

On the Semiotics of Tea

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to provide a brief sketch of the cultural phenomenon of tea from the point of view of Cultural Semiotics as developed by Juri M. Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics.

Tea, either as a beverage, tradition, ceremony, fashion product, or a 21st century cultural practice, is a product developed by human communication. Thus, it involves a complex meaning-web and meaning-production. To account for it as such, we must posit that it constitutes several semiotic models that explain and construct the context of tea in our social reality. Thus, we may say that tea is a meaning-generating mechanism, which presupposes it is inside a cultural space called *semiosphere*.

Keywords: cultural semiotics; semiosphere; tea

1. Introduction

In this paper we undertake to define tea's semiotic space, where we find several specific semiospheres. From there, we endeavor to codify tea as a text and describe the languages that flow around this semiosphere. Finally, we describe the diversity of its properties and attributes, as well as establishing the laws of its internal organization.

2. Tea as a Text

Tea entails so many things because it is not merely an agricultural product that became a suitable beverage by means of infusion. Tea is also a commodity and an object of human consumption that is subject to nature's extravagances.

Above all, the human consumption of tea is a very old trans-cultural production that has gone beyond several boundaries and evolved, re-semanticizing and re-functionalizing itself along the way. Throughout history it has developed in several ways within many cultures, and finally become a traditional practice adapted across a

multitude of different cultures.

Therefore, tea is a cultural phenomenon located in the heart of a community where an exchange of information occurs. Since this phenomenon may become a sign, that is to say a determined *meaning carrier*, it must always be part of a larger system in which the establishment of relationships with other signs and non-signs is possible.

Thus we can see these relationships with *kinema¹ objects, icons and linguistic signs as well*. So, we are saying that inside of its structure there are actions of signs and sign-processes that bear an active, diverse and continuous semiotic flow. Therefore tea presupposes semiosis.

As in other sign systems, this flow is heterogeneous as well. The semiosis of tea is not a single-sign action, but involves a multitude of signs. As we have already said, signs are always part of a bigger system and are accompanied by other signs. As Kull (2002) points out, in the Lotmanian tradition, that bigger system may be called text.

According to Lotman and Escuela de Tartu (1979) there are three types of texts: a) primary texts: generated by natural language; b) secondary texts, which are semiotically more complex: rituals or ceremonies; and, c) tertiary texts: such as artistic ones.

It is clear that tea manifests these features as a meaning-generator mechanism, so it is considered herein as a text, a text that has produced a plethora of meanings among the cultures of the world.

In tea's semiotic space there are co-existing primary and secondary texts: the former are generated by *natural language* and the latter, semiotically more complex, are situated at the core of the semiotic space. Among them are cultural texts, ceremonial texts and ritual texts.

In *The Book of Tea*, the tea master Kakuzo Okakura suggests that tea might constitute a *tertiary text*, i.e. an artistic text. This is the case when the drinking and preparation of tea is codified as a ritual ceremony and, subsequently, becomes a *work of art* (Okakura, 2001, p. 11).

3. Tea's Semiosphere

The origins of the human use of tea are in China and date back to 2500 years ago.

1 The notion of kinema refers to special gestures present in every etiquette situation, e.g. greetings, farewells, kisses, reverences and so on (Civ'Jan, 1979).

In ancient times, tea was not used as a conventional beverage or foodstuff. Rather it was but a plant whose leaves might have been occasionally eaten by ancient Chinese people. Then it lacked a properly well-formed meaning. As time went by and its use was extended, tea first became part of a culinary system; when exported outside of China, it was translated in many different ways, acquiring new meanings in the process

At this point, we turn to the process through which tea produces meaning within the *semiosphere* (a concept coined by Juri Lotman¹ in 1984). Thus, the *semiosis of tea* may be explained by means of textual and dialectic processes that take place only inside of the semiotic space.

Inside the semiosphere, tea was an early mythological characterization that recalls an opening text: a *metatext* that performs a metalinguistic function with respect to the other texts that form part of the semiosphere. Tea, in the first instance, is codified under the mythological consciousness, which is oriented towards mythopoetics. Therefore, it is expressed by means of a legend that deals with elements belonging to the same level, where everything is a whole, non-discrete and continual. Thus, myth-poetics is transmitted by means of oral speech, whose elements are unrepeatable: tea's accidental discovery. In this way, in the very first moment, tea is encoded by means of the mythological consciousness that is expressed by a legend: Shennong's tea-chance discovery.

In Shennong's *The Divine Farmer's Herb-Root Classic*, written during the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BC - 220 AD), we can see that Shennong was a ruler of China and a cultural hero:

Legend holds that Shennong had a transparent body, and thus could see the effects of different plants and herbs on himself. Tea, which acts as an antidote against the poisonous effects of some seventy herbs, is also said to have been his discovery. Shennong first tasted it, traditionally in ca. 2737 BC, from tea leaves on burning tea twigs, after they were carried up from the fire by the hot air, landing in his cauldron of boiling water (Du & Lin, 1990: 48).

Thenceforth, the habit of drinking an infusion made of tea leaves was born here and this legend represents the *opening text* inside the semiosphere of tea. According to

1 See Lotman, 1996.

Lotman & Uspenskij (1979), mythological consciousness performs these features: 1) the opening text is homogeneous because it is monolingual and its process of translation-interpretation is secondary; 2) it is composed of objects belonging to the same rank, where hierarchies are absent; 3) the text is decomposed into portions: first, Shennong's transparent body and its ability to see the effects of plants on himself; then the tea-twigs landing in his cauldron of boiling water and finally the "amazing" tea-chance discovery; and 4) Shennong's myth represents unique objects that do not assume a meta-descriptive level's existence.

3.1 Tea's Culinary Semiosis

Inside of tea's semiotic space, and because of its heterogeneous nature, there is a convergence of several languages and diverse communication forms that must guarantee the message's reception; for us *this message is tea*. These languages belong to several quantitative cycles; they flow along different periods and forms through a continuum that goes from what is translatable to what is untranslatable. Altogether they codify tea's semiotic mechanism: the *culinary language*, the *language of objects* and the *language of ritual* (hence **L1**, **L2**, **L3**). In the core of the semiotic space, as a *modeling and translator mechanism* that helps us to explain reality, there is *natural language*. Therefore we will say that the semiosis of tea is a *complex semiosis*. From now on, we deal with the first language in which tea was transmitted. Thus, the several languages that flow around the semiosphere circulate through different historical periods: in the periphery, tea was first transmitted within China as a medicine; thence it experienced some change-stages until it became a meal. This latter change happened insofar as its consumption grew.

The semiosis of tea is encoded, first, by means of culinary language (**L1**) because every tea's salient thing, as culinary text, is provided by it. The sole existence of this language is explained by its primary function: to describe the process in which tea (as a message) was transmitted around the whole Chinese nation (and outwards) by means of a culinary code.

In ancient times, even before tea was drunk, starving inhabitants of China picked tea leaves with the purpose of feeding themselves. As time went by and the Chinese developed its use, they discovered that tea may refresh the body and quench thirst. Not so much later, they became aware that tea served as a stimulant that eliminated fatigue and cheered people up (Pettigrew, 2001, p. 32).

