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Yingkun Hou

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [annie.hou.621@gmail.com](mailto:annie.hou.621@gmail.com)

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TASTING TEA, TASTING CHINA: TEAROOMS AND THE EVERYDAY CULTURE  
IN DALIAN

by

Yingkun Hou

B.S., China Agriculture University, 2011  
M.A., The University of Southern Mississippi, 2015

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

Department of Anthropology  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
August 2021

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

TASTING TEA, TASTING CHINA: TEAROOMS AND THE EVERYDAY CULTURE  
IN DALIAN

by

Yingkun Hou

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of Anthropology

Approved by:

Dr. David Sutton, Chair

Dr. John McCall

Dr. Paul Welch

Dr. Anthony Steinbock

Dr. Amy Trubek

Dr. Jinghong Zhang

Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

March 26, 2021

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Yingkun Hou, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Anthropology, presented on March 26, 2021, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: TASTING TEA, TASTING CHINA: TEAROOMS AND THE EVERYDAY CULTURE IN DALIAN

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. David Sutton

Tea is a beverage that has long been taken to symbolize a key aspect of Chinese tradition and history. However, it is one of many beverages drunk in contemporary China, where in recent times knowledge of wine has come to stand for the West and as a much-desired cultural capital. This dissertation examines everyday tea drinking and tea tasting in Dalian—a northeastern city in Liaoning Province, China. Through ethnography of practices, processes, and interactions taking place in daily events of tea drinking and tasting, this dissertation provides a window into social conflicts, ideas and desires, historical consciousness, and national identity, individualism, and collectivism, in a contemporary Chinese city. It explores questions of why and how people learn to taste tea by acquiring certain levels of knowledge and skill that is valued in tea culture, and how people drink and taste tea in different social scenarios and contexts. Then it explores the significance of tea drinking and tasting to people in their daily life and as part of ritualized social relations, and specifically in contrast to beverages such as wine. As representative of Chinese culture, tea tasting raises questions of how sensory capabilities should be honed and deployed, and the relationship between so-called “objective” scientific knowledge of taste and the tacit, embodied skill that is associated with traditional cultural understandings.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When one is in China, one is compelled to think about her, with compassion always, with despair sometimes, and with discrimination and understanding very rarely. For one either loves or hates China.

—My Country and My People

Lin Yutang 1939, 3

*Cha*<sup>1</sup> (Chinese character for tea, written as 茶), *pin cha*<sup>2</sup> (tasting tea, *pin* 品: taste), and *yin cha*<sup>3</sup> or *he cha*<sup>4</sup>(drinking tea, *he*<sup>5</sup> and *yin*<sup>6</sup>: drink<sup>7</sup> ) are not entirely foreign to people in the

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<sup>1</sup> 茶. If the Chinese word or phrase cannot be translated accurately in English, I would use italic *pinyin* (Chinese phonetics) and literal translation in parenthesis. If there is accurate translation in English, I would put the *pinyin* in parenthesis.

<sup>2</sup> 品茶

<sup>3</sup> 饮茶

<sup>4</sup> 喝茶

<sup>5</sup> 喝

<sup>6</sup> 饮

<sup>7</sup> In Chinese, *pin yin* 品饮 as a single word, means the action of tasting (*pin*) and drinking (*yin*) tea. In this dissertation, I will use “drinking and tasting” in most cases to refer to this Chinese word unless further clarified for emphasis on one of them.

West. To many people in the West, drinking tea can be a personal, private, and relaxing event: pick out a mug from the cabinet, choose a preferred flavor from the variety pack of prepackaged tea bags (what Chinese call *daipao cha*<sup>8</sup>) that was probably purchased from the grocery store, add it to the mug, wait for the kettle to whistle, and finally pour hot water into the mug, making sure the thread and tag stay outside the mug. In probably less than a minute, you will take the tea bag out, throw it away, and then start to enjoy tea from the mug. Knowing that I am from China and have been conducting research about tea, many Americans have asked me to help them choose some tea that does not have too much caffeine so they could drink it at night without risking sleeplessness. For them, there is often a sense of slowing down and resting in those moments of drinking tea.

While Chinese people do use tea bags, it is only common in situations where there is no other choice or other forms of tea, or when it is too much to go through the tea making process—it is convenient if one is just after *he cha* or *yin cha* (drink tea) but not *pin cha* (taste/appreciate tea; *pin* means taste, savor, and even appreciate). Therefore, when people talk about tea culture, or when *pin* and *yin* are used together to indicate appreciating tea or talking about tea culture in China, people usually don't include the tea bags most familiar to Americans. Many would consider a tea bag a poor substitute for “real tea” and probably only slightly better flavored than bottled tea-flavored beverages like “*bing hongcha*”<sup>9</sup>(iced red tea) or “*moli qingcha*”<sup>10</sup>(jasmine-flavored tea). Both taste rather sweet and are consumed cold.

---

<sup>8</sup> 袋泡茶

<sup>9</sup> 冰红茶, a common type of red tea flavored beverage.

<sup>10</sup> 茉莉清茶, a common type of jasmine tea flavored beverage

In “Coffee: The Bottomless Cup,” Lawrence Taylor notices that in America, while restaurants produce coffee en masse and guests can get coffee refilled for free, it is the opposite in England (1976). The English make tea by the pot and charge no extra for refills, but people must pay for refills for their coffee. He argues that this fact suggests that what coffee means to Americans is probably similar to what tea means to the English. Similarly, in the US, many places such as churches, the waiting areas of banks, and buffet restaurants offer both complimentary coffee and tea. While fresh coffee is kept in thermoses or heated coffee pots, tea typically comes only in the form of different flavored bags next to thermoses of hot water (Sometimes the water is not even hot enough to bring out the flavor of the tea.). In similar locations in China, it is the opposite. It is guaranteed that there is fresh hot water and many different varieties of loose-leaf tea for people to choose from, while many don’t even offer coffee. If they do offer coffee, however, it would most likely be instant coffee powder<sup>11</sup> in a paper cup.

Therefore, when people ask me about tea culture in China, I would usually use an oversimplified analogy: comparing how people drink tea here with tea culture in China would be like comparing drinking instant coffee to finely brewed, freshly ground espresso in America. As Lawrence Taylor points out, both instant coffee and tea bags have standardized flavor and little complexity compared to the fresh varieties people spend time learning to enjoy and appreciate (1976). Just like good coffee cannot be instant, tea bags are also unable to capture the complex sensory experience one would appreciate in a more elaborate form. People I interviewed in

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<sup>11</sup> *su rong ka fei*, 速溶咖啡

China told me that the tea used in making most tea bags—*hong sui cha*<sup>12</sup> (red chopped tea)—is the leftovers (*bian jiao yu liao*<sup>13</sup>) from making better tea that cannot be made into any other form of decent tea. Therefore, when someone tells me that they love (*ai* 爱 or *xihuan*<sup>14</sup> 喜欢) tea or enjoy drinking tea in China, I can be certain that they are not referring to *daipaocha*.

Although many Chinese agree that tea is an important part of their life, what tea means to people in China is a complex question. The vast regional and cultural differences in China, and the idiosyncratic habits and experiences of various groups, and even individuals, result in very different answers to this question. In fact, the answer will almost always include individual preferences. Nevertheless, one thing is definitive—just like wine and coffee, the process of drinking/tasting (*pinchang*<sup>15</sup>), or rather, the bodily experience of the taste (*wei*<sup>16</sup>), is essential to the appreciation of tea (*pincha*). In this dissertation I explore the ways that learning to taste tea, which “happens” in people’s individual bodies, is externalized as a culturally meaningful experience that speaks to questions of life in contemporary China and the relationship of sensory experience to people’s negotiations of symbolic meanings and social relations. In drawing on interviews and observations with people living in the city of Dalian, as well as my own experience of tasting tea, I hope to show how the anthropological study of taste can contribute to broader questions of current concern: from the relationship of “local” and “global” identities to the ways ideas of “tradition” and “history” are incorporated into everyday life.

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<sup>12</sup> 红碎茶

<sup>13</sup> 边角余料

<sup>14</sup> *Ai* (爱) is the character for love but in many cases when people say they *ai* something, it means the same as *xihuan* (喜欢), which is the word for like.

<sup>15</sup> 品尝, more detailed discussion on *pinchang* see later chapters.

<sup>16</sup> In Chinese, *wei*, 味, has many meanings, which will be discussed later.



## Exploring Taste: Connecting Food and the Senses

### The development of food anthropology

In *Food in Chinese Culture*, Kwang-chih Chang suggests that “one of the best ways of getting to a culture’s heart would be through its stomach,” pointing to the intimate relationship between food and culture (Chang and Anderson 1977, 4). As an indispensable substance to human survival, food appears in all types of anthropological discussions about cultures since the beginning of the discipline. Food and drinks, like tea, which are ubiquitous in everyday life, can “be equated with life itself,” thus revealing prominent insights of “great religious, social, political, and cultural significance” (Ayora-Diaz 2015, 290-293). As Mintz and Du Bois point out in their paper “The Anthropology of Food and Eating,” food and eating has long been a subject in anthropology, tracing back to the nineteenth century. The extensive Kwakiutl salmon recipes Franz Boaz collected has much to say about social organization if one read it carefully (Mintz and Du Bois 2002, 100, Boas and Hunt 1921). The field of food anthropology has produced copious amounts of exciting work since then (Mintz and Du Bois 2002, 99). Early discussions could be traced back to the often-cited work *The Raw and the Cooked* by Lévi-Strauss, where he proposes the “culinary triangles,” pointing out the transformational processes between three essential forms of food in our culture—the raw, the cooked, and the rotten, suggesting that whereas the other two-forms are closer to nature, cooked food is closer to culture (Lévi-Strauss 1970).

Mary Douglas explores the meaning of food by considering it as a system of communication. She argues that food is like language, it can encode messages about social relationships, and through the consumption of shared substance, people can make boundaries or emphasis relatedness, create and transform identities such as nationality, ethnicity and social class. One of the most important frameworks she proposes is how symbolic meaning is assigned and practiced through cultural categories. By examining the texts in Leviticus, she argues the reason that pork is considered not clean is that people cannot fit pigs into a category like other animals that are considered clean and, therefore cannot be consumed. Besides, she also examines the structure of meals in everyday life as well as in special occasions, stressing that the function of cultural categories cannot be understood in isolation, but in the context of other parts and the whole system containing them (Douglas 2005).

In Oxfeld's recent work *Bitter and Sweet*, she compares the analysis of Douglas with Sidney Mintz (Oxfeld 2017). According to her, Mintz argues that cultural categories cannot explain situations such as global transformation of food. The ingestion today, as Mintz points out, does not fit into the cultural categories Douglas proposes anymore; rather it can take quite different forms, becoming more individualized and less interactive. Instead, in his groundbreaking work *Sweetness and Power*, using examples of the production and consumption of sugar and sweetness in the history of capitalistic transformation that affect countries such as England and those in the Caribbean, Mintz highlights the interconnectedness of food, politics, and economy in historical contexts (Mintz 1986).

Scholars have also expanded the investigation of food to a broad set of subjects, significantly broadening our understandings of other cultures. These subjects include social occasions, rituals, gift-giving, social status, consumption (Appadurai 1988, Arnott 1975, Goody

1982), historical and socioeconomic changes (Gately 2003, Salaman 1952), globalization (Nützenadel and Trentmann 2008, Phillips 2006), gender (Cowan 1991), place (Trubek, Guy, and Bowen 2010), and so forth. In *Always Hungry, Never Greedy*, Miriam Kahn explores what food means to a group of people in order to understand different aspects of their culture, such as social relations, gender roles, and moral values (Kahn 1986). David Sutton's *Remembrance of Repast* analyzes how food generates and encodes powerful social memories and meanings through both everyday practices and ritualistic events. He proposes that the "evocative power" of food lies in its synthetic sensory stimulations, and thus investigating sensory experiences that food embodies can help us better analyze the expression of memory processes and other related topics that interest anthropologists (Sutton 2001).

Among these, the construction of food and national identity is of special relevance to this research. Sociologist DeSoucey proposes the concept of "gastronationalism" to connect food and national symbolism (DeSoucey 2010). In anthropology, Sydney Mintz's famous analysis of sugar is in a similar vein—it examines the historical and sociopolitical context of sugar production in European societies, reflecting on its connection with modern individualism—this is perhaps the earliest connection discussed between food and taste in anthropology. Later works, such as the discussions of French cooking, Indian cuisine, Japanese cuisine, American fast food, and their respective national identities are also excellent examples in exploring the relationship of food and national identity (Appadurai 1988, Cwiertka 2006, Gabaccia 1999). In comparison, intensive ethnographic works of particular food items and national identities are still relatively few: In *Rice as Self*, Ohnuki-Tierney notes how the Japanese identity is tied to their production and consumption of rice—rice embodies rich meanings in Japanese society and thus it is essential to their national identity (Ohnuki-Tierney 1994). Alison Leitch's examination of lardo

reveals the politics of “slow food” and European identity within today’s socio-economic contexts (Leitch 2000); Anne Meneley analyzes olive oil in discourses and argues that Palestinians consciously construct their distinct image through public discourses (Meneley 2007). However, taste is still rarely the topic of these works, even with notable exceptions like Mintz’s piece on sweetness and sugar.

### Food anthropology in China

As Waley-Cohen points out, “Chinese culture ranks among the most keenly food-oriented in the world.” Although “Have you eaten?” is not the most common greeting in urban Dalian today, food and “the whole range of activities surrounding it” still occupy the central position in Chinese lives: “These activities included the acquisition, preparation, presentation and consumption of food, often accompanied by intense discussion of every detail along the way” (Waley-Cohen 2007, 99). Indeed, as Waley-Cohen states, food’s centrality in Chinese culture is beyond its “immediate practical purposes” and “has always played a significant part in Chinese political, social and cultural life”: “For persons of refinement, an interest in and knowledge about food was from antiquity one of the essential attributes of the cultivated life, binding together gustatory and aesthetic taste” (Waley-Cohen 2007, 99). In the twentieth century, Japanese scholars were the first to study Chinese food culture and history systematically in terms of contemporary academic frameworks. *Chūgoku shokuhin jiten* (An Encyclopedia of Chinese Food), edited by Tanaka,<sup>17</sup> was published in the 1970s. Many scholars have since noted the importance of food in Chinese culture, including the aforementioned book edited by Chinese

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<sup>17</sup> In Chinese characters, the book is 中国食品事典 and the author’s name is 田中静一.

American anthropologist Kwang-chih Chang (Chang and Anderson 1977, see also Farquhar 2002, 299 n16). Chang notes that in the regard to studying culture through food, there is no better case than China where food itself is greatly valued by the culture. In *Food in China: A Cultural and Historical Inquiry*, in addition to categorizing different kinds of food, Frederick Simoons also points out the central position of food in Chinese culture (Simoons 1990).

In *The Food of China*, aside from pointing out the “Chinese fascination with food, cuisine, and elaborate dining,” Eugene Anderson also examines the food and agricultural system of China throughout the history, attempting to answer the question: How did China manage to support a quarter of the world population on relatively small farming land per capita (Anderson 1988)? In her review “Anthropological reflection for eating: a review for Eugene Anderson’s book, *The Food of China*,”<sup>18</sup> in addition to commenting on Anderson’s book, Guo Yuhua also briefly reviews Simoons’ and Chang’s books. She stresses that “a Chinese stomach is a cultural stomach—good food and good taste can always become good stories in China.” It is more than just taste (*wei*, 味) in terms of physiology, but taste of culture (*wenhua zhi wei*, 文化), and thus there is *pin wei* (品味)—taste in terms of appreciation; *wan wei* (玩味)—taste in terms of savoring and reflecting, etc., which are both considered signifiers for one’s good upbringing, knowledge, and sophistication. She also connects the concept of *wei* in Chinese back to Bourdieu’s discussion on taste (Guo 2006, 102, Bourdieu 1984). She argues that unlike in Western culture, Chinese scribes have always been proud to be considered a gourmet.

Farquhar provides a more specific ethnographic discussion of food and sex in China, which she describes as a “flavorful temporal formation” in order to capture the cultural significance in

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<sup>18</sup> This article is originally in Chinese. The name and the content are my translation.

Chinese food and herbal medicines in people's everyday life. Taste, such as bitterness, is an embodiment of the continuity between history and the contemporary, as well as between memory and current experience (Farquhar 2002, 29). More recently, Jacob Klein studied Chinese food and local identity in urban Southwest China focusing on a campaign in Yunnan to promote a "modern" image of its regional cuisine. Oxfeld's *Bitter and Sweet* also takes a "tasteful" approach examining the importance of the embodiment of taste in a rural community in China. As embodied metaphors, bitter and sweet transcend the mere bodily experience and link with worldview, social relations, and other aspects of changes in village life (Oxfeld 2017).

### The anthropology of the senses

Like the anthropology of food, the anthropology of the senses (or sensory anthropology) has seen significant growth since the 1990s. As Herzfeld points out, the focus on sensory experience in anthropology is a trend that emerged only a few decades ago, when the specific term "the anthropology of the senses" was pioneered by Canadian anthropologists such as Constance Classen and David Howes. (Herzfeld 2001). The earliest work emphasizing the centrality of sensory experience in anthropology is usually attributed to Paul Stoller, particularly his books of *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (1989) and *Sensuous Scholarship* (1997). In *Sensuous Scholarship*, Stoller criticizes the Cartesian dualism tradition in academic work that values sight as a higher sense whereas touch, taste, and smell are considered lower senses in the Western five-senses model, and advocates for a more "tasteful" writing of ethnography among anthropologists. In the five-senses model, senses are often considered in isolation as a physiological mechanism that is only meant to gather the data from the world. As Classen pointed out, however, "The notion that there are five senses is itself a cultural construction"

(Classen 1993, 1), suggesting that we don't simply passively receive sense data from the outside world. In *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, Stoller describes his experience with Songhay people in Niger, in which he gives detailed accounts of an experience with bad sauce in a meal he and his wife had there. He argues that the bad taste of the sauce is a powerful way of expressing resentment of the family members without verbally addressing the issue, and thus the terrible taste is an expression of rivalry among the siblings in this family. Another influential early piece is Steven Feld's *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*, giving sensorially rich accounts on the auditory-centered epistemology of Kaluli people. Notably, he also refutes the western vision-centered thinking that considers cultures without written language "inferior," pointing out the logic, relevance, and emotional connection of Kaluli auditory categorization of birds are just as intellectual as cultures with written language.

Many anthropologists have since reflected on the bias of the five-senses model in the West, turning to a "full-bodied approach" to our sensory experience, which takes the senses of touch, taste, and smell into consideration as much as, if not more than the sight (Howes 2010b, xi). The anthropology of the senses thus focuses on investigating the sensorium as a social construction to uncover the distinctions and interrelationships of "sensory meaning and practice particular to different cultures" (Classen 1997, 401) (also see Classen 1993, Seremetakis 1996, Howes 2010a, Geurts 2003). In *Culture and the Senses*, Kathryn Geurts, using ethnographic materials from her fieldwork among Anlo-Ewe people, discusses the connections of sensory orders, embodiment, social identity, and people's sense of well-being. According to Geurts, sensing is defined as "bodily ways of gathering information" (2003, 3). She emphasizes that culture traditions lead to sensorium differences. In Anlo-Ewe culture, contrasting to the western model of sensory orders,

balance, kinesthesia, and sound are privileged, all of which have a great influence on the linguistic categories of sensorium. This means that moral values are embedded in child-rearing and social development, as well as the sense of personhood. Above all, she points out that the significance in grasping the perceptual and associated structures of a culture in understanding the culture. In *Sensual Relations*, Howes uses ethnographic materials of cultural groups in Melanesia and Papua New Guinea to demonstrate alternative sensory orders such as a culture that perceives beauty through scent instead of sight, challenging the biased sensory assumption in the Western sensorium (Howes 2010b).

Classen's *World of Senses* provides discussions on different aspects of sensory experiences in Western culture. She argues that even within Western society, the sensory orders are not static—in tracing the history, she shows us that smell was once considered much more important than it is today in Europe. Similarly, she demonstrates the connection of words that have a different sensory orientation in history than its modern usage, suggesting that the discrete sensory categories that are “common sense” in today's western culture used to be much more fluid. One of the most thought-provoking passages in this book is her account of the “wild-child” in history: by comparing the process of three children who did not have the normal social interactions with humans accustomed to the sensory structure of human society, she proposes that to be a member of a society, one must adopt its sensory codes (Classen 2005, 45). In *The Book of Touch, Ways of Sensing* and *Empire of the Senses*, Classen and Howes continue to collect works that address how culture constructs and transfers meaning through modulating the ways of touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, and sighting. Furthermore, they direct our attention to topics such as the “manifold relations” and the “intersensoriality” between different senses, and the politics of senses that are connected to social identities such as gender, class, ethnicity,



while emphasizing the importance of both corporeality and lived experiences as well as the symbolic meanings of senses (Classen 2005, Howes and Classen 2014, Howes 2005, 7-12).

Another approach to liberate ourselves from the sensory bias is to open up discussions on the possibility of new sensory categories. The book *Deciphering the Senses* proposes alternative routes in this topic, suggesting that the categories of senses from different perspectives can range from two to thirteen or even more (Rivlin and Gravelle 1984). David Sutton proposes that memory can be considered as a sense in reflecting its connection to other senses through synesthesia (Sutton 2011).

#### Taste: between the food and the senses

In the light of these developments, the intersection of food studies and sensory studies has also become a developing “field of inquiry” (Sutton 2010, 210). As David Sutton points out in his extensive review “Food and the Senses,” the combination of different approaches to both fields has led to new paths of conceptualizing food-related topics in more sensorially engaged ways like “sensory geography” (Sutton 2010, 214). While food studies point out how food is central to the “cosmologies, worldviews, and ways of life” of cultures, focusing on taste and other sensory experiences of food can be central as well (Sutton 2010, 215). As mentioned earlier, in the West many scholars presume taste is “a mere matter of physical sensation” and thus is disqualified for extensive study. Yet, this negative presumption is “more than counterbalanced by an appreciation of the complexities of taste and gustatory activities” (Korsmeyer 2005, 1-2). In Korsmeyer’s book *The Taste Culture Reader*, she collects works from scientists, philosophers, sociologists, historians, and anthropologists to cover concerns pertaining to taste and culture (2005). Similar to Howes, Korsmeyer also notes the basis of the experience

of taste is “physiological responses” of sensitive organs to objects. She argues that taste can be understood as the overall experience of flavor in all relevant dimensions,” including “those supplied by other senses” (Korsmeyer 2005, 3). At the same time, taste is much more than personal experience and biological mechanisms: it is the most fundamental domain of cultural expressions and the medium that enacts values and practices of society. Sutton’s aforementioned review also reveals the important intersection of the two topics/fields—the taste of food. Drawing inspiration from the term “acoustemology,” Sutton proposes the idea of “gustemology,” highlighting the centrality of taste in the overall sensory experience of eating (Sutton 2010, 212). In the case of food and drink, taking a gustemological approach can help to organize “a wide range of cultural issues around taste and other sensory aspects of food” (Sutton 2010, 215).

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu famously draws the connection between taste and class. To Bourdieu, tastes are “manifested preferences,” with the “propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices” (Bourdieu 1984, 56). They “are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference” that can function as “markers of ‘class’” (Bourdieu 1984, 173). By introducing concepts such as “cultural capital” and “habitus,” he connects taste with social status. While Bourdieu’s take on taste is more abstract— “aesthetic taste” that is not necessarily about the experience of tasting food—many scholars in anthropology and related fields have been using his work to examine food as consumed products and how it connects with social status (Sutton 2010, 211).<sup>19</sup>

Like many other anthropologists, Sutton also traces his discussion of taste and culture to Bourdieu’s *Distinction*. He notes that although rarely does Bourdieu use the word “taste” in

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<sup>19</sup> Bourdieu does have a discussion of food taste in this book, although it is relatively brief.

terms of flavors of food, his discussion of taste as a “preferred disposition” is revealing in terms of analyzing the connection of taste to aesthetic values, cultural capital, and social class. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, even in Chinese, the word “taste”—*wei* (味)—often also carries the connotation of appreciation of aesthetic values. On a more abstract level, the meaning of taste can be contradictory: while it ranks the lowest on the sensory hierarchy in the western five-sense model, it is also precisely the term that describes the appreciation of aesthetics that can identify one with high social status.

Practices regarding food and eating, such as tasting, therefore can be excellent starting points for us to decode this contradiction. For instance, the “basic tastes” such as saltiness, bitterness, and sweetness can have profound social implications. Visser argues that salt is considered an embodiment of hospitality, mystery, and power (2005); Mintz’s historical analysis of the economic-political significance of sugar and sweetness describes how sweetness is produced in the contexts of colonization, and how it is then socially introduced and diffused (1986). In Farquhar’s account of the flavors of herbs in traditional Chinese medicine, she links the bitterness of herbal medicine to its “experiential quality” and “classificatory function” in order to grasp how Chinese people experience bitterness. She also explores the metaphoric uses of bitterness (*ku*) in Chinese colloquialism as hardship and hard work, suggesting that the use of flavor terms such as bitterness are grounded in everyday experiences of taste (Farquhar 2002, 62).

The relationship between taste and gender, national identities, and social class are also explored in the study of food and culture (Cowan 1991, Manalansan 2006). In Cowan’s work on Greek culture, she notes the association of gender roles with sweet food, pointing out through events that are as trivial and quotidian as drinking sweet coffee and eating sweet food, women

practice and thus subconsciously learn the assigned “sweet” feminine gender disposition. Men, on the other hand, emphasize their masculinity by preferring salty food (Cowan 1991). Similarly, Kuipers (1984) suggests the association of meat and bitterness (as in espresso) with masculinity. Janeja analyzes the “transactional” taste in middle class in Begali culture where food serves as an agency in generating perceived normality (Janeja 2010). In terms of linguistic expressions of taste, Burenhult and Majid conducted fieldwork among a hunter-gatherer group in south Asia: by examining their specific terms in odors, they argue against the popular idea that olfactory experience is universally difficult to verbalize (Burenhult and Majid 2015). They propose that just like the naming of colors in the West, a culture that values smell is linguistically more sophisticated in the terminology of olfaction. A special issue published by the Chinese Dietary Foundation in Taiwan also includes an article that investigates the Chinese online corpus of modern Chinese. This article concludes that the metaphoric uses of flavor terms such as sourness and bitterness can be more frequent than referring to the physical “taste” in Chinese everyday language (Hong 2017).

Taste can also reflect the culture of place making. As Trubek, Demossier and others have argued, in cases like *terroir* in French culture, while there are identifiable features in taste relating to places, the association of certain image of tastes and places are culturally constructed categories (Trubek, Guy, and Bowen 2010, Demossier 2011). In terms of memory and social changes, as Sutton notes, there are relatively fewer works; however, Farquhar and Oxfeld have given good examples of how the association of taste changes and memories relates to how people make sense of the social changes (Farquhar 2002, Oxfeld 2017). In his discussion, Sutton also notes some methodological challenges regarding taste. The issue of how to approach taste “in the field” is largely ignored, with the exception of Pink’s phenomenological approach (Pink

2009), Sutton also calls for attention to the relationship between the synesthetic nature of senses and memory as part of the ethnographic study of taste (Sutton 2005).

In “Mixing methods, tasting fingers,” Mann and colleagues stretch the meaning of “tasting” by examining “a particular configuration” of what “tasting fingers” may be when eating with one’s fingers. They suggest that in the case of eating with one’s fingers, “tasting” may “include being appreciative of the warmth and the texture” of what the fingers sense in the process (Mann et al. 2011). In Anna Mann’s *Tasting in Mundane Practices*, she investigates different scenarios in Western Europe where tasting is practiced, pointing out certain directions such as combining and experimenting with different contexts of tasting can help understand taste as a mundane practice situated in different ways (Mann 2015).

Indeed, each of the aspects mentioned above can be further explored by specific ethnographic works like the present research. In this dissertation, I will explore the relationship between the taste/tasting of tea and cultural identity, engaging in a more cross-cultural comparison of taste, and the sensorial process of tasting and teaching/learning of tasting. I will take more of a gustemological approach to organize these cultural issues around “taste and other sensory aspects of food” (Sutton 2010, 215).

### From Wine Tasting to the Taste of Tea

What “taste” means to me has been quite different in different stages of my life. Like many people, I had not thought about what taste is or what vocabularies I should use to describe taste in my childhood. This changed when I became a student of wine engineering in college. In the 2000s, in Dalian, wine was either Tonghua (通化) Sweet Wine made from native Chinese grapes

in Jilin province, Changyu (张裕), Greatwall (长城),<sup>20</sup> or some “luxurious foreign brand”<sup>21</sup> few would recognize. At that time, the discipline of Viticulture and Enology in China was a rather new field of study. Only a handful of universities had the department of Viticulture and Enology, and all of them were part of the Food Engineering college. However, it was around that time that many people began forecasting that the wine market in China was about to take off. Many people with that expectation, such as local investors or successful businessmen from other areas, became quite interested in wine and wine tasting. We began to see more and more tasting events taking place in Beijing.

To most people, however, wine was a foreign and distant beverage from Europe (mostly France) and was quite mysterious, similar to coffee and beer, which were introduced even before wine in China. To some, it was an example of—as it still is today to many people in China today—the lifestyle, culture, and history of the West; to others who believed that strong drinks were meant for strong bodies, red wine was thought to be a drink for women. Compared to the 56-78% alcohol content of Chinese *baijiu*,<sup>22</sup> the 13-15% alcohol content of wine was not “masculine” enough (Reitz 2015, 8).<sup>23</sup> Just as Sohoian girls and women enhance the female body through consuming sweetness (Cowan 1991, 184), men consumed strong alcohol to enhance their masculinity at Chinese dinner tables. As for its taste, the sour, bitter and astringent palate of wine did not have many instant converts. Adding Sprite to wine to sweeten it and make it more drinkable was almost a standard practice for some time before everybody had access to

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<sup>20</sup> For a recount of wine and modernity in China, see “Drunken Modernity” by Björn Kjellgren, in which he pointed out that in 2002, more than 90 percent of the national total wine production is by domestic wineries led by Changyu, Great Wall, Dynasty, Tong Hua (Kjellgren 2004).

<sup>21</sup> *gaodang jinkou pinpai*, 高档进口品牌

<sup>22</sup> Literally mean white alcohol, 白酒.

<sup>23</sup> The red color was also considered more “feminine” as it shows less “purity” of alcohol.

the “correct” way of drinking wine. It was not until later when higher quality imported wine flourished on the market, together with the effort of wine professionals to educate people to get used to the taste of wine, did most stop adulterating wine with soda.

Indeed, it took some time for people to accept the taste of wine as it is marketed, as a “balanced” drink that is “healthy,” “cultured,” and to connect consuming wine properly with wealth, sophistication, and *pinwei*.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, with little knowledge of what the discipline was like, I expected to learn more about the wine culture in western countries like France and Italy when I started my degree in Viticulture and Enology.

