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A Changing Tea Culture, A Changing China

Variations in Conceptions of Gift Tea Among Tea Sellers

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the department of Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Department of Sociology

Yale University

2020

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ABSTRACT

Existing literature discusses tea in terms of consumption and as a symbol of nationalism, but its role in guanxi relations has remained largely unexplored. This paper examines how the cultural and economic meanings of tea in guanxi relations are changing in reaction to 1) a demographic transition in the composition of the tea industry and 2) an exogenous shock—i.e., the 2013 anti-corruption campaign. China’s economic rise in the past few decades has spawned a new generation of middle-class consumers who are influenced by Western values of individualism and connoisseurship. I argue that this, along with the structural dismantling of public and social meanings that resulted from the crackdown on luxury gift items, spurred tea sellers to further emphasize consumer values in their conceptualization of tea as a gift object. Findings from interviews and observations with twenty tea merchants across Beijing, Jinan, and Shanghai show that tea transformed from a guanxi gift item that prioritized social Confucian meanings to one that reflected a combination of public Confucian values and Western hedonic values. I additionally argue that the financial impact of the 2013 anti-corruption campaign affected tea merchants unevenly based on their geographical location, with Beijing tea sellers suffering the heaviest losses.

Keywords: China, consumption, guanxi, geography, gift, tea
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Jeffrey Alexander, for his insightful comments and guidance throughout the writing process. I am also grateful to Jonathan Wyrtzen and Tony Cheng, who provided constant support over the course of the year, and to the Light Fellowship for funding my travels abroad. This paper benefited greatly from Cathy Shufro’s feedback—thank you for your generosity and stylistic suggestions. And of course, thank you to the tea sellers who shared their experiences, as well as family and friends who encouraged me every step of the way. This paper would not have been possible without you.
INTRODUCTION

My father has a ritual. A few days before his annual trip back to China to see friends and family, my father goes to Costco and splurges. Like clockwork, he returns with stacks of boxes of Belgian chocolates and fancy cashews. I used to sit on the sofa at his side, watching him check names off a list as he methodically packed the treats in his suitcases.

This ritual perplexed me. My father—usually frugal to a fault—scrimps and saves on everything from stationery to shirts. We rarely ate such cashews at home, and certainly never Belgian chocolates. They were simply too expensive to fit regularly into our household budget, which was maintained on the salary of one university researcher.

Although I was confused by why my father would spend hundreds of dollars on these gifts, I never complained. He always returned from China with lovely presents: a keychain with a stuffed panda, a pack of mooncakes with runny yolk filling, a necklace carved out of jade. He also brought back beautifully packaged containers of tea.

I found the tea particularly fascinating for one reason: my parents never drank tea. Over the years, the containers piled up in cabinets, and, when those were filled, in the closets. During middle school, surrounded by their abundance, I gained a sudden and intense interest in tea. I wanted to tear apart the pretty packages and see what they concealed, to taste what was inside. Humoring me, my father opened a few tins. We brewed the loose-leaf oolong and black teas in teapots made from Yixing clay—otherwise known as Purple Sand—and we sipped the fragrant liquor from porcelain cups.

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1 There are seven main types of Chinese tea: green, yellow, white, oolong, black (or red), dark, and puer. All tea is made from the leaves of the same plant—Camellia sinensis. Variations in the production process create the different types of tea.
But even years after we started treating the tea as something to be consumed rather than something to look at, a prodigious amount remains untouched in our house. My father has always viewed drinking these gift teas as an extravagant, borderline excessive act. When I asked him why we had so much tea in the first place, he said they were gifts from friends in his hometown. They had originally received the tea as gifts from other people, but because these friends didn’t typically drink tea either, they regifted the tea to my father when he visited bearing those chocolates and cashews. My father’s fancy treats from Costco, which he didn’t eat, were reciprocated with expensive teas that his friends didn’t drink. My father and his friends seemed equally pleased with this arrangement. Of course, I was delighted.

But a few years after my father and I began our own ritual of drinking tea together, I noticed that he was bringing home fewer boxes of tea from his trips—from five to six in 2010 down to one or two in 2015. This intrigued me, especially since my father continued his yearly gift-shopping spree at Costco. Was tea no longer popular as a gift in China? Why did my father’s friends, who had supplied us with quality teas for years, become suddenly inconsistent in their generosity?

When I asked him why, my father explained the gifts reflected renqing and gave mianzi: two things fundamental to guanxi relations in China. My father continued to give the same gifts from Costco, which showed renqing and mianzi to his friends, but the flow of guanxi between his friends and their other gift givers had been somehow disrupted: they were no longer receiving gift teas.

*Renqing* can be described as “moral norms and human feelings” that also coincide with norms of reciprocity (Huang 1987), while *mianzi* is loosely—and somewhat reductively—
defined as “face” in global sociology (Qi 2011). Both contribute significantly to guanxi, a system of personal relationships and connections based on Confucian values that pervades every aspect of Chinese social life (Ruan 2017). Lacking a perfect Western equivalent but generally perceived as a social phenomenon (Yan 1996), guanxi has been translated as “personal connections,” “social networks,” and “particularistic ties”—all terms that fail to fully capture its rich meanings (Qiao 1988). Although scholars of Chinese society disagree on the exact translation, they widely acknowledge that guanxi is a “complex yet centrally important for understanding interpersonal relations in China” (Yan 1996).

Part of the difficulty in determining a nuanced translation lies in Western scholarship’s tendency to treat guanxi as instrumental networks established at the level of personal interactions (Yan 1996). Western accounts have characterized guanxi as the outcome of rational calculation and manipulation by individuals pursuing personal interests, therefore imbuing it with a negative meaning (Gold 1984). Yet as Chinese research has shown, guanxi is not limited to instrumentality and rational calculation, but may also convey sociability, morality, intentionality, and personal affection: as anthropologist Yunxiang Yan describes it, guanxi is “both a power game and a life-style” (Yan 1996).

I had a chance to learn more the role of tea in this power game and lifestyle in spring 2019, when I received a fellowship to study at Tsinghua University in Beijing for a semester. As a sociology major, I wanted to conduct original research for my senior thesis on guanxi and its relationship to tea, as well as on tea culture at large. Conscious of limitations in time and travel, I decided to sample a population that would provide me with a more comprehensive view of tea as a cultural object. I was reluctant to survey tea givers or tea recipients, because they would provide only one perspective on the dyadic guanxi
relation. Further, it was possible that such subjects would have little in common, except in relation to tea gifting. When I mentioned my project to some teachers at my study abroad program, they recommended that I talk to tea sellers, and go to Maliandao Tea Market, the largest tea market in Beijing.

Tea merchants proved to be the ideal subjects for my research. As providers of tea, they come into contact with a variety of gift givers and recipients, and they are attuned to trends in customer behavior. Their intimate relationship with tea allowed for nuanced and insightful responses to my questions. Moreover, I could find them at their stalls on later visits to ask follow-up questions and build relationships over time. Since the tea merchants operated long-term businesses and had reputations to uphold, and recognized me as a curious student instead of a profitable customer, they were discouraged from giving me false information for the sake of a quick sale.

Over the course of dozens of hours spent interviewing and observing tea sellers perform *gongfu* tea ceremonies in the small theaters of their stalls, I learned about shifts in tea culture, consumption patterns, and industry demographics. I realized that my father had only told me about a small sliver of the whole picture. A sharp dichotomy existed between the image of tea presented to an international audience, and the image of tea domestically. In global diplomacy, the cultural meaning of tea has remained relatively stable over the past few decades: almost half a century after President Nixon returned from his historic summit in Beijing with tea from Chairman Mao in his possession (Neis 2013), President Xi Jinping presents tea to foreign leaders as a “symbol of Chinese culture and hospitality” (Yang 2018). Within China, however, its social significance has changed dramatically since the start of China’s 2013 anti-corruption campaign.
A few years before the crackdown, a *China Daily* article notes that tea—long considered a traditional gift for family members—had become an increasingly common offering to officials. One reason for its growing popularity as a bribe lay in its sometimes exorbitant price: in Beijing’s famous tea stores, packages of tea sold easily at more than $6,000 (2010). One cake of puer tea, which typically ranges between 300-500 grams (0.66 - 1.1 lb), could be worth more than $13,000 (Kuo 2007). In contrast, a similar amount of common terrace puer tea was $6 in 2007 (Zhang 2014). Due to its value as a status symbol and perception as a luxury good, expensive teas were grouped with fine wines and tobacco on the gift lists of officials as items to be targeted in the anti-corruption and anti-extravagance campaign (2010).

When President Xi Jinping launched a massive austerity campaign to crack down on corruption (Demick 2013), he escalated ongoing anti-corruption efforts. Partially in response to the rapid socio-economic change in China, anti-corruption policies had been implemented, with varying effect, since the 1990s (Ko 2012). The 2013 regulation led to the bans against any form of gift-giving, extravagant spending of public funds, and feudal rites that may facilitate guanxi-building for actual or potential corruption (Lee 2017). As a result, sales of premium tea dropped sharply ("China Tea Market" 2015). The campaign’s influence on Maliandao Tea Market was even covered in a September 2013 article from *Xinhua*, China’s official state-run news agency: “The street was cheerless and quiet, quite unlike the usual bustling scenes before the Mid-Autumn Festival.”

Starting my project, I had one question in mind: What are the cultural and economic meanings of gift tea in relation to Chinese tea culture at large? My research in Beijing yielded three central findings. The first is that tea culture in China incorporates both
connoisseurship and *guanxi* values. While some presented tea as a gift carrying symbolic meaning, others sold tea as a beverage to be consumed. The differences in how buyers and sellers approached tea fell somewhat along generational and educational lines. Generally, although older tea merchants did evoke consumer values in their efforts to make tea compelling and attractive to buyers, they also alluded to tea's function as a gift. Younger tea merchants, on the other hand, more readily expressed values of individualism and a turn towards connoisseurship in relation to tea.

The second is that as values and approaches associated with consumer teas permeated tea-gifting culture, *guanxi* gift-giving became closely connected, even dependent upon, themes from tea connoisseurship. The public or social meaning of the tea, which was largely determined by the response of the recipient, has been replaced by individual preferences for tea as the primary motivation for its involvement in gift exchange. The shift to incorporate consumer and connoisseur tea values into *guanxi* relations, which had been ongoing as more buyers and sellers from younger generations entered into the industry, was abruptly accelerated by the 2013 anti-corruption campaign. This could be seen most clearly in the disproportionate impact of the crackdown on tea sellers in Beijing, compared to sellers in Jinan and Shanghai.