Further in the periphery, the Chinese started to cook tea in water. This was done for healing illnesses, and made up the first consumption stage. Thus, tea started to produce a first meaning as a medicine that was used in special occasions as an offering.

The culture of tea begins to split its inner world from its outside world in this way: the inner space covers every cultural space that holds the origin of tea-seed (*Camellia Sinensis*); besides is the same space where their uses and features were discovered, where its costumes and traditions originated as well; and finally where it arose for being re-encoded: China. In the same way this is the space where, on several levels, its texts and its languages, and also the set of its reciprocal relations, are contained.

According to Lotman, the *semiotic boundaries* are regions where cultural multilingualism exists, because they split the semiosphere's inner space from the exterior one (Lotman, 1990, p., 138).

The introduction of tea in Sechwan following the occupation by the Qin dynasty (221 BC – 206 BC) contributed to a huge cultural and economical exchange that produced the unification of the cultural space (Maspero & Escarra, 1952). The introduction of the cultivation of tea and its use was from the southeast region, up to the central Chinese plains. Here, we can appreciate the localization of *two semiotic boundaries*: on the one hand, a *temporal boundary* that is located in the axis of the past and belongs to an important governing period in tea history. During this time its cultivation and uses were strengthened in the south of China.

On the other hand, there is a *personality boundary* in the Qin dynasty, whose community in this system (emperors, princes, princesses, employees [Mandarin], bureaucrats, imperial court, craftsmen and so on) forms the *socio-cultural-historic subject*. At the beginning of its reign the Qin dynasty literally went through the semiotic space when they transmitted the first medicinal use of tea towards the northern territories.

A direct aftermath of these exchanges that the Qin carried out was the opening of a *dialogue* and the beginning of tea diffusion towards the north of the country. This happened through two lines: on the one hand, from Xianyang's capital to the provinces of Shaanxi, Henan and so on, and on the other hand, from the Changjiang river towards its central and southern regions. The spreading into the country's northern part occurred because Mandarins started imitating the southern ones in this custom of drinking tea. The north of China between the second and third centuries was inhabited by nomadic tribes whose activities were not related to agriculture but mainly to hunting

and harvesting. This means that in the north of China there was no tea in its wild state, and all of the tea that was drunk came from the south only. This explains why tea was expensive in the north of China: only the nobility and their relatives had the opportunity for tea tasting (Butel, 1998, p. 40).

At this point we turn to tea's formative state as a *culinary text*. This is due to the beginning of a process of homogeneity in the culinary text that was spreading within Chinese culture. At this time, the development of tea's consumption had already begun, thenceforth its function as a *storing information device* is already "switched on" (Lotman, 1996).

The *second stage* in the process of tea consumption arrived with the appearance of the Eastern Han dynasty (25 - 220 AD). In this age, tea making acquired new items that conferred new meanings. This came about as people gave up considering tea as a medicine and transformed it into a more developed meal. Thus, tea leaves began to be boiled in hot water with millet, rice, salt, oranges and even onions, and seasoned with ginger and other spices as well. In this part of its evolution tea finally acquired the quality of a *storing information device* because it developed the capacity of preserving the previous contexts' memory and, from a preceding use as a medicine, it evolved until it became thought of as a meal. The latter is a display of human cultures' memory since it quantitatively increases its knowledge and transmits it from one generation to another (or from one place to another). This manner of consumption, as a *soup*, persisted until the Tang dynasty's arrival (618 AD).

Until the rule of the Eastern-Han dynasty (25 - 220 AD), some members of the bourgeoisie had been devoted to tea growing and production. It was not until the Jin dynasty (265 - 420 AD) that *tea merchants* appeared, and hence the common people started to drink tea.

With this arrival we can set up a new *boundary of personality*, with another communal notion about personality where the *socio-cultural-historical subject* gathered the tea merchants who were socially stigmatized due to their dark commercial activities. The merchants used to move around the cities' streets and along the countryside, offering several types of tea and, sometimes, carrying big hot water-bins and even a ready-made tea (soup) for customers' satisfaction and comfort. Those customers belonged to the lower social classes and they were responsible for the large scale spreading among peasants, craftsmen, poets, Taoist hermits, painters and so on.

The merchants traveled in caravans, crossing huge distances and taking with them

not only tea but paints, spices, silk and animals as well (Du & Lin, 1990).

The *third stage* in the tea consumption process was the boiling of tea. First, a bunch of leaves was picked and then prepared in the shape of a cake; later it was shredded, putting tea inside a porcelain cup. Next, boiling water was poured onto the tea and mixed up with leek, ginger and orange. This method of preparing tea started the “purification” of tea as a meal and precedes the infusion method of drinking tea. Moreover, it introduces new objects into the range for preparing it. At this juncture we turn to deal with the new language’s border: the language of objects.

3.2 Tea’s Objects System

In this part of the semiosphere we speak about tea as a *text-object* and about the development of its inherent language as well. The language that codifies and translates it is the *language of objects*. Soon afterwards setting itself up as a culinary text (**T1**), tea began its dialogue with other cultures (firstly inside of China), which translated and re-encoded it.

The culture of tea started its development in the moment in which tea became a culinary text and was disseminated throughout China. This process was successful among the receiving audience; tea was grasping several types of signs because *it was storing information and acquiring memory*. In this moment, and for a full development, tea became attached to *several objects*. As a consequence, a **text-object** emerged (**T2**); it did not appear alone, but with an inherent language (**L2**) that increased its semiotic productivity level. The insertion of this *text-object* within semiotic reality happened through the systemization that had already begun when tea-customs were encoded and with the functions’ demarcation as well.

Moreover, we can see the emergence of a code whose main function implies the tea transmission from the objects that go with it. The text-object (**T2**) is this *set of objects that accompanies tea along its performance*, and its expression was given as the *tea set*. Henceforth, it is made up of tea utensils that exist together in several types and shapes. Those have kept developing continuously as part of the utensils’ cultural system.

Tea sets changed materially, that is to say, either in shape, manufacture or in name. This was due to the diversification in customs of tea preparation during different historical periods. The existing differences among several Chinese provinces changed as well, just like their ethnic diversity. Among them, we can find utensils made of either clay, porcelain, bronze, tin, gold, jade, agate, glass, steel or glaze. Some of these

utensils are essential in everyday life and have high artistic merit. In spite of the fact that the clay utensils were manufactured so long ago in China, in former times the Chinese only used tight-rim clay pots. According to Du and Lin (1990, p. 56), during the Han dynasty between 206 BC and 220 AD, the first clay jugs were introduced in Yunnan and Sechwan provinces.

At the beginning, the tea set was presented as a medium-sized clay bowl. In order for tea (as a culinary text) to acquire memory, its customs were modified. Later on, a *textual displacement* in the content plane took place: that is to say, tea was no longer taken as a meal, but evolved as a drink. This displacement produced a change in the objects system. Thenceforth, cups, teapots and plates came into the scene and made up a new tea set that began, little by little, to generate meaning.

The use of this set depended on the place, costumes and the kind of tea available. Every utensil's appearance and their manner of use are *material signs* of every stage along the development of tea as a *drink*. These objects have the ability to store memory because each one bears within a particular manner of either preparation or serving several sorts of tea. Clay tea sets were the first produced in China because clay could preserve the tea's smell and color.