As part of the Food Engineering and Nutrition College, Viticulture and Enology was generally referred to as *putaojiu gongcheng*<sup>25</sup> (wine engineering) instead of its full name.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the discipline is by definition an engineering program in this college, which means it did not contain courses on the culture of wine in particular. Rather, similar to other subjects in food engineering, wine was discussed more as a product of the food industry rather than a cultural product. Many of the courses relied on empirical knowledge: math, physics, biology, biochemistry, wine chemistry, etc., in which hypotheses and theories can be tested and analyzed by equipment in laboratories, in which the introduction of subjective human error was supposed to be reduced to the minimum.

Nevertheless, in application, the taste of food matters to the consumers. In the realm of food engineering, however, taste is the concern of sensory evaluation, which is defined as “a scientific method used to evoke, measure, analyze, and interpret those responses to products as

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<sup>24</sup> 品味, taste as in sophistication.

<sup>25</sup> 葡萄酒工程, or *pugong* 葡工, in short.

<sup>26</sup> *putao yu putaojiu gongcheng*, 葡萄与葡萄酒工程.

perceived through the sense of sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing” (Lawless and Heymann 2010, 1). While experts in the field do recognize that sensory experiences can be highly subjective, the biases introduced by humans can be minimized by “preparation and serving of samples under controlled conditions” (Lawless and Heymann 2010, 1). Indeed, as Jacob Lahne points out, sensory science focuses particularly on “industrially produced foods,” often in favor of “predictable and consistent” sensory properties. To this end, it assumes that certain sensory stimuli “are inherent to food and are thus valid or true,” while sensory science “is concerned with sieving a type of objectivity *from* those inner experiences” (Lahne 2016, original stress).

In this regard, many types of wine can be considered standardized products from industrialized procedures just like other industrial food products that seek for consistency in their sensory properties. On the other hand, there are also wines in which “a degree of variations is accepted and even valorized by producers and consumers alike” (Lahne 2016). The sensory evaluation of wine shares many concepts and methodologies from sensory evaluation. For instance, the definition for taste in wine tasting is the same as in sensory science, which is quite different from the complex, ambiguous meanings people use in everyday life. It “refers to a select group of compounds (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami) detected by modified epithelial cells, primarily located in taste buds on the tongue” (Jackson 2017, ix). At the same time, as Lahne noted, in almost every textbook for wine tasting, wine is also considered “a sophisticated beverage” and thus has characteristics of “artisan food” that cannot be fully appreciated as an “industrial food product” (Lahne 2016). This is perhaps why most courses in the curriculum, such as wine chemistry, wine microbiology, and wine quality control, were one semester, while the course on wine tasting was two semesters.



To study taste in a systematic way, we started by learning about the physiology of perceptive organs; the formation and properties of chemical compounds that would stimulate tastes on the tongue (tastants) or those that would simulate smells we were familiar with such as rose, honey, toast, coffee... The evaluation of the taste of wine was conducted in ways that are very similar to other natural science courses. Since we cannot map taste or smell through equipment yet, we must train the sensory organs of the human body into a tool with as much consistency as possible. For instance, the variables in the tasting environment were carefully controlled. There were standardized taste booths that guarantee each taster had the same exact setting: lighting, sink for spitting, tap water for rinsing glasses, etc. (see Figure 1). Other variables such as the time of the day to conduct tasting, room temperature, clean and dry standardized glassware, etc., were all carefully controlled to a prescribed standard to reduce the possible distractions that may affect our perception or our analysis of it.

The process of tasting was broken down to its most basic level so that it could be standardized as well. For example, the five different tastes (sometimes referred to as tastants) were sweetness, saltiness, sourness, bitterness, and umami. Whereas the common understanding of *wu wei* (五味 five flavors/tastes) that is customary to Chinese culture was considered inaccurate. While Chinese culture does recognize umami (*xian* 鲜) as an important taste, *wuwe* often refers to *suan* (酸, sourness), *tian* (甜, sweetness), *ku* (苦, bitterness), *la* (辣, hot in the sense of spiciness) or *xin* (辛, spiciness), and *xian* (咸). But in analyzing wine tasting, *la* is considered more of a combination of the sensation of hot and bitter. The sensation of *la* is evoked by an entirely different mechanism than the other tastes, which are exclusively

experienced through taste buds. The sensation of *la*, on the other hand, can be experienced on other body tissues like skin and mucous membranes as well, and therefore does not qualify as a “taste.” For a few years, I used these techniques in numerous wine tastings to evaluate different wines and to communicate with other wine professionals and enthusiasts.



Figure 1. Tasting room in China Agriculture University. Photo by the author.

Later, I taught many people in China about wine in wine classes, wine tastings, and at dinner tables. Not surprisingly, people were not that interested in all the chemicals, equipment, and other technical facts of the “scientific” aspects of wine. They were, however, much more interested in the actual experience in tasting wine and learning about how people in the West

experience wine in everyday life. People would almost always compare the culture of wine with tea. To an extent, for many people in the West, it may be difficult to identify what wine means to them, but tea clearly represents the East. Conversely, for Chinese people, tea is completely Chinese, while wine represents the West. Knowing wine or tea, is a way for one culture to know more about the other.

After living in the US for many years and seeing the comparison between wine and tea from the “Western” perspective, I started contemplating the question: if the wine tasting class is an example of a cultural structure designed from the “scientific” system, then what would a tea tasting class look like in China and what cultural construction would that reflect? As previously mentioned, if Chinese people get to know more about the West from tasting wine, what would people from the West learn from tasting tea? What can the taste of tea tell us about people, culture, and everyday life in China, or understanding sensory experiences in cultures in general? Moreover, given that wine tasting is associated with “objectified” knowledge of taste properties believed to inhere in the wine itself, what might the different relationship between the taste of tea and objectified knowledge tell us about cultural experiences of taste.

### Tea in China

Growing up in the 1990s in urban China, like many families that shared a similar background, my parents and I lived with my grandparents.<sup>27</sup> My grandfather had started to drink

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<sup>27</sup> Living with the husband’s parents after marriage has been a norm for many years in China. The couple may live with the wife’s parents as well (as in the case of my parents). Living with retired grandparents to provide care for their child/children is the primary reason that many *shuang zhigong jiating* (双职工家庭, literally family with two workers) are possible for many years.

tea long before I was born, so not surprisingly I began drinking tea so early that I cannot recount how old I was when I drank tea for the first time. Like many young children, I liked sweets, but I had also got used to the bitterness and astringency in tea as it was such a common drink in our daily life. I remember drinking tea from my grandfather's big white *tangci chagang*<sup>28</sup> (an enamel mug about 5 inches in diameter that was popular at that time) every time I needed something to drink, until my parents and I moved out to live on our own. Occasionally, he would dump the leftover tea in the *chagang* out, and add new tea leaves; other times, we just added more hot water from a *nuanhu* (thermos).<sup>29</sup> Cold or hot, there was always tea in the *chagang*. It was rarely washed so the inside wall had a thick layer of *cha gou*<sup>30</sup> (literally tea dirt) on it, which almost looked like a coating of brownish black rust.

To most people in northern Chinese cities like ours at the time, that is what it meant to drink tea. *The Tea Grandpa Makes*<sup>31</sup> is a well-known song by popular singer Jay Chou, who was born in 1979. He grew up around the 1990s, so his experience resembles many people born around 1970s to 1990s: "The tea grandpa makes has a taste that is called home."<sup>32</sup> Many people grow up watching tea made by parents or grandparents as well as drinking it with them. Just like the common saying goes, tea was one of the seven essentials for a household (*kai men qi jian*

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<sup>28</sup> 搪瓷茶缸

<sup>29</sup> 暖壶

<sup>30</sup> 茶垢

<sup>31</sup> 爷爷泡的茶

<sup>32</sup> The original lyric is in Chinese: 爷爷泡的茶，有一种味道叫做家。I translated it into English. Without further explanation, it is the same in this dissertation.

*shi*)<sup>33</sup>—not too fancy, but functional, affordable, and just as indispensable as salt and rice to a family.

Thirty years later, what tea means may not have changed much to people like my grandfather, but even my grandfather replaced his enamel tea mug with glass. No one uses *tangci chagang* in the cities anymore—it can still be found only in some early socialist-period themed souvenir stores. Just like many things from that time, enamelware is now history. Many ingenious *chaqi*<sup>34</sup> (literally “tea container/apparatus”) for people who want tea to serve the purpose of water, to *jieke*<sup>35</sup> (literally “quench thirst”). Sometimes my grandfather uses a *piaoyi bei*<sup>36</sup> (a tea-brewing device resembling a French press, see Figure 2), and other times he uses a *yangsheng hu*,<sup>37</sup> a clear glass electric kettle where tea can be boiled directly in it. *Yangsheng hu* had been very popular for the time when we were in China. Almost every family I encountered in Dalian had one. There were many different programs on the panel of this electric kettle, designed to meet the need for making (herbal) tea, medicinal soup, porridge, etc. But for the most part people used it to boil tea.

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<sup>33</sup> *kai men qi jian shi*—开门七件事: 柴 wood, 米 rice, 油 oil, 盐 salt, 酱 sauce, 醋 vinegar, 茶 tea. It is a very popular saying in China.

<sup>34</sup> 茶器, see later chapters for more on this subject.

<sup>35</sup> 解渴

<sup>36</sup> 飘逸杯

<sup>37</sup> 养生壶



Figure 2. Piao yi bei. Photo by the author.

The ways people consume tea have dramatically increased over time as well. One can easily buy pre-packaged tea-flavored beverages (*cha yin liao*<sup>38</sup>) of different flavors in supermarkets: red tea, green tea, jasmine honey tea, *liangcha*<sup>39</sup> (cold tea), citrus-flavored red tea, milk tea, etc. At the same time, people can buy finely packaged *chaye lihe*<sup>40</sup> (loose leaf tea or tea cakes packaged in fine classy boxes) for gift-giving or buy loose leaf tea in bulk in a *chaye dian*<sup>41</sup>(specialized tea stores) on the street or in shopping malls or supermarkets (See Figure 3

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<sup>38</sup> 茶饮料

<sup>39</sup> 凉茶

<sup>40</sup> 茶叶礼盒

<sup>41</sup> 茶叶店

and 4); street side stalls are almost on every corner in residential zone<sup>42</sup> areas; not to mention all kinds of *cha shi*<sup>43</sup> (tearooms) and *cha lou*<sup>44</sup> (teahouses). The tiny stalls on the street and some of the *chayin dian*<sup>45</sup> make fresh tea beverages with all kinds of flavors (e.g., bubble milk tea, honey jujube red tea, rose oolong tea, etc.) in take-out paper or plastic cups in a similar fashion of coffee-based beverages sold in the United States, which can be quite popular among young people today (see Figure 5).

There has also been a proliferation of mid-range priced tea shops, as well as more expensive tea stores, tearooms, and teahouses where people can purchase more expensive tea for themselves, as gifts or even just as long-term investments. Indeed, as individual wealth has been growing, the market for high quality tea (i.e., *hao cha*, 好茶) has grown as well (Oxfeld 2017, 21). However, having money does not mean one can find high quality tea easily, as Zhang points out in her article “Tea and Wine Tasting: The Social and Political Discourses of Consumption in Contemporary China”: in many cases, having a good relationship with people is quite important in getting good tea, whereas mere monetary exchanges may not be enough (Zhang 2017a, 94).

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<sup>42</sup> *xiao qu*, 小区

<sup>43</sup> 茶室

<sup>44</sup> 茶楼

<sup>45</sup> 茶饮店



Figure 3. A Teashop next to a KFC. Photo by the author.





Figure 4. Specialized tea store in a supermarket in Dalian, China. Photo by the author.



Figure 5. Tea beverage shop in a shopping mall in Dalian, China. Photo by the author.

Indeed, drinking tea in China is often an involved process to which many people devote a considerable amount of time, money, and energy. Tea has been such an important part of people's lives for hundreds of years that it is embedded in many aspects of Chinese people's

everyday lives—it is a common theme in literature, art, antique auction/collection, gift-giving, social bonding...in China, it would be quite difficult, if not impossible, to find someone, poor or rich, who has not had anything to do with tea at some point in their life at all. The emerging tea-themed services and businesses in China reflect the constant yet fluid changes that Chinese society has gone through over the past few decades. In this dissertation I will further explore this topic.

Similarly, the multifarious tea related products show a greater appreciation of consuming tea in a refined manner among those who have the time and money to afford such practices. I am particularly interested in these people, who I call *ai cha zhi ren*<sup>46</sup> (爱茶之人, literally people who love tea). They had often professed their love for tea, taken tea courses, and actively sought different types of tea from different regions. They would take trips to tea plantations—very much like a wine connoisseur in the West who might travel to the chateaux in Bordeaux region in France or go on a wine tour in Napa Valley. As I will explain in detail later, my experiences have given me opportunities to get to know many *ai cha zhi ren*, joining them for their daily tea consuming practices and talking with them about these experiences. I was able to go to *cha hui*<sup>47</sup> (tea tasting events, tea gatherings), *cha ke*<sup>48</sup> (tea classes), and drank tea in many tearooms. *Ai cha zhi ren* (i.e., tea-lovers) appreciated tea drinking activities and practices on a daily basis and often loved to share these experiences with their friends, family, and even potential business partners. Drinking tea, in many of these social situations, serves a critical role for developing and

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<sup>46</sup> 爱茶之人

<sup>47</sup> 茶会

<sup>48</sup> 茶课

maintaining social relationships. To what extent does Bourdieu's theory about social capital and class-based taste apply in the case of tea? To investigate what tea means to them can be further broken down into more specific questions such as these: What do people mean when they say they love drinking tea (*ai he cha*<sup>49</sup>) or simply love tea (*ai cha*<sup>50</sup>). How do they become tea-lovers? In terms of sensorial experiences, what in particular about tea have they learned to appreciate? Why is it important to be able to distinguish one type of tea from another, or a good cup of tea from a bad cup of tea? As for those who also appreciate wine and coffee, what does tea mean to them as compared to their western counterparts? By looking at the role of taste in people's lives, I will be able to explore the relationships between tea drinking and notions of public versus private, ritual versus everyday life, and the significance of material culture and embodied knowledge in sharing contemporary identities.

### Brief Overview of Dalian in Changing China

Dalian is a major harbor city in the southmost part of Liaodong Peninsula, Liaoning Province in northeast China (see Figure 6). It is the second largest city in the province and is also considered to be the second-most important urban area by many (Zhang, Kotze, and Yu 2012, 94). The total administrative area of Dalian is 13,237 km<sup>2</sup>, the main urban area is 621 km<sup>2</sup> (Mu and de Jong 2018, 480). Based on the household registration record, the population was 5.95 million by the end of 2018 (Dalian 2020). Dalian is ruled by the province, but as a sub-provincial city. In aspects such as economic policy, it "has some discretion" (Mu and de Jong 2018, 480).

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<sup>49</sup> 爱喝茶

<sup>50</sup> 爱茶

The city has “embraced the economic reform policies” since the 1980s and has since experienced “continuous high-level GDP growth” (Mu and de Jong 2018, 480). In 2018, the annual regional GDP of Dalian was 736.39 billion RMB (\$103.57 billion), 105,387 RMB per capita, an increase of 7.1% over the previous year (Dalian 2020).



Figure 6. Map of Liaoning Province (in red) in China

Dalian has over a hundred years of history of being under foreign powers; thus, to understand its unique position as a Chinese city, it is necessary to briefly look into its history. During the Second Opium War in the 1860s, the settlement where Dalian is today was called

Qingniwa—blue mud swamp—which was claimed by the British in the 1860s as “Victoria Bay” (O'Dwyer 2015, 23). After being returned to the Qing government in the 1880s, the Qingniwa settlement was then leased to the Russians under the name “Dalny”—“far away” in Russian—as it is more than more than six thousand miles from Saint Petersburg, guaranteeing twenty-five years of access to the ice-free ports of Dalny. In 1904, the city was again captured by Japan and later was officially named by a Japanese commanding officer as Dairen (大連) (O'Dwyer 2015, 23, Zhang, Kotze, and Yu 2012, 94).

My parents ran a *sifangcai*<sup>51</sup> (literally private kitchen) restaurant that specialized in French and Italian wine and western food in Dalian between 2007 and 2015. The clientele was often high-level executives or upper management for major state-owned companies (*guoqi*<sup>52</sup>) or foreign companies (*waiqi*<sup>53</sup>), who had enough income to spare hundreds to thousands of RMB<sup>54</sup> (or yuan in Chinese) on a meal—accompanied by a few bottles of wine—several times a week. Almost every time, whether being there to simply drink tea, coffee or wine, or a full meal, people discussed the taste of food and drinks they were having or had before. To many of these individuals, to be a gourmet who can tell the nuances of food and drinks—especially wine, coffee, and tea—and to share such experience with others can be an integral part of social life. Learning about food and drink intellectually, or from other people, is one thing. But the pleasure is also in the process of the tasting while discussing the taste, so that they can fully experience the product, fulfilling the desire of appreciation. Indeed, as Lin puts it in his book *My Country*

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<sup>51</sup> 私房菜

<sup>52</sup> 国企

<sup>53</sup> 外企

<sup>54</sup> The ratio between RMB to US dollars fluctuates between 1 to 6.7-8.

*and My People*, “No food is really enjoyed unless it is keenly anticipated, discussed, eaten and then commented upon” (Lin 1939, 338). In this dissertation, I will explore the socially situated experiences of taste, and of discussions of taste, as a way to understand people’s everyday life in contemporary urban China.

### Research Question and Structure of this Dissertation

Sensory experience, specifically when it comes to the experience of taste, is an under-explored area in ethnographic research, particularly in the Anthropology of China. Tea tasting and tea drinking as cultural practices, however, are fundamentally sensorial, which are the basis for a culture of tea. Therefore, this research takes the approach of the anthropology of senses, or more specifically the anthropology of taste, to investigate people’s everyday life of tea tasting/drinking in order to reveal subtle interplays of cultural categories and subjects, and social changes in the context of contemporary urban China. I will start with the questions why and how people learn to taste tea in the process of acquiring certain levels of knowledge and skill that is valued in tea culture, and how people drink and taste tea in different social scenarios and contexts. With this in mind, I will further explore the significance of tea drinking and tasting to people in their daily life and social relations.

Through an ethnography of practices, processes, and interactions taking place in daily events, this research intends to capture moments of today’s China that will further help us understand the complexity and dynamics on important subjects such as social conflicts, ideas and desires, historical consciousness and national identity, individualism, and collectivism, etc., in a contemporary Chinese city. This research will provide new cases in ethnographic works about

urban everyday life in contemporary China, especially in terms of insights about the relationships and connections among food, taste, and culture in China. In this process, I will specifically investigate the subtleties in taste terms that are particular to tea culture, to explore how sensory experiences are externalized. By addressing the tensions between lived bodily experience and abstractions of scientific standardized measures of taste, I attempt to shed some light on how and why reproducible subjective experiences are culturally mediated, which can then contribute to the anthropology of taste. It will also help future researchers to consider how to conduct sensorial anthropology, especially in understanding the culture of taste in China. Only when we understand people's real-life experience, can we start to piece together how individuals negotiate their position in the society they live in, and thus truly begin to see the meanings of culture to those people who live in it.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter Two discusses research methods and provides more information on the field site. Chapter Three explores the legend of tea and its implication in tea drinking practices, as well as the social memory of learning to serve tea. Chapter Four takes a closer look at the tea event in people's everyday life in Dalian, China, and discusses the social implications of these events. Chapter Five focuses on the taste of tea by examining the tea classes and juxtaposing it with people's experience with wine to explore the role of taste in these people's lives. Chapter Six concludes the research by discussing the contradictions in the practice of tasting and discusses possible directions for future research.

#### Notes on Transliteration and Names



In this dissertation, all transcriptions of Mandarin Chinese follow the standard Pinyin romanization system, except for some commonly used names. Some of the quotations were translated by me from the original Chinese texts. All names in the running texts are pseudonyms.

## CHAPTER 2

### FIELD-SITE AND METHODOLOGY

I registered for my first tea expo (*cha bolan hui*<sup>55</sup>) a few weeks before it started. The commercial for this exhibition was everywhere: in elevators, on the street, and even in the Pizza hut restaurant where we ate. The event was supposed to be three days. I missed the first day and went on the afternoon of the second day. It was in the Xinghai Exhibition Center II,<sup>56</sup> which is 30 minutes by bus from the east side of the city where I was staying (see Figure 7). It was a hot summer day and due to the lack of experience of going to tea events, I did not think much about what I needed to wear, so I dressed very casually: just some shorts and a T-shirt, with a pink handbag. I scanned my QR code at a kiosk at the gate and got a hanging tag with my name on it and was told to go to a stall in the exhibition center to get a small gift bag. Then, I went in and quickly found out about a “*Qushui liushang*”<sup>57</sup> “When the East meets the West” event, which would compare coffee with tea on the northwest corner of the exhibition area.

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<sup>55</sup> 茶博览会

<sup>56</sup> *Xinghai Huizhan Zhongxin erqi*, 星海会展广场二期

<sup>57</sup> 曲水流觞, can be translated to “winding stream party,” literally means “floating cups and winding stream”



Figure 7. Outside of Xinghai Exhibition Center. Photo by the author.

As I walked toward the event for coffee and tea, I heard traditional Chinese instrumental (*gu qin*, 古琴) music playing in the background. As I walked past many different stalls in the exhibition center, I saw people sitting down and drinking tea at each stall, chatting with the staff who served them tea. There were many varieties: tea from the rainforest (*yulin cha*, 雨林茶) in Yunnan, post-fermented tea (*hei cha*, 黑茶, literally black tea) from Guangxi, mountain tea (*gaoshan cha* 高山茶) from Taiwan, white tea (*bai cha*, 白茶) from Fuding, Fujian Province, etc. As I approached the area for the event, I saw a white screen with a rock-like pattern on the bottom and Chinese characters “曲水流觞” above a round open window. In the center of the

screen, under the characters, there was a round window-like opening that was decorated by bamboo and white lighting, giving it a peaceful atmosphere. I could also hear people chatting and ancient Chinese style music playing behind that screen (see Figure 8).



Figure 8. Design for *Qushui liushang*: When the East meets the West. Photo by the author.

As I walked past the screen, I could see an open area about 3,000 square feet in size for the event. Although I had once seen a pavilion with water channels carved into the stone floor in an ancient garden for winding stream parties, I had never experienced a modern version of a winding stream party before. According to historical records, people would sit in one of these pavilions with water channels for the winding stream party to drink the rice wine floating on the

water and compose poems. It is also considered a very cultured classic activity especially since it was popularized by the famous Chinese calligrapher Wang Xizhi in 353 CE. He composed *Lanting jixu* (兰亭集序) to describe one of these parties he participated in, which is also in Chinese textbooks in school, making this event well-known:

On this late spring day, the ninth year of Yonghe (CE 353), we gathered at the Orchid Pavilion in Shaoxing to observe the Spring Purification Festival. All of the prominent people were there, from old to young. High mountains and luxuriant bamboo groves lie in the back; a limpid, swift stream gurgles around, which reflected the sunlight as it flowed past either side of the pavilion. We sat by the water, sharing wine from a floating goblet while chanting poems, which gave us delight in spite of the absence of musical accompaniment. This is a sunny day with a gentle valley breeze. Spreading before the eye is the beauty of nature, and hanging high is the immeasurable universe. This is perfect for an aspired mind. What a joy. [Wang 353]

Even though Wang Xizhi was describing drinking wine, this type of historical text matches perfectly with the atmosphere that events like this attempt to evoke. Drawing on historical contexts is prevalent in tea drinking events. When people discussed tea in the field, the history and comments regarding historic matters came up from time to time, showing tea's function in transcending time and space, which I will return to later in this dissertation.

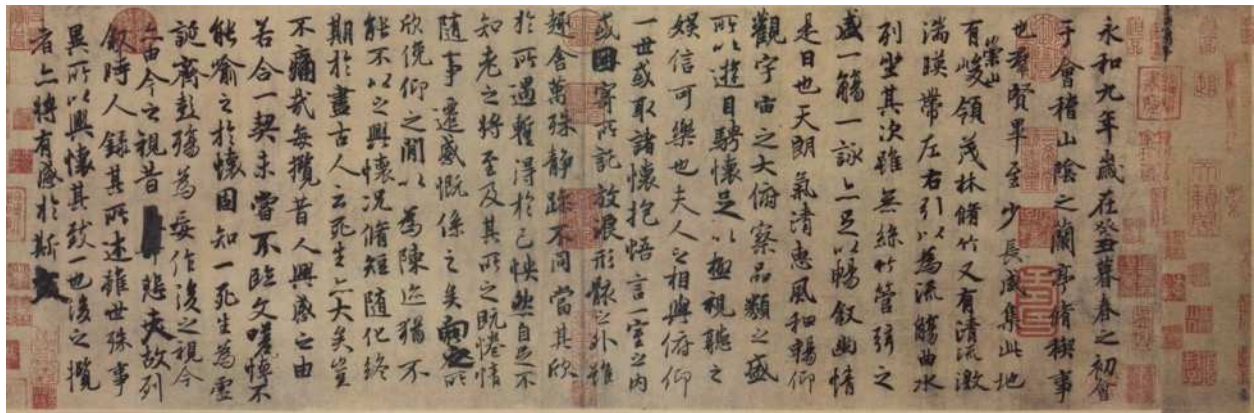


Figure 9. Lanting jixu by Wang Xizhi. Photo from chinaonlinemuseum.com

When I arrived, the event had already started. The area was surrounded by nearly two feet tall white translucent screens. There were ancient-themed decorations on the wall to create a more secluded space. Surrounded by the stream was an irregular blotch-shaped island covered in white sand with tiny flowers and some green moss on top. There was white light along the water channel (See Figure 10). Many people were already sitting along the channels. On the right-hand side of the island from where I stood, there were a few tables with some coffee wares and a man dressed in an apron who looked like a barista standing next to it. On the other side there was a low table, a woman sitting behind it on the floor in what we call *cha fu* (茶服, literally means tea clothes or outfit),<sup>58</sup> with a long red scarf draping down around her neck. A man dressed in a vest suit and a bowler hat was giving a lecture about coffee. I took a seat in a corner and started to take everything in.

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<sup>58</sup> These outfits usually have many traditional features and come in plain light colors, somewhat loose in figure which some people considered to be a style of Han dynasty clothing.





Figure 10. Water channel in the Qushui liushang: When the East meets the West event. Photo by the author.

The host first introduced the man in the bowler hat and suit as a master in coffee brewing from Taiwan and he started to talk about the history of coffee beans, how coffee was roasted, the water-powder ratio for coffee, and so forth. While he started to explain the intricacies of making coffee, the barista who stood next to him in front of a table was making coffee. After he finished the speech, the coffee was also ready. The barista then poured the coffee he just made into small glasses, which was then put on small white plates to float down the stream. Then the lady who sat at the tea table stood up and began to speak. She first introduced herself: her name is Lan, and she was the owner of a “tea space”,<sup>59</sup> where she taught one- or two-day classes for tea (*yiri dao*,

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<sup>59</sup> *cha kongjian*, 茶空间

*liangri dao*).<sup>60</sup> Today, she would serve us a special type of aged white tea that was hard to get on the market for people without special connections.

She also pointed out that since the whiteness of tea and the blackness of the coffee can complement each other, forming a *Taiji* symbol together that signifies the traditional Chinese cosmology of yin and yang; they also both needed water to carry it—just like the water was carrying the cups floating down to us. She believed that it would be a great topic of an event for the tea exhibition (I will further discuss this event in Chapter 3 and 4.). I have since been to many other events that relate to tea, but I believe this one encapsulates the theme of this dissertation rather well. Drinks that are more common to the West like coffee or wine can draw great comparisons with tea in China for the reader.

Like wine drinking, the ritual of tea drinking can be categorized by its formality and focus. I call the most casual form of tea drinking *minimal tea drinking*, which happens all the time in people's everyday life in Dalian, requiring only the most essential elements of tea drinking: a container, tea in some form (loose leaves, compressed tea, or even tea bags), and water to infuse tea. Whereas the most sophisticated tea ritual such as a special performance for audiences and guests in business settings or on stages, which I call *performative tea drinking*, may employ all sorts of tools. In this type of event, the performative elements of serving tea were emphasized. For instance, in the event aforementioned, as Lan was explaining tea, on the corner where I was sitting, there was a short table for incense with all types of tools for burning incense and a lady in a white *cha fu* was sitting on the floor behind it, serving incense (See Figure 11) to create a more traditional atmosphere. Next to Lan, a girl in *cha fu* was serving tea. On the table in front of her,

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<sup>60</sup> Dao is the *pinyin* (Chinese phonetics) for Tao (道). Literally mean one-day Tao and two-day Tao.



there was a clean table with a tea cloth, a *gaiwan* (盖碗, see Figure 12), tea cups, a wooden stick for pushing the tea leaves, water, a constant heating kettle (see Figure 13) with a certain type of water for infusing, etc. The most common type of tea drinking falls between the most casual and the most formal kind, which I call *focused tea drinking* in this dissertation.



Figure 11. Incense performance in the Qushui liushang event. Photo by the author.



Figure 12. Clay Gaiwan with coating. Photo by the author.



Figure 13. Electric kettle for tea. Photo by the author.

## Research Method and Venues

In February 2018, after living and studying in the US for five years, I returned to Dalian for my year-long fieldwork and became a native anthropologist “at home” (Panourgiá 1994, 44). Unlike other anthropologists who come to Dalian for the first time for their fieldwork, I did have close friends and family here, which removed the pressure to settle in—my family moved to Dalian in 1996 from a smaller city a few hours to the north when my parents came to seek a career in business. Being a native gave me a jumpstart for my research; at the same time, my position also created some unexpected dynamics.

During this time, I conducted participant observation, formal and informal interviews with people who performed focused tea drinking in various venues such as *cha shi* (茶室, tearoom), their homes and other venues where events took place such as house churches, restaurants, etc. After I returned to the United States in February of 2019, I remained in contact with many informants whom I had followed in the field on various forms of Chinese social media, specifically through WeChat—a social app that includes text/voice message and a social media platform that everyone with a cellphone uses in China—to continue following their lives and talking with them regularly. The benefit of being a native from Dalian was obvious, I could easily navigate around Dalian to find places people mentioned and bond with them over events and history of the city. This made it easier to connect with some people and gain their trust; on the other hand, people found it strange and offensive sometimes that as a local person I would ask them many simple and obvious questions, like when people started to drink tea in Dalian. Anthropology was not a popular discipline in China; therefore, many people had a hard time understanding the point of my research. Sometimes people would give me very concise answers

or became defensive, which made it hard for me to unpack their statements or to continue asking more follow-up questions.

