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CHAXI

PART II



A Story of Three Chaxi

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I wouldn't consider myself particularly exceptional at creating a chaxi; I just really like the process. I rarely come back from a walk in my neighborhood without a little fern I picked, a bud of yellow flowers or a fallen autumn leaf that I can admire next to my tea.

Ever since the beginning of my life with tea, the process of arranging a chaxi has been very intuitive to me. Chaxi is not about randomly adding things and hoping for the best—and yet, it can also be just that. It's a silent conversation with the moment, the season, the day and the occasion. Chaxi involves the mood you'd like to welcome your guests into, as well as a sense of honor for this space and time that we are lucky to share together.

I often don't know what my chaxi will look like until moments before it comes together. I once ran out of my house just before a tea ceremony wielding garden secateurs so I could snip a beautiful branch of white bougainvillea hanging over a fence that came to mind as I was laying down the tea runner (*chabu*). I don't usually like to be breathless when my guests arrive,

but those gorgeous blossoms were worth it. Other times, I trust that the right elements will present themselves when I least expect it, like a friend bringing over a cutting of natives from her garden, or a branch I found on a hike months before (now dried) suddenly coming to life with a new purpose.

Chaxi is a practice that deepens your relationship with the *now*. The process is indeed a mindful pursuit in focus and attentiveness; to embody a sense of awe and joy before you even sit down for tea. I always trust that the chaxi will express the “one encounter, one chance (*ichi go ichie*)” of the moment perfectly, and I am just there to lend a helping hand. It is also helpful to remind yourself when you get too “heady” about a chaxi, of Master Tsai Yizhe's words in the December 2019 issue that, “Nothing in this life is permanent, so a single *chaxi* needn't be an earth-shaking affair!” The creation of chaxi continually brings wonder and creative flow to my own life, so I would like to share with you the story behind three of my chaxi in the hopes that they may help you in yours.

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Chaxi One: Seaside Breeze with Baba

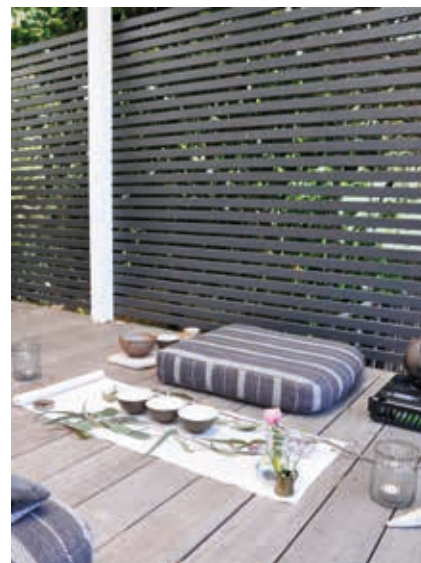
奶奶的海邊微風

My mum and I went away for our first weekend together in a long time to a small seaside town called Augusta in Western Australia. It is essentially the bottom of the world; the next stop is literally Antarctica. We were staying in a gorgeous restored vintage shack that used to belong to a shipwright. On this day, we were honoring the spirit of my dear Baba (my mama's mum) who passed away fifteen years prior. I knew I wanted to commemorate her with an outdoor tea ceremony. Baba often visits me in my daily tea sits, and I wanted my mum to feel her presence too. I set out three bowls for the three souls in attendance. Tea is the forever con-

necter, and of course Baba was with us, sitting with my mum and I for hours upon hours as we spoke about her and my mum's childhood memories.

The chaxi itself was very spontaneous. I found a Silver Princess Gum branch on a walk where the ocean becomes a river. My Baba's house in Rudovci in Serbia was surrounded by rose bushes, so there was a single rose on the chaxi to represent her. Also, there was a small sprig of Golden Wattle that we picked on the way back from collecting hot chips for dinner (an Australian delicacy). My Baba had mentioned a similar flowering tree in Serbia that was her favorite growing up.

Looking back on this chaxi, I admit I went a little "OTT" (over the top) by adding the candles and shells. I was a bit too on the nose with the theme, perhaps. I am slowly learning the merits of empty space and to practice simplicity in all my chaxi, even though I clearly could not help myself this time. A chaxi celebrates a reverence for everyday beauty. There is so much beauty in this pocket of the world. If any of us looks more carefully and takes the time to notice, we find such beauty all around us. We snuggled up in blankets, sipping tea outside in the breeze, knowing that those we truly love never really leave us.





Chaxi Two: On Leaving

關於離開

Tea brings the splendor of Nature to us indoors. It had been a long, hot summer and I was waiting in anticipation for the leaves to turn. I had just met a new tea friend named Laura who had recently moved back from Canada after living there for nine years. Canada is in many ways my soul's home—particularly the Canadian Rockies. I created this chaxi to honor our mutual love of autumn. I tried to be sparse but it's just not me. I love abundance! I scattered the leaves as if they had just fallen from a tree, trying not to let my perfectionist tendencies kick in to re-arrange them. They were perfect just so (albeit plentiful). I added one of the beeswax candles I rolled for the chaxi, placing it in a tree stump to represent the woods in Canada. It was a very cozy affair and it felt like we were in a cabin.

