

# The Newsletter



Tamil film culture and politics



The Focus

## Heritage expertise across Asia

Preservation through specific and diverse interventions



Chinese tea and Asian societies

# Chinese tea and Asian societies

Kunbing Xiao

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.

We encourage our readers to consider tea in both its macroscale and microscale 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 'the flow of tea', five articles outline the transmission of tea and the interplay of tea-tasting arts in Asian societies, including China, British 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, infiltrating and becoming rooted in Asian societies. In the modern era, tea's globalisation is significantly accelerating and becoming more widely appreciated than ever before.

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 tea houses 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.

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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 everyday lives of people in a fast-changing, increasingly consumerist society? To explore this question, I travelled to a region renowned for its traditional tea culture: the Chaoshan (潮汕) 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 Chaozhou and other centres in Chaoshan, I tried to understand what *gongfu* tea meant for people in Chaoshan.<sup>1</sup>

The first finding 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 woven into the rhythms of everyday life: at home, after dinner; and in shops, whenever trading is slow, out comes the *gongfu* tea set. Above all, drinking *gongfu* tea can be considered to be a social activity, nurturing relationships with family, friends and associates, and in doing so, affirming the drinkers' identity in a network of

social relationships through which a distinctive and valued regional culture is transmitted.

As literary descriptions tell us, *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* (鳳凰單叢) tea. This is poured into small cups of around 30 ml capacity for drinking repeated infusions from the same tealeaves. From my observations, preparing and drinking *gongfu* tea requires attentiveness to procedural details – to being *jiangjiu* (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 appreciate the tea slowly.

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 oldest extant treatise on tea, the *Cha Jing* or Classic of Tea. (In fact, *gongfu* tea almost certainly originated in the 18th century in the Wuyi mountain area of Fujian province.)

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.

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### Notes

- 1 d'Abbs, P. 2017. *Art as Everyday Practice: A Study of Gongfu Tea in Chaoshan, China*. Master of Arts with Honours, University of New England, Armidale, NSW.
- 2 Appadurai, A. (ed.) 1986. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press; Palumbo-Liu, D. & Gumbrecht, H. (eds) 1997. *Streams of Cultural Capital: Transnational Cultural Studies*. Stanford University Press.
- 3 Shuenn-Der Yu. 2016. 'Taiwan and the Globalization of Puer Tea: The Role of the Taste of Aging', *Cultural and Religious Studies* 4(5):310-320; doi:10.17265/2328-2177/2016.05.004



Gongfu tea. Creative Commons. Courtesy Cosmin Dordea on Flickr.

## The Global Tea Initiative at UC Davis

Katharine P. Burnett

In 2015, the University of California, Davis launched the Global Tea Initiative for the Study of Tea Culture and Science (GTI). 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 *Camelia sinensis* through evidence-based research. Its goals are many. They include fostering knowledge about tea through colloquia and symposia, lecture series and workshops, and through the extended



Global Tea Initiative with photograph of Tea Garden Village, Qinghai. Photograph courtesy of Zhong Zhao, Green Camel Bell NGO, China.

efforts of research and teaching on campus and through national and international partnerships and exchange; 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 tearooms 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 *Camelia sinensis* is the primary focus, GTI scholars acknowledge not only that many things are consumed as tea, but also many diverse tea 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 team-taught 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.

**Katharine P. Burnett** Associate Professor of Art History at UC Davis, is Founding Director of UC Davis's Global Tea Initiative for the Study of Tea Culture and Science at the University of California, Davis. Her interdisciplinary research explores how cultural values are manifested in art, what it means to collect art, and now also, what we can learn about cultures and societies through studying individual and diverse tea cultures. For more information about GTI, please contact Katharine Burnett, [kpburnett@ucdavis.edu](mailto:kpburnett@ucdavis.edu). To inquire about supporting the program, please contact Assistant Dean Charlene A. Mattison, [cmattison@ucdavis.edu](mailto:cmattison@ucdavis.edu)

## The globalization of Chennian and Qingxiang

Shuenn-Der Yu

Studying the globalization of 'aging' (*chennian* 陳年) and 'fresh fragrance' (*qingxiang* 清香) allows us to understand how Taiwan has influenced the development or resurgence 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. Few 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 Guangdong, 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 newly defined taste for Pu'er by Taiwanese tea 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 was 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 'stinky' 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 scale 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 re* 中國熱). The return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 also accelerated the growth of the Pu'er tea market in Taiwan;

the Hong Kong tea traders sold off their aged Pu'er tea to Taiwanese merchants because of the uncertain future of Hong Kong's economy. The Pu'er tea fad was developed in the mid-1990s in Taiwan, and soon spread to the rest of Asia and the world. Today, one aged tea cake can be sold for as high as 100,000 USD. Along the globalization of the Pu'er tea products was the legitimization of *chennian* as the criterion to evaluate Pu'er and other aged teas. This criterion also had an influence on the fresh teas; for example, big-tree tea (*dashu cha* 大樹茶) of better leaf quality for potential aging is preferred in the market.

*Qingxiang* (fresh fragrance) has a different story. It has been widely used to describe the fresh aroma of tea in Taiwan both in history and in modern times. However, in the mid-1990s, *qingxiang* was adopted to describe the unique flavor of high-mountain tea to distinguish this newly invented tea from Oolong tea. This *qingxiang* flavor partially depends on the special materiality of tea leaves from high altitudes, but mainly is the result of a deliberate manipulation of the manufacture process to create a new tea.

