

The way of tea

**English transcript
to the
podcast**

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Podcast on Gong Fu Cha

English transcript

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FM: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast produced by METIS, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices. You can find us at www.metis.ethz.ch.

FM: Today we visit Meng-Lin Chou at Spiegelgasse 26 in downtown Zurich, where she has been running a tea store for 13 years. She grew up in Taiwan and came to Germany to study German and Sociology in Konstanz. She learned and practiced Japanese tea ceremony and is now dedicated to the traditional Chinese Way of Tea: 'Gong Fu Cha'. Hello, I'm happy to be here with you today!

MC: Thank you.

FM: In the intro, we already mentioned the Way of Tea, which is what we're going to be talking about today. To start off, I would like to ask you, how did you get on this path, or rather, why did you get on this path?

MC: I was born into a very traditional, old family in Taipei. We have lived in the same place for seven generations. As a child, I always felt like I was in the wrong place. The feeling of

being in the wrong place always haunted me and I could not identify with role models like my mother, my grandmother, my aunts, i.e. women who have set an example. I always wanted to go to Europe as a child. My father is a businessman, and when he showed me photos of Europe, I always told him that I wanted to go there. For Taiwanese parents it is clear that their children must be openminded because Taiwan is an island in the Pacific. Then I had the chance to go to Germany to study. When I was there, the feeling of being in the wrong place was still very, very present and I had a lot of bad experiences in Germany in the first three years. I was accosted by strangers on the street, discriminated, treated badly and I became aware that I was not German, but who was I? Who am I? The feeling of being in the wrong place did not let me go. But I had the opportunity to find myself among the strangers. My professor of sociology told me: "Ms. Chou, we have a lot of German sociologists, we don't need one more, we don't need to breed one more. But please stay as you are. We need a Taiwanese perspective; we need a fresh perspective. Stay as you are." I first became very aware of this when I attended a Japanese tea ceremony for the first time, kneeling on tatami and watching the movements, drinking the tea, a feeling of 'I-have-arrived' overwhelmed me. The feeling of 'I-am-as-I-am' was wonderful. And then I understood that this is the path I need to take. And later I understood that the feeling of being in the wrong place is a condition that every person should cultivate in life, always cultivating a certain distance to oneself and to the outside world so that one always gets a fresh look. Choosing the tea path, feeling that 'I-have-arrived, I-am-as-I-am' in life, that was a clear path for me, that's how I came on this path.

FM: Thank you for this very individual story. It sounds like the Way of Tea has become your life path, in a way. Today you are a kind of tea master. Would you say that this is the goal of this path, have you reached the goal, is tea mastery the highest one can achieve on Way of Tea?

MC: I have tried to build a bridge between myself and the so-called Way of Tea. My intention is to convey to people that the tea path started somewhere, sometime, in the unconscious. And where the Way of Tea ends, we never know. Maybe it will never end, not until death. I have become a master in the eyes of others, and I would never claim myself to be a master. I am fine the way I am. People have made me a master. This is actually very,

how shall I say, this is actually very natural because whoever feels that they can receive something from you has recognized your authority as a teacher, in order to receive something from you. To them, you are a master. But I would never claim that I am a master myself. I try to cultivate, as I told you earlier, a certain distance and humility, and I know that I am, well, that I am, yes, still learning and that makes me very happy that I am still learning. That's why I would say that being a tea master is not a goal. Yes, and not worth striving for or aspiring to.

FM: The traditional Chinese Way of Tea is also called 'Gong Fu Cha', can you explain what that means?

MC: Well, 'Gong Fu Cha' has two different meanings, one is literal: 'Gong Fu' means effort, a task that needs a lot, a lot of effort, a lot of energy, a lot of concentration. That's why there's a saying in Chinese: "Wo mei you gong fu ge ni shuo hua", which means: "I don't have time, nor energy to discuss such things with you now" and a sport or a, let's say gymnastics, I don't know, I can't think of a better one at the moment, which is very important for vitality, which requires a lot of attention, energy, is called 'Gong Fu'. Basically 'Gong Fu' is a term for effort, energy, concentration, and this kind of tea preparation just needs a lot of effort. My grandfather used to tell me: "We make things so complicated to discourage others from doing it." That means you take, you make a great effort, maybe you use equipment, so a lot of people who think practically stop doing something like this. That's 'Gong Fu Cha', so to speak, in the first respect, on the first level. On the second level, 'Gong Fu Cha' means: a tea making method that represents us, when we drink tea, moving on the level of time, of eternity. So, that is, at the moment I am talking to you now, we are actually moving in transience, that is, there is spring, there is summer, there is autumn, when autumn comes I am sad, when autumn comes I eat game. So, this is the law of impermanence, that means I am vulnerable, I feel sadness, in winter I feel depressed, and so on, and so on. Man is subject to external influences. But when we are in 'Gong Fu Cha', we move in the sense of eternity, that is, even if the outside is difficult, war, we make a peace tea here. We are not impressed by external circumstances. Yes, this is what I understand as the meaning of 'Gong Fu Cha'.

