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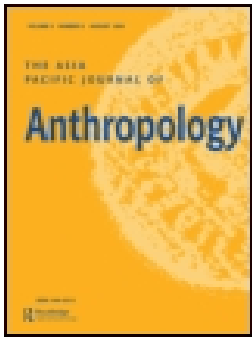
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Tea Art as Everyday Practice: *Gongfu* Tea in Chaoshan, Guangdong, Today

Peter d'Abbs  

In recent decades a style of preparing and drinking tea modelled largely on gongfu tea associated with the Chaoshan region of north-eastern Guangdong Province, China, has been taken up as a contemporary tea art in Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland and elsewhere. This paper draws on fieldwork conducted in Chaoshan to examine gongfu tea as contemporary practice in its home setting. Three aspects are considered: gongfu tea as an everyday practice, as a refined practice, and as commercialised leisure in tea-houses. I argue that, as an everyday practice in Chaoshan, gongfu tea primarily serves to nourish social connectedness with family, friends and associates. It is regarded as an integral part of day-to-day life rather than a tea art. However, some people separate it from the everyday world by cultivating discernment and knowledge with regard to selected aspects, such as high-quality teapots or appreciation of different teas.

Keywords: *Gongfu tea; Chinese tea culture; Food and drink culture; Tea art; Chaozhou*

Introduction

One autumn evening a few years ago, as I climbed out of a subway exit onto a noisy, crowded street in Shanghai, I came upon three men and two women, all—I subsequently learnt—in their 30s, sitting on the pavement on low stools, around a small wooden table on which they had placed a *gongfu* teaset. The term *gongfu* tea refers not to a particular kind of tea, but to a relatively refined way of preparing and drinking tea using small teapots—around the size and shape of a persimmon, it

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is often said—in which strong brew is prepared, with the dry leaves sometimes filling $\frac{1}{2}$ or more of the pot. The tea is poured into small cups of around 30 ml capacity. Repeated brews are made from the same leaves, and a session of *gongfu* tea almost invariably involves the drinkers consuming many cups. The types of tea most commonly used to prepare *gongfu* tea are semi-fermented Oolong teas, but in principle any kind of tea can be used. In this instance the five friends were drinking what Westerners call black tea but Chinese classify as red tea (*hong cha*).

While pedestrians hurried by, drivers blasted their horns and the deep thud of a nearby disco dance-floor pounded the night air, these five people sat sipping and chatting quietly, topping up the pot periodically with hot water from two large thermos flasks that stood on the pavement beside the table. One of the women had also brought a box of chocolates to share. In response to my curiosity, they explained that they gathered here every Friday evening, in front of the shop owned by one of the group, to drink tea and chat. What struck me at the time was how effectively, with these simple props, these five friends had created an island of peace and quietness in a very noisy street. A Chinese friend to whom I later described the encounter immediately invoked an expression that captured the essence of what I had witnessed; this was, she said, an example of *nao zhong qu jing*—creating a place of peace amidst the noise.

Gongfu tea as a tradition has its home today in Chaoshan, a geographically and culturally distinct region in north-eastern Guangdong Province (Olson 1998). As shown in Figure 1, it is made up of three contiguous conurbations: Chaozhou (population 2.6 million), Shantou (5.3 million) and Jieyang (5.8 million).¹

In literary accounts, Chaoshan *gongfu* tea is celebrated as one of the finest expressions of Chinese tea culture.² Wang, for example, describes it as ‘an integrated ceremony encompassing the reflected spirit, the etiquette, the skills of both making tea and pouring tea for guests, and the appraisal of the quality of the tea’ (Wang 2000, 124). Others have claimed that contemporary Chaoshan *gongfu* tea is a modern manifestation—a *huohuashi* or ‘living fossil’—of the methods for preparing and drinking tea in the Tang dynasty, as described in the earliest extant treatise on tea: Lu Yu’s *Classic of Tea* (*Cha Jing*) (Chen and Chen 2005; Yü 1974, 2007). The claim is rejected by Kim and Zhang (2012; Zhang 2016), who view the ascription of such an ancient lineage to *gongfu* tea as an ‘invented tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Huang (1997) suggests that what has become known as *gongfu* tea today originated in Fujian in the early eighteenth century, following the adoption of a new technique for controlling the fermentation of tea-leaves by a high temperature firing that halts fermentation at whatever stage the tea-maker wishes.

As Zhang (2018) observes, Chaoshan *gongfu* tea has also provided a foundation for the modern tea art (*chayi*) movement that began to emerge in Taiwan from the 1970s and has since spread to Hong Kong and the mainland (Yu 2016; Wicentowski 2000; Writer 2013). Writer draws on articles in Taiwanese lifestyle magazines to show that contemporary tea art is associated with a model of consumption that purports to differ from market-driven commodity consumption by sensitising the tea connoisseur to the natural environment in which the tea has been grown. The borrowed concept of

