

Journeying Toward Beauty, Nurturing Through Tea: Pathways of Aesthetic Education via Themed Tea Gatherings in Higher Education

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Abstract:

Focusing on the unique characteristics of tea gatherings - “cultivating individuals through tea and enriching them with culture”, this paper systematically sorts out the aesthetic values and humanistic connotations carried by tea party culture, and deeply explores the aesthetic education model of Chinese tea parties as a target oriented aesthetic education model for college students, aimed at promoting their harmonious development and comprehensive growth. It also explores the aesthetic education function, implementation strategies, and practical paths in the construction of “one-stop” student communities and campus culture in colleges and universities. To stimulate the positive role of aesthetic education in the protection, inheritance, and innovation of intangible cultural heritage in universities, and to provide theoretical support and practical examples for building a university aesthetic education system with Chinese characteristics and regional style.

Keywords:

Tea Culture, Aesthetic Education in Universities, Themed Tea Gatherings

1. Introduction

Since the implementation of the 14th Five-Year Plan, higher education has entered a new stage of high-quality, in-depth development, progressively establishing an educational framework that integrates five pillars: moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education. As a key avenue for achieving this in-depth development, aesthetic education plays a vital role in fostering students’ well-rounded personal growth, cultivating their aesthetic sensibilities and innovative capacities, and working in synergy with ideological and political education to nurture roots and forge character. Advancing aesthetic education in universities is therefore both a fundamental guarantee and an urgent task for strengthening the core mission of

cultivating virtue through education. (Note: the targeted text can be found on the appendix, serial number 1)

Aesthetic education nurtures the soul, while tea culture bridges the world. Tea, originating in China and flourishing globally, is a vivid testament to its power as a cultural bond. Today, tea is cultivated in over 60 countries and regions and enjoyed by more than two billion people. In 2020, the United Nations established “International Tea Day”; in 2022, “Traditional tea processing techniques and associated social practices in China” was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; and in September 2023, China’s “Cultural Landscape of Old Tea Forests of the Jingmai Mountain in Pu’er” was added to the World Heritage List. [1] As a traditional expression of Chinese hospitality and an iconic cultural symbol, tea has been used by President Xi Jinping on numerous diplomatic occasions to “build friendships over tea” and exchange ideas. Through this medium, he has conveyed the philosophy of “harmony in diversity” to the world, signaled a commitment to openness and cooperation, and fostered a growing international acclaim for Chinese tea culture and craftsmanship. A tea gathering, also known as a tea banquet or tea assembly, is an artistic expression of tea culture. It is a social event where guests are served tea and refreshments, and historically, a refined literary salon where scholars would forge friendships, compose poetry, and hone their artistic skills. [2]

As aesthetic education in China has evolved from a narrow to a broader concept, its focus has shifted from the formal appreciation of sensory beauty to a life-oriented cultivation of aesthetics through environmental immersion [3]. In the context of daily university life, themed tea gatherings create a platform for exchange that not only preserves and promotes classic Chinese culture while building students’ self-confidence, but also cultivates the ability of both faculty and students to recognize, experience, appreciate, and create beauty. This is achieved through the gathering’s thematic content, aesthetic environment, cultural atmosphere, and etiquette, as well as the entire process of planning, execution, and interaction. This process signifies a profound shift from the mere appreciation of aesthetic forms to a deeper, more substantive immersion in aesthetic education itself.

2. Historical Evolution of Tea Gatherings

Ancient tea gatherings, also referred to as “tea banquets,” emerged as products of sociocultural development and served distinct social functions. Just as literati employed tea gatherings to express literary inspiration or articulate their ideals, monks utilized them for spiritual cultivation, while common people embraced them to strengthen social bonds.