The third finding is that, due to the political nature of the anti-corruption campaign, geography crucially informed the extent to which tea sellers were financially affected. *Guanxi* tea gift-giving often took place within the context of government bureaucracy and political power. While sellers in Jinan and Shanghai were able to survive and even expand their businesses, tea sellers in Beijing—China's political center—went bankrupt, and a number had to return to their hometowns. The extent to which public meanings informed
tea’s significance as a gift was not uniform across China, and so the effect of the 2013 anti-corruption campaign on the tea market was correspondingly not evenly distributed across China.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

*Sociology of Tea*

Existing sociological literature primarily approaches tea from three perspectives: of tea’s symbolism as a marker of national identity (Sigley 2015; Zhang 2017); of the performativity of the tea ceremony (Surak 2012; Zhang 2017); and of tea’s cultural and social significance as a consumer object (Zhang 2014). Although such discussions of tea have established its value as a meaningful subject of study in cultural sociology, the social relations associated with tea remain insufficiently explored. Namely, what is missing from the literature, and what this paper aims to provide, is an analysis of how tea functions to create, enhance, and affirm relationship ties—an analysis that draws on ideas from economic sociology to examine the role of tea in Chinese social relations such as *guanxi*.

Current sociological representations of tea can be understood through the lens of contemporary debates regarding the materiality and cultural significance of objects. Tracing the history of tea as a contested, desirable global beverage throughout the past three centuries, Gary Sigley takes a functionalist approach in his analysis of "tea nationalism" (2015): the idea that claiming tea as “distinctly ‘Chinese’ was an important act of national assertion” (2015). Sigley argues that tea plays an important role in the construction of Chinese identity by emphasizing China’s cultural heritage and differences in values from countries such as England. Whereas the Lipton tea bag “personifies the ‘values’
of modern urban consumer life: standardized, convenient and fast,” loose-leaf Chinese teas
are not amenable to being “standardized with no difference in quality” (2015); they are
complex and not interchangeable.

Sigley further cites reactions to the controversial 2006 opening of a Starbucks location
in the Forbidden City as an example of tea nationalism. Beijing’s Forbidden City was the
seat of political power in China for almost 500 years, and the presence of Starbucks within
this iconic site sparked a heated discussion. Indeed, Sigley says, this incident was often
regarded as the “first major instance of ‘online public opinion’” (2015) in China. Affronted
netizens labeled this as an act that “tramples over Chinese culture,” protesting that
“Starbucks is a symbol of lower middle-class culture in the west…. there is a fine line
between globalization and contamination” (Watts 2007). Even though Starbucks did sell
tea, the positive nationalistic connotations of tea were undermined by Starbucks’
reputation for coffee and Western origins, which made many people view it as a threat to
the “preserv[ation] of cultural identity” (2015). From this functionalist perspective (Shils
and Young 1953), therefore, it seems that tea represents the same meaning—China’s
distinctive culture and the construction of a Chinese identity—to a multitude of people.

Like Sigley, Surak writes about tea in relation to national identity. Her work, however, is
based in Japan. In *Making Tea, Making Japan*, Surak makes use of “thick descriptions” of the
Japanese tea ceremony to advance her argument that the art of preparing tea in Japan is a
form of “nation-work” (2012). Through these thick descriptions—interpretative narratives
that imbue subjects with an aesthetic or moral quality (Geertz 1972, Douglas 1966), Surak
shows that the Japanese tea ceremony is more than just a quotidian practice. Rather, it has
played a historical role in both nation-formation and explicating Japanese identity by
underscoring distinctions between the self and nonnational others (Surak 2012). This research on the ritualized performance surrounding the consumption of tea thus shows how institutions of cultural production can shape the national meaning of a product and use the meaning to expand their own influence and power.

Yet tea does not always reflect a monolithic national identity, as Sigley and Surak suggest with their respective ideas of the single “authentic Chinese cultural tradition” and Japanese nation-work. In Taiwan, sociologist Jinghong Zhang argues that tea culture instead reveals “an adapted authenticity that integrates multiple sources, including Chinese cultural legacy, Japanese art influences and constant innovations by Taiwanese actors” (Zhang 2017). Zhang illustrates the differences in these influences through an ethnography of Taiwanese tea ceremonies. Some tea masters admitted the influence of Japanese culture but stressed that the Taiwanese tea ceremony was far less delicate and meticulous, or, alternatively, less rigid and more leisurely. Others used history to remind people that parts of the ceremony that might have seemed Japanese were actually originally learned from the Chinese. Yet others indicated disapproval for the commodification and “showy” nature of mainland tea practices. Others, meanwhile, believed that the Taiwanese tea ceremony has transformed and grown beyond its influences—that the domestication and adaptation of the ceremony had made it a distinctive ritual that uniquely suits Taiwanese tea culture. By conditionally selecting whether to side with Japanese or Chinese culture, tea practitioners manifest a Taiwanese cultural identity that is alternatively built on values of innovation, leisure, “showiness,” or commodification (Zhang 2017). The fragmented meanings of tea art ultimately point towards a “paradox of authenticity” in Taiwanese culture (Zhang 2017).
As Zhang points out, tea ceremonies express different priorities and values in Japan and China. In her earlier *Puer Tea: Ancient Caravans and Urban Chic*, Zhang states that practitioners of the infusing techniques of the Chinese gongfu cha fa ceremony “could not rival the Japanese tea ceremony in their attention to detail, as their purpose was more taste sensation than spiritual inspiration” (2014, emphasis mine). Therefore, instead of discussing tea culture in terms of the performance of gongfu cha in China, Zhang conducts a deep ethnography of puer tea drinkers.

Even though the book is only about one of the seven Chinese tea types, its insights on the relationship between tea and society are valuable as a way of understanding how tea can function in China. Produced in Yunnan, puer is endowed with multiple symbolic meanings that represent that Yunnan’s relative autonomy and contribution to the world (2014). As Zhang notes, however, the symbolism attached to puer is the product of a dynamic process: not only is puer packaged by multiple actors into a “fashionable drink with multiple authenticities,” but its packaging is also being constantly “challenged and unpacked by multiple counterforces” (2014). As a result, Chinese symbolic identification with tea “has not always naturally or steadily developed throughout history”—rather, it has been uneven, shaped by political and economic pressures, as well as social demands (2014). The demands of puer consumers, in particular, forms a substantial part of Zhang’s analysis.

*Consumption and Individualism in China*

Consumer demand for puer has been shaped by China’s historical and economic rise over the past decades. Zhang articulates four main relevant trends: the first is that consumers want to become wealthy and move beyond the poverty of the past. As a result,
they are drawn to puer, which, as a “drinkable antique,” serves as a sound investment vehicle (2014). The second trend is that consumers hope to live healthier lives, “to achieve physical balance for their bodies” in a way that was not as feasible during earlier times of poverty (Zhang 2014). The third is that, to compensate for the suppression of interest in cultural goods during the Maoist era, the expanding upper and middle classes are expending more of their salaries on objects with “traditional Chinese aesthetic values” (Zhang 2014). Further, because they have more leisure time, the consumers can delve deeply into learning about and collecting such objects. The appreciation and connoisseurship of antiques such as puer is also driven by a desire among current generations, who live in a rapidly globalizing and modernizing world, for something both “old and new,” i.e., a novelty that carries historical value.

Lastly, consumers wish to purchase authentic goods that can reflect their authentic selves. According to Zhang, authenticity is endowed with “meanings of self-determination and freedom” (2014). Studies investigating the consequences of China’s socioeconomic and political transformations have found that the Chinese are increasingly prioritizing individualistic factors in assessing their own happiness and life satisfaction (Steele and Lynch 2014). Moreover, members of the Chinese middle class are newly motivated by the pursuit of personal pleasure and comfort in their consumption habits—elements that, although widespread in highly developed capitalist countries, were not as prevalent in Maoist China (Zhu 2016). Pushing back against the Maoist era’s emphasis on collectivity and unification, consumers are now striving to “achieve distinct identification” through the products they consume (Zhang 2014).
The ways in which consumers engage with materialism and distinctions of taste vary along generational and educational lines. A content analysis of over 400 ads showed that “both modernity and individualism values predominate in current Chinese advertising” (Zhang and Shavitt 2002). The ads shown to the younger generation (18-35 years old at the time) emphasized these values to a greater extent than ads aimed at the mass market, which featured collectivism and tradition values (Zhang and Shavitt 2002). The authors of the study added that the ads marketed to the younger generation had the unique potential to “create or shape a new set of values in China” (2002).

This is all the more likely because Chinese cultural capital largely does not arise from the internalization of household interactions, as Bourdieu’s theory posits (Zhang 2018). In “Consumption, Taste, and the Economic Transition in Modern China,” Weiwei Zhang argues that China’s middle class instead possesses cultural capital that mainly depends on their education and occupation (2018). Due to the Cultural Revolution, a large part of the older generation did not receive much education, with only a small proportion holding a bachelor’s degree or higher, and most receiving either a middle school education or little to no formal schooling at all. If discovering authentic puer tea represents one’s ability to achieve one’s ideal lifestyle, and authenticity is endowed with meanings with individualism (Zhang 2014), then it is likely that consumption of puer among the Chinese middle class varies along generational and educational lines as well.

*Tea and Gift-Giving*

As Zhang reveals in *Puer Tea*, tea’s role as a consumer object is only one aspect of its materiality. Another notable aspect is tea’s place in maintaining and managing social relations:
[Tea] is regarded as far more than a drink to quench thirst. In ordinary people’s lives, tea is served to guests for hospitality and is essential in managing social relations. It is commonly given as a gift to respected people, especially during festivals... such as Chinese New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival (2014).

Given puer’s status as a “drinkable antique” and potential as a vehicle for investment, it seems that to categorize puer-gifting as a solely social phenomenon would be a mistake. According to Viviana Zelizer, people engage in the process of differentiating meaningful social relations as they negotiate economic actions (Zelizer 2011). Although a gift of tea is not quite the same as a gift of cash, the widespread acknowledgment of its monetary value makes the act of giving tea a relational economic one in Chinese society. The economic aspect of these social gifts complicates the picture, however, as Zhang alludes to below:

Rather than simply reflecting bureaucratic corruption, since the 1980s, the gift economy has actually become an alternative means of distribution and even an important supplement to the state’s distributive and redistributive economy. Socializing through gift exchange — known as guanxi — may be understood as an unofficial order that arises from the “popular realm” (minjian) and is both oppositional and complementary to that of the state (Yang 1994). Likewise, many attempts by ordinary tea producers, traders, and consumers to define authentic Puer tea have come to supplement, as well as subtly resist, governmental regulation (2014).

