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Balancing Heat and Clarity: Alcohol, Tea, and the Body in Premodern Chinese Texts

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This paper explores how two familiar beverages—tea (茶 cha) and alcohol (酒 jiu)—became philosophical and medical opposites in premodern China yet were always understood as partners in achieving bodily and moral balance. Drawing on eight key works ranging from the Western Han silk manuscripts to late Qing household recipe books, I show how the act of drinking was conceived as both therapy and self-cultivation. The *Recipes for Fifty-Two Ailments*: From the Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts (c. 200 BCE) establishes the pharmacological foundation by describing wine as a warm solvent guiding herbs through the body. By the Tang period, treatises such as Lu Yu's *Cha Jing* and the anonymous *Jiu Jing* portray tea and alcohol as moral emblems—clarity against indulgence—while *Cha Jiu Lun* gives them voices in debate. Later texts, from the *Shi Jian Ben Cao* and *Qian Jin Shi Zhi* to Qing works like *Sui Yuan Shi Dan* and *Sui Xi Ju Yin Shi Pu*, integrate dietary, medical, and aesthetic discourses. In addition to close reading, I employ computational text analysis to visualize how moral and physiological vocabularies cluster around these substances. Using a controlled lexicon of key terms (e.g., 清 clear, 毒 toxin, 德 virtue, 心 heart), I generate frequency charts, co-occurrence heatmaps, and network graphs to trace semantic relationships across the corpus. The results reveal two recurring clusters: a “cool” domain linking tea with clarity and integrity, and a “warm” domain linking wine with heat and passion. Together, they illustrate a persistent Chinese logic of healing in which good living depends not on abstinence but on harmonizing opposites—cool and hot, bitter and sweet, clarity and warmth.