

ULAANBAATAR UNIVERSITY

MONGOLIAN TEA RITUAL

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MONGOLIA

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Mongolian tea ritual is an essential part of its nomadic culture, that still exists in vast plains of Central Asia in the shadow of modern civilization and fast urbanization. Tea ritual elements express its unique characteristics and invisible connection to the ancient shamanic ideology.

Before the Tea Trade with China in the 13th century Mongolians used over a hundred herbs and plants for tea.¹ When the Silk Road trade was prospering under the protection of Mongol Empire, silk, tea, porcelain, paper, ink, spices, jewels, perfume, medicine and other valuable goods were traded along the route from China to the West. In that period green tea was introduced to Mongolians. Later, with the established Tea Route, passing through western territories of Mongolia to Russia, in the 16th century, green tea had become a common drink.

...The Mongol Empire started with the rise of Genghis Khan in 1206 CE and ended in 1370 CE after multiple civil disruptions and external pressures. While 164 years is not considered remarkable for an empire, the impact the Mongols had was remarkable. Oddly, the one thing that is often forgotten in history is the one item these ancient people took with them when their empire fell. Tea was an item of treasured by the Mongols. The Mongolian people recognized that tea was a medicine, food, drink and functional trade good. Because the Mongols retained a primarily nomadic lifestyle, coins were seen as valuable, but could only be used to trade with outsiders. Tea was valued because it was directly useful. Mongolian milk tea is still a staple of the Mongol diet today.²

While being considered as a part of Mongolian cuisine it plays a vital role in spirituality, mentality, and ethical norms as well as youth upbringing. And how is it connected to all those? To see that one must observe carefully each and every steps of the tea ritual and people's attitude towards it. It could be subtle because all steps and moves are being done in habitual acts of common daily behavior.

But all those unregistered elements of performance of tea ritual express some messages, signify certain moves at all levels of performing from ordinary tea time to highly festive dining.

As the anthropologists analyzed, the degrees of ritualization is divided into performance-centered and liturgy-centered (C.Humphrey & J.Laidlow), or ecstatic and ascetic (Edmund Leach), or indexical and canonical (Roy Rapport), but D.Bum-Ochir, a Mongolian scholar, proposed four degrees of ritualization: high-degree, mid-degree, low-degree and non-ritual performance.

According to this classification the Mongolian Tea Ritual elements are purely based on oral tradition, thus it categorized into performance-centered, from mid-degree to low-degree rituals. Morning tea rituals, tea offering and serving rituals are low-degree as they are conscience based,

¹ Ch.Erdenezaya "Mongolian tea herbs"

² [Steve N Green](#) "Tea's Influence in Mongolia and Russia"

intentional performances without specific rules or instructions to follow, and they are still considered ritual because of repetitious nature of the acts. Tea Oblation, Bridal Tea ritual, Baby shower tea rituals are mid-degree because there are certain rules to follow.

The objective of this article is to analyze Mongolian tea ritual, Tea ceremony, Tea recipes and categorize them separately.

Tea Rituals

The art of tea ritual includes Tea making, Tea oblation and Tea serving rituals and it relates to many aspects of Mongolian customs.

1. Tea making ritual - Tea making starts with how to position the pot on the fire. In ancient Mongolian culture the fireplace was in the center of the Mongolian ger (traditional dwelling) with three stones as a support for pots. Later it was replaced successively by a four-legged iron stand, metal stoves, brick ovens and then electric ovens of modern technology.

In a Mongolian ger the door always faces south. In the tea-making procedure a pot must sit straight with no tilt south, or towards the door, and to avoid a tilt south it is intentionally tilted north slightly. This symbolizes ancient shamanic custom that considered the south as losing and the north as gaining.

First, they bring water to a boil and add loose green tea leaves or a bag with loose tea and leave it to boil. After stirring the tea with a ladle and removing the tea-bag when it is boiled they add milk and a pinch of salt for taste (optional, depending upon the recipes and the region) and boil it some more. In the final process it is given a strong ladling up and down for aerating stronger aroma of tea and creamy flavor of milk. As they say, the more you ladle, the better the tea becomes.

If they want to taste the tea they take some in the ladle and pour half of it back to the pot, then pour the rest into a cup, which means the very first serving for the Tea oblation is not taken. When the tea is done they first take some for the Tea Oblation, some for the family Shrine and then they ladle it into a kettle, using a mesh strainer if loose tea was used, and then pour it into a thermos to keep it hot. This procedure is for a basic tea with milk without additional ingredients.