Zhang briefly exposes the tension underlying the connection between government and guanxi in relation to gift tea, but regrettably fails to extend this line of thought further in the book. To investigate this topic more deeply, it is necessarily to turn elsewhere—namely, to the rich sociological literature surrounding gift-giving and guanxi in China.
Sociology of Gift-Giving

Chinese Gift-Giving in a Global Context

Gift-giving maintains, strengthens, and creates social bonds in societies everywhere. Its ubiquity and importance in social exchanges have been explored in disciplines ranging from anthropology to consumer behavior to sociology, with scholars drawing liberally from discoveries made in different fields.

Scholars of gift-giving have primarily been preoccupied with two issues: the first is understanding the reciprocal nature of gift relations, and the second is determining the material and emotional value of gift objects. Anthropologist Marcel Mauss addresses these concerns in his 1925 seminal essay, The Gift. Answering the main question of “What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?” (1990), Mauss determines that the answer lies in the intertwining of obligation and spontaneity in the gift with morality. Reciprocity arises out of the “moral,” “physical,” and “spiritual” forces exerted by the object:

This system of ideas one clearly and logically realizes that one must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance, because to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul. To retain that thing would be dangerous and mortal, not only because it would be against law and morality, but also because that thing coming from the person not only morally, but physically and spiritually... exert[s] a magical or religious hold over you (1990).

An inalienable object, the gift takes on the spiritual qualities of the giver. To give a gift is thus to give away a part of oneself; the transfer of objects creates or reinforces mutually dependent ties between giver and recipient.

As an anthropological work, Yunxiang Yan’s The Flow of Gifts engages with the questions and answers posed by Mauss’ work. Despite the book’s focus on rural China, the
concepts discussed permeate much of Chinese society at large. Yan contextualizes Mauss’ ideas about gift-giving and reciprocity within the framework of a Confucian society, noting that the concept of *li* upholds the obligation to reciprocate among people. *Li* means propriety, ritual, norm, and gift, and is described in the Confucian classic *Li Ji*, or *Book of Rites*.

In the highest antiquity they prized (simply conferring) good; in the time next to this, giving and repaying was the thing attended to. And what the rules of propriety value is reciprocity. If I give a gift and nothing comes in return, that is contrary to propriety; if the thing comes to me, and I give nothing in return, that also is contrary to propriety. (Legg [trans.] 1885)

Yan notes that this passage explicitly links gift-giving activities to the notion of propriety, which constituted the “basic concept of Confucianism” in traditional Chinese culture (Weber 1968) and provided a set of norms governing people’s behavior in daily life (1996). Despite variations in how individuals understood the original concept of *li*, the principle of reciprocity remains a salient and stable presence in how they conducted daily life transactions (1996).

Building off of this foundational understanding of the Confucian values governing reciprocal relations, Yan enumerates three significant characteristics that are unique to the system of gift exchange in China. The first is that because the structure of Chinese social relations rests largely on fluid, person-centered social networks, rather than on fixed social institutions, gift exchange has been central to Chinese culture throughout its long history (1996). The second is that gift exchange in China is embedded in the “cultural construction of personhood”—individuals learn to deal with different categories of people through gift exchange, which defines the boundaries of the socially recognized person (1996).
Since Chinese society has traditionally been structured according to a hierarchy, and
gifts are often given by people of lower social status to those of higher social status in a
vertical exchange, the flow of gifts is asymmetric. This leads into a third distinctive
characteristic of the Chinese exchange system, one that has been previously mentioned by
Zhang. In contemporary Chinese society—a socialist state—gift exchange and guanxi are
crucial to economic and political life as part of the state system of redistribution and the
market system for commodities. The mode of gift exchange has been used instrumentally to
advance political and economic interests, heightening concerns about guanxi-facilitated
corruption in post-Mao China (1996). Yan states that “unambiguous, unilateral” gift-giving
from those of lower rank to their superiors is practiced at “all levels of the bureaucratic
system—all the way up to the central bureaus in Beijing” (1996). The influence of China’s
social structure and Confucian history upon the values that inform and are expressed
through gift exchange will further discussed in the next section, which will take a
comparative approach to analyzing gift-giving values through the lens of the East-West
dichotomy.

*Western and Eastern Values in Gift-Giving*

Gift-giving behavior is shaped by personal and cultural values, as well as the
occasion of the gift. These values are, of course, not universal. In a 1991 study involving
students from two cultures (Japanese and American), Beatty, Kahle and Homer discovered
that there were two basic types of gift givers: those who give thoughtfully because “it feels
good” (or “endorsers of self-respect”) and those who give thoughtfully because it allows
them to demonstrate and receive feelings of friendship (or “endorsers of warm
relationships”). Although values play a powerful role in non-obligatory gifting regardless of
gender or culture, “notable value differences” were found between Japanese and U.S. respondents. Whereas American respondents prioritized self-respect in gift-giving, Japanese respondents prioritized self-fulfillment and warm relationships (Beatty et al. 1991). Unlike motives such as self-interest and social interaction, which tend to drive behavior and be situationally specific, values are more abstract and more divorced from concrete situations and behaviors (Beatty et al. 1993). As a highly ego-involving activity (Belk 1982), gift-giving should be strongly related to one’s values, which are, in turn, closely related to one’s ego or sense of self (Beatty et al. 1993).

Despite sharing certain similarities, conceptions of the self differ between Eastern and Western cultures. Both cultures perceive the self as divided into an independent inner private self that consists of internal emotions, morals, memories, desires, etc. and an interdependent outer public self that is based on social roles and outward personas (Markus and Kitayama 1991). In the West, however, the independent construal of the self, which is rooted in the belief that individuals are inherently separate, is dominant. Consequently, personal tastes, preferences, abilities, values play a large role in regulating behavior in Western society. Strength and integrity are shown through a commitment to one’s personal convictions—one is “being true” to oneself when one does not waver in the face of social pressure to conform (Kasima et al. 1995). Authenticity is expressed through adhering to inner values and tastes, and if a group that grants membership by marriage, religion, or geography fails to meet the demands of the individual, the individual may either attempt to change the group, or to leave it (Wong and Ahuvia 1998).

Conversely, in the East, one’s familial, cultural, professional, and social relationships are more meaningful to the construal of the self (Wong and Ahuvia 1998), and distinctions
between the group and individual can become blurred. In China, the family is the basic social unit: clan-like networks sprawl around the close family members that form its core (Qian et al. 2007). This social structure not only cultivates an interconnected sense of self (Hsu 1970), but also presents a model for conduct in all Chinese organizations (Chen and Chung 1994) and passes on emotional and cultural values to individuals (La Barre 1946). Conformity and prioritization of group goals are prized. Drawing from lessons in Confucian ethics, which stress harmonious interactions and the performance of one's duties to the group (Lau & Kuan 1988), fulfilling the needs of the private self is not seen as necessary to leading an authentic life. Rather, emphasis is placed on acknowledging and behaving according to one's position in the strong social hierarchies that characterize collectivist cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis et al. 1990; Wong and Ahuvia 1998).

Distinctions between independent and interdependent construals of the self thus dictate, to a degree, the value that consumers seek in products such as gift objects. Wong and Ahuvia conceive of value as divided into three primary categories: instrumental, symbolic/public, or hedonic (1998). They define public meanings as symbolic meanings that are widely shared within a culture or group and stand in contrast to private or hedonic meanings, which are idiosyncratic to an individual (i.e. sentimental value).

Western societies place greater importance on gifts possessing hedonic value, which satisfies the desires and preferences of the internal, private self—the independent self. In contrast, instead of approaching gift-giving as a reflection of internal personal attributes, 

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2 Because a gift is, by definition, voluntarily bestowed and not required, its instrumental value cannot be assumed. In the context of the 2013 anti-corruption campaign’s crackdown on instrumental gift-giving, the instrumental value of gifts in guanxi relations is no longer as salient. Further, instrumental gift-giving within a political context has been addressed by Yan and Zhang in earlier sections. Therefore, this discussion will center on the dichotomy between symbolic and hedonic value.
the majority of members of a society belonging to Confucian traditions will evaluate a particular gift in terms of its symbolic—specifically public—value within a culture or group (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). Members of interdependent societies are highly concerned with other people's perceptions of them and with the maintenance of their own status. Respecting another's “face”—or “giving face”—is an essential part of enforcing one’s position in the Confucian hierarchy (Redding and Ng 1983; Wong and Ahuvia 1998).

As previously mentioned, Chinese values in relation to gift-giving have been profoundly impacted by the nation's distinctive historical and cultural traditions. Scholars have emphasized the influence of Confucian thought and philosophy on Chinese interpersonal relationships and social orientations (Yan 1996; Wong and Ahuvia 1998; Qian et al. 2007; Regan et al. 2019). Therefore, China shares the Confucian collectivist cultural standpoint that the exchange of luxury goods is shaped by interdependent self-concepts, the balance between individual and group needs, hierarchy, and the legitimacy of group affiliations. This view affects consumption patterns, influencing which brands are purchased, motivations for purchase, the manner of usage for the goods, and the meaning of the goods to consumers (Wong and Ahuvia 1998).

Such Confucian societies are focused on economic status differences, and, as a result, place a greater emphasis on symbolic goods that mark those differences (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). The public display of wealth is a consequence of wanting to belong “with the in group or elite class”—a way to demonstrate one’s allegiance to the prescribed social values. For Southeast Asian countries, for example, affluence, a new phenomenon, is a “cultural fixation” (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). In China, a country with a relatively recent history of
wealth that began after its economic reformation in 1978, affluence is a new phenomenon that holds strong appeal for many as well.

Affluence informs current cultural tastes: expensive luxury goods—especially ones both public and visible—are socially appropriate in a large number of situations, and so serve as popular gifts (Belk 1994; Wong and Ahuvia 1998; Godart 2014). In a Confucian collectivist society, the possession of an expensive luxury good, such as a rare tea, does not reveal one to be “a selfish materialist,” but rather “an exemplar of social virtues in fulfilling familial obligation” (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). Giving an expensive gift brings honor to both the gift-giver and the recipient, who might, in an independent society where the value of such an object is primarily hedonic, be chastised for indulging in his or her extravagant tastes. The ownership of a luxury item, Wong and Ahuvia conclude, may or may not reflect internal personal tastes, goals, or characteristics (1998).

