Comparative Study of Tea Cultures in China and Japan: Exploring Cultural Diversity, Transmission and Innovation

A Report on Experience-Based Learning (Trip) to Kyoto and Tokyo

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Abstract

This study explores the cultural transmission, transformation, and innovation of tea culture in China and Japan through immersive fieldwork in Kyoto and Tokyo. Drawing on my academic background in Chinese tea science, I investigated how Japanese tea culture has evolved from its classical roots—shaped by Zen philosophy and ceremonial aesthetics—to its modern expressions in contemporary food, design, and beverage industries. Through visits to museums, tea houses, and workshops, I examined both the historical continuity and adaptive innovations of tea practices. Comparative analysis highlights how each country reflects its values through tea: China emphasizes diversity and regional identity, while Japan refines a focused set of practices to perfection. The findings deepen understanding of cultural heritage and offer insights into cross-cultural empathy, sustainable tradition, and cultural diplomacy in East Asia. This research also contributes to broader discussions on how traditional knowledge systems adapt within globalized, consumer-driven contexts.

1 Research Background

Tea (*Camellia sinensis* L) is one of the most widely popular beverage, consumed by over two-thirds of the world's population (Karak T and Bhagat R M, 2010). It not only brings people special refreshing flavors and tastes, but also has multiple health benefits such as antioxidant activity, anti-obesity, neuroprotection, anti-cancer, etc. (Hollman *et al.*, 2011; Rains *et al.*, 2011; Kimura *et al.*, 2007; Cooper *et al.*, 2005) Tea culture represents an enduring and profound cultural tradition in both China and Japan. As the original place of tea, China has cultivated tea for over 4,000 years, integrating it deeply into everyday life, religious rituals, social etiquette, and philosophical reflection (Lan *et al.*, 2023). Various Chinese tea types such as green tea, oolong tea, and dark tea are not only agricultural products but also cultural symbols reflecting regional identities and traditional knowledge systems (Pan *et al.*, 2022).

The transmission of tea culture from China to Japan, particularly alongside the spread of Zen Buddhism during the Tang and Song dynasties, laid the foundation for the development of the Japanese tea ceremony (Gao G, 2021). Over time, Japan localized this practice by integrating native aesthetics and philosophies. The Japanese tea ceremony evolved into a codified and spiritualized cultural form, embodying Zen principles of harmony (wa), respect (kei), purity (sei), and tranquility (jaku), and reflecting Japanese values of simplicity, ritual, and impermanence (Wilson D, 2018). While both traditions share common roots, their subsequent evolution has led to distinct cultural expressions. Understanding these similarities and differences is not only valuable for academic inquiry into cultural transmission and transformation, but also for fostering cross-cultural appreciation and dialogue between the two nations.

From a personal perspective, my academic training in tea science at the undergraduate level focused largely on the botany, processing techniques, and cultural heritage of Chinese traditional teas. In my third year of study, I had the opportunity to attend a course on Japanese tea ceremony, which

sparked a deep interest in the Japanese approach to tea culture. This experience inspired me to explore beyond the technical aspects of tea and consider its cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical dimensions.

By conducting this comparative study on tea culture in China and Japan, I aim to bridge my background in Chinese tea studies with new insights into Japanese traditions. This research seeks to contribute not only to academic understanding of tea culture but also to broader conversations about cultural identity, mutual respect, and regional cultural diplomacy in East Asia. As a member of the Bai Xian Asia Institute, I am also committed to promoting intercultural understanding and cooperation across Asia. Through this cultural research project, I hope to contribute meaningfully to the BXAI's mission of building bridges across cultures and generations, using tea as a lens to foster deeper empathy and dialogue between China and Japan.

2 Objectives of this study

This study aims to conduct a comprehensive exploration of Japanese tea culture through fieldwork in Tokyo, in order to better understand its historical development, cultural meaning, and practical embodiment. The specific research objectives are as follows:

- To document the historical and contemporary practices of Japanese tea culture by visiting museums and cultural institutions in Tokyo that house tea-related artifacts. These visits will provide insight into the evolution of tea customs in Japan and their role in shaping social and aesthetic values.
- To gain first-hand experience of the Japanese tea ceremony through participation in tea gatherings (chakai) and workshops held in traditional tea houses. By observing and practicing the formal procedures of chanoyu, this research seeks to grasp the spiritual essence and embodied aesthetics of Japanese tea culture.
- To investigate the transmission of tea culture in modern educational settings, particularly by conducting interviews with tea masters and exploring how tea-related knowledge is preserved and taught in universities or cultural centers. This will shed light on how traditional knowledge is maintained, adapted, or reinterpreted in contemporary Japanese society.
- To compare Chinese and Japanese tea cultures, drawing from both fieldwork and existing literature. This objective focuses on identifying shared roots and distinct developments in their respective tea rituals, philosophies, and cultural significance, thereby contributing to a nuanced cross-cultural analysis.

