

Broadly, I would consider *chaxi* to be anything in the tea space that contributes to the energy of the session. This could include the things that are not on the table itself, as “tea space” means the whole room. But for the purposes of this article, we’ll focus on the elements that are on the table. *Chaxi* can be translated as “tea stage/theater”, and is often regarded as the “decoration” of the tea space, although I feel such an interpretation doesn’t do justice to what *chaxi* really can be. At its deepest, *chaxi* should be a reflection of one’s approach to tea.

We often talk about the way that Tea meets all kinds of people on all kinds of levels, from beverage, to hobby, to art, to Dao. At the beverage and hobby level, *chaxi* most likely isn’t even entering into the picture, or at least minimally so. When you meet someone that approaches their tea as an art-form, it will almost certainly be there, but such *chaxi* and the tea sessions that stem from them are not much more than studies in contrasting colors, composition, and matching the teapot and cups to the cloth and saucers. It is common for the tea to get lost amongst the aesthetics, because the *chaxi* is the center of attention, not the tea, and the quality of the teaware (and therefore the tea) will suffer as a result.

This is not to say that knowledge of composition and colors is bad. Without any feel for these subjects you will flounder. And it isn’t that I am averse to ornate tea cloths; I have quite a few. It’s just that if this is as far as your approach to *chaxi* goes, there won’t be a lot of transformation available to you as a result. It’s quite simple, really: Without an intention for transformation, there won’t be much transformation!

If your goal is to show off your aesthetics and please the eye, then the tea becomes more of an excuse for the *chaxi* to exist. The tea is in orbit around the *chaxi* in other words. With an intention for transformation however, the *chaxi* now orbits the tea. It’s a bit like the difference between a movie where the point is the special effects, and the actors and storyline are just vaguely added in to give them a reason to exist. Such movies are fun and entertaining, but we don’t leave wanting to change ourselves or the world very often.

But when a movie sets out to touch our hearts and souls, the actors and the script are where the money goes. In that way, my pot is chosen because it suits the tea, and *then* I can choose a cloth, not the other way around. The tea is the point, and the stage is in support. If any ingredient in this session can transform anyone, it is the tea, not

my ego’s amazing artistic talent! And as a practitioner of Cha Dao, transformation of myself, others and the world are always conscious intentions when I serve tea.

This is not meant to imply there is anything wrong with an artistic approach to tea. It only means that if transformation is your goal, tea as a Dao has greater potential. This is a beautiful quality of Tea, that no matter how we approach Her, She is there and wants to connect. This presents us with two opportunities: One is to follow the spirit of Tea, and connect gladly to fellow tea-lovers at whatever level they choose to approach Her. The other is to look down our noses at those who approach tea differently than we do.

Hopefully, we will choose connection instead. Personally, I approach tea in all of these ways, from time to time, and enjoy doing so. But, it is important to understand the consequences or effects, and the limitations of every approach. I can’t help feeling lucky that I do approach tea primarily in the fourth way, as a Dao, because I think it makes connecting with the entire spectrum that much more natural.

Chaxi can also be thought of as a means of welcoming guests, whether that guest is a friend, the tea, or perhaps your own higher self. This question of who is sitting down for this tea session is often the first one I ask myself before I begin. I also consider the kind of tea, and the brewing style.

If making bowl tea, a few rustic and rough elements are often appropriate, whereas *gongfu* tea generally demands a refined element or two. Having a theme in mind, such as a season, an emotion or a scene, also goes a long way towards taking a *chaxi* that simply ‘works’ into something that is really great. One of the best I have seen caught the essence of seasons changing from winter into spring. Another represented “calm joy”, and yet another was reminiscent of a flock of birds in the sky, to name a few.

The spirit of chaxi

As for advice on how to arrange your *chaxi*, the only thing that really needs to be said is to let the spirit of Tea be your guide. Balance, simplicity and cleanliness are a good start. A table full of fancy items cheapens them all, whereas a single artisan piece draws attention and greater appreciation when contrasted with simpler elements. Don’t put a statue down at the end just because the space is empty, put it down because both your theme

