

## DAOIST AND CHAN AESTHETICS IN WALLACE STEVENS'S WORLD OF TEA

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper argues that Stevens's two poems about tea, "Tea" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon", are wealthy of Chan Buddhist and Daoist messages. Stevens's passion about tea and tea culture has so far escaped attention from critics. In the light of Stevens's letters and biography, this paper will show Stevens's craze for tea all his lifetime. By analyzing the poetic style, images and phonetic features of two poems, this paper will elaborate how Stevens's orientalist aesthetics and philosophy of Taoism and Chan are embodied in the two early poems.*

**KEYWORDS:** Wallace Stevens, "Tea", "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon", Daoism, Chan Buddhism

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### INTRODUCTION

As one of the most respected American poets, Wallace Stevens held it as his duty to "help people live their lives" in the fragmented and desperate post-war world (Stevens *Angel*, 29). In an age of disbelief and chaos, he pursued a new order by absorbing various foreign cultures and philosophies from the globe. Stevens's acquaintance with Chinese culture has deeply influenced his poetic creation, as illustrated by a number of his letters and biographies. Since the late 1980s, western scholars began to highlight Chinese elements manifested in Stevens's poems, such as images of Chinese people, Chan Buddhism and Taoism, and colors of Chinese Jade and ceramics.

It is worth noting that two poems involve tea as the central object in *Harmonium*, the most renowned volume of Stevens. Yet it seems at odds that the interrelationship of "tea" and Stevens's orientalist aesthetics has thus far escaped due attention from critics. For instance, Nico Israel and Huang Xiaoyan expound on the impact of Chinese culture on Stevens's literary creation. However, they stop at the surface and do not examine the relationship between Stevens and his orientalist aesthetics deeply. Likewise, another scholar Qian Zongming does not devote much attention to tea in Stevens's poems. Instead, he explores Stevens's experiment with Chan Buddhism in his poetic creation with less emphasis on his engagement with Taoism. Thus, it may be ripe time to focus on the hidden relations between Stevens and Taoism.

This paper argues that Stevens's two poems are wealthy of Chan Buddhist and Daoist messages. Also noteworthy, Stevens's immersion in tea and Chinese culture triggers him to

seek a novel perception toward the world. After a brief introduction, this paper will explore Stevens's appreciation of Chinese culture and his expression of Daoist and Chan philosophy in the two poems. In light of Stevens's letters and biography, this paper will first explicate his fascination with the art of tea, in which Chan Buddhism and Taoism are embodied. By analyzing the poetic style, images and phonetic features of two poems, this paper will then analyze how Stevens textualizes his orientalist aesthetics and philosophy of Taoism and Chan explicitly and implicitly in the two early poems.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Although scholars have long discussed Chinese elements in Stevens's poetry, the interaction between Stevens and "tea" is far from being their primary consideration. With respect to Stevens's connoisseurship of tea, Nico Israel is the first critic who attaches great importance to "tea" in Stevens's poems, "Tea" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon". In "Wallace Stevens and the World of Tea" Israel argues that tea functions as an important connection between Stevens's preference for Chinese culture and orientalist aesthetics. According to Israel, tea differs from other objects in Stevens's poetry. Or rather, it contributes to Stevens's own formulation of his poetics.

To illustrate tea's impact on Stevens, Israel conducts a detailed analysis about Stevens's poems and biographies. In light of historical facts and his own observation, Israel gives a thought-provoking interpretation about "java" and "palaz" in the two poems, two images which symbolize oriental culture. After an elaboration about poems, he explores Stevens's desire for tea in the actual life. Additionally, he reckons that Stevens's way of engaging with things, at least in poetry, echoes the philosophy of tea and the temperament of tea-masters. In this way, Israel implies that the spirit of Taoism is also manifested in Stevens more or less, but his assumption lacks sufficient primary resources to support. That is to say, he does not give an in-depth examination about Stevens's direct contact with Chinese art, let alone Taoism.

