

# Tea versus celadon: some chromatic interactions

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## ABSTRACT

The tea as well as the stoneware named celadon in Occident, are inventions originate from China. The triad established by the “Elements” tea, celadon and jade is emblematic in the culture of the Middle Kingdom and encompasses numerous symbolic. The existing synergy between these three materials is, finally, based on imitation (*mimèsis*) developed by Aristotle in his celebrated book *Poetic* [1]. Thus, based on this schematic triad, chromatic effects are appearing and disappearing. Sometimes recreating landscape sensation, sometimes recreating material substance (jade). User takes up a lot of space in this relationship which combines both utilitarian tool and edible substrate. He is the one who will help to create poetic (*poiètikè*) dimension into these two items.

Over a first phase, it's important to contextualize the origin of this practice which remains, otherwise, very current in Chinese tradition. Then, we will discuss components accountable for intensify the variable character existing between tea and celadon. The latter will, naturally, bring us to the question of interaction of color. That's why, the experimental and emblematic approach of the artist-painter and teacher, Josef Albers, will be develop in a third section. We will finish by describing how usage scenarios might be innovative through the poetic scope.

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## 1. ORIGINS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The art of tea as well as ceramics called celadon are very strongly tied in Chinese culture. Such a practice and aesthetic choice will have a direct impact on many other Asian cultures, for instance Japan will make use of celadon for the Tea Ceremony as G. St. G. M. Gompertz [2] points out in the foreword to his book *Chinese Celadon Wares*:

*Perhaps there is no province of Chinese ceramics in which Japanese views require more careful consideration than that of celadon. For this is a class of wares in which the Japanese have taken great aesthetic pleasure from the time it first became known to them in the eighth or ninth century, and their appreciation has been sharpened by long tradition and systematic training in the Tea Ceremony. (p 17)*

Such a practice was developed during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) for several reasons.

First and foremost, in the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, economic crisis lead the Empire to find material and aesthetic alternatives. It's in this way that celadon or *qing cí* enters into the home of a new clientele. Monks, rich and aristocratic families or civil servants are no longer rich enough to offer themselves rare material as jade. For want of anything better, people pour tea in small stoneware bowls. *Qing cí* is rapidly becoming in a manner of speaking an alternative material because it incorporates some of the aspects of the semi-precious stone (jade) while being less expensive.

However, even though the production of celadon remains a cheaper option than the production of objects in jade, this doesn't necessarily weaken its poetic and aesthetic richness.

*Qing cí's* tea bowls are much appreciated by Chinese poets from Tang Dynasty for their finesse and perfection. G. St. G. M. Gompertz even said that Yue tea bowls "were considered preferable to all others." Chinese writer Lu Yü greatly valued their merits in his treatise the Classic of Tea as Gompertz remarked:



Figure 1 - Green tea in a cup of Chinese celadon, Beijing, 2012

*"(...) The famous "Tea Classic" of the Tang writer Lu Yü rates them [celadon or qing ci] more highly than the silvery-white wares of Hsing-chou." (p 35)*

Danielle Elisseeff explains as well that this taste lies in the fact that these monochrome ceramics are "all at once slightly shiny but not glitzy." [3] Beyond the form and purity of the object, this attachment is due to its chromatic «power». As we all know, jade and celadon have always been intrinsically linked particularly because of their chromatic affiliation since both belong, initially, to different shades of green. Gompertz's allegations confirm the origin of this ability:

*"(...) the color resemble dice or jade and was thus considered superior to any other, or it was thought to enhance the beauty of the tea by deepening its green tone instead of changing this to red or black." (p 35-36)*

This remark was also made by Michel Culas who explains that Lu Yü:

*"praised Yuezhou's green porcelains from Henan because its "enhanced the color of tea".(p 124) [4]*

Put another way, in addition to look jade-like, the scholars find that enamel's color matches perfectly with green tea. Celadon's tea bowls bring out the color intensity of the tea (the word «deepening» come from the same root as the word «deep» which means «profound» or «intense»). Indeed, through tea, there is well and truly a highlighting of each elements.

## 2. AN INTANGIBLE CHROMATIC «VIBRANCE»

We also know that the complexity of celadon lies in his variety of colors: it can be green, blue-green, sky blue, blue lavender, grey, grey green, green-yellow, green-brown, etc. In other words, it can take a wide range of colors that makes it even more interesting and intangible.

