

Narrating the Native: Mapping the Tea Art Houses of Taipei

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Introduction

The spring “plum rains” were falling on the day I visited my first tea house in Taiwan a few years ago, while I was there studying Mandarin Chinese for a year during college. A classmate of mine, a Taiwanese-American from Los Angeles, offered to take me and my visiting mother to a tea house. This tea house was perched on one of the many mountains surrounding Taipei. Walking past the gate to the tea house, I was surrounded by views of serpentine tea bushes lining the terraced hills. We took the clay pots provided by tea house down a stone path and chose a lone table. It was a misty day to begin with, and the steam that poured out of our boiling pot followed the underbelly of our table’s umbrella before rolling out into the air. My classmate served us sweet, earthy fragrant Oolong tea grown on these very mountains; she poured pot after pot of water into the small clay tea pot, then poured the brewed tea into a second pot, and finally poured the evenly brewed tea into each of our short clay cups. She did this over and over, pot after pot, leisurely and comfortably for hours. My friend explained that this method of brewing tea was brought by Taiwan’s settlers coming from Fujian, who called it *gongfucha*, “free time tea,” or *laorencha*, “old man tea”, clearly indicating what it takes or how old you have to be before you have enough time to make tea this way. Today, she explained, you can have tea this way at any number of *chayiguan*, or “tea art houses,” in around the

island. Feeling the whole sensual texture of this experience to be terribly exotic, I could not help but feel that people had been practicing and enjoying this refined tradition on these mountains for hundreds of years and that this “tea art house,” too, was ancient. I was not entirely correct.

How surprised I was when I discovered that Taiwanese tea art houses only appeared less than 25 years ago; the first opened in 1978, not in the mountains surrounding Taipei but in an office building in the city’s central business district.¹ This word “tea art house” (*chayiguan*) is a neologism, invented in the early 1970s to distinguish and elevate this new genre from past ones, but also to define the boundaries of a newly codified form of brewing tea: “tea art” (*chayi*). Moreover, only a few years after tea art houses appeared, they were nearly closed down by the government. Now there are tea art houses in nearly every corner of Taipei and throughout cities on the island, in diverse styles of decoration and architecture. Although the tea art house movement began calling itself a revival of Chinese culture, featuring classical Jiangnan architecture and decorations, the genre has been inclusive enough that there are and have been tea art houses opened by members of aboriginal Taiwanese tribes. Many also feature an interesting style of architecture and decoration that many call native (*bentu*), or literally of this land. Tea art houses have given birth to other tea-related phenomena, such as the bubble-tea (*paomo hongcha*) or pearl milk tea (*zhenzhu naicha*) fad, a phenomenon beyond the scope of this paper. But tea art houses themselves could have been a fad, a passing fashion; unlike many other fads in Taiwan, tea art houses have become established features of Taiwanese people’s everyday vocabulary and Taiwan’s urban landscape. I returned to Taiwan during the summer of 1998² to probe more deeply into the tea art house, asking questions such as: Why did this new genre of tea houses emerge on Taiwan and why during the 1970s? What was new about them, and how did these new tea art houses situate themselves against other outlets of consumption present at the time,

¹ Incidentally, at that time on the other side of the straits tea houses had virtually disappeared, as the result of the cultural revolution’s strongly anti-leisure bias; and in recent years, Taiwanese businessmen have brought tea art houses to China, advertising on their signs “Authentic Taiwan tea art”. See Cao.

² The material used in this project is the result of two months of field research and material collected in Taiwan during the summer of 1998. I visited approximately eighty teahouses in Taipei and Taichung, distributing informal surveys to customers. Also, I interviewed managers, owners, and others intimately related to the tea art and tea art house movements. I collected historical and literary materials at the National Library and the Chinese Dietary Culture Library. Many of my impressions of the tea art movement come from a class, called “Beginning Tea Art.,” that I took in Taipei at the Luyu Tea Art Center (*Luyu chayi zhongxin*). Since that summer, I have kept in touch with those acquaintances, followed tea house discussions on the internet, and returned once to make additional observations this past summer.

as well as those that have developed since? Given the short time I have to talk today, I will discuss in particular the latter question, that is, how do tea art houses map themselves against Taiwan's history, culture, and urban modernity?

I will argue that, throughout the course of the development of tea art houses, they have situated themselves broadly as **modern conduits to the native**. They are physical spaces where Taiwanese can escape from the anxieties of the overwhelming modern life outside and explore various aspects of their ethnic, cultural, and local identity. Before proceeding, let me mention that I approach the definitions of terms such as modern and native terms from an ethnographic perspective. Rather than first assuming modernity to be a metaphysical concept or a universal condition and then applying it to Taiwan, I will take it as a local discourse, one that has a history, is changing, and that different people use for different purposes. Following Lisa Rofel, who calls modernity a “story that people tell themselves about themselves”³, this discussion will reconstruct and illustrate Taiwan's modernity through the prism of tea art houses (FN). Similarly, rather than assuming a narrow definition of “native” (*xiangtu*, or, more commonly in these stories, *bentu*), I will let the actors illuminate the meaning of native.