FM: You already mentioned it when you explained that 'Gong Fu' requires a certain effort, but I would like to ask more pointedly, what is the difference between the tea as an everyday drink that I make in my office, that I can buy at a kiosk, and the tea, that is prepared in a tea ceremony as you do it here? Do you drink different tea, purely product-wise?

MC: You mentioned different levels. So, I drink my tea in the morning in a mug. It is a large quantity, and simple. That means you don't always have to drink the tea at the 'Gong Fu Cha' level. That is, some tea is integrated into our daily routine, that is one, that is, people are free to drink tea any way. And on the second level, if we understand 'Gong Fu Cha' as a ritual, that is, as a, a vessel that helps us to stay on the, on this absolute level, to stay on the clarity, on the independence, on the freedom level, untouched by external circumstances, then we can actually drink anything, right? In principle, I can drink a natural wine with you as long as we keep this consciousness, yes. But why do we like to drink 'Gong Fu Cha' with the drink made from *Camellia Sinensis*? Because this whole ideal is derived from this drink. This of course has to do with the drink *Camellia Sinensis* that has gone down in history because of how you discover the, how shall I say, the awake, this mental refreshing effect from the *Camellia Sinensis*, and realizing that you can use this drink in a repetition, a repetition as the first step to a ritual very, very well, so this, this of course is all related, yes. But of course, you can have a glass of wine with 'Gong Fu Cha' consciousness. You are free.

FM: Yes, I hope we'll talk more about the tea later. But maybe first let's circle back to what you called consciousness; you mentioned in the preliminary interview that you practice Zen. Can you tell us what this is all about, and how this idea of consciousness relates to tea?

MC: Ah the consciousness of Zen and tea. So, first of all I want to say, the consciousness that we stay on the eternity level, this state of eternity is not only so with tea and not only so with Zen, but it's so with all spiritual paths. You can, you don't have to come to me, you can find the same cultural roots in Christianity, in Christian mysticism, in Islamic mysticism, you in yoga, in all spiritual practice. Only, Zen and tea are so readily mentioned together because there's a saying that goes, "Tea and Zen have the same taste." It's just cultural. You have to imagine, Zen Buddhism went from India to China and the monks practice meditation and of course as an ordinary person I fall asleep in meditation. And if I drink a wonderful

beverage that keeps me awake, that's wonderful, right? And that's why tea and Zen, we say that has the same taste because tea is drunk so much in Buddhist monasteries and there are also very many famous Zen stories that have to do with tea and so, tea or Zen, the so-called Way of Zen, the Way of Tea, that is a vessel. I see these things like this: in Chinese culture we understand life like a river. Young people like you, you need the courage to take the Wildness, the non-conformist life, or what we also see in our society, the young people who rebel, they need that to cut a mountain. They need to want and be able to cut the mountain and sometimes the river has a dam, is blocked, life somehow, is like a reservoir. At that moment we must look for an opening so the water can be released, otherwise it overflows. And maybe we can use this blocked energy for our life, to generate electricity. And even more important is that we endure this blockage, that we find a way out and people in my age must have the courage to, to summarize, to jump into the ocean. And this river of life has two banks, one bank is ying, one bank is yang. One bank is male, one bank is female. One bank is spiritual, the other bank is material. How should we understand this? If we discuss now, what peace means, we may have different, conflicting interpretations, and we may argue about having different ideas. This thinking, analytical thinking, speaking, clear expression, that is the male yang energy, male energy, which is partly also discriminating when I tell you: "Peace is like this and not like that". But after we have talked with each other, discussed, we have to be able to have a beer together again. This is again the feminine energy, integrating, how shall I say, reflecting: "Maybe I was too energetic, maybe I was too blind". So that means you need both energies; if you stay too long only in the material world you need a vessel to come into the spiritual world, otherwise you are only a slave. And if you stay only in the spiritual world, maybe you maintain castles in the air, that is the Way of Zen or Tea, that is the vessel, the ship, that is the vehicle that we have in 'Gong Fu Cha', to help us stroll between two riverbanks. And I think it's very, very important that everybody cultivates that, and tea has this spiritual, spiritual aspect similar to Zen, that's why we say tea and Zen have the same taste but it's not only in Zen but in all spiritual practice.