Through these objectives, the project not only deepens the understanding of Japanese tea culture from a comparative perspective but also seeks to promote cultural empathy and dialogue between China and Japan. The outcomes of this research are intended to enrich academic perspectives on intangible cultural heritage and inform broader discourses on intercultural education and communication.

Table 1. Itinerary of Experience-based Learning (EBL)

Date	Time	Activities
Friday,May 2,2025	17:00 ~ 21:00	Travel from Kyoto to Tokyo
Saturday,May 3,2025	12:00 ~ 16:00	Visit Tokyo National Museum and observe tea-ceremony gallery (artifacts, utensils, calligraphy, teahouses)
	18:00 ~ 20:00	Visit tea shops
Sunday,May 4,2025	11:00 ~ 12:00	Visit the modern tea house SAKURAI (eventually failed due to the wrong reservation)
	13:00 ~ 17:00	Travel from Tokyo to Kyoto
Sunday,June 29,2025	12:00 ~ 13:00	Travel to Uji
	13:00 ~ 14:30	Visit the museum in Tea and Uji Community Center, Chazuna
	14:45 ~ 16:00	Participation in Matcha making & Matcha ice cream workshop; Learn shading method and manual grinding with stone mill
Sunday,July 6,2025	15:30 ~ 16:30	Experience tea-based alcoholic beverages in Kyoto

3 Fieldwork Observations on Japanese Tea Culture: Tradition, Innovation, and Contemporary Expressions

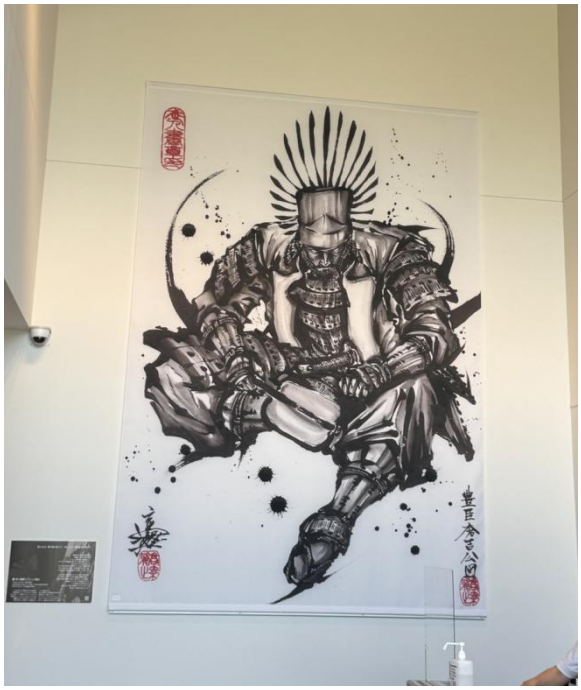
3.1 Learning about Japanese Tea in Uji, Kyoto

As part of my field research in Kyoto, I selected the Tea and Uji community Center, “Chazuna” (お茶と宇治のまち歴史公園) for a site visit due to Uji’s renowned status as a historical center of Japanese tea production. Before telling my experience in this tea community center, I want to explain about the special name of this community (“Chazuna”).

The name "Chazuna" (茶づな) originates from a public naming contest held in Uji city, a wonderful example of community engagement. It cleverly combines two Japanese words: 茶 (cha) meaning “tea”; 綱 / つな (tsuna) meaning “rope,” “link,” or “strand”. Therefore, this name was proposed to express the hope that “Uji tea would connect many people and its rich history like a single strand”.

The museum offered a comprehensive and well-structured introduction to the cultural and scientific dimensions of Japanese tea. Through the exhibition, I gained an in-depth understanding of the development of Japanese tea culture, including its historical roots, and the evolution of Japanese tea. Also, I gained more scientific knowledge about the categories, processing, sensory qualities and health effects of Japanese tea.