A native tradition corrupted: “There was no place to drink tea”

When I asked people about why tea art houses caught on so well since they appeared in the late 1970s, one simple phrase echoed over and over: “Before, there was no place to drink tea.” For a place like Taiwan, where tea has been one of the main industries since Chinese pioneers arrived on the island, this statement seems striking. What came next, however, illustrated that their statements were qualitative in nature: The places where one could drink tea were not satisfactory (and so it was as if “there was no place”). These places did not live up to their expectations and standards for a place to drink tea. Out of these definitions, we see that tea had to somehow become respectable again and that tea art houses sanitized of their negative connotations and made acceptable for a wider audience.

According to Zhou Yu, a prominent figure in intellectual and artistic circles in Taipei and the owner of the Wisteria tea art house (*zitenglu*), teahouses by the late 1970s had lost touch with ordinary urban consumers. There were two types of tea houses at the

³ Rofel 1992:96.

time: old-man teahouses (*laoren chaguan*), and tea rooms (*chashi*).⁴ “Old-man teahouses” were not in urban centers, but mostly found on sidestreets in old neighborhoods such as Wanhua. They served a limited customer base of retired or middle-aged men who lived in the few blocks surrounding the tea house. Decorations were sparse, and the *gongfu* pots and tea utensils they offered were old and dirty. In recent years, the only thing that pierced the voices and sound of cracking melon seeds was the sound of the television. One article about the history of tea houses wrote that televisions had taken the main stage, silencing the colorful conversation and sapping the tea house of their charm. Even though old man tea houses may have rightly carried the distinction of being the local traditional tea house in Taiwan, they lacked appeal for a younger urban audience and have been slowly dying out.

Even the mention of the other kind of tea house, the *chashi* or “tea room”, still conjures the image of debauchery to Taiwanese today. In addition to tea, tea rooms also served “female company” (*niüpei*). Although they must have done a brisk business, these tea rooms obviously could not be acceptable forums for a wide audience; many people would obviously be unwilling to enter such a place just for a drink of tea. The extent to which tea rooms had this debaucherous reputation was made clear in 1974, the Administrative Yuan passed a law, called the “Measures to Halt Society’s Wasteful Practices,” which required that tea rooms register under the euphemistic category of “special industry” (*tezhong hangye*).⁵ Tea art houses would run into conflict with this law, as will be described below, but suffice it to say that the tea aficionados who launched tea art houses a few years later were determined to sanitize tea houses of this degrading status — and to let the consumer audience know that tea houses did not have to be associated with sex.

One might ask why the home itself did not suffice as a “place to drink tea.” More than one person related to me that, during the 1960s, it was impolite to serve tea at one’s home when receiving guests. Tea, they said, was considered cheap and base; rather, only Coca-Cola or Sprite were acceptable. In other words, while it was possible to drink tea in the privacy of one’s home, tea may did not carry adequate status for social situations. New-fangled, foreign beverages had robbed tea of its place as the medium for social

⁴ Zhou recalled another form of tea house from his youth that had since disappeared: Road-side teahouses (*chazuo*), sold tea in glasses—a way of drinking tea strictly associated with mainland Chinese who accompanied the Nationalist government to Taiwan in the late 1940s.

⁵ Fan 1992:120.

courtesy in the home. And so, home was no more acceptable than tea rooms or old man tea houses.

The negative reputation of tea houses was not the only indicator that the native tradition of drinking tea was sick. Even more striking was the extent to which other forms of consuming beverages dominated urban life in Taipei. Zhou Yu, the owner of Wisteria, described Taipei during the late 1960s:

When I returned to Taipei after finishing college, there were already many new cafés. They were cultural salon kinds-of-places, where a fair number of literary or artistic people went, such as Bright Star Café⁶ [*mingxing kafeiguan*, where many writers went. They all drank coffee, and so at the time Taipei lacked a tea-drinking atmosphere. Everyone was drinking coffee, including artistic and literary circles. Everyone was drinking coffee... At the time Taipei was completely westernized.⁷

Zhou's comment resembles what others said about Coke and Sprite as the only acceptable beverages to serve guests. One professor of tea culture in the Ming dynasty, Wu Zhihe, recalled that, before tea regained its status, academic gatherings were centered around alcohol and led to alcoholism and family problems. Similarly, some sources cite the proliferation of pubs and bars as symbols of the extent to which Taipei had been Westernized. Following his description of coffee and cafes, Zhou added