4. The Tang Dynasty: The Core of the Semiosphere

At this time we arrive at the center of the Chinese tea semiosphere where the semiotically most developed structures coexist: the *Tang dynasty*. The age when the Tang ruled comprises a *temporary boundary* located in the past and corresponds to the most prosperous age in China's history. Then, both domestic and external trade was highly developed. Tea and other wares were disseminated around the Arab mainland (Mashrek) by means of either Persian or Arabian dealers.

The Tang dynasty (sovereigns and their families; princes, princesses, mandarins, poets, craftsmen and the imperial court, among others) covered a *personality boundary* because they acted as a *socio-cultural-historical subject* in this part of the semiosphere of tea. In order for the Tang dynasty to rule China, they started controlling the message's flow when they were in charge of transmitting it outwards, then encoding it and describing it as well.

At that time, tea came from the regions around the Changjiang and Huaihe rivers. It was transported both in boats and ships, and in large quantities. Hence, the *tea*

tribute increased.¹ The amount of the tribute was increased in twenty provinces and prefectures. Tea that was delivered as a tribute was selected according to its quality: teas coming from Guzhu, Qiyang and Mengshan were considered good-quality teas. However those teas whose origin was in Shouyang, Yixing, Bijian, Yonghu and Hengshan were treated as average-quality teas. Tea coming from Fuliang was considered to be of lower quality. The tea tribute was applied by local bureaucrats under careful surveillance (Maspero & Balazs, 1967).

In this part of the system, tea not only acquires meaning as either a *culinary text* or a *text-object* but sets up a *tax-sign*, a sign whose symbolic value was determined because it was considered a real-value good, similar to gold or precious stones. Moreover, there was an additional value imposed on it, that of pleasing the imperial desires and whims of the Chinese dominant-class. In this moment tea was imbued with an extra value, a *pleasure value*.

4.1 Tea's Export

The process through which tea was exported outwards was a very enriching and important process for the tea culture because it unleashed its departure, from *its own semiotic native space*, towards the unknown space, *the alosemiotic space* (Lotman, 1990). Thanks to it tea started producing new meanings. The export process that happened between the sixth and the ninth centuries, first with the *Sui* Dynasty (581- 618 AD) and then with the *Tang* Dynasty (618 - 907 AD), stands for a *temporary boundary*. That is to say during this time tea was *translated*: it became involved with other cultures and acquired new codes; thus it started to produce and to reproduce several meanings.

The outer semiosphere's space, i.e., the extra-systemic one, comes from another place: it is up to another system indeed, the set of China's bordering countries and their cultures. In order to make it semioticizable, from the outside, cultural external systems provided tea (as a **T1**) with new information.

Hence, when tea goes across the edges of the semiotic space and scatters, when

1 The taxing of tea was a system applied among Chinese feudal society dating from the Western Zhou Dynasty's older period (1046 BC – 771 BC). Tea drunk by the imperial family among the Han Dynasties (206 BC – 220 AD) came from southwestern China. Since the Three Kingdom's period (220 – 280 AD), the tea tax was instituted among harvesters chiefly according to the whim of the emperor (Maspero & Balazs, 1967, p. 453).

it goes outside the other semiospheres' boundaries, we may say that we leave the inner space behind, and we start speaking about the *external space*. From now on, the external semiosphere's space is this cultural space (or spaces) *that is not China*, i.e., the place where *Camellia Sinensis* does not grow, the place where there is no tea and its uses remain unknown, without producing any custom or tradition for consumption.

The contact that tea made with other cultures brought about a process called *translation*. About this process, Lotman says, "it is the elemental thinking mechanism" (Lotman, 1990, p. 143). Its constituent mechanism is called *dialogue* and presupposes one of the laws that govern the semiotic space: *asymmetry*.

Asymmetry may be seen in two ways: 1) in the difference among languages that participants use in dialogue, and 2) in the alternating directions where the message flows. Thus, on the one hand, tea (T1) comes into contact with an audience: firstly, with *Shennong* (by means of the mythical consciousness), later on with the ruling-class (governing dynasties: imperial families and Buddhist bourgeoisie); and on the other hand, with the Chinese people. This contact was done in order to achieve its meaning-generative functions.

The *first external* contact happened when tea went to the outward space and crossed a *first spatial boundary*, towards the left: to Western China. This took place in 641 AD, when Princess *Wen Cheng* of Tang married the Tibetan King *Songtsan Gambo*. The princess took with her to Tibet tea from Sechwan province, after which Tibetan inhabitants began enjoying it as a beverage (Yiet al., 1996, p. 145).

In Tibetan territories, ethnic minorities from bordering regions such as the *T'u-chüeh*, the *Huihé* and the *Khitan*, who used to eat large amounts of fat, happily received tea. They adopted it immediately as a consumption good, as important as oil, salt or cereals.

Later on, tea left again towards *alosemiotic* space: this time through other spatial boundaries, westwards to Persia and Arabia traversing the silk route (in 610 AD), and southwards, to archipelagos in Thailand, Burma, Malaysia and so on. Tea left towards Ceylon and India as well. Finally it "jumped" towards Japan (in 805 AD), and then Korea (in 823 AD). Thenceforth we can deal with new inner and external spaces (Stella & Brochard, 2003).

Seven centuries later, in 1595 AD, tea arrived in Europe, and later in Africa and America. This arrival produced new contact processes when tea shocked other semiospheres; then, it was translated in several ways setting up diverse dialogue

mechanisms and assimilating itself to the west, with its own cultural codes as well. Therefore, we can say that contact with another culture entails the starting mechanism that switches on generative process.

The dialogue between Chinese ethnic minorities, mainly in Tibet, and Tang government employees was maintained only by means of a mutual attraction: a previous *semiotic situation*. This latter was the similarity in commercial needs. That is to say, the Tibetans, inhabiting highlands and far off mountainous regions, lacked a farming life as such. This was a factor that disposed them towards cattle farming activities, horse wrangling and taming as well. In addition, they produced dairy products from their yak herds (Le Guide Théophile, 2002). Tibetans relied on need dealers to supply them with spices, vegetables, cloths and tea of course (as a complement to their fat-based diet).

Tang rulers, in a full expansionist wave, required the consolidation of their power among people and started to export tea to new places, always seeking better profits, and large numbers of horses for supplying the armies as well. The generation of a dialogic situation as such was possible due only to this *need of bilateral exchanges with neighboring regions*, and the close relationship resulted in *wedding alliances* as well.

The *first asymmetry stage* came about when textual exchange was given. That is to say, this is the process through which tea (**T1**) emerged from its inner space and “shocked” the bordering languages that showed suitable conditions for dialogue. Tea was transferred from the interior of China to Tibet by means of a culinary language that encoded it, not in its *fourth consumption state* (as an infusion) but in a previous phase (a stock whose dry leaves were *tablet-shaped*). The reason for this feature was the length of transport from the interior of China that might arrive between eight and ten months later in Tibet’s capital, Lhasa. The Chinese tea-crafters crushed tea and made tablets with it for insuring preservation (Du & Lin, 1990).