The first striking exhibits I encountered at the Uji Chazuna Tea Museum was a powerful ink painting of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Rendered in a bold, expressive sumi-e (ink wash) style, the artwork blends traditional Japanese aesthetics with modern visual intensity. I was immediately drawn to the warrior's imposing presence and intricate armor details, which conveyed both strength and solemnity. Knowing that Toyotomi Hideyoshi played a significant role in the history of tea culture—particularly through his association with Sen no Rikyū and the promotion of tea gatherings—I found it especially meaningful to see his image featured in a tea museum. The artwork reminded me that Japanese tea culture is not only about peaceful rituals but also deeply intertwined with politics, power, and historical transformation.



The interior design of the Chazuna presents a thoughtful integration of both traditional and contemporary aesthetics. On one hand, visitors are greeted by wooden sculptures and artifacts that reflect the region’s rich historical and cultural heritage, such as a life-sized statue of an ancient figure with a bird perched on his arm—likely referencing local legends or historical figures associated with Uji. On the other hand, the museum embraces modern visual culture through vibrant anime-style artwork and interactive digital panels. One large illustration depicts a lively scene of historical and modern characters walking across the famous Uji Bridge, blending fantasy with reality. Additionally, the inclusion of manga-style touchscreen displays introducing local attractions not only enhances accessibility for younger audiences but also adds an engaging, user-friendly layer to the museum experience. This harmonious coexistence of old and new creates a welcoming environment that appeals to a wide range of visitors, while effectively communicating the cultural depth and ongoing evolution of Uji's tea heritage.

The first exhibits that caught my attention at the Tea Museum in “Chazuna” was a live tea tree, carefully displayed in a glass case. According to the label, it originated from Takayama in Kyoto, home to one of the oldest tea plantations in Japan. Seeing the actual plant up close—its dark green leaves and sturdy branches—allowed me to connect more tangibly with the origins of Japanese tea culture. The exhibit was accompanied by a projected video showing tea fields and traditional cultivation methods, which helped illustrate how such trees are nurtured under specific environmental conditions. This display set the tone for the rest of the museum experience, emphasizing the deep historical roots of tea production in Uji. It reminded me that Japanese tea is not just a drink, but a living tradition rooted in centuries of agricultural practice, environmental adaptation, and cultural refinement.

“What is Ujicha?” framed the significance of Uji tea as a cultural and technical symbol. The bilingual explanation pointed out how Uji tea represents the blend of tradition and innovation that defines Japanese tea culture. This made me reflect on the broader social meanings of tea—not just as a beverage, but as a practice deeply embedded in national identity, seasonal rituals, and everyday life.

Through this section of the museum, I deepened my understanding of how tea serves as both a historical artifact and a living tradition in Japan. It also inspired me to consider how regional identity is preserved and communicated through agricultural heritage and local craftsmanship.

The first session of the museum is was the historical timeline exhibit, which offered a detailed overview of the 800-year development of Ujicha (Uji tea). The timeline traced the evolution of tea culture in Uji from the Heian period to the present day, highlighting key historical moments and figures such as Eisai and Myōe, who were instrumental in introducing and cultivating tea in the Uji region. Each period was accompanied by charming illustrated panels and corresponding texts, which made the information accessible and engaging.

In addition to textual explanation, artifacts and images at the bottom of the timeline helped visualize changes in cultivation techniques, tea processing, and cultural practices surrounding tea. I found it particularly fascinating how Uji emerged as a center not only of production but also of innovation—developing methods such as ōishita saibai (覆い下栽培, covered cultivation), which are essential for producing high-grade matcha. Furthermore, I was impressed by how Uji tea was integrated into court life during the Muromachi period and later into the cultural practices of common people, especially through the influence of tea masters like Sen no Rikyū.

The next section of the Uji Chazuna Tea Museum focused on the classification of Japanese tea. This display offered a visually engaging and well-organized overview of various tea types, arranged according to their fermentation levels: non-fermented (green tea), semi-fermented (oolong

tea), and fully fermented (black tea). Each type was introduced with a banner showing its name, a short description, its unique processing method, and a sample for visual inspection and scent testing.