When I took my husband, Zack, with me to conduct research sometimes, I found people were quite curious about what his experience with China was like and how he liked China. Discussions about his experiences in China can shift the focus from tea sometimes, but it also pleased people that they could explain tea and Chinese culture to a foreigner. People were also more likely to correct his behavior and explain the obvious aspects of the culture to him. For instance, people did not really want to correct other Chinese in most situations for fear of offending them, and if they did correct a Chinese person, the comment would be too subtle sometimes for me to tell. They did not mind, however, correcting an American, who was assumed to be unfamiliar with what was appropriate in Chinese culture. People would marvel at even the smallest effort Zack made to be appropriate in Chinese culture, like saying thank you (*xiexie*, 谢谢) and tea is good (*cha hen hao he*, 茶很好喝) in Chinese, using both the index and the middle finger to knock on the table twice as a gesture of saying thank you when someone poured him tea, or mastering the use of chopsticks at the dinner table. It usually helped to draw our relationships with them a little closer. Having a foreigner on the spot also encouraged people to contrast Chinese culture with Western culture in a way that may have otherwise been left out. All these helped me to get a glimpse of what it would be like if I were a traditional stranger anthropologist in my home city.

Among the people I encountered in the field, tea drinking activities happened every day, and often took place spontaneously among friends and family: Teacher Lu and Ms. Wu were a couple that my husband and I stayed with during the time of my fieldwork. The family church they attended was an apartment that Pastor Li bought years ago. There were about 30-40 regular

members in this church. In the kitchen of this apartment/church, next to the water heating devices, there was TAE<sup>61</sup> Pu'er teabags, loose-leaf white tea, and many other varieties of tea. Every time people came for a service or group meeting, they could grab a mug from the UV sterilizer and boil some water from the electric kettle to make any tea they like.

One evening, I accompanied Teacher Lu to a meeting with Pastor Li in private, Pastor Li served us with his reserved raw Pu'er tea. He said that before he became a pastor, he was once a successful businessman. Tea was one of the things he had been interested in back then. The evening started as more of a focused tea drinking where tea was the center of the topic. We discussed the age of the tea Pastor Li served us, how Pastor Li found and collected the tea, and how it tasted. Then the topic shifted to other subjects naturally. When people meet in this type of situation where alcohol consumption was considered inappropriate, tea was always the default drink. Occasionally, the host may ask if their guests want coffee. Teacher Lu had spent some time overseas and would drink coffee at home sometimes. Once he had a friend who had been in New Zealand for a few years come to visit him at his home, and he offered her coffee. While it is quite common to buy machine-made coffee from convenient stores on the street in Dalian, it is much rarer for the Chinese families I visited in Dalian to have the apparatus to make coffee at home.

Except for making tea at home, people today are also drawn to places like teahouses or *cha shi* (tearoom) as a more *zhong shi*<sup>62</sup> (literally means “Chinese style” as opposed to *xi shi*<sup>63</sup>—Western style) and traditional option than a more modern-style bar or a coffee place. Although

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<sup>61</sup> TAE (大益) tea is a popular brand for Pu'er tea in China. It is also available on Amazon in the US.

<sup>62</sup> 中式

<sup>63</sup> 西式

people of all social classes enjoy drinking tea as a pastime and get together at tea houses often (Wang 2005, 4). As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, because of my former connection with family and friends, people I knew initially were mostly either *bai ling*<sup>64</sup> (white collar) or small private business owners (tearoom owners I ran into and their friends are also in this category). The western-food/wine restaurant/saloon (*huisuo*<sup>65</sup>) my parents used to operate was in Zhongshan District, Dalian, which is one of the two original [or oldest] districts on the east coast of Dalian City—now the center of the city. People who worked or lived in that part of the city and would go to the *huisuo* regularly were likely to be of *xiao kang* background. *Xiao kang* is a concept that the Chinese government promotes which means “moderately well-off” (Croll 2006, 2), which is different from the umbrella term of “middle-class” that is more suitable for certain western societies. Born between the 1960s to the 1980s, they usually had college level degrees and grew up in the decades where China just started to reform and open up for global trading and the free market. In modern China, however, after decades of diligent work and taking advantage of good opportunities, many of these people have achieved a certain social status as well as wealth. Many were doctors, college professors, business owners, etc., —they were active in their specialized field or in at least some level of management.

Almost all of these regular consumers were quite enthusiastic about either tea or wine, or both. In addition, many of them were also interested in certain luxury products such as precious stones and jade decorations (bracelets, rings, pendants, etc.) and other cultural food products that require a level of cultivation such as coffee, craft beer, cigars, etc., and would consume them regularly. Most of the time, spending time with them involved tea and/or wine drinking. After

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<sup>64</sup> 白领

<sup>65</sup> 会所

meeting me and knowing that I brought my American husband back to Dalian for fieldwork, people would happily invite us to some establishments together—sometimes tea, sometimes coffee, sometimes even wine tasting events—though many of these types of places usually also had elaborate tea-sets and would serve tea as well. In Dalian, many coffee places and some nice restaurants also serve some form of Chinese tea. Moreover, *guwan*<sup>66</sup> shops (antique shops for fine art and jade decorations and ancient artifacts) always had elaborate tea tables that resemble characteristics of professional tearooms to serve potential and regular clients with some tea and to establish or strengthen their personal connections with their customers or guests (see Figure 14).

A bookstore we visited with more traditional elements even had a corner for a tea table next to the big glass window facing the street. This type of “casual,” or what I call *peripheral tea drinking* applies to various aspects of everyday life in Dalian, which I will further look into in this dissertation. There were also many occasions where tea was more of the focus like the meeting with Teacher Lu and the pastor. As I explained in last section, the formality of this type of tea drinking falls into the category of focused tea drinking, which is the most common type of tea drinking I studied in the field. In this dissertation, I will employ examples from my fieldwork to explore in terms of how people take advantage of tea in different situations. For instance, the type of tea provided, how tea is served, and the comments of people who provide and those who consume them, and most importantly, how all these relate back to the everyday life culture in China.

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<sup>66</sup> 古玩



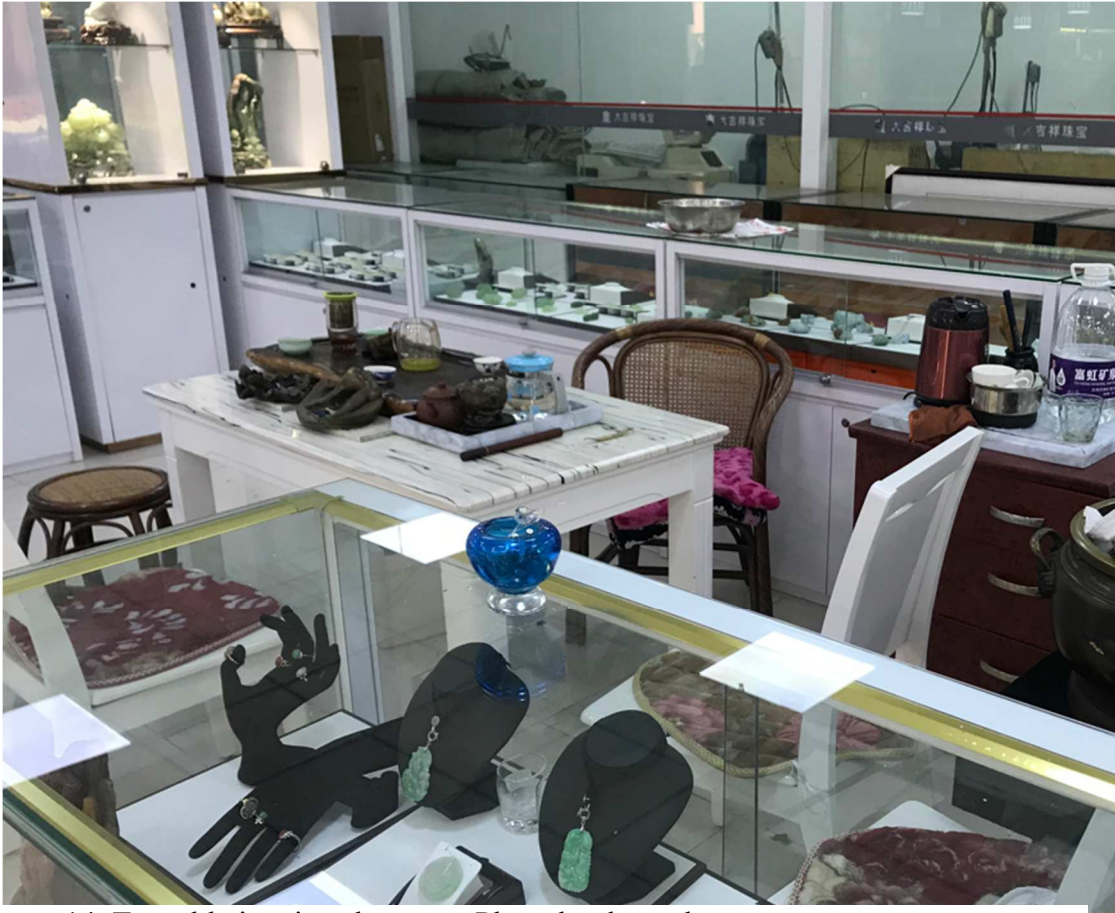


Figure 14. Tea table in a jewelry store. Photo by the author.

In these events, I discovered that people also took advantage of other sensory elements which are consistent with the spirit of tea. For instance, when I toured around the tea expo I mentioned in the last section, I talked with salespeople from different companies and drank tea from various tea regions with them. Similar to the concept of terroir, tea regions are also a big factor for the taste of tea, which I will discuss later in this dissertation. The expo lasted for three and half days and each day there were some special events like *Qushui liushang*. At another event in this expo that was meant to introduce some basic knowledge about tea, I met the founder of “*Shuli cha shi*”, Yuyuan. She invited me to visit an event in the next week in *Hengshan si* (横山寺, temple on the Heng mountain).



I learned later, her *cha shi* (tearoom) is more like a training institution for people who were interested in tea. In the tea-themed events such as *cha hui* (tea gatherings) she hosted, her students were able to further practice what they learned in the class and it helped to bring in new students. In the *Hengshan si* event, I met a few of her students and eventually became one myself. From my interaction and involvement in her business, I learned more about her strategy in recruiting students and how that played into selling tea products she had at the store. For example, aside from tea classes, Yuyuan also had other teachers come in to teach yoga and Ikebana<sup>67</sup> classes, which clearly interested some of her students.

I briefly helped her to publish articles on WeChat and made promotional films using videos I filmed at her events. We also managed to set up a tea and English corner with Zack one time. Once she learned that her other students were asking me about wine, she was also interested in collaborating with me for starting a wine class. The process of trying to implement this class was quite complicated, resulting in only a trial with a few people. All these events I participated in with her showed her strategy in promoting her business.

By visiting different venues and spending time with people who drink tea regularly, I was able to get to know some people who sold tea while I was in the field. Through this, I was able to learn the process of picking different types of tea for customers from the perspective of people who work in tea trading. At the same time, I was able to collect information on the regions producing certain types of tea from people working in the tea profession. However, I noticed conflicts in how people evaluate the quality of tea among these people; what type of tea one drinks, how one drinks tea, and how one tastes tea, can be marks for certain social status. How

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<sup>67</sup> *hua dao*, 花道

people talked about tea was affected by their experience, preference with tea, and their stance in their profession. For instance, when I brought the same tea from one owner to drink with another tearoom owner, it received varying evaluations from different people. This could be due to conflict of interest, as well as differences in standards for the same type of tea. Furthermore, sometimes it was difficult for me to tell whether someone posing as a tea expert actually had significant expertise. The first day I went to the tea expo, I explained my research to a lady I thought was an expert and asked her for an interview but was rejected. I thought it was because I was dressed too casually to gain her trust.<sup>68</sup> Later, I learned from another trustworthy informant who happened to work with this lady before, that it was because she had only recently started to pose as a tea expert and thus was afraid that researchers like myself would expose her lack of expertise.

Another type of tea tasting that takes place in more specialized tea drinking environments is tea tasting in *cha shi* (literally translates into “tearoom” or “tea chamber”). They can be as small as a few square meters in a fresh fruit and vegetable wet market, or as fancy and sophisticated as a few thousand square meters establishment that sells tea worth thousands of dollars per pound. Most of the places where I had conducted my fieldwork were in between these two extremes. In these *cha shi*, I drank tea with the owners, interviewed many of them, participated in tea-tasting classes, and contacted many other people, including students who were present when I had a chance. I was able to record seven tea tasting events on my phone. Through these practices, I was able to learn how they attracted consumers through these events and tastings.

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<sup>68</sup> I changed into a more formal outfit the next day and it was much easier to talk to people that day.

## A Brief Overview of the Participants in Dalian

As mentioned above, the ethnographic fieldwork in this research employs participant-observation in situations involving tea drinking/tasting in everyday life. Similar to wine drinking, the ritual of tea drinking can be categorized by its formality and focus. The most casual form of tea drinking—minimal tea drinking—can happen every day in Chinese people’s lives. Most of the restaurants provide free hot tea in white teapots and white teacups after the guests sit down (see Figure 15), whereas the most sophisticated tea ritual, such as a special performance for important guests in business settings, may employ all sorts of tools. For instance, there may be incense burning in a quiet background, generous daylight, clean table with tea trays, teapot, teacups, wooden tools for handling tea leaves, spring water, “fair cups,” and a constant heating kettle with water for infusing... (see Figure 16) I conducted participant-observation in a range of scenarios that were perhaps more formal than the first setting and less intense than the latter.



Figure 15. Free tea in a noodle restaurant. Photo by Xiaoyu Zhang.



Figure 16. Shot of a formal tea tasting event. Photo by the author.

People now have many more opportunities to participate in tea tastings in Dalian, where a few different types of tea would be presented, tasted, and evaluated for their sensory properties such as color, smell, flavor, aftertaste, *qi* and *yun* (see Chapter 5) and so forth. The drastic and rapid reformation time between the 1990s and the 2010s had been their opportunity to rise to a more affluent position, accumulate wealth, which in turn piqued desires for habits such as consuming wine, coffee, cigars, and more expensive teas—things that represent a more “middle-class” (*zhong chan*) lifestyle. Today, what type of tea one drinks, how one drinks tea, and even how one tastes tea, has become criteria for certain social status. As compared to the *xiaokang*

concept mentioned earlier, the idea of “middle-class” is more of an imagined status that people have, which I will discuss more in later chapters.

As I conducted my research in tea houses, *cha shi* and *cha cheng* (Chinese is 茶城, literally “tea city”—markets that specialize in tea, where one could find many small *cha shi* as stalls in the big market place), I interviewed *cha ren* (people who work in the tea business) and conducted participant-observation in teahouses and *cha shi* to understand the process of selecting characteristic tea for customers from the perspective of people who work in tea trading. Following this line, I also managed to collect information on the regions producing certain types of tea.

On the other hand, I also conducted my fieldwork among the consumers. Some I met through my initial contacts, family, and friends in Dalian, while others I was introduced to or simply ran into while I was at *cha shi* or teahouses. Some of them are very experienced in tea tasting and performing tea rituals, suggesting an extensive immersion in tea culture in their lives. They would visit teahouses or *cha shi* from time to time and try different teas with the *cha yi shi* (茶艺师, literally mean tea art master/“sommelier”, people who specialize in serving tea) or the owners of the places. They would drink sometimes alone, sometimes with friends or contacts from work, performing special tea serving rituals at their home for guests, or just enjoy tea in a more casual manner. I interviewed around 25 individuals and have kept in contact with 60 of them on a widely used social media platform WeChat.

Other than participant-observation with subjects in everyday tea drinking and tasting events, I also engaged in around 20-30 lessons for tea in *Shuli cha shi* with Yuyuan that provided for people who desired to master the knowledge and associated cultural practices in tea drinking

and tasting, where I was also able to find some of my informants as well. In addition to taking classes in person, I have also joined her group chats on WeChat that were established for these tea classes, which had 50-60 people—most of them her students.

### Tea Community on WeChat

WeChat is an app for smartphones launched in 2011 that provides functions such as text messaging, voice and video chat/intercom, group chat, photo sharing, QR code scanning, etc., and has quickly become the most widely used social media app in China, with 902 million daily active users by the end of 2017 (Kuang 2017, 36, Internet Society of China and Center 2018). According to the Internet Society of China and China Internet Network Information Center's report in 2018, the majority of the users of WeChat were between 18 to 35 years old—as high as 86.2%, and over 40% of the users have more than 100 contacts, demonstrating a strong tendency for interaction (Internet Society of China and Center 2018). Beyond communicating through messages (both in the form of voice messages and text messages) with contacts on WeChat, the WeChat *qun* (群, group) and *peng you quan* (朋友圈, “literally friend circle,” official translation is “Moment”)—an in-app platform that functions like Instagram where people can share pictures, short messages like tweets and articles with all their contacts, like and leave comments on each other's posts—are also popular functions used by all my informants.

Because of WeChat, not only was I able to have live conversations with people regardless of time difference and space, giving me more opportunities to communicate with contacts in China after I was back to the States. But, since it also intersects with their everyday life, I was able to follow what people have been doing with tea in their life on a daily basis, providing real

time updates. Therefore, WeChat made it possible for me to have conversations with them about the events they had participated in. Interestingly, I found it can be easier to interview people on WeChat through voice messages than in person sometimes. I interviewed more than 20 contacts on WeChat this way. They left me many 60-second-long (the longest the app allows at one time) voice messages whenever they had time and shared their stories with me. Some of them I came to know through shared contacts or group chats and never met in person. I usually typed out my questions first and told them that they could leave me voice messages since it is usually more convenient for them, and they could usually provide much more information than typing. Because of the 14-hour time difference between China and Carbondale Illinois, I usually received their responses the next day after I sent them the questions. Sometimes the interview could last a few days, going back and forth. However, it seemed that by removing the pressure of immediate response while they could still talk like they were talking to me, people felt more open to share their stories and opinions.

Group chat, on the other hand, provided a public space for people with particular common interests to chat. For instance, the tea class group chat Yuyuan set up would post the time of the next class and ask who would participate. It helped the students to keep track of the time, location, and content changes for classes. A few days before the class started, the teacher, Yuyuan, asked who would participate in the class so she could prepare tea according to the number of people that would join. People who were interested could then add their name to a list in the chat interface. Yuyuan would also post information about her events such as tea tastings and other events, such as the English corner and the wine tasting event we organized together on group chat in a similar way to inform people, promote the events, and also prepare for the events accordingly based upon who was planning to attend.



Group chat is of particular importance to online-only classes. For the online tea classes I joined, one of the features they had that attracted people was their “class group chat.”<sup>69</sup> The class was developed by a popular Chinese magazine aiming at their readers—especially readers of their WeChat public account<sup>70</sup>—who had interests in taking online courses in various topics such as history, music, efficiency, etc., to “better themselves.”<sup>71</sup> Thousands of their readers paid for their classes online. After paying for the class, they can then add the WeChat account of the administrator of the course to ask to join their class group chat. Not only do these chats help to develop a more tightly connected environment for their subscribers, but they also manage to use these group chats to further promote other products in these group chats from time to time. I managed to join both group chats for the online tea courses: the first one has over 490 people (500 is the maximum number of contacts in each group chat), the other has around 300. I have observed and recorded discussions in these group chats. The topics ranged from the tea they drank, the tea shops and coffee places they visited, to what water is best for certain tea and coffee. I would also ask questions sometimes and add people who were willing to talk to me and interview them. Many of these people I interviewed were from southern cities in China, which also provided interesting insights of how the tea culture can be different from northern cities like Dalian.

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<sup>69</sup> *ban ji qun*, 班级群

<sup>70</sup> Individual and organizational entities can register public account on WeChat, which enables them to send articles, pictures, recordings and videos to targeted subscribers directly to their WeChat account.

<sup>71</sup> *zi wo ti sheng*, 自我提升

## Participate Sensing in Tea Tasting

This research practices what Sarah Pink calls “sensory ethnography” by “attending to the senses in ethnographic research and representations” (Pink 2009, 8). In her book *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Pink suggests that a sensory ethnography encompasses:

Taking a series of conceptual and practical steps that allow the researcher to rethink both established and new participatory and collaborative ethnographic research techniques in terms of sensory perception, categories, meanings and values, ways of knowing and practices. It involves the researcher self-consciously and reflexively attending to the senses throughout the research process, that is during the planning, reviewing, fieldwork analysis and representational processes of a project. [Pink 2009, 10]

As mentioned earlier, my experience in sensory science makes me more conscientious about my senses in general. I immersed myself in the physical engagement with “the materiality and sensoriality of everyday” and with tea drinkers in the field (Pink 2009, 10). This includes drinking and tasting tea together, taking tea classes together, serving tea together, all the while talking about the experience of tea drinking/tasting. Furthermore, there was a collaborative component in exploring the theme of tasting in terms of wine tasting in tea rooms. As three of the tearoom owners learned about my knowledge and experiences with wine, they wanted to organize events featuring wine tasting with my help as they knew many of their customers had

potential interests in wine. Together with them, I planned four wine tasting events and also provided lectures on how to taste wine to the audience in these events.

Drawing upon her experience with conducting fieldwork about the Cittàslow movement, Sarah Pink elaborates about her “food and drink-related sensory experiences” which also accounted for the Slow Food movement (Pink 2009, 68). By adapting aspects of her sensorially engaged fieldwork method as an initial model in fieldwork, I was able to see the effect of certain methods and make changes accordingly. One important aspect of this research is to record as many details as possible in the form of sensory terms or expressions participants used and developed in tasting tea. I thus employed methods such as voice recording, video recording, in addition to notetaking and taking pictures for later analysis.

After I learned people were all using WeChat (微信) public account—a popular platform for businesses in China—and that many of the tearoom owners I knew were taking advantage of it to promote their events and have the consumers better follow up on the topics they are interested in, I was able to collaborate with Yuyuan and other tearoom/wine distributors to publish and manage their public account. In these ways, I emplaced myself in a deeper sense of participate sensing in terms of the media presentation of tea drinking events, as “part of a social, sensory and material environment,” and managed to get feedback from both the *cha ren* and their followers—the tea consumers. Thus, I was able to gain a detailed understanding of how these other people “experience, remember, and imagine” these events (Pink 2009, 23). Other methods include semi-structured or unstructured interviews in the field, recordings when accessible and necessary, and conscious reflection of my sensorial experiences after tasting events.

## CHAPTER 3

### TEA DRINKING AS A SOCIAL EVENT

#### The Legend of Tea: From Shennong to Lu Yu

I have heard many lectures about wine and taught many myself. It usually starts with how we discovered wine. The first story tells that monkeys found some naturally fermented grape juice and started to drink it. Humans found out about it from imitating monkeys. The second story is about a king who stored many jars of grape juice in his cellar. People believed it had turned into poison after some time. One of his concubines who had been forgotten decided to commit suicide by drinking these poisonous jars, only to find out it tasted rather good and helped to cheer her up. Then I would start to tell people the differences between wine grapes (*Vitis vinifera*) and table grapes.

Similarly, a lecture about tea often starts with the explanation of how tea was discovered and what tea is. Yuyuan, a *cha ren* (person who works with tea) I met through the tea expo in Dalian, developed a set of tea courses a few years ago in her *Shuli cha shi*, and has been teaching students about tea since. She told us the story of the legendary ruler figure Shennong (the Divine Farmer/Husbandman, 神农) in prehistoric time (traditionally dates 2737-2697 BCE) in her lectures (Benn 2015, 21): Shennong taught Chinese people how to plough the field and the

nutritional and medicinal property of different wild plants and herbs. In order to understand the properties of wild plants, he would try to eat them himself first (Some legends even say he had a transparent stomach to help him better understand the property of the plants he consumed). One day, when he was trying some wild plant, he was poisoned. He then happened to eat some tea leaves and it saved his life from the poison.<sup>72</sup> Another version of this story states that tea leaves were accidentally blown into his open cauldron when Shennong was boiling some water one day. The fragrance attracted Shennong and he tasted it, discovering its delicious taste and health properties (see also Owyong 2009, 31). Yuyuan would remind us sometimes what tea is when we drank tea together before she was about to explain some customs of tea, “What is tea? A tree leaf fell into water, and then we had tea.” Then she would show us five or six different leaves on the table and teach us about how tea leaves were different from the other leaves judging from the appearance (see Figure 17).

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<sup>72</sup> The original text is 神农尝百草，日遇七十二毒，得茶而解之



Figure 17. Different type of leaves Yuyuan showed in her classes. Photo by the author.

In the event of *Qushui liushang*: When the East meets the West, the speaker told a similar story of how coffee was discovered: a shepherd found that his goats ate some coffee beans and started dancing. That made him curious, so he tried some of the beans himself. The origins of the three drinks were surely all too old to be recorded in history accurately, and therefore all the myths were quite ambiguous in many details. However, what is interesting is that there is a specific sage character in the myth about tea in China: the mythical ruler Shennong. How did the story about Shennong and tea become popular? In this chapter, I will start by comparing the three stories, exploring some of the reasons for tea to be associated with Shennong. From there, I will further investigate the etiquette of tea and how it is transmitted through social memory.

In the first and also a very influential tea book in Tang dynasty, *Classic of Tea* (around 780 CE), the author Lu Yu famously attributed the discovery of tea to Shennong. Indeed, as James Benn notes, although his statement has no “historical merit,” it has been proven to be “remarkably tenacious” —*cha ren* I met in the field like Yuyuan, as well as many tea books we read, often referred to Shennong for the discovery of tea (2015, 28). Benn argues that in the contexts of Lu Yu’s time, Shennong was viewed not only as a cultural hero who was responsible for inventing agriculture for the Chinese people, but more importantly, he was also viewed as a “heroic pioneer who personally tastes and tests the various herbs on behalf of the humanity.” This emphasis on his connection with medicinal properties of herbs making him the best figure for Lu Yu to cast as “the discoverer of tea” as he made the claim that tea was “a kind of medicine that has a beneficial long-term effect on the body and mind” (Benn 2015, 29).

Moreover, as Sigley notes in “Tea and China’s Rise: Tea, Nationalism and Culture in the 21st Century this origin myth demonstrates that tea has been an essential part of Chinese life “since time immemorial” and it was through cultural and social developments that “tea became embedded in the Chinese culture and national imaginary.” In other stories of Shennong, he also invented *qin* (琴, an ancient Chinese string instrument) and helped to educate<sup>73</sup> people, making him the perfect candidate for Lu Yu to pick as the personification of the spirit of tea. Thus, the story of Shennong, according to Sigley, is also a part of the process of associating tea with the “civilizing process” (Sigley 2015, 339).

Indeed, just as wine is considered the pride of French civilization, to many people, tea is the representation of Chinese civilization. In this case, the sage Shennong and the person who

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<sup>73</sup> *jiaohua* 教化

promoted tea under his name, Lu Yu, have both become the personification of tea in Chinese people's narrative of tea over time. While the Greek god of wine and agriculture, Dionysus (The Roman version is Bacchus.), also stands for fertility and indulgence, the tea ancestor, Divine Farmer represents a pragmatic view of tea—it is beneficial to human health. Because of the influential book *Classic of Tea*, Lu Yu is also considered a saint<sup>74</sup> in Chinese tea culture. Sharply contrasted to what wine stands for, Lu Yu advocated for a more modest style of tea drinking—tea drinking should be *jian* (俭), which means simple and frugal. In creating the connection between Shennong and tea, Lu Yu managed to establish a famous embodiment of the spirit of tea: it is ancient, healthy, and natural. In the same way, these images are often evoked today by *cha ren* when they refer to the Shennong and Lu Yu.

Compared to the drunken monkey story and the sheep with coffee beans story, the concubine story has a specific character, making it less credible but more personable. The origin story Lu Yu told takes it even further and claimed a specific mythical leader, Shennong, making it even more relatable, memorable, and above all, a good story to tell. It is not uncommon to attribute a sage-like figure with inventions and achievements in ancient Chinese literature. Other than Shennong, Zhuangzi (late fourth century BCE) had credited *Youchao shi* (有巢氏) for inventing houses for people, and Hanfeizi claimed that *Suiren shi* (燧人氏) was the saint who taught people how to use fire, *Cangjie* the inventor for characters, and *Dukang* for wine, etc. However, none of them seem to enjoy the same impact that Shennong has with tea. Since Lu Yu, many people have considered Shennong as the tea ancestor.

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<sup>74</sup> *cha sheng*, 茶圣



Indeed, the character of Shennong already existed before Lu Yu's writing. In "Early Shennong Legends and Their Culture Meaning," Lei argues that people had over time built a strong, caring, and saint-like image for Shennong, which helped further develop a collective cultural memory and legitimize cultural traditions (2015). This might be another reason for Lu Yu to pick Shennong as the hero for the tea origin story. In "The Explanation of Literary Mythology of the Tea Ancestor, Shennong and the Related Genesis Mythology," Geng argues that after Lu Yu's success in linking Shennong with tea, the connection between the two gradually become more interdependent, and in fact, complimented each other well. Without tea, Shennong's story is incomplete and maybe even a little boring; while without Shennong, the culture of tea lacks a highlight and seems shallow (2018).<sup>75</sup>

Indeed, this symbolic connection has been evoked often in people's discussion about tea to emphasize the long tradition of tea drinking in China and the health benefit of tea. After I returned to the United States, Yuyuan started an online course for young children to introduce different types of tea and how to perform the art of tea (*pao cha*, 泡茶). I was able to help her transcribe the audio messages in her lecture into texts to put on the webpage for the course. In this course, she told the story of Shennong in the first class:

The history of our ancestors drinking tea can be traced back to the mythical era.

We often heard the story that Shennong had tasted hundreds of different plants<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> Here is my translation. The original text is in Chinese: 茶与神农不但为人乐道，他们之间最终还演变出一种相互依存、互相成就的关系，没有茶，神农的神话就是不完整的，甚至略显单调；而没有神农，茶文化亦是有所残缺的，进而趋于肤浅。

<sup>76</sup> *Shennong chang bai cao*, 神农尝百草

In this famous story, there is a place for tea as well. Before people understand anything about medicine, in order to help with all kinds of disease people had, Shennong tried various plants and herbs. Some of them have medicinal benefits, some were harmful to the human body. Every time he encountered the poisonous or harmful plants, Shennong would eat some tea. Even though this is a myth, it is enough to show that our ancestors started consuming tea over 4,000 years ago. It is also the reason that the first book recording tea was not a historical book, but a book that records herbs and medicine like *Shennong bencao* (神农本草).