2. Tea Oblation - It is sacrificial offerings of tea to the Sun, Sky, Higher beings, Deities and Nature spirits. They use a flat, carved, wooden spoon with a blue silk ribbon tied at the handle to sprinkle tea upwards. They offer tea to the Spirits of shamanic ancestry and Munkh Tengri (Higher Being in Upper world), to the Sun rising from the East, and to the Spirits of mountains or waters of surrounding nature.

Performing Tea oblation requires wearing a hat or headscarf because of the shamanistic belief that a human being is born with an opening on top of his head, called fontanel, and that is a

susceptible part of the body for intrusion of harmful spirits. The avoidance of being bare headed outdoors was common practice in most countries until mid 20th century and it is still in practice for some cultures.

The essential parts of the Tea oblation ritual are the prayer with appreciation: “The tea, the best of food, is being offered to Mighty Spirits, or Mother Sun, or Munkh Tengri, please savor it, we appreciate your caring and protection deeply, we worship you dearly” and asking guidance: “Please, safeguard our family and our herds, and guide us in earthly pursuits”.

3. Tea serving ritual - There are symbolic perceptions of pouring the tea right, in which it should be done in certain way so that tea whirls clockwise like the Sun movement and tea kettle spout or thermos mouth should not face the south or the door, which indicates the loss.

They follow certain manners for the tea serving, such as holding a cup with two hands or the right hand with the left hand supporting the elbow of the right, making sure the sleeves are not folded back, preventing from setting the finger over the cup edge and keeping ones hair tucked into scarf or tied with ribbon or braided so that it does not sweep over the tea.

Serving tea to guests starts with elderly and then by age sequences.

Tea Ceremonies

Mongolian tea ritual is associated with Tea Ceremonies that could be categorized into following:

- Morning tea ritual
- Bridal tea ceremony
- Baby shower tea ceremony
- Shamanic ceremony- tea offering

Morning tea ritual differs from other daily tea makings in that it begins with the Tea Oblation for Deities and Spirits of Nature. After making the tea the housewife steps out with the first serving of tea and says prayers while sprinkling tea in particular directions. Also, one can add a particular cause or a person to be guarded on that day.

This communication connects the human spirit with sacred entities and establishes harmony with nature providing inner peace and spiritual stability. Mongolians’ deep-rooted belief system of worshipping the Munkh Tengri, which is the foundation of the nomad’s philosophy about life cycles and spiritual continuance, inspires an optimistic attitude towards life, and even death.

After the Tea Oblation they set a small cup of tea on the family shrine to give an offer to Deities, and a recently deceased family member. They believe the spirit of a deceased stays home or on the earth for 49 days and must be treated well with food, prayers and happy memories before departing.

Once these rituals are completed the wife pours the tea first into her husband's cup and hands it to him. Otherwise, the first serving goes to the oldest male of the household.

The Bridal tea making ceremony completes a wedding. The groom makes a fire in a fireplace, to symbolize continuance of paternal lineage, to vow sustaining the family fire and hearth, while the bride performs the tea ritual and offers tea to the groom, expressing respect, caring and acceptance of responsibility for maintaining the household.

Baby shower tea ceremony – A Mongolian baby shower, held within a week of a baby's birth, is a celebration of welcoming a new person into the family. Both grandmothers of the baby make green tea without milk and cool it down. Then they wash the baby in a tea bath, wrap him or her in a warm blanket. The baby's father chooses a name for his child and whispers it three times into his right ear for a boy, or into her left ear for a girl. Afterwards, he announces the baby's name and the family expresses good wishes and gives presents.

Thus, the tea ritual also plays a special bonding role as the newborn baby is warmly embraced by his community.

During the shamanic performance tea is used as a main offering to the spirits to quench their thirst after they arrive in the shaman's physical body. The shaman's helper greets the spirit and offers tea by saying "Sit comfortably in your home, Sip your favorite tea to quench your thirst, please."

Tea offering tradition

Mongolian Tea offering differs from other cultures by some specific patterns. Since their nomadic lifestyle is unique, with its isolated and scattered settlements, there is always joy and curiosity having guests, invited or unexpected, to hear the news or exchange ideas or just to communicate with. In rural nomadic communities when someone approaches gers and makes a sound as if clearing his throat or saying aloud "Watch your dog!", a sign of respecting privacy, one of a family members comes out to greet and welcome him in. After they enter the ger they let him sit on the right side of the ger and hand him a cup of tea.