But, when we went on *baibai* (religious prayer gatherings or temple festivals), every family of farmers was brewing tea, and it was *laorencha*!⁸

This experience showed Zhou that the countryside had faithfully retained a native tradition that had been abandoned in the city. Zhou recalled that his own interest in tea was an outgrowth of sentiments of nativist consciousness expressed in the literary debates of the time. Advocates of so-called “nativist literature” (*xiangtu wenxue*) were reacting against the pan-westernization they saw the dominant “modernist literature” as

⁶ Taipei's early cafés are still remembered vividly as part of the city's history. During the summer of 1998 a public exhibit called "Taipei Memories" (*Taipei jiyi*) was launched around the city. Posters that celebrated different aspects of city heritage were mounted along the railings of pedestrian bridges; walking by, one would frequently see people stopping to look at the photographs and read the captions. One poster, entitled "Bright Star Café" (*Mingxing kafeiguan*) honored that famous café and others: "During the 1960s Taipei had an abundant array of styles of cafés. Other than providing the usual basic functions such as music, beverages, and romance, cafés were also an important place for cultural workers, artists, and poets to gather and have discussions. Chaofeng, across from Zhongshantang, and Tianyuan, next to New Park, and Mingxing, on Wuchang St. where Zhou Mengdie set up a bookstand—these were the most splendid literary cafés of the day."

⁷ Zhou Yu, Interview August 28, 1998.

⁸ *ibid.*

supporting. The nativists looked nostalgically to the countryside for sources of tradition, as well as proof that industrialization and urbanization was quickly destroying that local culture. Zhou Yu and others interested in reviving local culture felt that, if presented correctly, the countryside's *gongfucha* could serve as the foundation of an urban revival of tea, the traditional drink of Taiwan.

Justifying / Marketing Nativist Sentiment: “From café to tea art house”

Although several tea art houses had opened since the first one in 1978, some had closed due to trouble settling on a suitable management scheme and to little demand. By 1981, the owners of eight tea art houses had decided that they needed to pool their resources and present a united front against the market. Together they formed the Chinese Tea Art Friendship Association (*Zhonghua Chayi Youlianhui*), and at the first meeting the owners vowed to assist each other and to work together to increase public awareness of tea art houses. The association decided to produce a business card with a unified logo that advertised the name of each teahouse. Moreover, they debated on a motto to adopt for the association. Zhou Yu, who once headed the organization, recalls the views of the owners: “[The others] felt that the spirit of the West was simply in coffee houses. They thought that if we could only beat down cafes, then our teahouses could flourish—a simple logic. I suggested that we not be so extreme, because we were not opposing all of western culture, but rather those things from the West that were popular and vulgar.”⁹ Finally, they settled upon: “From café to tea art house; from a Western sentiment enter an Eastern realm” (*cong kafeiting dao chayiguan, cong xifang qingdiao zoujin dongfang jingjie*).¹⁰

With these words, the organization made its public opponent not other forms of tea houses but the café. Clearly, coffee was imported from abroad, but the history of cafes for those on Taiwan led them to associate cafes with the invasion of Western culture. The earliest cafes which opened in Taipei during the Japanese colonial period played Western classical music and took foreign names.¹¹ Even mainlanders from urban areas like

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Zhou Yu, Interview July 14, 1998. Also, see “A Short History of the Development of the China Tea Art Friendship Association” in *A Handbook of the Members' Convention 1997*, p. 56.

¹¹ Taiwan's oldest café, Bolero (Japanese: *bolelo*, Chinese: *bolilo*), opened over sixty years ago during the Japanese occupation. Professor Wang Shiqing recalls visiting many cafes during his youth, and that their attraction was the classical music that would be played on the phonograph (Interview, July 2000). Many mistakenly see cafes as a recent development in Taiwan, but Professor Wang's statement suggests that history of cafes in Taiwan is both rich and understudied. For an attempt, see my unpublished paper,

Shanghai remembered the cafes modeled after their Parisian predecessors. And cafes at the time, such as Bright Star Café, attracted intellectuals linked with Western modernism. Cafes were not the only Western or foreign phenomenon seen as threatening Taiwan: Taiwan's close alignment with the United States after the war left Taiwan reliant on massive foreign aid and the students who returned from America bringing foreign ideas and material culture all left Taiwan with the psychological impression that the future laid with America.

The tea art house owners took its conviction that the popularity of coffee houses was both symbolically and truly hindering the growth of tea art houses and transformed it into a mild but direct suggestion: Leave behind the foreign, western coffee house, and return home to the tea house. The owners believes that the motto would convince consumers to overlook their previous conceptions about tea houses by triggering the nativist sentiment or ethno-cultural loyalty within them. But loyalty to what ethno-cultural group? Notably, the opposite of the foreign is not the Chinese or Taiwanese, but Eastern.