FM: *So the tea serves as a vessel or to....*

MC: Exactly

FM: *...to stick with your metaphor as, as a ship maybe...*

MC: Exactly, a vehicle

FM: *...to get to...as a vehicle...to get to its own, spiritual riverbank. But if I understand that correctly, it's also that you have to find out for yourself what works for me, what is a good vehicle for me to get there?*

MC: For example

FM: *...to get there, if that is tea...*

MC: Exactly, wonderful, wonderful, the way you describe it. Yes, for you maybe philosophy is, for example. For some people maybe pottery, for some people maybe painting, yes, so for me it's very important that we know that we have to keep going between two banks and not just, not become one dimensional.

FM: *We're here with you today in your tea store, you sell tea here, you also sell tea equipment here and you do ceremonies with people who would like to learn from you. I would be interested to know who, who comes to learn from you, what are people perhaps looking for when they come to you?*

MC: Very different people come to me, young people who, some are less than 12 years old and older people who realize that they need to do something for themselves now. Very different people. I know that what they are looking for is also very different. I can think of some keywords: deceleration. Many people realize that they are perhaps a successful person on a social level, but they have possibly done too little for themselves and they have the feeling, they can now take tea as a vehicle, as a vessel for themselves, to do something for themselves, yes. So I, I say, very different but of course many have also very many projections, so they thought they can do this and this and this, yes but tea, learning tea is a long path, that means you encounter many stumbling blocks, you have to work on yourself,

you have to deal with Meng-Lin. Because she suddenly says something that you don't like at all. It's not easy at all...

FM: Yes, we have already talked about how individual this path can be and how individual the quest can be, which also means that probably not all people who come to you learn and take away the same thing. It can probably be very divergent. Is it difficult for a tea master to adjust to what those different needs are?

MC: Well, I never worry about what other people want because that's their job. So you know, I learn to keep my hands and feet in my own garden, and not in other people's garden. I think for a person it is a lot in the beginning, even if that person is thinking so consciously and so clearly why they want to learn tea. But basically, only through the confrontation with yourself and with others you become more and more conscious about why you are on this path. And why you are still there. There are so many projections and so many illusions too, but that's normal, isn't it, for me too. At first I thought, like you said earlier, I have to be able to respond to everybody, I have to be able to always be available and such. After a year or two I realized that it's enough that I can be there for myself.

FM: Yes, the tea ceremony is also about a taste experience. Maybe we want to talk about the role of the taste, the product, so this sensual level and this joy of tea that is different than in meditation; in the ceremony you also consume something that tastes good, that also has a stimulating effect, so what importance do the quality differences in the product have in the tea ceremony?

MC: For me these are two different things. I teach tea classification, there's no ceremony, there you should leave your head at home, just bring five senses. That means eyes, hands, sense of touch, nose, palate and sense of hearing, nothing else. Here it's really about tea, that you learn what a well-made tea is and what a tea that has flaws is. What is an original tea, what is a fake tea. There is a lot of fake tea. What does fake tea mean? It is similar to champagne; champagne is champagne because it comes from the Champagne region. But such awareness is not necessarily cultivated in tea even Europeans or French, they don't cultivate that. They would buy a Sencha from China and claim that it is a Sencha. They

would sell a Pu Erh tea that comes from South Asia instead of Yunnan. And in such courses I teach what an original is, what original, originality means, and what a well-made tea is. And in 'Gong Fu Cha' I actually teach body awareness. It is not about the senses. And for someone who is interested in the Way of Tea, he actually has to go both ways, right? So that means he actually learns what a good tea is, he, his sense of taste is enhanced so that his intellect can be turned off, that he is completely in his body and then in 'Gong Fu Cha' he is very aware of his own rhythm and very aware of all the complexity of what he wants to express. 'Gong Fu Cha' is a way of bridging the gap between people, so for example when the war broke out, I told my students, today we're going to make peace tea. What does that mean? Then I said: "Yes, imagine that you invite Putin to have tea. Then you have to ask the following question: what kind of pot would you take? Would you take a porcelain pot?" For me, for example, if I would take a porcelain pot to drink tea with Putin, I would want to express: "Hey Putin, peace is fragile. We have to be careful, be cautious, and live Eros, connections, feel committed." And if I were to have tea with Zelensky, I might take a teapot that has been burned in fire for a month. To tell him: "Peace is like a baptism of fire, we must persevere." So that means a 'Gong Fu Cha' is much more than the taste on the one hand, you must know, for example, having a tea with Putin I for me, for example, I would probably choose an Oolong tea that is infested with insects. So, I of course, I of course have my reasons; 'Gong Fu Cha' has a lot of layers. First, you know the tea very well, you're able to, of course it's embarrassing to drink a tea with Putin that is a fake. And then, of course, you have to be able to express the cultural history from what you know of the material without saying it. I don't know, have I made myself clear?