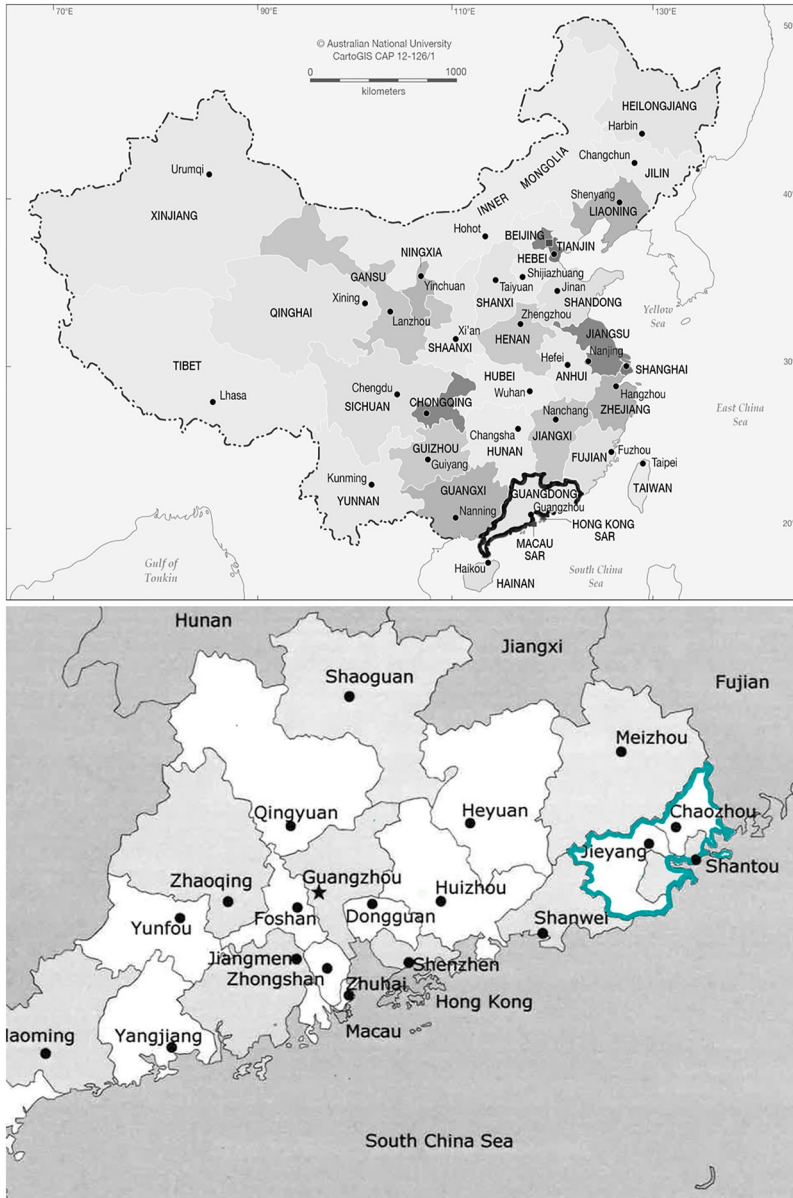


Figure 1 Map of China showing location of Chaoshan region.

‘terroir’ serves to link what Writer terms ‘specificities of place and subtlety of taste’ (Writer 2013, 136). Zhang describes the ongoing evolution of tea art in Taiwan as part of what she calls ‘the new landscape of cultural reconstruction in Taiwan’, as practitioners seek to blend utensils and conventions from Japan, China and Taiwan itself (Zhang 2018, 6). Similarly, Ma (2018) shows that among urban middle class tea

connoisseurs in China, consumption of aged *puer* tea grown in the forests of Yunnan province by ethnic minorities has become the hallmark of a new lifestyle, a symbol of refinement.

On the mainland, in the city of Quanzhou in Fujian Province, which adjoins Chaoshan, a style of serving and drinking tea modelled on Chaoshan *gongfu* tea was introduced in the 1990s. Tan and Ding (2010) ascribe the change to innovations in the production and marketing of teas in the post-Mao era, as tea producers from Taiwan, who had themselves recently modernised their production techniques, joined with tea farmers, tea merchants and government officials in Fujian to improve local techniques and cultivate new domestic markets. According to Tan and Ding, the new style of drinking tea was virtually unknown in the area prior to 2000, but was already being depicted in 2006 as the traditional way of drinking tea in Quanzhou (Tan and Ding 2010).

Beyond China, aided by electronic media and the streams of cultural capital that flow through them, a style of tea-drinking modelled on Chaoshan *gongfu* tea has entered the global marketplace (Appadurai 1996, 1986; Palumbo-Liu 1997). For example, in my home city of Brisbane, Australia, until recently the Chat Tea café offered a 'traditional Chinese tea ceremony'. The enthusiastic response of one reviewer shows how 'traditions' can be created, nurtured and disseminated:

The tea was served as part of a traditional Chinese tea ceremony—it was so intricate with so many small steps that I don't think I'll ever be able to remember all of it! The ceremony lasted approximately 5 minutes—I was enthralled by it. Despite being of Chinese descent, and being 23 years old, I had yet to experience anything as traditional as Chat Tea's tea ceremony.³