The *translation* that was generated between Chinese culinary language (**L1**) and Tibetan culinary language (henceforth **L1’**) produced an *imitation process*. In this latter, tea reproduced its meaning. Next, we are going to display the process in which tea scattered into the culture and finally was adapted to it:

a) Tea (**T1**) emerged from the outskirts as a foreign entity and kept this status for some time until it was read in the native culinary language (**L1’**). Then, great significance was conferred to it as an imported drink.

b) The foreign text (**T1**) and the Tibetan culture went through a re-structuration of

each other. In this stage, a textual “idealization” occurred; imported codes (**L2**) next to the inherent text became part of the metalinguistic structure.

c) Tea acquired a new value. The receiving culture began to embrace it and imposed on it a higher value. Then, it splits up the “imported” value and there was a search for stressing the national features. Here, tea was developed as a *native culinary text* (hence **T1**). Tibetans experimented with its preparation and started cooking tea in water (as the ancient Chinese did long ago). Next, they strained and transferred it into a 1-meter-long butter churn, adding to it yak butter and salt. In order to whip the butter, a wooden stick with a disc on the top was used (and then a total emulsion was obtained). In this mixing process with tea, a type of energy drink was obtained. Inside the drink they used to soak roasted barley flour (Yi *et al.*, 1996).

d) In this stage, the text is totally assimilated into the culture. It has changed towards an active state and has started generating new texts based on cultural codes that in the past were encouraged by external invasions. At this point, tea with butter is produced (**T1**) as its own textual demonstration and Tibetans became interested in tea sets as well. In this later interest we find the *own text-object* (henceforth **T2**), as a product of a translation from the inherent language of objects that had been previously imported. In Tibet there are not many utensils. Actually, the tea set consists only of cups for drinking tea. These are wooden-made and each family member has his own cup. It is fairly common that Tibetan families also have special cups for guests to use and their manufacture varies according to the paradigmatic relationship between Tibetans and their social positions: i.e., top-quality cups, the best ones, are made from black sandalwood and are used by people with prominent social positions as either high-ranking officials, foreign guests or Buddhist monks (Yiet al., 1996).

e) Finally, the culture’s core is reached and a change in the addresser culture is produced as well. This addresser started transmitting text outwards. In Tibet, the texts that were transferred were exported to their neighbors: Mongolian, Kazakh and Uighur peasants who had also acquired the habit of drinking tea with yak butter.

The message started flowing in every direction. The point here was that in some places tea had larger cultural impacts; this is clearer in the *second stage of asymmetry*.

The message flow was *asymmetrical*; the most striking proof of it is the *dual structure interaction in tea’s diffusion mechanism within the region*. We mean that the message’s spreading happened in different ways both in the south and the north (top-down), and in western China (left-to-right).

Emperor Wu of Liang (502 - 557 AD), from the southern dynasties, pleaded for an abstinence lifestyle of Buddhists. Tea was incorporated into their diet and later on, the monks started to raise temples next to either famous mountains or large rivers: strangely, they did it in tea-producing zones. The Buddhist temples were the places where tea-elaboration techniques were mostly developed. In southern China what triggered the consumption index was the development of Buddhism, and its inherent social class as well. Buddhist monks began to use tea to relieve drowsiness during their long meditations. The Chinese working classes did not drink tea, but the imperial family did, and also the Buddhist bourgeoisie (Maspero & Escarra, 1952, p. 380).

Summing up, as we have seen above, the message's flow in the north of China happened thanks to the fact that the northern Chinese started imitating the people of the south. With regard to the *diffusion mechanism* towards the west, we have seen that business and trade with the bordering-cultures brought about tea's development.

4.2 The Tea Code: Self-description Mechanisms

During the reign of the Tang Dynasty we can see the *fourth and last stage* within *tea's consumption development*, which involved the infusion of leaves in hot water. In this stage, tea acquired a completely new meaning because it no longer constituted a meal when every piece of food was removed from its manner of consumption. Moreover, it experienced a change on the *plane of content* and then underwent a *redistribution* of its items when it became a beverage prepared in a process of infusion in which leaves were infused in water for some minutes. Subsequently, the leaves were strained and removed producing a fragrant, soft and limpid liquid. This method of preparation, begun during the Tang Dynasty, became popular during the Ming and Qing Dynasties as well.

In what we may call tea's "purification" phase,¹ we can see a text's constitutive phase; we mean that phase where tea is an *oblivion device* (Lotman, 1996). In other words, tea has set up the items necessary for generating information. Tea has chosen some other elements that will no longer be needed. Therefore, these items are lost or left behind (*forgotten*). The example that more clearly represents this mechanism is

1 The Tang Dynasty created the infusion process with the use of loose tea leaves. First, the buds were harvested in the spring and then steamed. Later, they were slowly dried to finally become loose leaves. This presentation represented a step forward in its consumption because loose tea leaves of good quality provided drinkers with enjoyment (Butel, 1998).

tea's physical-state change, i.e., from a meal to a beverage.

Tea, in its ultimate and ideal form as a drink has its periods and schools in China, and they can be divided into three main stages according to Kakuzo Okakura:

[...] the boiled tea, the whipped tea and the steeped tea. The Cake-tea which was boiled, the Powdered-tea which was whipped, the Leaf-tea which was steeped, mark the distinct emotional impulses of the Tang, the Song and the Ming dynasties of China (Okakura, 2001, pp. 11–12).

Thenceforth, tea sets up as a drink and starts *to store new information*. In this moment the structural system's organization begins its *self-description*; this process is necessary before the arrival of large amounts of information that may cause a collapse of the system, producing the loss of unity.

The increase in the semiotic activity of tea during the Tang Dynasty entailed a maturing of the semiosphere's core, where a metalanguage was born: a language that Lu Yu encoded in *Cha King (Tea Classics)*. This is the most complex and influential text along the semiosis of tea's development; besides it unleashed a protocol that tried reaching the universality along the semiosphere. The self-description of tea's semiosphere happened with the appearance of *Cha King* (around 794 AD), giving way to *three important factors*: first, there occurred an ideal representation of a nucleus linguistic structure (something like a language of tea); second, a *standard* was generated: a protocol that produces a new ritual language (L3) that encodes the tradition of tea-drinking; and third, there is an increase in the system's rigidity, and the a slowing in the development of semiotic production.

Lu Yu (733 - 804 AD) was tea's first "apostle"; he was a poet who was born during a time in which Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism functioned as mutually synthesizing lifestyles. Lu Yu, as an aesthete, tried to find his own world's symbols. Thus, he found in the tea service the same harmony and order that governs everything. Then, he encoded this tea-drinking tradition during his time and wrote *Cha King* at the end of his life, around 794 AD. In those days, Lu Yu literally encoded tea, founded the first tea school and, last but not least, became tea's semiosphere grammarian: "the tea merchants' tutelary god" (Okakura, 2001: 9). In this way, *Cha King* sets itself up as a *meta-structural self-descriptor* consisting of three volumes and ten chapters.

Although the Chinese, unlike the Japanese, never converted the tea drinking act into a ceremony, they started the custom of offering tea to someone (either a guest or a visitor). This custom was begun by Lao Tse's pupil, Kuanyin, who once offered his

5. Tea Returns to the Periphery

During the Song dynasty (960 - 1279 AD), whipped tea became popular and *tea's second school* was created. Then, dried tea leaves were crushed into a fine powder in a little mortar, and the product was whipped into hot water with a fine bamboo-made whisk. This new process unleashed an inherent change in the objects system and the tea leaves' sieve. Ceramics took their own special place within tea's surrounding universe. Furthermore, salt was eliminated forever. In those times, two tea-making methods co-existed: the steeped tea method and the infusion method (Okakura, 2001).