[Transcription, 2019]

### *Cha li*—The Etiquette of Tea

When I first met Yuyuan, she was already five months pregnant. She started her own tearoom (*cha shi*) *Shuli* a few years earlier. When I went to the tea expo on its last day, she and her staff were giving a lecture about tea at the northeastern corner of the lobby. At the end of the lecture, I went to talk to her and introduced my research project, asking if I could interview her later. She then invited me to come to a *cha hui* (literally tea meeting/gathering, 茶会. Similarly, wine tasting is called *jiu hui*, 酒会, literally wine meeting) the coming Saturday at *Hengshan si* (横山寺)—a temple on the *Heng* Mountain that was a few hours away from the city (see Figure 18). In that event, I learned more about the tea courses she taught. Her youngest student was a 10-year-old girl, Xiaoxiao. Like other students of Yuyuan who showed up that day, Xiaoxiao was

in a traditional Chinese style dress, and her hair was even tied up as a bun on top with a pink cloth in ancient style. That was the first time I witnessed in person that people dressed up in such traditional style clothes in real life, which created a distinct visual appeal to the whole event (see Figure 19).



Figure 18. Hengshan temple. Photo by the author.



Figure 19. Chaxi settings in Hengshan temple. Photo by the author.

I was able to talk to Xiaoxiao's parents and learned that she had studied tea<sup>77</sup> with Yuyuan for almost a year. I told them I had known many parents who sent their children to study piano, dancing, violin, etc., but this was the first time I saw children studying tea. They said they both loved tea and drank a lot of tea at work with colleagues. Thus, they wanted their daughter to learn more about the traditional Chinese culture and values, particularly about *Li* (礼, propriety, manner). It helped to better her *su yang* (personal qualities). In the group chat Yuyuan arranged for all her students, one parent expressed their appreciation for *shaoer cha dao* (少儿茶道, tea courses for children): "Traditional Chinese culture can be difficult for children to comprehend,

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<sup>77</sup> *xue cha*, 学茶

but our tea courses are a great subject where many of the traditional cultural values are present. Since my daughter studied tea, she has become more polite and genteel<sup>78</sup> in her manner.” Some ladies I met admitted that they first wanted to learn about tea because they wanted to be “different,” “peaceful” and “elegant.” They told me before they studied tea, they thought people who mastered tea appeared very cultured and even mysterious.

Similarly, in the online courses for children Yuyuan asked me to help with, one benefit she emphasized for children to learn about tea was to learn about *Li*.<sup>79</sup> As Yuyuan says in the beginning of her first class:

I call my tea school *Shuli* because I want to emphasize on the importance of *Li*. *Li* here means *Li yi* (etiquette and ritual). I believe there’s no point for *xiao pengyou men* (小朋友们, little friends, a term Chinese address children) just to learn some skill in making tea, rather, I hope through my effort, you can systematically learn about the culture of tea, at the same time, you can master *cha li* (the *Li* of tea) and finally a form of life<sup>80</sup> that would help to cultivate your body and benefit you for life. [Transcript, 2019]

There are many aspects of *cha li* in practice. In more formal occasions like the *cha hui* in *Hengshan*, *cha li* includes a dress code, elaborate apparatus, and proper manners of serving and

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<sup>78</sup> *wen jing*, 文静

<sup>79</sup> *zhi li*, 知礼

<sup>80</sup> *shenghuo fangshi*, 生活方式

drinking tea. In one lecture I attended, the speaker emphasized the importance of appearance in serving tea in formal occasions:

One aspect of *cha li* is *yi biao* (仪表, bearings), which includes the clothes you wear, what type of hair you have, and your postures such as how you stand. It differs between man and women. We have a saying that men need to stand straight like a pine tree,<sup>81</sup> sit like a clock.<sup>82</sup> In *cha li*, both men and women need to stand straight. [Transcript, 2018]

Then the speaker continued to explain where hands and feet should be placed and how to bow when standing. In particular, she emphasized that women should not be wearing heavy make up or wearing perfume, as it would affect the appreciation of tea. In performing the tea ceremony, one's nails need to appear clean with no bright nail polish and the hand movement need to be pleasant to the eye.<sup>83</sup>

In more informal scenarios in everyday life, to offer guests tea is a common practice of *Li*. Depending on the economic situation of the host and the social status of the guests, people will choose different types of tea. For extremely poor families in the past, as Oxfeld notes, they may only be able to offer boiling water in the spirit of tea (2017, 21). When we lived with Teacher Lu and Ms. Wu in their home, we witnessed many different occasions when guests came over to visit. For about fifteen minutes before the guests' arrival, Ms. Wu would start boiling some

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<sup>81</sup> *zhan ru song*, 站如松

<sup>82</sup> *zuo ru zhong*, 坐如钟

<sup>83</sup> *you mei*, 优美

water, put out the tea set on the table in living room or dining room, and discuss with Teacher Lu which tea to select.

If it is the first time a guest came to visit, they would usually bring some things as *shou xin* (手信, literally gift in hand). Sometimes fresh fruits,<sup>84</sup> sometimes dairy products, beverages, wine or even tea<sup>85</sup> in nice packages. If they brought fruits, Ms. Wu would then prepare and serve them to the guests together with what they already had. In the initial greeting phase, if we were going to join them, they would usually introduce us to the guests at this time. Then the host couple, Teacher Lu and Ms. Wu, would lead the guests either to the living room or the dining room to sit down. They then would tell the guests what tea they had at home and ask if they had a preference for a particular type of tea. Conversations then might start with the stories of how they got the tea or anecdotes about the tea they picked.

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<sup>84</sup> Bringing fresh fruit is such a common practice that there are usually a few nicely decorated stores for exquisite fruits that are more expensive than what people usually get such as jackfruit, dragon fruit, and other types of imported fruits for gifts around the residential complex, also see Figure 20.

<sup>85</sup> Like the fruits, people can easily buy these items in gift package in stores near the residential complex they visit.



Figure 20. Fruit gift boxes in one fruit store in Dalian. Photo by the author.

In the living room, the guests would sit on their black leather couches, and tea would be served on a big golden marble *cha ji* (tea table, 茶几, the equivalent of a coffee table); if they were drinking tea in the dining room, people would sit next to the dining table. Teacher Lu would sit at the end of the table facing the door while the guests and his wife, Ms. Wu, would sit next to him on different sides of the table. Teacher Lu also drank tea every day himself at home or at work. He knew more about the tea than Ms. Wu. He usually was the one to serve the guests tea. I have seen him making himself green tea, white tea, Pu'er tea, etc. Depending on the tea, the



water temperature, and what apparatus was used, how to infuse tea may also vary, which can also serve as a subject for the initial conversation.

### Contextualizing *Li*

In Chinese culture, as Oxfeld notes, food in everyday life serves the role of “continuous grease of all social relationships”: even “the most informal of visits” would at least “involve an offer to drink tea” (Oxfeld 2017, 100). Here, serving tea is a “minimum gesture of hospitality,” which is an important aspect of *Li* in Chinese culture (Oxfeld 2017, 21). In Confucianism doctrines, the concept of *Li* is similar to ritual, while traditionally, *Li* often was explained as “a principle and its practice” (Wang 2012, 89). Furthermore, *Li* in Chinese culture can also be translated as “polite, courteous, protocol, gift, ceremony or rite” (Wang 2012, 89). In Confucianism, philosopher Wang argues that *Li* is “the fundamental means of both governing the state and cultivating a moral sense” (Wang 2012, 89). It establishes a set system and behavioral norms that helps to keep “the political and social order in place”: “In the process of exercising *Li*, individuals keep a tight rein on their feelings, emotions, and desires as a means to restraining their behavior to meet the standards of communal life” (Wang 2012, 89).

Chinese anthropologist Anzhai Li argues that in Chinese society, *Li* seems to incorporate folkways, mores, institutions, etc. In the broadest sense, he suggests, *Li* is the equivalent of culture in China (Li 2012, 3). Indeed, *Li* can incorporate all types of scenarios in everyday life in China, such as appropriate manners in eating, drinking, and other everyday activities; power hierarchy and principles in different types of social relations; moral obligations in different circumstances. It is not an overstatement to say that *Li* is an integral part of Chinese culture and

cosmology, and that it encompasses all aspects of social life and is expressed through all types of social activities. In this sense, a more elaborate ritual of tea drinking is also a medium that embodies *Li* as part of collective social memories.

*Li* is a common character in Chinese. It can mean etiquette, manner, politeness, etc. Historically people often trace *Li* back to one of the Confucius Canon, *Liji* (*The Book of Rites*), supposedly written by Confucius' student around the Warring State period (457-227 BC), and compiled in Han dynasty by Dai Sheng (first century BC). It discusses ancient customs, rituals, and propriety. *Liji* goes into great length about the ritual of eating and drinking:

Originally, the propriety began with eating and drinking. The ancient people washed the millet and the pork, and then placed them separately on the stone to roast their food. Besides, they excavated the ground in the form of a deep water hole and scooped the water from it with two hands as to drink wine. They also made an earthen drum with clay to beat as reverence to the spirits. When someone died, they climbed on the house-top and called out to the sky with a prolonged voice: "O, you come back! You come back!" They then held a ceremony to put uncooked millet into the deceased's mouth. They used the cooked meat packed for the deceased while buried. They thought that the heaven would call back the soul of the dead, and the dead sleeps underground, its spirit would go upwards to the sky. So the dead should be buried with its head to the north, and the living lives with his house to the south. They are all the earliest customs which are handed to

the present day.<sup>86</sup> [Dai 2017]

Peng points out that *Li* is a distinct characteristic of the food culture in China since it practices the moral of the society through the process of tasting food (Peng 2015,74). On a national scale, the emphasis of *Li* in modern China is a recent thing. In the past few decades, China has gone through profound changes—from politics, economy to culture and even the perception of what it means to be Chinese, as well as China’s influence worldwide. Chinese society is transformed by “globalization, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism to a degree never seen before” (Pieke 2014, 123).

Since the late nineteenth century, China had turned from a country that once perceived itself as the Middle Kingdom that lead *tianxia* (天下, the world under heaven) to a “third-world” or “developing country” in today’s world order (Ling 2008). As Meissner notes, the concepts of *tianxia* and “nation” are “incompatible”: *tianxia* was a “globalistic” idea of how to structure the world. It assumes “cultural superiority” in which the world is “under the leadership of China,” in which “one was Chinese because of one’s language, one’s culture and by descent” (Meissner 2004). The government, the people, and the functionality of the society in general is bound by *Li*—a moral code that defines everyone based on their position in terms of different social connections (father/son, older brother/younger brother, emperor/subordinate, husband/wife, etc.).

The idea of nation in the West, on the contrary, forms its identity through a collective construction from the people, assuming equality among the individuals. As Sigley points out, it is

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<sup>86</sup> 夫礼之初始诸饮食。其燔黍捭豚，污尊而抔饮，蕢桴而土鼓，犹若可以致其敬于鬼神。及其死也，升屋而号告曰：“皋某复。”然后饭腥而苴孰。故天望而地藏也，体魄则降，知气在上。故死者北首，生者南乡，皆从其初。

not until the Eighteenth Century that Chinese society was surpassed by the West, when China was under the rule of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), which was also accompanied by peasant rebellions, “natural disasters and the steady penetration of colonial powers from the treaty ports on the eastern seaboard and then deeper and deeper into the teeming heartland of China” (Sigley 2015, 322).

Undoubtedly, with the fall of the last empire, there was a rapid rupture of *Li* together with many other traditional values, which in turn changed the cultural identity of Chinese people radically. Many Chinese thinkers were forced to see that China had fallen behind and started to see China and traditional Chinese culture as “backward” and “no longer part of the ‘progressive history’” (Sigley 2015, 322). This started the debate between the value and position of traditional Chinese culture in a modern world that many still engage in even today. As the form of governance in China shifted from imperialism to Kuomintang’s (ruling party of the Republic of China) adaptation of nationalism, and eventually the government in power today, the focus of each time period is different, but the desire to restore<sup>87</sup> the original condition of China has remained a key value in official discourse (Sigley 2015, 322).

The process of building a “modern nation” with “unification and political integration” was again heavily emphasized in 1949 when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded. Just as the foci of each time period shifts, so did the emphasis on national identity. Upon the founding of the PRC, having realized the threat other industrial countries posed to China, the government thus called for everyone to participate in modernization. According to Farquhar, the Maoism culture “became well established in the 1950s and reached its greatest degree of ideological

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<sup>87</sup> *fixing*, 复兴

ambition in the late 1960s and 1970s” when it was “much more proper to speak of past suffering (in the old society), future utopia (when communism is achieved), and, in the present, work, production, and service” (Farquhar 2002, 3). In 1958, the Great Leap Forward<sup>88</sup> mobilized the whole population, attempting to achieve “rapid industrialization and intensified agricultural output” through “increased amounts of manual labor on the part of all citizens” (Farquhar 2002, 12). However, the three years of movement left much of the country with famine and “great deprivation,” which was followed by the “cultural revolution.”<sup>89</sup> All these movements had further created gaps between the traditional value such as *Li* and people’s everyday life. Even today, I still hear people talk about these movements with regrets, mourning the loss of traditional values to those times. One lady, Lanxin, I met in the *cha hui* in *Hengshan* was a designer who very much enjoyed traditional Chinese culture. She also showed up in a more traditional Chinese style clothes that day with painted white shoes (see Figure 21) and a round fan (see Figure 22).

I later learned that she loved to paint Chinese paintings<sup>90</sup> herself and painted those fan and shoes herself. She later started her own group chat on WeChat to promote *guoxue* (国学) and traditional culture<sup>91</sup>: sharing Chinese paintings she painted, teaching others calligraphy, ancient poems, and her thoughts on other relevant historical concepts etc. She believed that “these traditional activities were like keys to *chuan tong wen hua* (traditional culture), once we open the

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<sup>88</sup> *da yue jin* 大跃进

<sup>89</sup> *wen hua da ge ming* 文化大革命

<sup>90</sup> *guo hua*, 国画

<sup>91</sup> *chuan tong wen hua*, 传统文化

door, there will be an unlimited amount of treasure.”<sup>92</sup> Speaking of *chuan tong wen hua*, she commented:

Because of some historical reasons, our traditional culture is at a low point today. Children used to receive much better early education from a classic educational system. Practices such as calligraphy, incense burning, and tea drinking can help one to cultivate the spirit. In times of anxieties like now, we need traditional values even more. [Transcript 2018]



Figure 21. Shoes Lanxin Painted. Photo by the author.

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<sup>92</sup> 宝藏取之不尽用之不竭



Figure 22. Traditional Chinese style fan Lanxin painted. Photo by the author.

After *gai ge kai fang* (改革开放, reform and opening up), “the roaring nineties” started the era of “socialism with market characteristics”<sup>93</sup> with an “expansive and permissive reform economy,” the focus turned to developing advanced technology and developing a new idea of the nation that is unique in the context of China (Barmé 2010, Ling 2008). Indeed, in response to the change of social order and the impact from neoliberal market reforms, the objectives and modalities of governance and personal life course have all become more complex and dynamic. While new issues and social “stratum” emerge, the legacies and remains from the past may take new forms in the new contexts. Contradictions and conflicts such as *Li* and nationalism, tradition

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<sup>93</sup> *you zhong guo te se de she hui zhu yi* 有中国特色的社会主义

and modernity, locality and globalization are reflected in the responses and negotiations of cultural identity.

While the public discourse has successfully instilled “a (new) sense of Chinese identity” which “was shared across the country,” there are still some unique “local, ethnic, and religious identities” remaining (Pieke 2014). Thus, the restoration of *Li* through cultural practices such as tea drinking today, as Trnka, et al. suggest, is also part of “the sensorial aspects of citizenship” that are essential to “political power, collective ideologies, and citizen subjectivities” as the grounds for a mutual definition (of us/them, citizen/foreigner) return to “sensory knowledge and being.” That is to say, everyday practices such as tasting, can create “sensory models to legitimate belonging and exclusion” (Trnka, Dureau, and Park 2013). The body that performs *Li*, therefore, as Farquhar put it, can be the “formations of everyday life” whereas everyday life can be “thoroughly suffused with discourses” (Farquhar 2002, 8). Just as Farquhar argues that everyday life in reformed China is still inhabited by the nation’s Maoist past, I argue that *Li* also “lived in mundane practices and embodied habits” such as *cha li* as a more ancient past and collective identity in 2010s’ urban China (Farquhar 2002, 8).

### *Cha li* and Social Memory

In *How Society Remembers*, Connerton argues that our experience of the present “very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past.” The present experience is “causally connected with past events and objects.” Therefore, the present will be experienced differently depending on “the different pasts to which we are able to connect that present,” which means the past factors can then “influence, or distort, our experience of the present.” Connerton also emphasizes



that this process “reaches into the most minute and everyday details of our lives” (Connerton 1989, 2). In this sense, the restoration of *Li* thus reconstructs the connection with a more distant past of China (before the nineteenth century). Thus, the formation and transition of a shared set of social memories through *Li* are important to “legitimate a present social order” (Connerton 1989, 3).

Connerton introduces the topic of creating and passing social memories as a common practice across generations in different societies first by citing Halbwachs’ *Collective Memory* written in the 1920s. He points out that Maurice Halbwachs notices that all memories are inherently social and thus produce the social identity for individuals in collective lives (Connerton 1989, 36). While Halbwachs himself did not elaborate on the process of transmitting memory, Connerton employs Marc Bloch’s explanation on this issue, arguing that in rural societies in Europe, the oldest members of the family can pass down their narration of social memories through everyday practices, events, and activities in the process of enculturation of the grandchildren when the parents are often engaged in working activities outside the household (Connerton 1989, 39).

Similarly, tea drinking as a common practice in everyday life in China is a type of scenario where these memory transmissions take place. Even in today’s China, as many of my informants told me, just like my experience, they grew up with their grandparents as well and learned to drink tea from the grandparents at a young age. These habitual bodily practices, or what Connerton calls “sediment” in the body are thus “incorporated” through everyday “bodily activities” transmitted from the grandparents’ generation, creating their earliest social memory. Moreover, Connerton points out that these habits “are more than technical abilities.” He argues that habits do not “exist apart from our likes and dislikes and lack any quality of urgency or

impulsion or marked affective disposition,” rather, they “entail an inherent tendency to act in a certain way.” They are, in fact, “affective dispositions”: “that a predisposition formed through the frequent repetition of a number of specific acts is an intimate and fundamental part of ourselves,” and “such habits have power because they are so intimately a part of ourselves” (Connerton 1989, 92-93). In the case of tea drinking, the habit of drinking tea becomes an “affective disposition” over time and thus incorporated into children’s everyday “bodily activities.” This impression then helps to establish the commonality of tea drinking in Chinese culture in different generations.

*Cha li*, as Yuyuan was teaching Xiaoxiao and other children who listened to her lecture online, was the more ritualistic aspect to the tea drinking practices in Chinese people’s lives. As Connerton suggests, ritual serves as a more poetic and meaningful aspect of experience. In his example of table manners, Connerton cites Norbert Elias to point out that “nothing in modern Western table manners is self-evident or the expression of a ‘natural’ feeling of delicacy or simply ‘reasonable.’” They become that “by virtue of being a set of particular practices built up slowly in a historical process of long duration” (Connerton 1989, 83). It was not until the French leisured upper class “fully elaborated the standard of table manners” that it gradually became “self-evident” in Western civilized society as a whole. In this sense, “the shapes of eating utensils are from then on no more than variations on accomplished themes, and the method of handling them remains from that time on unchanged in its essential features” (Connerton 1989, 83).

Guan argues that since Du Yu’s “Chuan Fu (筵賦)” in West Jin dynasty (266-316 CE) tea drinking had become a fashion among the gentry class at the time and marks the beginning of *cha dao* (茶道, the Tao of tea). “Chuan Fu” records choosing particular apparatus of tea and how

to appreciate the color of tea broth (茶汤, *cha tang*), “displays keen sensitivity toward the major aspects of tea production and appreciation,” and, therefore, suggests that a ritualized *Li* had formed in tea drinking (*li yi hua*) (Guan 2001, 222). After the publication of Lu Yu’s *Classic of Tea* in the Tang dynasty, tea drinking started to gain more and more popularity across all of China and over time, the ritualistic aspect of tea drinking is established in *cha dao* as *cha li*.

Just like the case of table manners Connerton discusses, as the aristocratic embraced tea drinking “as a refined activity” and thus developed elaborate forms of *cha li*, it also became “a set of historically specific proprieties of the body,” and as “technical skills imbued with moral values” (Hinsch 2015, Connerton 1989, 83). When one learns about *cha li* today, such as how to dress, how to use the apparatus, it is to form the “body proprieties” where the rules of *cha li* are being “reproduced and remembered” as “habit-memories” (Connerton 1989, 84). Connerton further discusses the ceremonial privileges in French were “a mnemonics of the body” that can constantly remind people of the order of estates (Connerton 1989, 87).

The elaborate set up and the ritualistic aspect of *cha hui* such as, going to the *Hengshan* temple and dressing up in traditional Chinese clothing, thus purposely practices a different set of sensory experiences from the mundaneness of everyday life. It then creates a set of special social memories and reinforces the social relations that connect the host and the guests through the concept of *Li*.

In these cases, the children who were present like Xiaoxiao and the others (who were not Yuyuan’s students but just came with their parents) would also be immersed in the sensory environs. Sometimes they were even encouraged to help with pouring tea, bringing the hot water, or some other small chores relating to serving tea to the guests. Connerton argues that “the precarious sway of culture over nature is celebrated by making the meal an occasion for the

demonstration of taste.” Connerton cites Bourdieu here and points out that in doing so, it denies “the primary function of consumption” by making the meal “an occasion for the celebration of artistic refinement and ethical value” (Connerton 1989, 84). Similarly, drinking tea in *cha hui*, is not about quenching thirst or the health benefit of tea any longer; through the mnemonics of the body, the ritualistic aspects of tea drinking is formed and reproduced in the bodies of children.

For parents who sent their children to learn *cha li*, in this view, they also had decided to invest in their children to develop a skill that takes time. *Cha li* here is endowed with great “symbolic power” that can be used to display their inherent quality through clear demonstration of “the quality required in their appropriation” (Connerton 1989, 87). Indeed, *cha li* as a symbolic demonstration of power, is quite distinct from monetary capital, since it cannot be acquired in haste, rather, it needs to be “locked into the whole life history, and, therefore, the memories” of the children who master it. Connerton argues: “Part of the point of what is possessed is precisely that it cannot be managed by leading a life independently of specific demands of what is possessed. And part of the point of what is possessed is that it is not independent of the past context in which it was acquired” (Connerton 1989, 87). In this way, someone who has the most natural proper manner in serving tea at a young age demonstrates that their parents invested in them at a young age so that they can learn it slowly and take time to enjoy it slowly, manifesting “a concern for the things that last” (Connerton 1989, 87).

Furthermore, “poetic/meaningful” narrations regarding tea or tea tasting were emphasized in this type of ritual, which include stories similar to Shennong and personal accounts about tea they drank and places they had been for tea. In participating in these performances, children are able to incorporate bodily practices, linguistic applications, and social meanings with these types

of commemorative ceremonies, which further shapes their understanding of Chinese culture on essential elements of social relations such as *Li*.

## CHAPTER 4

### TEA EVENTS AND TEA UTENSILS

Over the last few decades, as I mentioned in previous chapters, things have changed rapidly in Dalian. Not only how people drink tea has changed, but the taste of what people favor in tea has also changed. Just like Zhang points out how the fever for Pu'er tea started and how the price of Pu'er tea rose and fell in China in the last few decades, the complicated process of changing taste is a result of multiple factors and can reflect interesting aspects of people's everyday life in China (Zhang 2014). In this chapter, I will use white tea as an example to analyze some of these factors while using the ethnographic data I collected on tea ceremonies and tea courses in Dalian to explore some of the reasons behind this transformation.

#### Getting to Know about White Tea in A Tea Gathering

When I was working in my parents' restaurant, I often met people who were enthusiastic about tea. As they learned about wine from us in the establishment, they also taught us much about tea. After getting to know my parents, some people would bring tea that they enjoy to share with my parents from time to time. A few people even gave my parents complete tea sets as gifts, so that my parents could better enjoy tea themselves. Over the time I spent in the restaurant, I had drunk tea with many people countless times and heard many of them tell me

how tea is prepared and served, but I still felt like I knew very little about tea. Tea can be infused (*pao*, 泡, literally means soak, can also mean the liquid from the infusion or used as a measure word in Chinese for each iteration of infusion ) in *gaiwan* or *cha hu* (teapot); perhaps using boiling water to wash the tea leaves<sup>94</sup> first and then use that first *pao* (泡, tea from infusion) to rinse the teacups and dump the water away. For each *pao* (infusion/iteration) the tea should be infused for slightly different lengths of time (For a certain type of tea, I remember someone told me each time it needs to set in the water 5 seconds longer.). I went to the teahouse next door twice to talk to the girl who served tea there to learn more about tea, but I still had a hard time memorizing the different varieties of tea and how each should be made differently. This was perhaps because there were many things about tea that I needed to remember in the first place in order to catch up with other people’s knowledge about tea. Besides, I was not learning about them in a more systematic manner like when I was learning about wine, which was what I had expected in learning about tea.

I brought a nice white clay tea set that a friend from Dalian gave my husband and me as a gift back to the United States, and used it to drink tea in America, but never felt like I really “got” what tea is about like I did with wine. I knew that almost all people in the North like Beijing and Dalian used to drink jasmine tea (jasmine scented green tea) for a long time before the 2000s. By the time around 2010, several types of tea I knew were very popular in Dalian:

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<sup>94</sup> *xi cha*, 洗茶, literally mean rinse tea

*hong cha* (red tea) such as *jinjunmei* (金骏眉) and *zhengshan xiaozhong* (正山小种), *Pu'er* tea, and *tieguanyin* (铁观音, literally iron bodhisattva, a type of oolong tea).

After I returned to China in 2018 for my research, I started to pay closer attention to teahouses and tea shops wherever I went. My friends and family soon started to take me to different tea shops as well as shared their tea with me. I was surprised to find out that particularly *tieguanyin* had fallen out of favor. While people still drink some *hong cha* and *Pu'er* often, a type of tea that I did not recall hearing much about, white tea, had become quite popular. Almost everywhere I went for tea, someone was drinking white tea. I also started to hear a lot about the health benefits of aged white tea. In the event of *Qushui liushang* mentioned in previous chapters, it was the white tea that was picked to represent Chinese tea culture in contrast with coffee. After the coffee master, Mr. Li, explained about coffee and his barista made coffee, the host lady, Lan, contrasted white tea with coffee and commented on Chinese culture:

I have a tea space<sup>95</sup> on the 40th floor of the building nearby, Mr. Li's coffee place was on the first floor of the same building, so I go to have some hand-made coffee with him from time to time. At one point, we were talking about white tea and coffee. I said, look, western culture is coffee, and eastern culture is tea. They are both representatives of different cultures. But what is interesting about both of them is their connection with water. Water is the medium for both.<sup>96</sup> In China, we

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<sup>95</sup> *cha kongjian*, 茶空间

<sup>96</sup> *shui wei zaiti*, 水为载体



say ‘the highest excellence is like water<sup>97</sup>’. Water has great wisdom. Coffee is black. I use white tea here. They are black and white, just like a *Taiji* symbol. There is yang in yin and yin in yang.<sup>98</sup> Yin is inside yang, not the opposite of yang. Just like the *Taiji* symbol.<sup>99</sup> a dot of black in the white half and a dot of white in the black half. Just like life, a cycle of ups and downs. The international affairs are like this. Cities are like this. Business is like this. Even our lives are like this. This is the greatest wisdom of our culture. This event is to use this culture of water to give you an experience of the differences in cultures.

[Transcript 2018]

In “Tea and Wine Tasting: The Social and Political Discourses of Consumption in Contemporary China,” Zhang compares tea tasting events and wine tasting events that took place in China. She draws on the similarities and differences between these two types of events, arguing that both types of events “share common social and political discourses in contemporary China, both showing the unresolved paradox between ideals and realities, performances and practices” (Zhang 2017a, 76). What Lan said here represents how people view coffee for the most part. Just like wine, coffee is viewed as a “western” product. The example of *Taiji* symbol Lan uses here reflects a school of traditional Chinese thought that I hear expressed quite often in public discourse in China: the paradoxical nature of things is everywhere and can be best represented by the contrast of black and white in *Taiji* symbol. It also symbolizes that a pair of

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<sup>97</sup> *shang shan ruo shui*, 上善若水

<sup>98</sup> *yin zhong you yang, yang zhong you yin*, 阴中有阳，阳中有阴

<sup>99</sup> *tai ji tu*, 太极图

contradictions not only can coexist, but also can reach a state of reconciliation, and even complement each other. In this sense, while the blackness of the coffee can be a sharp contrast to the whiteness of “white tea,” they are also both products of water and thus can balance, complement and stimulate each other. This state of *yuan rong* (圓融, all-encompassing, all-accommodating) is an ideal quality for many Chinese people who have reached some financial stability in life.

In the meantime, as Zhang points out, the sensorial setting of this event was designed to be very ritualistic and symbolic to bring out its “authenticity” in reenacting traditional Chinese culture and values (Zhang 2014, 83). The opening speech and brewing performance of coffee here emphasized the technical aspects of hand-made coffee such as what type of water is the best, how the water temperature would affect the extraction of the flavors, and how to pour the water to achieve the desired taste. This information drew the attention of the audience to the sensory elements of the process and helped to establish a sense of accuracy and professionalism, creating a sense of “authenticity.” Combining the coffee and tea to create the contrast of black and white which resembles *Taiji* also made the event quite special, creating what Zhang calls “interesting highlights” (*quwei dian*, 趣味点) (Zhang 2014, 88). Many people in the events were holding their phones up to take pictures to share on their social media. Later when I browsed my WeChat “Moment” timeline, I found out that three people I knew had also been to this exhibition and posted about it. One lady posted pictures of tea cakes that she found at the exhibition that was produced during the time of Culture Revolution: “I met this old tea cake today at the tea exhibition. It is even older than I am. It tasted sweet with a hint of jujube.” Another lady I knew had a booth set up at the exhibition for her white tea, she posted a few pictures of her booth and

told people to take the time to come and buy some tea since there was a discount for the exhibition.

