

The Gaiwan

BY WINNIE YU

One of the most popular styles of brewing and drinking tea in China uses, instead of a teapot, a vessel called a *gaiwan*—a covered tea bowl. The *gaiwan* is comprised of three parts: the lid, the bowl, and the saucer.

The lid, or *gai*, is smaller than the mouth of the bowl but larger than the body, so it fits inside the bowl without falling in. When one is drinking full-leaf Chinese or Taiwanese tea, the lid is tilted back slightly, and the leaves are blocked inside, allowing only the liquid to pour through. The lid, when closed, allows the tea to infuse more quickly, and can also be used to brush away any foam and stir the leaves. It allows easy access to observe and smell the tea. Removing the lid allows the tea to cool,



and with the lid on, the tea stays warm while breathing. In a Chinese teahouse, if one's *gaiwan* is empty, all one needs to do is to lift the lid and place it on the table, and an attendant will come by with hot water. If one needed to leave the table temporarily, the lid is placed on the chair, which indicates an imminent return.

The bowl, or *wan*, is the main steeping chamber where the leaves are placed to steep. Tea was first drunk in a bowl as it was handleless and round. The wide mouth tea bowl, or *chawan*, as it was originally called, was used particularly for preparing *matcha* or powdered tea. As whole leaf teas began to gain prominence and the bowl became a steeping as well as drinking vessel, it became known as a *gaiwan*. The *gaiwan* bowl is usually round with a flared rim, so that the user may hold a bowl of hot tea by the rim without burning one's fingers. Southern Chinese sometimes call the *gaiwan* a *gai-bei*, the “*bei*” meaning cup instead of bowl. The reason is that in the south, this vessel is more commonly used to just drink tea rather than for steeping, qualifying it as a cup.

The saucer, or *tuo*, also commonly called the tea boat, is used for supporting the bowl. The saucer prevents the bowl from burning the tabletop or the hands that serve the tea, and can also catch any tea spilled from the bowl. The saucer is usually made of porcelain but can sometimes be made of metal, and has a depres-

sion in its surface to perfectly cradle the bottom of the bowl. On the bottom is the “foot,” a base that sets on the table or other surface. It is thought that in the T'ang dynasty, a daughter of the governor of Sichuan, in Chengdu, invented a wooden dish to bear the bowl to serve tea with. She invented this saucer so the bowl would not easily burn the hands when serving. Later on, she made wax rings to place on the saucers to secure the bowls better, forming the earliest tea boats. The first professionally made saucers were made of lacquer while the bowl was made of porcelain.

The *gaiwan* is also called the Three Marvels Bowl, for Heaven, Earth, and Man. The lid is on top, therefore heaven, the saucer supports everything, therefore earth, and living between heaven and earth is mankind, and therefore, the bowl. This vessel embodies in microcosm the Chinese philosophical thought: “Heaven covers, Earth supports, and Man nourishes.”

By the Qing dynasty, the *gaiwan* was recognized as the official royal tea vessel, and subsequently, most teahouses in China served tea in *gaiwan*. The key to the *gaiwan* is that there is no teapot necessary; this is an immediate, direct method much simpler than *gongfu* tea service using Yixing teapots. As a result, the *gaiwan* flourished as the vessel of choice for refined as well as everyday consumption of tea.

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