The Tea Tray (Chaban): A Draining Board for Gongfu

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The tea tray, in summary:** The tea tray (chaban) is a draining board for the wet gongfu brewing style: it catches the rinse water, warming water and pour-offs so they do not soak the table. Genuinely useful if you brew gongfu, easily substituted otherwise.

The tea tray (chaban or cha pan) is the large draining board gongfu tea is often brewed on. It is not a decorative stage but a practical solution to a specific brewing style: gongfu involves deliberate spillage, rinsing and pouring, and the tray exists to manage the water. Understand the wet style and the tray stops looking like an indulgence.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in January 2026.

What it actually is

A tea tray is a flat platform, wood, bamboo, stone or ceramic, with a slatted or grilled top and either a hidden reservoir or a drainage tube, on which the gaiwan, pot, pitcher and cups sit during brewing. Water poured over or spilled around them drains away through the top into the reservoir or tube rather than across the table. It is, functionally, a built-in draining board for tea. Reservoir-style trays (a slatted top over a hidden 1 to 2 litre tank) are the common domestic form; drainage-tube trays run a spout to an external bucket and suit very long sessions.

Why the "wet" gongfu style needs it

Traditional gongfu brewing is deliberately wet: you rinse the leaves and discard the first quick infusion, you may warm pot and cups by pouring hot water over them and tipping it away, and complete pour-offs and small vessels mean drips and overflow. All of that water has to go somewhere. The tray makes this rinse-and-pour method practical without soaking the table, which is precisely why it exists, not as ceremony for its own sake but because the brewing style generates water by design. If you do not do the wet style, you do not need the tray, a point that immediately right-sizes the purchase.

The cheap alternatives

The function is "catch and drain the water", and you do not need an expensive carved tray to achieve it. A deep bowl or basin to pour waste water into, brewing over a draining board or large dish, a lasagne-sized pyrex dish, or a simple silicone tea mat with a raised edge all work, and many people brew gongfu perfectly

well with a bowl beside the gaiwan. A beautiful hardwood chaban is a pleasant object if you value it, but it does not improve the tea at all, the tea never touches it, so it is purely about convenience and aesthetics, which a straight guide states rather than implying it is essential kit.

How to use and care for it

Set the vessels on the tray, brew gongfu style pouring rinse water and warming water freely onto the tray, and empty the reservoir (or ensure the drain tube runs to a container) before it overflows; the single practical failure is forgetting to empty it. Care: dry wooden and bamboo trays after use and let them air fully, as constant damp causes mould, warping and splitting; this is the main maintenance issue. Use no soap on bamboo or unfinished wood, just hot water. Stone and ceramic trays are lower maintenance. Keep it clean of leaf debris, and bamboo will darken into a pleasant tea patina with use.

Is it worth it

Worth it if you genuinely brew wet-style gongfu often and want it tidy and convenient; entirely optional otherwise, and easily substituted with a bowl or basin. A basic bamboo chaban runs roughly 20 to 30 pounds and lasts years; hardwood and stone climb well beyond that for looks alone. It is a convenience and pleasure object, not a tea improver, so buy modestly, prioritise drainage capacity and easy drying over carving, avoid flimsy plastic trays and do not oversize for your space, and treat a fine tray as a luxury rather than a requirement, the consistent framing of this wiki's equipment pages.

The tea tray (chaban), at a glance

Question	Answer
What is a chaban?	A drainage tray used in Chinese gongfu tea, with a slatted top surface and a hidden reservoir below to catch poured-off water.
Why is it needed?	Gongfu tea uses a lot of preparatory water: warming pots, washing leaves, multiple short infusions. Water spills constantly; the tray catches it.
What is it made from?	Bamboo (most common), wood, stone or porcelain. Bamboo trays are the everyday standard.
How big?	Small portable trays around 25cm x 18cm; full ceremonial trays 40-60cm; large communal trays 80cm+.
Built-in drainage?	Most have a hidden tank below the slatted surface. A few have a drainage tube attaching to an external bucket.
Cost range?	£15-30 for everyday bamboo trays. £80+ for hardwood. £200+ for stone or art-tray styles.
Is it essential?	For wet-style gongfu yes; for dry-style or Western brewing no. A baking tray with paper towel will do in a pinch.
Care?	Empty the reservoir after each session. Rinse with hot water. Dry thoroughly to prevent mould. Don't use soap on bamboo or wood.

Reference noted

- Britannica: Bamboo

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Per-cup price is the only price that matters. Loose leaf usually wins; supermarket bags sometimes do too.

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