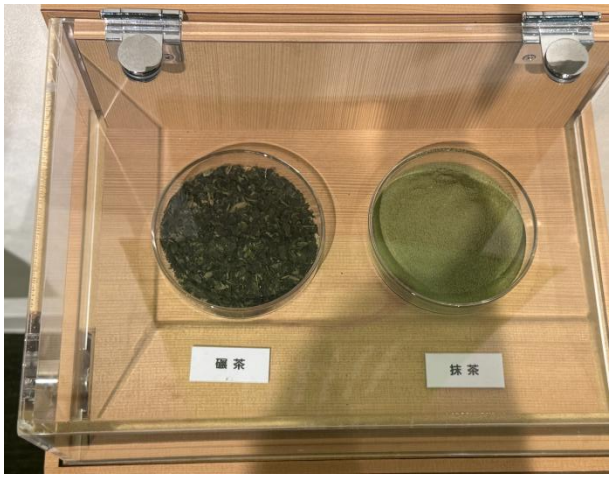
What I found especially informative was the distinction between covered cultivation (覆下園, oishita-en) and open-field cultivation (露天園, roten-en), which fundamentally affect the aroma, color, and flavor of green teas such as gyokuro (玉露), kabusecha (かぶせ茶), and sencha (煎茶). These subtle agricultural techniques help define the high quality of Uji tea, and I was impressed by the depth of expertise involved in cultivating and refining each type. The exhibit also included popular varieties like genmaicha (玄米茶, green tea with roasted rice), hojicha (ほうじ茶, roasted green tea), and wakoucha (和紅茶, Japanese black tea), illustrating how Japanese tea culture continues to evolve by adapting traditional methods to modern tastes.

This hands-on, sensory learning experience deepened my appreciation for how processing, cultivation method, and fermentation level collectively shape the final character of tea. It also made me realize that tea is not just a static category but a dynamic system of craftsmanship, deeply influenced by regional climate, historical technique, and cultural preference. Such a classification system underscores the rich diversity within Japanese tea culture and reinforces Uji's reputation as a center of both tradition and innovation.

Compared to the Chinese classification system, which organizes tea into six major types—green tea (緑茶), black tea (红茶), white tea (白茶), yellow tea (黄茶), oolong tea (ウーロン茶), and dark tea (黒茶, including pu-erh)—the Japanese system is somewhat narrower, with a strong emphasis on green tea and its subtypes. While China's categorization is based primarily on oxidation levels and historical craftsmanship traditions, Japan focuses more on cultivation and processing methods within the green tea category, especially distinctions such as shaded vs. unshaded growing (e.g., gyokuro and sencha), roasting (e.g., hojicha), and blending (e.g., genmaicha).

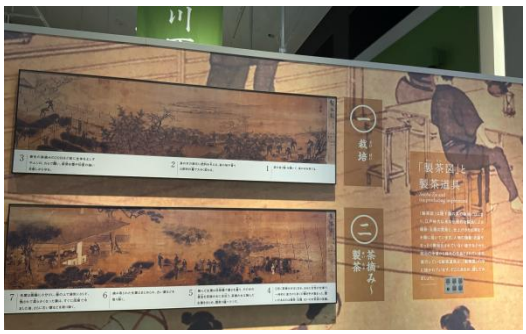
This contrast reflects the different cultural and historical trajectories of tea in the two countries. In China, tea evolved into a wide spectrum of types reflecting regional diversity and

philosophical traditions, while in Japan, the focus has long been on refining a smaller number of styles to perfection, particularly for use in the tea ceremony and everyday life. Experiencing this Japanese classification system allowed me to reflect on how tea functions not only as an agricultural product, but also as a mirror of national taste, environment, and identity.

