Tamil film culture and politics

Heritage expertise across Asia
Preservation through specific and diverse interventions

Chinese tea and Asian societies
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Tea originated in China and has spread worldwide over the past two centuries. Tea plants are highly sensitive to their natural environment and, even today, are mainly cultivated in subtropical Asian countries. The cultivation, processing and consumption of tea has influenced Asian societies for centuries, in various ways. In this edition of ‘China Connections’, inspired by Appadurai’s ‘Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy’, we explore how tea, as a commodity critically involved in modern world history, affected ancient China’s regional politics, and how it still permeates ordinary people’s lives in Asia.

The extensive influence of tea has also challenged researchers’ assumptions and knowledge, making an interdisciplinary approach and methodology essential for the study of tea. From China of the Tang Dynasty to California in America, from British Indian tea plantations to teahouses in Chaozhou, tea has influenced our societies dynamically and is still shaping our modern world. We hope that the following articles will unveil some of tea’s mysteries and enable you to enjoy more than just a cup of the beverage.

We encourage our readers to consider tea in both its macro- and micro-level contexts. On the one hand, tea is associated with regime change, long-distance transportation, the organization of production, and global capitalism, and so has propelled the emergence of the world trade system. On the other hand, tea is closely related to our consumption habits, our social organization and life-styles, and to some extent reflects our bodily perception of the environment.

Following the ‘path of tea’, five articles outline the transmission of tea and the interplay of tea-tasting arts in Asian societies, including China, Brunei, India and Taiwan. Researchers working from the diverse backgrounds of history, art history, anthropology and substance abuse, reveal in their studies the hidden nature of tea’s impact on economics, politics and people’s daily lives throughout Asia. These fascinating research findings also remind us of Okakura Kakuzō’s claim made approximately 200 years ago, when he asserted that “Asia is one”, a possible contemplation on his latter even more renowned work, ‘The Book of Tea’.

However, a discussion about tea in Asian societies should never ignore western influences. We cannot imagine those tea plantations in Darjeeling and Assam without the enthusiastic British search for the taste of tea. The circulation of Chinese tea around the world occurred at the same time as westerners invaded the old empire. Thus, global capitalism has been a critical factor, facilitating and becoming rooted in Asian societies. In the modern era, tea’s globalisation is significantly accelerating and becoming more widely appreciated than ever before.

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Tea and everyday life: observations from Chaoshan, Guangdong

Peter d’Abbs

What place do the rich traditions of Chinese tea culture hold in the face of rapid social change and changing, increasingly consumerist society? To explore this question, I travelled to a region renowned for its traditional tea culture: the Chaoshan (潮州) region in eastern Guangdong province, home of gongfu tea—one of the most elegant and refined of China’s diverse tea-drinking traditions. Through in-depth, informal interviews, and observations over several trips to Chaoshan and other centres in Chaoshan, I tried to understand what gongfu tea meant for people in Chaoshan.

The first thing that became apparent to me was how deeply gongfu tea was integrated into the everyday lives of people of all kinds of social background. As one of my interviewees explained, it has ‘seeped into our bones’. People who were born and raised in Chaoshan did not consciously learn about gongfu tea, they simply came to know about it as they grew up. The integral place of gongfu tea had three dimensions: spatial, temporal and social.

Spatially, gongfu tea was everywhere. In the workplaces, shops or homes that I observed, a gongfu tea set was always found in regular use. Temporally, gongfu tea is a purchase woven into the rhythms of everyday life: at home, after dinner, and in shops, whenever trading is slow, out comes the gongfu tea. And in doing so, affirming the drinkers’ identity in a network of social relationships through which a distinctive and valued regional culture is transmitted. And lastly, gongfu tea is a highly refined way of preparing and drinking tea, using small teapots, preferably of Yixing or Chaozhou clay, or porcelain gaiwan, in which to prepare a very strong brew, most frequently of the locally grown, semi-fermented Fenghuang Dancong (凤凰单丛) tea. This is poured into small cups of around 30 ml capacity for drinking repeated infusions from the same tealoves. From my observations, preparing and drinking gongfu tea requires attentiveness to procedural details – to being jiangju (講究) – but this was achieved, not by slavishly following a rigid sequence of steps as some literary accounts suggest, but by showing skill and dexterity. A gongfu tea-drinking occasion creates its own tempo. Regardless of whether the occasion lasts ten minutes or two hours, during this time participants put aside the incessant demands for haste that punctuate the world around and appropriate the tea tempo.

