

# 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.

Kunbing Xiao is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Southwest Minzu University; the CGA-ARC postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Global Asia (2017-2018) NYU Shanghai; and Regional Editor of 'China Connections'.  
[xiaokunbing@gmail.com](mailto:xiaokunbing@gmail.com)

## 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.

Peter d'Abbs is Professorial Research Fellow, School of Public Health, University of Queensland, Australia.  
[p.dabbs@uq.edu.au](mailto:p.dabbs@uq.edu.au)

### Notes

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