But the idea of luxury gifts as holding greater symbolic than hedonic meaning in the interdependent Chinese society is now being challenged. In the past, Chinese cultural values in the consumption domain have implied that social needs predominate over individual needs and group goals predominate over individual ones. As a result, when those who are in higher positions receive a gift from a subordinate, “acceptance of the gift itself is believed to render face to the inferior gift giver” (Yan 1996). The public value of a gift depends on the status of the receiver more than the sentiments of its giver. In a recent study, however, Regan et al. show that younger consumers of wine—a luxury good culturally comparable to tea—are beginning to seek to “self-gift experiential luxury”: they are starting to invest in luxury goods that reflect their “individualistic, materialistic and personally oriented tastes” (2019). This finding could signal a shift in traditionally
Confucian societies towards valuing a gift by its hedonic meaning, rather than its public one.

**METHODOLOGY**

*Participants*

For this project on tea culture and the role of tea as a gift in Chinese society, I interviewed and observed a total of 20 tea merchants from February 2019 to May 2019—a period of four months. Eighteen interviews were face-to-face, 1 was via phone call, and 1 was via a messaging app. Twelve tea sellers owned or operated a stall at Maliandao Tea Market, the largest tea market in Beijing. I additionally interviewed 8 Chinese tea merchants and people within the tea industry who operated outside of Maliandao, as either independent vendors or representatives at a franchise.

I interviewed merchants based in other locations in order to corroborate the accounts of the Maliandao tea sellers. I wanted to determine if their experiences were unique to that particular tea market, or if they were representative of the situations of tea sellers in China at large. One interview was with a merchant who ran a stall at another tea center in Beijing, and one with a salesperson at a prominent tea franchise. One was with a manager of a Fujian tea company, who was introduced to me through a campus tea association. Two were with traveling sellers who set up temporary stalls at the Beijing Tea Expo. One interview was with the owner of multiple tea stores in Jinan, and yet another with a retired tea seller who used to work in Jinan. I also exchanged messages through WeChat with a tea seller in Shanghai. In addition to interviews, I observed interactions with customers and merchants at various tea stores around Beijing. The ages of the participants spanned from early twenties to late seventies. Eleven of the interviewees were male, and 9
were female. Five expressed that they had a bachelor’s degree or higher. In terms of
geographical origin, the sample skews towards Fujian, with 9 from the area; this is justified
by Fujian’s dominance in tea production.

**Table of Interview Subjects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (estimate)</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Current location</th>
<th>Working/based at</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>Fujian</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Stall in Malandao Tea Market</td>
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<td>Jinan</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Stall at Malandao</td>
<td>High school</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Fujian</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Stall in Malandao</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1: Pseudonyms, Gender, Age, Origin, Current Location/Workplace, and Education Level*
**Research Design**

I took a mixed methods approach that combines semi-structured interviews and observations of 20 tea sellers based in three different Chinese cities. This research design allowed me to explore the experiences of respondents systematically and comprehensively (Jamshed 2014), while providing me with opportunities to examine nonverbal signals, participate in and watch routine interactions involving interviewees (i.e. tea-selling, in this case), and verify points raised in the interviews (Kawulich 2005). The two methods further made it possible to gather and incorporate data from both one-time participants and participants whom I interviewed several times (Kawulich 2005) and had established a relationship with over the course of the 6 times that I went to Maliandao Tea Market.

I decided to employ this mixed-methods approach after three informal unstructured interviews with tea merchants—two in Beijing (specifically Maliandao) and one in Jinan. Conversational in nature, unstructured interviews are a way to “elicit people’s social realities” (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009). Although some, such as John Levi Martin (2010) have argued that interviewing is a weak method for research in cultural sociology, I agree with sociologists Pugh, Rivas, and Gibson-Light’s view that in-depth interviews are valid and useful for investigating cultural phenomena (Pugh, 2012; Rivas and Gibson-Light 2016). In the beginning stages of my project, I asked minimal questions and simply attempted to obtain the participants’ perspective. Without the need to attend to other customers—the shops and market were very quiet when I visited—the interviewees were unrestrained by time limitations and eager to talk. They covered a wide array of topics.
ranging from the ideal climates for tea production to recent changes in the industry. The
theme of significant changes to business occurring in the past few years emerged clearly
from the Beijing merchants in the form of multiple comments on the abnormal emptiness
of Maliandao in the past years. From the contents of these unstructured interviews, I
developed the guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews using an interpretive,
or constructivist, research paradigm (Mackenzie and Knipe 2006).

In a semi-structured interview, the researcher asks subjects a set of predetermined,
open-ended questions (Given 2008). Since this qualitative research strategy is especially
useful when the researcher possesses enough knowledge about the topic to know what is
pertinent and not, but does not have enough information to anticipate all of the answers
(Morse 2012), I developed a list of guiding interview questions (see Appendix) following
the initial unstructured interviews in order to hone in on areas of research that I had found
especially intriguing: the tea merchants’ description of the current tea market compared to
that of previous years, the relationship between gift-giving behavior and business in the tea
industry, and their interpretation of the concept of tea culture.

Pugh notes that although interviews allow researchers a “glimpse” of the cultural
pressures perceived by individuals, they are “not the best means to excavate the cultural
milieu in which people are embedded” (Pugh 2012). Through ethnographic observations,
however, the cultural environment and setting can be captured (Pugh 2012). Therefore, to
better understand the cultural context, I incorporated participant observation into the
design. Observation is the process of “entering a group of people with a shared identity to
gain an understanding of their community” (Allen 2017). Cultural groups operate within a
“web of significance” that is constructed of multiple layers of meaning in everyday life, and
through observation, researchers can come to identify and comprehend these layers of
meaning, build relationships, and learn firsthand about the experience in a particular
community (Allen 2017). This observational approach was particularly valuable due to the
performative nature of tea drinking in China, which often incorporated non-verbal
elements involving objects and physical movements (e.g. of the hand). As it was customary
for buyers to sample tea before purchase, the sellers had a space where they could display,
brew, and drink tea with customers. The space and setting created by the seller were
essential to their environment and work process. Further, because tea sampling is an
activity that engages the five senses, I felt that observational techniques suited the project.

Another reason for choosing observational methods was that they enabled the
documentation of relatively long-term relationships with the subjects. While semi-
structured interviews are generally conducted only once (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree
2006), observations can take place on a certain site over a period of time (Bernard 1994). I
established relationships with and returned to two especially insightful tea merchants at
Maliandao three times over my four months of research. Both had worked in the tea
industry for over twenty years and had been at Maliandao since the tea market first
opened.

Measures

Even though there did not seem to be many interactions between the tea merchants,
I began in a different area of the tea market on each trip, so as to reduce the likelihood of
interviewing tea merchants who co-owned a business, or who operated a stall close to a
family member. This way, I could further diversify the range of accounts received.
Procedure

The majority of my participants were found through simple random sampling at Maliandao Tea Market. I made trips to the “tea city” on weekday afternoons, weekend mornings, and weekend afternoons. Three of the four floors of the tea market were occupied by tea sellers’ stalls; the fourth floor at the top was designated for vendors carrying camera equipment. During each visit, I would weave through the stall “blocks” in search of willing interview subjects. While most sellers kept regular hours, many of the stalls were closed during the Chinese New Year holiday period.

On my subsequent visits, most, if not all, of the vendors were working during the hours when I was present. I would walk around one floor at a time in search of a tea merchant who would agree to be interviewed. Some tea merchants would refuse to answer my questions, or—upon hearing that I was interested in interviewing them as part of my senior thesis—say that there was nothing to research. A few mentioned that they had been in the business for too short a duration to make meaningful contributions. Approximating in retrospect, about 60% of the tea sellers I spoke to were willing to participate. A smaller percentage ultimately proved to be immensely helpful, responding to my questions with thought, care, and enthusiasm. Some of these interviews were only several minutes in length, while others stretched on for over two hours. Due to either a lack of opportunity to ask or the subject’s reluctance to answer, I was unable to ascertain the place of origin for 4 participants, and the level of education for 5. During the period from February to the end of May, I was able to establish more long-term relationships with 2 tea merchants over the course of three to four visits.
I spoke to Beijing tea sellers outside of Maliandao Tea Market in order to corroborate findings and determine if the phenomena described by those at Maliandao were applicable beyond the bounded geographical landmark. At the annual Beijing Tea Exhibition, which featured tea merchants from across provinces in China, I randomly selected two vendors to talk to: a puer seller and a green tea seller. On the recommendation of a friend, I visited Fulite Tea Market, which was very similar to Maliandao. I also visited a well-known tea franchise with a long history. Both locations were in Beijing.

I utilized a convenience sampling approach to gather information from tea sellers who operated outside of Beijing. I asked family, friends, and colleagues to connect me with tea merchants. This yielded the highest response rates, with 100% participation among the four subjects. This second, non-Beijing-based group encompassed tea sellers of various ages from Jinan, Shanghai, and Fujian.

Before each interview started, I would briefly introduce myself and my research project. I then asked if they were willing to answer some questions related to the tea industry and their experiences within it. Interviews were recorded, and, in cases where the participant expressed an unwillingness to be recorded, careful and detailed notes were taken during or immediately following the interview. Observations were similarly captured in notes and recordings.

All of the interactions were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. Having grown up in China and attended school there until second grade, I possess native fluency in Mandarin. Further, I was in a study abroad program to improve my Chinese during the research period. Although the interviews were for the most part conducted in fairly straightforward
business Chinese, there were moments when the tea seller used a technical term from the industry. During these cases, I would ask for clarification.

I transcribed all of the recordings using Trint, an automated transcription service that functions for multiple languages including Mandarin. I edited the uploaded transcriptions manually, verifying their accuracy by listening closely to the recording as I read through the transcriptions. Although Trint was reasonably accurate in transcribing most of the interviews, it had a difficult time processing accents—older merchants from Fujian and Jinan, in particular, had notably heavier accents, which led to decreased accuracy in the AI-generated transcriptions.