Tea gatherings first emerged during the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420) of the Six Dynasties period and flourished in the Tang Dynasty. Tang Dynasty tea gatherings served as significant convocations for scholars and cultured elites (Fig.1), centered around tea drinking, intellectual discourse, and poetic composition—captured in Qian Qi’s phrases “mystical discussion enriched with literary grace” and “brush poised heedless of the slanting sun.” These gatherings were frequently attended by monks or hosted in Buddhist monasteries, embodying a transcendent, serene, and contemplative spirit that harmonized Chan (Zen), tea, and poetry, with tea acting as a mediating element. During the Song Dynasty, tea gatherings flourished, reaching new heights of sophistication and diversity. This era saw the emergence of specialized forms like competitive tea tastings (*doucha*) and serene monastic ceremonies. A quintessential

example was the “Four Seasons Tea Ceremony” (Sì Xù Chá Huì), which celebrated the art and etiquette of tea by harmonizing with the natural cycles of the year. This practice reflected a profound communion with the natural world and was structured around an elegant choreography of rituals, including the offering of incense, the artful arrangement of flowers, and the formal serving of tea. In the Ming Dynasty, literati often sought to express their emotions through landscapes, placing great importance on the natural setting for their tea sessions. The most iconic example is the literati tea gathering, beautifully captured in the painting “Picture of the Huishan Tea Gathering” (Figure 2). This work depicts a scene from the Qingming Festival in the 13th year of the Zhengde era (1518), where the renowned scholar Wen Zhengming and his friends are shown visiting Huishan in Wuxi, enjoying tea, composing poetry, and socializing by a mountain spring. Representative tea gatherings of the Qing Dynasty include the Sanqing Tea Banquet and the Thousand Elders Banquet. Modern tea gatherings have largely done away with the complex rituals of the past, instead focusing on the core elements of tea appreciation, meaningful discussion, and fostering friendship. They have evolved into accessible, enjoyable, and culturally rich social events.

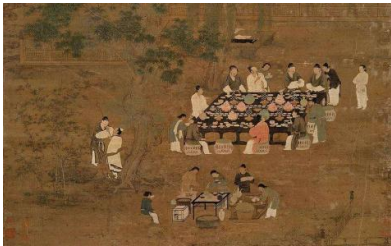


Figure 1. *A Literary Gathering by Emperor Huizong of Song.*



Figure 2. *Picture of the Huishan Tea Gathering.*

Contemporary tea gatherings come in various forms, primarily categorized into tea-seating, banquet, floating-cup, circular-arrangement, and ceremonial styles. They can also be classified by scale (large, medium, or small) and organizational format (e.g., tea-seating, floating-cup, and ceremonial styles). Depending on their purpose, they may be cultural salons, tasting sessions, exhibitions, promotional events, competitions, serving ceremonies, Zen tea practices, or even tea breaks. The process of organizing a tea gathering involves planning, preparation, and execution (Figure 3).