As Israel demonstrates, frequent descriptions about tea purchase in Stevens's letters indicate that his connoisseurship of tea. After showing Stevens as a collector of tea, Israel points out that what Stevens looks for is something exceptional in tea, but he does not clarify what Stevens actually aspires for. Also importantly, Israel concludes that tea seems to be a pivot point between West and East, culture and nature, discovery and concealment. According to Israel, there is a truth in tea, which not only influences Stevens's poetics, but also provides us a new approach to this great poet.

In comparison to studies abroad, domestic scholars attach greater importance to the relationship between Stevens and Chinese culture. Qian Zongming, one of the pioneering scholars in studies on Stevens, has made a significant contribution to analyzing Chinese

elements in his poems. Basing his research on Stevens's biographies, letters and essays, Qian provides us with a more focused and elaborate study on Stevens's relationship with Chinese paintings, landscape paintings and Chan paintings in particular. To pursue more persuasive first-hand resources, Qian even investigates Stevens's notes on books which Stevens once borrowed. Moreover, Qian explicates Stevens's reconstruction of Chan aesthetics in a series of poems early published. Building on the empirical studies, Qian's research convincingly demonstrates that Chan Buddhism does have a far-reaching influence in Stevens's literary creation.

In "Thoughts of Chan in Stevens' s Early Poems", Qian firstly outlines the development and transmission of Chan Buddhism. According to Qian, it is the ancient Chinese Buddhist paintings exhibited in Boston that arouses Stevens's interest in Chan Buddhism and Chinese culture. Then, a detailed description of Stevens's acquaintance with Chan paintings is presented in the second part. Under reliable proofs drawn from Stevens's private letters and other materials, Qian maintains that Chan Buddhism plays an indispensable role in development of Stevens's orientalist aesthetics. Furthermore, he also claims that creation of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Bird" should be attributed to Buddhist paintings, rather than Haiku.

It is followed by a comprehensive examination about the great influence of Chan on Stevens's two well-known poems, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Bird" and "The Snow Man". With respect to the former one, he highlights that its structure and style are in accordance with "oddness", "simplicity" and "serenity" preferred by Chan Buddhism. By the same token, Qian also touches upon some major features of Chan Buddhism manifested in "the Snow Man". In terms of the theme of "nothingness", he compares "the Snow Man" with "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon", the poem which was produced in the same year. By illustrating several lines from the poem, Qian assumes that "Hoon", who falls from the sky in purple, is derived from Buddha. Apart from Chan paintings, Qian also investigates that Stevens once closely read the translation of Buddhism in China, which might be another decisive proof to exemplify his involvement in Chinese culture.

Needless to say, both studies above are brilliant extensions of literary interpretation of Stevens's poetry and poetics. Nonetheless, neither Israel nor Qian has made an in-depth investigation of Stevens's Daoist and Chan philosophy manifested in the two poems about tea. In his analysis about the two poems, Israel pays less attention to the context and the background in which Stevens wrote them, which could have hindered the themes in the poems. In spite of Qian's elaboration, he neglects Stevens's indirect engagement with Taoism. Thus, it is of great significance to explore further the relationship of Stevens and Chinese philosophies in the two poems about tea.

## Stevens's Affinity with Chinese Culture

### Stevens's Appreciation of Tea

Accompanied by Stevens's other well-known poems like "The Snow Man," "Tea" (1915) is placed in the middle of *Harmonium*, "the most impressive first volume", and the "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" (1921) the second to last in the volume (Beach 52). Apparently, the repetition of "tea" is more like a poetic representation of Stevens's passion about tea in everyday life, rather than a coincidence.

Few critics note that in the *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, "tea" has been discussed up to nearly forty times. A note dated 1903 portrays Stevens as a "tea-fancier": "[Stevens and his family] use nails to stir the tea (owing to a shortage in forks)" (Stevens 65). In addition, his aspiration for tea shows in more details in his letter dated September 14, 1937 for asking his friend Van Geyzel to purchase Christmas presents for the whole family: "As for myself, I should like to have some tea, say, five pounds of the very best tea procurable [...] I should like a tea that would be something not procurable [...]. The tea, which is non-dutiable, should be sent separately from the other things" (Stevens 324). Also noteworthy, Stevens mentions repeatedly flowering tea in his letters, like "Chrysanthemum Tea", originating from China and keeping the Chinese tradition of tea-making wholly intact (Stevens 303).