For most of my research participants, drinking gongfu tea was seen as “part of our lives”. Some participants, however, had chosen to elevate their tea-drinking to a kind of art.

Again, this was accomplished by cultivating expertise and discernment in one or more of several domains, for example, creating a special space for drinking tea; seeking out high quality tea utensils; exploring philosophical and spiritual aspects of tea-drinking; developing a capacity to understand and appreciate the qualities and properties of any given tealeaves, and knowing where and how to purchase teas of the finest quality. Today’s globalised world is characterised by what some sociologists have described as transnational streams of ‘cultural capital’, in which cultural objects from one place are appropriated, redefined and repackaged for deployment as commodities elsewhere.

In the case of Chaoshan gongfu tea, it is possible to detect at least three such ‘streams’. Firstly, within China, gongfu tea modelled on Chaoshan practices has been taken up by many non-Chaoshan people, particularly in business settings, as a vehicle for interacting and negotiating with associates. Secondly, in the emergence of contemporary tea art in Taiwan that began in the 1970s, a style of drinking adapted from Chaoshan gongfu tea came to be regarded not as one among many regional styles in China, but as Chinese tea art per se. Thirdly, outside China gongfu tea is being promoted as an authentic, national Chinese ‘tea ceremony’, by implication analogous to the well-known Japanese tea ceremony, with cultural roots that go back to ancient times. This last claim is bolstered by historically dubious suggestions that Chaoshan gongfu tea is a modern manifestation of Tang dynasty tea-drinking practices as described by Lu Yu in the earliest extant treatise on tea, the Chaowu Classic of Tea.

Where these cultural streams will flow in future is a question for another day. In the meantime, in at least one region of China, traditional tea culture continues to enrich the lives, not just of a privileged cultural elite, but of people everywhere.
The Global Tea Initiative at UC Davis

Katharine P. Burnett

In 2015, the University of California, Davis launched the Global Tea Initiative (GTI) within the Study of Tea Culture and Science (GTI) is now transitioning to become the Global Tea Institute for the Study of Tea Culture and Science. GTI is committed to producing tea research with a global perspective and supporting research on tea from anywhere in the world, in any discipline, and with any methodology.

GTI’s mission is to promote the understanding of Camellia sinensis through evidence-based research. Its goals are many. They include fostering research through colloquia and symposia, lecture series and workshops, and through the extended efforts of research and teaching on campus and through national and international partnerships and exchanges. Developing a curriculum for undergrads and grads, as well as extramural courses for industry specialists and the general public. When GTI becomes an institute, we envision a dedicated building with tea rooms and gardens, exhibition space for narrating the stories of tea culture and science around the world, meeting and teaching space, a sensory theater, and more. Although Camellia sinensis is the primary focus, GTI scholars acknowledge not only that many things are consumed as tea, but also may diverse cultures exist around the world.

All merit study.

Students are eager for formal classes and research opportunities. Some of us are already making this possible in our home departments. This year, seven GTI members teach a trans-disciplinary First Year Seminar on Global Tea Culture and Science, a course aimed at new students on campus. This course is providing the basis from which to build a permanent course on Global Tea Culture and Science, and then the curricula on Global Tea Culture and Science. GTI aims to collaborate and partner with scholars, research institutes, and the tea industry, nationally and internationally. With its broad mandate for research and teaching across the disciplines and from a global perspective, GTI aims to work collegially and flexibly with others, with an inclusionary attitude.

Shuenn-Der Yu

The globalization of Chennian and Qingxiang

Studying the globalization of ‘aging’ (chennian 陳年) and ‘fresh fragrance’ (qingxiang 清香) allows us to understand how Taiwan has influenced the development of Chinese tea art and culture in recent years. How the flavors known as chennian and qingxiang were discovered or created, recognized, and evaluated across Asian markets has been the focus of my research for the past fifteen years.

For Taiwanese knew of Pu’er tea before the 1990s; nonetheless, the fervor for Pu’er emerged in Taiwan, rather than in Hong Kong where this aged tea had been stockpiled for decades. The craze then spread back to Hong Kong, and soon to Guantong, Yunnan and Northeast Asia.

While Pu’er tea was gaining significance in trade, the high-mountain tea (gaoshancha 高山茶) from the tea plantations in the high mountains of Taiwan (established in the late 1970s), quickly became Taiwan’s most popular tea. Remarkably, the flavor preference and appreciation rituals in Taiwan had a profound influence on other kinds of partially fermented teas. The popularity of Pu’er and high-mountain tea led to the emphasis of two new flavor categories—chennian for the former and qingxiang for the latter.