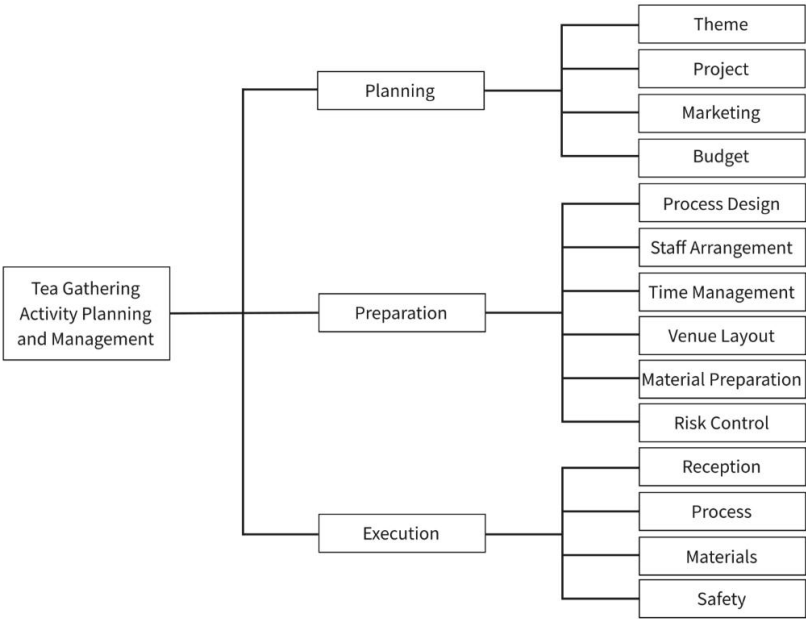


Figure 3. *Tea Gathering Planning and Management Table.*

The Orchid Pavilion Elegant Assembly stands as a classic example of a successful themed tea gathering. Events often feature elements like tea art performances, music, and a specific thematic backdrop. This requires creative planning and design, from the overall concept to the layout of the tea settings and scenic elements (Figure 4). A typical modern tea gathering lasts between two and three hours [4]. Today, tea gatherings serve as a means of cultural preservation, spiritual enrichment, fostering communication, and brand promotion. As society evolves, they have adapted to modern needs, with new formats like virtual elegant gatherings emerging to promote social development and build harmonious interpersonal relationships.

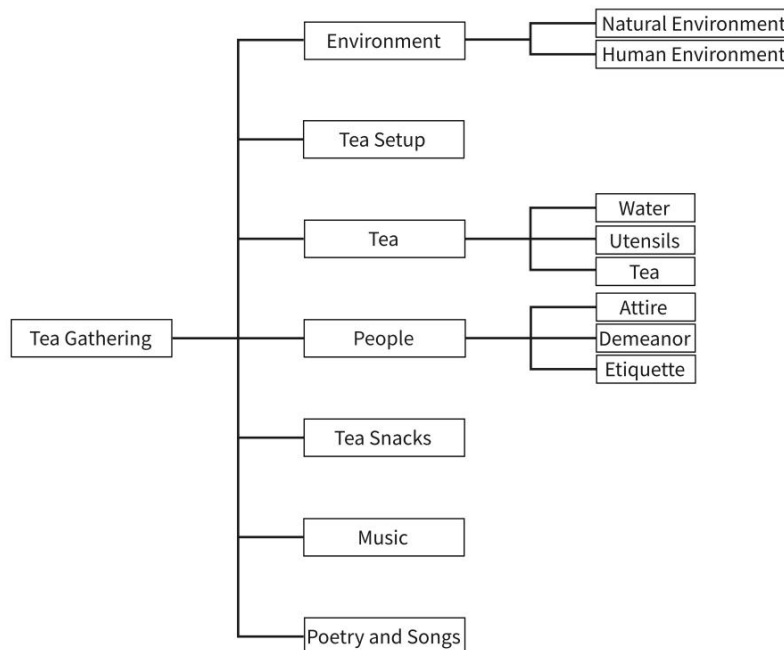


Figure 4. *Tea Gathering Activity Presentation.*

In March 1947, aiming to “foster connections, exchange scholarly insights, and stimulate the growth of the art movement, while also initiating welfare initiatives for artists,” members of the Shanghai art community, led by Yu Wen and Zheng Wuchang, proposed a weekly “Art Tea Gathering.” This was an irregularly held, art-themed salon [5]. In 2021, the Tea Art Association at Wuhan University also organized a spring tea-tasting event. On May 21 of the same year, Hubei University hosted a campus tea gathering titled “Tea Brings Us Together” as part of its International Tea Day and Wanli Tea Road event series. (Note: the targeted text can be found on the appendix, serial number 2).

3. The Current State of Aesthetic Education in Higher Education

Aesthetic education, also known as beauty appreciation education, aims to cultivate an individual's ability to recognize, experience, feel, appreciate, and create beauty. Through this process, individuals develop a sense of beauty in their ideals, character, and overall disposition. Friedrich Schiller first proposed the concept of aesthetic education in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) [6]. Cai Yuanpei (1901) was the first to introduce the term “aesthetic education” in China, stating: “In pedagogy, intellectual education teaches the application of intellect, moral education teaches the application of will, and aesthetic education teaches the application of emotion.” [7] In his *On the Aims of Education* (1903), Wang Guowei was the first to comprehensively discuss the significant role of aesthetic education within the