Although the object can have a multitude of different enamels, the delicate decoction, especially during the Tang Dynasty, was itself complex and subject to « multifaceted chromaticity ». Tea of the poor people was for example conceived with willow leaves or poplar leaves. Michel Culas gives details of the recipe and the ingredients:

*Sous les Tang, on mettait à infuser les feuilles de thé dans un pot en y ajoutant du gingembre, de la datte, de la menthe, des*

*pelures d'orange, de l'oignon ou du poireau et même du sel. Le thé était alors servi dans de petites coupes (chawan) de céladon transparent ou de porcelaine blanche. (p149)*

This said, it is not simply a matter of «tea», it is also a blend of aromatic herbs, spices or condiments and sometimes, dry fruits. Each of these elements were more likely to color the water in different way. This contributes to develop the elusive nature of the tint which could only blossom by the combination of these two substances (water and stone).

Water, which can be regarded as a coloring element, was also of importance. The poet Lu Yü could easily distinguish "simple" waterfall from spring water, a very valuable water. Paul Butel, in his book History of Tea, states that [5]:

*Les légendes sur Lu Yu sont nombreuses. Citons un talent presque miraculeux à distinguer de subtiles différences entre diverses sortes d'eaux utilisées pour préparer le thé dont il devait apprécier la pureté relative. Un tel talent était un élément important de l'art d'un maître du thé.*

Celadon tea cups were also employed to drink wine, thereby creating new color patterns, new types of combinatorial color... The latter recalling perhaps a trend that would later become, under Mongol domination (1279-1368), very popular in the Chinese ceramic Art named tobi-seiji. It is a green enamel flecked with reddish or purplish spots.

If the use of tea enables a chromatic harmony very close to tone-on-tone, the synergy which acts between enamel and fluid is a product of a discordance or a dissonance. A successful chromatic balance that could be compared to the notion of "tonos" describes by Pliny the Elder [6]:

*(...) The art of painting at last became developed, in the invention of light and shade, the alternating contrast of the colours serving to heighten the effect of each. At a later period, again, lustre was added, a thing altogether different from light. The gradation between lustre and light on the one hand and shade on the other, was called "tonos"; while the blending of the various tints and their passing into one another, was known as "harmoge". (p 234-235)*

This tone or "tonos" is, according to Pliny the Elder, the interstice which standing midway between the brightness and darkness. This rift is apparent by opposing values (light/gloomy) as much as complementary hues (yellow/purple) or contrast of saturation (pale/bright).

In the case of wine and *celadon*, the strained relationship between opposite tone allows improvement of each color. This might be thought of as a seeking of harmony by contrast theory as Johannes Itten was able to try out in his work *The Art of Color*. [7]

In the course of the Tang Dynasty, there are several principles of fermentation of grapes but there is also wine made by fermenting grains. Thus the awareness of various tints obtained through fermentation could provide us more meaningful level of information about the chromatic effects resulting of the association of *celadon* and liquid.

### 3. CHROMATIC INTERACTIONS

These chromatic interactions between fluid and material-container, invite us to get closer to the experiences developed by Josef Albers. Indeed, in his work *Interaction of Color* [8], the former Master of the Bauhaus mentions two typologies of effects. It is through these effects that color be viewed like a "volume color" or like "film color". In addition, identify these effects from the question of the use, summarizes, after all, the premise explains by Josef Albers at the beginning of his work, that:

*«In order to use color effectively it is necessary to recognize that color deceives continually.»*  
(p 1)

In the case of the connection which that exists between tea and celadon, the principle of "volume color" appears to be particularly suitable, due to the fact that it is question of the color in three dimensions. In order to strengthen this idea, Josef Albers also uses the locution "surface color" to define the "volume color". This color is attached to the object like a "skin", it is a coating which is naturally intrinsic to it. Albers also gives the example lemon peel which is yellow.

To illustrate this phenomenon, Josef Albers took as an example coffee and then tea (two fluids more or less opaque):

*«In the same way, tea will look lighter in a spoon than in a cup. Here we are dealing with volume color, which exists and is perceived in 3-dimensional fluids.»* (p 45)

Strangely, while Albers "classifies" tea in the register of colors so-called "volume", the Chinese reality is quite the opposite. The choice of tea in small celadon bowls allowed, according to the Chinese poet Lu Yü, to "enhance the color of the tea".