In fact, chennian was a more refined taste for Pu’er by Taiwanese merchants and experts in the late 20th century. The development of chennian revealed the socio-cultural and historical processes wherein value was allocated and meaning constructed by the tea merchants, collectors, consumers and the government. Pu’er tea from Yunnan was first introduced to Taiwan in the 1970s through Hong Kong, but this ‘strikely’ tea was not well accepted by Taiwan’s popular tea culture that highly appreciated fragrance. Nonetheless, the sophisticated tea art in contemporary Taiwan, which was advanced by the government to increase domestic tea consumption, facilitated the invention of appreciation rituals and evaluation standards for Pu’er tea. After years of exploratory research in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Taiwan tea merchants and experts established an evaluation standard for Pu’er tea according to the degree of aging: the longer preserved Pu’er tea has better taste and thus has higher value.

In the late 1980s, as the tension between mainland China and Taiwan started to relax, Pu’er tea became better recognized and accepted by the Taiwanese under the ‘China Fever’ (zhongguo de 中國熱). The return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 also accelerated the growth of the Pu’er tea market in Taiwan;
Tea production in southern China and its political implications during the Tang and Song Dynasties

Yi Zou

Throughout the Tang and Song dynasties (618–1279), the center of China's economy gradually shifted southwards into the vallies of the Yangtze and Huai Rivers—a region that is now known as 'southern China'. Moreover, a significant fiscal reform on taxation took place during the mid-Tang era; the government started to collect a tea tax, which gradually became an important source of government revenue. This practice was legitimized in 793 AD through a law imposing a 10 percent tax on tea. Before that, the government only collected land taxes and commodity taxes on textiles. This tax reform was closely related to the expansion of tea plantations, as well as changes in the broader context of economy and politics during the Tang and Song dynasties.

Tea production in China was originally concentrated in Sichuan and Yunnan, and expanded east and southward to the Yangtze River during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Up to the Tang, tea plantations had prospered in southern China. Parts of southern China, like the hilly areas in southern Anhui, had already been known for tea production during the Tang dynasty. Historical records show that around 882 AD, 70–80% of the residents in Oinin (今寧), a county in Anhui, relied on tea cultivation. During the spring harvest season, merchants would flock in to purchase tea with silver or silk, and then sell the tea in other parts of China or abroad. During this time, the once backward hilly areas developed into affluent counties that contributed abundant taxes. Local elites, such as the Zheng Chuan (郑傳) family, who accumulated enormous wealth from tea trading, founded a militia for self-defense during the turmoil in late Tang. Later, the Northern Song dynasty re-unified the Central Plains, but was confronted with chronic threats from nomadic regimes in the north. Tea, as a profitable business and means to cover the military expenditure, was a key form of protection for nomadic groups, became a strategic commodity for the government. Therefore, the government controlled tea production. Thus, the government continued to adjust the tea acts (chaofa 茶法). It also promoted a government monopoly on tea to maximize fiscal revenue and to control the outflow of tea products. As a result, the merchants, who paid a high price for their official tea licenses (jīn 金), armed their caravans to protect their tea products. At the same time, the highly lucrative tea business attracted many international trade and increasing numbers of armed smugglers seeking to counter the government monopoly. Consequently, a distinct military-musical and trading system developed by the tea giants appeared in provinces such as Hubel, Jiangxi, and Anhui. Later, during the north-and-south military confrontation between the Great Jin and the Southern Song dynasty, these local militias played active roles to guard their own properties. When the Yuan dynasty replaced the Song, the government appointed the surrendering militia leaders to rule their own regions. For example, Wang Yunlong (汪雲龍) from Wujuan (吳漸) County, Anhui, was appointed as a local administrator, and his offspring inherited his authority to manage tea taxes in Anhui and Jiangxi.

This historical vignette indicates that tea production and trade advanced the development of the hilly areas in southern China during the Tang and Song dynasties, turning infertile counties into prominent tax contributors. The loose control of the government over these originally barren and backward areas facilitated the growth of local forces in the new prosperous era of tea. However, as the government quickly became aware of the financial and strategic significance of tea, it extended central administration into these areas, despite the initial interdependence between the central and local forces, the government eventually absorbed these local forces as a strategic force and began to focus over lucrative and strategic tea resources.

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