Thus, the life history of *qingxiang* reveals the co-evolution of technology to ensure



Tea tasting with double cups (*shuangbei pinming* 雙杯品茗) were invented when high-mountain tea became popular in 1980s. Photograph courtesy of Shuenn-Der Yu.

this flavor is consistently produced and well appreciated. For example, a hot-air withering machine was used to counteract the fickle weather in mountain areas and to stabilize the chemical reactions; a new utensil (the sniffing cup) and a new style of tea tasting with double cups (*shuangbei pinming* 雙杯品茗) were invented to promote this *qingxiang* flavor. As *qingxiang* has become a preferred taste in Taiwan, it gradually transformed the flavor, aroma and values of other teas in Taiwan, as well as in Fujian, Yunnan and North Vietnam. Teas now tend to go through reduced fermentation and baking to produce a similar *qingxiang* flavor. For instance, Anxi County

in Fujian started to produce the *qingxiang*-style variation of *Tieguanyin* (鐵觀音) called 'green *Tieguanyin*'. On the other hand, since high-elevation cultivation is considered the key to achieve the *qingxiang* flavor, a concept called 'mountain-top aroma', similar to the idea of French terroir, which emphasizes the micro-environmental ecology and local flavor of teas, has become the predominant factor in determining the qualities and thus values of high-mountain tea.

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Puer tea cakes are being sun dried in Yiwu, the famous Puer tea production/distribution center since the Qing times. Photograph courtesy of Shuenn-Der Yu.

## Chinese and Indian teas and the history of global capitalism

Andrew B. Liu

Tea, originating in China and later widely cultivated in colonial India and other Asian societies, was one of the key factors in the creation of a global market. Tea sales from China spiked after the 1842 Nanjing Treaty and the attendant creation of the treaty port system. At the same time, British colonialists established their own tea industry in the northeast Indian territory of Assam. Over the second half of the century, the Chinese and Indian industries engaged in a back-and-forth competition for consumers in Europe and the U.S. In both regions, the first systematic calculations of labor (conducted in the twentieth century) revealed that each of the tea industries employed more workers than any comparable urban sector in each country. In short, tea was central to the creation of modern capitalism in both regional societies.

Past scholarship has acknowledged the massive expansion of tea cultivation and production in Asia during this period, but it has been skeptical whether market competition actually transformed the economic conditions in those regions.



Tea cellar in Ruiquan (Wuyi) Rock Tea Factory. This tea cellar was inspired by wine cellars from western wine culture. Courtesy: Ruiquan Wuyi Rock Tea Museum.

For instance, the China trade relied upon smallholder peasant households, and the Indian industry was powered by an indentured workforce. Historians have labeled both types of production as 'precapitalist' in nature.

In fact, tea production in Asia was constantly evolving and dynamic. Chinese merchants and British planters introduced techniques that were recognizably industrial and modern. For instance, much like the classic English factories of the industrial revolution, they increased the scale of operations in response to greater demand,

and relied upon a strategy of hiring primarily low-wage workers—women and children—in an attempt to save expenses.

But perhaps the most notable instance of the subtle 'industrial' character of rural tea production in Asia was the way in which tea plant managers developed systems for rationalizing production through the careful calculation, measurement, and disciplining of their employees' working time. This was true for tea production in both China and India. For instance, in the Chinese tea districts of southern Anhui (Huizhou), we have manuals written by merchant and workshop owners

that use precise calculations to designate how quickly one should roll and roast tea. Huizhou factory managers would monitor working time by lighting incense sticks that burned at a constant rate. With the sticks as a baseline, the managers rewarded workers based upon how many pounds of tea they could process in a given time. Similarly, in the plantations of Assam, we have recorded observations that the 'tea gardens' in the remote valleys of the Brahmaputra River set their clocks differently from the rest of the surrounding Indian society, a system they called 'Garden Time'. British planters sought to maximize the amount of daytime spent working, so they set their clocks backwards an extra hour such that, in the words of one account in Bengali: "when the gong strikes six o'clock, it is not quite (*thik na*) six o'clock". Planters then divided up the day into twelve equal units of sunlight, in which work was carefully regulated by the ringing of gongs and the constant weighing of leaves plucked.

Such examples suggest that instead of thinking of Chinese and Indian tea as the apex of the traditional, pre-industrial economies of Asia, we should view the history of tea as a pivotal moment in the history of capitalism, both within China and India as well as in their connection to the rest of the world.

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## 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 valleys 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 862 AD, 70-80% of the residents in Qimen (祁門) County, Anhui depended on tea cultivation. During the spring harvest season, merchants would flock in to purchase tea with silver or silks, 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 (鄭傳) 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 necessary for protection from nomadic groups, became a strategic commodity for the Song government. Thus, the government continued to adjust the tea acts (*chafa* 茶法). It also promoted a government monopoly on tea to maximize fiscal revenue and to control the outbound flow of tea products. As a result, the merchants, who paid a high price for their official tea licenses (*yin* 引), armed their caravans to protect their tea products. At the same time, the highly lucrative tea business attracted increasing numbers of armed smugglers seeking to counter the government monopoly. Consequently, local militias organized by the tea giants appeared in provinces such as Hubei, 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 Wuyuan (婺源) 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 the local forces, the government eventually absorbed the local forces and gained control over lucrative and strategic tea resources.



Tang Dynasty. Anonymous: A Palace Concert (*Gongyuetu* 宮樂圖) Ten court ladies in late Tang Dynasty were sitting around a table and drinking tea. Courtesy: National Palace Museum (Taiwan).

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