Naturally, as a poet, Stevens also shows his keen interest in his depiction of tea in poems. "Tea" is a free-verse, one-sentence poem followed and preceded by commas, which is wealthy of imagination:

When the elephant's-ear in the park  
Shrivelled in frost,  
And the leaves on the paths  
Ran like rats,  
Your lamp-light fell  
On shining pillows,  
Of sea-shades and sky-shades  
Like umbrellas in Java (*CP* 112-13).

Stevens wields abundant images to portray tea leaves from various aspects. In the first four lines, the poet depicts the outer characteristics of tea leaves both from the static and dynamic perspective: for refined tea before tea-making, he compares the curling tea leaf to "the elephant's-ear" "shrivelled in frost" (*CP* 112); Then the hovering and dancing tea leaves are paralleled to the running rats. Through the lens of imagination, Stevens builds a bridge between reality and imagination by associating the appearance of tea leaves with the images of more widely-known animals. His expression implicitly unfolds delight and fascination surging in mind as he catches the first glimpse of tea leaves.

Then, shifting from “park” and “path” to “lamp”, “pillow”, from the public place to the private space, the poet embarks on another whim to highlight the internal charm of tea (*CP* 112). The elusive “[y]our lamp-light” in the last four lines triggers various interpretations from critics. Some maintain that “you” is probably an indication of some human listener, like a guest, a friend or the fiancée of the poet. Whereas I am more inclined to argue that the addressee of “you” is “tea” itself, the central object in the whole poem. In this sense, the “light” could also be interpreted as the enlightening quality of tea: the physical warmth and spiritual refreshment after tea-drinking. On top of that, the forceful simile in the last line is worthy of particular attention. “The sea-shades” and “sky-shades” are closely linked to “umbrellas in Java” in that they offer a form of shades and symbolizes the role of protector. The verses easily provoke the readers to conjure up the soothing and protective effect of tea as a kind of medicine.

Even though “tea” is literally mentioned only in the title, each line of this poem conveys much information about tea. This kind of poetic technique echoes “Little Plum Blossom in Hill of Garden” by Lin Bu, a poet in Song Dynasty, which represents “the refinement of Sung society” Stevens admired (Stevens, *SP* 221). Throughout the poem, “little plum blossom” has not been mentioned for the second time but the poem still has earned the reputation as the masterpiece among plum-chanting poems. By the same token, Stevens suggests his eagerness about the oriental culture by giving the impressive portrayal of leaves-taking in “Tea”.

“Tea” has not merely entered Stevens’s body, enriched the literary life, and also permeates in his everyday life, shaping his manner as a tea-master to some extent. In Okakura’s masterpiece *The Book of Tea*, the tea-masters “have given emphasis to our natural love of simplicity, and shown us the beauty of humility” (97-98). Like a one-hundred percent tea-master, Stevens appeared to be “humble and modest” in his actual life (Yang 413). Although Stevens was hailed as a “true connoisseur of tea” (Richardson, *Later* 126), he still understated that “I know nothing about tea” (qtd. in Israel 11), let alone “self-praise” (Yang 413). With respect to philosophy of tea, Okakura interprets “Teaism” as “Taoism in disguise.” Further he elaborates that Teaism is the “art of concealing beauty that you may discover it, of suggesting what you dare not reveal” (25). Apparently, the portrayal of a tea-master echoes the image of Stevens as an “enigmatic, reclusive” American modernist poet and his “abstract representation in an increasingly violent and pressingly ‘real’ world” in poetic practice (Ragg 3-4).