educational system [8]. Cai Yuanpei observed that among the Six Arts of ancient education—rites, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics—“with the exception of mathematics, all contain elements of aesthetic education.” Wang Guowei believed that Confucius’s approach to cultivating individuals “began and ended with aesthetic education,” adding that “beyond poetry and music, it particularly encouraged the appreciation of natural beauty.” [9] As aesthetic education theory has deepened and evolved, its definition has been continuously enriched. It is now broadly defined as education in aesthetics, personality, and creativity. For a long time, the concept of “beauty” has been an explicit component of China’s educational policy, integrated into all aspects of teaching and learning. It plays a subtle yet effective role in fostering well-rounded socialist builders and successors who are developed morally, intellectually, physically, aesthetically, and in their capacity for labor. Currently, most colleges and universities offer aesthetic education courses primarily to students majoring in aesthetics or the arts, with relatively few general electives available to the wider student body. The lack of professional guidance for extracurricular aesthetic activities further limits most students’ opportunities to engage with aesthetic education, hindering its widespread adoption. At the same time, practical challenges persist, including unclear educational objectives, an underdeveloped environmental atmosphere, and a lack of robust evaluation mechanisms [10].

A search on CNKI for “universities” and “aesthetic education” returns 10,399 relevant papers, with a large number focusing on core elements of aesthetic education such as music, dance, visual arts, architecture, and calligraphy. In stark contrast, only one paper addressing “tea ceremonies” in the context of aesthetic education was published between 1981 and 2019 [11]. Research on aesthetic education through tea culture or tea ceremonies remains remarkably limited. The current body of work neither matches the vigorous growth of Chinese tea culture nor fully reflects its profound historical depth.

4. The Role of Thematic Tea Gatherings in Aesthetic Education

The university’s journey begins with wisdom, aims for compassion, and finds its culmination in virtue. Its ultimate purpose, as articulated by Cai Yuanpei, is to foster a fully realized personality. The comprehensive development of a university student encompasses moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education. Aesthetic education, in this context, serves to nurture virtue, inspire truth (wisdom), strengthen the body, and promote diligence. At the 2018 National Education Congress, President Xi Jinping emphasized: “We must comprehensively strengthen and improve aesthetic education in schools, adhering to the principle of educating people through beauty and cultivating character through culture to enhance students’ aesthetic and humanistic qualities.” Tea, with its humble leaf, enriches the world. It is a supreme form of beauty and an ideal “foundational element of aesthetic education” for higher education institutions. The culture of a tea gathering embodies the artistic and behavioral beauty of the Chinese aesthetic spirit. Its content integrates a wide range of knowledge, including tea studies, tea ceremony etiquette, and traditional Chinese culture. Tea gatherings demonstrate a high degree of unity between ideological depth and artistic expression, between aesthetic content and real-life experience, between emotional engagement and logical thinking, and between artistic substance and expressive form. The core of aesthetic education in a thematic tea gathering is to cultivate college students’ ability to perceive and create beauty. It aims to enhance their aesthetic sensibility, humanistic literacy, physical and mental well-being, and

professional competence, while also actively contributing to the development of campus culture.

4.1. Cultivating Moral Character through the Aesthetics of Tea Gatherings

Tea itself is inherently endowed with virtues, a concept known as “tea morality.” Modern tea culture emphasizes eight core values: “wellness, delight, sweetness, aroma, harmony, clarity, reverence, and beauty.” [12] Lu Yu linked tea morality to the virtue of frugality, which he believed every tea drinker should possess. [13] Among the “Ten Virtues of Tea” from the Tang Dynasty, one states that “tea can cultivate elegance and purpose” [14]. Through the multi-sensory experience of sight, smell, and taste, tea gatherings allow students to engage with and learn about tea, understanding its properties and symbolic meanings. This approach helps them develop sound aesthetic judgment, nurture noble ethical sensibilities, and cultivate a beautiful inner spirit. It is an appreciation-based form of aesthetic education that avoids forced indoctrination. By studying the etiquette and graceful demeanor of the tea ceremony, students are encouraged to reflect on their personal values, develop a stronger sense of social responsibility, and internalize the socialist core values. By appreciating the external elements—such as attire, utensils, behavior, music, and the environment—one can intimately experience the inner strength and subtle elegance of a themed tea gathering. With every breath, this immersion awakens individual vitality, evokes a sense of existence and freedom, and inspires a deeper appreciation and respect for one’s own life. Ultimately, it encourages students to cultivate moral integrity, uphold virtue, and become an ideal new generation with purpose.