During the Song Dynasty two factors that influenced the continuous development of Chinese tea culture may be noted:

1) The appearance of black, brown, blue and white-blue colored enamels and glazes. At that time, Changnan town was renamed Jingdezhen, whose Celadon¹ porcelain was in fashion, admired for its fine quality and color (Du & Lin, 1990). The tea service became popular at banquets and feasts.

2) A *tea monopoly* became legalized. Parliament established six gathering centers and thirteen plantations throughout the country. Tea growers were required to check-in at the government's office, which operated as a bank, lending money for business transactions. At the end of the harvest growers had to repay their loans, pay taxes and sell the harvest to the government (Maspero & Escarra, 1952). Around the thirteenth century, northern Mongolian tribes conquered China and the country fell under the Yuan emperors' rule (1206 - 1368 AD), destroying all cultural traces of the Song Dynasty. It was during this dynasty that Jingdezhen town became famous for its white-blue porcelain; in the subsequent Ming dynasty it became the largest manufacturing center of porcelain.

In the fifteenth century, during the native Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644 AD), tea leaves were steeped as an infusion, setting up the third tea school: *the steeped tea school*. This method involved putting shredded tea leaves into boiled water to steep for some minutes in a bowl. This was the method that Europeans came to know in the sixteenth century, when they arrived in China, and this is the tea preparation that prevails today. It was during the Ming Dynasty that the *teapot* established itself as the main utensil for drinking tea, displacing the bowl. As well, the kettle replaced Tang

¹ The term "Celadon", by which the pottery and its glaze are known, has been attributed to several sources.

Dynasty use of tins and tea jars. In those days, tea drinking was a very refined social act that pretended not only to bring to mind, but to imitate the forgotten gestures of the Song Dynasty.

In the seventeenth century China fell under Manchu rule. The uses and customs of tea consumption changed, leaving behind every trace of antiquity. Whipped tea, as such, was completely forgotten. Here, we can see the process in which tea confirms itself as an *oblivion-generating device*, because it discarded what is unnecessary for the system (Lotman, 1998).

6. Hot-water Tea: Tea in Japan

Contact with Japan was the most important contact for tea. In the ninth century, tea crossed through its native semiotic space towards the periphery until reaching Japan. Henceforth, we may say that the Japanese culture of tea began, with connections between Japanese inner space and the external spaces of China, Korea, and so on. In the periphery of this semiosphere, the translation process got underway due to the dialogue between Chinese Buddhist monks and Japanese Zen monks. Student exchanges between Chinese and Japanese monasteries created a necessary *dialogic situation*. In those days, Japanese monks sent many students to study in Chinese temples and monasteries. The purpose of these visits was to learn meditation techniques and religious matters. This exchange was the semiotic situation that preceded the *dialogue* between these cultures.

The *process of dialogue presupposed a certain amount of asymmetry* in the message's distribution when the textual exchange happened: during this process tea (**T1**), coming out from the inner space in China towards the external space (the new tea's inner space — Japan), was shocked with the bordering languages (that were influenced by Chinese culture) and showed suitable conditions for setting up dialogue (Lotman, 1990).

The message's flow within the Japanese tea's inner space was *asymmetrical* as well. The evidence lies in the fact that the message was received only by one social class, Buddhist monks, who kept control until the eleventh century when *samurai* became interested in tea through "meetings" that would end in huge binges. During these parties, samurai held contests known as *Tocha*, where they tasted several types of raw tea and speculated about their origins. The winners might be awarded either with

panther-leathers or Chinese dinner services (Kaibara, 2000).

In 805 AD tea (T1), as a message, entered into Japan from outside, keeping its “foreignness”. Already in the reception process, tea was encoded by means of the foreign language: the culinary one (L1). Tea arrived in tablet shape because it was transmitted during the Tang dynasty. Since the code and the message were translated literally, we are before a *literal translation*, and the final text was not an innovative one but an *imitation* of the original culinary text. The translation was given by means of a *native culinary language* (hence L4). We should notice that tea reached Japan in its final shape: as a drink and its preparation was according to the second Chinese tea school.

The translation of the other texts was gradual and discrete.¹ It was gradual because it happened over a long period of time, and discrete because it was not until 806 AD that utensils and preparation techniques (steam-cooking, shredding and drying) arrived in Japan. We can view the process in this way: in those days the *translation process of the text-object* (T2) took place. Its development started from a language of objects (L2) towards a language (L5) [hence *language of Japanese objects*]. This supposed the appearance of an *adapted text-object* instead of a new text-object. The introduction of this text into the semiotic reality would happen later. Up to this moment it would generate a systematization that encodes its costumes and demarcates its functions as well. In this translation moment, some communication factors were transmitted. That is to say, along this process the Code (L1) and the Message (T1) were translated towards another language (L5), producing an *accurate translation* and a *similar text-object*. In this part of the semiosphere the texts and the receiving Japanese culture started re-organizing each other; from here, imitations and adaptations happened.

In 805 AD, when tea reached Japan, we find this semiosphere’s first boundary: a *temporary boundary* that is located on the axis of the past. In those days, the country was in the *Heian* age (794 - 1185 AD), a period of time in which Chinese influence was predominant, and the samurai social class started obtaining power. Then, the introduction of tea into Japan took place. In 804 AD, the Buddhist monk *Saicho* (a member of the Tendai sect) went to China to study where he met another Japanese monk, *Eichu*. They returned to Japan together in 805 AD with tea seeds that they sowed in a monastery located in the capital’s outskirts, Kyoto. Both of them coincide in the

1 This process corresponds to a dialogic systems law that is called discretion. It is known as the ability for “splitting up information in parts” (Lotman, 1990: 143).

boundary of personality because they were the *socio-cultural-historical subjects* in this system. It was due to the fact that they were responsible for the introduction of Chinese tea to Japan (Butel, 1998). Five years later, when the plant was sufficiently mature, the emperor's entourage stopped in that monastery. *Eichu*, the abbot, plied the emperor with green tea, the first tea grown on Japanese soil. The emperor, delighted with the tea, ordered the farmers to sow tea in five provinces surrounding Kyoto. Tea started its development within Japanese monastic life. Since it was kept aside for Buddhist monks, tea remained under the temple's rule for a long time. It was not until the Song Dynasty (in 1191 AD) when *powdered tea* was invented in China. In those days the Japanese had suspended relations with the Chinese. Up until the eleventh century they resumed their relations by sending monks and artists to China to improve their education.

Tea reappeared in Japan thanks to the Eisai monk. He began to farm new tea plants in Uji province; furthermore, he introduced the new costume of powdered tea (produced by the second Chinese tea school), known in Japan as *Matcha* (foam tea). Thereafter, tea began to be considered as a stimulating drink that was capable of extending arduous meditations. It was valued for its therapeutic values as well. Eisai, himself, wrote *Kissa Yokoji* (*How to Stay Healthy by Drinking Tea*) in 1211 (Stella & Brochard, 2003, p. 76). In this moment of Japanese tea history, its "imported" texts began to be assimilated entirely into the culture in order to *store memory*. Later, they separated contents that took up again in the development of subsequent national identities.