I then translated the interview transcripts into English. Having previously done translation work for a Chinese press, I had some previous experience with translating from Mandarin to English. Where possible, I preserved the tone and style of the speaker; in cases when a Chinese phrase could not be literally translated in a way that made sense in English, I used the closest English approximation in meaning. I added a note or included the multiple meanings to note cases of ambiguity. Although it is possible that mistranslations occurred due to cultural or linguistic differences, I believe that they are minor, if present at all—in most of the interviews, the tea sellers used vernacular Chinese suitable for everyday business dealings, rather than literary or academic language. Furthermore, I constantly consulted the original recordings and detailed notes during the process, so as to include the full context of the conversations in the translations.
RESULTS

Persistent themes in tea culture and gift-giving appeared in my 20 interviews and observations with tea sellers. As I gathered progressively more data, it became clear that I was conducting research during a time of transition and instability for many tea merchants. Eleven of twelve tea merchants at Maliandao Tea Market echoed the sentiment of Chong Xi, a tea seller from Fujian who owned a stall on the second floor of the market: “Each day, selling tea is harder than the day before.” Only one tea merchant at Maliandao, Ju Hua, said that business had largely been the same; as a worker for a large franchise that sold chrysanthemum flower tea, she saw sales that had been relatively constant since she started there. Sellers who had been at Maliandao for over two decades, such as Chong Xi and Bao Liu, said that a decrease in customers started two or three years ago. Businesses around them, which had endured for decades, had gone bankrupt in 2016 or 2017, and they foresaw their own bankruptcy in the future.

Yet the landscape of the tea industry was not equally affected; other tea merchants I interviewed in cities outside of Beijing have felt little, if any, impact, and some have even been able to expand operations. This stark dichotomy in tea sellers’ situations—from facing financial ruin to enjoying unprecedented financial growth—initially mystified me. If the changes that had swept the tea market were as devastating as some subjects said, then why were the merchants not uniformly impacted?
Figure 4 (above): Maliandao Tea Market exterior. The statue depicts Lu Yu, a tea master and the author of *The Classic of Tea*. 
Figures 5 and 6 (above): Maliandao Tea Market interior.

Figure 7 (above): A shop in Maliandao that sells teaware used in gongfu tea ceremonies.
The answer seems to lie, in part, in the three themes that persistently emerged over the course of my interviews and observations with the 20 tea sellers. The first was that the tea market was experiencing a demographic transition as growing numbers of younger consumers and sellers entered the industry. With this demographic transition came a gradual industry-wide change in the perception and valuation of tea. Some older tea merchants evoked consumer values in their descriptions of teas, while younger tea merchants more readily expressed values of individualism and connoisseurship. Both also alluded to the function of tea as a gift, although not always in a *guanxi* capacity. The increasing attention to individual and connoisseurship in tea culture permeated the industry in an ongoing process.

The second theme was that as values associated with consumer teas became a larger part of tea culture, *guanxi* tea gift-giving became closely connected, even dependent upon, approaches from tea connoisseurship. The 2013 anti-corruption campaign accelerated this trend when it cracked down on instrumental gift-giving. Public and social meanings of tea—its associations with wealth, status, and tradition—no longer contributed to its value as a *guanxi* gift to the recipient. Rather, tea’s worth in non-instrumental *guanxi* relations stemmed from the giver’s hedonic valuation, i.e., their tastes and preferences as consumers and connoisseurs.

The third and final theme is that the effect of the 2013 anti-corruption on the tea sellers was not uniform across China’s tea market. It unevenly impacted tea sellers based on their personal geography. Instrumental, vertical gift-giving took place primarily in Beijing. The crackdown on luxury gift-giving effectively erased a reliable customer base for tea merchants whose income depended on the selling of expensive gift teas. Therefore, while
sellers in Jinan and Shanghai were largely unaffected, and in some cases even able to thrive, a number of Beijing tea merchants suffered heavy financial losses or even went bankrupt. That guanxi tea gift-giving often took place within the context of government bureaucracy and political power had significant geographical implications in terms of the regulation's impact.

From my interviews and observations, it became clear that the campaign did not completely eradicate the culture of giving tea as guanxi gifts—rather, it has simply changed the values associated with the gift-giving ritual. In the aftermath of the crackdown, tea has become a gift that is increasingly associated with Western values and gift-giving preferences. Tea merchants today frame gifts of tea as not only a sign of respect for social values, but also a symbol of personal authenticity: they reflect a combination of Confucian collectivist values and hedonic Western values. Whereas the traditional guanxi gift of luxury tea reflected social needs and priorities rather than individual tastes and goals, gift tea in China today reflects both, with a particular emphasis on the later.

**Against a Monolithic Tea Culture**

Before delving into the values associated with tea in China, it is important to first acknowledge that tea culture in China is not monolithic. In fact, no single comprehensive definition of tea culture emerged throughout the course of my interviews and observations. While some tea merchants view tea culture as the rich traditions and historical narrative surrounding tea, others believe that tea culture should be centered around the consumption of the tea itself. One merchant, Zhi Huang, sees the appreciation of tea as its own culture and criticizes the unnecessary embellishments that over-complicate the tea-selling process:
Tea is tea, culture is culture, both have their own lives. Before, tea was mixed up with too much pseudo-culture, and it made tea overly complicated. Random calligraphy, Chinese national culture, Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, were stubbornly forced onto the tea mat. Drinking tea doesn’t actually have to be that complicated.... I used to hear many people say that they would be disgusted whenever they heard tea sellers preach about life philosophies and would avoid them.

While this seller does not seem to condemn the idea of culture itself, he expresses wariness towards the concept when it is incorporated into the rhetoric surrounding tea without just cause. For him, their obstructive nature arises out of the arbitrary logic with which they were “mixed up” with tea. In particular, he is skeptical of the tea merchants’ claims of tea as possessing nationalist qualities, artistic ideals, and philosophical significance—claims that he calls “pseudo-culture.”

For other tea merchants, such as Chong Xi, tea culture was woven into general wisdom on ways to brew tea property: “Drink green tea when the temperature is high, and black tea when the weather is cool.” For still others, it was tied to lessons stemming from traditional Chinese medicine, as Wen Shan articulates:

*Do not drink new white tea. The same applies to puer. Store the new white tea for a while. It is said that one-year-old white tea is tea, while 3-year-old white tea is medicine. White tea can be used as a kind of medicine. You can drink white tea when your throat feels uncomfortable.*

The variations in tea merchants’ conceptualization of tea culture in general reveal that their ideas of what tea culture should incorporate and address were profoundly influenced by their personal circumstances and experiences in the market.

**Consumer Values along Generational and Educational Lines**

In the 20 interviews and observations, tea sellers articulated an understanding of the values associated with tea that differed along generational lines. While some noted that
there were no discernable differences between the tastes of younger clients and those of older customers—and no changes in tea culture—others argued that the influx of young consumers have fundamentally shifted the ways that tea is consumed and appreciated.

Among older tea merchants, some see selling tea as business as usual, with little to no change in the preferences of their customers. Bao Liu is from Huangshan in Anhui province, and has been running her stall at Maliandao for over 20 years. Her father and grandfather were tea sellers, and her husband does the same. For years, her son, too, has sold tea in the stall beside her. Bao Liu views tea as a family business and a tradition that she intends to pass on: she gives her eight-year grandson tea to drink instead of soda so that he would develop his own palate from an early age. In fact, she told me proudly, he voluntarily chooses tea over soda now. Within her family, Bao Liu has witnessed the continuance of an intergenerational interest in tea. Outside of the household, Bao Liu has not noticed any shifts in tea culture. She said that although there are fewer one-time clients buying gift teas, the behaviors of long-term clients haven’t changed. The tastes of younger clients have stayed largely the same as well.

For Shanghai-based Zhi Huang, the opposite is true: “The traditional image of tea is changing,” he said. Younger than Bao Liu by about twenty years and college-educated, he belongs to a different generation of the Chinese middle class. He believes that “young people don’t buy into the outdated so-called culture anymore.” Rather, they are appreciating tea with new priorities in mind—a difference that Zhi Huang attributes to the generational divide. He points out the dichotomy between young and middle-aged and older consumers.
Ten years ago, it was commonly thought that young people drank coffee, and tea was for middle-aged and older consumers. Now, however, more and more young people are beginning to like tea. In addition, their curiosity and research abilities are exceedingly strong, and they have their own taste and sense of appreciation.... [Their sense of appreciation] is more real, more ubiquitous. It doesn't overly emphasize the so-called “traditional culture” that surrounds tea. They generally like to investigate tea’s aroma, and taste, along with the origin of production.

Because the customer base that expanded the fastest at his business was the young shoppers— “the growth surpassed our expectations”—Zhi Huang is highly attuned to their consumption habits. In contrast to older buyers, they do not necessarily enter into the market to sustain tea-based traditions and consumption patterns passed down at home. Rather, their interest in tea is a reflection of their individuality—something that arises out of a passion for tea’s “aroma, and taste, along with the origin of production.” As a result, the young consumers have a greater appreciation for the “wonder and beauty of tea leaves.”

Zhi Huang identifies the cultural values that these consumers seek and associate with tea as authenticity and personal taste, and believes that the old product model “needs to catch up with the needs of the new generation of customers.”

Recent college graduate Guang Yue, too, draws distinctions among tea buyers based on their age. “Most of my customers are around 30,” she said. “People in their thirties are more experienced and influenced by the tea ceremonies. The people who really appreciate tea, though, are usually in their forties or fifties. Twenty-year-olds are still drinking soft drinks.” Like Zhi Huang, most of Guang Yue’s customers are on the younger side—from thirty to forty. Their interest in tea is just budding, unlike the forty- and fifty-year-olds, whose tastes have had time to develop further. The latter group, she notes, makes up a smaller proportion of her clientele.
Shou Mei similarly remarked upon age differences among consumers of different types of tea. Another college graduate working in the tea industry, he is in his twenties and helping out his parents on weekends in their shop, which has been in Maliandao for twenty years. Shou Mei's store mainly deals in white and puer teas. He noticed that the number of customers who make purchases on behalf of companies has decreased significantly, while the number of buyers who seek tea for personal enjoyment has increased.

The amount bought by companies decreased noticeably after the Eight-point regulation\(^3\) was passed. Most tea, especially high-quality tea, were bought by companies as gifts before. It was seldomly bought for personal consumption.

Most of the younger buyers are at least in their thirties, Shou Mei said, although some of his classmates and friends also drink tea. A higher ratio of young tea drinkers like white tea—only occasionally does he see young people who drink black tea. And puer, he added, is mostly preferred by older people.

Chong Xi, an older tea seller from Fujian, also brought up puer over the course of the interview. He did not frame tea in terms of authenticity and individual taste, however, but rather advocated for its consumer value as a health product.

When the temperature is high, drink green tea. Puer tea can be drunk throughout the entire year. Old [puer] tea will nourish your gut microbiome. New puer tea will hurt your stomach, so only drink tea that is over three years old.... If you boil water to 100°C and cool it to 70°C, the tea will taste better.