In short, the humble street scene I witnessed in Shanghai offered a glimpse into what has become a cultural kaleidoscope of discourses, objects, practices and claims, all connected in one way or another with Chaoshan *gongfu* tea. In this paper, I visit the source of this proliferation—the Chaoshan region—to observe contemporary tea-drinking practices. My starting point is an observation made some 20 years ago by the historian Huang Ting, who pointed to an emerging divergence between literary representations and everyday practices. In recent decades, he argued, Chaoshan *gongfu* tea had undergone important changes, by way of simplifying some of the more complex components, both with regard to utensils used and methods of preparing tea (Huang 1997, 110). Xu and Li conclude their essay on Chaoshan *gongfu* tea by pointing in the same direction:

Nowadays, the old customs and modern culture mingle in tea markets, and tea-houses are springing up one after the other, creating environments that seek to synthesize tea art and folk customs, traditional with contemporary; integrating beautiful settings, the way of tea and local folk practices, thereby infusing the ancient history and inner meaning of tea culture with new elements.⁴

In similar vein, Wang argues that, if we are to understand the meaning and significance of contemporary tea culture as embodied in places such as Chaoshan, we need to

put aside the literary representations and observe the practices themselves (Wang 2009). I seek to do this by pursuing two objectives: first, describing the place of *gongfu* tea in Chaoshan today; second, documenting the changes alluded to above by Huang and by Xu and Li. The paper begins with an account of the research setting, methods used in the study, and some conceptual issues. I then present findings relating to three aspects of contemporary practice: *gongfu* tea as everyday practice; *gongfu* tea as a refined practice, and *gongfu* tea as commercialised leisure. The paper concludes with a discussion about the relationship between these three aspects, and the connections between them and contemporary notions of Chinese tea art or *chayi*.

Methods and Frameworks

The Chaoshan region adjoins southern Fujian Province, with which it shares historical and cultural affinities. The local language, known as Chaoshan dialect, is not Cantonese but a variant of Minnan, which in turn is a subgroup of the Min language group spoken through southern Fujian, southern Zhejiang and in Taiwan (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2015; Olson 1998). The region contains tropical, sub-tropical and temperate areas (Su and Chen 2004). These conditions have fostered a distinct regional food and drink culture, in which Chaoshan *gongfu* tea has long occupied a central part (Chen 2001; Su and Chen 2004; Xu and Li 2007).

For data collection, I generated a sample created through referrals by people, all of whom drank *gongfu* tea, to others who also drank *gongfu* tea (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). As a sampling technique, snowball sampling does not aim for statistical representativeness of a population, but rather to gain access to people through whom one can expect to gain deeper understanding of the research topic (Coyne 1997; Creswell 2013). I followed a strategy that has been described as ‘theory-driven sociological ethnography’ (Nadai and Maeder 2005), and also as ‘multi-sited ethnography’ (Marcus 1995; Nadai and Maeder 2005), in which the ‘field’ of inquiry is not a single, spatially-bounded group or community but rather a set of activities, interactions and contexts generated by their relevance to a particular research question. The study sample eventually comprised 32 individuals and one family that I chose, for analytical purposes, to treat as a single unit. Of these, 22 individual participants grew up in Chaoshan. Because I was also interested in the practices of people who did not come from Chaoshan but who had adopted *gongfu* tea as a regular practice, the sample also included people born outside Chaoshan. In this paper, however, I focus entirely on the 22 participants from Chaoshan. (For an exploration of pathways by which people from outside Chaoshan came to adopt *gongfu* tea, see d’Abbs (2017).)⁵

In the course of four field trips to Chaoshan that took place between March 2010 and April 2017, I used a mix of semi-structured and unstructured interviews and observations to explore participants’ experiences of drinking *gongfu* tea, and the ways in which these experiences fitted in with other parts of their lives. Although I have used the term ‘interview’ above, most of my research encounters felt more like

conversations, usually over tea. This is why I refer to the people I interviewed as participants rather than 'respondents'. They were not just responding to my questions; they were *reflecting* on activities which, in many cases, were so thoroughly integrated into their daily routines that they had rarely, if ever, had occasion to reflect on them before. Moreover, in Chaoshan, a lot of *gongfu* tea drinking takes place, if not in public, at least in spaces that are publicly visible, such as shops and shop-fronts. The slightest expression of curiosity on my part often led to an invitation to join the tea-drinking circle.

Initially I drew on Douglas and Isherwood's concept of a 'consumption ritual' (Douglas 1996; Douglas and Isherwood 1996) as a frame for my inquiry. In this light, *gongfu* tea can be seen as the performance of a pre-ordained sequence of actions through which participants not only address utilitarian needs but also accord significance to particular events and social relationships. As fieldwork progressed, however, I became concerned with what seemed to be a limitation of the 'consumption ritual' concept. While *gongfu* tea involves the performance of a pre-ordained sequence of actions, it also entails, I realised, a high degree of creativity. Chaoshan tea drinkers pride themselves on following proper procedures—on being, as they say, *jiangjiu* or attentive to detail—but they do not follow some sort of secular liturgy. Fashioning a *gongfu* tea session into an occasion that satisfies the participants, while meeting other demands on the host's time and other resources, is a matter that calls for considerable skill. The concept of a 'consumption ritual', I concluded, did not accord due recognition to this more creative aspect of *gongfu* tea. Instead, I turned to de Certeau's conceptualisation of 'everyday practice' (de Certeau 1984). De Certeau's key insight—that the practices that people deploy in appropriating and utilising cultural objects constitute in themselves an act of production as well as consumption—resonated with what I was observing among the *gongfu* tea drinkers around me.