Since the spreading of Matcha tea and its codification, written under *Kissa Yokoji*, we can speak about a *new culinary text* configuration: the first Japanese tea (hence **T4**). This would be the *first mass-produced Japanese tea*, and later on the most iconic one. Its use, as a meditation support and health-maintenance elixir, gave rise to a legend, more recent than Shennong's legend. There is another text that is encoded by the language of myth:

The legend says that Prince Dharma was touched by Divine grace and went out to preach the teachings of Buddha in China. To make himself worthy of such a mission, he vowed never to sleep during the nine years of his journey. After three years Bodhidharma, exhausted, ended up falling asleep while he prayed. On awaking, infuriated by his weakness and devastated by his sin, he cut off his eyelids and threw them to the ground. Some years later, on passing the same spot, he saw that they had given birth to a bush that he had never seen before. He tried

the leaves and discovered that they had the property of keeping a person awake. He told the people around him about his discovery and tea began to be cultivated in all those places through which he travelled (Yi *et al.*, 1996).

As in the Chinese meta-text, this text also has some special features:

1) The text is homogeneous because the mythological consciousness that encodes this text is monolingual.

2) The text is composed of items belonging to the same rank, where there is a hierarchical absence as such; every text's elements are on the same structural level.

3) The text may be decomposed in portions: a) Bodhidharma's birth and his subsequent touch by Divine forces; b) Its dedication to Buddhist preaching; c) He fell asleep and sinned, as a consequence he cut off his eyelids and threw them to the ground; d) A new invigorating plant is discovered

4) The myth of Bodhidharma also conveys unique items that do not entail the presence of a meta-descriptive level (Lotman & Uspenskij, 1979).

6.1 The Pathway of Tea

In the fourteenth century, Zen's southern Buddhist sect, which incorporated many Taoist doctrines, formulated a rather elaborated tea ritual. The monks would gather together around Bodhidharma image and drink tea from a single bowl with the deep formality of a holy sacrament. This Zen ritual would develop finally to culminate in the Japanese tea ceremony in the fifteenth century. In those days we can start speaking about the Japanese culture's unique *text-object*. Thus, we may see that the imported Japanese culture text-object has ended its dissolution process because it has developed a memory, stored information as well and has reproduced meaning as new for-tea-objects.

A *matchless proof* is the creation of iron teapots, originating in Iwate, in northern Honshu. Their production began in the twelfth century. At that time, thanks to Nambu Toshinao, Nambu's district feudal lord (Iwate's old name), craftsmen started exploiting regional iron-mines and creating iron objects that were destined for tea preparation. Teapots became popular quickly and their fame spread over Japan, with a large amount of orders (Kaibara, 2000). With this, we can see the setting up of an *autonomous Japanese text-object* (hence **T5**). Since *Rikyū* rebuilt ritual and established the ceremonial codes, many new materials began to be developed. *Murata Juko*, a

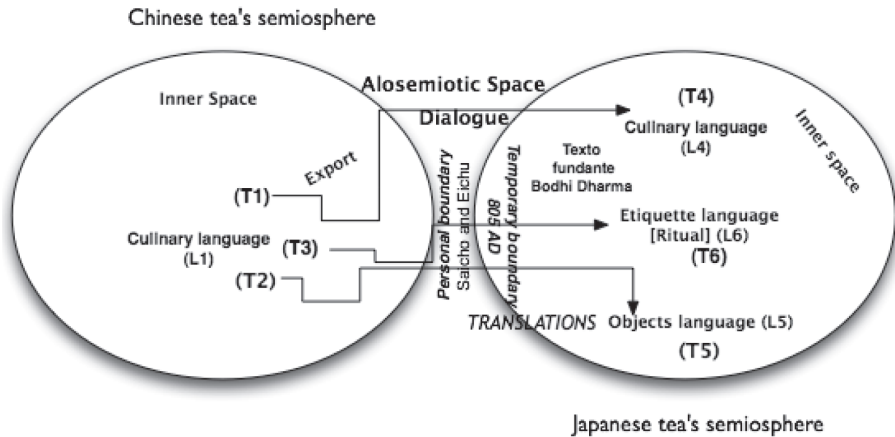
fifteenth century Zen tea master (1422 -1502 AD), broke with every convention when he celebrated a tea ceremony for the aristocracy within a little humble room.

This is *the core of the Japanese semiosphere of tea* (and *the whole culture of tea* as well), corresponding to this period in Japanese history in which tea civilization was born, *Momoyama* (a period of Japanese history called the homonymous castle). As a matter of fact, this period did not last more than fifty years. In those days the country was ruled by shogun *Ashikaga-Yoshimasa*. Nonetheless, its rule was symbolic because his deputies, *Oda Nobunaga* and *Toyotomi Hideyoshi*, were Japan's true governors (Kaibara, 2000).

The tea ceremony master, *Sen no Rikyu* (1522 - 1591 AD) was the master who perfected ritual (**Cha no yu**, literally *tea-hot water*). He was a contemporary of these characters. Rikyu, son of a rich dealer from Sakai, attended several tea ceremonies. However, he was truly interested in the way monks used to consider the tea ritual as the embodiment of Zen principles for appreciating what was sacred in everyday life (Yiet al., 1996). Taking Juko as an influence, Rikyu removed the tea-room, and he also removed everything that was not fully essential. As a result, he developed a tea ritual where there was neither any trivial movement, nor any superfluous object. Rikyu himself became Hideyoshi's personal tea master. In 1590 AD some jealous enemies conspired against Rikyu, accusing him of trying to kill Hideyoshi by means of a poisoned cup of tea that was prepared by Rikyu (Yiet al., 1996). Later, Rikyu was condemned by his master to undergo the suicide ritual, *Seppuku*, an act based on honor and viewed as more honorable than public execution.

With the arrival of the Tokugawa clan in the seventeenth century, the privileged tea masters' social standing was questioned. Before, the tea ritual's teaching transmission was directly effected from master-to-disciples; the latter, without a precisely established code, had total freedom to interpret the ceremony. Rikyu's children and grandchildren kept practicing the way of tea. Before Rikyu's death, his grandson Sen No Sotan (1578 - 1658 AD), divided Rikyu's estate into three parts and distributed one part to each of

his children. Every part of the estate was appointed by a name, giving rise to three tea schools, which still exist: *Urasenke* (the rear Sen house), *Omotesenke* (the front Sen house) and *Mushakōjisenke* (the Sen house next to the homonymous temple) (Kaibara, 2000: 153).



6.2 Chaji as a Text

At this point I turn from the Japanese tea ceremony as such. What we understand as the tea ceremony (since Rikyu) began as a custom performed in old China that started its *most explosive semiotic stage* during the Tang dynasty (thanks to Lu Yu). This custom was developed in Japan as a complex ritual very close to art, where the process of tea idealization reaches its climax. The Japanese tea ceremony stands for the most receptive stage in the semiosphere of Japanese tea, and also where textual integration is more accelerated. Along its development we notice how imported texts have completely assimilated into Japanese culture. The culture in turn has moved on towards an activity state, and has started producing new texts. This tea ceremony sets up the core of the semiosphere: the place where all former external dissolved texts come together, with new texts and languages as well.