“Eastern” was not only the logical parallel to “Western.” It reflects one tenuous line that tea art houses tried to walk: that between nationalistic distinctions and apolitical localness. Tea art houses could be enjoyed both by so-called mainlanders and Taiwanese, because they could unite in a common opposition to the western or foreign. Because this movement adopted the local *gongfucha* tradition, it could not be accused, as the KMT government had been, of being biased against local culture. Indeed, government attempts to portray itself as the defender of orthodox Chinese culture had alienated local culture; the KMT policy of banning the Taiwanese dialect in favor of Mandarin, funding Peking opera at the strangulating exclusion of Taiwanese opera and puppet theater all seemed to promote the non-local, North-China mainlander culture of the ruling elite, to which Taiwanese could not relate. The tea art house owners' strategy would be more inclusive, a determination that would allow tea art houses to employ even Japanese architecture and aboriginal decorations.

A Test and An Opportunity: The Tea King House Incident

A crisis struck in 1983, only a few years after the first tea art houses opened. In August the police forcibly closed a tea house called Tea King House (*chawanglou*), based

“Starbucks in Taiwan: A Local Café Culture Fears McDonaldization”, on my web site at <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wicentow/starbucks.html>.

on the 1974 law that required tea rooms to register as “special businesses.” Incensed that the police would suggest that their businesses resembled those brothels that needed to register with the government, the tea house owners and tea proponents took their case to the media. On August 27, 1983, the Zili Evening Paper ran a full page of editorials covering the incident.¹² Owners of teahouses and intellectuals hailed tea art houses as having “raised the quality of life” for citizens, and chided the government for not recognizing the contributions of this civil movement. The owners fused the language of their motto with the government’s own rhetoric to advance their cause:

Today’s tea art houses are serene, elegant, and rich with Eastern and native features (*dongfang ji xiangtu secai*). Now, contrary to the government’s own highly-encouraged Cultural Revival, they do not even allow tea art houses to operate. And they even put tea houses in the same legal category as ‘tea rooms’ and other erotic businesses; they have truly overdone this!¹³

They accused the government of having contradicted its own cultural policy: “That the police should close tea art houses during the era of developing Chinese culture [initiated and led by the government] is unfathomable to people.”¹⁴ That policy is the Chinese Culture Revival Movement (*zhonghua wenhua fuxing yundong*), which Chiang Kai-shek launched in 1966 soon after Mao Zedong proclaimed the Great Cultural Revolution (*wenhua da geming*). The movement was consistent with the KMT notion that their Republic of China on Taiwan was the defender of Chinese tradition and culture, the true “descendants of the dragon”. (At the time, American critics attacked the movement as a shallow conservative move meant to justify further tightening of the KMT’s dictatorial rule over Taiwan, and they said that its elitist, top-down approach would have little effect.¹⁵) In this instance, civilians employed the government’s own rhetoric to force it to change its position. The law was soon amended, and tea art houses were allowed to fall under the class of restaurant businesses.¹⁶

¹² “*Yuan chayiguan jinsu youge mingfen*” (May Tea Art Houses Soon Acquire Proper Recognition). *Ziliwanbao* August 27, 1983. Saturday. p. 9

¹³ *ibid*, quoted in Hu 1997:45.

¹⁴ *ibid*.

¹⁵ Uhalley 1967.

¹⁶ Many tea art house owners had campaigned for a further step, placing tea art houses in a class by themselves. This way, the law would reflect, as Cai Rongzhang told me, that their “cultural-ness is comparatively stronger” (*wenhuaxing bijiao qiang*) than restaurants. Being classed as restaurants also posed the practical problem of having to conform to the same building and sanitary codes as restaurants.

Perhaps more important than securing the government's sanction was the public relations opportunity to convince the public of the true nature and mission of tea art houses. The crisis gave tea art houses the chance to publicly demonstrate that they shared no negative connotations with the tainted, debaucherous "tea room". While condemning the debaucherous "tea rooms". They emphatically described the serene atmosphere and elegant decorations of the tea art houses, in contrast to the images that "old man tea houses" likely conjured. The authors cast tea art houses at the center of a narrative of economic, cultural, and moral progress. After years of single-mindedly pursuing the economic miracle, Taiwanese could now contribute to a cultural miracle by contributing some of their newly accumulated disposable income and leisure time and reviving lost and tainted traditions like tea art. They celebrated the accomplishments and promise of the indigenous sophistication that spearheaded this movement of self-discovery in the face of the forces of modernity and western cultural imperialism.¹⁷

"Modern" Tea Art Houses: Serving the Needs of "Modern People"