Just like Zhang states in her article, to Chinese people, tea is traditional, pure and represents the beauty of being reserved (*hanxu*, 含蓄) while western beverages such as coffee and wine are perceived as more western, modern, fashionable, and outgoing (Zhang 2014, 79). In Lan's remark above, we can see her understanding of the contrasts between the two, while making an effort to draw connections by emphasizing on the traditional thoughts of *Taiji* and applying it to a larger picture of Chinese culture. After drawing these connections between tea and traditional Chinese culture, she mentioned her courses with VIP members of a specific bank in Dalian where people can experience more about tea culture. She emphasized the cultural underpinnings<sup>100</sup> behind the experiences of the course, inviting people to join. She then started to explain white tea:

Many people don't understand what is *lao bai cha* (老白茶, literally old white tea, referring to aged white tea). Some think white tea that is stored for a while is *lao bai cha*. To tell you honestly, the oldest white tea in China is about ten years. If someone told you there are 20- or 30-year-old white tea, then it must be problematic. Why? When China was still in a planned economy, all our white tea was for exportation. Only Chinese expatriates can get it. If someone has a 30-year-old white tea today, it can only be of overseas origin.<sup>101</sup> White tea first

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<sup>100</sup> *wen hua de cheng zai*, 文化的承载

<sup>101</sup> *hui liu*, 回流

gained reputation overseas. Americans love our white tea, because they found out that white tea has six times more the amount of Vitamin C than orange juice. It is called woman tea.<sup>102</sup> In fact, white tea is good to everyone. We all know that tea culture in China has over 5,000 years of history and it started from Shennong. While Shennong was tasting different plants in the field, he got poisoned. He boiled some water and then lay down under a tree. Some tea leaves fell into his water. After he drank the water that boiled these tea leaves, it neutralized the poison. We all know this is how tea originated. Let's think about the tea tree in this story. What type of tea leaves would fall? It must have been dried and withered in the sun, right? The process of withering, is the central process for white tea—*rishai* (日晒, expose in the sun), *weidiao* (萎凋, withering). It is a very natural process. We can ask our friends who are doctors of Chinese traditional medicine. They will tell you that white tea is the only tea that can be used as a medicine. It is very good for our body. [Transcript 2019]

In this part of the speech, she highlighted the rarity of the white tea and its health benefits. As Zhang points out, before the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, World War II and the civil war had seriously interrupted the tea trade. After 1949, the trading of tea and other foodstuffs were monopolized by the state. Some of my informants in Dalian confirmed what Lan said here about white tea and its exportation: it was mainly an export product for

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<sup>102</sup> *nüren cha*, 女人茶

overseas markets. It was not until 2013 to 2015 that white tea had become more sought after in markets like Dalian.

Interestingly, it seems that people in the South have always had access to white tea as a regional cheap tea. Perhaps, for them in that time white tea was just as cheap and accessible as the jasmine tea (*moli hua cha*, 茉莉花茶) my grandfather drank when I was little. When I asked people about white tea in the group chat for the online tea classes, some people from southern China that were closer to tea regions said that they had been drinking white tea since they were little:

When I was a child, every family would buy some big leaf loose tea. They were all naturally *weidiao* (萎凋, withered), whole dried leaves. Add some of them to the boiling water, and it will become bright yellow colored tea. All the tea stalls on the street back then sold tea like that. I think that was white tea. It was quite cheap, ten to twenty yuan<sup>103</sup> (about \$1.5 to \$3) per *jin*<sup>104</sup> (500 grams=1.10 pounds).” [Transcript 2020]

Lan also gave very elaborate accounts of the health benefit of white tea in her speech. From talking to different *cha ren*, I believe it was another reason that white tea had become popular in many cities in the last few years. Zheng shushu,<sup>105</sup> who had been running a small tea shop for

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<sup>103</sup> The average rate of RMB to US dollars in 2018 is 0.15.

<sup>104</sup> 斤

<sup>105</sup> 叔叔, literally means uncle on the father's side. Because I am friends with his daughter, I call him shushu

almost 25 years in Zhongshan District, Dalian, told me that white tea was mostly for export to Southeast Asia before. It was first consumed for its medicinal properties. People would drink it in the morning for *zao cha* (早茶, literally breakfast/morning tea). After drinking it, they would sweat a little, which was believed to help the body to release the extra “wet” qi<sup>106</sup> and restore the proper balance in the body. Another lady who specialized in selling white tea told me that white tea can also help with skin disease for children and she herself would boil some old white tea to drink when she had a cold.

### The Event that Led Me to the Tea Courses

After hearing about white tea from Lan, I had an opportunity to drink a few different varieties of white tea in *Hengshan* temple with Yuyuan, her husband and her students. Five students were making tea and the rest of us were there to drink what they made. As I described in Chapter Two, the elaborate and elegant settings for this tea meeting left a great impression on me. The scene had also attracted some other visitors that passed by to share some tea with us. After everybody had set up their *cha xi* (茶席, literally tea mat, but it can also refer to the whole setting which include all the apparatus for the tea on the tea mat) on the floor (see Figure 23 and Figure 24), and traditional music started playing in the background, Yuyuan gave a short speech about the essence of this experience. She told us this was a “Selfless Tea Gathering.”<sup>107</sup> She

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<sup>106</sup> *shi qi*, 湿气

<sup>107</sup> *wu wo cha hui*, 无我茶会, literally non-self tea gathering

emphasized that this was not just about the formality or the appearance, but to “let go of the anxieties and caring we had for the worldly affairs.”<sup>108</sup> It was for cultivating the heart.

When you drink tea, please make a point to appreciate what the person who made tea<sup>109</sup> has given you—the feeling of the tea and the taste (*ziwei*, 滋味) of the tea.

If you are the one making tea (*pao cha ren*), then focus on the tea with all your heart. The essence of *cha dao*<sup>110</sup> (茶道) is in the heart. Just like in Buddhism, it says our appearance follows what is in our heart. Whatever is in your heart is going to be in the tea you make. Some of us are using teapots (*cha hu*, 茶壺), and others are using *gaiwan*. Each container is different. So notice the different taste (*ziwei*) in each container.<sup>111</sup> Each *pao cha ren* is different. What they have in their heart will be reflected in the tea they make. Make a point to notice how their tea would taste different. That is our goal in this tea tasting. Now let’s begin our tea meeting. [Recording, 2018]

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<sup>108</sup> 放下我们内心对世俗之事的焦虑

<sup>109</sup> *pao cha ren*, 泡茶人

<sup>110</sup> The Chinese characters for *cha dao*, literally means “the way of tea” or “the Tao of tea.” It is the same Chinese characters used for the Japanese tea ceremony *sadō/chadō* (茶道) or *chanoyu* (茶の湯). According to Zhang, in mainland China and Taiwan, *cha dao* sometimes is used in the same way as *cha yi* (茶艺), which originated from Taiwan. *Cha yi* was used more frequently since 1980s, comparing to *cha dao* in Japan, *cha yi* emphasizes the art of making tea and appreciating the taste of tea (Zhang 2016, 56). Although in cases like this, the use of *cha dao* also stresses the Taoism aspects of tea drinking.

<sup>111</sup> *qimin*, 器皿



Figure 23. Cha xi design in Hengshan Temple event. Photo by the author.



Figure 24. Cha xi design in Hengshan Temple. Photo by the author.



It was at this event that I first tasted a series of different white teas and became quite interested in them. This was also the first time I saw tea mats set up with carefully matched tea sets. All five *pao cha ren* were women. They brought their own tea mats and *cha ju* (茶具, can also be called *cha qi*, 茶器 referring to all relevant apparatus for making tea). They all looked very elegant, but each also reflected their own aesthetic taste. When I was chatting with them drinking the tea they made, they explained to me where they bought their teacups and why they purchased them. As Zhang and Yu point out, this type of tea gathering often has many different *cha xi*. While each uses different *cha ju*, there are great similarities: the color and the sizes of *cha xi* and *cha ju* match well, as well as the type of tea and what type of *cha ju* they use. As shown in Figure 23 and Figure 24, a larger size single color cloth for *cha xi* matched with larger teacups, and the green *cha xi* uses a green leafy plant in a white china vase as decoration while the darker purple *cha xi* uses a pink flower (Zhang 2016, Yu 2009).

That day happened to be Yuyuan's youngest student Xiaoxiao's eleventh birthday, so Yuyuan invited my husband and me to join them for the birthday dinner for Xiaoxiao after the tea meeting. After the tea gathering, we rode with Yuyuan and her husband to the restaurant. Except for us, there were also a few of Yuyuan's students who worked quite closely with her, Xiaoxiao's parents, and her uncle's family for the dinner. To me, it was more or less similar to the informal version of business dinners I had attended many times when I was working in China, but to other people it could mean quite different things. To Xiaoxiao, it was her tea teacher, classmates and her family celebrating her eleventh birthday. To Yuyuan's students who also work for her, it could be more than celebration but also work related. To Yuyuan and her

husband, it was first a dinner for Xiaoxiao's birthday, their friend and student (later I also learned that Xiaoxiao's parents were also invested in Yuyuan's business), but also a chance to get to know my husband and me and see if we could join their course and possibly work together to bring in more students.

As both Yang and Farquhar point out, this type of dinner for building up connections is a very important and integral aspect of Chinese sociality. Similar to what Yang discusses in *guanxi*, there were several inflections on the "conduct of social relationships" in this dinner (Yang 1994, 123). While we talked some when we were having tea together in *Hengshan* temple, it was a more formal experience that themed tea. Inviting us to dinner in a more private circle added the inflection of "emotional affect" and a degree of "etiquette and propriety conduct," which showed their respect and appreciation for us and drew the relationship a little closer (Yang 1994, 123). On the other hand, as Farquhar notes, this type of dinner can also be a source of pleasure (Farquhar 2002, 146). Facilitated by beer, people also enjoyed the time together and got to know my husband Zack in this more casual setting. They asked about life in the United States, complimented Zack on his Chinese, and talked about the possibility for them to visit his family's farm in America in the future. This dinner was but one small example of the many complicated and versatile banquets to build *guanxi* in China, and it was a good start of our relationship with Yuyuan.

During the dinner, I learned more about Yuyuan. She started *Shuli* tearoom a few years ago. She and her husband came to know each other through tea. Since he also liked tea, he was quite supportive of her running her own business. Because he had a decent job in a state-owned company and also had quite some free time, he would show up in her tearoom to help entertain the guests whenever he could. Yuyuan and her husband were very friendly to my husband and

me and talked about possibilities of us working together using the resources I mentioned we had. Yuyuan also told me about her tea courses. After she learned that Zack did not really speak Chinese but was quite interested in tea, she told me he can also come to join the class with me for free if I were to pay for my class. The classes to understand the different types of tea were divided in to three categories: elementary (*chu ji*, 初级), intermediate (*zhong ji*, 中级), and advanced (*gao ji*, 高级) level.

There was another class just for performing tea rituals where the students could practice the skills learned in class. If after one course the student still felt like he or she had not mastered everything, they could join the next round of class for free. Knowing that I had taught courses in both wine and anthropology before, she also told me it was possible for me to teach in her courses when I mastered the knowledge about tea. Afterward some of us also went to a bar that a friend of Yuyuan's husband ran. The bar was not very big, and we were the only guests there. We drank more beer together, and I tried some of their cocktails. My husband and I even sang a few songs on their karaoke machine. Eating together, drinking together, going to bars and karaoke are all forms of "enjoyable occasion for the cultivation of fellow feelings" (Farquhar 2002, 146). At the end of that evening, both Zack and I felt very much appreciated, and I decided to join Yuyuan's class and possibly help her with some of her projects.

### Learning about Tea and *Cha yi* (The Art of Tea)

## Categories and production processes of Chinese tea

As I started the tea classes at Yuyuan's tearoom, I learned that her classes were organized by the categories of tea in each level. While the naming of each particular tea can be complicated, today, people usually agree that there are in general six kinds of Chinese tea based on the production processes and the degree and method of fermentation (Zhang 2014, 11).<sup>112</sup> The fermentation of tea can refer to the oxidation process when the tea leaves are exposed to the air or reactions caused by microbial enzymes when tea leaves are stacked together in a moist environment (Zhang 2014, 11). Thus, proper activation or suppression of fermentation of the tea leaves to achieve the desired degree of fermentation is an important procedure in tea processing, which will in turn result in different flavors (Zhang 2014, 11). Since different categories use different fermentation processes, each category also results in different colors: green tea (*lü cha*, 绿茶), white tea (*bai cha*, 白茶), yellow tea (*huang cha*, 黄茶), blue-green tea (*qing cha*, 青茶, also called oolong tea), red tea (*hong cha*, 红茶, what the US calls black tea), and dark tea (*hei cha*, 黑茶). Flower scented tea (*hua cha*, 花茶) such as jasmine tea (scented green tea) sometimes is considered green tea, while people like Yuyuan considered it a separate category, reprocessed tea (*zai jiagong cha*, 再加工茶). Green tea is not fermented as it goes through different techniques of fermentation suppression (*sha qing*, 杀青, literally means killing the green—the enzymes in the green leaves).

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<sup>112</sup> *fajiao du*, 发酵度

After brewing, the *cha tang* (茶汤, liquid/broth of tea) of green tea is green and clear (*lǜ yè qīng tāng*, 绿叶清汤). The process of yellow tea also involves fermentation suppression, but afterward, the process is slightly different from green tea. According to Yuyuan, after *sha qing*, yellow tea was slightly fermented and thus both the leaves and *cha tang* appeared yellow. White tea is slightly fermented and the leaves appear white with slightly yellow *cha tang*. Blue-green tea is semi-fermented. The tea leaves of blue-green tea appear green with red edges and its *cha tang* is yellow. Red tea is fully fermented. Both its leaves and *cha tang* appear red. Dark tea is also fully fermented but the timing of fermentation is different from that of red tea. The leaves of dark tea appear brown, and the *cha tang* is red. While many consider Pu'er tea as a subcategory of dark tea, it is also treated as an independent category by some (See also Table 1 for summary).

Table 1. Categories and production process of Chinese tea (Zhang 2014, 13)<sup>113</sup>

Fermentation Type	General Tea Category	Subcategory or Examples	Production Process	Color of leaves ( <i>cha tang</i> )
Nonfermented	Green tea	Kill the green by steaming Japanese green tea; Yunnan Steamed Enzyme tea (Zhengmei)	Harvest—kill the green—roll—dry (—scented: jasmine tea; osmanthus tea)	Green (clear)
		Kill the green by stir-roasting Dragon Well; Raw Puer tea ( <i>sheng cha</i> )		
	Yellow tea	Jun Mountain Silver Needle ( <i>Junshan yinzhen</i> ); Meng Mountain Yellow Buds ( <i>Mengding huangya</i> )	Based on green tea—sealed yellowing ( <i>men huang</i> )	Yellow (yellow)
Partially fermented	White tea	White Hair Silver Needle ( <i>Baihao yinzhen</i> ); White Peony ( <i>Bai mudan</i> )	Harvest—wither—dry	White (light yellow)
	Blue-green tea	Iron Bodhisattva ( <i>Tieguanyin</i> ); Wuyi Rock tea ( <i>Wuyi yan cha</i> ); White Hair Oolong ( <i>Baihao wulong</i> )	Harvest—wither—ferment—kill the green—dry	Green with red edges (yellow)
Fully fermented	Red tea	Keemun ( <i>Qi hong</i> ) Red tea; Yunnan Red tea ( <i>Dian hong</i> ); Earl Grey	Harvest—wither—roll—ferment—dry	Red (red)
	Dark tea	Anhua Dark tea; Liubao tea	Harvest—wither—kill the green—roll—ferment—dry	
	Puer tea (fermented)	Artificially fermented Puer tea ( <i>shu cha</i> )	Harvest—wither—kill the green—roll—dry—ferment—dry	Based on raw Puer tea—age
Naturally fermented Puer tea / aged raw Puer tea ( <i>lao sheng cha</i> )				

<sup>113</sup>This table is a adapted from Table 1.1 of Jinghong Zhang's *Puer tea: ancient caravans and urban chic* with permission.

### Contextualizing the emergence of *cha yi* in mainland China

The art of tea, or *cha yi*, has mainly been used in Taiwan and mainland China for the past thirty years. It refers to the “the serious tea preparation and drinking” like the Japanese tea ceremony, but it has “a stronger focus on developing effective skills of making and appreciating tea” (Zhang 2017b, 1). As many scholars who have been studying tea in China and Taiwan point out, the tea culture in mainland China is heavily influenced by the tea culture in Taiwan (Zhang 2016, Yu 2009, Zheng 2004). Due to the interruption of political movements such as the Great Leap Forward and the Culture Revolution in mainland China, many people believe that the “authentic” traditional Chinese culture like the culture of tea is better “preserved” in Taiwan, and therefore can be rediscovered from places like Taiwan (Zhang 2016). Places that practice and promote *cha yi* in particular, *cha yi guan*, or teahouses<sup>114</sup> can be traced back to Taiwan in the 1980s as well (Zheng 2004).

In contemporary northeastern Chinese cities like Dalian, building upon the prototype of *cha yi guan*, many establishments that practiced *cha yi* I visited were rather small and preferred to call themselves *cha shi* (tearoom), *cha kongjian* (tea space) instead of *cha yi guan*. The idea of *cha yi guan*, according to Zheng, was based on teahouses and developed during a phase of “revitalization of traditional Chinese culture” in Taiwan when many traditional Chinese arts boomed (2004, 201). While the idea of teahouses or *cha yi guan* seems like a big place where there can be little interaction between the owner of the place and the guests, *cha shi* and *cha kongjian* seem to put emphasis on the intimacy between the host of the establishment and the guest. Many of the *cha shi* I studied were much smaller than teahouses, and usually did not hire

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<sup>114</sup> *cha lou*, 茶楼

any other staff, but the owners themselves were the only ones there. Many people preferred to directly communicate with the tea owner when they came. In other words, the owner of a *cha shi* was very much part of the product people enjoy.

One lady I met in a tearoom had her own logistic business. She told me that she would not stay if she walked into a tearoom and there was only the hired server, because she “had nothing to say to them.” Similar to the clients my parents’ restaurant used to have, these regular visitors of small tea rooms were usually of certain social status and wealth who appreciated establishing personal connections with people at their level—the owner of the establishment. In this case, all the visitors who came in had a relationship with the owner and would be introduced to each other by the owner if they were there at the same time. Thus, unlike teahouses where each group of visitors would have their own table like in a restaurant, a tearoom can only have a few people at one time because of the constraint of the space, but it is a much more intimate and deeply connected space that centers on the owner. Indeed, this was how I met quite a few of my informants as the owner introduced us to each other while hanging out together.

While I had also been to multiple larger *cha yi guan*, most of the establishments I conducted my fieldwork in were the small tearooms. Usually there was only one or two rooms with a small bathroom. There were usually shelves with various cakes or boxes of tea and teacups. The most prominent feature in a *cha shi* would be the table for making tea. The water for tea is usually behind the tea table or under the tea table. Sometimes the water can be connected to a device that can directly add water to the kettle on a hot plate. While the art of tea in mainland China today can be traced back to Taiwan, the art of tea in Taiwan originated from



the tea ritual of *gongfu cha* (工夫茶 or 功夫茶) in the Chaoshan<sup>115</sup> area in China. In Chinese, *gongfu* means the time and energy needed for completing a task, thus, *gongfu tea* indicates the “time-consuming nature of the tasting process” and that the procedure of tea making is sophisticated (Yu 2014, 453).

Although there are concepts in Chinese culture referring to time outside of activities, it is also common to refer to time by comparing it with how long a task takes, particularly in ancient times. For example, the *gongfu* (duration of time) of *yizhan*<sup>116</sup> (a cup of) *cha* (tea), the *gongfu* (duration of time) of *yizhu xiang*<sup>117</sup> (burning one incense), or the *gongfu* (duration of time) of *yidai yan*<sup>118</sup> (one bag of pipe tobacco). In the context of *gongfu*, there is no clear distinction made between time or energy for work and leisure as Ingold specifies in capitalistic society (Ingold 2011, 326). For instance, when people say someone “*xia* (下, spend) *gongfu*” to accomplish something such as learning a skill or accomplishing a project, it means that he or she spent a great amount of energy and time for that goal. Here, the time and energy are inherently connected, and both intrinsically embedded in the task. Therefore, by consuming *gongfu cha*, in a way, one leaves the rhythm of modern capitalistic framework of time and returns to a more “task-oriented” view of time that is more traditional in Chinese culture (Ingold 2011, 323).

As Yu points out, unlike the well-developed different schools in Japan, the art of tea in today’s Taiwan is still in a developing process, characterized by “its informal and less structured

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<sup>115</sup> Chaoshan is a cultural-linguistic area in the east of Guangdong, China. It is short for two big cities in these area, Chaozhou and Shantou.

<sup>116</sup> 一盞

<sup>117</sup> 一炷香

<sup>118</sup> 一袋烟

but flexible and creative nature (Yu 2014, 454)". Indeed, as Yu suggests, the art of tea is still in the process of what Hobsbawm calls "the invention of tradition" today (Yu 2014, 454). Similarly, while there were some general traits, the art of tea in Dalian can be quite different for each *cha ren* and there are still new elements being added in from time to time.

### Learning about Tea Utensils

#### Cha xi and cha zhuo (tea table)

The central performing stage, the tea tables of each *cha ren*, for example, clearly all used elements and forms that were considered very Classical Chinese. There were always some common and essential elements like the water, kettle, and the tea set, but they can also differ from person to person. The tea table is a more elaborate version of a *cha xi* I discussed above. A *cha xi* like the ones Yuyuan's student used in *Hengshan* temple, can be easily put together in a basket and taken to places. It can be set up on a table or on the floor. For some *cha ren*, the arrangement of *cha xi* can be a refined art. In "Learning to Be a Tea Art Practitioner: An Anthropologist's Self-Reflection," Yu talks about his experience in learning to be a *cha ren*. He points out that while there are certain clear principles, such as the utensils should be arranged to allow "a smooth flow" when serving tea, and "assembling utensils with similar functions into small groups" and selecting some "eye-catching object," there are also "implicit rules" that "are hard to spell out" that require "the students' long-term observation and practice" (Yu 2014, 453-454).

For the classes I attended, I learned that *cha xi* is supposed to be elegant and simple.<sup>119</sup> For the tea gathering in *Hengshan* temple, most of the students brought their own collection for *cha xi*. After I became a student of Yuyuan, I joined another event as one of the *cha ren*. We were supposed to make tea for potential buyers for a real estate company on the day of Mid-autumn Festival. Since I did not have *cha fu* or a set for *cha xi*, Yuyuan provided both for me (See Figure 25).

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<sup>119</sup> *su ya*, 素雅



Figure 25. Tea tasting events for Mid-Autumn Day. Photo by Zachery Saucier.

*Cha zhuo*, tea table, on the other hand, is a more complicated and elaborate version of *cha xi*. Not only is there a larger area for setting everything up, but it is also more permanent than *cha xi*. In homes and offices, while a few people may have designated tables for tea where they leave their tea sets out on the table, many people use clay tea plates (also called tea boat, *cha chuan*, 茶船) or wooden or bamboo tea trays (*cha pan*, 茶盘) that can be easily put away with the rest of the tea sets to save space when they are not in use. A tea tray is usually two-storied, where the tea sets were placed on top of a removable tray. The tray is usually made with slits or holes for the wastewater to sieve through to the bottom level. Both the tea plate and the tea tray are usually small. But in *cha shi*, people use tea tables that were designed specifically for tea: many tables have a water heating device embedded that can directly draw water from a big water barrel under the table. Instead of storing the wastewater in the tea tray mentioned earlier, the specially designed big *cha pan* connects to a waste barrel under the table with a tube to drain the wastewater (see Figure 26). Some tea tables also have embedded plates for tea and can drain the wastewater from there (see Figure 27).

While *cha zhuo* is the center of a *cha shi*, it can also create a focused space for tea for people who are serious about tea drinking and have enough space in their business, office, or home. As I have mentioned in earlier chapters, tea tables are considered very symbolic for traditional Chinese culture. For businesses like jade stores and antique stores,<sup>120</sup> or some homes and offices that were designed to be of traditional Chinese style, it was quite common to have a dedicated space for a tea table, further legitimizing their emphasized “traditional-Chineseness.”

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<sup>120</sup> *gu wan dian*, 古玩店



Figure 26. Tea table in a tearoom. Photo by the author.



Figure 27. Tea table design in a tearoom. Photo by the author.

Whether the tea table goes well with the furniture around it, what type of wood or materials the tea table was made of, each apparatus or utensil on the tea table one has, and what plants and other decorations were on and around the table, can all be an expression of the owner's taste, demonstration of the owner's wealth, and also what Yu calls representation of his or her "personhood" (Yu 2014, 455). All of these elements can also become the topic for discussion for guests as well. For instance, there was a traditional Chinese style wooden table in one *cha shi* I went to that had inlaid mother-of-pearl shell decorations. It left me with quite an impression. This technique is called *luodian* (螺钿) in Chinese and is considered quite delicate and expensive. I had only seen this technique in documentary films but had never seen it in person. When I asked about it, the owner told me it was inherited from his grandparents (see Figure 28).

Unlike *cha xi*, which usually only have one set of utensils for steeping tea, there were usually a few different "main steeping devices" (*zhu pao qi*, 主泡器) for making different types of tea on a tea table: there were often multiple *gaiwans* (sometimes they also come in different sizes) and teapots that were designated for particular types of tea (e.g.: some people like to use purple clay teapots for Pu'er). There were always different clay-made miniature statues for Buddha figurines, animals, or Chinese mythical figures called "*cha chong*" (茶宠, literally tea pet). By pouring waste tea water on it, I was told by some tearoom owners, the appearance of the *cha chong*, just like teapots, would change over time as it gains a patina. This process is called *yang* (养, raise or nurture). One owner of tea room showed me a Maitreyan Buddha *cha chong*



made in *Ruyao* (汝窑)<sup>121</sup> that had the iconic *kai pian* (开片, cracks in the glazing of the chinaware) pattern. He told me the crack was a special characteristic from *Ruyao*. It was formed because the coefficients of thermal expansion of the glaze and the paste were different. When he made good tea, he would pour the first *pao* (infusion) for washing the tea leaves onto these tea miniature Maitreyan Buddha. Over time, the cracks would gain the color of the tea (see Figure 29). In so doing, these objects then can become symbolically dense and, therefore gain admiration of others (Weiner 1994, 394). I often heard people discuss how long they had been “nurturing” their tea pets or teapots and what particular good tea they used for certain teapots to gain the best quality of patina (*yang de hao*, 养得好). Since the owner would often sit behind the table during the day even when there were not any guests, some would also set up their small office behind the tea table (see Figure 28).



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<sup>121</sup> A kiln in *Ruzhou* that has been making chinaware since Song dynasty



Figure 28. Tea table in a tearoom. Photo by the author.



Figure 29. Ruyao *kaipian* tea pet and *zisha* teapot. Photo by the author.

### Teapot and *gaiwan*

As I spent more time in tea rooms, and learning about tea with Yuyuan, I started to understand more about the tools and their use. As mentioned before, when people were drinking tea together, the tools used for tea can often become a good topic for conversation. While some people believed *cha ju* should not take people's focus away from the tea,<sup>122</sup> more than one tea aficionado told me they first became interested in tea because they were fascinated by the tea

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<sup>122</sup> *bu ke xuan bin duo zhu*, 不可喧宾夺主。

ware (*cha ju*). Some even said that “Water is the mother of tea, and tea wares are the father of tea.”<sup>123</sup> In *Classic of Tea*, Lu Yu mentioned over 20 kinds of apparatus and tools for “tea picking, producing, containing, baking, cooking and drinking” (Liu 2010, 93). While how people drink tea has changed since Lu Yu’s time, the tools people tend to use have also developed over time. Nonetheless, *cha ju* or *cha qi* is an important aspect in making tea (*pao cha*). Here I will not list all the tools. Instead, I will discuss two main steeping devices that are essential in performing tea ceremonies.

Depending on what tea a *pao cha ren* decides to make, he or she would choose the main steeping device accordingly. The two most often used steeping devices are teapot and *gaiwan*. In the tearooms that I visited, there were usually quite a few teapots and *gaiwan* on the tea table for the owner to choose from. As for teapots, a few tearoom owners told me, the most famous kind is probably the unglazed purple clay teapots (*zisha hu*, 紫砂壶) made of special clay from “the capital of earth ware”<sup>124</sup> Yixing<sup>125</sup> (See Figure 29). First appeared in late Tang dynasty, there are a wide variety of different types of Yixing purple clay teapots. Depending on the history, the reputation of the makers, the quality of clay, the techniques, and the design, some of the Yixing purple *zisha* teapots were considered valuable collectibles by many tea lovers. I often heard people exchange their stories about their *zisha* teapots. One tea lover, Zhang Ling, told me, he spent a few years just looking for a particular type of mini purple clay teapots and was quite excited to finally find one in the tea expo.

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<sup>123</sup> *shui wei cha zhi mu, qi wei cha zhi fu*. 水为茶之母，器为茶之父。 This is perhaps a comment that reflects the “nature=female” and “technology=male” association.

<sup>124</sup> 陶都

<sup>125</sup> 宜兴

*Zisha* teapots or other unglazed clay teapots are known for being porous, which allowed for good air permeability.<sup>126</sup> This is believed to help with retaining the aroma of the tea when infusing tea in it. Similar to *cha chong* I mentioned earlier, because of the clay used and how the teapot was made, these clay teapots can also be “raised/nurtured” (*yang*) over time. I have seen people leave their favorite teapots with the owner of a tearoom so she can “nurture” the teapot for them. Sometimes, a well-nurtured tea pot can cost more than their original price. To experts,<sup>127</sup> a well raised teapot not only looks different than others, but it can also change how the tea made in it tastes. I had heard people who were more experienced in raising *cha ju* giving advice to others:

To raise a good *zisha* teapot, you will need to be careful of how often it is used to steep tea in it. You will need to use a high-quality tea for a good *zisha* teapot to let it absorb the aromatic compounds from the particular tea. Once you start with one type of tea, only use that type of tea. For this teapot, I only use raw Pu’er tea. The more you steep this type of tea in the pot, the more *cha tang* (茶汤, tea broth) it absorbs. Over time, the substances absorbed reaches a certain level, then the surface of this teapot will look like it has a jade-like luster. It will also make that particular tea you use to raise the teapot taste better. Using this teapot to *pao* (steep) raw Pu’er tea now is so much better than using other ones. [WeChat history, 2018]

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<sup>126</sup> *tou qi xing*, 透气性

<sup>127</sup> *hang jia*, 行家

While there are many different shapes and designs of *zisha* teapots, the unglazed appearance gives it a simple and naturalistic look that *cha ren* like. Many people also like to caress their *zisha* teapots, believing it would also help with the “raise” as well. Just as Sutton and Hernandez discuss in “Voices in the Kitchen: Cooking Tools as Inalienable Possessions,” objects like teapots and tea pets can take on “a patina of age” and age with their owners; in the case of *yang* teapots and tea pets, these objects “drink” good tea together with their owner and absorb the taste as “sediment” in themselves (Sutton and Hernandez 2007, 76). This interaction also creates inalienable intimacy between the owner and the teapot, making it “denser” and therefore more meaningful.

