

Title: Discover the Culture of ‘Salt’

This week we invited Chair of Department of Japanese Language and Literature Fang Hsien Chou to be our lecturer today. The theme is “Discover the Culture of ‘Salt’.” The outline of this class is as below:

Salt, or table salt, is a necessary for us that we intake every day. The scientific name of salt is “sodium chloride (NaCl)” and its natural form as a crystalline powder or granular. It is odorless and it tastes salty and dissolve easily in water. It is composed primarily by two chemical elements “Sodium” and “Chlorine.” Sodium reacts exothermically with water and the reaction may cause radical chemical reactions such as warming and deflagration. Chlorine itself is a noxious gas. Two chemical elements that are harmful for human body combine together and become a necessary chemical compound for human body. This is truly the magic of nature.

Salt plays an important role in human life. Before a refrigerator was invented, salt is the best preservative to preserve vegetable, meat, fish, and milk. After our forefather found out that table salt can be used for marinating and preserving, certain food is no longer limited to certain season and people are able to bring food for long-distance trip. In the initial stage of history of producing salt, it was boiled in the iron pot with stove. This traditional way of producing salt is time-consuming, fuel-consuming, and can only produce small amount of salt. Thus, salt was expensive.

A saying goes, “if one does not eat salt one day, food does not taste good; if one does not eat salt for three days, he/she feels weak.” Salt was called “the king of hundred taste.” Another saying goes, “Who gain salt, who can rule the world.” Chi-yun Chang wrote in this book *Five Thousand Years of History of China*, “in the era of Shennong, there were record of sea salt. Prince Susha boiled seawater for salt and he did not follow Shennong’s advice but monopolized salt. Shennong did not conquer with forces but improved its culture and morality. It became an apparent contrast. Ultimately Prince Susha was overthrown by its people and chose Shennong to be their leader. Then the source of sea salt became stable.” From this story we can see that in a countries based on agriculture, salt is an important element to consolidate a country. Salt is a motive force to promote human’s improvement.

Regarding the word “salt,” earliest record in Chinese literature was Hsu Shih’s *Shuowen Jiezi* (Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters) and it indicated that “Salt means salty. The character of this word include 鹵 and its pronounce has the sound of 監 (Chien).” This description is based on its taste. The original meaning of this word “鹽” means “cook halogen in a container.” In Japan, “salt” was called しお (shio) and its origin is “produce from seawater.” It omitted the first part of the word “u shio” and shortened the

word to “shio.”

In Ancient Rome, salt was used as currency and it was paid to officials and soldier as salary. In Marco Polo's book *The Travels of Marco Polo* which reflect the history fact of 13th century China, it also mentioned that in Tibet, salt block was used as currency. Except that, when Egyptian Queen Cleopatra VII Philopator and Yang Guifei bathed, they added salt in bathing pool. In Ancient Rome, salt was used as beauty products.

In ancient European countries, they used to put salt on uncooked vegetable. The origin of the word “salad” (Slade in French) was from Latin “sal,” which means salt. The original meaning of “salad” means things with salt, things seasoned with salt, things marinated with salt. Its meaning later became “vegetable seasoned with salt.”

Bible mentioned salt many times. Salt industry was monopolized by governments in many countries in world history. Salt was also a way to control finance resources for many ancient governments. In Slavic traditional culture, bread and salt are most important ceremonious etiquette to welcome important guests. In the Western and the Eastern culture, salt was used for exorcism. In the West, people use salt to block door and window to prevent devil from entering the house. In the East, for example in Japan, after attending a funeral, people sprinkle salt on their own bodies for purification. Sumo wrestlers also spread salt in the sumo ring when they enter the sumo ring for purification. Vietnamese consider that buying salt on the first date of year can expel evil spirit and bring good luck for everyone.

As we can see, in the culture of various countries in the world, most countries have complicated feeling about salt. Some shows respect, some shows praise. Salt is not only necessary thing for living, but also closely related with Gods and spiritual thoughts. Its power should not to be underestimated.

Chair Fang starts with “sodium chloride (NaCl),” the chemical compound of salt. Two chemical elements that are harmful for human body combine together and become a necessary chemical compound for human body. This is truly the magic of nature.

Chair Fang continue to brief how our forefather discover “salt” and how to produce “salt” from historical and cultural aspects. The importance of “salt” for human is that it not only created history and culture but also kept influence history and culture. For example, in China, salt is an important element in establishing and consolidating a country. In Ancient Rome and Tibet, salt block was used as currency. Bible mentioned salt many times. Salt industry was monopolized by governments in many countries in world history. Salt was also a way to control finance resources for many ancient governments.

Chair Fang also analyzes salt from the perspective of language and culture. For example, in the East, in China Hsu Shen's *Shuowen Jiezi* indicated that “Salt means salty. The character of this word include 鹵 and its pronounce has the sound of 監(Chien).” This description is based on its taste. The original meaning of this word “鹽” means “cook halogen in a container.” In Japan, the word origin of Japanese word “塩 しお (shio)” (Salt) came from seawater “潮 うしお (ushio).” In Japanese, both “salt” and “潮” (seawater, tide) are called “しお (shio).” In addition, in the West, the word “Salad” (Slade in French) with

which we are familiar. Its word origin was also came from Latin “sal,” which means salt.

Then Chair Fang analyzes salt from the perspective of culture and belief. For example, in Slavic traditional culture, bread and salt are most important ceremonious etiquette to welcome important guests. In the Western and the Eastern culture, salt was used for exorcism. In the West, people use salt to block door and window to prevent devil from entering the house. In the East, in Japan, Sumo wrestlers also spread salt in the sumo ring when they enter the sumo ring for purification. After an unwelcome guest left the house, Japanese people sprinkle salt to expel bad luck. Vietnamese consider that buying salt on the first date of year can expel evil spirit and bring good luck for everyone. From these examples, we not only can see how “salt” influences the culture and customs of various countries in the world, but also can see the commonality toward salt in the culture of these countries.

Although salt can be seen everywhere in our daily life and it seems inconspicuous, it actually contains culture and wisdom lasting for thousand years.

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