FM: Exactly, if I understood correctly, the tea serves to come to a sensual level, to put aside the intellect in order to engage with the body. I find that this is also a parallel to art, when we go to the museum and we start to see things, there too we have sensual experiences and can perhaps put our intellect on the back burner, so maybe the tea is also a kind of trick to get out of thinking.

MC: So in the Chinese world, the visible and invisible world is one. In the European world it is not. In the European civilization, visible and invisible worlds are separate. In the visible world, everything has to be measurable. But in Chinese culture, the tea, the fragrance, the

taste, it reminds us of something, it has a key to our cerebrum. That is, besides the intellectual activity, we can, we have the possibility to live something holistic. This is actually what I mean. Because the intellect doesn't take us any further. I can't classify tea with intellect, but only with my senses. And so we experience our world as a holistic one, as a whole and not as measurable, touchable, tangible. Yes, that's actually what I want to say.

FM: You came to Europe to study here and you have remained here to this day, and today you teach tea drinking to a middle-class, European clientele. What kind of considerations did you have to make, have you had to adapt certain things for this as well and you also talked about projections that people bring with them. So how is it different to offer a tea ceremony to Europeans than perhaps in Taiwan, where tea is also integrated into the culture in a different way?

MC: I don't adapt the tea here. I don't know if I understood your question, but I try to convey tea as original as possible. Of course it is, the transmission is always through my coloring, that's clear. I always have to reflect that as well. But I try to convey the tea as original as possible. Whether the person here can accept it that way or not, that's not my business. This person, if he wants, has to go his way. What I can do is simply, if he needs me, he finds my hand. But I'm not trying to modify the tea for Europeans. Where do I get the right to patronize Europeans and think what they can and can't do, right? That's the first thing. The second is, of course, that there are always cultural differences...of course I realize that, for example, when we are in Europe the boys are raised differently than the girls. The European boys, they are allowed to cultivate their hobbies when they are 10 years old, but the girls they are mostly more, they are more oriented to the girls, they are social beings, you notice very quickly. That's why Shui Tang is more of a boy's store, a men's store so to speak, because what we do is first of all too expensive for a woman, most women here so in this society, would buy everything for the other people, but for themselves the least and they would also buy many things for dresses, bags, shoes, everything visible. But an expensive teapot that you use to make tea in a quiet little room, not so often. So, that's an interesting thing to observe, that Shui Tang is more of a male-dominated business. And I think that has to do with gender education in Switzerland. And boys are just allowed to do things right because that, they have a, they're allowed to cultivate hobbies, right? And that,

of course I think is a pity and back to the peace tea that I spoke about earlier: I also noticed, that when we made anger tea once in our course, some Swiss women can't do that because you're not educated in Swiss society as a woman to express or act out your anger.

FM: *That's interesting. The gender aspect that you're introducing now. I wouldn't have considered that at first. You also studied sociology, so you certainly get your money's worth in terms of your clientele.*

MC: Well, I don't want to say that what I'm saying is the truth, it's simply an observation.

FM: *An observation...yes. So, would you subscribe to the phrase: "Here at your store, you can have an authentic Taiwanese tea experience"?*

MC: So...

FM: *Now that's purposely worded a bit polemically.*

MC: No, no, not polemic, but I just want to say I practice humility. How could I dare say you experience the original Taiwanese, the Taiwanese, or you experience the original Taiwanese tea with me? I would say, in other words, I would say I try to convey what I have received. And of course, via my reflection, also with my imprint, yes. I hope so.

FM: *Yes. In conclusion, maybe again a somewhat ostentatious question, but can the Way of Tea contribute to a successful life, that is, contribute significantly?*

MC: So what does, what does a successful life mean, or, I mean Elon Mu...

FM: *Elon Musk*

MC: Yeah exactly. Is he, is he leading a successful life? I'm not sure about that, right? I think...you're a philosopher, you know this is a very important question that we, that we should in fact address in school. What does happiness mean, what does success mean? For

me, thanks to my tea path, I live a life that is mine, as much as possible mine. And that is successful for me, yes.

FM: Thank you very much Mrs. Chou for this nice conversation; that was already the last question I wanted to ask you today.

MC: Thank you very much!

FM: The podcast was produced by Martin Münnich, with support from ETH Zurich and the Udo Keller Foundation Forum Humanum in Hamburg. I would like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks and to explore the media offerings on the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and practices at www.metis.ethz.ch, for example by following the link below to access the booklets to the podcast. Thank you for your time and and hope to see you soon again!