Unlike teapots, *gaiwans* are usually made of porcelain. Its volume is around 100-150 ml. The price of *gaiwan* ranges from less than 100 RMB to thousands, depending on the prestige of the maker. It has three different parts: the lid,<sup>128</sup> the cup<sup>129</sup> (a bowl with a flared lip), and the saucer.<sup>130</sup> Yuyuan told us, it is also called *san cai wan* (三才碗, three talent bowl): These three parts symbolizes the sky (*tian*, 天), the earth (*di*, 地), and the human (*ren*, 人) respectively: the sky covers, the earth bears, and human nurtures.<sup>131</sup> In some areas in China, people use *gaiwan* as a bowl/cup to both steep tea and drink from directly. The lid can help to retain the heat inside and

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<sup>128</sup> *beigai*, 杯盖

<sup>129</sup> *beishen*, 杯身

<sup>130</sup> *beituo*, 杯托

<sup>131</sup> *tian gai zhi, di zai zhi, ren yu zhi*, 天盖之，地载之，人育之。

also help to move the floating leaves out of the way when drinking from it. In Dalian, however, people mostly use *gaiwan* as an alternative to a teapot as a steeping device.

Compared to the use of a teapot, using a *gaiwan* to steep tea requires a considerable amount of practice. I learned about how to perform the tea ceremony using a *gaiwan* in Yuyuan's "tea art performing"<sup>132</sup> class, which is more formal and less interactive than how we made tea in everyday life (see Figure 30). The first step of making tea in a *gaiwan* is to warm up and clean all the utensils with boiling water.<sup>133</sup> We need to first open the lid and hold it in the left hand, then pour boiling water<sup>134</sup> into the *gaiwan* to about one-third of its volume with the right hand. Then we put the kettle down, put the lid back, and leave a small crack for the water to come out later. Then we lift the *gaiwan* up with the thumb and middle finger around the edge of the bowl of *gaiwan* as the index finger holds the lid down and tilt it over the fair cup (see Figure 30 and 31).<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> *cha yi biao yan*, 茶艺表演

<sup>133</sup> *wen bei jing ju*, 温杯净具

<sup>134</sup> *zhu shui*, 注水

<sup>135</sup> *gong dao bei*, 公道杯



Figure 30. Setting for tea performance. Photo by the author.



Figure 31. Pouring tea from a *gaiwan* into a fair cup. Photo by the author.

A fair cup is a type of glass pitcher that is just slightly bigger than a *gaiwan* or teapot. It can also be made of porcelain or clay, but some people told me glass ones are the best since it allows us to better appreciate the color of the tea in it. Freshly made tea from a *gaiwan* or teapot is first poured into the fair cup to make sure the tea leaves do not brew too long. Moreover, the tea poured out first is usually lighter than that poured out later, since the water in the bottom of the container is in closer contact with the leaves, therefore depositing tea from a *gaiwan* or teapot into the fair cup first can make sure each teacup has the same concentration of the tea broth. Sometimes people also put a strainer on top of the fair cup when they pour tea from the *gaiwan* into it to prevent any tea leaf crumbs from getting into the cup. Then the water is poured from the fair cup into each teacup to the same level and then poured out to warm up all the teacups.

Chenyun, a tearoom owner whom I came to know through a friend, once told me a story about this step of “washing tea” when he was serving tea for me and some of his friend in his tearoom. As he was pouring the very first “tea-wash-water”<sup>136</sup> into each teacup in front of us, he said jokingly: “It is tea-wash-water, don’t drink it.” Then he told us that he did not tell guests about it before, assuming they all knew about it. However, one time, one of his guests actually drank it. “It was super awkward,” so he started to make a point to remind his guests since then. After washing the teacups, the following steps will be making tea and serving tea. These steps are all quite similar. We would add an appropriate amount of tea leaves to the *gaiwan* that matches the size of the *gaiwan* (e.g., 6 grams of tea for a 90 ml *gaiwan*), pour in boiling water again to about two-thirds full, and then pour the water out again into the fair cup. Finally, we pour the tea from the fair cup to the teacups to about 70 percent (*qi fen*, 七分) full.<sup>137</sup> Yuyuan always told us that we need to leave the remaining 30% (*san fen*) for *qingyi* (情意, affection, sentiment).

Thus, the most important skill in using a *gaiwan* is to master how to hold a *gaiwan* when there is boiling water or tea in it and pour it out elegantly. Unlike pouring from a teapot, holding a scalding hot *gaiwan* is quite challenging to many people at first. When I was training to use a *gaiwan* to make tea at Yuyuan’s tearoom, I could not even hold the *gaiwan* long enough to pour all the liquid out before I had to put it down, and my hand shook quite a bit when I was pouring. I often exclaimed, “It is hot! (*tang*, 烫)” Whenever that happened, people always looked at me

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<sup>136</sup> *xi cha shui*, 洗茶水

<sup>137</sup> *man*, 满.



with a slight smile, nodding, “It will be hot for a while until it is not.”<sup>138</sup> Or when I questioned if my hand was too small for the *gaiwan* I was using, they would tell me, “No. You will get there with practice. Even Xiaoxiao (who was only eleven years old at the time) can!” Instead of giving more specific instructions, people just kept encouraging me to practice more and were certain that I would eventually “get used to”<sup>139</sup> the burning<sup>140</sup> sensation somehow.

Just like Sutton’s discussion on the Kalymnian style of cutting objects in hand, and Tim Ingold’s discussion on cutting wood, pouring boiling tea from *gaiwan* can only be felt by the hand of the practitioner: where exactly on the edge of the lip of the bowl and the lid should one put the fingers to hold the *gaiwan* in place and not get burnt; what angle should one position the hand and the wrist; and how much a crack should one leave for the lid to let the tea pour out and to avoid the steam coming out from the opposite side to burn the hand, and many more variables. Indeed, to use a *gaiwan* effectively and elegantly requires an “intimacy and control of the hand and the object” (Sutton 2014, 52).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed two tea gatherings that featured white tea to explore some of the factors that may lead to the rising popularity of white tea in Dalian today. While these events have some ritualistic elements, they are also an important part of people’s everyday experience of tea (Zhang 2017a, 103). In these events, people like Lan and Yuyuan “draw

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<sup>138</sup> 烫多了就好了

<sup>139</sup> *xi guan*, 习惯

<sup>140</sup> *tang*, 烫

strength from their faith in China's ancient civilization” and “the country's long history” to promote tea culture and relevant products such as their tea courses (Wang 2014, 2).

Similarly, taking after the forms of *cha yi* from Taiwan to set up *cha xi* and *cha zhuo* in tearooms also reflects people’s desire to reconnect with the past and tradition, which is in line with today’s grand narrative of “restoring the glory of the Chinese nation,”<sup>141</sup> as the news in China often puts it. This ideology takes embodied form in the practice of the tea ceremony. Becoming a tea connoisseur also means people have to master a set of new skills with the apparatus in performing an appropriate tea ceremony. In this process, I argue that people establish a different type of relationship with objects and become more intimate with the tools they use.

In the next chapter, I will use the tea courses and other tasting events that happened in tearooms to discuss synesthesia, sensory memory, and terroir in tea classes and tea tasting practices.

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<sup>141</sup> 中华民族的伟大复兴

## CHAPTER 5

### THE TASTE OF TEA

Taste is probably “the most ethnographically neglected of the senses” (Sutton 2006, 88). In this chapter, I will start by discussing the scientific understanding of taste in critical wine tasting and move to discuss tea and tea tasting from the aspect of taste as a synesthetic sensory experience.

#### The Science of Taste

##### The five tastes

When I was learning about wine tasting in college, the teacher asked us a question we never gave much thought before: “How many tastes (*weidao*, 味道) can our tongue taste?”

Later, when I was teaching other people how to taste wine, I also asked the same question many times. Here, the Chinese word *weidao* and the English word “taste” in particular mean “taste modalities”<sup>142</sup> which arise from “specialized receptor cells that generate gustatory sensations.” As I explained in Chapter One, in sensory science and enology, the answer is five: bitter, sweet,

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<sup>142</sup> In *Wine Tasting: A Professional Handbook*, Jackson notes it is possible that there are six to seven taste modalities (103).

sourness, salt, and umami (Jackson 2017, 103). However, people’s first reaction to this question, including my own, is often the common “*wuwei*” (五味, five tastes): sour (*suan*), sweet (*tian*), bitter (*ku*), pungent/hot (*xin* or *la*), salt (*xian*). In Chinese, *wuwei* are often not only used to discuss gustatory experience related to food, but also used metaphorically to describe emotional experiences in life. For instance, we often describe someone with complicated feelings as he or she “has all the five tastes in their heart.”<sup>143</sup>

However, in sensory science *la* (hot) is not a distinct gustatory sensation, but a combination of tactile sensation, heat, and bitterness. To most people, this explanation makes sense. Interestingly, while the taste of umami, *xian* (鲜), is not one of the “*wuwei*,” it is quite important in the tastescape in Chinese culture. In 1908, a Japanese chemist Kikunae Ikeda discovered monosodium glutamate (MSG)—the substance that causes the taste of umami—from seaweed (Mouritsen and Styrbæk 2014, 23). He then proposed the name umami (旨味 or うまみ) in Japanese for this taste. It derives from the Japanese adjective *umai* (旨い) which can mean both delicious and pleasant as well as something that tastes meaty and spicy. Umami combines *umai* with *mi* (味), which means “essence,” “essential nature,” or “taste” (Mouritsen and Styrbæk 2014, 26). Similarly, in Chinese, the character *xian* (鲜) has long been used to describe the particular taste of seafood or meat, or deliciousness (*xianmei*, 鲜美). The character *xian* can also

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<sup>143</sup> *xin zhong wu wei chen za*, 心中五味陈杂

mean fresh (*xinxian*, 新鲜), obvious (*xianming*, 鲜明), but when combined with the character *wei* (味) to form a compound word *xianwei* (鲜味), it is used the same way as umami in Japanese, referring specifically to the taste of glutamate and deliciousness in food (Mouritsen and Styrbæk 2014, 253).

In *Neurogastronomy*, neuroscientist Gordon Shepherd discusses the neurological pathways of how we perceive and process tastes and smells. In the chapter of “Taste and Flavor,” he lists “the simplest qualities” associated with the five tastants:

Saltiness is essential for maintaining salty body fluids derived from mammals’ sea ancestry.

Sweetness is innate in all mammals, because sugars reliably signal high energy.

Mother’s milk and ripe fruits are sweet.

Sourness warns of food that may have gone bad.

Bitterness warns of toxic substances that should be rejected.

Savoriness is a meaty quality, signaling a high-energy food. [Shepherd 2012]

In the wine tasting class, after we understand what the five tastes are, then we proceed to taste the water solution of each tastant<sup>144</sup> in particular—sugar, sodium chloride, citric acid, etc.,—to train ourselves to pay attention to the sensation each evokes on the tastebuds and become more sensitive to low densities. In one of the wine tasting competitions I participated in, one of the tests was to arrange five glasses of sugar solution each with a different density in order,

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<sup>144</sup> Taste stimulus.

which was quite difficult for an untrained palate. I was told only a few out of the three hundred people got the correct answer.

### Flavor: the synesthetic experience in tasting

When we discuss our experience of “the taste” of a wine, however, rarely are we only referring to the mere five tastes on our palates. Rather, it is a combination of all our sensory experiences when we are tasting the wine. As Steven Shapin points out, “in common vernacular, and in some expert practice, and from the distant past to the present, the notion of ‘taste’ tends to fold together olfactory and gustatory experiences” (Shapin 2016, 440). Textbooks on wine tasting do note the multiple meanings of “taste.” As Jackson suggests in his book, *Wine Tasting: A Professional Handbook*: “To the sensory scientist, taste refers to a select group of compounds (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, umami) detected by modified epithelial cells, primarily located in taste buds on the tongue. In common usage, taste incorporates the sensations of mouth-feel and retronasal<sup>145</sup> odor, generating the multimodal perception, flavor” (Jackson 2017, ix).

Moreover, in critical wine tasting, the appearance, other in-mouth sensations such as astringency, burning sensation caused by alcohol, temperature, weight, prickling and related carbon dioxide effects are also taken into consideration. According to Jackson, after all these sensations we experience from a wine “are initially analyzed in distinct areas of the brain, they are subsequently integrated in the orbitofrontal cortex,” which means “they are also merged with previously generated vinous memories, creating our conscious image of the wine.” Since critical analysis of wine aims to “rank it within some concept of quality, cultivar, or appellation

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<sup>145</sup> Retronasal is used to “designate the perception of odor substances that are released in the oral cavity and from there move up into the nose” (Mouritsen and Styrbæk 2014, 250).

prototype, delineate its sensory diversity, or investigate the origins of its sensory characteristics,” the tasters are trained to “separate subjective responses from consistent, defined, objective evaluation” in order to “obtain data that may be both statistically significant and of human relevance” (Jackson 2017, ix).

Compared to the limited numbers of taste in its strict sense in sensory science, what our sense of smell can detect is much more diverse. Similar to the training of different tastants, the wine tasting class focused on the odorant compounds that are common in wine. We learned about their categories, properties, and their smell in different densities,<sup>146</sup> and how certain combinations can have different effects (such as additive, synergistic, or suppressive). As research has shown that wine odor memory development “is also affected by the attention paid to the wine, and any expectations the taster may have,” we learned to train ourselves to be sensitive to different smells in daily life (such as the smell of fruits, herbs, and spices) (Jackson 2017, 50). The teacher also used chemical compounds that simulate certain common smells (e.g., yeast, ethyl acetate, corked smell, etc.) in wine to help us identify them.

Indeed, as Shapin stresses, the fact that the concept “flavor” can designate multiple sensory channels reflects “the seamless integration of models that one experiences when drinking wine as opposed to the special occasions when one might intentionally parse its aspects” (Shapin 2016, 440). The concept synesthesia is thus proposed to describe “the sort of everyday integration of modes captured by the concept of flavor” (Shapin 2016, 440). While it is helpful to look at each sensory channel individually to train a wine taster, in the study of taste in everyday life such as tea tasting, it may be worth considering taste as a synesthetic sensory experience. In his book *Remembrance of Repast*, Sutton uses the concept of synesthesia as “the synthesis or crossing of

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<sup>146</sup> Some substances can be desirable in lower density but can be an off odor in higher density.

experiences from different sensory registers (i.e., taste, smell, hearing)” to understand eating in Kalymnos as an “embodied practice” (Sutton 2001, 17). Similarly, I argue that synesthesia is also an important aspect in the practices of tea tasting among the people I studied in Dalian, especially compared with wine tasting, instead of an emphasis on an in-depth understanding and particular training of each tastant and odorant, tea tasting is more about the overall synesthetic experience. In the next section, I will explore the experience of a tea tasting class and how the flavor of tea is discussed and experienced in this type of context. While the tea class I participated in was not as academically oriented as the wine classes I had in college, I have used literature that discusses critical tea tasting for reference as well. Nonetheless, comparing wine tasting with tea can still reveal important insights on this topic.

#### Tea Tasting Class in *Shuli* tearoom

The first class I participated in Yuyuan’s place was the first class for intermediate level tasting of white tea. Yuyuan told me I could come to the higher-level class even without being in the elementary ones. The class started at 6:30 pm one Monday evening in September. I took the subway and arrived there at around 7:15 pm. When I arrived, everyone had already started tasting the second round of tea. In the middle of the tearoom, there were six golden yellow wooden tables put together into a large table area. Other than Yuyuan, there were nine other women sitting around the table with notebooks and teacups. Most of them were around their mid-twenties to thirties.

After I had spent more time in the class, I came to know some of them better. Nanting, a twenty-four-year-old who worked in a tech company as a product manager, was planning to



cooperate with Yuyuan to open another tearoom in Dalian Development Area.<sup>147</sup> Ruohua, who was in her early thirties, was a colleague of Xiaoxiao's father. After Xiaoxiao's father brought her here to have some tea with Yuyuan, she got engaged and decided to join the tea classes. She drove an Infiniti SUV and carried a luxury brand handbag with her. She came from a smaller city a few hours away from Dalian but had stayed in Dalian after finishing school here. Only two of the women were in their forties and both lived in a nearby residential zone.<sup>148</sup> One of them was a stay-at-home mom of a teenage girl and the other lady had her own logistic company near Dalian harbor. Later, I learned some of them had bought teacups they liked from Yuyuan and left them in the tearoom. When they came here for tea or the tea class, they would use their own cups. Since I did not have my own, Yuyuan gave me a light azure blue China teacup from a set that she had for guests to use.

### The wet and dry steeping style

The different types of tea leaves we were tasting that night were put in small cubic wooden plates called sample tea plates<sup>149</sup> to compare, examine and evaluate the leaves before steeping. After steeping, the used tea leaves would be put on a thin piece of paper and placed next to its dry leaves for us to see (See Figure 32). Some of them were pried off by a tea needle<sup>150</sup> from compressed tea cakes. Others were in the form of loose leaves. Yuyuan was sitting at one end of

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<sup>147</sup> *Dalian jingji jishu kaifa qu*, 大连经济技术开发区. Formerly called Dalian Economic and Technological Development Zone. Established in 1984, this district introduced a new economic system with special legal arrangements. It is now connected with the rest of the city through convenient subway system. It is about 19.5 miles from where we lived in the city.

<sup>148</sup> *xiao qu*, 小区

<sup>149</sup> *yang cha pan* or *ping cha pan*, 样茶盘 or 评茶盘

<sup>150</sup> *cha zhen*, 茶针

the table with a hot plate and water kettle on her side and a *gaiwan* and fair cup (*gongdao bei*<sup>151</sup>) in front of her on a small plate that was just big enough for the two containers on the table. Here I learned that the steeping style<sup>152</sup> of *cha xi* where there is no tea boat or tea tray is different from the style with them. Storing the wastewater in a tea tray or letting it drain from the cracks of a *cha pan* or *cha chuan* is the “wet steeping” (*shi pao*, 湿泡) style. The style Yuyuan’s student used in the tea event in *Hengshan* on *cha xi* was the “dry steeping” (*gan pao*, 干泡) style.

Yuyuan explained to me about the wet steeping style:

*Shi pao* originated from the *gongfu cha* steeping style<sup>153</sup> from Chaoshan regions, which did not use fair cups. Each teapot can pour three to five small teacups.

While pouring tea, there were traditional pouring techniques<sup>154</sup> such as

*Guangong xun cheng*<sup>155</sup> (关公巡城, Guan Gong patrolling the city), *Han Xin*

*dianbing*<sup>156</sup> (韩信点兵, Han Xin counting the troops), and *wulong rugong* (乌龙

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<sup>151</sup> 公道杯

<sup>152</sup> *pao fa*, 泡法

<sup>153</sup> *pao fa*, 泡法

<sup>154</sup> *shou fa*, 手法

<sup>155</sup> See also the thesis of Peter d’Abbs *Art as Everyday Practice: A Study of Gongfu Tea in Chaoshan, China*. Guan Gong (关公, Guan is his last name and Gong is a title for man) is a heroic historical figure in Three Kingdoms period that followed the demise of the Han dynasty (209 BCE–220 CE). When performing Guan Gong “patrolling the city,” the practitioner would tilt the teapot on top of three to five teacups in a straight line at the same time by moving the teapot back and forth, so that each cup would have the same amount of tea, of the same strength and color.

<sup>156</sup> *Han Xin* (韩信) refers to an ancient military leader from Han dynasty. After pouring the majority of the tea out of the teapot, distributing every last drop of tea from the pot evenly among the cups of the guests, “again to ensure that the tea offered to each guest shares the same characteristics” (d’Abbs 2018, 83)

入宮, black dragon entering the palace) that would leave water on the tea tray or tea table. Later, as the Taiwanese usually drank tea with more than five people at a table, making it difficult to use the small teapot to reach everyone. So, they invented the fair cup to hold the tea broth and then distribute it to everyone. Gradually, the fair cup became an essential apparatus that we use today. Taiwan *cha yi* style has been influenced by the Japanese style, which places more value on the visual aesthetics. They started to develop ways that are more of their characteristics, which we call *cha mei xue* (茶美学, the study of tea aesthetics). So, they developed *cha xi*, which has a dry and clean surface. It is more hygienic too. You can use cloths of different colors for *cha xi* and arrange the tea utensils more freely according to your aesthetic standards in *gan pao* (dry steeping) style. This not only shows the respect the *cha ren* has for the tea ceremony, but it also reflects their understanding of aesthetics. So many different designs derived from the *gan pao* style like the art of incense<sup>157</sup> and Ikebana. Over time the *gan pao* style became more and more popular. [Interview, 2021]

While *shi pao* style is still popular today, more and more people are preferring the *gan pao* style. As Yu notes, this dry style of steeping tea is a “significant creation” in Taiwan *cha yi*. By replacing the tea boat or tea tray to hold water with a much smaller plate that does not hold much water, it requires the *cha ren* to be much more careful in pouring (Yu 2014, 454). Removing the

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<sup>157</sup> In Japan, it is called *Kōdō* (香道, "Way of Fragrance"), the art of appreciating Japanese incense.

tea boat or tea tray frees up the spaces and allows the practitioner to place the teacups or utensils more freely (as compared to fitting everything only on top of a tray). The *gan pao* setting is more open, clearer, and lighter. While a *shi pao* setting is more permanent and rarely gets moved around, the *gan pao* setting allows the *cha ren* to pack everything they need to use easily in a basket and bring it to other places with ease. As Yuyuan said: “You will see many Taiwan *cha ren* like to have tea gatherings outside in beautiful scenery. It would be quite inconvenient to bring the tea tray. But *cha xi* can be easily contained and taken to the woods, or next to the river...” Yuyuan only used the dry style when she made tea herself and in her class.

#### Tasting white tea in class

On the tea table in her *cha shi*, while there were still many different *gaiwan*, teapots and teacups just like other *shi pao* tea tables, instead of having a *cha pan* or *cha chuan*, there was only two relatively large porcelain containers for wastewater (see Figure 32 and Figure 33). Similarly, on the table for this tea class, there was no tea tray or tea boat. To the right of the *gaiwan*, there was two porcelain containers<sup>158</sup>—one dark blue and one vermilion—for the wastewater. Her own cup for tea tasting was on the left side of the fair cup (see Figure 33).

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<sup>158</sup> *shui yu*, 水盂



Figure 32. Dry leaves and tea leaves after steeping placed next to each other. Photo by the author.



Figure 33. Tea class in Yuyuan's tearoom. Photo by the author.

Based on the quality of the tea leaves—how many tea buds<sup>159</sup> there are—there are four different types of white tea. *Shoumei* (寿眉) and *gongmei* (贡眉) are the two lowest level tea in terms of the quality of the tea leaves as they contain the lowest amount of tea buds. The highest level is silver needle (*yinzhen*, 银针) or white hair silver needle,<sup>160</sup> which is made of only the buds of the tea plant (see Figure 34). White peony (*bai mudan*, 白牡丹) is only a level lower than silver needle, using one bud with one leaf<sup>161</sup> or one bud with two leaves.<sup>162</sup> Similar to wine

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<sup>159</sup> *cha ya*, 茶芽

<sup>160</sup> *baihao yinzhen*, 白毫银针

<sup>161</sup> *yiya yiye*, 一芽一叶

<sup>162</sup> *yiya liangye*, 一芽两叶

tasting, when tasting multiple different teas, tea tasting also starts with lighter (*dan*, 淡) flavored tea and gradually moves to stronger/intense (*nong*, 浓) flavored ones. In this class, we started with a silver needle that was harvested in 2017.

Yuyuan first explained to us how the tea was harvested and processed. For white tea, the time of the year and the weather of the day for plucking are both very important to the quality of the tea leaves picked. Afterwards, the picked leaves (*cha qing*, 茶青) go through the “withering” (*weidiao*, 萎凋) process where their water content level changes and certain enzymes are activated. Then the leaves would be dried either in the sun, by hot coals (*tanbei*, 炭焙), or by electricity (*dianbei*, 电焙). Depending on the technique each tea uses, the taste would also be different. We started the tasting first by looking at the tea leaves in the sampling plate, in which we can tell the quality of the dry leaves: what is the ratio of younger leaves to older leaves, are there any bad leaves, do the leaves look all evenly processed, and so forth. Then she measured 6 grams of silver needle tea leaves on a small electric scale on the table and put the leaves in the *gaiwan*.





Figure 34. Silver needle tea. Photo by the author.

Similar to making coffee, the water temperature is important to the making of good tea. The best water temperature for each tea is different. For silver needle, the best is 98 Celsius degree (208 °F). However, Yuyuan told us, the requirement is different for critical tea tasting (*chaye shenping*, 茶叶审评). Like critical wine tasting, critical tea tasting was also used as a quality controlling method for tea, which means there is a set of sensory standards for each type of tea that was issued by the Standardization Administration of China. Just like critical wine tasting, critical tea tasting also has rather strict requirements for the environment to eliminate



distractions and to achieve the most objective result as possible: for instance, the lighting of the tasting lab, humidity, temperature, the situation of the platform for both dry<sup>163</sup> and wet<sup>164</sup> evaluation (see Figure 35) all have clear standards.

To borrow some strategies from critical tea tasting, Yuyuan told us, if we want to expose all the possible flaws of tea, we can always use 100 °C boiling water.<sup>165</sup> She told us if the water is not hot enough, the substances that are responsible for tastes will not be released into the tea broth. The hotter the water is, the faster these substances get extracted. Using 100 °C boiling water can quickly extract all the substances in the tea leaves, whether desirable or not to be released quickly, to make both desirable traits and flaws more obvious and to help to make quick evaluations on the quality of the tea. However, if we want to enjoy the tea outside of critical tasting scenario, it is best to use the appropriate temperature depending on the quality of the tea to highlight the desirable tastes and avoid showing the flaws.

According to my informants who had taken classes in critical tea tasting, the process of tasting in this type of scenario is quite standardized, somewhat similar to the tasting room of a brokerage house in India Sarah Besky describes in her book *Tasting Qualities: The Past and Future of Tea*. In critical tea tasting, there are clear instructions in how to sample tea<sup>166</sup> for a batch of tea. The taster first carefully examines 200~500 grams of sampled tea leaves in its dry form<sup>167</sup> in the sample tray by looking at the appearance and feeling it in the hand after shaking

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<sup>163</sup> *gan ping tai*, 干评台

<sup>164</sup> *shi ping tai*, 湿评台

<sup>165</sup> *100 °C de feishui*, 100摄氏度的沸水

<sup>166</sup> *quyuang*, 取样

<sup>167</sup> *gancha*, 干茶

the tray<sup>168</sup> in a certain way. The next step is called *kaitang* (literally “open the broth,” 开汤).

Instead of putting a small sample bag into a mug for steeping like Besky describes, the taster measures a few grams of tea leaves from the sampling tray or specially designed porcelain cup on the wet platform. Similar to what Besky describes, then the taster would add boiling water to the cup on the wet platform and let it steep for 4-5 mins before fully straining the liquid

(*chatang*, 茶汤) into the evaluating bowl<sup>169</sup> and puts the wet leaves into another tray. Then the taster smells and tastes the liquid tea, and then examines the wet leaves by looking and feeling them in the hand. Similar to what Besky sees in India, tasters would spit the tea out as well.

Water is an important factor in making a good cup of tea. To make a good cup of tea<sup>170</sup> requires specific knowledge about water: the type of water (stream water, well water, bottled water, etc.), the best water temperature and even how long the water should remain boiled, the ratio of water to tea for different type of teas... In the *Classic of Tea*, there is an entire chapter devoted to discussing water for tea. For instance, for good green tea, which is very fresh and delicate, the water temperature should be just boiled and left to cool to around 80-85 °C. If the water is boiled too long, it is “too old”<sup>171</sup>—all the carbon dioxide in the water is lost and the tea would not taste very “*xian shuang*” (鲜爽, *xian* is the umami taste discussed earlier in this chapter; *shuang* means refreshing and comfortable) if the water is not boiled, then it is too

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<sup>168</sup> *yaopan*, 摇盘

<sup>169</sup> *shenping wan*, 审评碗

<sup>170</sup> *pao hao cha*, 泡好茶

<sup>171</sup> *shui lao*, 水老

young<sup>172</sup> for tea. When the temperature is too high for the tea, the buds will get over-cooked. Vitamins in the leaves will also be destroyed and the broth will taste bitter. If the water is too cool, then the desirable substances cannot get extracted and the broth would be tasteless and lack aroma. The leaves will also stay on the surface and make it harder for the drinker to appreciate. According to Lijie (more about her later in this chapter), these discussions about water in tea can be viewed in a more scientific light just like coffee. She told me we can learn from how coffee distinguishes the differences between different types of water to understand tea by using concepts like the total dissolved solids (TDS). She said, as she learned more about how “extraction”<sup>173</sup> works in making coffee such as the concept of “water-powder ratio”<sup>174</sup> and “extraction time,” she understood some of the reasons behind making tea better.

Both making tea and making coffee is about extraction. The extraction time is how long you let the tea steep in the water before you pour out the *tang*<sup>175</sup> (broth). The water-powder ratio and how fine the coffee powder is are the same as the tea-water ratio. The water temperature and the pressure for extraction are also very important factors for extraction. What people in the West<sup>176</sup> did not understand is that making a good cup of tea can be discussed the same way as brewing a cup of coffee. Our *cha ren* don't use the same terminology or discuss making tea in the same manner as coffee baristas, but it is essentially the same set of ideas. For

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<sup>172</sup> *shui nen*, 水嫩

<sup>173</sup> *cui qu*, 萃取

<sup>174</sup> *shui fen bi*, 水粉比

<sup>175</sup> *chu tang*, 出汤

<sup>176</sup> *xi fang ren*, 西方人

people who work in academic settings for tea science, I believe would also use scientific measures to study tea just like they do in coffee. [Interview 2019]



Figure 35. Wet style tea tasting platform. Photo by Xuefu Cheng.

After Yuyuan poured some boiling water in the *gaiwan* the first time, she immediately poured it out from the *gaiwan* into the fair cup. This step was meant to wash<sup>177</sup> the tea leaves and also to help release some of the flavors stored in the tea leaves. She then passed the *gaiwan* with the lid on it to the lady sitting next to her and asked her to smell it and passed it around. When it was passed to me, the *gaiwan* was still quite warm. I followed what the others did, lifted

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<sup>177</sup> *xi cha*, 洗茶

the lid gently from the cup and then put my nose close to the crack between the cup and the lid to smell it. I saw the leaves were slightly damp, and I could clearly see the white hair on them. Unlike in wine, where the smell was cold and mostly carried by the alcohol undertone, the smell from tea was carried by warm vapor. I sensed a very light and general scent of green herb and woodiness in the steam, but it was very difficult for me to distinguish what else was in there. One lady commented on the aroma, “Very light.<sup>178</sup> It is not as aromatic as the first one.” Yuyuan agreed, “We used this one for the exhibition for the past couple days. This caused it to lose some of its *wei* (味, smell and taste).”

After the *gaiwan* was returned to Yuyuan, she continued to pour boiling water into the *gaiwan*, let it sit for a few seconds in the *gaiwan*, poured it out into the fair cup and then passed the fair cup around for us to pour the tea into our cups and taste it. At the same time, the *gaiwan* was also passed around for us to smell and discuss if it smelt differently this time. Some said now they could smell something, but they couldn’t describe it.<sup>179</sup> One older lady agreed with that statement after she smelled and tasted it. She said she was surprised that it “drinks good”<sup>180</sup> because she always thought silver needle was too bland.<sup>181</sup> Yuyuan confirmed it. She said that good silver needle should taste very good,<sup>182</sup> and if it tasted too bland (*dan*) then that meant the tea was not good anyway. After the *gaiwan* and fair cup got back to her, she continued to steep and pour for the next round until the fourth time. Then Yuyuan dumped the leaves out onto a

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<sup>178</sup> *te bie ruo*, 特别弱

<sup>179</sup> 无法形容.

