

# THE HEART OF TEA

## MUSIC & SILENCE IN CHAXI

茶人: Wu De

# 茶的精髓



*The first step in deciding what music to play at a tea session is choosing whether to have any music at all. For many sessions, silence is going to be the best option after all. Sometimes, it may seem like explorations into the minutiae of arranging a chaxi and preparing tea are too much fuss over small matters, but in this article, Wu De clarifies why the details are important and why we should care.*



When I traveled to New Zealand last year, Sam took me to the Shire. Walking around and looking at the permanent set of Sir Peter Jackson's movies was a real treat, as I love the books and movies very much. I was blown away by the attention to detail, care and passion that went into the creation of Hobbiton, especially since some of the sets would have only been backgrounds for a matter of seconds in the film, and much of the detail was far beyond what anyone could notice as the film rolls. The guide told us that Sir Peter Jackson hired people to come there every day for more than a year before shooting and walk down the village trails so that they would appear well-worn, as if hobbits really lived there. Being a teacher, I used it as an opportunity to talk to Sam about how the focus on such details is very much in the spirit of Tea art as well. Around the Center, I always teach that students should focus on the details, and let the big things take care of themselves.

When we clean the Center every Monday, we leave no stone unturned. "Cha Dao is eighty percent cleaning," my teacher always said. The idea is not to clean only where the guests see, but everywhere. The idea is that in truth—in the absolute sense—the space is clean or it isn't and you cannot fool the world or yourself about that. When tea is your practice, the details matter. They matter because it is your practice and your passion. And where you invest your love, you invest your life, so it is also your

life's work, literally. The attention to detail in cleaning and arranging the stage for tea aren't for the sake of show, in other words—not when you are spiritually and wholly invested in the performance of the tea session. There are two reasons why even the most minute details matter.

First and foremost, we have to understand that there is a personal investment in sharing tea when it is your practice. Cha Dao means "the Way of Tea." Like many things, the term has become watered-down in modern times to mean "brewing methods." But it really is self-cultivation through tea—living a life of tea. There are two verbs for doing a thing with commitment in one's life/career: you *make* cabinets or you *are* a cabinet-maker. They aren't the same thing. You can *make* cabinets for all kinds of reasons—for money, as an hourly job, etc. But if you apprentice with someone who *is* a cabinet-maker, you will find, most definitely, that included in their art is a) an approach to how to live a human life, and b) an approach to the world in which that life is lived. When you put yourself in a practice completely, you become it. Art was not a hobby for Van Gogh or Michelangelo. Music was not a pastime for Beethoven or Bach. *It was everything.* It was a way of life, not just a hobby or even a career. They lived it, in other words. Similarly, Sir Peter Jackson and the other artists who made these movies put so much time, energy and soul into them because it was their very life, their Dao and Way of living,

愛茶者和道大師，李合春，彈古琴于青羊宮，中國成都四川。照片源於馬修倫敦未出版之書，“茶魂 - 寄與愛茶者”

*Tea lover and Daoist Master Li Hechun playing the Qin at the Chingyang Gong (Green Ram Abbey), Chengdu, Sichuan, China*

*Photograph by Matthew London from his forthcoming book  
"The Spirit of Tea: An Offering to Tea Lovers"  
[www.spiritoftea.net](http://www.spiritoftea.net)*



and hopefully, an art form before a means to earn a living. It doesn't matter what moviegoers will and will not notice. The artists will know and the camera will know. They are investing all of themselves into their craft for their own sakes, and for the sake of the art itself. Above my bed, I have calligraphy that reads: "In every breath, in every step, from the moment I wake till the moment I sleep, I am preparing tea." And so the first reason we devote ourselves to every detail is that the practice then becomes us. It is done for the sake of our self-cultivation, in other words. We let nothing slide, as if this is our last-ever tea session—as it very well may be.

The second reason every detail counts is that in our tradition we do not learn how to *make* tea, but how to *serve* tea. The more energy we put into cleaning, preparing the space, decorating and arranging our *chaxi*

and then learning/practicing the skills that will allow us to brew the tea properly, the more we honor our guests. They needn't notice all that has gone into their cups to feel the love in them. It still fills the heart. Around the holidays, I remember, my grandmother, mother and sister would devote two whole days to making a huge meal that would essentially be eaten in thirty minutes to an hour. And some of the guests would not, nor could they know how much time and effort had gone into even small details like decorating the cake. But the energy of love was felt by all—to the extent that guests who were ordinarily involved in family feuds or arguments would naturally set them aside on that day and instead be smiling, chatting and hugging one another, perhaps without even knowing why—oblivious to the fact that they had been so angry at one another just a week

ago that they weren't speaking, and might be so again the following week.

