

# CHINESE CULTURE IN A JAR OF RICE WINE

## FOUR DISTINCT FLAVORS OF CHINA

BY ALICE ZHANG

**I**n the memories from my childhood, every time that winter seemed to come, I anxiously awaited Chinese New Year by counting the days. It was indeed a day I anticipated. Every member of my family would put on new colorful outfits and enjoy a big dinner. Afterwards, we played with fireworks that shot flaming balls into the sky, suddenly bursting into giant glaring flower blossoms so bright and beautiful that all the blazing stars seemed to lose their shine. But none of these was the real reason I loved the Chinese New Year so much. What I was really waiting for was the chance when I could quietly sneak into the kitchen when no adult paid attention to me, swiftly open a jar of rice wine made by my grandma, carefully dip the tip of a chopstick into it, and taste its heavenly flavor with my eyes closed. It was a moment of excitement, as if I found my priceless grail on the coolest adventure; it was also a moment when I accepted rice wine as part of my bare identity without consciously knowing it. As I grew up, I started to realize there was something more in the rice wine, something beyond its taste and smell, something that when I looked into it, I saw a reflection of my home and of myself.

I remember I used to bug my grandma by asking her how she learned to make rice wine. She answered, “from your great grandma.” Then I asked her how my great grandma learned that, she answered, “from your great-great grandma.” Then I knew that this question could go on forever because the history of the rice wine was so long that no one could trace definitively its earliest creation. Only through many old Chinese legends could the origin of rice wine be explained, which had a mysterious aura around it. It was said that YiDi, the wife of the first dynasty’s king Yu, invented the brewing method. Yu was the king and hero who fought the Great Flood in the Xia Dynasty. One time, YiDi was delivering a jar of rice to her husband who had been working laboriously at the floodplain. Getting lost, YiDi preserved the jar of rice in a tree hole for three days, and when she finally found her husband and opened the jar, she was shocked to see that there was only yellowish, semi-transparent liquid left in the jar. However, to

appreciate his wife, Yu tasted a sip and magically, he immediately felt a power infused in his exhausted body. With the power of rice wine, Yu finally defeated the Great Flood after nine years, and thus saved the earliest Chinese civilization. At the same time, YiDi dedicated herself to fermenting rice and eventually created the brewing method. This legend proves that rice wine was once considered by Chinese ancestors to have a divine power that could defeat evil, while nowadays, although the supernatural power of rice wine is no longer believed true, its luck and blessing qualities are still widely accepted.

To get a sense of how rice wine is really made in current times, I officially interviewed my grandmother, an expert in making rice wine, who affirmed that the process of making rice wine is extremely simple: first, combine rice and yeast together; second, store the mixture in a container; third, store the mixture in the container for a long period of time. “What matters is not the ingredients added, but the time for fermenting,” my grandma emphasized at the end of the conversation. Thinking more about this simple process, I realized that the modern rice wine making process isn’t too different from the one described in the legend—‘when raw grain mingles with time, miracles happen.’ This process somewhat symbolizes Chinese culture itself: Chinese civilization began simply with some primitive seeds of grain and the YangZi river that ran through sediment for over 5,000 years, turning this land into a nation with great profundity and diversity.

The taste of rice wine reflects the “art of flavor” in Chinese culture. When I take a sip of rice wine, I feel that my gustatory sense is immediately lighted up by its slightly fiery taste. After the burning taste follows a pleasantly faint bitterness, and just as the bitter taste starts to fade away, a mixture of sweetness and sourness takes over. In the Han Dynasty, there was a notion of “five flavors” which stated that the mixture of bitter, sour, acrid, salty, and sweet achieves “harmony”. Very uniquely, rice wine itself includes four of the five flavors at the same time—bitterness, acridness, sourness, and sweetness, while any other food or drink hardly owns more than one flavor. Because of this special characteristic, rice wine is destined to be meaningful in Chinese culture. Each of the five flavors also associates and resonates with the model of a very traditional Chinese theory called the Five Phases Theory, which presumes that all phenomena of the universe and of nature can be broken down into five elemental qualities—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Only when the five phases are complete can the harmonious passage of time and season be ensured. Thus, in ancient China, people viewed rice wine as a sacred drink that guaranteed them a smooth and lucky year of life. When it comes to judge the grade of rice wine’s taste, “thickness” is the rating standard: the more condensed the wine, the better its quality. This fact is also reflected in the eyes of Chinese people, who value the “condensity” of a person more than anything else. In other words, means that a person can be respected only if he or she is enriched by knowledge, experience, and the “fermenting” of time.

Rice wine was seen to have the special power to bless a person’s spirit and purify his or her soul. In 1968, several jars of rice wine were found in the two Man-cheng tombs, which proved there was some special link between rice wine and spirituality. According to ancient Chinese mythology, when a person dies, his or her soul goes through the nine spheres of hell,

and in the ninth one the soul would leave the recycling centre and head for the reincarnation door. The person would meet Lady Meng Po at the gate, who would offer him or her the Soup of Forgiveness, making the person to forget the previous life or the time spent in hell. In this process, the existence of rice wine was considered critical because people believed it had the power to help a soul be reborn noble and wealthy. For the living spirits, rice wine was like a filter, cleansing the corruption and sins away and leaving the bare essence that belongs to a pure soul. The great poet in the Dong Jin Dynasty, Tao Yuan Ming, is such an example, who used rice wine to purify his spirit. Disappointed by the corruption and chaos in the monastic government, Tao quit politics and retreated to the country, indulging in farming, poetries, and homemade rice wine. In one of his poems, “Oh, Such a Shame,” he wrote, “Only by wine one’s heart is lit, only a poem calms a soul that’s torn,” to indicate that only wine and poetry brought him peace.

Living in Boston means living 6,000 miles away from home, away from the little kitchen I used to sneak into and stealthily look for the jar of rice wine, away from the culture in which I have grown up for sixteen years; however, whenever and wherever I take a sip of the rice wine, I realize that I am tasting the same savor created and enjoyed by Chinese ancestors living 5,000 years ago. Rice wine is a piece of evidence that has been passed on from generation to generation, symbolizing the origin of our Chinese culture and witnessing all the changes throughout Chinese history. It brings me through a gateway, which connects to the other side of the world - the world that has shaped my mind and formed my identity.

# ENDNOTES & REFERENCES

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