Saying 'No' to the tea offering or not offering tea would be inconceivable in Mongolia. There is an idiomatic expression "No tea, lose face", which interpreted as an inhospitable. Also, one never asks guests if they wish drinking tea since it is unwritten rule to offer tea to the guest, expected or unexpected, which shows the household's hospitality and openness, even to strangers.

And tea always goes with a dish of Mongolian cookies, or dairy products like cheese, pressed and cookie-cut dried yogurt, cream or other treats.

One distinctive custom, formed in the last 70 years, is bringing a thermos with hot, milk tea and sweets when visiting someone in a hospital. This custom can be explained by two reasons; first,

their get well wishes are expressed by the whiteness of milk, and second, home made tea and a meal are always more welcoming.

Another unique example of Mongolian hospitality is if they see a caravan of a moving family in the distance they walk up with tea and a dish of cookies to greet them. This tradition shows their sympathy for each other, especially for someone moving in hot or cold weather, and their knowledge of paying respect to others and welcoming with open hands can establish friendly and peaceful coexistence.

However, shifting to urban settlement minimizes some of this unique tradition. Nowadays, in the cities there is less and less incidents of friendly neighbors greet a newcomer with tea and goodies with a welcome smile. Most city dwellers do not know who lives next door or behind their thin walls, nomadic herders still come to help with their hot, milk tea from half a mile away.

Honoring the tea

Tea is a ceremonial beverage. On the first day of Mongolian Tsagaan sar - Lunar calendar New Year, every family starts ceremony. They get up early and the housewife makes the morning tea. Each family member walks outside to start their first steps in their good directions, religious ritual symbolizing wellbeing and luck for the year, the housewife performs the Tea Oblation, the house head performs a sacrificial food offering. After the ceremony they return home and start the greeting to elders, except for the spouses. Then everybody sits down at the table and housewife serves tea starting with the head of house, food dishes follow. They talk pleasantly only about good happenings with no harsh words to symbolize the best for that year.

Also it is the main sacrificial element of worshipping ceremony for Mountain Spirits and the Munkh Tengri. It is used for an offering as a drink along with khadag out of deep respect.

Milk and milk tea are used to wish a farewell to someone heading on long journey. They sprinkle the tea or milk after the departed leaves wishing good luck and a safe trip.

Mongolians revere milk and milk tea highly and consider them top of the food, so it is prohibited to be wasted or spilt off. In a case of accidentally spilling of the milk or milk tea on the ground they show their regret by touching it with the ring finger of the right hand and bring it up touching their forehead.

Another traditional concept about milk is its symbolic meaning of pure and whiteness, so one can not pour water on top of milk because water represents black. It is related to shamanic elements as to good deeds are performed with milk and bad deeds are performed with water. So if they need to mix milk and water they pour milk over water.

All these daily chores that connected with milk and milk tea are performances based on belief and conscience, which leads to intentional performance with respect, then eventually becomes habitual acts.

Thus, tea ritual as being performance-centered ritual of daily life has significant influence on youth upbringing. Children learn the tradition just by watching and following it daily. Mongolian Tea Ritual has an impact on treating others well, respecting the elders and social skills.

Tea consumption pattern of Mongolians

Tea consumption pattern is directly correlated to tea making style. Mongolian families prepare milk tea and reserve it in a thermos of two liters or more volume, which is consumed within a few hours, and, in average, they prepare it two to three times a day.

Reserving milk tea fresh might seem a bit skeptical, but as long as it is hot the freshness and flavor will not diminish. In early days Mongolians used wooden jugs with copper or silver bands and narrow mouths and kept them in hot ash of fireplace or in felt bags. Now, vacuum insulated glass thermos can be seen in every household, city or countryside.

Mongolian children are introduced to the tea at very early age, but they drink less tea and more “hyaram”, boiled milk diluted with water. In summer time this milk drink and just plain tea are used as a cold drink. Unfortunately, in modern days more sweetened and carbonated drinks are being consumed by young people and are causing more illnesses.