Gongfu Tea as Everyday Practice

Among the 22 study participants who had grown up in Chaoshan, *gongfu* tea was not a set of skills that they had consciously acquired. As one 37-year-old female respondent put it when I asked her where she had learned to drink *gongfu* tea: she did not learn about it at all—it was simply there, part of the world she came into: '*cong dongshi kaishi*'. Several people remarked that *gongfu* tea was not something for which they had to make time—even though drinking it would be regarded by most external observers as quite a time-consuming activity. Indeed, the two main connotations of the term '*gongfu*' are, firstly, availability of time and, secondly, an activity requiring skill. In Chaoshan, however, *gongfu* tea tends to be seen as a natural activity. As one participant put it, 'whenever we have some spare time we will want to drink *gongfu* tea, whereas other people will create an occasion to drink'. In a particularly evocative image, he described drinking *gongfu* tea as something that had 'seeped into our bones and cannot be discarded'.⁶



Figure 2 *Gongfu* tea as everyday practice in Chaozhou.

Figure 2 shows two men with some spare time one evening, sitting outside the shop belonging to the man on the left, enjoying *gongfu* tea. It typifies *gongfu* tea as an everyday practice. On the table stands a ceramic *chachuan* or tea boat. This is made up of two parts: a bowl and a removable perforated disc that fits snugly within the rim of the bowl to form a flat, upper-level surface. Most of the processes of making the tea in everyday settings—rinsing the cups, rinsing the tea-leaves, and pouring tea into the cups—are performed on the *chachuan*. Excess water or tea flows onto the lid and drains away into the bowl below, which can be emptied at the host's convenience.

On top of the *chachuan* stand two more basic *gongfu* tea utensils: a set of three small teacups and a lidded bowl known as a *gaiwan*. Tea is brewed either in a small teapot or a *gaiwan*—most commonly in my observation the latter. Together, the *chachuan*, *gaiwan* or teapot and the three cups constitute the basic equipment for making *gongfu* tea. Even though there are only two people drinking on this occasion, there are three cups on the *chachuan*. If four or five drinkers were present, it is likely that there would still be just the three cups, which would be shared among the drinkers, with the cups being rinsed between each *pao* or round of tea.

In the instant captured in the photograph, the host has just finished pouring hot water from the kettle into each of the teacups in order to rinse them prior to pouring another cup of tea from the *gaiwan*. In the following few seconds, having put down the kettle, he performed a step known as *tang bei*, *gun bei*—literally heat cups, roll cups. The top centre photograph in Figure 3 shows another host performing the same step; it involves picking up each cup one by one, turning it on to its side, and immersing it in another cup filled with hot water in order to rinse it. The cups are then



Figure 3 *Gongfu* tea as everyday practice. Clockwise from top left: *Gongfu* tea set in a street stall; rinsing the cups; pouring hot water into a *gaiwan*; pouring tea into cups; traditional earthenware stove and clay pot for heating water.

emptied. Once this has been done, the brewed tea can be poured into the cups. The first brew or *pao* is normally emptied out into the *chachuan* rather than consumed, partly because this in effect rinses the tea-leaves, and partly because it is often thought to taste bitter. Subsequent *pao* are drunk.

In pouring tea into the cups, whether using a *gaiwan* or teapot, the host is expected to ensure that the tea in each cup is of the same colour and strength. This requires an attribute which suffuses the entire *gongfu* tea drinking occasion, and which is considered by Chaoshan people to be an important, if not defining characteristic of *gongfu* tea: namely, *jiangjiu* or attention to detail. With regard to pouring the tea, this quality is in effect codified in two metaphors to which tea hosts often allude: *Guangong xun cheng* or ‘Guan Gong patrols the city’, and *Han Xin dian bing* — ‘Han Xin counts the troops’. Both metaphors invoke ancient culture heroes to prescribe, in the first instance, distributing the tea evenly among guests and, in the second, distributing the last drops of tea from the pot evenly.

Drinking *gongfu* tea as an everyday practice, above all, is about relaxing and chatting with friends, family, colleagues. At the same time, the importance of *jiangjiu* in practising *gongfu* tea makes it more than just another social lubricant, like drinking coffee or having a beer in a pub in a Western society. The process of preparing tea, and the small cups from which it is drunk, foster a quiet attentiveness, in which participants, as one of my informants put it, ‘slow down to taste the tea’ (*manmande qu pin cha*). With larger cups, she added, participants would be unlikely to notice subtle differences between different brews of the same tea—unlikely, to use a phrase often used in Chaoshan, to *savour* the tea (*tan cha*). Typically, participants in a *gongfu* tea drinking session will pay attention to at least three characteristics of each round of tea served: its colour (*tangse*), aroma (*xiangqi*) and taste (*ziwei*).