<sup>180</sup> *haohe*, 好喝.

<sup>181</sup> *guadan*, 寡淡.

<sup>182</sup> *haohe*, 好喝. Here she used the word “drink” instead of taste, but it means the same.

piece of white paper and passed it around to us. This is for examining the bottom of the leaves (*ye di*, 叶底).

While we were smelling and drinking tea, Yuyuan told us the price of this tea was 1800 RMB (\$270) per 500 grams on the market. It would taste even better and therefore more expensive after storing for a few more years. “It means that buying some cakes now to store can be a good investment. In a few years, it would worth a lot more than it is now. You can drink it and enjoy the better flavor yourself or sell it,” she remarked. People continued to smell the wet leaves and comment in general on the smell, the taste, and how it compared to others. One lady said it smelt creamy,<sup>183</sup> and a little like honey. Another said she smelled more chocolate in this one compared to one silver needle she had before elsewhere, which had more of a smell of beans.<sup>184</sup> Yuyuan then told us that the longer silver needle stores in a good condition, the more obvious the chocolate smell should appear. It is because of how the chemical compounds develop over time—what first appeared raw and green would eventually turn into a more chocolate like smell.

After tasting the silver needle, we continued to taste *shoumei*, white peony, and one white tea that grew on tea trees in the wild (*huangye baicha*, 荒野白茶). Similar to the case with Pu’er tea, where the forest tree is considered better quality than the concentrated terrace tea, as people had become more concerned about environmental issues, residual pesticide, fertilizers, and other mass production related issues in agriculture, tea made from wild trees that were free from

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<sup>183</sup> *naiyou de weidao*, 奶油的味道.

<sup>184</sup> *douxiang*, 豆香.

human intervention became a rare and desirable product. Yuyuan told us silver needle and white peony were picked in the spring and therefore were more tender.<sup>185</sup> *Shoumei* was picked in the winter. As she noticed special aroma like an almond and plummy smell in one tea, she asked us to pay more attention to it and passed it around again.

### The People Who Love Both Tea and Wine

While we were drinking tea and discussing the taste, I commented some on the differences between wine tasting and tea tasting. Ruohua started to ask me some questions she had about wine stored in oak barrels. She told me she was also quite interested in wine and had even taken a two-day introductory course on wine that was offered by a French wine association. Hearing our conversation, Yuyuan asked me later if I was interested in teaching a wine course here in her tearoom. She told me she also had other teachers come in to teach Ikebana and yoga. If I had a complete course design, she could help promote the wine course with her current students and customers just like she did with other classes. However, it would be necessary to issue the students some sort of certificate<sup>186</sup> from an institution like the one Ruohua was in at the end of the course to show their proficiency. Unfortunately, since I had left the wine circle<sup>187</sup> for a few years and lacked the time to work on this matter, I was unable to start the wine course with her. But I did manage to have a trial run of a wine tasting class in Yuyuan's tearoom. Later, as I came to know more tearoom owners, I also helped two other tearoom owners to hold wine tasting

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<sup>185</sup> *nen*, 嫩.

<sup>186</sup> *zhengshu*, 证书

<sup>187</sup> *jiuquan*, 酒圈

sessions in their venues. Working with them together gave me interesting insights on the differences between tea tasting and wine tasting.

One of the major concerns for people who wanted to learn about tea is that they want to be able to distinguish “fake” and/or over-priced tea from authentic tea with a reasonable price. That was a main issue Yuyuan discussed with the students in the tea classes. As she had gained the trust and respect from her students and clients, they would bring tea they bought elsewhere or received as gifts to let her brew it in her tearoom and to hear her opinions on it. I talked to some regular customers of many tearooms I visited, some of them were friends or classmates with the owners before they became involved in the tea business. These people told me they were actually glad that they had someone they could trust in this business so they can rely on their expertise and products when they needed to get good tea. Other people may be introduced by their friends or walked in themselves one day and developed their trust with the tearoom owner over time. In both cases, establishing trust with the customer was essential for the business of a tearoom.

While consuming wine and tea can be viewed as a type of conspicuous consumption, Zhang also proposes the concept of “professional consumption” (Zhang 2017a, 95).<sup>188</sup> According to Zhang, this concept can help explain those who don’t consume wine or tea for demonstrating their social statuses, but they are more interested in the knowledge of tea or wine, or they hope to establish a certain type of ideal in life and their identity. They might not even be rich but have a particular liking for consuming certain products. This is a growing group of people who are important participants in both wine and tea tastings. They represented a trend of rising desire for “individualized consumption” (Zhang 2017a, 95).<sup>189</sup> Some of Yuyuan’s students

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<sup>188</sup> 专业消费

<sup>189</sup> 个性化消费要求



may fit in this category. As they were introduced to wine or tea through friends, colleagues, or family, they became more interested in it. With just enough money and time at their disposal, they decided to learn more about it by taking tea courses. However, to people like Ruohua, who had more resources to invest, she also wanted to start her own wine/tearoom someday. As I spent some more time with her and her friends, it became clear to me that people in her social circle all drank wine and tea regularly. One night she invited me to have dinner with her and a senior colleague of hers. I met her at her office, and she drove me and her colleague to a nearby tearoom. The decoration of this place was more like a tearoom, but they also had wine and provided dinner for us. The owner knew both of them very well as they met there quite regularly during their lunch break. We started by drinking tea in the lobby area at a big tea table, then we moved to upstairs in a private room to have some dinner and drink wine. The owner was from Fujian Province, which is quite famous for its tea production. While he knew much about tea, he admitted that he was not an expert in wine, so that night I explained to them the basics about tasting wine.

Although there are tea lovers who did not care much about wine, I also know many people in Dalian who are interested in both like Ruohua. Hannan was a customer of my parents' restaurant since 2007. He had a successful business in logistics. He told me over the years he had spent a few millions of RMB on buying wine and taking wine classes. It was not surprising that many people I knew in the wine circle were his acquaintance as well. He also knew a lot about tea. Back when my parents and I spent considerable time in the restaurant, he came over to just hang out with us and would be the one that made tea for us. During these times, he discussed with us what he experienced when he traveled with his family for vacation. He was concerned about the air pollution and food safety in China. He also felt the education system in China was

putting too much pressure on children and believed that immigration could benefit his two sons. As Australian wines became more and more popular in China in the 2010s and he learned from other friends who had successfully taken advantage of the immigrant policy in Australia for investors, Hannan started importing Australian wine and tried to use his connections in Dalian to sell it. Right before I finished my fieldwork in 2019, my parents invited him to have dinner with us. That night he told us he was quite frustrated that after he met the quota of investment from selling some wines, the policy had changed and disqualified the brand he imported (which was quite popular in China) from that program. He eventually decided to give up on the immigration program and wine business altogether and back to focus on his main business.

Like many similar occasions, after Hannan came that night, we started by drinking tea while my mother was finishing up with cooking.<sup>190</sup> When I told him about the topic of my dissertation, he regretted that he forgot to bring a “very good”<sup>191</sup> high-end Yunnan red tea (*dian hong*, 滇红) that he recently had acquired. He said it had an obvious orchid<sup>192</sup> and honey<sup>193</sup> smell. He also told me that he had recently done an episode of a radio program with the city radio station hosted by a lady, Lijie. Lijie had two radio programs, one was on music, and the other one was for wine. Hannan knew that Lijie was also into tea, so she would want to do an episode with me discussing my experience with wine and tea. While we had dinner, including the wine he brought, we had three different red wines. The wine he brought was a 2006 Bordeaux

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<sup>190</sup> Unlike in America, when guests come over for dinner, it is quite common for them to come a little early.

<sup>191</sup> *Te bie hao*, 特别好

<sup>192</sup> *lan hua xiang*, 兰花香

<sup>193</sup> *mi xiang*, 蜜香

wine from the fourth growth (Quatrièmes Crus) Château,<sup>194</sup> which was worth about 2000 RMB (about \$300). He poured the wine into a glass decanter and let it air for an hour before we started drinking it. While we were drinking the wines, we discussed the taste they developed over time and compared them to each other.

Thanks to Hannan, I soon made contact with Lijie, and we managed to broadcast two episodes with her discussing wine and tea before I left China. Her program was live at 10:00 am on Saturday and Sunday. On the day we broadcast the episode, I met her in front of the city radio broadcast center building around 9:30, and she showed me in (see Figure 36). As it was the weekend, she was the only one in the office. We sat at her desk, and she naturally reached for her *gaiwan* from the tea set on her desk and poured me some red tea she was drinking earlier. She told me that she was quite happy that Hannan introduced me to her. She had always loved tea, but her director asked her to do a program for wine five years ago. At first, she did not know much about wine and did not very much care. But over the years, she had interviewed hundreds of people in the wine circle in Dalian (that was also how she got to know Hannan) and learned a great deal about wine. She found that there were great similarities between tea and wine and had always wanted to discuss them in her program.

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<sup>194</sup> *si ji zhuang*, 四级庄. In 1855, in order to promote Bordeaux wines in the Exposition Universelle de Paris, Emperor Napoleon III requested a classification system for France's best Bordeaux wines so the visitors from other countries could have a better idea about their quality and price. Brokers from the wine industry ranked the wines based on the reputation and trading price of château at the time, which reflected their quality. This is the famous Bordeaux Wine Official Classification of 1855. It still affects the reputation and price of wines in Bordeaux today.



Figure 36. Zack in front of the building of Dalian Radio Station. Photo by the author.

She also gave me some brief instructions for live recording while we were drinking tea. The broadcasting went very well. She was quite interested in the differences and similarities between tea culture and wine culture. The show was also recorded and uploaded to a popular online podcast platform. I was able to post it on my WeChat moment (*peng you quan*) later and invited my friends to listen to it and give me some feedback. From people's comment on that post, I found out some of my friends had actually been listening to her music programs for years. Most people said they enjoyed my episode, but one lady who owned a tearoom told me she thought it was quite confusing to compare tea with wine like that: "It was too much to talk about both of them at the same time. If you want to talk about tea, just talk about tea. I don't like when people compare tea with wine."

After the first episode, Lijie suggested we do a roundtable discussion with two other people in the wine industry who studied wine in France. This time we met first to get a general idea about what to cover in the show. One of them had a wine lounge near where I was staying at the time, which was where we met before the show. Lijie was still the one making us tea there. That time she told us many stories of her tours to tea regions in China years ago. I also joined a champagne tasting she held later for her listeners later. Lijie had nine different group chats on WeChat to talk to her listeners (her guests in the broadcast were not included, since they were mostly wine sellers instead of just consumers). She posted the tasting event in these group chats and said there were 12 seats available. About 12 people showed up for the tasting and we tasted 4 different champagnes. She gave a brief introduction on how to taste wine, how champagne was made, and how her liking for different tastes in life had changed. While we were tasting the wines, people discussed the taste and compared them to each other as well. As people became more acquainted with each other, they also added each other on WeChat to maintain in contact with each other.

### The Taste of Wine and Tea

After I got back to the US, I remained in contact with Lijie and interviewed her over WeChat. I learned that not only did she love both wine and tea, but she was also into coffee, music, and traveled as much as she could every year. Lijie was born in the early 1970s and was the youngest among the four siblings of her family. She chose to be single and had no children. She told me that for her age and social circle, the car she drove was considered embarrassing. But she did not care about buying things only for show. Instead, she spent all her money buying

good devices for listening to good music, good tea, coffee, and wine, as well as traveling around the world. Her unique experience makes her a great person to discuss the differences and similarities between tea and wine.

While many tea lovers did show interest in wine as I was expecting, and I did learn much more about tea, it was still quite frustrating at times when I was studying tea. As Yu stresses in his experience in become a tea practitioner, much of the tea culture “had become internalized” in his body without his awareness (Yu 2014, 460). While Yuyuan’s tea classes were much more systematic and organized than the informal instructions and teachings I had received elsewhere, I was still confused about different tea regions except for a general idea of the provinces, how to identify different types of tea in the same category (like how to tell oolong tea from different regions apart), and what exactly what certain concepts like *cha qi* (茶气, the qi of tea) mean, and so forth. In the wine tastings we had for people who loved tea but just started to learn about wine, their main concerns were: what is a good wine, how to read the label of a bottle of wine and buy the good wine with a reasonable price? For people like me who first started to learn about tea, the questions were not that different: how can we tell a good tea with a reasonable price from the others and where can we get them?

As I discussed this with people like Lijie who were well-versed in wine, tea, and coffee, we all agreed that in both wine and tea business in China, the water can be muddy. There were definitely people who were taking advantage of those who did not have much experience and expertise. While very few people learned about wine like I did in an academic setting, there is a well-recognized wine education system from an UK organization—The Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET)—widely available in Dalian and many other cities in China. They collaborated with certain local wine businesses in China, offering textbooks and other resources for four

different levels, and exams. People who take the course of a certain level and pass the exams will receive a certificate. The courses are expensive: the second level lasts three days and costs 5,600 RMB (about \$840); the third level is five days and costs 10,800 RMB (about \$1600). Once someone achieves the third level, they can become a teacher for the second level, but they must first have the second level certificate first. Chenyun, Lijie, and many people we knew who were serious about wine took these courses. The courses were short, expensive, but quite intensive, focusing on covering all the basics for tasting, grape varieties, terroir, and technology of the wine industry.

The only thing that was similar to this system in tea is the courses for Occupational Qualification Certificate for critical tea tasters issued by Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security in China. However, this training seems to target only people who want to work as a critical tea taster and does not seem all that interesting to people who just want to learn more about how to enjoy tea. For instance, in *Shuli* tearoom, the course for the certificate was an entirely different course from the ones I paid for. Only a few students who had taken Yuyuan's classes for years had taken it. Lijie was quite upset about the situation with tea business and education. She told me, even if she wanted to do a radio program about tea, it would be quite difficult to have a clear knowledge structure like the one with wine for tea. Anything she said could be controversial. For instance, just like wine, terroir is important in the production of tea. Terroir in Chinese is translated as *fengtu* (*feng*, 风, wind; *tu*, 土, soil). A good system of protecting the reputation of terroir is the AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) or AOP (Appellation d'Origine Protégée) labeling system for wine in France. This system, as Elizabeth Barham puts it, links "to the local through the concept of terroir" and links "to the global as intellectual property" regulated "by the WTO as a 'geographical indication'" (Barham 2003,

127). However, the counterpart system of protecting certain small regions in China is not well-established as it had been in Europe with geographical indication (GI) system. Lijie told me she started thinking about the GI system after she studied about wine:

My radio program has talked about a great deal of knowledge about wine over the years. But they can all be summarized in a few keywords: terroir, grape varieties, vinification technologies. As for tea, we also have a protection system for the original region, we also talk about the differences between different varieties of teas. A cup of tea is an expression of terroir and its processing techniques. In the Panama–Pacific International Exposition in 1915, we listed *biluochun*,<sup>195</sup> *Xinyang maojian*,<sup>196</sup> West Lake Dragon Well<sup>197</sup> (*xihu longjing*), *Huangshan maofeng*,<sup>198</sup> Wuyi Rock Tea,<sup>199</sup> Keemun Red tea,<sup>200</sup> etc., as Ten Famous Chinese Teas.<sup>201</sup> We have a lot more than 10 types of tea in China. After I learned more about wine, I started to use the concept of *fengtu* to think about tea. We do have the same concept in tea regions. [Radio transcription, 2019]

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<sup>195</sup> 碧螺春, a type of green tea from Suzhou city, Zhejiang Province.

<sup>196</sup> 信阳毛尖, a type of green tea from Xinyang city, Henan Province.

<sup>197</sup> 西湖龙井, a type of green tea from West Lake (*xihu*) region of Hangzhou City, Zhejiang Province.

<sup>198</sup> 黄山毛峰, a type of green tea from Huangshan Region in Anhui Province.

<sup>199</sup> 武夷岩茶, also known by the trade name Bohea in English. A type of oolong (blue) tea from Wuyi mountain region in Fujian Province.

<sup>200</sup> 祁门红茶, a type of red (black) tea from Anhui Province.

<sup>201</sup> *zhongguo shida mingcha*, 中国十大名茶. There were other lists of “Ten Famous Chinese tea” from different sources later as well.



Just like wine, where tea come from and how it is processed do matter. However, compared to the regulation of GI in Europe, unfortunately, there are no clear rules for tea in these regions. She went on to describe what she saw when she observed while visiting the tea regions:

Because we don't quite have a system like GI to protect the reputable region, people from those prestige villages would stand at the border of their village to prevent people from other villages to come and steal their technology or come inside with outside tea so that they can claim their tea is from the reputable village. [Interview 2019]

Lijie then talked about how we can learn from the GI system in European wine regions to help establish a system to protect tea from reputable regions and help to promote tea culture. She said:

I spent about ten thousand RMB for the WSET third level class so I can learn about their system. I hope we would have something as accessible for tea and clear as they have for wine. Right now, China does not have an all-recognized official system for origin protection. There's no textbook for this. I cannot do a radio program on the tea region and history. Everyone has their own system. Even in the same region, different tea producers can use very different technology. There is no clear regulation like the GI system for the growing, harvesting, and production process. Sometimes different experts even contradict each other. I don't even know who is supposed to be right so I can tell my audience on the

radio program. I spent a lot of time talking with people who own teashops. For example, I am studying white tea recently. You know the regions produce white tea, right? White tea seems to be the simplest tea since it is only slightly fermented. There is supposed to be the least amount of human intervention. But it is very rich in culture.<sup>202</sup> [Interview, 2019]

Once again, she gave me an example of white tea from what she saw in Fujian province when she visited there years ago. Similar to what Trubek notes in her research on *terroir*, according to Lijie, there were “distinctive tastes” linked to *fengtu* in different regions for tea as well (Trubek 2008, 4).

When I went to white tea region in October, the weather changed very quickly. For different grades of white tea, like the buds of silver needle, and the next level of *bai mudan*, and the lowest *gongmei* and *shoumei*, people had to very quickly decide when they want to pick the tea leaves. If you don’t pick them today, tomorrow the leaves you pick would be too old to be in silver needle grade and had be *bai mudan* grade. In the market, the price of them is very different. But if you do decide to harvest it as silver needle, you will have to set it in the sun for the next couple days. How can you guarantee the weather will be sunny for the next couple days? If it rains, how should you bake it? Right now, there is no clear regulation for how it was supposed to be processed. A silver needle that used

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<sup>202</sup> *Ren wen de dong xi shi zoo duo de*, 人文的东西是最多的

different baking technique can taste very different and their potential in aging are very different as well. A good, aged silver needle tea should taste like chocolate. The information on our tea packaging system also needs better regulation. Compared to what is required on the wine label, the tea packaging gives very vague information. Many people are taking advantage of these ambiguities in the system and don't want the people to really become experts of tea so they can make more money. [Interview, 2019]

### The Synesthetic Memory of Tea

Aside from the differences in regulation on an industrial level, as compared to the system of breaking down the taste in wine tasting, the taste of tea focuses more on the overall ambience and experience. While some of us may be frustrated with how to learn about tea over time, there were many people who did not mind the ambiguity. They simply enjoyed the taste of tea with their friends who had shared interests. People often told me where they had their tea, what the weather was like that day, and who they were with when they had the tea. As one lady, Tan, told me:

We were working on building a sales team back then. One of our colleagues owned a venue. The first floor was a boutique shop and the second floor was his place to hang out. There was a shrine for a Buddha on the second floor and a big tatami. In winter, he did not have a central heating system there. We went there

every day around that time. In the morning, he used some coal in a stove to boil some white tea. The smell spread out everywhere. It was very good. It was light,<sup>203</sup> a little like herbal medicine,<sup>204</sup> and mixed with a hint of jujube.<sup>205</sup> We all surrounded the stove. The sunlight travelled into the room and shed on the white vapor of the white tea. I don't know. I think I just suddenly fell in love with white tea. I asked them what that was—it smelt so good! I first liked its smell, then I fell in love with the taste and started drinking it. The taste was very thick.<sup>206</sup> It was an aged white tea. I could taste the medicinal taste<sup>207</sup> and the date taste.<sup>208</sup> It was just so nice. Since then, I deeply fell in love with tea. I think liking something starts with the scene that was connected to it. The memory linked me to the scene and I got attached to it. [Interview, 2020]

Tan's memory of taste is certainly synesthetic. The “social agency of flavor” (Sutton, n.d.), in this case, the white tea flavor shaped her daily life, social relations and memory. When she described the smell of herbal medicine and date, she used the words *yao* (药, medicine) *xiang* and *zao* (枣, jujube) *xiang*. *Xiang*, in Chinese can mean both good smell and good taste. Then, when she described the taste later, she used *yao* (药, medicine) *xiang wei* and *zao* (枣, date)

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<sup>203</sup> *qing xiang*, 清香

<sup>204</sup> *yao xiang*, 药香

<sup>205</sup> *zao xiang*, 枣香

<sup>206</sup> *chun hou*, 醇厚

<sup>207</sup> *yao xiang wei*, 药香味儿

<sup>208</sup> *zao xiang wei*, 枣香味儿

*xiang wei*. She repeated the words she used to describe the smell but added *wei* (味) to signify the taste. In fact, denoting the taste instead of the smell here was mostly contextual. *Wei* can also be used in the same way to describe smell. It is evident here, that the sense of taste is intertwined with the sense of smell. In wine tasting, contrary to this more synesthetic view that is open to subjective interpretation, the vocabulary of wine odor is standardized in the use of the Wine Aroma Wheel (see Figure 37). Many of the specific odors can be tied back to discoveries of specific chemicals and can thus be simulated in training scenarios. It is designed to help ordinary consumers “to increase their knowledge of wine and to talk more coherently with each other about their sensory experience” (Shapin 2016, 450). Indeed, the invention of the aroma wheel helps to establish a reliable communication among people who are concerned with wine odor, without the restrictions of space and time (Shapin 2016, 450). As a “intersubjectivity engine,” the aroma wheel” intended to allow people to coordinate their subjective experiences and to agree about the language to be used in sharing those subjective experiences with others” (Shapin 2016, 450).

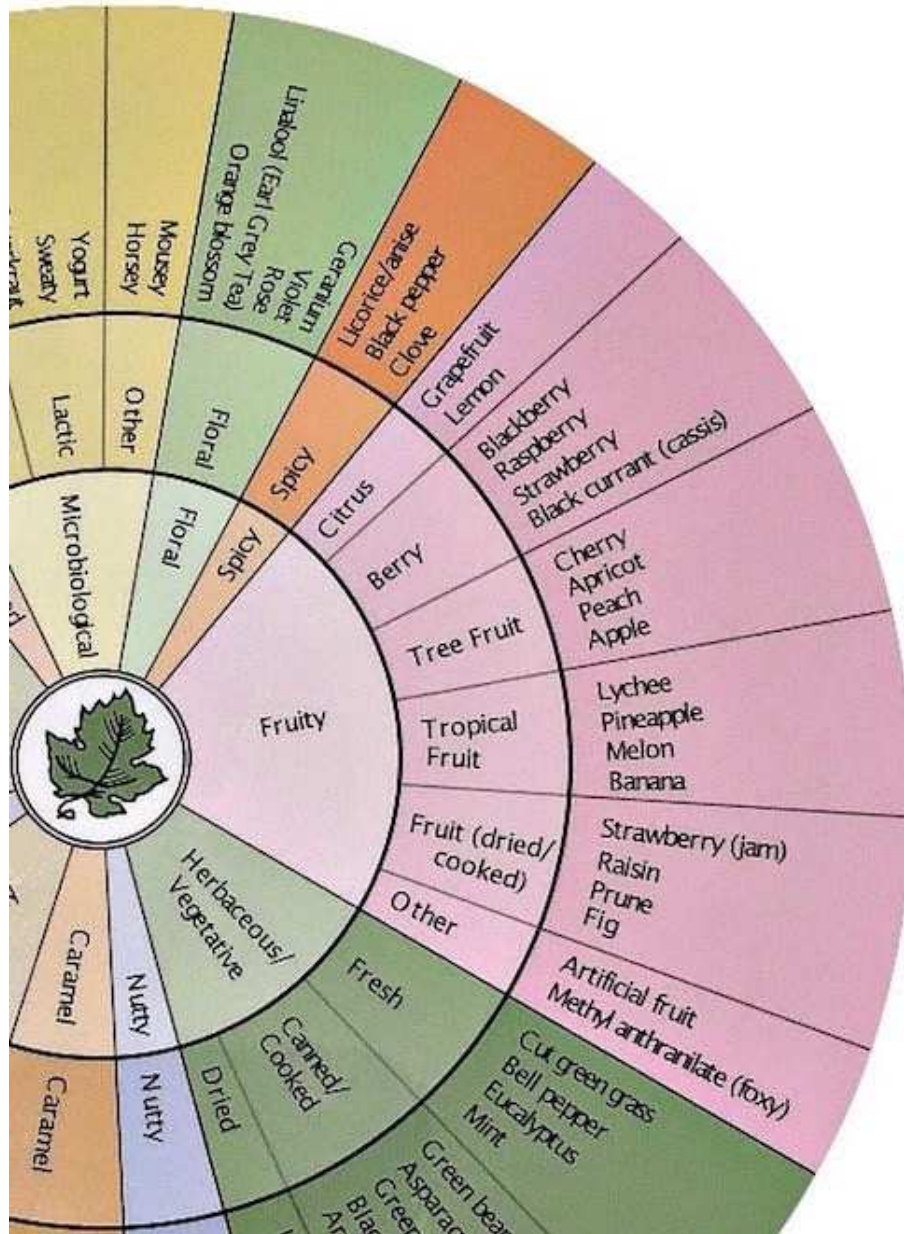


Figure 37. Wine aroma wheel. Copyright 1990, 2002 A. C. Noble www.winearomawheel.com

Besides the Wine Aroma Wheel, there is also the Comté Cheese Aroma Wheel that is used by the terroir jury as their “words of the *terroir*” (Shields-Argelès 2018, 89, emphasis original). However, Shields-Argelès points out, for the jury members, the descriptors were more specifically tied to “people, places and activities in the region” as well as their sensory memory growing up in the region (Shields-Argelès 2018, 88). In tea tasting, as Dalian does not produce

tea, people did not have any sensory memories that directly associated with the *fengtu* of the tea production region. This is compensated by the stories of those who did take tours to those regions, as the ones Lijie mentioned to me. Almost all the tearoom owners, including Yuyuan and Chenyun, would go to the tea regions every year to discover new teas for their business. Indeed, the stories they told about how they discovered the tea was also an important aspect of people's synesthetic memory of tea drinking and tasting. In her classes, for instance, Yuyuan often mentioned how she discovered certain teas when she was in the village that produced them and would organize tours to tea regions as well. For people like me who had never been to these regions, the taste of *fengtu* was experienced through other people's memory and language (Seremetakis 1994, 2).

To people like Lijie, Hannan, and I who appreciated the coherent standardization provided by the Wine Aroma Wheel for discussing smells, the lack of an equivalent device in tea tasting can be confusing sometimes. But as Lijie also points out to mean one time, the evaluation systems of tea and wine were quite different. While many manuals for critical tea tasting do provide certain vocabulary for tea tasting such as "*xianshuang* (鲜爽)," unlike wine tasting classes for consumers, which isolates the sense of smell and encourage the use of the Wine Aroma Wheel, tea tasting classes usually don't put emphasis on a consensus of descriptors for a particular sense but give some general keywords such as "*cha qi*" and "*yun*" for each taster to translate into their own synesthetic experience. Tea tasting thus blurs the division of different senses and even encourages the synesthetic experience with words like *yun* (韵). In Chinese, *yun* means pleasant sound, rhyme, and aesthetic taste. Quite a few *cha ren* had told me what is important in tea is the *yun* in the throat after the tea is swallowed. It sounds somewhat like the

aftertaste in wine, but more ambiguous. When evaluating wine, in terms of aftertaste, we mostly are concerned about the length. Lijie told me, the differences in tasting tea and tasting wine are the same as the differences in *zhongyi* (中医, Traditional Chinese Medicine) and western medicine:

Like we never measure how many grams of condiments to put in our dishes when we were cooking but say “a pinch,”<sup>209</sup> *zhongyi* does not tell you where exactly an acupuncture point is. It is mostly feeling-based.<sup>210</sup> This is how us Chinese approach things. We don’t refer to the exact measurement, but that does not mean it is not accurate. Especially if you meet a good old *zhongyi* (中医, doctor in Traditional Chinese Medicine), when he inserts the needle, it is always right on the acupuncture point. You will feel a sour<sup>211</sup> and swelling pain on the particular point in the body. You know how you should feel it? Use your heart. When you need to describe to the western audience, you need to use the concept of love to describe it. When you made a cup of tea right,<sup>212</sup> it is like the feeling when you love the right person. You know you love someone, or you know you don’t love someone. It is like that. Is there a feeling of love between you? If you find the right acupuncture point, it is love. You love this person. You have a feeling of

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<sup>209</sup> *shaoxu*, 少许

<sup>210</sup> *ganxing de*, 感性的

<sup>211</sup> In Chinese, sore is *suan* (酸), which is the same the character for sour.

<sup>212</sup> *pao dui le*, 泡对了



love. The tea you are drinking at noon, it is not just the water, the tea table is important, and the utensil<sup>213</sup> is important. The environment is important. Where your heart is is important. Especially, when we drink tea in China, sometimes I will burn some incense. [Interview, 2020]

### Should the tea industry be more like wine?

Indeed, as I explained earlier, unlike wine tastings that can link back to a more regulated system of terroir, tea tastings in tearooms I visited in Dalian—even Yuyuan’s tasting classes—are meant to evoke a shared but personal tasteful experience rather than to establish a widely applicable system that features standardization. Some people, like Lijie, had conflicted feelings about it: on the one hand she wanted there to be some regulations installed on the industrial level, like the GI system in Europe for wine to help clear up the muddy water in the tea market in China, and make learning about tea easier for beginners and outsiders; on the other hand, she did appreciate the “feeling based” tasteful experience in tea and also wanted it to be appreciated by people from a completely different cultural background such as the Westerners.