Although there is this notion of interaction (the container in celadon comes to glorify the

natural color of tea by a camaieu of bright green), the principle of transparence, near from the definition of "film color", is also mentioned in this sober declaration. For if we look at the verb "to enhance" from a chromatic point of view, even more particularly a "pictorial" point of view, it means: "Execute lights, to lighten a color", sometimes there is even talk of «to add color (...). », indeed to «Emphasize by using a strongly contrasted color.» [9]

Finally, these three effects are inherent to the relationship which exists between tea and celadon. Firstly, the "water" Element comes to bring brightness and luminosity to the green enamel, the first tint is delicately transformed by an understated filter (in this case, we also speak about "color-light"). Next, the coloured water created indubitably a new color. The fact of "enhance" the initial tint of tea leads to the unreal fabrication and to the creation of a third color. We could make reference to one of experiences realized by Josef Albers entitled: "VI. 1 color appears as 2 – looking like the reversed grounds." At last, the third comment is about wine use instead of tea, in this case, "enhance" effect occurs by contrast and by "tonos" sensation.

So, interaction which comes through between tea and celadon is infinitely more complex than what we are tempted to reduce it to. Actually, it is a mixture where celadon becomes an "ingredient", and where it is an integral part of the recipe. In this case, the relationship which exists between tea and celadon is situated mid-way between "film color" and "volume color". That is to say, it's a third way. And, a third typology which it ought to define.

This third typology follows these untranslatable ideas widely developed by Barbara Cassin. Guy Lecerf dealt with more specially this problem by a chromatic point of view. Borrowing the term of "plateau" from Gilles Deleuze, the author of *Le coloris comme expérience poétique* determines three reference spaces: couleur, coloration and coloris. [10] Each one of these spaces is linked to specific applications and uses. By manipulating what Guy Lecerf terms "modalités chromatiques", it is possible to create usage scenarios between tea and celadon.

### 4. USER AND IMAGINARY

This notion of action is even more present in this case. Indeed, surely it is about a chromatic relationship between tea and celadon, however a third factor must be taken into consideration: the user.

Historical and cultural context (Tang Dynasty), reminds us that the user is firstly an artist. It is about a poet, a philosopher; in other words a sensitive individual doted of a strong poetic perception. It is the Chinese poets, the first ones,



who praised the beauty of *celadon* in their poems. It is also Lu Yü, himself poet, who developed a treaty on the art "to drink well" the tea. Ceramics in *celadon* of Yue awakened more particularly Chinese poets' astonishment. They praised the enamel looking for to describe the elusive nature of these ceramics. Lu Guimeng evoked for example in its poem "Mi Sè Yuè Qì" ["Secret color of Yue's productions"], unattainable and almost mystical dimension of Yue's productions [Bushell's translation]:

*The misty scenery of late autumn appear  
when the Yüeh kilns are thrown open:  
The thousand peaks have been despoiled of  
their bright colour for the decoration of the  
bowls.  
Let us take them out at midnight to collect  
the falling dew,  
Or fill up the cups with wine in emulation of  
Chi Chung-san.*

The triadic relationship which is established between tea, *celadon* and jade, also awakens all five sense. If it is mainly the sense of the view which is highlighted through these poems, musicality along with tactility contribute to give to the tea an additional sensitive dimension. Indeed, view and hearing are highlighted through celadon itself.

