

THE CHAXI CHRONICLES

The Chabu

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Two of the greatest joys of being a tea lover are the slow process of “seasoning” one’s teaware through years of use, and creating your own tea utensils, especially out of “non-tea” materials. This month, we are proud to send you a bit of teaware that, for the first time, we didn’t buy from anywhere! We designed them ourselves; they are unique and just for you! These cloths are called *chabu*, and they are almost always an integral part of the tea ceremony when we make tea here.

Practically speaking, *chabu* are important for two basic reasons: The first is that you are protecting your teaware by resting it on something that isn’t hard. In case of a big mistake, if something is dropped or hit, a soft cloth may save your teaware’s life. Secondly, if you spill any tea during preparation, the cloth will absorb it and maintain the cleanliness of the ceremony. If you make tea on a bare tabletop, it looks messy when there are spots and splatters of tea pooling here and there in plain sight. Of course you can wipe them up, and in fact you should wipe them up, but having a cloth minimizes the necessity to do this, and too much wiping up can distract from the gracefulness of the ceremony.

We all spill a bit of tea from time to time, especially when we are getting to know new teaware, or perhaps using a grumpy old pot whose character is drippy, it’s good to have a cloth to catch those mistakes. If we don’t use a cloth, it’s usually because we have a large piece of wood or stone that we are using in that *chaxi* instead, as these can also serve the same function. But be extra careful, because these materials definitely won’t be as forgiving of mistakes.

I have noticed that myself and other tea lovers are inevitably drawn towards very light-colored or bright white cloths. I had to learn early on, though, to be careful when using such colors. It is better if these cloths are the very narrow “runner” style. With a narrow tea cloth, you are only pouring water into your teapot over it, which won’t stain it if you spill some. Then you pour the tea itself into the bowls or cups on a tray that is directly on the table. If the cloth is so wide that your tray is going to be on it, you are bound to end up with tea stains on your light tea cloth in no time, which are often impossible to remove and very messy looking. Such stains can negate the sense of cleanliness a white cloth usually inspires, though sometimes a *Wabi* aesthetic is to be celebrated and the stains take on a charm all their own.

When I do use a wide, light-colored cloth, I make bowl tea. The simplest kind of bowl tea is best, because then I am not pouring tea at all, only water. This is also nice because in a sense this is the “purest” form of tea preparation, so using a white cloth reflects that. Or I will use a side-handle pot, and carefully pick up the pour between each bowl, instead of doing a continuous pour between them all. I can be sure I won’t spill tea this way, and because it is bowl tea, a continuous pour is less important. Personally, I can’t pour gongfu tea skillfully enough yet to be sure I won’t spill a single drop outside my tray, so I only make gongfu tea on a light cloth if it is a narrow one with the tray outside. Even then, I am extra mindful and possibly change the way I normally would pour a bit to be sure I don’t stain my cloth.

Making tea without sloppiness or spilling are ideals we strive for when preparing gongfu tea, and important demonstrations of respect in our tea ceremony, for our guests, the tea and ourselves. In nearly every ancient Eastern kingdom, but particularly in China and Japan, personal hygiene was fundamental to every class of people, as it was considered a basic sign of respect for others. Never forget that the tea is the guest of honor in any tea ceremony. Thus, providing your teaware with something soft and beautiful to sit upon and keep the space clean as you prepare tea is a fundamental demonstration of Respect and Purity, which are two of the four Virtues of Tea.

Whenever we clear away an old *chaxi*, wipe down our tea table and begin again with an empty space, and the *chabu* is often the new beginning for the next tea session. We want to create a space for our tea ceremony that will lead everyone who drinks with us into a space of harmony with the Universe, the Tao, themselves, and each other. A well-chosen *chabu* is often the most fundamental piece in the creation of such a space. A long blue one might be part of a theme with a river or the sky, a scarlet or orange hue might remind us of monk’s robes and renunciation. It is a bit like the canvas upon which the tea session is painted. All the rest of the teaware must be in harmony with the canvas on which they are placed, or the whole session will be disharmonious.

Although a change in such items as the tea scoop or other necessities are important, it is the *chabu* that sets the tone for everything that sits on it, and which can most dramatically change the energy or the theme being presented. For this reason, it is very useful to have a wide variety of *chabu*, and we have sent you a two-sided one that will allow you to experiment. We’ve chosen



similar coloration for each side of the cloths, but one side is patterned and the other is plain. I think you'll find a lot of insight in exploring the differences between the two.

Personally, I have found it to be a great pleasure and an honor to participate in designing and creating teaware to share with you this month. It was a bit overwhelming, going to the big cloth market in Taipei and needing to sift through all the patterns with cartoon frogs, Hello Kitty, half-naked ladies and other just weird or uninspiring nonsense, blasted on all sides with so many different patterns and colors. That market itself was a deep lesson on the importance of harmony. With tens of thousands of completely different pieces of material hoping to appeal to all sensibilities stuffed in every corner, I had to concentrate deeply on my breath and maintain great focus to find the stillness needed to find what I was there seeking. And the same thing happens at the tea table.

If I clutter my tea table with trinkets and decorations, or teaware, or whatever it is, I am forcing my guests to do hard work if they are to find any stillness or connection in that space. By presenting a disharmonious space, I present a barrier to overcome right from the start. I want to make it as easy as possible for my guests. I want to remove as many barriers as I possibly can, not present them with distractions, barriers or conflict. And the same should be true for all the spaces in our lives. It could be your bedroom, your office or your shop. The extent to which you arrange it harmoniously and free of conflicting energies or distracting clutter, the more clear-minded, still and harmonious you or your guests will feel in that space, and the better your work, business and life will be.

In fact, it was awesome that we had to go to a place like that market. We literally traveled to a disharmonious space in our quest to bring a bit of extra harmony into yours! In doing so, we were forced to discover the harmony within the so-called "disharmony", rather than pushing on it or looking for the "perfect" shop where everything was aligned before we were willing to look inside. We'd have been shopping forever. And before we took this cloth out of there, it was just another piece of disharmony as well, so we literally had a chance to transmute it for you. That kind of alchemy is what tea is all about: turning our internal dust into gold. Being there really drove home to me the importance of what we were there to accomplish, and just how vitally important a clean, pure, harmonious space for self-cultivation really is in the world today; how few and far between such spaces are, and how awesome it is to be able to find the stillness in the noise, as it were.

Knowing that there will be hundreds of tea sessions drunk between friends with these cloths sitting on the table takes my breath away, and I've never been so excited about sending out a month's gift as I am about this one! I think I've found a tea lovers' joy that transcends the two more private ones that I began with at the start of this article: Passing on teaware to fellow tea lovers! I am grateful to all of you for the opportunity to give.