Thus, the true performing artist will invest her entire being, heart and soul, no matter what it takes, into perfecting every detail of the stage and the performance. They do this because this is their Dao, their way of life and their being. They also do it out of love for the audience. As Chajin, our stage is our *chaxi*. We clean and arrange it in as much detail as we can muster, counting every little thing as a communication our guests could notice, whether they eventually do or not. We do this to demonstrate our love for and service to them and also for our own sakes, as a vehicle to better ourselves and improving our understanding of Tea, Nature and Dao. In essence, there are three aspects of Tea as a Dao: 1) *Setting the stage*, which includes cleaning, preparing,



recognizing every detail as a possible communication between you and your guests on the theme/spirit of the event. 2) *The internal preparation*, which includes both your spiritual availability to your guests—the heart-mind you have cultivated—and your brewing skills. As I often say, each cup I offer you has really taken me more than twenty years to prepare. 3) Finally, then, there is *the performance itself*. This is where all the details come together: the *chaxi*, the teaware and tea, coals and water, the meditation and preparation, and your brewing skills, are all there to honor the guests. How deeply they drink of it all will depend on their own affinity to Tea, as well as the training they have received. Will they notice the subtlest communications that are but hints way off to the left? Did you notice how well-worn the trails were in *Hobbiton* when you watched the film? Maybe

you did, maybe subconsciously. Or maybe each little detail was woven together to form a tapestry of the scene that convinced you that you were there, that it was lifelike and real. Maybe all the small details conveyed a bigger truth, in other words. The same is true of tea sessions.

Some guests who know tea, like a master weaver who knows tapestry, will see the details of different aspects of the *chaxi* and the brewing performance and appreciate them, like another cook may notice that the icing my sister made is hand-whipped and appreciate the cake all the more, or a fellow film producer may notice the little hand-labeled bottles in the windows of hobbit holes and appreciate how much work went into it all. Others walk away with an overall feeling of being honored. They know that a lot went into hosting them for tea, and this contributes to their experience.

Whether or not you know that the stage took ten hours to set up, that there were dozens of sound checks, or that the band rehearsed for hours and hours every day for months to get ready for the tour—your recognition will depend on your previous experience helping in such performances—but whether you notice the details or not, you will walk away transformed by the concert, a changed woman! And it is impossible to say whether that would happen if any single detail were missing. We don't miss anything because it is our practice not to, and because all that love and devotion adds up to a full bowl of tea and a more glorious *chaxi*. Our guests will know that our hearts were in the cleaning, preparation, decoration and arrangement, as well as the brewing as we serve them tea with all our heart and soul, because we love them. And because we are Chajin.

## First There Is Music

You may wonder where this all is heading and what it has to do with Tea, music and silence. Well, when we begin practicing *chaxi*, we focus on the teapot, tea pillow and tea runner, and so on. But as we progress from the gross to the subtle, as in any practice or path, we begin to see that the whole environment is our *chaxi*. It is not just the lights and decorations that make a show—there are costumes, smoke, small decorative details, and, yes, the background music. Such details can be honed down quite distinctly, like, for example, recognizing that there is not just a color coordination between the tea cloth and teaware/utensils, but also with the color of the shirt of the brewer (or shirt and pants/dress if he or she is sitting on the ground). Deciding on the background music may not have passed through your mind previously as an element of your *chaxi*, subject to the same principles you use to arrange your session, but I hope that it will from now on.