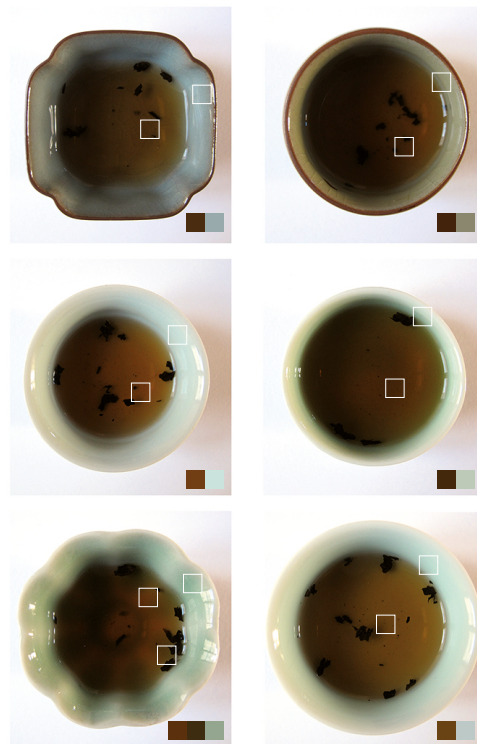
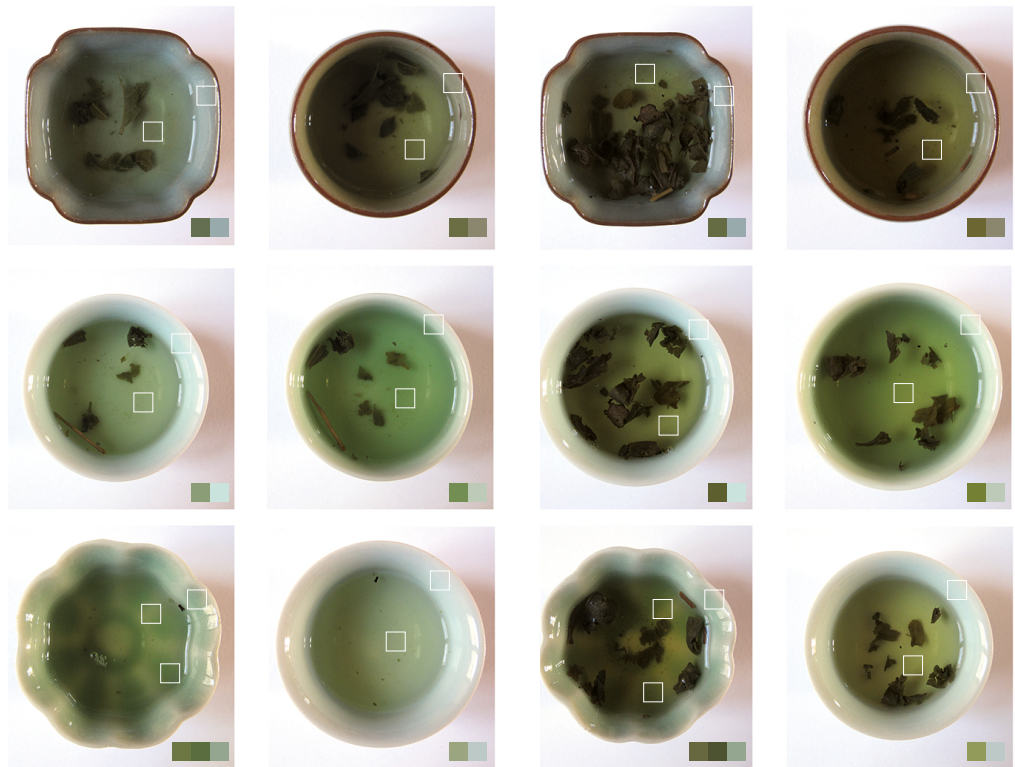


Figure 3 - Experience with Tuoicha

Beyond writing and the gesture (drink tea), imagination and poetry are build up by ritualized practice. Michel Culas evokes especially the "elegant gatherings", where scholars "made float their bowls into the streams." It's another life for object. It evolves on a wider scale. *Celadon* cups

Figure 4 - Experience with Sencha (left)

Figure 5 - Experience with GunPowder (right)



become as little boats or bottles “thrown into the sea” as messages posted to a deeper spiritual order.