As an everyday practice, *gongfu* tea was not seen as an adornment of everyday life so much as an integral part of it. It was *xiguan*—habitual—or, in one frequently used phrase, *shenghuo de yi bu fen*—part of our lives. The integration of *gongfu* tea into everyday Chaoshan life can be seen in three dimensions: spatial, temporal and social. The most obvious of these aspects, at least to me as an outside observer, was the spatial integration of *gongfu* tea into daily life. Put simply, in Chaoshan, *gongfu* tea sets are everywhere: in offices, factories, homes, hotel rooms. In Figure 3 the two photographs at left show street stalls; the person photographed rinsing the cups (top centre) was in an office tea-room, while the two remaining photographs were taken in private homes.

In Chaoshan, drinking *gongfu* tea is primarily a part of household and workplace life rather than an activity associated with tea-houses. Most Chaoshan households, I was told, have a tea table or *chaji* somewhere in the living room, to which family members would adjourn after a meal. (In Chaoshan, *gongfu* tea is normally drunk after rather than during meals.) Participants also drank more or less regularly at work, although here constraints on time and space had led to variation in drinking patterns. In my observation, *gongfu* tea was enjoyed in workplaces whenever the immediate pressures of the job allowed.

The integration of *gongfu* tea into the spatial and temporal dimensions of everyday life both expresses and sustains its role in the third dimension—that of nourishing sociability and friendship. Sociability is built into the structure of *gongfu* tea, firstly and most obviously through the convention that *gongfu* teaset contains three cups. Secondly, the practices entailed in preparing, serving and drinking *gongfu* tea foster an ambience of quiet, relaxed attentiveness both to the tea itself and to each other. No matter how noisy the surroundings, the presence of a *gongfu* teaset and the care with which the host boils the water, prepares the pot or *gaiwan*, and brews and serves the tea, combine to create a space for attending to aromas, tastes and conversation.

When compared with written accounts of *gongfu* tea in earlier times, contemporary practice displays both continuity and change. The earliest detailed description is an essay written in 1957—but not published at the time—by Weng Huidong (Huang 1997; Weng 2009 (1957)). More recently, Chen and Chen (2005) have listed 18 steps in preparing Chaoshan *gongfu* tea, plus another three prescribing how the tea should be drunk. Accounts such as these are literary representations, not ethnographic reports; we do not know how accurately they portray everyday practice at any point in time. But they provide a frame for examining contemporary practices.

Some changes reflect the adoption of new utensils. For example, water was traditionally heated in a clay pot (*shadiao*) on an earthenware stove using charcoal made from olive pips. These utensils have largely been replaced by the electric kettle. As the photograph at bottom left of Figure 3 demonstrates, however, the earthenware stove and clay pot have not entirely disappeared, and two other study participants—both *gongfu* tea aficionados—sometimes used them when making tea at home. Prior to the invention of the *chachuan* in Chaozhou in the 1960s, separate bowls were used for housing the teapot, rinsing cups and pouring tea (Zeng and Ye 2011).

Some practices also appear to be changing. In my observation, while shopkeepers and others drinking *gongfu* tea on pavements often practised *tang bei gun bei*, among the more highly educated participants in this study, using one's fingers was considered unhygienic (even with boiling water) and had been replaced by the use of wooden tongs. Other traditional practices, however, continue to be observed, such as *Guangong xun cheng* and *Han Xin dian bing*. Sometimes, however, especially if there are too many guests to serve each of them from a single brew of the pot or *gaiwan*, the host will also make use of a small jug (usually around 150 ml capacity), known as a *gongdao bei*. In this case, tea is poured first into the jug, and from there into each guest's cup. The *gongdao bei* is an even more modern innovation than the *chachuan*. In most instances where I observed people drinking *gongfu* tea with friends, family or associates, it was not used, although it is said to be commonly used in tea-houses and other commercial establishments.

Gongfu Tea as Refined Practice

Despite the importance attached by Chaoshan *gongfu* tea drinkers to *jiangjiu*, the kind of occasions discussed above were not regarded by participants as tea *art*. Rather, they

were *xiguan* (habitual). Some study participants, however, had elevated their *gongfu* tea drinking practices to what they regarded as a form of tea art, or *chayi*. This was accomplished, not by adhering to a set of practices that could be contrasted in either/or fashion with *gongfu* tea as *xiguan*, but rather by selective attention to one or more of five aspects of *gongfu* tea, each of which could be conceptualised as a continuum, as shown in Table 1, with low attentiveness at one end, high attentiveness at the other. To the extent that a person devoted attentiveness to any of these aspects, he or she took their practice out of the realm of the everyday, and made it special. The 'special' quality is multi-dimensional: one person, for example, might cultivate an interest in teapots, while another might care little about pots but be very attentive to the aroma and appearance of tea leaves.

The first dimension involved attention to settings. While most *gongfu* tea settings in Chaoshan, as indicated earlier, are integrated into the routines of everyday life, some participants defined tea-drinking as a special activity by creating a more distinctive setting, sometimes by means of an elaborately carved tea-table or *chatai*. One participant, between the time of my first and second visits to Chaozhou, had converted his entire garage into a tea-room, complete with specially commissioned calligraphy and a variety of urns, ceramic vases, statues and other *objets d'art*. Here he would host frequent visits from other dedicated *gongfu* tea drinkers.