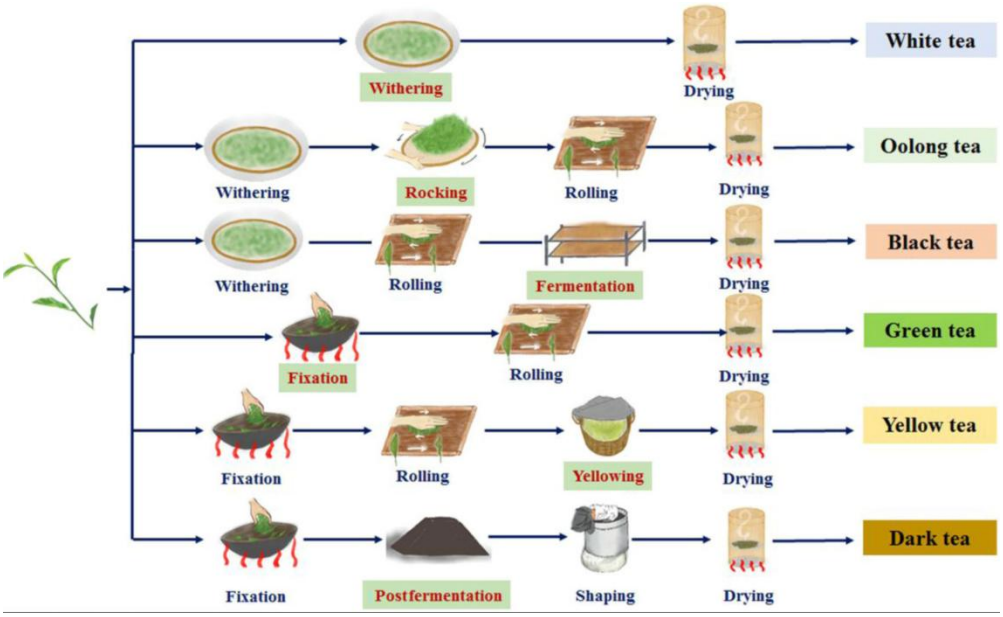


Furthermore, I also learned about the processing of Japanese tea in ancient times. Compared with Japanese tea, Chinese tea processing incorporates a wider range of techniques such as pan-firing, sun-drying, fermentation, and post-fermentation, depending on the type and region. For example, Longjing tea from Hangzhou is pan-fired to produce a toasty, nutty flavor, while Pu-erh tea from Yunnan undergoes microbial aging over years to develop complex earthy notes. These variations result in China's six major tea categories—green, white, yellow, oolong, black, and dark teas—each with unique flavor profiles and cultural meanings.

Processing procedures of Japanese tea:



Processing procedures of Chinese tea:



3.2 Experience the application of Matcha in modern foods

After visiting the museum and learning about the knowledge of Uji tea, I attended the experiencing class of making matcha and matcha ice cream.

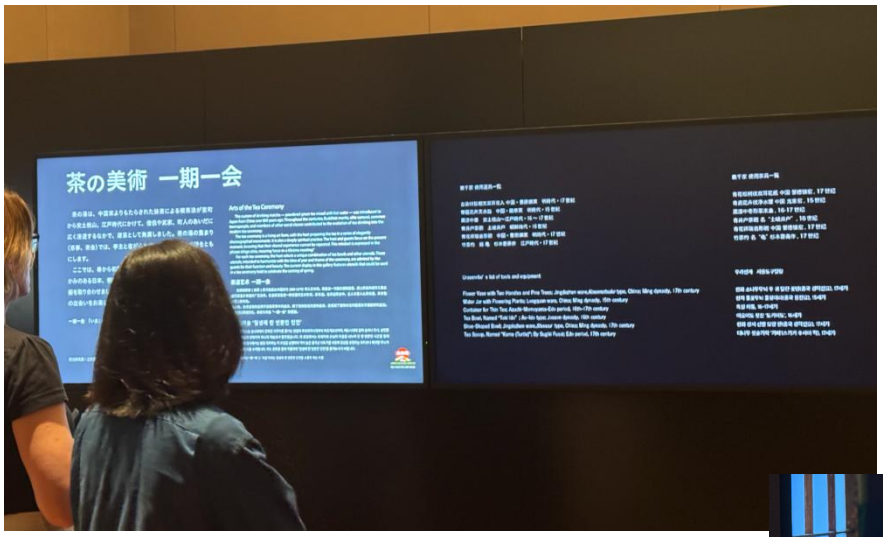
Firstly the assistants taught us the secret of making high-quality matcha, which is “shading”. In Japan, shading—known as “覆下栽培（oishita saibai）”—is a highly standardized and essential practice, especially in the production of matcha and gyokuro. Tea bushes are typically shaded with woven straw mats or synthetic black nets for about 20–30 days before harvest. This reduces sunlight by up to 90%, promoting the accumulation of theanine and reducing catechin levels, which results in a sweeter, umami-rich flavor. The process is highly controlled and integral to the identity of Uji tea.

In China, while shading is also practiced, it is generally used more flexibly and varies greatly by region and tea type. For example, there’s a special category of tea named “Anji Baicha”. Different from typical tea plants, the leave color of “Anji Baicha” is white. This characteristic not only results from the modified genes, but also from the “shading” treatment. Moreover, shading in China is less associated with ceremonial use and more focused on protecting leaf tenderness and enhancing aroma.