First of all, we say that a tea ceremony is a *ritual text* (T6) because it is conceived as a complete, autonomous and formal event. Above all, the tea ceremony is an *etiquette situation* (hence ES) that is sublimated (Civ'Jan, 1979). In Japanese it is called **Chaji** and its main function is to take all followers along an ethical and esthetic stroll that entails the subject's being and its transformation. The stroll itself is called **Chado**

(the way, or path, of tea).

Chaji, firstly, is encoded by means of an *autonomous language of etiquette* [ritual] that was developed since Rikyu's time (we call it **L6**, and it flows around the whole event).

a) This situation's genre belongs to a ritual ceremony. The encoded *Chaji*, specifically, may be displayed according to two norms: *Shin* norm (formal) and *So* norm (informal). In the *So* norm, utensils as positions are arranged with regard to the participants. In this paper we deal with the **So** norm as described by Manar Hammad (1987, p. 23).

b) The time of the etiquette situation: the year of tea is usually divided into two seasons, summer and winter, the latter derived from the former. The emergence of summer *Chaji* is time related in that the noon version is the most developed and researched. An informal *Chaji* lasts almost four hours, and its whole performance is completely scheduled. Along its deployment, several fixed and well-demarcated formulas are switched on: the *essential set of differential signals*¹ (hence **SDS**: *kinema* [special gestures]) and *accessories* (objects with the capacity to acquire meaning from specific use).

c) *Chaji* is carried out in the host's home in a specially designed place that is known as *Sukiya* (fancy abode). This term denotes a structure that has been created for recognizing any individual requirement. The tea room is made for the tea master, and not the tea master for the tea room. According to Okakura, "Sukiya is not conceived for posterity, therefore it is ephemeral" (Okakura, 2001, p. 34).

The ritual text (**T6**) is not only encoded by means of its homonymous corresponding language but through the language of objects (**L5**). Its main function is to establish the conditions upon which utensils as objects, that go with the ES, acquire meaning regarding the situation's development. This language deals with tea preparation and the lunch utensils, with the flowers and tea pavilion's calligraphy, and finally with some other elements that surround *Sukiya*. Its use is up to the SDS and the participants' additional features (tea ceremony individual manners). The essence of accessories, or text-object (**T5**) lies in the fact that in every tea ceremony, every participant is concerned with a certain number of objects, each one with its own ritual meaning.

1 We mean SDS as the objective index of an individual's social standing, which in every given situation establishes its stance regarding the other (Civ'Jan, 1979).

Chaji is performed in three stages and it is thoroughly delimited by an *etiquette behavior* (hence **EB**):

The *first stage* (*Shoza*) begins when the host invites some friends (from one to three) to drink tea. The custom states that guests must confirm their attendance as quickly as possible by briefly visiting the host's house. This is the beginning of the etiquette situation, where the participants' splitting takes place: this splitting is given in the form of two groups: an addresser **A** (the host) and an addressee **a** (or many guests as well). The roles do not take turns in the ceremony because **A** always conducts its course; that is to say, **A** always shows the limit of ES (the marking of either its beginning or the ending), and applies the performances that mark the moment in which a set of people gathers to set themselves as participants within the ET as well. Furthermore, **A** fulfills the pragmatic function by making sure to fulfill the role that guarantees the accurate ES development; finally s/he arranges the implementation of aesthetically flawless performances.

On the side of **A**, for a satisfactory ES development, they must fulfill a *behavior etiquette strategy*, which is determined by means of its additional features (namely tea ceremony education, or performance). This last feature is defined as the capacity for using and quantifying etiquette behaviors and the attention towards the aesthetic function (either taste, sense or measures).

On *Chaji's day*, every member (host and guests) must take a shower just before the meeting (purification is an important matter for ES). The guests must arrive 15 minutes before the fixed hour and they might be invited to come in if and only if the garden's door stands half-opened and the paving stones have been soaked. The guests might take a little stroll around the street if these two conditions have not been fulfilled. Inside the house, the guests gather together around a little reception pavilion (*Machiai*), where they can leave items not related to the ceremony. Someone offers them some hot water to wash themselves. If the main guest has not yet been designated by the host, then all together decide the positions' order. Here, SDS, which comes from outside, and is abstract as well, takes part: among the guests, *the honorary position* is occupied by the most preeminent one.

When the guests are outside *Machiai*, they walk towards the garden and take a seat on an outdoor green bench. Silently, they wait and contemplate the garden. The host comes out from the tea pavilion (*Chashitsu*) and performs some purificative ablutions next to the washbasin (*Tsukubai*), and then opens the door (*Nakakuguri*) that divides

the inner garden (Nakaroji) from the external garden (*Sotoroji*), where the guests are waiting. Later on, already in the garden, the host starts to perform a set of kinema: first, bowing down to his/her visitors; this gesture means that they can come into the tea room. Immediately after, the host comes back to Chashitsu and goes through the guests' door. After a little moment that is devoted to the guests, one by one they enter the inner garden, performing their ablutions in the washbasin, finally entering into Chashitsu. Their movements are thoroughly adjourned, as a way of fulfilling a certain amount of kinema. The guests enter Chashitsu through an approximately 60 centimeter-wide square door (*Nijiriguchi*). Each guest bows deeply before the calligraphy (*Kakemono*), which is located upon the honorary niche (*Tokonoma*). After observing it, each one stands up and diagonally crosses the room, approaching the brazier where three burning coals are heating up the kettle. The last guest closes the door with another kinema: a slight knock, whose meaning is addressed to the guest, who in the annex room (namely the water room — *Mizuya*) is making the guests' lunch.

The entrance door is usually located in the corner of Chashitsu. From *Tokonoma*, the first guest starts walking with the right foot and, with the same foot as well, crosses the divisions among *tatami* (the straw mats that function as floor). In the diagonal path towards the brazier, each guest starts walking with the left foot and crosses the divisions, again with the same foot. Before arriving at the flame, the guest changes the foot and moves forward with the right one. This kinematic use of the feet is important because it bears a strict order when “ascending” the *tatami* towards the fire. Later on, the guest opens the door that divides *Mizuya* from Chashitsu and welcomes the guest, who returns the greetings to him. Next, the main guest (already determined by SDS) addresses the host and asks him/her to come in the room. After the greetings the host serves a light lunch (*Kaiseki*) with two kinds of meals: either seafood or wildgame, which are prepared and equally distributed. At this time of the ceremony we can see how *culinary language* (L4) bursts in, assigning *Kaiseki*'s items. According to its content, the courses follow this order: soy soup, white rice, clear soup, some barbecue (either with fish or meat) with vegetables, a lighter clear soup, pickled vegetables and a hot roasted-rice infusion. *Sake* accompanies the whole lunch, and it is served in traditional ceramics called *Mukozuke*.

While the host prepares the rice infusion, the guests dine on their own inside the water room (*Mizuya*). When sake is poured, the main guest offers it to the host, who gives a bowl to every guest and the bowl circulates around all the guests and the host, while

serving sake to each other. This sharing of the sake shows the *second rapprochement phase between the host and the guests* (the first one already started when the host came out to invite the guests into the tea pavilion). The main guest signals the end of lunch when he/she asks for the roasted-rice infusion. Every guest cleans the dishes thoroughly, just before putting them away. When the guests stop “making noise” on the dishes, the host knows that it is time to serve the dessert, which marks the lunch’s end. In this way, the lunch marks the end of the *ceremony’s first sequence*.