The dimension of tea art most widely practised among participants in this study involved cultivating expertise in tasting and purchasing tea. Discernment does not necessarily mean buying the most expensive teas. On the basis of my fieldwork observations, it would appear to be the product of two inter-related practices: first, acquiring knowledge about teas; second, locating a trusted source for purchases. Both practices take place within a context still shaped largely by local rather than wider national factors. For example, one participant, a manager in a travel agency in Chaozhou, found it difficult amid the routines and cramped space in her office to indulge fully

Table 1 Gongfu tea art as a multi-dimensional continuum

LOW	Attentiveness to	HIGH
←————	Creating a special <i>setting</i> for <i>gongfu</i> tea.	————→
←————	Selecting and purchasing high quality teas.	————→
←————	Setting time aside especially for tasting high quality teas.	————→
←————	Cultivating knowledge about, and using, high quality utensils.	————→
←————	Incorporating philosophical/spiritual aspects of tea culture into tea-related practices.	————→

her love of *gongfu* tea, but she had cultivated a discerning palate. We met in her office where she prepared, firstly, a pot of Fenghuang Dancong tea, grown in the mountains north of Chaozhou. High mountain teas are prized for their flavour and aroma. This one, she informed me, retailed for more than 1,000 RMB per *jin* (that is, roughly \$AUD400 per kilogram). Later, she prepared another Fenghuang Dancong tea that sold for less than one-tenth of the price of the first. An undiscerning drinker, she explained, might find it difficult to distinguish between the two, or even prefer the cheaper tea because it had a stronger aroma. But the latter aroma was an example of 'floating aroma' (*qingfu de xiang*), more immediately noticeable, but less valued by most discerning tea-drinkers than the deeper, subtler aroma (*you diyun de xiang*) of the higher-priced tea.

She added—as did several other participants—that nowadays some local tea producers used chemicals as flavour or aroma enhancers. It is partly because of the currency of these suspicions that the issue of trust in connection with sourcing tea is salient in Chaoshan. A discerning tea-drinker takes pains to ensure access to one or more trusted suppliers, sometimes by driving up into the mountains—by car, a journey of between one and two hours—and purchasing tea directly from a farmer. Most of the tea grown in Chaoshan is Fenghuang Dancong Oolong tea produced on small, family owned farms known as *jiating zuofang*. More commonly, participants purchased tea from a trusted local merchant, who in turn purchased directly from tea farmers. In both of these strategies, personal relationships were more important than impersonal market transactions.

A third dimension of Chaoshan *gongfu* tea as tea-art involved setting time aside for appreciating tea. Earlier, I suggested that Chaoshan people generally do not consciously *make* time for *gongfu* tea; it is built into everyday routines. But some do so. In Chaozhou, several participants belonged to a group of friends who met intermittently in each other's houses for tea-drinking evenings. One of these occurred during one of my visits. Each of the nine participants—two of whom were women—brought a small amount of tea to share. For example, one man brought along some Fenghuang Dancong tea that came from a tree more than 60 years old. I asked one of those present—a now retired man who appeared to be regarded as the expert among experts when it came to judging tea—what he thought of it. He remarked that, while the tea had the rich flavour of tea from an older tree, the farmer who had produced it had not been able to maximise those benefits. Throughout the entire evening, the host quietly prepared each pot or *gaiwan* of tea, sitting behind an elegant table, using just five cups, which he rinsed in hot water with each new pouring, deftly ensuring that we all shared equally in the tea consumed. In all, we drank 10 or 11 kinds of tea over a few hours, before the guests dispersed.

One of the oldest ways of elevating tea-drinking to an art is through using fine utensils. This is true of Chinese tea culture in general, and Chaoshan is no exception. Several participants had collections of hand-crafted purple clay teapots from Yixing in Jiangsu province—the most famous site in China today for both factory and hand-made teapots. Although teapots made from the local red clay are less highly

prized—according to one participant, the clay is a little ‘thin’ (*taibao*)—all of the serious *gongfu* teapot collectors I met also used Chaozhou-made red clay teapots. One had several in his collection of over 70 teapots.

The final dimension of Chaoshan *gongfu* tea as tea art identified above involved cultivating interest in connections between tea and spirituality or philosophy. Above an arch in the ancient Kou Chi Buddhist temple in the heart of Chaozhou is a sign proclaiming ‘*Chan cha yi wei*’ (Zen and tea are of one flavour). The saying is an ancient one. To what extent the association lives on in day-to-day practices in the K. Chi temple or other monastic sites in Chaoshan, I cannot say. I did not extend my inquiries into the monastery, nor did my sample include any people who might be categorised as ‘literati’ or ‘intellectuals’. It consisted rather of individuals working in private industry or the civil service. These limitations of the study need to be kept in mind when assessing the scepticism that I encountered regarding attempts to link Chaoshan *gongfu* tea with spirituality or religiosity. One participant declared bluntly ‘*Buyao tai shenhua le*’—‘Don’t spiritualise it’. The scepticism was not universal. One participant, for example, described tea culture and Buddhism as not merely similar, but the same (*xiangtong*), while another invoked Daoist concepts in asserting that tea should be produced and consumed in such a way as to promote *tian di ren he*—that is, harmony among the three sources of energy: heaven (*tian*), earth (*di*) and people (*ren*). Amongst most of the participants in this study, however, drinking *gongfu* tea was a social rather than a spiritual pastime.