Variety of Mongolian tea recipes

Nomadic cuisine is high in nourishment and simple to prepare. Nomadic herders work outdoors from dawn till dusk in open fields with various weather conditions, as cold as -20F in winter, which requires highly nutritious food to fight the cold temperature and keep strong. Mongolians make types of tea that substitute for meal. Some tea recipes are used therapeutically to ease the fatigue, prevent from a common cold and boost the immune system.

Mongolian tea can be divided into two main categories: tea with milk and tea without milk, and further, following sub-categories:

1. Plain tea
2. Tea with fats
3. Tea, thickened with flours
4. Tea with meat ingredients
5. Tea with herbs and plants
6. Tea made by special cooking techniques
7. Therapeutic teas

Gaby Bamana, a research scholar of Mongolian Study, mentioned that there are 42 recipes of Mongolian tea in his book “On the Tea Road” (2008).

Since there are 20 ethnic diversities in Mongolia, that number could be even more. On the basis of travelling to 11 aimags to the West, East, North and South, also collecting tea recipes from seniors in Ulaanbaatar city, so far, total 48 recipes have been collected.

APPENDIX

1. Plain tea recipes

1. Green tea (tea without milk) – Add green tea leaves into boiling water and let it boil.
2. Milk tea with salt - Add green tea leaves into boiling water and let it boil more, then add milk and cover to boil, put some salt and when it is boiling up ladle it up and down strongly using a big ladle.
3. Milk tea without salt – the same as above only without salt. The East and South East regions use no salt for their tea, except the tea with meat and other ingredients.
4. Khyaram - Boil water, add some milk and let it boil once.

2. Tea with fats

1. Green tea with shin bones – boil water, add green tea and some shin bones of sheep to boil, then add pinch of salt and let it boil.
2. Green tea with sour cream, reserved in sheep’s stomach pouch – It is green tea without milk, some preserved milk cream in a sheep’s stomach pouch added before serving it
3. Milk tea with pure butter - It is regular milk tea, pure butter added before ladling up.
4. Milk Tea with sheep tail fat – Prepare green tea first and set aside. Stir fry some Mongolian sheep tail slices and pour the green tea over to boil. Then add milk, sprinkle some salt and ladle up and down when it is boiling.
5. Milk Tea with shin-bone – boil water, add green tea and some shin bones of sheep to boil, then add milk and pinch of salt and let it boil.
6. Tea “Tsorgison” – pound green tea leaves first, melt butter in a pot, stir green tea in and fry, add hot water to boil more, and add some milk. Ladle it well.
7. Tea with mare’s milk fat – Add a spoonful of fat, accumulated in “Airag” fermenting pouch, and ladle it well. (Airag- fermented mare’s milk drink)

3. Tea, thickened with flours

1. Milk Tea, thickened with browned flour – Prepare green tea about a half gallon and set aside. Melt 1 tablespoon of butter in a large pot, stir in and brown 2 tablespoon of flour. Add the prepared green tea and cover it immediately. After it is boiled put 1 teaspoonful salt and add 2 cups of milk and let it boil. Then give a few strong ladling up and down.
2. Milk Tea with flour and millet - Prepare green tea about a half gallon, set aside covered. Melt 1 tablespoon of butter in a large pot, stir-fry 1 cup of millet, washed. Add the prepared green tea and cover it immediately. After the millet is cooked put 1 teaspoonful salt, add 2 cups of milk and let it boil. Then give a few strong ladling up and down.
3. Milk Tea with browned flour and rice – the same as above
Milk Tea with rice and sheep tail fat - Prepare green tea first and set aside. Fry some Mongolian sheep tail slices and pour the green tea over to boil. Then add 1 cup of rice,

washed, cook until rice is done. Add 2 cups of milk, sprinkle some salt and ladle up and down when it is boiling.

4. Milk Tea with millet and sheep tail fat – the same as above
5. Tea with browned barley flour - Prepare green tea about a half gallon and set aside. Melt 1 tablespoon of butter in a large pot, stir in and brown 2 tablespoon of barley flour. Pour the prepared green tea over and cover it immediately. After it is boiled put 1 teaspoonful salt and add 2 cup of milk and let it boil. Then give a few strong ladling up and down.
6. Tea with “Tsulhir” flour - Prepare green tea about a half gallon and set aside. Melt 1 tablespoon of butter in a large pot, stir in and brown 2 tablespoon of “tsulhir” flour. Pour the prepared green tea over and cover it immediately. After it is boiled put 1 teaspoonful salt and add 2 cup of milk and let it boil. Then give a few strong ladling up and down.
7. Oold tea – Prepare green tea, set it aside. Pour milk into a pot, add loose tea leaves, pinch of salt, and let it boil. Then pour the prepared green tea over and give a strong ladling.