### **Stevens’s Access to Chinese Paintings, Poetry, and Philosophies**

More or less, Stevens’s fondness about tea, especially for Chinese tea, reflects his engagement with the oriental arts and culture. In this regard, Chinese paintings, books of Chan Buddhism and Daoism left him a deep and favorable impression about China and Chinese classical philosophies. It is during the years between 1909 and 1914 that American enthusiasm for Chinese culture was in full swing. As a lawyer in New York at that time,

Stevens was one of the hundred or so visitors to a show about Chinese elements. In a letter dated 1909, Stevens recalled his memorable encounter with the painting about Arhats and he highly praised the intoxicating poetic embodied in the oriental artwork (*Letters* 137). Significantly, Qian Zhaoming observes that Stevens frequently visited the National Gallery where a number of Chan artworks were on exhibition during the first two decades of the 20th century (64). “[A]ll from the Chinese, painted centuries ago” overwhelmed Stevens, contributing his craze for Chinese culture (*Letters* 137). Stevens even purchased a few pretty artworks from Beijing through Harriet Monroe’s sister (*Letters* 229-31). As his letter dated 18 March 1909 demonstrates, Stevens spent the whole week “reading about the Chinese feeling about landscape” in New York’s Astor Library (*Letters* 137).

In addition, Chinese poetry and philosophies also bewitched Stevens. After reading a little landscape poem by Wang Anshi, he commented that “I don’t know of anything more beautiful than that anywhere, or more Chinese”. Considering his lack of knowledge about China, Stevens even planned to “poke around more or less in the dust of Asia for a week or two”. His great passion and curiosity about Chinese culture “makes [him] wild to learn it in a night” (*Letters* 138). Meanwhile, in the summer of 1911 did Stevens begin reading Confucius and Mencius, exemplified by his comment made to his wife. Stevens remarked that he had often mentioned the wise sayings of “[Ming?] Tzu and K’Ung Fu-Tzu” (*Letters* 171).

It seemed that since the second half of 1911 Stevens started searching for some aesthetic and philosophical alternative from the orient, more exactly, some spiritually motivational power in Chinese culture, including Chan Buddhism and Daoism. To demonstrate Stevens’s direct contact with Chan art, Qian suggests that Stevens once read a guide to Buddhism, *Buddhism in China* in 1911, evidenced by Stevens’s inscription in the front endpaper (94). Several markings and notes left on the book unveil his involvement in Chan Buddhism, the philosophy which did not fade away even in late Stevens. Nevertheless, Qian neglects the hidden relations between Stevens and Daoism. Comparatively speaking, Stevens’s acquisition of “Dao” is more indirect. To date, there is no direct proof that Stevens once read Tao Te Ching or other Daoist readings. However, it is worth noting that the Chinese landscape paintings which Stevens was keen on are imbued with the spirit of Dao and Chan. Most of landscape paintings exhibited in American museums in the early 1920s were characterized as serene and harmonious. As the carrier of Daoist philosophy and culture, those paintings reveal that human beings are part of nature and could get along comfortably by uniting with their surroundings. That is to say, unity of human and nature in the artworks wholesomely embodies the fundamental Taoist gist, which possibly has a far-reaching influence on Stevens’s poetic creation.

## Stevens's Expression of Daoist and Chan Aesthetics in Poetry

### Human and Nature in "Tea"

"Tea" (1915) was written during WWI when the world was undergoing suffering and pain, together with the breakdown of the age-old beliefs in the values of capitalism. As WWI undermined the stable and traditional structure in the capitalist society, the individual probably lost a sense of identity, let alone religious beliefs (Vanspanckeren 206). For those who have abandoned a belief in God, Stevens addresses that poetry is "that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (*OP* 185). In this regard, Daoism's escalating popularity seemed to provide a new spiritual land for hopeless Americans. They could be easily consoled by Daoism, with its percept of "forgetting self" and "observing things in terms of things" (Fung 467). The tenet of "wuwei", generally translated as acting in accordance with nature, also taught people a lesson. As whoever "does nothing" never "ruins anything", it is better to stop in time than to overdo (Lao-tzu 125). Equally importantly, Daoist mode of thought and presentation advocates that nature outweighs human, spirit outweighs body, and intuition outweighs logic. This kind of philosophy, needless to say, shakes the American traditional culture of reason, objectivity and impersonality. It offers another perspective for Americans to look into their plight.