4.2. Inspiring Wisdom and Creativity through the Beauty of Tea Gatherings

“Enhancing intelligence through aesthetic education” refers to a process that develops emotional and intellectual intelligence, stimulating innovative thinking and creativity through the recognition, appreciation, and creation of beauty. [15] Tea gatherings are rich in intellectual and educational content, encompassing elements like tea utensils, the tea liquor itself, the tea setting, the overall space, and hanging scrolls. For instance, the proportional relationships in the music, the aesthetic ratios in the utensils and settings, and the grammar, word choice, and structure of tea-related poetry all serve as intellectual stimuli. They enhance students’ aesthetic sensitivity and deepen their appreciation for tea. By transforming education into an aesthetic process through the artistic orchestration of activities, tea gatherings guide students in building aesthetic capital and foster an intrinsic motivation to find value in the beauty of daily life. Additionally, when students actively participate in and organize these events, they engage in a series of aesthetically demanding tasks, such as arranging tea settings (Figure 5 and Figure 6), designing the space, and maintaining cleanliness. This allows them to fully express their agency and unleash their creative potential.



Figure 5. Tea Setting Design.



Figure 6. Outdoor Tea Setting Design on Campus

4.3. Fostering Humanistic Literacy through the Atmosphere of Tea Gatherings

The term “humanistic literacy” refers to “the research ability in the humanities, knowledge level, along with the human-centered spirit embodied within these disciplines—the essence of what it means to be human.” Every tea gathering is built around a specific theme. The accompanying promotional materials, tea poetry, music, and utensils are essential components of tea culture, known for their refined language and profound artistic conception. For students, participating in a tea gathering and experiencing its carefully curated atmosphere helps to develop humanistic qualities, refine their character, and nourish their spirit. These gatherings also exert a permeating and balancing influence on moral, intellectual, physical, and labor education, effectively acting as an “integrative medium” that supports holistic personal development.

4.4. Enhancing Physical Wellness through the Aesthetics of Tea Gatherings

Chinese tea culture, which flourished in the Tang and Song dynasties, has evolved from “eating tea” to “drinking tea” to “appreciating tea.” With over two thousand varieties of tea in China, the primary functional components—such as catechins, theaflavins, theanine, and tea polysaccharides—offer a wide range of health benefits. These include delaying aging, regulating metabolism (of carbohydrates, lipids, and proteins), supporting weight management, modulating gut microbiota, boosting immune function, combating depression, reducing inflammation, and strengthening bones. The three most valuable health properties are considered to be delaying aging, regulating metabolism, and boosting immunity. Regular and consistent tea consumption contributes to a comprehensive improvement in overall physical health.

5. Pathways for Aesthetic Education through Tea Culture

To promote high-quality development in higher education in the new era, it is crucial to focus on the significance and methods of aesthetic education. We must skillfully understand the principles of educational development to foster the comprehensive growth of students. Tea gatherings can integrate various traditional cultural elements, such as those related to important solar terms, commemorative events, and intangible cultural heritage. This enriches the value of aesthetic education in modern universities and strengthens students’ cultural confidence. Furthermore, given the social nature of tea gatherings, they can fully leverage open and multi-dimensional social resources. By collaborating with social theater programs and high-art events, a comprehensive mechanism for aesthetic education can be established, uniting schools, families, and society.

