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"Buddhism and the Invention of Tea Culture in
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A Report on Dr. James A. Benn's Talk: “Buddhism and the Invention of Tea Culture in Medieval China” (November 4, 2017)

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On November 4, 2017, McMaster University's Dr. James A. Benn gave a talk entitled “Buddhism and the Invention of Tea Culture in Medieval China” for a lecture series on Tea and Buddhism hosted by The Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Centre for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. This talk was inspired by paintings that depict Buddhist monks drinking tea. Dr. Benn asks: Why do images of Buddhist monks consuming tea make sense to us? Why are they conventional? To begin diving into this question, he looks at three paintings from the Five Hundred Arhats series: *Arhats Drinking Tea*, *Arhats Gathering for Tea*, and *Arhats Preparing for Tea*. Each of these paintings comes from the Southern Song, and was made in 1178 using ink and colour on silk. These scrolls were not decorative—they were donated by monks and families in the area and were efficacious. They were considered efficacious because they depicted *arhats*, awakened individuals who were revered beings in a widespread cult at the time. These images do not surprise us; as viewers, we readily accept not only that Buddhism and tea are related, but that these holy beings gather for, make, and drink tea.

Next, Dr. Benn asks: why do we think that China shifted towards a culture of tea consumption? He starts with the basic proposition that during the eighth-ninth century, tea started to take over as the beverage of choice when Buddhist monks and lay people worked together to change public attitudes about intoxicating substances. Buddhists make good “missionaries” for tea and tea culture because tea culture aligns well with Buddhist culture. Tea alters brain chemistry, and has aesthetic qualities that can be appreciated and discussed. Tea preparation can be likened to a ritual. Both of these qualities stimulate the poetic imagination. Finally, tea culture offered an arena where monks and literati could meet without violating precepts (there are both lay and monastic precepts prohibiting the consumption of alcohol).

What textual evidence do we have that supports this theory? Dr. Benn discusses two examples, one of which I will highlight here. There is a text titled *Chajiu lun*¹ that was discovered in the Dunhuang cave library that presents an argument between “Mr. Tea” and “Mr. Alcohol.” Each argues for their superiority, until “Mr. Water” shows up and wins the debate. Dr. Benn presents a few passages from the manuscript. The first boasts of the finer qualities of tea. Tea is the colour of precious substances (jade and gold), is beneficial to monks for its ability to keep them awake and positively alter brain chemistry, and it is an appropriate offering for Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The second passage berates the intoxicating effects of alcohol, which causes people to kill and be killed through the madness it induces. Mr. Water arrives and reprimands the two, claiming his superiority as the source of both tea and alcohol, and one of the four elements. Finally, Mr. Water calls for the two to cooperate, so that both wine and tea houses prosper. Here, we see evidence of

¹ James A. Benn, *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), 44.

Buddhists being aware of the benefits of tea and advocating it over alcohol, while also recognizing that getting rid of alcohol completely is not an option.

What can visual and material culture tell us about tea? Here Dr. Benn looks at another painting, entitled *Xiao Yi Trying to Swipe the Lanting Scroll* (by Yan Liben d.673), dated to the seventh century during Tang dynasty (618-907 CE). This painting depicts a notorious scene from a popular story, in which the Tang emperor Taizong (r. 626-649) sends an emissary disguised as a scholar to obtain the famous calligraphy *Orchid Pavilion Preface* from the Buddhist monk Biancai. The official tricks the monk into showing him the scroll, and flees with it in the night.² The narrative does not concern us here, and the colophons associated with the image disagree as to what is happening in the exact moment depicted. What is important to us is the two men sitting behind the monk, preparing tea. This could suggest that tea may have been brewed in monastic settings since the seventh century, which is much earlier than we know of. However, it is more likely that this was the work of a tenth-century painter who is knowledgeable about Tang tea production and is trying to make the painting look old.

Dr. Benn then moves on to talk about what we can learn from archaeological evidence about this matter. He examines scholarly theories around the treasure found in the crypt at Famensi Monastery. The crypt, which had been sealed since 874, was discovered when a group of archaeologists were surveying the foundations of the collapsed pagoda in 1987. The treasures left there included metal objects, Buddha relics, a basket (used for the storage of tea leaves), a tea grinding wheel (for processing tea cakes), and a tea sieve made of silver. The inscription in the

² James A. Benn, *Tea in China*, 59-61.

gilt of the sieve tells us that it was made in the imperial workshop in 869. It was originally donated by the Tang emperor during an intense relic enshrinement project, and is used as evidence that establishes tea in Buddhist setting in the ninth century. Scholars have argued that the inclusion of these tea wares means that tea was a part of esoteric rituals. Dr. Benn refutes these claims as being unfounded, because people donated a wide variety of things to Buddha relics (for example, silver hair pins) in order to try and make a karmic connection to the Buddha. Furthermore, he is not convinced that the décor was esoteric or Buddhist. Scholars also put forth claims that the crypt was laid out as a mandala, but looking at the layout reveals that there is not very much evidence to support this theory.

Should we see these objects as evidence for a close association between Buddhism and tea drinking? To answer this question, we can examine the location of these items within the crypt in tandem with the inventory of all the donations. The items were found in the anterior chamber, which does not look like a ritual site, rather it functioned as a room where donations were simply piled up. The original inventory lists two sets of donations from the imperial family. The first is a set of ritual implement, and the second is a set of everyday objects. The tea-related objects were listed in the second group of donated items. Therefore, we should not have to accept them as special items proving an association between tea and Buddhism. They are simply valuable donations that are aimed at generating benefit for the imperial family.

Dr. Benn concludes his lecture by stating that it is only by combining knowledge from different fields (literature, archaeology, religious studies and art history) that can we learn about this key moment in tea history. Tea and Buddhism were not always associated. Tea was not invented by Buddhist monks, as some myths would have us believe. It is

clear through these examples that people have actively tried to persuade others of tea's value and benefit.

Bibliography

Benn, James A. *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015. eBook Collection (accessed Feb 9, 2018).