Amongst the 22 Chaoshan-born participants in this study, 15 devoted attentiveness to one or more of the five dimensions shown in Table 1, while two of them did so with respect to all five.

Chaoshan Gongfu Tea as Commercialised Leisure

In contrast to some other parts of China such as Sichuan, tea-houses are not prominent in Chaoshan. Not one of the Chaoshan-born participants in this study frequented them regularly, and several derided them as commercial places run by people who knew little about *gongfu* tea. This situation, however, may be changing, as two examples from my fieldwork suggest. The first is the Lu Yu Chalou or Lu Yu Tea-house which occupies an entire modern two-storey building in the central business district of Shantou. Here, patrons can choose between restaurant-style booths on the ground floor or private rooms—called *baoxiang*—on the upper floor. In both, patrons sit around a table on which stands a tea plate (*chapan*) and a set of *gongfu* tea wares. On the occasion of my visit, the menu offered a variety of teas from southern China, including locally produced Fenghuang Dancong, all sold in small, vacuum-sealed packets containing about 3 grams, enough for a single *pao* or pot of tea. A single *pao* could be used several times, and each purchase came with an unlimited supply of hot water, provided in large thermos flasks. Prices ranged from 78 Yuan for a packet (a little under \$AUD16) to 268 Yuan (around \$AUD54).

While the setting and utensils evoked local traditions of tea-drinking, tea was just one beverage on offer from a menu that also included coffee, spirits, beer, milk shakes, soft drinks, ice cream, milk tea, preserved fruits, cigarettes, and snacks. Similarly, the teahouse invoked national as well as local cultural symbols, most obviously in the appropriation of Lu Yu, the Tang Dynasty author of the *Cha Jing* or *Classic of Tea*. Lu Yu (who historically had no connection with Chaoshan) was everywhere, appearing not only in the name of the tea-house, but also on the menu, the first page of which described his life, and also on that quintessentially consumerist accessory—a box of tissues, on one side of which was printed the opening chapter of the *Cha Jing*.

My visit to the Lu Yu Chalou was facilitated, at my request, by one of my middle-aged, female participants, who prior to this occasion had never patronised the place, despite having been a regular *gongfu* tea drinker over several decades. Older people like her, she said, preferred to drink tea in their own or each other's homes. Her daughter, on the other hand, had visited the tea-house several times. She pointed out that, with young children and perhaps grandparents in the house, home was not always a relaxing place in which to meet friends. Tea-houses like this offered an alternative, where she and her friends could chat or play poker or mahjong.

The second example is a 'tea art' house established in a laneway in the Chaozhou 'old town' just a few months prior to my visit in April 2017. A young couple had converted a small Qing dynasty house, using rooms located around the perimeter of a central courtyard as semi-private tea-rooms. The décor evoked a pronounced Japanese influence. Patrons sat on woven mats and cushions on the floor, around a table no more than 15-20 cm above the floor. At one end of the table stood a ceramic urn and a matching ceramic kettle, while along it were displayed *gongfu* tea wares, laid out with a degree of attention to placement that is characteristic of contemporary Taiwanese tea art, but not of Chaoshan *gongfu* tea. Patrons could look out on the central courtyard, where paved pathways divided segments covered in white pebbles, dotted with rocks, bowls and statues of Buddhist monks—all designed, it appeared to me, to suggest a Zen-like stillness.

Discussion

This account offers no more than a glimpse into a local tea culture that has many facets, but it invites further consideration of at least two issues. One is the connection between the three kinds of contemporary practice described above: *gongfu* tea as everyday practice, as tea art, and as an object of commercialised leisure. A second is the relationship between all of these practices and contemporary notions of Chinese tea art or *chayi*.

Despite the importance of attention to detail or *jiangjiu* in *gongfu* tea as an everyday practice, those who engage in it every day, as already mentioned, do not regard it as a form of tea art. My observations and interviews suggest that its primary roles are social: expressing and nurturing relationships with family, friends and associates, and creating a congenial setting in which to do so. Judging by the pervasiveness of

gongfu teaset and their frequent use, its part in doing so is important. In this sense, the place of *gongfu* tea in Chaoshan is similar to that of tea-drinking in the very different context of the Ang people studied by Li (2008). The Ang are a Mon-Khmer speaking ethnic minority people living along the China-Burma border. They too prepare and share tea as an everyday practice as a means of affirming social connectedness, although the practices themselves appear to be less *jiangjiu* than in Chaoshan, and their social, cultural and economic circumstances—as a numerically small, economically marginalised minority on the periphery of China—are very different.

The question of whether or not a set of practices should be categorised as ‘art’ presupposes a dichotomy between ‘art’ and ‘everyday life’, between the artistic and the quotidian. Chaoshan *gongfu* tea, it can be argued, surmounts this dichotomy. Zeng and Ye assert that *gongfu* tea

lends itself to being a tea art for the most refined room, among the most exclusive literati, and as a custom of ordinary people. In the refined there is the popular, in the popular, refinement. It appeals to both refined and popular tastes. Its combination of refinement and popularity gives to *gongfu* tea its distinctive charm and vitality. (Zeng and Ye 2011, 83)⁷

The claim is perhaps a bold one, but my observations incline me to think it is warranted.