Although tea art houses discursively differentiated themselves from both coffee houses and older forms of teahouses, they never competed with older teahouses for their narrow and diminishing clientele. In their day, older teahouses did serve some value. During an interview at the Nine Pots Hall (*jiuhutang*) tea art house, the owner Zhan Xunhua spoke of them in an almost nostalgic, eulogizing manner: "Even though the quality [of their tea] is not as high, old man teahouses do provide old people with a place to spend their day, with a bit of comfort." I asked Mr. Zhan if the demise of the old-style teahouses was a loss. "No," he replied, "Now society's needs are different."¹⁸ In other interviews, I heard people reiterate Mr. Zhan's characterization about the changing needs of society. Tea art house owners told me over and over that "society's needs had changed" and, recognizing the needs, the owners had catered to these "different social

¹⁷ It should be noted at the end of this section that, despite tea art houses attempts to distinguish themselves nominally from tea rooms, many Wanhua brothel/tea houses have adopted precisely this term. For example, *Meihua Chayiguan* ("Beautiful-Gorgeous Tea Art House") does not hide its true attraction but still uses the term "tea art house." Some have lamented this situation, especially because tea art houses so carefully crafted their pure, artistic image. One might also see this as adapting one's business to the market's changing terminology, and in fact, tea house-brothels have employed the homonym. For example, there are two businesses called *Chanyuan Chayiguan*; the first in Beitou which means "Zen Garden Tea Art House", and the second in Wanhua, "Beautiful Woman Garden Tea Art House". Zen and beautiful woman share the same pronunciation and tone (*chan*), and unless one spots the female radical on *chan* rather than the religion radical, they are indistinguishable. Tea art houses do not have the monopoly on their name, causing them great strife. See Chi 1986.

¹⁸ Zhan Xunhua, Interview July 14, 1998.

needs”—“the needs of modern people.” Insofar as they implied that the needs of modern people produced the tea art house, the theory is a demand-side model of culture. These changing needs constitute a narrative of Taiwanese cultural history.

The needs of modern people figured very strongly in the views of a veteran tea art activist and the original manager of the first tea art house, China Gongfu Teahouse (*zhongguo gongfu chaguan*), Cai Rongzhang. When I asked Cai what exactly these needs of modern people are, Cai responded:

In older teahouses, such as those during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), people would go to listen to storytelling or to play chess. They had a lot of time, and so they'd go to pass the time... The early tea art houses tried to restore the old form, by offering storytelling, but they didn't succeed. But modern people care more about efficiency and they tend to act in a very specialized way. So if they want to drink tea, they just go to a tea-drinking place. This is the way modern people are.¹⁹

In other words, in the older society moved at a slower pace, that people had more time to spend, and that the old men in these old man teahouses are the receding shadows of the old society. But as the economy shifted from a rural agricultural to an urban industrial and service economy, discretionary leisure time became rare. What fundamentally defined “modern people” was that they more conscious how constrained their time and money spent engaging in leisure activities was. They became attuned to the intensity and quality of their experience.

If customers associated tea with the “careless, unsanitary” method of that farmers or old men brewed tea, Cai would show them a more refined, scientific, and hygienic “modern tea art” (*xiandai chayi*). In the classes he teaches at his Lu Yu Tea Art Center²⁰, Cai strongly emphasizes hygiene: tea pots and cups had to be properly cleaned and sanitized between uses. Science comes in when Cai teaches how to brew a good cup of tea. After scientifically testing different teas by varying the amount of tea used, the temperature of the water, and the time brewed, Cai developed the following general formula: The first pot should be brewed for 1:15 minutes, the second one minute, the third again for 1:15 minutes, and all subsequent pots for an additional fifteen or twenty seconds each. Cai encourages students to use a digital stopwatch to ensure that they

¹⁹ Cai Rongzhang, Interview July 24, 1998..

²⁰ Lu Yu is the Tang dynasty author of the Classic of Tea (*chajing*). By naming his tea art center after, Cai established his authenticity and authority as transmitter of tradition.

adhere to the prescribed times; he sells a specially-designed stopwatch with Chinese knot patterns that does not emit a beep when its buttons are pressed. Cai breaks the steps of brewing tea into eighteen highly ordered parts, each deliberate but elegant, and aesthetic but pragmatically aimed at producing a tasty cup of tea.²¹ Although some criticized Cai's approach as too Japanese (referring to the highly prescribed and ritualized Japanese *chado*, others defend it as the right way to giving beginners a foundation in tea brewing. Cai has been successful: while marketing pots and utensils that he uses to teach, and accommodating the budgets, time constraints, and tastes of his "modern people" (my month-long "Introduction to Tea Art" class cost NT\$1000, or about US\$35). In his 20 years at the business, he has handed certificates to over 10,000 students.