4. Tea with meat ingredients

1. Milk Tea with meat dumplings – Make meat dumplings 5-6 pieces for each serving. Prepare milk tea and cook dumplings in it.
2. Milk Tea with browned flour and meat dumplings - Prepare green tea about a half gallon and set aside. Melt 1 tablespoon of butter in a large pot, stir in and brown 2 tablespoon of flour. Pour the prepared green tea over and cover it immediately. After it is boiled put 1 teaspoonful salt, add 2 cups of milk and give a few strong ladling up and down when it boils. Then add dumplings and let it boil until they are cooked.
3. Milk Tea with sheep tail bone – Prepare milk tea and cook some sheep tailbone in it.
4. Milk Tea with jerky - Prepare milk tea and cook some jerky pieces or 1 tablespoon of pounded jerky in it.
5. Milk Tea with rice and jerky – same as milk tea with rice, only some jerky added.
6. Milk Tea with millet and jerky - same as milk tea with millet, only some jerky added.
7. Milk Tea, thickened with browned flour and sheep tail bone - Prepare green tea about a half gallon and set aside. Melt 1 tablespoon of butter in a large pot, stir in and brown 2 tablespoon of flour. Pour the prepared green tea over and put some sheep tailbones in and cover it immediately. After it is boiled put 1 teaspoonful salt and add 2 cups of milk and let it boil some more. Then give a few strong ladling up and down.
8. Gobi-three finest tea - Prepare green tea about a half gallon and set aside. Melt 1 tablespoon of butter in a large pot, stir in and brown 2 tablespoon of flour. Stir in some sheep tailfat and a few slices of mutton. Pour the prepared green tea over and cover it immediately. After it is boiled put 1 teaspoonful salt and add 2 cup of milk and let it boil. Then give a few strong ladling up and down. Serve in bowls with a slice of fat and 2 slices of meat in each.
9. Uvs Province “Boontei tsai” – Prepare green tea first, then fat from jerk meat is used to brown flour. After adding tea to boil, add milk and salt, then ladle it well.

5. Tea with herbs and plants

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| 1. Green tea with mushrooms | 7. Green tea with fennel |
| 2. Milk Tea with “hujir” | 8. “Budargana” tea |
| 3. Tea with “Halgai” | 9. “Sod” tea |
| 4. “Borolzgono” tea | 10. “Tsair” tea |
| 5. “Zagasgal” tea | 11. “White Yargui” tea |
| 6. Green tea with ginger | 12. “Orul” tea |

6. Tea made by special cooking techniques

1. Tea made in steam cooking (Хөөрцөглөсөн цай) – Cooking with the steam by pouring liquid over hot butter or tailfat is being fried
2. Tea, cooked with hot stones (Хорхоглюсон цай) – Prepare hot stones in open fire. Pour water into a pot with a tight fitting lid to boil, then add tea leaves, milk, salt and other ingredients. Add hot stones into the pot and close tightly. Cook in low heat, when it is done let the steam off slowly before open the lid.
3. Tea, made by pressure cooking method (Агдүүлж эдгээх цай) – Put whole ingredients, water, tea leaves, milk, butter and salt, into a pot and close the lid tightly, and boil it over medium heat.
4. Steamed tea – Boil water in a large steamer. Add water, green tea, milk, pinch of salt and a teaspoonful of milk butter in a clay pot, and cover it with a flat-rolled dough. Set the clay pot in the steamer, cover it and cook 25 minutes.

7. Therapeutic teas

1. Milk boiled with green tea – Put a cup of milk in a pot and add handful of green tea leaves and boil it in medium heat. Pour it into a mug and drink it immediately, covering your head with a large towel. Not only strong tea in milk, but also steam of it has an effect on cold, fatigue and stress.
2. Milk tea with seven dumplings – same as milk tea with meat dumplings, only made in one serving with seven mutton dumplings, which has therapeutic effect with its right amount of ingredients.
3. Tea with “nohoin hoshuu” – it is medicinal berry and added to green tea that produces some therapeutic effect.
4. Milk tea with ankle bone – Boil some ankle bones in tea before adding milk and salt.
5. Milk tea with shin bones - Same as above except using sheep’s shin bones