By framing his information about tea as medical knowledge, Chong Xi, like Wen Shan in her description of white tea, elevates tea from its place as a common beverage to a drink with traditional medicinal associations. Beyond mentioning the tea’s healthful benefits,

\(^{3}\) The Eight-point regulation is a vital component of Xi Jinping’s 2013 anti-corruption campaign.
Chong Xi alluded to puer’s reputation as a “drinkable antique” when he brought out a more expensive puer for sampling. The price of the puer had been ¥300 per 500 grams when it was manufactured in 2008. Eleven years later, it had tripled in price—the tea now cost ¥1500 for 500 grams. The implication was that purchasing puer would be similar to making an investment as the puer continued to age. Chong Xi is confident that the quality of a consumer tea is mirrored in its price:

Do not buy a cheap tea—it is useless. The taste of cheap tea is not good and the tea will make you uncomfortable... The tea wouldn’t cost so much if the quality were not good. Expensive tea will be high-quality tea.

Chong Xi associates a higher price with better taste, subscribing to the common adage of “You get what you pay for.” Following this logic, it seems that the most expensive teas would also be the finest consumer teas—but on this point, opinions are mixed.

From the different ways in which these tea merchants presented their teas, it became clear that each selectively decided which aspects of their teas to accentuate. Although all of them emphasized the tea’s value from a consumer authenticity perspective, younger, college-educated tea sellers referred to personal taste and identity formation, while the older tea merchants, who had sold tea at Maliandao for decades, talked about general consumer meanings such as family tradition, physical health, and puer tea’s value as an antique. But age was not the only element informing how merchants portrayed the consumer value of their teas—sellers of certain tea types associated with healthful benefits, such as puer (Chong Xi) and white tea (Wen Shan), were more likely to discuss the tea in medicinal terms.
Connoisseurship and Consumerism in Guanxi Gift-Giving and Beyond

If consumer tea culture has the appreciation of tea’s aesthetic, palatal, and hedonic qualities as its core, then the rhetoric and behaviors surrounding gift teas are shaped largely by the tea’s image. Guang Yue touches on this subject when she observes that motives for purchasing tea had changed among her buyers: “People bought tea as gifts before, while now they buy tea for personal consumption. The price is the most important thing for gift teas. Now that the government has placed restrictions on gift-giving, it can allocate funds [for gifts] itself and save some money.”

Although its price may be crucial to the tea’s value as a gift, its image depends on social function and branding as well. At a popular tea franchise, merchant Guan Xiao mentioned that his brand of tea is “a bit more formal; it’s called ‘business tea.’” “Business tea,” he explained, “is for gifts. It’s also used in the office.... Each time, you would brew an entire container [of the loose tea].” The tea’s convenience made it appealing for workplace use, while its packaging and branding heightened its desirability and respectability as a gift.

One might argue that “business” tea has more in common with consumer teas than gift teas. Indeed, the blurriness of this boundary between gift and consumer teas is precisely what I want to highlight. The dependence of guanxi tea gift-giving on the language of consumption and connoisseurship was made clear to me during my first trip to Maliandao, when I met Hui Ming, an older tea merchant who had served as a soldier before pivoting into the tea industry. During our interview, he showed me a small, bright-red package that was sealed off with a piece of calligraphy. The bag contained 1.3 ounces of tea and cost ¥600, or around $85. He said that the tea—antioxidant-rich, aromatic, and flavorful—was very popular as a gift for family members. This interaction revealed that, even after the
2013 crackdown on instrumental gift-giving, luxury teas were still involved in *guanxi* gift relations.

This interaction also demonstrated a second, similarly crucial point: tea sellers are referencing connoisseurship and consumer values of personal taste and health in their marketing of *gift* teas. While I was perusing the selection at one well-known Beijing tea franchise that has been in business for over a hundred years, salesperson Yu Tai recommended a tea: “The tea is scented with pure jasmine flowers or pure orchids, without any additional flavors added... Buy one of each kind. You can drink yourself or *give it as a gift* (emphasis mine).” My observation of the space yielded that although buyers were allowed to smell the fragrance of the tea, the location curiously did not set aside a space where customers could sample the tea in a *gongfu cha* ceremony.

This inability of customers to taste the tea raised an interesting dilemma from a consumption viewpoint. Tea sampling is a crucial part of the selling process: at nearly every stall in Maliandao and the other tea stores I visited, the seller had a space set up with hot water and teaware. As customers chatted with the merchants, they would drink cup after cup, participating in iterations of a *gongfu cha* ceremony. Originating in Fujian, this ritualistic preparation of tea (*gongfu cha* literally translates to “making tea with skill”) is commonly performed in tea shops across China.\(^4\) *Gongfu cha* offers a sampling opportunity so essential that merchants who sell mainly to everyday consumers do not have an online platform because customers would not have a chance to experience the taste, smell, and appearance in person.

\(^4\) Although deserving of further study, it is outside the scope of this paper to fully analyze the tea ceremony by itself from an ethnographic perspective. Please refer to Zhang and Surak’s research mentioned in the literature review.
I participated in many *gongfu cha* ceremonies throughout my research, one of which was with the aforementioned Shou Mei. Over the course of three hours, we sampled six different kinds of white and puer tea. As he prepared the tea, he explained the ideal brewing conditions:

The brewing time for this tea is short for the first round—about 10 to 20 seconds—and the temperature of the water should not be too high. The brewing time increases as the number of times that you brew the tea increases. Towards the end, it takes as long as 5 minutes, 10 minutes or half an hour.

For the conscientious consumer, precision in brewing time is only one aspect; Shou Mei elaborated on how myriad other factors—some as minute as the fine hairs on a tea leaf—affect the aroma and taste of the tea. Using a tea filter is discouraged, for example, because it will damage the fine hairs on white tea leaves, which add to the fragrance of the tea. The utensils used for brewing tea must be carefully selected, as should be the water (clean spring water is ideal), the storage method, and the tea itself. The seasons matter when one is picking out a tea—as multiple merchants reiterated to me, green tea should be drunk in the spring and summer for its cooling qualities, and warming red tea is most suitable for fall and winter. Puer tea and white tea can be brewed year-round, but raw puer should be drunk after 20 years of fermentation, while ripe puer might only need one to three. Tea culture—at least consumer tea culture—involves many such general guidelines and best practices designed to enhance and maximize one's enjoyment of the tea.

Zhi Huang, too, repeatedly emphasized the importance of “focus[ing] on the leaf itself” and the need for buyers to approach tea as they would any premium drink—paying meticulous attention to flavor and aroma. While researching this topic, I was struck by how sellers differentiated between gift and consumer teas. Most notably, even though
merchants acknowledged the grave impact of the anti-corruption campaign on the gift tea market, many also believed that the quality of consumer teas has not been seriously affected, if at all. At Maliandao, Bao Liu said that “Good tea will still be out there,” and Shou Mei stated that “There is not much of a difference in tea quality—it is related to the tea’s growing environment and craftsmanship.” He added that even though the quality is the same, the annual price of tea fluctuates based on demand.

To me, this seemed like a glaring contradiction: if the market for gift tea shrunk so dramatically, then why was the consumer tea market the same? Weren’t they both teas made by the same producers and sold by the same merchants?

According to Guang Yue, the packaging of gift teas could have no bearing on the quality of the tea it contained: “There are factories that only produce packaging.” She recounted a phenomenon that she had seen in the past of customers coming to her store with empty gift tins that they would then fill with ordinary tea.

Zhi Huang also remarked on the complexity and occasional duplicity of gift teas:

If [the tea] is complemented with perfect packaging, then it can function as a gift; that would be ideal. It will be just like Lafite wine or premium champagne…. The “gift tea” that you speak of may be referring to mediocre or subpar tea leaves wrapped up in impressive but untruthful packaging—the kind [of tea] that is not even drinkable.

For Zhi Huang, whose company has predominately served consumers rather than companies throughout its history, the recent changes in the market mean that other tea sellers should pay more attention to the individual customer and make sure to “treat tea as a real consumer product.” He points to the proliferation of milk tea shops as an example of businesses successfully adapting to these changes.
In recent years, milk tea has flourished. In its popularity, one can see the tendency for things to become more modern, as well as the powerful draw of the return of everyday, consumer tea products. There are more and more forays into this field, like Xi Cha.

As Zhi Huang states, consumer tea products have widespread appeal in the current Chinese market. He cites Xi Cha as an example. Also known as “Hey Tea,” it has grown explosively over the past few years, gaining a cult following that is willing to queue up for over two hours at times. This new devotion to daily consumer tea, rather than a reliance on the ornate but deceptive image of some gift teas, presents “a chance for the tea industry to regain its health... Only by returning to the product and the industry themselves can the field of tea develop as it should.” For sellers like Zhi Huang, “good quality consumer teas at bargain prices” play a central, even foundational role in the revitalization of the tea industry.

**Personal Geography and Identity**

Personal geography—both in terms of where they were from and where they ended up—inform the experiences of the tea sellers to an enormous extent. Most, if not all, of the tea sellers had migrated, often with their family, to cosmopolitan centers for the sake of expanding their tea business and other reasons (e.g., education for children). Yet although Beijing provided numerous opportunities to profit, it was also where tea sellers who used to deal mainly in gift teas felt the most severe financial impact.

**Migration and Geographical Origin**

As migrants, many of the tea sellers referred frequently to geographical origin in discussing both their tea and their own backgrounds. Throughout the interviews, the theme of one’s hometown providing informal and formal resources for achieving later
success in Beijing and other city centers emerged. Two regions in particular were repeatedly mentioned: the southeastern province of Fujian—an area famous for its tea mountains—and Yunnan, a southwestern province known for its puer production. Not only did these places play a key role in the sellers' personal narratives, but they were also brought up by the merchants as support for their tea products' superior quality.

The theme of family background as profoundly shaping later professional interest frequently appeared in interviews. At the Beijing Tea Exhibition, for instance, Zhu Tong, a twenty-something vendor—pointing to one of the photographs that covered his stall's walls—said that his upbringing on a tea farm led to his interest in tea. The photograph was a self-portrait of Zhu Tong standing on a dirt path before a field of tea plants in his family's Yunnan tea farm. I asked Zhu Tong what kind of tea he was selling. He answered that because he was from Yunnan, he only sold puer tea. This sentiment was echoed by some of the other Yunnan merchants I met at Maliandao and elsewhere. Curiously, it seemed that while sellers from Yunnan almost exclusively specialized in puer tea, puer tea merchants originated from a wide range of provinces across China.