The *ceremony’s second sequence (Goza Iri)* takes place inside Chashitsu and belongs to *thick tea (Koicha)*. This sequence, according to Hammad (1987), is marked with a semiotic element: *the coal’s arranging act*. The charred coals must be changed. Next, the host lights some incense before placing the kettle on the brazier. Henceforth, the language of objects (**L5**) comes in and, little by little, deals with every aesthetic object that takes part in the ceremony: the main guest asks to watch the incense pot. After this visual test, done by every guest, the main guest will comment about the objects’ features with the host. After serving a cake, the host invites the guests to take a break (*Nakadachi*), and the guests stand up and speak about the calligraphy and the brazier’s flame. Later, they come out to the garden and sit down on the covered bench. During this break the host performs a displacement into the text-object’s *expression plane*, taking down Tokonoma’s calligraphy, replacing it with a flower arrangement (*Chabana*). Here, the guest replaces an aesthetic item with another because the former’s function is already finished; from now on he/she must give way to the development of a new item: *the flowers* (whose meaning-grasping ends when it conforms itself as the aesthetic item par excellence into the tea pavilion).

Afterwards, for preparing tea, the host brings into the room a big jar and a little one, both filled with water, and puts them together near the brazier. A *semantic regulation* happens here, as the items are geometrically arranged. Then, the tea preparation ends and the host signals loudly by striking the *gong* in the water room (*Mizuya*). This is the sign to show that the ES must go on. The guests stand up when they hear the sound of the gong, and they come back to the tea room after their ablutions at the washbasin. Indoors, every guest bows before the flower arrangement as the flame, while the host straightens up the items from the washbasin and pulls down the exterior blinds (which have been keeping the room in half-lights). Thus, the guest enters the tea pavilion through the water room. He/she takes the last necessary utensils and closes the door. The utensils are cleaned silently with hot water and the guest

prepares thick tea, adding three spoonfuls of Matcha per guest into the bowl before pouring boiling water into it. During this process, the guest handles a vessel where he transfers either the hot or the cold water. In this way, the guests drink, one by one, three and a half sips with the same bowl. The first who drinks tea is the honorary guest who, after his first sip, comments on the tea's taste. Immediately after, he cleans the part of the bowl where his lips have touched the *Kaishi*; then the second guest receives the bowl from the honorary guest and drinks tea in the same manner. Finally, the last guest drinks the remainder of the tea and returns the bowl to the main guest. This thick tea "distribution" is the most solemn and "strained" ceremonial moment. It is the only moment in which the host and the guests are gathered together behind closed doors.

After the tea's consumption, the guests examine the bowl and ask for the tea's jar and the spoon: these are aesthetically precious items. The *tea ceremony's second sequence* is described by a constant interplay between the culinary and objects codes. We can try imagining the tea ceremony as a communicative situation, a dialogue between several different languages where each one awaits, carefully, its own turn. The guest collects the utensils to take them to Mizuya. That's the way the *tea ceremony's third sequence starts*: the light tea sequence (*Usucha*). It starts with the *coal's realignment* and is marked by a slight break, a revaluation of the objects and the contemplation of the coals.

The main guest, with a kinema, asks to see the coals before the kettle is placed on the brazier. The guests take their positions one after another, before the brazier, to contemplate the ashes. The guest serves rice cakes (either sweet or dry), and carries the light tea's utensils. Then, he/she prepares a tea bowl for every guest. The guests eat the cakes, drink tea and admire the bowl. The light tea is served to the extent that guests ask for it. In this sequence there are no defined roles as in the previous sequence. The light tea is served in a different way, requiring not individual but collective participation in order to achieve a harmonious ending to the ceremony.

Finally, the main guest asks to observe the tea can and the spoon. The guest displays them and straightens the room. This is the last testing of the utensils. From now on, the objects have finished their function and the guest takes the guests out, closing the door when coming out. Immediately after he/she re-opens the door without entering the room and thanks the guests for attending the ceremony. Throughout a last kinema combination, the guests return the greetings and the main guest says to the host that taking them outside is unnecessary. The guests bow down before the flowers and

the brazier when leaving. The little guests' door closes and the host goes to the door and then moves to the guests' door to watch them. The guests comprehend this gesture and turn their back to bow down before him. The host returns the greetings and will stay there, standing, until the guests are no longer visible.

7. Summary and Conclusion

When Rikyu encoded the tea ceremony, he developed the semiosphere's *self-description mechanism*. What he did was to elevate the tea-making act to its final and more organized stage: that is because it *self-describes* and *the ceremony's norms are generated*. In this way we can gain access to the *meta-level*, where all tendencies converge. The self-description outcomes take us to the end of this section: every semiosphere's central developed sections are prone to losing their "flexibility" and the acquired dynamism (Lotman, 1990). Therefore, they become unable to generate more semiotic production and the subsequent development in their structures as well. This is verifiable when we account for tea in Japan, as in any other culture it could not reach the higher stages in its development as culinary text or ritual text. Its essence's idealization through ritual comprises the last stage in its cultural development. From now on, tea will not go beyond what other eastern cultures have achieved. However, it will keep unleashing cultural changes on them.

Following this stroll through the history of tea culture, we can sum up:

a) By means of the construction of tea's semiotic space we have accounted for tea's constitution process as a text. Before tea had acquired meaning as a drink it had to cross several manufacturing processes: Tea was a plant, and then the Chinese discovered that it had medicinal features if combined with water. Then, they added food to it and noticed that it had a good taste when prepared as a soup. In this way tea started to spread among the Chinese in the governing class. Thus, for the purpose of pleasing imperial desires and whims (the Chinese dominant-class), tea is imposed with another value, a *pleasing value*.

The use and expansion of tea within China gave birth to two legends that set themselves up as the founding discourses in each semiosphere.

b) Tea has kept evolving semiotically in the way in which the Chinese developed all its constitutive features. From being a soup they purified it until transforming it into a drink. As the Chinese society was grasping it, the tea-drinking act became a custom.

And it finally reached its height with the Tang dynasty between 618 - 907 AD. In this same period an imperial poet encoded and transformed its status: he dealt with each feature of its existence, the harvesting, the preparation and the manner of drinking as well. Therefore, we say that Lu Yu started its ritual process.

c) Tea came out from its native cultural space towards a meeting with the cultures that bordered China, places where the inhabitants were pleased with it and mixed it up with their own items, unleashing a re-functionalization process in every place that tea was translated. Thus, tea started to produce different meanings insofar as it was converging with new cultural codes.

d) Changes among tea culture occurred according to the dialogue process that it kept with other cultures. Some cultures received it and merely adapted it to their customs, without a meaningful change in the original structures. But other cultures changed it and maintained its development. What occurred in Japan with tea is the clearest example of the *changing mechanism*. Tea will not ever develop itself in any other place as in Japan. Finally, some other cultures will make imitations.

e) At the same time as tea was developed as a culinary text, it started to develop several types of semiosis. Thus, an inherent objects system was produced and it became a text. Another more complex system was made up of etiquette formulas, special gestures, a specific preparation and drinking protocol, as well as a ritual ceremony as the highest demonstration. Besides, it produced its own language whose main function was to describe all these processes isolated together.

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