Similar debates were not uncommon in the group chat for the online tea classes I was in. The teacher was an advocate for the tea industry to adopt a more “science-based,” accurate and standardized system like the wine industry does with devices such as the Wine Aroma Wheel and was against ambiguous narratives for tea such as qi of tea (*cha qi*, 茶气).<sup>214</sup> At one point, one group of people in the group chat mentioned how the qi they experience in tea can be

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<sup>213</sup> *qi min*, 器皿

<sup>214</sup> In *Tasting Qualities*, Besky addresses a similar conflict: the “computer-savvy, internet-connected entrepreneurs” who want to reform tea auction in India through digitalization and the expert tea tasters that possess the tacit knowledge of tea.

equated to the flow of energy in traditional Chinese medicine. They argued that *cha qi* first gave people a strong feeling in the mouth, then would transfer into a warm flow of qi inside the body. Qi then would travel through the body to cause the pores on the skin to open up and sweat a little or expressed through the form of a gentle burp.

This description upset others in the group. They believed this type of description was a legacy of traditional Chinese culture—describing feelings in very abstract, mysterious way that leaves one confused about what exactly was going on. In modern terms, they argued, qi was just a special type of aroma. Then it turned to debate about *shi* (实, the concrete) and *xu* (虚, the abstract, deficiency in traditional Chinese medicine, see also Zhang 2012), the rational scientific system in wine and the sentimental, abstract system in traditional Chinese medicine. These debates allude to many of the on-going controversies existing in the public discourse in China. On the one hand, people were frustrated with certain marketing hypes that take advantage of the abstract, ambiguous descriptors people use in discussing the taste of tea and hope for a system that uses more concrete, research-based principles to regulate the market; on the other hand, many still find value in the current system and treasure its connection with the ancient Chinese culture. Nevertheless, whichever system of taste they prefer, both groups were definitely tea lovers (*ai cha zhi ren*). In other words, unlike wine with an “authentic” and “scientific” system that dictates how people should evaluate and appreciate it based on sensory science and the GI system, the taste of tea is much more complex, flexible, ambiguous, and conflicted.

## Conclusion

In Chinese, the character *gan* (感) can mean both “feeling” and “sense.” As Peng points out in his book *Food Anthropology*,<sup>215</sup> *gan* is a type of bodily sensation and perception—subjective feelings perceived through the medium of the human body, as well as cognitive connections that develop from these feelings.<sup>216</sup> According to Gong’s analysis, the character of *gan* (感) in Chinese is made of *xian* (咸, saltiness) and *xin* (心, heart) (Gong 2015, 109). In classic Chinese literature,<sup>217</sup> *xian* can also mean “all.” According to Gong, this is because *xian* can be understood as the essential nature/property of things. Thus, to put *xian* on top of *xin* (heart)—the character of *gan*, means to feel the salt and thus the property of things on (in) the heart. The character *gan* can also combine with *qing* (情, emotion, sentiment) as in the word *ganqing* (感情) to mean sentimental feelings, emotions. In *Tiwu ruwei*,<sup>218</sup> Yu combines the word *shenti* (身体, body) with the character of *gan* and proposed the concept of *shentigan* (身体感, the sense in the body). It is used to emphasize on the “feeling” and overall experiences in the body rather than different sensations that are divided by different parts of the body. As Hsu stresses, “in addition to sensory perception, *shentigan* can refer to hunger, thirst, feelings of nausea, anxiousness, hope and other experiences of the mind-body” (2008, 436). I would also contend that in Chinese culture, the sensory perceptions are also intertwined as well as synesthetic.

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<sup>215</sup> *yinshi renleixue*, 饮食人类学

<sup>216</sup> “感”属于一种身体感受和感知，即以身体为介质的主题感觉，并由此产生一系列的认知关联。

<sup>217</sup> *wen yan wen*, 文言文

<sup>218</sup> 体物入微

Wine tastings in China encouraged more of a critical sensory analysis by emphasizing on the separation of different senses and use of devices such as the Wine Aroma Wheel. While tea tastings did take advantage of some knowledge from critical sensory evaluations that were used in quality control in the industry, tea tastings in China that I participated in followed a very different framework. Just like the example Lijie gave in discussing *zhongyi* (traditional Chinese medicine) and western medicine, the sensory experience in tea tasting is inherently synesthetic as well as emotional. Thus, in the tea tasting class, as the sensory experiences were produced, evoked, and discussed, people were also forming “emotional resonance” in a more holistic and synesthetic way. Furthermore, the commensal aspect of tasting together affords significant connections between people (Sutton n.d.).

Besides the desire to become more knowledgeable consumers, studying either wine or tea requires a certain amount of time and money of the participants. In other words, all the subjects I met in these tasting events and classes were wealthy and free enough to explore the world of wine and tea. To become an expert in tasting the nuances of different terroir, regardless of wine or tea, requires one to taste many different varieties to form a large enough pool of sensory memories. As wine students, one difficulty we encountered in college was that we did not have enough money to buy a good selection of wines to train our tastes. Similarly, Yuyuan once told us we should make a point to try at least one different tea every day for the same reason. While tea can be much cheaper than wine, easier to store, and we can get it for free from familiar tearoom owners from time to time, it was still difficult for me to afford a different tea every day. On the other hand, many rich people did not spend the time, money, and effort to learn about tea or wine. Therefore, the group of people who were well-versed in wine and tea were certainly distinct from other rich people.

The concluding chapter looks further into the role of tea tasting and some of the contradictions I found in tea culture and considers its implication for understanding contemporary China.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

In the process of writing this dissertation, I continued to take advantage of WeChat to call and contact people in China and ask them questions regarding tea. Many of them had recollected fondly the time we spent together drinking tea and/or wine and asked when my husband and I would be back to drink tea and/or wine with them again. Zhouyue was one of them. Zhouyue was an accountant for a private company and was high school classmates with one tearoom owner, Chenyun. This particular tearoom was so small that there was only room for one tea table and some shelves, but it was very close to where my husband worked at the time, so we visited there quite often. As I was talking with Zhouyue in December 2020, he told me that the tearoom owner had gone out of business and talked about how he missed the time we were together.

It did not matter to me how small the place was or where it was, but when we all got together, whether drinking tea together or drinking wine together, it just felt different. If it were only yourself, then you don't have the desire to go through the effort of making things like that happen anymore. It was really good to have a place like that for me. It was such a shame he had to close the tearoom.

[Interview, 2020]

Zhouyue's words brought me back to the afternoon we had our second wine tasting at Chenyun's tearoom in October of 2018. Similar to what happened in Yuyuan's tearoom, when I ran into Chenyun's guests in his tearoom, he told them about my expertise in wine and they became very interested. Chenyun also told me he had other clients who were interested in wine but did not have any opportunity to learn about it. We then held a small wine tasting with a few of his clients in September for the first time. Then we planned the next one and invited seven of Chenyun's clients, including Zhouyue this time. But only one day before the tasting, Chenyun told us due to some conflict with his landlord, his tearoom would be out of power the next day.

After taking everything into consideration, we decided to do the tasting anyway. Because of the power outage, Chenyun couldn't boil hot water for tea like he did in the previous event in the very beginning, instead he brought a big thermos of hot water to make sure there was at least some of tea for the guests. We also used candles to light up the room (see Figure 38). The tasting lasted for a few hours. While it was a little chilly without heating, people really enjoyed it. After the tasting was over, people still wanted to stay and socialize more, so Zhouyue offered to take us to a restaurant nearby for dinner and we continued to drink wine there as well.



Figure 38. Wine tasting in Chenyun's tearoom. Photo by the author.

In this unplanned flow of events, in Sarah Pink's phrase, I arrived at "an understanding of other people's memories and meanings" through my own "embodied experiences and/or attending to other people's practices, subjectivities and explanations" (Pink 2009,65). In previous chapters, I have described a few instances where tea drinking accompanied a series of activities, such as wine drinking and dining that celebrated conviviality in a similar spontaneous way in people's everyday life. As Seremetakis points out, commensality here is not "just the social organization of food and drink consumption and the rules that enforce social institutions at the level of consumption" or only "food-related senses of taste and odor" (1994, 225). Rather, it is "the exchange of sensory memories and emotions, and of substances and objects incarnating remembrance and feelings" (Seremetakis 1994, 225). In these cases, unlike get-togethers that



only involved dining, sensory awareness was heightened when the series of events was led by the tea tasting. The sensory interaction between human body and material thus is also intensified by the heightened awareness to the sensory faculties in the tasting, where “the materiality of sociality resides” (Hsu 2008, 438).

Furthermore, through these types of joint experiences of “real stuff,” such as the tastes and smells of tea and wine, “a sense of belonging arises” (Hsu 2008, 438):

It is felt, sometimes, in moral terms as in instances of loyalty or compassion, and it is maintained through the refashioning of memories. In addition to the memories and emotions so closely intertwined with sensory experience, the sensorial has a titillating quality, which triggers imagination and play. [Hsu 2008,438]

While the tasting event was not explicitly mentioned in Zhouyue’s conversation with me on WeChat, I believe that memory was communicated through the instance of “simultaneously felt emotion, physically instantiated memories and sensations” as it was an “intense moment of social bonding” in our shared sensory experiences, which was entangled with our memories and emotions (Hsu 2008, 439). While “the centrality of commensality in affirming social relations” has long been established in anthropology, as Sutton points out, there has been far less stress on the “importance of the sensory nature of commensal events in the creation of sociability” (Sutton n.d.). Sutton proposes that instead of “focusing exclusively on questions of symbols and (already-formed) identities,” take commensality as a process can be quite “generative,” which is based in “its social, emotional and sensory intensifications.” Sutton substantiates this argument

by drawing on Adam Yuet Chau's and Ellen Oxfeld's works. In "The Sensory Production of the Social," drawing on research based in Shaanbei, Chau suggests that sensorium is produced as part of "how social actors actively construct their social worlds in sensorially rich manners," where actively participating in different activities can produce the sensation of *honghuo*—red hot sociality (2008, 488). Similarly, Oxfeld's interpretation of *renao*, drawn from her research in Moonshadow Pond in southeastern China, is "a concept that combines emotions, social relations and sensory stimulation, which allows for a celebration of social connection" (Sutton n.d.).

In events like the tasting I mentioned above, while the environment was not ideal, the intense production of sensory and emotional affects "allows for the creation of a sense of conviviality of consensus" (Sutton n.d.). In this concluding chapter, I want to continue some of the discussions of sensory experiences, emotions, and memories like the one Zhouyue and I experienced together in the commensal tasting that I described in earlier chapters and investigate their implications for understanding contemporary Chinese culture.

### The Contradictions in the Taste of Tea

Unlike the tasting Besky describes in her book *Tasting Qualities: The Past and Future of Tea* where "the multiplicity of qualities" produced by variation in "altitude, humidity, and plant selection" was considered "variability" that leads to "volatility" in both price and taste, tea as a "non-standardized commercial product" (2020, 23),<sup>219</sup> as one tearoom owner Zheng shushu put it, was what made tasting unique in tearooms. The taste of standardized tea like Besky discusses

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<sup>219</sup> *bu gui fan shangpin*, 不规范商品

does exist in China in the forms of all kinds of tea beverages<sup>220</sup> and tea bags from supermarkets and stores that are easily available to people. The target consumers for tea beverages are usually the younger generation who haven't really become tea enthusiasts. To them, tea is but one of the many flavors today's globalized market offer them for *jieke* (to quench the thirst) rather than a culture product of complex taste that required deliberate appreciation. Only a few informants I talked to said that they would occasionally drink bottled tea beverages or tea made from teabags. One lady said she would occasionally boil some teabags to make British style afternoon tea together with some desserts. She admitted that it did not seem very “*zhuanye*” (专业, literally mean “professional” or “specialized”, usually used to emphasize someone's professional level of certain knowledge or skill) of her to use teabags sometimes as an *ai cha zhi ren*. Tearoom owners, in particular, rarely spoke positively of standardized taste of tea like those in teabags and tea beverages. I remember people in a tearoom were quite surprised to see me drink a bottle of tea beverage I had bought from a supermarket. According to one informant, “once you get into the taste of good tea, the teabags just taste plain. They don't have the *wei* of real *cha*.”<sup>221</sup>

For many tea enthusiasts, therefore, prepackaged tea beverages or tea bags can be seen as produce of modern commercialism and industrialization with “tea flavor” that cannot represent the true essence of Chinese *cha*. Tearooms, on the other hand, could give them a satisfying taste of tea—a type of *wei* that cannot be confined in standardization. Here, the *wei* of tea extends beyond the five tastes, the overall in-mouth taste as defined in wine tasting, and even a broader sense of taste that includes the smell. Rather, similar to the concept of *shentigan*, here, the *wei* of

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<sup>220</sup> *cha yin liao*, 茶饮料

<sup>221</sup> *mei you cha wei*, 没有茶味

tea in tearooms is an all-encompassing sensory experience that incorporates all different parts of body and even the mind and the heart,<sup>222</sup> which means it encompasses both the reality and the imagined (Zhang 2015, 88). Zheng shushu had been in the tea business for more than twenty years. To people like him, standardized tea is exactly what the western culture stands for. He called standardized bagged tea “*meiyou wenhua*” (has no culture) and equated it to the “fast-food culture”<sup>223</sup> that values accuracy and “standardization” over the ever-changing complex taste from “real” tea, which cannot be produced in mass like other commercial products. Zheng shushu told me that the lack of standardization was because that tea was often made by hand, which was where the charm<sup>224</sup> of tea culture lies.

Bourdieu has argued that there is a fundamental opposition between “the taste of luxury” and “the taste of necessity” (2005, 72). He points out, as the income level raises, “the proportion of income spent diminishes” or the proportion spent on cheap and “heavy, fatty, fattening foods” also declines. The tastes of luxury, according to Bourdieu, are “the tastes of individuals who are the product of material conditions of existence defined by distance from necessity, by the freedoms of facilities stemming from possession of capital”; the tastes of necessity express “precisely in their adjustment, the necessities of which they are the product” (2005, 73). To take this approach, then the standardized tastes of tea from mass production, whether tea beverages or teabags, are thus closer to the taste of necessity as they are lacking the *wei* of tea and cultural meanings of those who don’t have culture (as Zheng shushu puts it—*meiyou wenhua*).<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> *xinling*, *xin* (心), literally the heart; *ling*, literally spirit or soul

<sup>223</sup> *kuai can wenhua*, 快餐文化

<sup>224</sup> *meili*, 魅力

<sup>225</sup> 没有文化

Indeed, to fully enjoy a tea culture that is rich in taste, one needs to be able to find a decent amount of time to participate in the events like the ones in the exhibition center and *Hengshan* temple, where people were reminded repeatedly that they need to clear their mind and focus on the nuances of the tastes of tea. Furthermore, other aspects that are important to the appreciation of tea such as developing the ability to discern the differences in the taste of tea (taking tea classes, trying out different types of tea every day), knowing how to use the utensil to make a good cup of tea (like using the *gaiwan*), and collecting and nourishing/raising (*yang*) good tea utensils (like *zisha* teapot) all requires investing time, effort, and money. To draw again on Connerton, this type of habitual memory, through careful nurturing over time, is “sedimented” in the body. Thus, the *wei* (or taste) for “real” tea, then is deeply embodied in the class body (Bourdieu 2015, 75-76).

While my informants did speak about money and class (*jiēcèng*), they rarely identify themselves with a certain class. They often referred to themselves as regular people.<sup>226</sup> In “Private Homes, Distinct Lifestyles,” Zhang argues that instead of treating class as “a given, fixed entity” in China, it can be viewed as “an ongoing process of ‘happening’” (2012, 214). As she points out,

What is central in the formation of middle-class subjects in China is the cultivation of a distinct cultural milieu based on taste, judgment, and the acquisition of cultural capital through consumption practices. In this open, unstable process, competing claims for status are made through public

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<sup>226</sup> *pingchang ren*, 平常人

performance of self-worth, and at the same time, what is considered suitable and proper is negotiated. Class making thus takes place not only within the domain of relations of production but also outside it, namely, through the spheres of consumption, family, community, and lifestyle. [2012, 214]

Similarly, in his research, instead of taking “the new rich” as a “coherent class defined by income level or occupation,” John Osburg suggests it is “an unstable and contested category that is constituted by the practices and performances of a diverse group of entrepreneurs, professionals, artists, and government officials” (2013, 12). In this sense, people who had the taste of “luxurious real tea” in Dalian, are both reinforcing and negotiating their class body through the sense of “taste.” Similar to how people talk about a wine connoisseur, one compliment for a good “tea person” (*cha ren*) I heard quite often was that they “can taste the difference when they drink the tea.” I even had someone tell me about this *cha xian* (tea fairy) who can taste the grade, region, and the price of the tea. While having money and time can help someone to become a good tea taster like *cha xian*, the class formation was also constantly negotiated. I also heard stories about how someone from a lower socioeconomic background rose into a higher social class because of their convincing performance of tasting and handling tea.<sup>227</sup>

### Sharing the taste of tea in tearooms

I found these conflicts and contradictions also existed in many aspects of tea culture among Dalian people. The taste of tea, on the one hand, was available to the common people like free

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<sup>227</sup> Although the person who told me the story considered this “new tea expert” a fraud, the point of class fluidity in this story still remains.

tea in a noodle restaurant on the street; on the other hand, it could be as expensive as a few thousand RMB for a cup that even people like Lijie found it too expensive to afford. That is to say, under the general umbrella of the taste of tea, there is a more affordable, economically sustainable type of taste and a more luxurious, over-the-top taste of “conspicuous consumption” for the selected few. The former, as Chenyun told me one time, was called *kouliang* (口粮, literally means “mouth food.” Originally refers to rations in military, now it also refers to foodstuff that an individual needs in daily life) *cha*. Depending on the circumstances, the appropriate tastes of tea also vary.

As Zheng shushu told me, tea is consumed by every social class in China. From the national leaders<sup>228</sup> to monks in Buddhist temples, everyone enjoys the taste of tea in one way or another. Historically, tea was considered a strategic product and controlled by the court. Since tea was a necessity for minority groups (*shaoshu minzu*)<sup>229</sup> near the border (*bianjiang*)<sup>230</sup> as a nutrient supplement, trading tea with these groups for their horses was an important part of policies for the court. In late eighteenth century, as tea became popular in Britain, it became a major trading product between China and Great Britain. To improve Britain’s unfavorable balance in payments with China, the British started exporting opium to China, which eventually lead to the Opium Wars that was considered the beginning of “a shameful hundred years”<sup>231</sup> of

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<sup>228</sup> *gao ceng*, 高层

<sup>229</sup> 少数民族

<sup>230</sup> 边疆

<sup>231</sup> *bainian chiru*, 百年耻辱

China.<sup>232</sup> But to him—one average person<sup>233</sup>—he liked tea and enjoyed chatting while he drank tea with people in his tearoom. He just wanted to make a living to take care of his family by selling his tea to “average people”<sup>234</sup> and enjoy a peaceful life. At the same time, similar to the comments of Zhang’s informant about people who drink Pu’er tea (2013, 100), Zheng shushu did say people who appreciate the taste of tea were relatively of higher *suzhi* (素质, personal quality) and offered me his insights on how to better the current tea industry and educate people about tea.

As Peng points out, *pinchang* (品尝), the Chinese word for taste (as a verb), follows a set of traditional ethics.<sup>235</sup> He notes that the character of *pin* (品) exists in oracle<sup>236</sup> inscription, with three “mouth” (口) combined. This is a character of combined ideogram,<sup>237</sup> emphasizing people as a group.<sup>238</sup> Thus, Peng argues, the word *pinchang*—taste in Chinese—emphasizes the collective aspect of the action over the individual experience. While the taste of *kouliang cha* is often appreciated at home or in the office alone, the tearoom is a place for sharing many different tastes of tea the owner felt appropriate in the moment. For an individual to enjoy their tea in private, there can be a minimum amount of effort. I saw one lady pry some good white tea from

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<sup>232</sup> For more detailed description of this part of Chinese history, see Tom Standage’s book *A History of the World in 6 Glasses*.

<sup>233</sup> *lao baixing*, 老百姓, in his own words.

<sup>234</sup> *lao baixing*, 老百姓

<sup>235</sup> 传统伦理

<sup>236</sup> 甲骨文

<sup>237</sup> 会意字

<sup>238</sup> 强调大众



a cake, infuse the leaves in boiling water in a mug for a minute and then poured cold water in the mug to adjust it to the right temperature to drink immediately. To some people, this may taste no different than if it was made appropriately, however, it is by no means acceptable for a tearoom owner, who is supposed to be the embodiment of professional tea culture. Indeed, as many people told me, even the same tea would taste different depending on the environment and the *pao cha ren* (people who made tea). Thus, the design, decoration, and ambience of the tearoom, or going to have tea gatherings in places like *Hengshan* temple, the charisma of the tearoom owner, which tea to be served, the tea table and the utensils used for making tea, even the conversations the take place in the tearoom, are all part of the taste of tea that draw people to these tearooms.



Figure 39. Different types of tea displayed in a tearoom. Photo by the author.

### The Taste of Tradition in Modern China

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, *cha shi* (tearooms) like the ones owned by Chenyun, Yuyuan, and Zheng shushu, are usually referred to as places that sell *chaye* (茶叶, literally means tea leaves), which are usually quite small and very personal. Some *cha yi guan* sometimes also call themselves *cha shi* (tearoom), which are referred to by one of my informants who was a tearoom owner as *mai shui de* (卖水的, literally means selling water, suggesting that they don't make

profit by selling tea leaves but by selling infused tea water).<sup>239</sup> These *cha yi guan* are more like coffee places in the US—more spacious, nicely decorated, and sometimes quite extravagant. Unlike the former type of *cha shi*, the customers don't come to spend time with the owner but only to take advantage of the environment and the service they provide and then pay for the tea they drink there. The business model is no different from a coffee house.

But small tearooms are characterized by a different and more “traditional” model for business. In these businesses, even a first-time guest would be treated like a friend: they would be invited to join the tea table with whoever was already there with the owner and taste some tea. When I first found out about this, I was quite puzzled. How could they make money if people can just walk in and drink tea for free? I asked many people, both tearoom owners and people who frequently visited tearooms and received quite different answers. People who were not tearoom owners usually pointed out to me that drinking a few cups of tea was a necessary investment in this line of business to gain customers. Firstly, everyone does this, it is a convention to offer potential customers free tea to taste before they decide if they like it and want to buy it. Secondly, usually after a few visits, people would start to buy some of the tea they like to take home. No one would feel comfortable if they kept drinking free tea from the same tearoom. When they do start paying, the profit for selling tea would justify the previous cost of tea for free tasting.

For tearoom owners, the answer to my question did not focus on a cost-profit discussion. Almost all of them told me they had opened their business because they loved to collect and drink tea themselves anyway. They also loved talking to other people about tea, so why not share

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<sup>239</sup> *cha shui*, 茶水

tea with more friends when people come to visit? From my own experience, even after their explanation of this, the deep-rooted sense of reciprocity and commercialism did make me feel uncomfortable to keep visiting tearooms without purchasing anything, so I did buy some tea from them from time to time. On the other hand, some people I talked to were used to the convention of visiting tearooms and befriending tearoom owners and said they did not really think about this issue. They believe this was just how tearooms work and they did not want to commit to any tea from a tearoom if the tearoom owner seemed too eager for money, which also showed a lack of confidence in their products and professionalism.

While I did not have definitive evidence any of the answers were the exact reasons, I think one tearoom owner's answer helped me to understand the situation. He pointed out to me the *guwan* businesses also had tea tables set up and would invite their potential customers to drink tea with them when they come to visit even for the first time. He told me this was how business was done traditionally in China: the seller treated potential buyers like they were just guests to be entertained and they become friends with them first. He said it is called *yiren weiben* (以人为本), which means people-centered. Then when the time is right, there will be a talk about business. Offering a potential customer tea was both the custom and an expression of *Li*.

As discussed in Chapter Three, *cha li*—the *Li* of tea—was an embodiment of traditional Chinese culture. In this case, the tradition is extended beyond how tea is made to how business is run. The taste of tea in the tearoom, thus, is not only an embodiment of the entire sensorial experience in the tearoom regarding tea, but also a continuation of traditional business culture that contradicts the neoliberal, consumerism-oriented culture. While it is hard for the tearoom owner to not think about the cost and profit of their business, it is also a fact that they adhere to

this people-centered tradition. To be a successful tearoom owner in today's urban China, one clearly needs to be able to find balance in this contradiction.

In these contexts, it is only natural for the tearoom owners to draw back on the elements in traditional Chinese culture in recreating and legitimizing their professionalism. The “Selfless Tea Gathering” (*wu wo cha hui*) in *Hengshan* temple was a good example. The “selfless” or “*wu wo*” (无我, or *anātman* in Sanskrit) was a Buddhist concept where one accepts the absence of oneself.

In *wu wo cha hui*, the idea of “selfless” is extended to believing that everyone is equal. There are no seats. People can freely decide where to sit and whether they want to taste the tea other people make or make their own tea. Some of the tearoom owners I knew were self-professed Buddhists who used to spend months in a Buddhist temple. However even tearoom owners who were not Buddhist would also draw on elements from Buddhism like the music or certain practices such as wearing the Buddhist prayer beads. They told me even though they were not devoted to Buddhism, they had Buddha “in their heart.”

Tearoom owners also drew on other traditional Chinese elements such as ancient artifacts (*gu dong*, 古董), traditional-style calligraphy and paintings, tea utensils made by ancient techniques (like porcelain from *Ruyao*). Moreover, even the packaging of tea was usually quite simple with large empty space<sup>240</sup> and featuring very traditional-style writings and paintings (see Figure 40). People usually expected tearoom owners to be interested in topics regarding traditional Chinese culture. When my husband and I visited a tearoom one time, the owner

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<sup>240</sup> *liubai*, 留白, literally mean “saved for white or blankness”. It is a technique in traditional Chinese painting. Similar to the contrast of *xu* (虚, abstract) and *shi* (实, solid, concrete), the idea of *liubai* is that the absence of image can itself be an important content.

happened to have a friend who was quite into *gu dong*. After the owner introduced us to each other, we spent a few hours discussing *gu dong* such as jade rings this person wore, the swords the tearoom owner had on the wall, and the idea of “to nourish or cultivate” small artifacts in hand. Directing his comment to my American husband, he also told us there was a similar concept in the West called EDC (everyday carry). When we mentioned that we wanted to buy some tea apparatus as gifts for people from a tearoom owner, he showed us a replica of a *jigangbei*<sup>241</sup> (chicken cup) from Chenghua reign (1465-87 CE) in Ming dynasty that achieved a record-breaking price of US\$36.05 million in auction (see Figure 41).

Cases like the *jigangbei* can be seen as examples of what Lisa Rofel calls “domesticated cosmopolitanism” (2007, 112). By quoting the price it achieved in auction, China is placed in “a re-imagined” world, which shows that the value of traditional Chineseness is recognized by the world. Thus, the cosmopolitanism is domesticated “through a series of structural dichotomies and structured forgettings that reinvent the past” (2007, 112). In this sense, one of the goals of these tearoom owners was to help people domesticate cosmopolitanism in this changing time of modern China. Similar to Rofel’s discussion on fast food in *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*, there are many products (luxury brands) and practices (drinking imported wine, travelling overseas) that are readily available to people like Ruohua, Hannan, and Lijie in modern China that signify cosmopolitanism. Much as they may have enjoyed the taste of modern cosmopolitanism, they also enjoyed visiting tearooms on a regular basis, where they can slow down and discuss the anxieties and concerns they experienced in their life. The overall taste of tearooms and the tearoom owners are thus an embodiment of

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<sup>241</sup> 鸡缸杯

traditions that stand for an “imagined past,” where people were more relaxed, perhaps content, and sophisticated in our own history, cultural traditions, and confident.



Figure 40. A cake of white tea (*shoumei*). Photo by the author.





Figure 41. Replica of *jigangbei* (chicken cup). Photo by the author.



In this dissertation, by taking a gustemological approach, I attempt to combine theoretical works from the anthropology of the senses, food anthropology, as well as studies from sensory science to examine the meaning of tea tasting in people's everyday life in contemporary urban China. Similar to Oxfeld's discussion on the food culture of Moonshadow Pond, the tea culture discussed in this dissertation can be understood as "being simultaneously part of a national culture and a historical tradition, in addition to being something expressly local" (2017, 185). Just like the conflicts in the taste of tea I discussed earlier, contemporary Chinese culture is complex and full of contradictions. Particularly, China is undergoing the process of transformation that causes tension between the desire to continue traditions associated with the Chinese past, and to join and be accepted by what is imagined as "modern" Western culture.

While there is no simple answer to these questions, the *wei* or taste of tea in an era of contradiction is a great example of how people cope with these changing times. The ambiguity and fluidity in *wei* in tearooms can be a good analogy for us to begin to examine these contradictions and complexities through a different perspective. The contrast between *wei* and the standardized version of taste is a good analogy of traditional values of Chinese culture and the values of modernity. As Rofel points out, modernity finds its "positivistic, instrumental, and universalizing morality materialized in bureaucratic mechanisms, capitalist production, and mass media" (1999, 10). The traditional values of Chinese culture that the *wei* of tea embodies, on the contrary, is ambiguous, reflective, and open to individual interpretation. As I have discussed in this dissertation, just like with tea tasting, while the two opposite sets values systems do create tension for Chinese people in searching for reconciliation between abstractions and lived experience at times, it is mediated through a unique culture of *wei* that allows for analytic

ambivalence in connoisseurship. Moreover, a deeper exploration of this friction between subjective, traditional, holistic, and ambivalent lived experiences and objective, modern, positivistic, and precise abstractions can also create opportunities for new perspectives and value systems to emerge.

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Zhongxin.

APPENDIX A

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Isabelle Lesschaeve <innovinum@gmail.com>

Fri 11/27/2020 9:31

To: Hou, Yingkun <yingkun.hou@siu.edu>

1 attachments (302 KB)

partial-WAW.jpeg;

My apologies for the delay.

Dr. Noble has agreed to partial reproduction of the wine aroma wheel (see attached) with the following mention: Wine aroma wheel. Copyright 1990, 2002 A. C. Noble and showing the link to the website [www.winearomawheel.com](http://www.winearomawheel.com)

Let me know if you have further questions.

Please let us know when you publish and defend your dissertation. Sounds fascinating.

Kind regards,

Isabelle

--

Thanks!

Isabelle

Isabelle Lesschaeve, PhD

InnoVinum LLC

innovinum@gmail.com

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APPENDIX B

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Neal Swain <nmswain@uw.edu>  
Tue 5/19/2020 12:40  
To: Hou, Yingkun <yingkun.hou@siu.edu>

Dear Yingkun,

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[nmswain@uw.edu](mailto:nmswain@uw.edu)

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[Blog](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

VITA

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University

Yingkun Hou

yingkun.hou@siu.edu

China Agriculture University  
Bachelor of Science, Viticulture and Enology, July 2011

The University of Southern Mississippi  
Master of Arts, Anthropology, 2015

Special Honors and Awards:

2020-2021   Dissertation Research Assistantship   Southern Illinois University  
2017-2019   Graduate Dean Fellowship   Southern Illinois University

Dissertation Paper Title:

Tasting Tea, Tasting China: Tea Tasting in Everyday Life in Dalian

Major Professor: Dr. David Sutton

Publications:

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