At times, it seemed that the association of Yunnan or Fujian with tea is so salient and widely recognized that just for one to say that they are from one of these provinces serves as sufficient context to explain one's interest in tea. Like Zhu Tong, Shanghai tea seller Zhi Huang sees his passion for tea and his early experiences as intrinsically intertwined. When asked how his interest in tea first developed, he relates childhood memories of spending time with his father: “I've been interested [in tea] since very early on. I used to live in Fujian when I was small, and would follow my father, who was in the Navy in the East Coast
Instead of describing how he became interested in the tea itself, Zhi Huang alludes to early experiences involving his father in Fujian. Implicit in this story is the assumption that, by saying that he had “liv[ed] in Fujian” with his father, others will understand the extent to which Zhi Huang was exposed to tea and immersed in tea culture.

Ling Tou, too, takes pride in his Fujianese heritage. Now in his 70s, Ling Tou is a tea seller at Fulite Tea Market in Beijing. His whole family has grown tea in Fujian for generations. Growing up during the Cultural Revolution, Ling Tou would often get a pinch of tea and drink it with his parents. Older than Zhi Huang by several decades, he contextualized Fujian’s role as a center for tea production as one that shifted in the eras before and after the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, the land that was originally allocated for tea was transformed into farmland for crops to feed a hungry population. Today, however, with more people drinking tea, much of the farmland is being converted back into land for growing tea. Although Zhi Huang’s statements might suggest that Fujian’s reputation as the center for tea production has been cemented into the national consciousness, Ling Tou makes it clear that the actual situation of the province was more complicated. Instead of solely basing his authority as a tea seller on his time spent in Fujian, Ling Tou asserts his expertise and explains his involvement in the industry in terms of continuing the multi-generational family business.

The close association of geographical origin with one’s expertise as a tea seller—and often the quality of one’s tea—is not limited to those hailing from Fujian and Yunnan. Rou Gui opened his Jinan-based tea shop in 1997 and sold tea for 17 years before leaving the industry to pursue another business opportunity. He, too, alluded to his migrant

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5 A city in Fujian.
background in explaining how he became involved in the tea market: “I’m from Hangzhou. We came to Jinan from Hangzhou. I sell West Lake Dragon Well tea.” Located in Zhejiang province, Hangzhou (although not as ubiquitously recognized as Fujian and Yunnan for its tea production) is nevertheless well-known in China as the source of green teas—in particular, West Lake Dragon Well (Longjing) tea. Rather than relating a personal anecdote about his first time drinking tea or a recollection of a family ritual revolving around tea, Rou Gui suggests that interest and expertise in tea are contingent on one’s location and origin.

Why does geography inform tea culture to such an extent that tea sellers can explain their reasons for entering the profession simply by alluding to their hometowns? The answer may lie in the importance of geography on the tea’s taste, according to Ju Hua, who represents a chrysanthemum tea company in Maliandao. As she introduced her chrysanthemum teas to me, Ju Hua elaborated that the clean air and humid environment of the Jiangsu mountains has an enormous impact on the tea: “The chrysanthemums that grow in the clouds and mists without pollution develop a different nutritional value and flavor than the kind that grows in greenhouses.” To give me a better sense of the growing conditions, she shared images of the flowers and the mountains with me through WeChat.

The link between geography and taste is not only a defining part of tea culture for merchants, but it also shapes how buyers approach and perceive tea. While I was interviewing Bao Liu, a migrant tea seller from Huangshan in Anhui province, a middle-aged male customer entered the stall. After stating that he wanted to try some green teas, the customer immediately asked Bao Liu where she was from. In response, she gestured to a shop plaque that read “Huangshan,” and said, “What does that [plaque] say?” Through
this interaction, it became evident that tea buyers are attuned to the importance of
geography in tea culture, viewing it as a signifier or marker to gauge the credibility of the
teaseller and the quality of the tea.

_The Impact of Geography on Tea Sellers Post-2013_

Despite the diverse geographical origins of the migrants, they were almost universally
more affected by the conditions of the place where they had ended up. Until the 2013 anti-
corruption campaign, sellers at Maliandao could rely on their personal pre-migration
geography to achieve success in Beijing; they could tap into existing networks to source
products, wield their backgrounds to assert their authority as tea merchants, and draw on
expertise from family and friends back home. Moreover, as China’s capital and the seat of
government power, a location in Beijing provided unmatched access to clientele. Because
instrumental _guanxi_ relations were particularly pervasive in state bureaucracies, which are
vertically structured, it was relatively easy to sell expensive gift teas pre-2013.

The crackdown on luxury gift-giving precisely targeted this instrumental, vertical
_guanxi_ relation. Curious as to whether the financial devastation was limited to Maliandao, I
headed to another tea market in Beijing. There, the situation was almost identical—empty
stalls, few customers, and sellers surrounded by unsold goods watching videos on their
smartphones.

Interviews with tea sellers outside of Beijing have led me to believe that the campaign
had an outsized impact on merchants who operated throughout the city. Tea sellers in
Jinan have expressed that business in the past several years has been similar to what it was
before, perhaps even better. One puer seller, who had recently created a new line of lemon
puer tea for younger consumers, was able to expand and open another store outside of
Jinan. For Zhi Huang in Shanghai, too, business is booming, with a growing number of customers developing a palate for everyday consumer teas. In fact, the tea sellers in Jinan and Shanghai did not organically bring up the 2013 anti-corruption campaign themselves, and said that they haven’t heard of many sellers who were affected when I raised the topic.

The campaign effectively and abruptly decimated an otherwise reliable customer base for many tea sellers in Beijing, the bulk of whose income depended on spikes in gift-buying at certain occasions during the year (i.e., Chinese New Year, the Mid-Autumn Festival). Although their migrant backgrounds had proved useful in establishing themselves in Beijing, it was now a source of anxiety—because so many of the migrants did not have the hukou registration to stay in Beijing and were no longer able to earn enough to maintain their stay in the expensive city, they had to move back to their hometowns, uprooting lives that were decades in the making. Among them might be Bao Liu, who said that if the monthly amount of sales remains what it currently is, she would probably have to go back to Huangshan in two years. She has had a stall in Maliandao for twenty years, with her son selling tea in the stall beside her. Three of the tea merchants around her have already gone bankrupt, and she does not know what they are doing now. “It’s not that the policy makes us move,” Bao Liu said. “It’s just impossible to stay.”

DISCUSSION

The 2013 anti-corruption campaign was, according to a number of tea merchants and news sources, a jarring exogenous shock to the tea industry. Targeting corruption among officials on a massive scale, the campaign punished and discouraged the giving of luxury gifts within Chinese bureaucratic systems. Yet its impact on tea merchants was far from
uniform: while some went bankrupt after decades—sometimes generations—of business, others remained largely unscathed, and some even thrived.

The tangible and extreme discrepancies in the economic impact of this government campaign were a significant motivation for me to investigate the sellers’ accounts of their experiences in the tea industry before and after the event. Across 20 interviews and observations with tea merchants in Beijing, Shanghai, and Jinan, major themes emerged in terms of tea culture that contextualize and elucidate why the regulation affected business to such different degrees.

My argument is divided into three parts: the first is that, as younger buyers represent an increasingly larger share of the market, sellers are incorporating more consumer and connoisseur values in their conceptions and presentations of tea in response. The demographic transition among members of the tea industry signals a corresponding change in customer values and demand. These new consumer values are notably influenced and shaped by educational backgrounds and generational differences.

Secondly, I argue that this ongoing process was rapidly accelerated by the advent of the 2013 anti-corruption campaign. A prominent source of revenue for tea sellers—expensive tea gifts for companies and bureaucrats—vanished almost overnight. In the face of this structural deterrent against the giving of luxury teas in guanxi relations, tea has taken on alternative meanings as a gift object. These meanings have been informed by the cultural understandings of tea as a consumer object.

Previous research on gift-giving behavior in Confucian societies found that luxury gifts are given for their symbolic worth: giving an expensive gift brings honor to both gift-giver and recipient, and social and group needs predominate over individual ones. Shifts in
consumption patterns and an expanding younger, more individualistic customer base, however, have altered the reasons for giving tea as a gift—as suggested by the tea merchants—so that they more perceptibly incorporating Western hedonic values of personal taste and preference. This marks a momentous transition: what previously existed as two separate sets of cultural norms—one distinctively related to formalized social institutions and patterns of gift-giving, and one solely concerning personal appreciation and taste—have effectively merged to create collectivist gift-giving behavior with individualistic qualities in modern China after the anti-corruption campaign.

The third piece of my argument is that the impact of this was determined to a significant extent by the location of the tea merchant. Although tea has historically carried significant cultural value as a gift in social guanxi relations, the demand for tea in instrumental guanxi relations was concentrated in Beijing. Customers in Beijing were disproportionately involved in vertical state bureaucracies, and so tea sellers in Beijing were disproportionately affected by this crackdown centered on luxury gifts. Merchants who depended largely on revenue from these kinds of teas saw most of their clientele suddenly vanish. For merchants who had woven tea culture into narratives of socially desirable luxury goods and gifts, this exogenous event had a disastrous financial impact. For merchants who regarded tea culture in terms of consumer appreciation and taste, however, this sudden loss of revenue proved to be not so grave, if they experienced a loss at all.

_A Changing Tea Culture, A Changing China_

Over the course of my research, it became apparent that the concept of “tea culture” is in a state of flux. Although no single, comprehensive definition materialized throughout my
interviews and observations, the tea sellers alluded to factors that influenced their understanding of tea culture. These factors relate closely to demographic changes and shifting market demands. Younger tea merchants are entering into the market just as younger consumers are showing more interest in teas. Older tea merchants who adhere to the traditional approach are finding that their customers, especially the historically more profitable ones of companies and government bureaucrats, are not returning. Even though the sellers individually might not be willing to adapt to growing trends in buyer behavior, they are also finding it increasingly untenable to resist the social and structural pressures exerted on the tea industry to transform.

While some things are staying the same—the salience of Fujian and Yunnan’s reputations as centers of quality tea production, for example—other things are changing. Many of the changes reflect China’s economic and political rise within the last several decades: a growing, newly wealthy class of young consumers is exploring the tea market in China and what it has to offer. Along with their personal teaware and more generous budgets, they are bringing ambitions of understanding tea aesthetics and hopes of developing their own senses of taste to the tea shops.

These young consumers are bringing something else, too: a value system that has been influenced by their experiences of living in a more interconnected world. Through media, stories of friends, or personal trips abroad, they have been exposed to Western history, society, and culture, along with Western values of individuality and independence. The result is that even traditionally sacred objects such as tea, which have been long associated with nationalism and “Chineseness,” are being consumed and treated in a different manner.
In the same way that consumers are increasingly making deliberate choices based on individual preferences and aims, a growing number of sellers, too, seem to be entering the industry out of a personal passion and connection to tea rather than a sense of obligation or lack of options. The younger sellers are generally more educated, with college degrees, unlike the generation of merchants who entered the business during or immediately following the Cultural Revolution.

