

PHOTO ESSAY

NOTES ON 见山

by Danielle Zhuo, 何建勋



IN MARCH 2020, I ended up revisiting Hangzhou, a city in China well known for its historical significance in Chinese literati culture, partially due to its role as the capital of possibly the most artistically rich period in Chinese history, the Song Dynasty.

I visited to see my family, but also to spend time at my favorite tea shop, JianShan Chashi (见山茶事). He Jianxun (何建勋), the owner and a good friend of mine, opened the tea shop's doors three years ago after two years of conceptualizing and constructing. We often call him by his nickname Xuxu (嘘嘘), which, when said, sounds like a quiet shh sound.

The core of the tea shop is the Chinese tea ceremony, in which the methods of tea brewing are meticulously chosen to enhance the drinking experience and fully express the flavor of each type of tea: the water, the material of the water vessel, the method of heating the water, the shape of the teacup, etc. However, the owner pushes the tea shop concept further, offering a peaceful atmosphere but with quite specific Chinese characteristics. It's a tea shop that intuitively expresses the mainland Chinese experience in thought and aesthetics, rooted in China's history, both new and old. The atmosphere is relaxed, with private rooms for customers to drink and talk at their own pace. It acts as an open learning space; Xuxu actively encourages guests to wander and explore the tea shop. Guests are invited to touch and interact with the many beautiful ceramic pieces, learn about Chinese tea, and most importantly, learn about Chinese culture.



Pictured is the large study on the second floor of the tea shop. At the current moment, it focuses on showcasing traditional Chinese craftsmanship through glasswork, porcelain, and sculpture. It has previously acted as a Guqin studio, calligraphy space, and tea room.

A running joke among regulars is the name of the tea shop, 见山茶事 (we've also talked about how poorly the name translates to English, literally meaning "see mountain tea affair"), as it's situated in one of the most modern areas of Hangzhou with absolutely no mountains around it.

Out of curiosity, I asked him on this trip why he named his tea shop the way he did, and he responded by reciting this saying from the Tang Dynasty:

见山是山，见水是水  
见山不是山，见水不是水  
见山还是山，见水还是水

Translated directly:

"The mountains you see are mountains, the water you see is water; the mountains you see are not mountains, the water you see is not water; the mountains you see are still mountains, the water you see is still water."

He then explained it in a different, perhaps more tangible way:

"Imagine your father is from the city of Hangzhou and leaves when he is young. The first time he comes back to visit, his interpretation of the city may change, and in following visits throughout his life, his understanding and interpretation will slowly grow with him as he notices different aspects of the city and experiences personal growth."

[Pictured on the right]

The teashop has a small selection of Chinese incense which can be burned after the tea ceremony.





A.

A. Based on the season, the tea shop will display a multitude of different fresh flowers and fruit. Pictured is the white pond lily, a flower that usually blooms in late spring to early summer.

B. The majority of the fine ceramic pieces in the tea shop are sourced from the owner's good friend and ceramic maker Qing Tang 青塘. Their ceramics are made in the infamous kilns of Jingdezhen and follow the aesthetic traditions of the Song Dynasty.

C. Pictured is the use of charcoal to heat the water. According to traditional tea texts, different methods producing, heating, and pouring the water will affect the resulting essence of the tea.



C.



B.



Chinese culture in the past and present is so deeply tied to Daoism, it's incredible the number of people you can meet in modern-day China that can recite Daoist lines of thought without realizing their origins. Daoism and its successive schools tend to focus more on the inner spirit; they're often interpreted as schools that emphasize introspective cultivation. Daoism is often seen as a predecessor of Zennism; while Daoism introduced the foundation of aesthetics and thought, Zennism made it practical. Zennism introduced ways of integrating the lines of thought in Daoism into daily life: for example, in seeing the beauty in supposedly menial tasks. These two schools are extensively loved by the tea community and for a good reason. The origin of tea rituals is strongly tied to Daoist ceremonies. The beginnings of tea for leisurely purposes derive from similar or perhaps simplified (if possible) lines of thought, and Zennism is a critical player in why these ancient ceremonies resonate with us in a modern, urbanized world.

