europe, you had a mainly marine civilization; you are better traders and paid deep attention to rules, regulations, contracts and laws to protect yourselves. Which is the better civilization? It’s hard to say. Balance is good, moderation is good. China cannot bring everything from the West and the West cannot absorb every aspect from China. Only with mutual respect and understanding will the world be a better place.”

Eventually we leave with photographs and handshakes. Outside, in the cold courtyard, the peace and tranquillity of the tea room pales a little, but not much. Every aspect of the courtyard has been considered in detail, from the offset entrance complete with water trough to mirror the sky and prevent the entering of bad luck. The inspiring calligraphic carvings over the solid doors support contemplation and the ancient trees at each corner show this is not a new build. It has been sympathetically and empathetically restored, a powerful metaphor for China, steeped in history yet newly reconstructed on the solid foundations of its cultural past.

I pause at the entrance as the wooden doors close solidly behind me. I have emerged again into modern China but I have been changed. The tea chi foams in my mind and I feel I’ve caught a bit of that Will-o’-the-wisp.