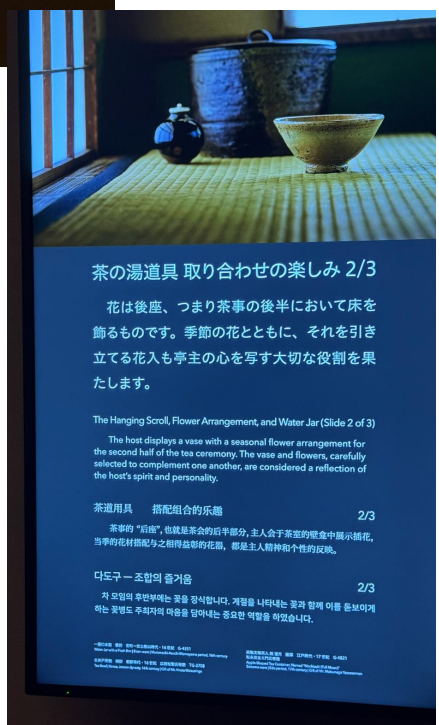
Equipped with further knowledge of Japanese tea cultivation, we started to making matcha manually by grinding tea leaves using a small stone mill.

3.3 Learning about Japanese Tea culture in Tokyo Museum

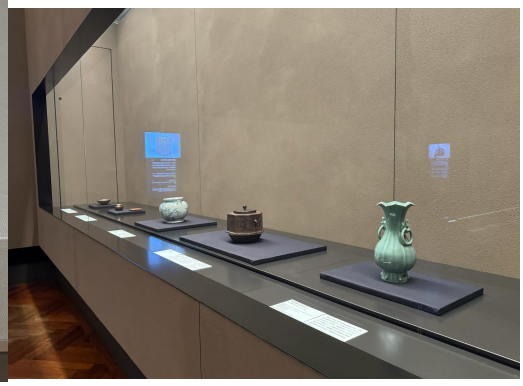
Next, I chose to visit the Tokyo National Museum (TNM) to investigate how Japanese tea traditions are preserved, displayed, and interpreted in a national museum context. Unlike regional institutions such as the Uji "Chazuna", TNM offers a macro-level, historically layered perspective that situates tea culture within Japan's broader material and intellectual history.



During my visit to the Tokyo National Museum, I engaged deeply with its dedicated tea-ceremony gallery (Honkan, Room 4), which showcases a rich array of artifacts—from paintings and calligraphy to tea bowls, kettles, caddies, and vases—that exemplify the aesthetic principles of chanoyu. The collection spans Korean and Chinese ceramics adopted in medieval Japan as well as Japonese-crafted "wabi" tea bowls by



figures such as Sen no Rikyū. Highlights included the famed “Water Jar ‘Shiba no Iori’” and the practical yet refined “Shinnari Gama” kettle—a testament to the harmonious blend of everyday utility and spiritual contemplation in tea ritual. The recently renovated display emphasizes the concept of “ichigo - ichie” (“one time, one meeting”), using improved lighting, display cases, and multilingual digital signage to enhance engagement, especially for international visitors. Complementing the indoor exhibit, the Museum’s garden features five historic teahouses—such as the Edo - period Shunsoro and the relocated Rokusō - an—offering a living context for chanoyu practice against a backdrop of seasonal landscapes.



These experiences at the Tokyo National Museum allowed me to observe how historical artifacts and spaces are curated to communicate not only material history but also living aesthetic values. This enriched my analysis of how Japan preserves and renovates cultural traditions — balancing authenticity and accessibility — and informed broader insights into cross - cultural empathy, sustainable heritage preservation, and cultural diplomacy in East Asia. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how traditional knowledge systems adapt within globalized, consumer-driven contexts.

3.4 The Fusion of Tea and Alcohol as a Contemporary Development in Japanese Tea Culture

During my fieldwork, I visited a local dessert shop that offered a unique selection of tea-based alcoholic beverages, combining traditional Japanese tea with various types of liquor. This experience highlighted a compelling dimension of tea culture’s modernization and reinvention in contemporary Japan. While historically tea has been associated with purity, calmness, and ritual—especially within the context of the tea ceremony—its fusion with alcohol represents a departure from conventional usage and a creative reinterpretation of tradition.