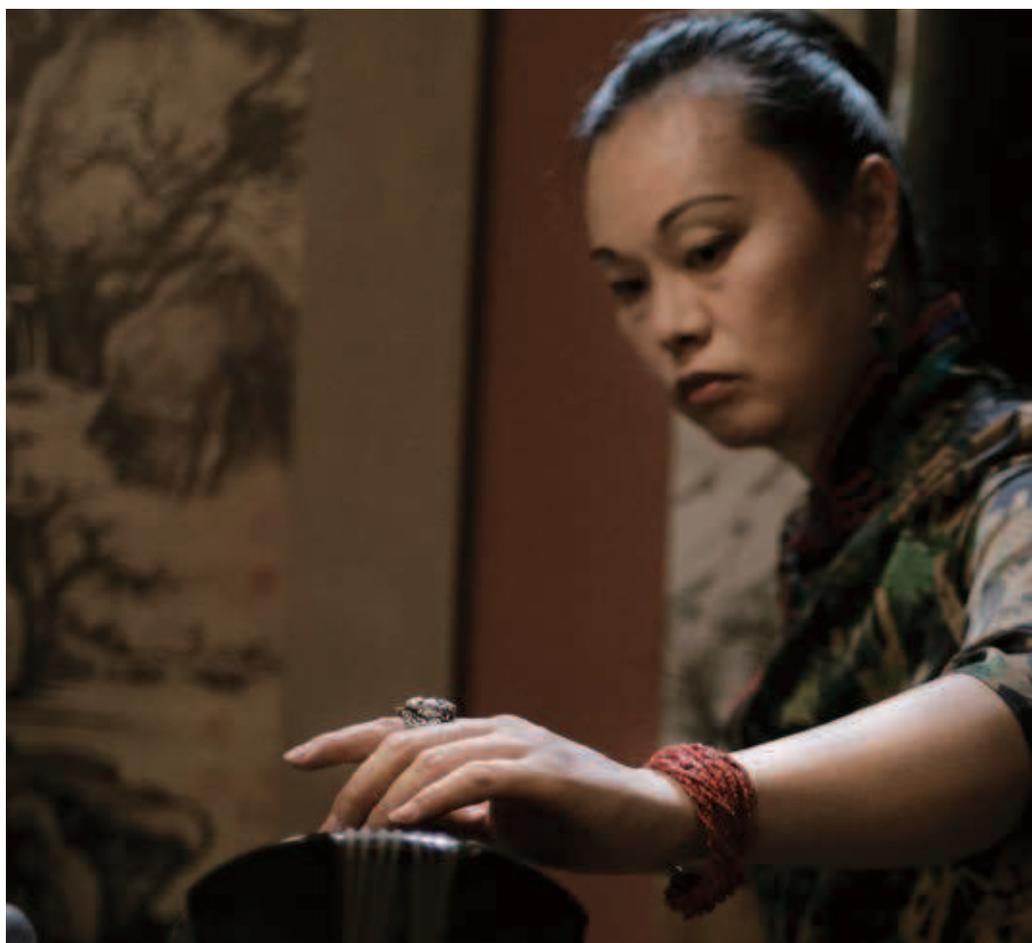
The most important question when it comes to choosing music is whether or not to have any at all. As we have often said in these pages, there are rarely any neutral elements in art. And simplicity should be your most treasured tool. Always start with emptiness and build upon the empty stage, recognizing that if any detail, any element isn't enhancing your piece, then it is most likely detracting from what you are trying to communicate. Each aspect of a *chaxi* should be communicating something. When they were building Hobbiton, the guide told us, each little detail of the set had a story—a story that the viewer would never hear, like that the gardeners' tools were so worn because they had been passed down generations. Just so, we should know why everything is as it is in our *chaxi*. *Make every detail intentional.*

There is no formula for the way things should be arranged for tea.

People often rebel against tradition, feeling like tea brewing is personal. And it is. But that doesn't mean we don't need tradition, teachers or guidance. We do. We want to learn because this is our love, and our Way of life. We naturally want to be better. In photography, there are elements that make up a proper exposure. Learning them is essential. But then you realize that the "proper" exposure is only correct depending on what kind of photograph you are trying to make. There is nothing wrong with "over-" or "under-exposing" if that is what you are trying to communicate in the photograph, in which case it *is* correct, not "over" or "under" anything. But it has to be intentional. Understanding how to get a "correct" exposure in the ordinary sense is important, however, and to do so you will need a teacher, tradition, experience and practice. The idea is that there is no correct way to arrange a *chaxi*, only what

is correct for a certain occasion. But make sure every aspect of every detail is exactly where it is *intentionally*. This will be your practice. Also, each detail is a voice—a non-verbal communication to your guests about the fact that you love them and welcome them, and also about all the other thematic elements you are trying to communicate in your gathering.

And so, what I am saying is that we should always start with silence before selecting music. Is music really necessary? Will it help you to honor your guests? Will it facilitate the spirit of the gathering? If guests are coming over for a conversation, perhaps to catch up because we haven't seen one another for a long time, then playing music will be in the way. It won't be in harmony with the purpose of the gathering and with what I am trying to communicate nonverbally to my guests, which is, amongst whatever other



specifics may surround these individuals and the nature of our gathering, to create a warm, welcoming heart-space to have a good chat in.