This chaxi ended up being a meditation on home. As Yanagi Sōetsu writes in *The Unknown Craftsman*: “Why do

we long for beauty? The Buddhists would reply that the world of beauty is our home and that we are born with a love for home. To long for beauty, therefore, is the same as to long for home.” I call this chaxi “On Leaving” (pun intended) because, but that was the strong theme that spontaneously came through while we were sitting in silence. We were drinking an old-growth Dian Hong called Groundless, which was not consciously chosen due to its name, but even that fit perfectly. This was a tea session that didn't want to end—bowl after bowl, we contemplated our own longings and recognized in each other the possibility of belonging to two places at the same time. I remember thinking: “Why must we leave the places we love?” and something answered: “To let go.”

I pulled out my copy of *A Year With Rilke* and opened to this message, which felt sent to us:

*Go forth to what? To uncertainty,
to a country with no connection to us
and indifferent to the dramas of our life.*

*What drives you to go forth?
Impatience, instinct,
a dark need, the incapacity
to understand.*

*To bow to all of this.
To let go —
even if you have to die alone.
Is this the start of a new life?*

This chaxi felt very cathartic, but for different reasons than I imagined it would when I created it. I thought it would be quite emotional to be reminded of a place we both love, and one so far away, but it was uplifting to sit with tea (another kind of leaf) and let our longings just be, letting go and being where we were.

Chaxi Three: All My Friends

我所有朋友們

I was inspired by Michael Pollan's book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, where he prepares a meal that he has hunted and grown by himself, and I wanted to make a chaxi where I gathered everything locally on my own. It was ambitious, and I didn't know how this would turn out, but it all started with a piece of silk...

I came across a stunning piece of earthy pink silk cloth at a local fair-trade shop. I was then told it was hand-dyed using eucalyptus leaves which blew me away as they are a sage green color (look it up!). It was then obvious to me that my extra special chaxi would be a homage to Walyalup (Fremantle), where I live now, by the ocean in Western Australia.

With my basket, I then went for a walk in a sacred local site called Booyeembara Park, which means "of the limestone hills" in the Aboriginal Nyoongar language. It was an important part of the Whadjuk dreaming story long before colonial settlement. I followed whichever path took my fancy. I came across a large flowering shrub of *Grevillea*—the only colorful flora in the park at this time of year in Djeran season—and so I asked quietly first and then picked a few stems. I later found out that Djeran is a time of red flowers and *Grevillea* (the small red spindly flower in the bottom left corner of my chaxi) were a traditional favorite among Indigenous Australian peoples for their sweet nectar, often called the original "bush lollies." As I was leaving the park, as serendipity would have it, on the side of the road near my car was a random deserted plank of wood. Amazingly, it was the perfect length for my chaxi! I cleaned it up when I got home, unsure how it

was to be incorporated, though I knew it had a role to play. It is satisfying to give such things a new life.

The morning of this "Sacred Sunday" ceremony, I was dropping off something to my friend Ella and in her garden was a native gumnut bush that looks spray-painted white but it's not. I have a particular love of gumnuts, so I gratefully took a small branch with me... Again, not sure exactly what for.

Making the chaxi, I reminded myself to be in the moment and to let whatever wants to happen arise. The tea stage was set with the eucalyptus-dyed silk *chabu*, then the plank fit perfectly underneath to provide an elegant shelf. Next, the *Grevillea* blossoms fit snugly in a tiny vase from Raneta Coolakova. I then placed the white gumnuts stem down (after another branch I gathered from Booyeembara Park did not go well). To add to the "Fremantle-ness" of it all, the small incense holder and the waste-water bowl (*kensui*) were both made by my friend Naomi Kido, a local Japanese potter. I also wore linen garments handmade by my talented friend Trish Bygott, who is a wonderful textile artist and designer. I then added a beeswax candle pillar to finish off the chaxi and learned a valuable lesson about excess when my guests sat down. The candle was an obstacle to navigate around in the ceremony and, while beautiful, it failed functionally, getting in the way of the tea service. I had to move it as soon as I realized this. As I mentioned, I am not known for restraint with my chaxi, but now I get it! Lessons steep in over time.

I call this chaxi "All My Friends" as an ode to the provenance of Fremantle and both the visible and invisible community that supports my tea practice.

I wrote in my journal afterwards: "I feel like I became the chaxi today." The energy of this ceremony is very hard to translate into words. It had its own intangible spirit. In the decadent silence, with streaks of sunlight on my face, and Hammock's *Silencia* hitting the perfect notes, my friends felt the same and the collective energy of the group brought so much wisdom and depth to the experience. As a line goes in one of my favorite books, "Beauty will dance with anyone who is brave enough to ask her."

Serving Tea

I have never made the same chaxi twice, and I never will. I have a lifetime of chaxi making ahead and I adore the process each time, ever more. As Wu De says, "The best questions come from within the practice." I have been asking myself: "Tea has given me so much, what would Tea like back?" Perhaps the experience of noticing Nature and adorning your chaxi for Her in this moment is enough. One of the many gifts of Tea is finding your way back to the beauty of the simplest everyday things. Whatever you give to your chaxi, it will give back to you through the space it holds for the tea ceremony—and give it tenfold. And then, as you are packing everything away, you smile at the *is-ness* of it all. Nothing is forever. Life is precious.







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