

THE ELEMENTS OF A CHAXI

KAI YA

We've had a few articles now on the spirit and principles of *chaxi*, so this month I thought it would be nice to write something a little more down to earth and practical. The standard elements of most *chaxi* are the tea cloth (*chabu*), the tea "boat" or "pillow" (where the teapot rests), a scoop or other item for displaying the tea and putting it into the pot, and a stick of some kind to guide the tea out of the scoop (usually thin enough to unclog the teapot's spout if needed). Though these represent the typical elements of a *chaxi*, you can prepare tea on an empty table, or think outside of teaware and gather elements of Nature, discarded things, etc.—fully expressing your own creativity!

Beyond these, there are a few optional items that you can include. Often a lid rest is used while pouring the last water from your kettle with two hands, so you have somewhere to put the lid without staining your cloth. If you have a beautiful stick, you may want something to rest the end of the stick on so it doesn't sit flat on the table, thus making it more prominent. It is also usual to include various decorations in the form of statues, flowers or bonsai. Anything decorative that you want to place on the table is fine. At the tea competition I participated in a few months ago, there was a children's category, and we saw everything from robots to Hello Kitties adorning the tea table!

As we talked about last month, the *chabu* is usually the first thing you will choose, and it generally sets the tone for all the other elements, as a base note or drone beneath the melody. It is possible to use the same small variety of utensils with many different cloths to greater effect than a large variety of utensils can be used with a small choice of cloths. I still have only four scoops in my collection, with a handful of sticks and perhaps eight pillows, but nearly thirty *chabu*. With these, I have been creating completely unique *chaxi* for three years, and rarely do I find myself frustrated because I can't make a *chaxi* I wanted to make for lack of the right scoop.

Make sure to get a broad range of different basic colors, as more complicated patterns tend to go well with only very specific things and are therefore less versatile. From there, you can also expand into different widths and textures and kinds of materials of those same colors as well, or, preferably, different shades of those colors. Two-sided tea cloths are common and quite desirable in a tea cloth, as you can often get a beautiful pattern and a simple one in the same cloth, like the ones we sent you two months ago. A tea cloth can be any material. Try hunting in fabric stores. All the best *chaxi* have elements outside the box

(sometimes simplicity is out of the ordinary). Any cloth you like will do. It isn't necessary that it be stitched for the purpose of tea.

Probably the second most important element is the tea "boat" or "pillow". A boat is used for gongfu tea, and has space to hold water that is showered over the pot. A pillow, on the other hand, is just something to rest a teapot on. Sometimes they are hollow with holes to accept drained water, which can then be discarded out a spout on the side. Generally, you want this especially to stand out in contrast from your cloth, so the teapot also stands out and gets the attention it deserves at center stage. If your cloth is elegant, it probably should be more refined. If your cloth is simple, you can choose something more rustic if you want. This is also a great place to break some of the boundaries of the standard *chaxi* being presented here. If you find a large enough, well-shaped piece of wood, for example, you can use this as both pillow and cloth (the wood will absorb spilled tea and you can place your bowl or pot on it directly instead of using another item), thus eliminating an element and simplifying your *chaxi*.

The material of your pillow is also important. If it is something particularly hard or abrasive, you should consider placing a small piece of cloth, or the round rattan circle we sent you as a gift, or anything else that is softer, between it and your teapot. This usually isn't an aspect of the *chaxi*; it's just a practical necessity to protect your pot. As such, don't put it out until the session begins, and try to find something very nearly the same size as the bottom of your pot so it won't be too distracting. The rattan circle we sent you is a good choice because it doesn't intrude on most any *chaxi* you can create.

Sticks and scoops go hand in hand, so of course it is natural for them to be the same material and design most of the time, though sometimes we contrast materials. For example, we have a copper scoop that looks like a crumpled leaf, which goes well with a particular natural bamboo stick. These two are often the supporting pieces of the theme, instead of the definition. But sometimes in *chaxi* with a simple cloth and pillow, an elegant or large and unique scoop and stick can play a more prominent role.

Lastly, the two more situational elements of a *chaxi* are a stick rest and a lid rest. Very often, these won't be needed and will just clutter up your table. It's important to have a *reason* to include these elements, instead of including them automatically. Actually, the same is true of all the elements: I've seen Wu De make *Chaxi* without *chabu*, without a stick, without a pillow or even without a scoop at particular times. These are a bit more "advanced"



Sometimes a simple season-themed chaxi is best, here for spring.

exceptions though, and it may help to lean a more basic style first.

For a stick rest and lid rest however, the considerations are fairly simple. If my tea pillow is large enough and flat enough to set my lid down next to my teapot, I don't need a lid rest. Sometimes, when making *gongfu* tea, I don't need a lid rest because I know I won't use the very last of the water in my kettle.

As for a stick rest, I first take a look at all the ways I can present the stick without it. Perhaps it can rest on the scoop itself. Or even under the scoop, hidden away, making my *chaxi* that much cleaner and simpler. If I can't tuck it away and my scoop is the wrong shape, I try putting it directly on the table next to the scoop. Some sticks get lost in the pattern or color of the cloth, or they are just too small and delicate to stand out. Sometimes it's a special one that has a rest that complements it and presents it in a special way. But only after first looking at the other options and finding them inadequate, and considering the necessity of these items, do I include either a lid rest or a stick rest.

Your efforts will be well worth it. No other element adds the kind of vibrancy, life and beauty to a *chaxi* the way a good flower arrangement does. And as we discussed last month, *chaxi* is all about honoring the transient unique beauty of this session. Flowers are the perfect representatives of the spirit of *Ichigo Ichie* in Nature.

The last of the basic elements is the wastewater container, or *jin shui*. It is important to note that although this is a necessary element to make tea, it is not necessarily always a part of *chaxi*. The main question when considering *jin shui* is whether you are going to make bowl tea or *gongfu* tea. In bowl tea, we only need a *jin shui* very briefly at the start of the ceremony. In the spirit of a simple and clean *chaxi*, then, it is best to keep the *jin shui* out of site, under the table. If you are making bowl tea on the floor, this won't be possible. If you are making *gongfu* tea, you need the *jin shui* to be on the table because you will be using it very often and you need it to be close at hand. It is common for, *jin shui* to be quite small so they don't impose on the *chaxi*, and can be poured into a larger, hidden *jin shui* that is not on the table. Often this is an element that you want to keep out of sight if possible, or at least unobtrusive. We do have some very beautiful and ornate *jin shui* at the center however, and they can bring a nice balance to the table, especially with a large flower arrangement or statue on the other end of the table.

This is all you really need for a complete *chaxi*, and my advice is to start with these simplest of elements and make as many different *chaxi* as you can, before beginning to incorporate decorations or other optional elements. Don't forget that tea is about healing and connection, and that where the spirit and the heart are in alignment, your *chaxi* will be in alignment too. Don't think too much!