The Jianshan saying is purposefully abstract, in the same way that many Daoist and Zen texts embrace abstractness and use paradoxes to communicate their ideas. In this case, I want to draw on some simple concepts to give some much-needed context to the saying. I've separated it into three sections, but I also want to emphasize the continuous, abstract, and unconsciously conscious qualities of them.

Here's a peek into one of my favorite rooms in the tea shop, across from the large study on the second floor. There's a cozy nook for sitting down and reading while you enjoy your tea, as well as an indoor moss garden. There's a beautiful sound system, on which one can listen to records, including the difficult-to-find record of classic songs by the Taiwanese singer Tsai Qin 蔡琴.

The first stage describes how our younger selves see the world in its natural state before conceptualizing what image constitutes what object. With our raw eyes, we see the object as it is. Neither the mountain nor the water represents ideas such as power or flexibility; they are just what they are.

The second stage represents how we view the world through our personal perspectives as a product of interacting with our society. We project ourselves onto the object to construct an image of our own reality, filled with subjectivity and influence. Through our own lens of expectations, beliefs, values of morality, etc., we are unaware, yet aware at the same time of our own reactive specificities.

The third stage emphasizes that the mountains are “still” mountains and the water is “still” water, meaning regardless of how we view these objects, they have remained the same. Here, this saying conveys the realization of the true natural state of things. Once we have achieved this awareness, we are able to embrace the natural state of the object. The ability to see this requires self-cultivation towards the Daoist concept of Zi ran (自然), meaning one’s true self or natural self, something that in turn allows us to be more aware and in tune with the Dao.

The stages and respective details are not meant to be statutory; they’re included here to give insight to the saying, but I want to emphasize the cyclical manner in which these stages flow. Within Asian schools of thought, there are strong recurring themes of interdependency and relativity when understanding extremes.



[Pictured from left to right]

1. The wife of the co-owner is a professional flower arranger and comes in to help with flower arrangements. Arrangements of Magnolia Figo (Chinese: 含笑花, translated directly: the smiling flower) are frequently seen in Chinese tea shops during their blooming season in late spring. The flowers pictured are a smaller variety native to the areas near the south of China. They have an especially fragrant but not overpowering fragrance, suitable for indoor tea rooms.

2. Pictured is the indoor moss garden, reflected in one of the thin rectangular glass panels, which frame customers’ perspectives of each room.



Xuxu had also advised me to read a few canons of tea culture, and *The Book of Tea* stood out to me in particular. This book is considered a classic for the tea community for many reasons. The writer, Kakuzo Okakura, was widely influential in attempting to preserve old Asiatic modes of thought and life essential to tea culture. Okakura was well-learned in Japanese, Chinese, and English. This is a pertinent point for any English speaker, as old Chinese texts are infamous for translating horribly. His dedication to preserving ancient Chinese art and bridging the gap between Western and Oriental cultures helped solidify a vision for the continuation and appreciation of old Asian culture. *The Book of Tea* remains one of the only novels able to express the complexity of tea (and other broader themes) in the English language.

At first glance, this book is just a thorough introduction to tea and the many practices that follow it, but upon closer reading, it becomes clear that the book's purpose is not tea. The author uses tea, something deeply ingrained in Asian culture, to convey Asian lines of philosophical thought, aesthetics, religion, and culture.

In particular, the writer wrote this novel during a time when he felt that the Japanese government and people were throwing away older Japanese customs and culture in favour of a more westernized lifestyle. His writing is informative, aiming to increase understanding and empathy in English readers for these foreign traditions. These themes flow clearly through the book and his personal life, remaining timeless even now.

So now to bring the two lines of thought together:

If one were to walk into JianShan Chashi (见山茶事), one would simply see a tea shop for tea. In subsequent visits, this initial impression of the tea shop and its function may change within you. The state of one's body and mind can influence the image and subjective associations with the tea shop. Perhaps your own personal interpretation of the deeper meaning of tea may bring in a new perspective to the tea shop.

But finally, in the end,  
the tea shop is still just a tea shop.  
In the same way that  
the book of tea is still just the book of tea.

Pictured is a classic visual of Hangzhou's rich, natural surroundings, also representative of the wider area's character and spirit. Frequent rolling mists and an abundance of greenery soften the surrounding mountains and scenery.