5.1. Promoting Tea Culture through General Education

A tea gathering is, at its core, a tea event based on open communication and active engagement. Such gatherings require careful planning, preparation, and execution, all of which involve specialized knowledge in areas like project design, spatial arrangement, and material sourcing. By exploring the educational elements of tea gatherings throughout history and identifying effective strategies from contemporary practice, we can develop a structured curriculum around tea culture. This approach, centered on practical application, is a highly effective way to teach tea culture in a modern context. Universities can integrate tea gatherings into their general education courses. For example, a public elective titled “The Mysterious Da Hong Pao” could be taught through instructional tea sessions, as has been successfully implemented [16].

5.2. Integrating Tea Gatherings into “One-Stop” Student Communities

Many universities are developing comprehensive “one-stop” student communities to enhance student support. The egalitarian and inclusive nature of tea gatherings aligns perfectly with the student-centered philosophy of these communities, improving how institutions prioritize, care for, and serve their students. The “Selfless Tea Gathering,” for example, is guided by seven core principles: No hierarchy: Seating is determined by lot; No expectation of return: Tea is served in a single direction; Acceptance and appreciation: All types of tea are welcomed; Spirit of dedication: Participants strive to brew their tea well; Adherence to shared norms: There is no single host or director; Cultivation of tacit understanding: Silence is observed during the session; Freedom from stylistic dogma: Any brewing method is acceptable [17]. These seven principles embody qualities such as equanimity, sharing, dedication, reverence, and compassion.



Figure 7. Tea Art Exchange at the 2023 Winter Tea Gathering.



Figure 8. Grain Buds Tea Gathering in 2025.

Since November 2023, Guangdong University of Finance and Economics has successfully integrated tea gatherings into the brand culture of its “One-Stop” Student Community at Palm Court. By holding regular themed tea events (Figure 7, Figure 8) within the community, students from different colleges and majors come together to experience the charm of traditional culture and etiquette in a ceremonial setting. Through activities like tea studies, poetry recitations, artistic performances, and tastings, they learn to appreciate the beauty of Chinese cultural heritage. Using tea as a vehicle for art, scholarship, and philosophical insight, these gatherings serve as a platform for practicing etiquette, expressing creativity, and cultivating moral character. They also promote peer-to-peer communication, ease anxiety, and strengthen relationships. This initiative helps foster a harmonious and warm community culture that contributes to the healthy development of students. [18]

5.3. Integrating Tea Gatherings with Professional Curricula

Wuyi University has developed various practical applications of modern tea gatherings, enriching its educational system with “curricular tea gatherings” to great effect. This teaching format can be applied not only to tea science majors but also to non-tea programs, seamlessly integrating tea culture throughout the entire instructional process.

For example, in November 2023, the fifth session of the graduate course “Design History and Contemporary Thought” at the School of Art and Design, Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, focused on the history of tea culture, tea logo design, and tea space design. Professor Liu Qionglin brought a tea gathering directly into the classroom, where three students performed a Gongfu tea ceremony, sharing tea brewing techniques and knowledge with over thirty classmates. Similarly, in the graduate course “Traditional Craftsmanship and Modern Design,” Professor Xiong Qingzhen used a tea gathering format to lecture on the design and production of tea

ware. This hands-on, experiential approach motivates students to learn about tea culture and their professional subjects, making specialized courses more dynamic and engaging.

5.4. Empowering Ideological Education Through Tea Gatherings

With the full implementation of the credit system reform and the series of policy initiatives promoting “one-stop” student community management models by the Ministry of Education in recent years, the cultural development of these communities has gradually surpassed traditional class-based structures. They have become the most crucial environment for students’ academic and social life, as well as peer interaction on campus, serving as a powerful complement to class-based education. The academic and cultural fabric of “one-stop” student communities cultivates a unique ecosystem that shapes students’ values and behaviors. University class advisors immerse themselves in student residential communities to provide ideological and political guidance. They organize regular activities like themed League and Party Day events and class meetings, alongside unique interdisciplinary cultural programs. These initiatives not only inspire students to be diligent learners and critical thinkers but also deepen their friendships and build a strong sense of community, transforming the class into a vibrant, supportive, and principled environment with a robust academic culture.