These innovative drinks, such as matcha-infused cocktails or gyokuro-based liqueurs, are not merely trendy novelties; they reflect a broader cultural shift in which tea is being reimagined as a flexible, lifestyle-oriented ingredient. By integrating tea with alcohol, producers appeal to younger consumers and urban markets, creating new contexts for social interaction that are distinct from formal tea gatherings or household consumption. Moreover, this hybridization aligns with Japan's broader trends in gastronomy and product design, where the blending of tradition and modernity is celebrated.

From a comparative perspective, while China has also begun experimenting with tea-infused spirits, such innovations are still relatively niche. Japan, by contrast, appears to be more proactive in positioning tea within contemporary culinary and beverage culture, not as a static heritage item but as a dynamic medium for cultural expression and market evolution.

This phenomenon raises important questions for further study: How does the blending of tea and alcohol influence the public perception of tea's cultural value? Can such reinventions coexist with preservation of traditional tea practices, or do they risk diluting cultural meaning? As Japanese tea continues to evolve in response to global and domestic trends, its ability to adapt while maintaining cultural depth may prove critical to its sustainable relevance in modern society.

4 Discussion

This comparative study reveals both convergence and divergence between Chinese and Japanese tea cultures in terms of historical development, cultural symbolism, and modern adaptation. While both traditions stem from a shared East Asian heritage and were historically influenced by Buddhism

and Confucianism, they have evolved into distinct cultural systems shaped by their respective societal values.

In China, tea culture is characterized by diversity and regional richness. The classification into six major tea types—green, black, oolong, white, yellow, and dark tea—reflects ecological, technological, and cultural variation across provinces. Tea practices are often informal and embedded in everyday life, ranging from casual household consumption to formal Gongfu tea ceremonies. Tea is also a common vehicle for hospitality, social bonding, and philosophical reflection, with great attention paid to the sensory evaluation of flavor, aroma, and liquor color.

In contrast, Japanese tea culture centers more narrowly around refined green tea practices, particularly matcha. The Japanese tea ceremony (chanoyu), deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism, emphasizes aesthetics, mindfulness, and spiritual values. Practices such as the shading of tea plants, codified movements, and the use of symbolic utensils highlight the ceremonial and artistic nature of tea in Japan. The experience at Uji's Chazuna Museum and Tokyo National Museum reinforced the importance of tea as a bearer of national identity and moral philosophy in Japan.

Importantly, this study also identified how both countries are negotiating the tension between preservation and innovation. In Japan, this is exemplified by modern reinterpretations of tea culture such as matcha-based desserts and tea-infused alcoholic beverages, which appeal to younger generations while preserving core values of elegance and hospitality. Museums like Chazuna and TNM play a vital role in mediating tradition and modernity—curating both historical artifacts and engaging, accessible displays that reach diverse audiences.

Moreover, the Tokyo National Museum’s tea culture exhibits emphasized how material culture, such as utensils and teahouse architecture, plays a crucial role in preserving intangible heritage. The concept of ichigo-ichie (“one time, one meeting”) not only encapsulates the essence of chanoyu, but also serves as a metaphor for cultural encounters—underscoring the uniqueness and impermanence of every cross-cultural experience.

From a broader perspective, this comparative inquiry highlights tea as a cultural lens through which we can examine issues of heritage, innovation, and international dialogue. While China's strength lies in the richness and regional specificity of its tea culture, Japan’s strength is its integration of philosophy and artistry into a highly systematized form. Both models offer valuable insights into how tradition can be sustained and renewed in response to changing cultural and economic environments.

Through this project, I have not only deepened my academic understanding of East Asian tea cultures, but also reflected on the broader role of cultural practice in shaping identity, promoting empathy, and facilitating cross-cultural learning.

5 Conclusion

This experience-based learning project provided me with a unique opportunity to explore the historical, aesthetic, and evolving dimensions of tea culture in Japan, while reflecting on its shared

roots and divergences from Chinese tea traditions. Through immersive fieldwork in Kyoto and Tokyo, I was able to observe how Japan balances heritage preservation with innovation—from traditional matcha cultivation and ceremonial practice to modern reinterpretations such as tea-infused beverages. This study not only deepened my academic understanding of intangible cultural heritage but also enhanced my intercultural sensitivity and comparative research skills. By bridging my Chinese academic background with Japanese cultural experiences, I gained valuable insights into how tradition can be adapted in response to changing societal values. I hope to continue this research in future projects that further explore how cultural practices evolve and foster dialogue in East Asia and beyond.

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