I felt this difference in educational backgrounds and availability of career options acutely during my conversations with the sellers. While both the older and the younger merchants offered nuanced and analytical considerations of tea culture, the later tended to synthesize their understandings of the everyday experience of selling tea with current news stories and knowledge of overseas markets. As a result, they were able to present a more cohesive, global narrative about tea and its place in the modern world.

The college-educated sellers were also noticeably more articulate in describing their reasons for entering into the tea industry. From my interviews, it became clear that tea selling was a difficult field to be entering into, particularly following the 2013 anti-corruption campaign. Perhaps juxtaposing their own lack of options in youth with the career choices available to their better-educated children, older merchants expressed an unwillingness for their children to continue with the family business. The younger tea merchants who had nevertheless entered into the family business seemed to anticipate defending or justifying their decision; they talked about the unique moments of calm that drinking tea brought them, or the profound enjoyment of tasting tea.

Although—like the generations before them—many of the younger tea merchants were influenced and driven by their desire to help their family, being a tea merchant was not
always their primary occupation. Shou Mei, for example, only assisted his parents in the tea shop on the weekends. A graduate of a good college, he works as an engineer during the rest of the week. Likewise, Kaihua Long is a full-time brand designer for Xiao Guan Cha, a luxury tea company, who sells tea with her mother on the weekends. These two framed their involvement in the tea industry as something that grew out of their childhood with tea-selling parents, but also emphasized that this was a deep personal interest and a choice. Relatively few of the older merchants, in comparison, mentioned that they started in the tea business because they had a passion for or curiosity in tea—rather, the career decision seemed to have been made for them based on family circumstances. Ling Tou, for instance, graduated from middle school during a time of great social upheaval, and had to contribute to his family’s tea business from an early age.

Regardless of age, however, the tea sellers were almost universally influenced by their origins and geographical background. For those from Fujian or Yunnan, and even Rou Gui from Hangzhou, discussions of what sparked interest in tea invariably involved the reputations that certain regions possessed as major tea producing areas. Regional expectations informed how tea sellers presented their place in the tea industry to others and themselves. Hometown pride was inextricably bound up with their pride as authoritative, knowledgeable tea sellers and their pride in providing quality teas.

Where the migrants ended up, too, had an enormous impact on the extent to which they were affected by the anti-corruption legislation. In Beijing, the center of political power, merchants relied on customers who engaged in vertical guanxi relations in the state bureaucracy. However, it was precisely this structure that was targeted by the campaign. In
the aftermath, many sellers were unable to adapt to the loss of this significant source of revenue, and consequently went bankrupt.

Although how these tea sellers asserted the quality of their teas to consumers differed before and after the 2013 anti-corruption campaign, their standards for judging tea did not seem to markedly shift. None of the merchants believed that the crackdown against luxury gift teas would affect the availability of high-quality teas.

This dissonance between the quality of the tea and the price of the tea can be explained by the two categories into which teas are conceptually sorted by both sellers and buyers: consumer and gift. The first category of everyday consumer teas is valued in terms of its more intrinsic characteristics, such as taste and aroma. As an object of connoisseurship, tea is a reflection of the drinker’s individual expertise and preferences. The tea’s “growing environment and craftsmanship” inform the worth of the tea insofar as they affect the tea’s flavor profile in relation to daily consumption. Tea sellers who focused on connoisseurship in their appreciation of tea drew on Western narratives and standards for luxury beverages, placing tea on the same level as coffee and wine.

The second category—also the more sociologically intriguing category—is that of gift teas. Such teas derive their value from guanxi social relations in China. Their social function and presentation are prioritized over aesthetic and palatal merits. The price of these gift teas corresponded to their image, or their power to grant mianzi in guanxi relations, which was enforced through traditional narratives relating tea to Chinese nationalism, history, and culture. In this way, tea was seen as a distinctly Chinese symbol and product. When the 2013 anti-corruption campaign abruptly disrupted the flow of gifts in Chinese society,
however, these teas lost much of their cultural value and literal price, devastating tea merchants who relied on sales of these teas in order to maintain their business.

**Gift-Giving in Today’s China**

Tea possesses a long history as a gift object in China, and has been enormously popular in facilitating guanxi relations. As sellers and buyers pivot from viewing tea as a luxury gift item to treating it as a consumer object, they are changing their conceptualization of tea culture at large. Tea culture and gift culture in China are thus interconnected, both exerting influence on the other.

Previously, tea sellers and buyers placed emphasis on tea's image and social function—its public meanings within a traditionally Confucian society—when approaching it as a gift object, but today the giving of gift teas revolves around considerations of individual taste and preference. My interviews and observations show that tea sellers still think of tea as a suitable gift in certain situations, but one whose worth is mediated now by a combination of symbolic and hedonic values.

Given the extent to which tea has been socially accepted as a mianzi-giving object, this shift from primarily respecting symbolic value to prizing hedonic value as well in gift teas carries implications for gift-giving industries in China as a whole. As the demand for luxury gifts shrinks, workers in related fields may find themselves unable to make a living as they have done before. Businesses may go bankrupt while suppliers and producers adapt to a changing landscape, or switch to a different industry.

Although some may be financially impacted by seismic transformations in the gift industries, as Zhu Huang argued, this culling of gift sellers may actually prove to be beneficial for the industries in the long run. Lowering the profit margin for people who deal
in inferior goods with high symbolic value would allow for the preservation of quality products while shattering misleading narratives or practices. In short, only what is good remains.

The issue is that the actual situation is far more complex. Most sellers at Maliandao sold to retailers and wholesalers, and parties on both sides of the transaction suffer if one fails. If gift sellers who provide quality products are equally harmed during the course of this transition, then this blow to the marketplace might reduce options for buyers in terms of prices and variety. After all, not every gifting relationship necessarily involves guanxi relations. Tea can also serve as a birthday gift for a friend or a New Year’s gift for a family member. With choices limited, it might be difficult to find the perfect gift. Although one might argue that the ease of e-commerce means that there are more options than ever, certain items such as tea should be sampled in person, especially as gift-givers are adopting a more connoisseur-minded approach that incorporates their personal sense of taste.

The findings of this paper concern the tea industry specifically, and are limited in their generalizability. At the same time, however, I strongly believe that what has happened in the tea industry foreshadow coming changes within other gift industries. The merging of Confucian and Western value systems in gift interactions has been encouraged by the crackdown on the mianzi-giving luxury gift market, increased globalization of knowledge and exposure to international media, and a more individual-centered way of considering traditional, culturally significant products among younger generations of consumers and sellers. Whether gift valuation systems will continue to absorb Western traits, or—like capitalism with Chinese characteristics—stay in stasis as hedonic gift-giving with Confucian characteristics, remains to be seen.
At any rate, this project has yielded a more complete answer to the personal question that motivated my research at the beginning: Why did my father’s friends stop giving him gifts of tea? The diminished role of tea in my father’s guanxi relations with his friends, it seems, is at least partially due to their lack of interest in seeing tea through a consumer, connoisseur lens. After all, they did not drink the tea that they regifted.

**Future Areas of Research**

My paper is by no means a comprehensive examination of gift culture and tea culture in China. Rather, it merely attempts to investigate the intersection of the two at a specific point in time—2019, more than half a decade after the launch of the anti-corruption campaign and little under a year from another significant event: the COVID-19 epidemic. The world in which I conducted my interviews and did my observations seems now to be very different indeed. For an industry where face-to-face conversations around a small table and sampling from shared teacups were an essential component of the buying process for many involved, it is unimaginable that business would proceed as usual. Tea culture and gift culture, both of which are so closely connected to social interactions, likely have incorporated new practices to ensure the safety of those involved. The experiences of tea sellers and buyers after the pandemic would serve as an interesting juxtaposition.

The cultures surrounding other consumable gift objects, such as baijiu (distilled clear liquor), are also deserving of further study. Is there a trend towards connoisseurship for those objects in gift relations as well? How is value determined and agreed upon for them? Are there traditional narratives associated with their symbolism and public meaning, and are those narratives still salient to new generations of consumers and gift-givers?
Is tea culture in other countries influenced by the same themes of generational divide, geography, globalization, and intended function (consumption or gift)? How do Confucian countries besides China approach gift-giving in the twenty-first century? Has similar legislation that discourages ritualized gift-giving been passed?

Throughout the course of my research, several points regarding policy emerged. The first concerns the issue of regulation: the tea market in China is lightly regulated, causing confusion among buyers and even sellers. Does this lack of national standardization affect the division of tea into consumer and gift goods? In more regulated markets, is the delineation between consumer and gift teas as sharp?

Other points that relate to policy are about migrants’ rights in cosmopolitan centers. Most, if not all, of the tea sellers I encountered were migrants who did not possess household registration in Beijing. Therefore, I was told, when the anti-corruption campaign—which was supposed to disrupt the dyadic relationship between gift-giver and recipient—ended up hurting intermediaries, many tea merchants went bankrupt and had to return home. Some of the sellers, such as Chong Xi and Bao Liu, had been in Beijing for over two decades, and had children and grandchildren grow up there. The fragile circumstances of these migrants deserve further sociological investigation.
APPENDIX

Final Interview Schedule

- How did you first become interested in tea? What motivated you to go into the tea business?
- What was the process of becoming a tea merchant like for you? How long have you been in the business, and in which roles have you occupied in the shop (serving tea, selling tea, contacting resellers, etc.)?
- What kind of tea does your shop carry?
- Who buys tea? Why do they buy it?
- How has business been for the past several years?
  - If better—can you please estimate the growth in sales? Why do you think business is better now?
    - What kind of customers are you seeing more of now?
  - If worse—can you please estimate the decline in sales? Why do you think business is worse now?
- Have you noticed any trends in the market or customer behavior in the past few years?
  - If yes, can you elaborate on these trends? What do you think is driving these changes?
  - How have you been impacted by these changes?
  - How have tea merchants around you reacted to these changes?
- Do you feel that the way that people drink or interact with tea broadly is changing?
- How would you describe “tea culture”? What does tea culture mean to you?
- Has your understanding of tea culture changed in the past few years? If yes, then how so?
- Are there any proverbs about tea/from the tea industry that you want to share?
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https://doi.org/10.1108/07363760710756002


doi: 10.1080/10357823.2017.1372363