One day, I caught a ride home from the airport with a man who offered to take me. The man had been attended graduate school in the United States, and today he was returning from a business trip. When the subject of tea came up, he proudly said (in English), "I am what you could call a tea gourmet!" During the early 1980s, he took the full complement of Cai's "modern tea art" courses, testing all the way to the level of "Tea Ph.D."

We might imagine the first time this man approached Lu Yu. He would have seen the sign prominently hung beside the foot of the entrance on the street. It reads, "Lu Yu Tea Art Center. Prohibited: Drinking alcohol, playing cards, playing chess, sleeping, being loud, and slovenly dress." Without even mentioning prostitution, these images negated all of the images associated with the older tea art houses, from "old man teahouses" to "tea rooms." Cai told me that, when he opened the tea art center, which contains a tea art house, he instructed his staff to politely ask any customers who spoke too loudly to please quiet down and to hand them a card with the rules of the house. Thus, we see that tea art houses did not immediately and smoothly "meet the needs of modern people." Rather, these people had to be shown and instructed that the tea art house could meet their needs.

Mapping tea art houses against the city

While on one hand adapting to the needs of their modern consumers, tea art houses have also advertised themselves as the savior from the anxieties Taiwan's modernity. They consistently map themselves as an escape from the modern city: its

²¹ For a step-by-step pictorial introduction to this codified "tea art", see Cai 1985. For a philosophically in-depth treatment of tea art, see Cai and Rui 1995.

suffocatingly heavy pollution, hoards of motor scooters, barreling busses, drab concrete buildings, and hectic pace. Consistently, throughout their own advertisements, as well as reviews and articles about tea art houses, they are described as places where one can escape the hustle and bustle of modern urban life and discover the native. In the first book to treat Taiwanese tea culture itself as a significant phenomenon, author Zhang Mingxiong begins his chapter on tea art houses by eloquently describing the need for escape—and the method of escaping.

People who live in the city find it hard even to steal away half a day's relaxation. Every day what people worry about is advancing their careers or family trivialities. If it were possible to invite a few friends and family to sit and talk to one's heart's content and drink tea (*qingyin chaming*), thereby putting aside a few worldly anxieties. How wonderful this would be!

However, when living in the city, the décor in a home simply won't do [for drinking tea]. So, for the purpose of seeking a tranquil place, many tea art houses have been built. The interior design at ordinary tea art houses feature small bridges, running water, pavilions, and everything else one would expect to find, such as: fine tea, exquisite tea snacks, as well as music and exhibitions. Indeed, it is a perfect combination. Sometimes tasting tea (*pinming*) and chatting with friends, makes one feel as if one has returned to the leisurely environment of the countryside. Therefore, the tea art house has indeed created a good place for modern people to stop and rest their spirits.²²

As Zhang suggests, tea art houses have combated the deleterious effects of the city by constructing an alternate space; or one could say that city dwellers have sought out these appealing alternate spaces and encouraged them to develop. Tea art houses have defined themselves by mapping themselves against the city in which they were born. While some shut the city out from inside, others physically place themselves outside the city, and yet others escape the modern city by steeping themselves within the city's layers of history.

Shutting out the city: Walls and Decor

²² Zhang 1993:93

One would be hard-pressed to find a tea art house that, like cafes, has long windows that face out onto the city traffic, letting those inside see passersby and be seen by them. Rather, as Zhang Mingxiong suggests above, most tea art houses shut the city out. By using gardens, walls, and seats divided by screens or sectioned into separate rooms, tea art houses create layers of barriers between the outside and the inside. This multiple interiority engenders the atmosphere that most people cited as the primary reason they like tea art houses. One tea house, “Age-old abode Tea Art House” (*guzaocuo*), had a basement room with rows of antique wooden Chinese canopy beds; illuminated inside by a hanging lamp, four people could sit inside on the hard wood and brew tea. One day while I sat brewing tea in my private bedspace, the electricity suddenly went off; immediately, I heard one young man in the bed next to me say to his friends, “Not this is atmosphere!” (*zheyang cai you qifen*). Many tea art houses share much in common with the trend of restaurants that evoke the past with such decorations as worn wooden tables, old agricultural implements, and old black and white photographs of families. These decorations nostalgically offer the atmospheric escape from the city that tea houses promise.