The “One-Stop” Student Community at Palm Court of Guangdong University of Finance and Economics has curated a series of cultural projects, establishing the “Theme Tea Gathering” as its flagship event. These gatherings weave together a rich tapestry of experiences: recommending tea literature, enjoying tea-inspired music and dance, sharing sentiments through “tea messages,” reciting classical tea poetry, creating tea-themed art, and demonstrating the elegant art of tea-making, all while participants savor different varieties of tea in several rounds. Students from the community take turns hosting these gatherings, and are often joined by university leaders, faculty members, alumni, parents, and even intangible cultural heritage experts. This creates a vibrant forum for the exchange of art, culture, and ideas. Through such a relaxed, elegant, and warm atmosphere, the community cultivates a nurturing and highly effective educational ecosystem.

5.5. Integrating Skill Development with Competitive Events

By participating in various university-led tea events, students accumulate valuable experience in tea ceremony design, artistic performance, and spatial arrangement. This foundation prepares them to enter competitions, offering a platform to further share and hone their skills. The Chinese Tea Olympic Games serves as a prime example. This competition evaluates not only technical brewing skills—spanning tea selection, water pouring, infusion, and serving—but also artistic expression. A premium is placed on elegance throughout the performance, celebrating a harmony of six aesthetic dimensions: the beauty of the tea, the exquisite utensils, the purity of the water, the poetic ambiance, the graceful posture, and the fluid movements. The event aims to cultivate a nationwide appreciation where “six great teas dance in harmony, modern tea-drinking thrives, and collaborative success blossoms.”

6. Conclusions

Tea, originating in China and celebrated worldwide, carries the romantic legacy of brewing tea with melted snow in the Tang Dynasty and the refined ritual of tea

competitions in the Song. From the “Zen and tea as one” philosophy that journeyed east to Japan, to the camel bells of tea caravans on the southern Silk Road, and culminating in its recognition as humanity’s intangible cultural heritage, this Eastern leaf has traversed millennia and crossed civilizational frontiers. It stands today as an aesthetic ambassador of Chinese culture, presenting the wisdom of the East to the world. As a vital vessel of Chinese tea culture, the tea gathering embodies a unique synthesis of scholarly assembly, Eastern aesthetics, and the Daoist principle of living in harmony with nature. Upholding this tradition through tea events is not merely a cultural activity; it is a profound way to advance the spirit of aesthetic education and fulfill higher education’s fundamental mission of cultivating moral integrity and holistic development. This paper explores the significance and role of integrating China’s distinguished tea culture into university aesthetic education. By reviewing exemplary practices at various Chinese universities and detailing the specific approaches of the tea-gathering initiatives at Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, this study offers recommendations for refining these integration pathways. It aims to provide a valuable reference for embedding China’s rich traditional heritage within the framework of higher aesthetic education.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Appendix

Note 1: In October 2020, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council jointly issued the Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Aesthetic Education in the New Era. The document opens by underscoring that “beauty is a vital source of moral purity and spiritual enrichment. Aesthetic education is not only the cultivation of taste, sentiment, and the inner self, but also an education that fosters imagination and innovative consciousness. It enhances aesthetic literacy, refines character, enriches the soul, and stimulates the vitality of innovation and creativity.” Subsequently, the Ministry of Education released the “Notice on the Full Implementation of the School Aesthetic Education Immersion Initiative” (JTY [2023] No. 5).

Note 2: On March 14, 2021, representatives from the Tea Art Association at Wuhan University, the Hubei Radio and Television Station, and the Dayi Tea Group, along with faculty members from Wuhan University, gathered at the Dayi Tea Zhuodaoquan Store to hold the society’s inaugural spring tea tasting event. More than 30 members

(students) of the Tea Art Association at Wuhan University participated in the event.
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