


Chapter 3

Cultural Alchemy: Fengcha Tradition in Tea Retailing in Contemporary China

Junhong Ma

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7669-7102>

University of Alberta, Canada

ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the commercialized practice of Fengcha in the contemporary tea retailing business. Adopted as an industry standard, this practice includes the systematic training of workers and showcases the historical process of cultural transmission. In recent years in urban China, traditional literati aesthetics in tea art education have resonated with the burgeoning middle class, reinforcing image building on the production side, and culminating in a tea culture rich with ritualistic and performative elements. This refined interpretation not only gives insight into the historical and cultural significance of tea in China but also highlights the complex intersection of tradition, commerce, and gender. The transformation of a simple act of hospitality into a profound symbol of culture and identity showcases the adaptability of cultural heritage in the modern era.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, the Chinese tea industry has undergone a remarkable transformation, significantly influenced by cultural and economic shifts. Notably, the emergence of female tea masters, known as “chayishi (茶艺师, tea master or tea artist),” epitomizes this change. Since the early 2000s, the training system initiated integrates traditional Chinese values and aesthetics into the educational journey of workers in tea retailing, the majority of whom are women. These female tea masters extend beyond the simple act of serving tea; they are pivotal in cultural exhibitions, creating an inviting ambiance while epitomizing traditional femininity and elegance. Their involvement enhances brand promotion and serves as a symbol of Chinese tea culture, shaping the industry’s image and the tea consumption experience for the public. Concurrently, the age-old Buddhist practice of “Fengcha” (奉茶, offering tea) has evolved

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into a powerful marketing strategy, weaving together elements of the past, present, and cultural identity to cultivate customer relationships. The renewed folklore tradition in tea retailing enables tea brands to present themselves in an authentic manner. Indeed, even before the rise of the “guochao” phenomenon (the nationalist trend in domestic consumption), the retail tea business was already experiencing transformative shifts. The industrial practice trace back the as early as the 1980s in Taiwan, merchants began to collaborate with intellectuals, using service and cultural packaging as essential tools to do marketing. Gradually, the commercialization of “offering tea (奉茶)” became a common practice in the retail sector of the tea industry.

This research focuses on the commercialized practice of Fengcha in the contemporary tea retailing business. Adopted as an industry standard, this practice includes the systematic training of workers and showcases the historical process of cultural transmission. This study accentuates the gender segregation within the tea industry and culture, exploring the utilization of predominantly female labor at an economical cost. In recent years urban China, traditional literati aesthetics in tea art education have resonated with the burgeoning middle class, reinforcing image building on the production side, and culminating in a tea culture rich with ritualistic and performative elements. This refined interpretation not only gives insight into the historical and cultural significance of tea in China but also highlights the complex intersection of tradition, commerce, and gender. The transformation of a simple act of hospitality into a profound symbol of culture and identity showcases the adaptability of cultural heritage in the modern era.

My Reflection: From Unseen to Seen – Those Who Remain in Silence in Their Work

Before embarking on my research into tea culture, my focus was primarily on historical archives and monographs, as most researchers on the topic does. My intention was to document the revival of tea culture, the reactions of industry insiders to this nationwide trend, and the evolution of everyday tea practices. Given that, I presumed that tea industry workers, who undergo compulsory training before entering their roles, would possess a wealth of knowledge and thus, would be ideal sources of information. However, my field visits to tea establishments in prominent tea cities such as Shanghai and Hangzhou challenged my expectations. Let’s consider a typical experience in the field, at a small teahouse near a 4-star hotel in urban Shanghai in 2015. Here, I was welcomed by two ladies dressed in traditional qipao uniforms. They seemed both perplexed and uncomfortable when I voiced my interest in learning about tea culture instead of merely ordering tea or reserving a private room (baojian 包间). Claiming a lack of time and a dearth of in-depth knowledge on the subject, they politely declined to engage in a discussion. While initiating casual conversation was quite effortless, as they welcomed anyone appropriately dressed into their stores, these discussions often met an awkward impasse once I disclosed my academic objectives. This usually left me feeling compelled to make a purchase or leave with a sense of guilt, given their reticence to engage in cultural dialogue, viewing such discussions as a privilege reserved for others.

In contrast, interactions with middle-class groups who were learning or drinking tea often yielded lengthy conversations. My fieldwork seemed to align with their pursuit, so much so that I found myself answering more questions than I asked. I often joked about the distinction between those paid to serve tea and those who pay to prepare it. The workers serving tea rarely expressed themselves, while those paying to learn about tea (middle class) were loquacious and enjoyed such conversations.

Numerous similar responses in urban areas and diverse experiences interviewing various groups led me to understand that there is a distinct class difference between the tea ladies in retail stores and stu-

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