Seen in this light, those people in Chaohan who consciously cultivate a more refined sensibility with respect to one or more of the dimensions of *gongfu* tea art as itemised above are, in effect, weighting the scales towards *ya* (elegance, refinement) at the expense of *su* (common, popular), but their practices, I suggest, can still best be understood within the framework of a distinct regional synthesis of *ya* and *su*. That is to say, their practices are still embedded in the local popular *gongfu* tea culture.

What of Chaoshan *gongfu* tea as a site for commercialised leisure? The two tea-houses described briefly above can best be viewed, I suggest, as early signs of attempts to harness local tea-drinking practices to a more cosmopolitan, commodified market (Appadurai 1986; Davis 2000). Similar processes are in train elsewhere. For example, Feng describes the growth of tea art houses in the southern island of Hainan (Feng 2005). The question arises as to whether tea-houses such as these, catering as they do to younger, affluent customers, will in time supersede the more domestic practices described in this paper. A small, exploratory study such as this offers no basis for prediction, but a few inferences can be advanced. Firstly, the entrenchment of a market economy in China and the ceaseless search for entrepreneurial opportunities it generates, together with today’s globalised patterns of cultural consumption, suggest that *gongfu* tea as a cultural object will continue to be appropriated, transformed and marketed in new places and new guises. Secondly, whatever happens in the future at the micro-social level in Chaoshan will be influenced by the benefits people derive from setting time aside to drink *gongfu* tea, and by the shifting constraints and opportunities that define the costs of doing so. The Chaozhou travel agency manager whose cultivation of a discerning tea palette I described above had adapted to the constraints of her

office by drinking from larger cups than those conventionally used for *gongfu* tea. Another younger woman I met in the course of fieldwork had been less successful in adapting to circumstances. At the time I met her, she had returned to Chaozhou for a few days to visit her family. She talked of how, after she moved to Guangzhou a few years earlier, first to study and then to work, she eventually stopped drinking *gongfu* tea, even though she missed it. Her new friendship network was not disposed to leisurely tea-drinking sessions and, as an inherently social activity, *gongfu* tea was not something she could enjoy on her own.

The final question foreshadowed above concerns the relationship between the *gongfu* tea-related practices described here and contemporary notions of Chinese tea art or *chayi*. The latter, as depicted by researchers such as Writer (2013), Zhang (2018) and (Ma 2018), is a consciously adopted form of cultural consumption, one that is held to offer an alternative to the dominant forms of commodity consumption by connecting the discerning tea-drinker with both the grower and manufacturer of tea and the places in which they do so. Chaoshan consumers of *gongfu* tea who cultivate knowledge and sensitivity with respect to tea, especially the numerous varieties of local Fenghuang Dancong tea, are in effect cultivating a similar sensibility, but as an adjunct to, rather than an alternative to, participation in a market-oriented consumer society. They are not, I think, making a lifestyle choice.

This study exhibits several limitations, some obvious, some less so. Firstly, I am not Chinese. I have a limited, but far from fluent ability in Chinese language, none in Chaoshan dialect. In conducting interviews, I received generous help from my wife who, as a Guangzhou-born Chinese, speaks fluent Chinese and Cantonese, but not Chaoshan dialect. In conversations with us, study participants spoke in Chinese—which did not appear to pose any difficulties for them, but it is not their preferred *lingua franca*. Secondly, the size and nature of my sample offered a limited vision. With the exception of a tea merchant based in Fenghuang township, and one tea farmer who lived high up in the mountains, the study sample was made up of city dwellers. I have neglected the countryside. Further, the sample as already stated was also drawn almost entirely from people working as civil servants or as managers in small businesses; it did not contain any scholars or ‘literati’. Thirdly, although nine of the 22 Chaoshan-born participants were women, I realised towards the end of the study that I had paid no more than superficial attention to ways in which contemporary *gongfu* tea drinking practices may be gendered. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study offers insights into the place of a celebrated local tradition of Chinese tea drinking in a social and cultural context that has recently undergone profound changes, including the shift from a command to a market economy, the rise of consumerism, and the emergence of new forms of leisure.

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Notes

- [1] These figures are derived from the 2010 Census. The name ‘Chaoshan’ does not refer to an official administrative region; it is an amalgam of the names of Chaozhou and Shantou.
- [2] Chaoshan gongfu tea is sometimes referred to as Chaozhou gongfu tea, after one of the cities that form part of the region. The terms are interchangeable. I have generally used ‘Chaoshan’.
- [3] www.weekendnotes.com/traditional-chinese-tea-ceremony-cha-tea (Accessed November 16 2016).
- [4] My translation.
- [5] The study had ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee, University of New England, Australia (HE10/045).
- [6] ‘Zhe yijing shentou dao guzi li mian le. Ziran er ran, tuo li bu liao le’.
- [7] My translation; the original reads ‘Gongfu cha jishi deng daya zhi tang de yin cha yishu, you shi tiaochule xia’ai de wenren quan, zhagen yu dazhong worang de minsu. Ya zhong you su, su zhong you ya, yasu gongshang, da ya er da su, zhe zheng shi ta meili yu shengmingli zhi suoza’.

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