By virtue of poetic representation of tea, Stevens, in an implicit way, expresses his own yearning for Daoist philosophies which could bring order and harmony to the chaotic western world. The unidentified "park" in the first line and the exotic "Java" in the last line are crucial to analyze. At the expense of nature, the park is the product of modern civilization with the acceleration of urbanization. Presumably, it stands for the order, the rationality or more broadly, the western culture. Nonetheless, the "elephant" juxtaposed in the park, as the symbol of uncivilized nature, disturbs the existing order and creates a sense of discrepancy. The incongruity between nature and culture is also in accordance with the imbalanced development of western society with an overemphasis on economic growth and a neglect of environment protection. Even worse, war and conflicts are also the products of profit-oriented capitalist culture. The WWI rose owing to conflicts of interest among countries and nations, and it caused catastrophes to humans and nature. Through verses and imagery, Stevens suggests his resentment about disordered nature undermined by humans in the wartime. Apparently, Stevens's reverence for nature corresponds to the Daoist tenet, the unification of human and nature.

In sharp contrast to park, "Java", at the time the poem was written, was in the possession of the Dutch East Indies, where the spice trade emerged and then the tea trade followed. The context and historical background, in which Israel lacks thorough exploration, is indeed worthy of particular attention. In fact, "Java" is abundant in messages about tea and oriental culture: this exotic location is closely related to large-scale tea production and transportation in the 19th century. Instead of a symbol of backwardness or colonialism, Stevens regards it as

a place unpolluted by human activity, a utopian society to realize “wuwei”, a wonderland which brought tea to him and enriched both his everyday life and poetic creation.

The phonetic features and rhythm of the poem, which is vital to expressing the emotion and theme, have not received much concern from critics. Huang Xiaoyan simply summarizes the images of tea leaves and does not go deeper into the organization of vowels and consonants. Considering the phonetic features of “Tea”, one could easily observe that, the short vowels like /i/, /e/, /æ/ and /ɔ/ repeatedly appear in the first four lines. This phonetic arrangement creates a more impulsive rhythm, which echoes the rapid advancement of modernization in western countries. Simultaneously, most of the first half is ended with the explosives like /t/, /k/, or its combination with /s/. These sounds strengthen the harsh and sharp effect. By contrast, more diphthongs like /ai/ and /əu/ gather in the latter half. With the progression from open vowels to close vowels, it presents an atmosphere of tranquility and peacefulness, in accordance with the refreshing spiritual civilization tea could bring to Stevens.

In light of the poetic practice about “tea”, Stevens introspects the relationship of human and nature in the procession of western society and culture. Showing almost mystic reverence for nature, he de-centers the superior status of the western civilization. Nevertheless, deeply influenced by humanism and individualism, Stevens could not fully appreciate Daoism, in which humans are viewed as no more important than trees or rocks. But he still could benefit from the Daoist gist of unity of human and nature and find spiritual solace in the oriental culture.

### **Meditation and Epiphany in “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon”**

Universally acknowledged as a philosophical poem, “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” is much analogous to “Tea”: the poem initially seems to have little to do with tea at all; but actually, it is implicitly associated with sensation, perception and self-knowledge, inspired by Chan philosophy. The poem reads as follows:

Not less because in purple I descended  
The western day through what you called  
The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?  
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?  
What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,  
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.  
I was myself the compass of that sea:



I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw  
 Or heard or felt came not but from myself;  
 And there I found myself more truly and more strange. (CP 65)

After the title, the word “tea” does not reappear in the poem; instead, the rhyming word “sea” appears twice in the lines “What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?” and “I was myself the compass of that sea” (CP 65). Seemingly, the relationship between “tea” and “sea” is presented in twofold: on the one hand, the boiled water with floating tea leaves is paralleled to the sea with floating boats visually; on the other hand, the limitless vagrancy of the sea is compared to Hoon’s boundless meditation about “finding self” in the world. This Chan-related moment is probably stimulated by tea-drinking in his “palaz”.