Escaping the city: Tea Tourism

It is not surprising that many tea art houses, in the attempt to provide an escape from the anxious life of the metropolis, have chosen the mountains surrounding the city as their home. This phenomenon has often been called tea tourism. The first tea art house that I visited was in Maokong, which became a tourist destination in 1980 when then-mayor of Taipei Lee Teng-hui approved a grant to pave a road into the depressed tea farm area.²³ The tea farms caught onto the urban tea art house craze and built tea art houses of their own, sometimes simply placing tables out on the hills. The mountainside seats offer a striking view of the city lights at night, but also gives many Taipei residents the distance they seem to crave. Today, Maokong attracts a diverse set of customers: young college students from nearby Zhengzhi University, urbanites after work or on the weekends, and elderly residents during the daytime. Taipei residents are willing to drive 30-45 minutes to reach these and other scenic mountain spots with tea art houses, Jiufen, Beitou, and Yangmingshan. One family I met makes a monthly trip to tea art houses in the mountains, alternating between each of these areas. The natural beauty and relative

²³ Selya 1995:57.

accessibility from the dense and cramped metropolis makes these teahouses very popular destinations for all ages.

In the case of Jiufen, however, the beauty and local history of a place is destroyed by the very touristic appeal that promised its rebirth. Built on a mountain on the northeast tip of Taiwan that overlooks the ocean, (offering a wonderful sunset), the community of Jiufen was once a prosperous gold mining town during the Japanese occupation. When the gold ran out, the community nearly disappeared, but it was rediscovered in the late 1980s. A commercial for canned coffee and a movie by Hou Hsiao-hsien called *The City of Sadness* (*Beiqing Chengshi*) were set in Jiufen, bringing the area back into the popular imagination.

In 1990, “Jiufen Teahouse” (*Jiufen chafang*) opened; Jiufen’s first commercial enterprise since the gold mines, the teahouse also adjoins a workshop and a gallery for local artists. Jiufen Teahouse’s success paved the way for over 40 tea art houses on the mountain, in addition to many other tourist-oriented businesses. Many teahouses have built up to three additional floors competing for a view of the ocean. Indeed, the local in Jiufen has been destroyed in the act of commodifying it. Many lament Jiufen’s losses, including some tea house owners whose family once lived on the mountain. But still, Jiufen does not cease to attract crowds that often keep these tea houses open all night.

Embracing the city’s local history

Wisteria, Taipei’s oldest tea-art house still in business, is an oasis of political and cultural interest. Wisteria’s gates and garden function to shut out the noise of traffic, but in many ways it embraces its location within the city and the city itself. Over one-hundred years old, Wisteria is one of the few buildings in Taipei to have survived the systematic “de-Japanization” (*fan ribenhua*) movement of the 1950s. Since its transformation into a tea art house in 1981, visitors have remarked that the structure’s Japaneseness made it a strange place to practice *gongfucha*, a tradition that originated in China.²⁴ But the owner of Wisteria, Zhou Yu, has never considered this a fault or a

²⁴ Take, for example, one woman’s statement recorded by a journalist in 1996: “A mother taking her child to drink tea told me that she isn’t a part of the artistic circle or any cultural organization, nor has she ever met Zhou Yu. But she truly likes to come here to drink tea; even though the architecture of Wisteria is Japanese, the interior decorations and the spirit of the tea art practiced here is quite Chinese. When she enters, it feels very harmonious and pleasant. She hopes to that there will be preserved one last place where her son, growing up in the fast food environment of Taipei, can find a bit of peace and tranquility.” “Zhenxi guyi ningjing, buneng shiqu Zitenglu” (Treasuring the peaceful and tranquil old, we cannot lose Wisteria). *Zhongguo Shibao*. June 16, 1997.

detriment. He has always defended the structure and his use of it as a tea house as perfectly compatible with the desire to explore local and native history. In a spirit very different from that of the de-Japanization movement, Zhou affirmed the existence of the structure as a true relic of Taiwan's history, a history which need not be cleansed but should be experienced. Just as the 1983 Tea King House incident allowed tea art houses to make their case, so did a 1996 incident that threatened Wisteria's existence allow it to make its case.

During the summer of 1996 the city government threatened to close Wisteria, arguing that the land which had been granted to Zhou's father, a Nationalist official who came in 1949, was actually city property. The tea art house would have to cease business, and the structure would likely be torn down. Again, the tea art house took its case to the media. As TV news broadcast images of the city boarding up the entrance to the garden, supporters collected signatures, and prominent customers wrote articles testifying that the tea house should be allowed to run. We see today the record of this incident in the tea house: a banner with the chronology of the house beginning in 1901, booklets of photocopied newspaper articles from the 1996 incident, and a booklet of appeals that was presented to the city government, entitled *The Threat to Taiwan's Public Urban Spaces*. Indeed, Wisteria was defended not only as a tea house, but as a single structure with layers of history that could be peeled away to expose local history. From its first Japanese inhabitants to Zhou's father who awaited the retaking of the mainland to its years as a gathering place for Zhou's political dissident and poor artist friends to its current function as a tea house that sponsors cultural events,²⁵ the structure of the building itself has absorbed the past. Preserving Wisteria meant preserving these crucial chapters in the island's historical experience. After a protracted campaign to save the tea house, the city finally declared the building a city historical site. The city did reclaim the land, but it allows Zhou Yu to run the tea house and maintain it as a "living cultural center."