### *Then There is Silence*

Those of you who have visited the Center will know that our morning tea sessions are often accompanied by music. This may give you the wrong idea: that music and tea should always go together. *Nothing could be further from the truth.* The reason that we often have music during tea at the Center is because there is already plenty of silent space here. Guests and residents meditate every morning and evening for one hour. In the mornings, after meditation, breakfast is also silent. This means that we have an hour of silent meditation followed by a silent breakfast before tea

even begins, which is why it is nice to have some quiet music playing in the background to accompany tea. If there weren't enough quiet space at the Center, we'd have many more silent sessions than we do.

It is rare that I choose music when serving tea in my courses or ceremonies as I travel. Most people do not have enough quiet space in their lives, and settling down to focus on tea is the goal of my service. Music can distract from the tea, after all, just as the tea can distract from the music. I really only choose to play music when I am out if I feel like my guests will be very distracted and find it difficult to rest in stillness. Sometimes, certain guests come from busier lifestyles and are therefore uncomfortable with silent space. This can be okay, but we don't want to push too hard. Tea is a gentle path. In such cases, some quiet music can help to pacify the room and ease such guests into

the tea. We always want to create a comfortable heart-space for our guests, which is the determining factor in using music in our *chaxi*.

Since music can be so powerful, it is always helpful to choose music without lyrics. It is a rare session indeed when we choose music with lyrics, which often distracts guests from the tea. A rare afternoon session of the casual variety with friends may benefit from some Van the Man, though. More often than not, you will want to choose music that is soft and without words.

When you don't have any music, the space itself becomes your symphony. Especially when outdoors, one should never choose music with tea (unless it is a special rare tea event with live music). Remember, no space is ever really completely silent. There is always a vibrant soundscape around us. And as the tea heightens our senses, we can use the ambient sounds meditatively.



Try listening to the softest sounds around you and refrain from labeling or evaluating them. Do not attempt to identify what they are and whether you find them pleasant or not. Let them instead remain as sound waves passing through you. Bowl by bowl, you will find that you hear softer and more distant sounds and that it all is within you, a part of the session. Then let go, and rest in the quiet and peace of the tea.

### **Then There Is Music**

Like every aspect of *chaxi*, music should be used sparingly, and only when it promotes an appreciation of the tea, which is why we are gathered at a tea session. Every element of your *chaxi* should be intentionally used, with a clear understanding of its function and what you are trying to communicate to your guests. We favor simplicity in *chaxi*, preferring emptiness to clutter and silence to music. There is enough filling in the world and too little emptying. Tea provides the space to facilitate anything we need to be healthy. There is no formula for how we create the space for the session to unfold, but everything in it should communicate that purpose. If you aren't sure, always lean towards clean and pure, which in this case means silence. When you don't know whether or not to use music or which music to choose, always choose silence. The subject of a good *chaxi* is *always* the tea. Nothing should distract from that—all lines should lead towards it, highlighting and enhancing the tea.

After sitting in an empty space, we start to add small details to our *chaxi* based on our theme, which always starts with honoring the guests and ends with the specifics of the occasion. We assume that nothing is neutral, and add elements slowly, paying attention to how they balance and harmonize with other elements. Try to include every aspect of the environment. The best

tea rooms are free of all distractions. Unfortunately, the small size of our Center means that there is a lot of tea in our Main Tea Hall, which can be nice—sitting around all the energy of Tea—but is also distracting. Light Meets Life will have many plain tea rooms to practice in, which makes creating a theme for a tea gathering so much easier. In this way, also choose your music carefully and make a serious commitment to do so. Once again, if you have any doubts, go with silence. Let the occasion determine whether it will benefit from some music, silence or maybe even conversation. If the latter, it is still beneficial to start with a bowl or three of silence before talking, which calms everyone down and helps facilitate real communication—from the heart and from a presence founded in the moment.

Stillness is the real music of Tea. Music that moves the tea energy in us should move it towards deeper stillness, contributing to the transformative power of the tea space.



**“Stillness is the real music of Tea. Music that moves the tea energy in and through us should take it towards deeper stillness, enhancing the transformative power of a tea ceremony.”**

沉默的聲音