In the title Stevens also adopts an exotic word “palaz”, the modern Turkish spelling for “palace”. As a transcontinental Eurasian country, Turkey is also known as a meeting point of diverse cultures, where the western and eastern cultures intersect and collide. This thought-provoking arrangement conforms to the mixture of orientalist aesthetics and western culture embedded in this poem. Undergoing a meditative experience, the oriental poet Hoon begins his journey of self-discovery by “descending the western day” “in purple” (CP 65). His “purple” robe easily conjures up the image of Sakyamuni (Qian 68). In addition, “the loneliest air” implies “nothingness” of “emptiness”. The poet seems to claim that only with a state of no-mind after meditation can one attain a flash of insight into human nature and the universe.

Much concern from commentators, like Qian and Israel, has focused on the last stanza “I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw”, which is seen by Harold Bloom as an extraordinary compelling evidence of solipsism, a narcissism-inclined philosophy of self (94). Yet I differ that it actually generates a kind of philosophy like epiphany or enlightenment. Critics have paid less attention to the second stanza. However, it is of great importance for us to fully grasp the whole meaning of the poem. By exerting the three successive interrogative sentences in a bold and powerful tone, Stevens questions that “what was the ointment sprinkled on my beard? /what were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears? /what was the sea whose tide swept through me there?” Apparently, “the sprinkling of ointment” on his beard could be interpreted as a parody of the ceremony or ritual. Before the enlightenment, “Hoon” could still tell himself from others, like the ointment, hymns and ointment. This ritual compels him to reflect upon the essence of being. During his meditation the boundary between the anointer and the anointed, the interior and the exterior is dissolved by Stevens. In “Hoon”’s perception, there is no distinction between himself and the outside world. It echoes what Chan masters often say “before one is enlightened, one sees a mountain as a mountain and a river as a river; in the process of attaining enlightenment, mountains are no longer mountains, rivers no longer rivers”(qtd. in Qian 93)

Moreover, an ecstatic joy is embodied in the following lines “[o]ut of my mind the golden

ointment rained, / [a]nd my ears made the blowing hymns they heard” (CP 65). As Anthony Whiting illuminates, “both the sense of creativity and the sense of pleasure expressed in ‘Tea at the Palaz of Hoon’ differ from” other kinds of poetical engagement (97). Arguably “the sense of pleasure” symbolizes that the momentary gushing of delight of Hoon as he finally finds the true self through meditation. In this sense, the last stanza provides a thought-provoking, more “true” and “strange” answer: “I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw” (CP 65). With respect to the last stanza, Huang Xiaoyan also suggests its close relationship with the unity of human and the outside world (163). I concede the two lines as an evident exemplification of Chan philosophy. The unity of self and the world means that human is an integral part of the world, the part of emptiness and the nothing. Finally, “Hoon” achieves the state of “wuwo” (there is no self), as he understands the notion of “emptiness of self” and the notion of “the emptiness of all phenomena and the insight that all beings possessed Buddha nature as well” (Hoang 297).

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, although some critics might hesitate to claim that Stevens’s world is closely associated with tea, it is apparent that Daoism and Chan Buddhism, have dramatically shaped his private and literary life. Not only as a refreshing beverage, tea has also served as a source of enlightenment to trigger the philosophical meditation and rekindle his poetic inspiration. To some extent, the investigation of Stevens and his world of tea has provided a comparatively new approach to studies on Stevens, in terms of phonetic features and the hidden relations between Stevens and Daoism. Also noteworthy, this paper lays an emphasis on context and historical background in analyzing images in the poems, which makes the elaboration more persuasive. Admittedly, there is still much room to further explore the influence of oriental culture on the poetry of Stevens, this paper still exemplified the vital role of the oriental culture has played in his poetic practice.

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