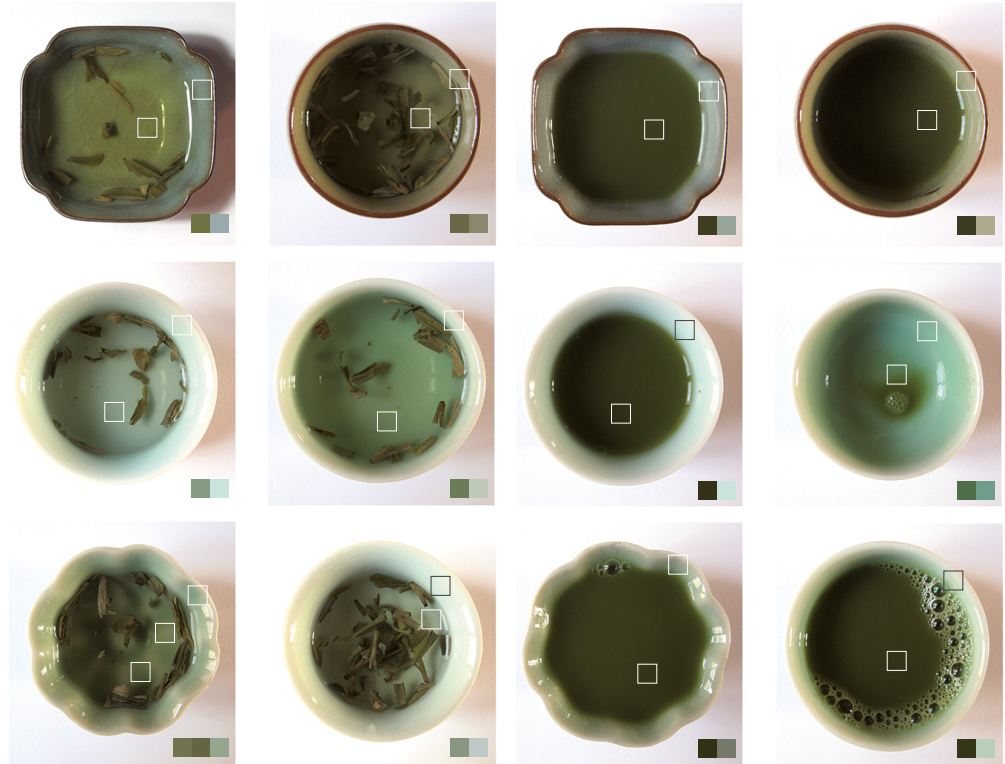
To develop innovation, we have to take into account this part of imagination which can be

“See more than there is” like Josef Albers said. He also suggested that

“Seeing here implies *Schauen* (as in *Weltanschauung*) and is coupled with fantasy,

Figure 6 - Experience with Long-Jing (left)

Figure 7 - Experience with Matcha (right)



extended in any object. Although the shape of the object, its color and usage scenarios suggest somehow principles of *fictionnalisation*, this is the user who decides to fictionalize more. It is also question of an additional effort of perception,

*with imagination.”(p 2)*

For example, the Norwegian designer Runa Klock designs poetic objects in order to create new usage scenarios. She imagined a collection

entitled “*Rocks*” where geometric shapes made of soapstone or marble sculptured come “*chill [a] drink without diluting it.*” Simple shapes and natural tints of steatite (ochre to gray-green) develop an imaginary landscape without altering the flavor of the liquid as defined the designer:

“*Soapstone is non-porous and thus odorless and tasteless and does not affect the taste.*”

The hue stone diffuses a colored light adding one more chromatic scale to the beverage.

## 5. PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

In the continuity of this article, I have made some chromatic experiences to understand the reality of the complex relationship between tea and celadon. The little tea bowls used, come from Longquan a Chinese city known for its traditional production of *celadon* (recognized in 2009 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site).

I didn't need to use a lot of “*raw material*” to observing a chromatic variety. In fact, I have chosen five different types of tea: *TuoCha*, *Sencha*, *GunPowder*, *Long-Jing* and *Matcha* and six emblematic enamels like *fengqing* and *guan*. I have been focusing on the principle of combinatorial and by the third color which appeared when tea meets celadon. The six little cups become each time different, sometimes more vibrant and luminous than ever (*Sencha* and *Long-Jing tea*), sometimes deeper (*TuoCha*).

## 6. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, we can observe that the correlation which develops among tea and celadon suggests concepts as “*skin tone*” and “*incarnation*”. The tea infusion comes to dwell within celadon. It's like a second “*life*”, the ceramic wears a second skin, a second enamel and the opposite effect happens on tea. The ceramic object is activated by different colors effects. The interaction is always new and always original. The variability is related to various factors: degree of infusion, presence or absence of plant-covered, water temperature which might create additional effects (steam, bubble, effervescence). All these elements participate one more time to emphasize the elusive identity of *celadon*.

Furthermore, the words “*skin-tone*” brings an expressiveness near from the “*flesh*”. That is to say, an organic dimension. The enamel, an unsettled material by nature (color in action, motion-color), is more perturbed by organic and vegetal Elements (water and vegetal (tea)). So, water and tea can be perceived as living

organisms. Chromatic vibration or chromatic vibrance is possible thanks to them.

By the changeover from actual to factual - two ideas described by Josef Albers, we can see how color acts and how it is playing with us. In the case of tea and celadon, the link is especially interesting that color characteristics are close. That's why, this relation of tension (or “*tonos*”) is subtle because it plays on clarity or materiality. Tea infusion's going to create some depth effects which can find in Chinese ceramic Art. Some patterns were carved into the bottom of the bowl to simulate depth effect.

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