Co-opting the tea art house

Wisteria challenged the Nationalist Party's orthodox, Sino-centric vision of culture and history in Taiwan, celebrating even the painful or non-Chinese aspects of Taiwan's past as valid aspects of local history. In a similar but even more subversive manner, others have co-opted tea art houses to advance their own version of local and

²⁵ The teahouse printed a list of all of the cultural events it had sponsored since it opened. See Zitenglu 1996a:1-7. See also Wisteria 1996b:13-16.

native. In the early 1990s, Sakinu, a member of the Paiwan tribe from Taidong, opened Qili'an Teahouse (*qili'an chafang*), adopting the name that the aboriginal inhabitants who occupied Taipei before Chinese settlers came called that area. He decorated the entrance and walls inside with imposing six-foot tall wooden relief carvings, in the style that his father taught him. He strung fish nets from the ceiling and placed musical instruments from various tribes on the walls. These items, all which have their own story, represent a version of the native very different from other tea houses. Unlike Wisteria, whose physical structure has a history of its own, Qili'an makes a political statement based on the place where it was built; the sign outside writes, "Qili'an: The Mother of Taipei" (*Taibeizhimuqin*).

Despite the aboriginal motifs, Qili'an is not hostile to Chinese or Taiwanese. (He refers to them by their race, the Han people (*hanzu, hanren*). In fact, Sakinu deliberately chose to call Qili'an a tea house in order to invite them in. Sakinu explained:

By calling it 'tea house,' we were looking toward Han people. Drinking tea— This was our most important goal. Han people drink tea, but here the drink in an aboriginal place. So we used this name: Qili'an, is the name of the city of a plainal tribe; and tea house is a Han people's thing (*hanrende dongxi*). That's it; so simple and pure.²⁶

Describing his own transformation that led him to share his culture and history with the customers he said:

Once a Mohawk Indian visited and asked, 'How, within this Han culture, could you open this kind of store?' I would say, I used to be ashamed of my background, but then I came to realize how beautiful our culture is; I respect our culture. Every people has something to share—for example, the Han have the dragon, a beautiful and powerful symbol. We have beautiful things too, for example, these wood carvings. I opened the tea house to share my culture with the Han.²⁷

Located near Wenhua University, Qili'an sponsors many lectures and discussions that highlight the plight of Taiwan's aboriginals.²⁸ The name, decorations, and functions

²⁶ Sakinu. Interview, September 15, 1998.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Qili'an is not the first such teahouse with aboriginal themes: a teahouse close to Wisteria called "The Occasional Drink" (*Jiujiujiu Yici*) opened in the late 1980s but closed in the early 1990s. In an article on The Occasional Drink in the magazine "Tea and Pot", byline of the article reads, "Native, Aboriginal, Cultural" (*Bentude, yuanzhuminde, wenhuade*) See Chen.

held inside the teahouse are all designed to remind the audience about their city's and their homeland's past. Sharing these things with the customers, Sakinu inserts the Taiwan's aboriginal past into the definition of Taiwan's nativeness; one article reviewing the tea house got the point, when it concluded: "[this place] really reveals a sense of historical memory (*po juyou lishi huiyi*)."²⁹ Through the medium of tea, Sakinu injects a dose of identification with and responsibility toward aboriginal rights and social issues.

Conclusion

From the beginning, the appearance and development of tea art houses has been intimately tied in with the search for the native, or the shared cultural and historical identity of the inhabitants of Taiwan. Tea art house owners were motivated by this feeling that native identity had to be respected and reinvigorated when they took on the risky business venture of establishing a new genre of consumer outlets. They also marketed their business along the narrative of allowing consumers to rediscover a native identity underneath the modern world around them. Toward their endeavor of making tea art houses into conduits between the modern and the native, the tea art community employed several distinctions that allowed tea art to be more than the sum of its parts.

Tea art has been able to function as both native and modern. On one hand, the tea art that they promoted was based on the foundation that Taiwanese farmers had retained even while urban Taiwan gave up that tradition. On the other hand, when they brought this venerable tradition to the cities, they criticized it as having been unsuitable on its own for the modern age; atop the foundation, they added science and hygiene and elevated tea to the level of art, a sort of high culture that could be enjoyed by the urban masses. Built on the foundation of a certain practice, the tea art community co-opted tea art and turned it against its roots. This impression has reached those members of the old tradition; one day, at an old man tea house, I asked a retiree if he thought of his tea drinking as part of traditional culture; he responded, "Culture? This has no culture [as the tea art houses do]." Similarly, one teacher at Cai Rongzhang's tea art center delighted in telling the story of how she convinced an old tea farmer that with her tea art techniques, she could brew his tea better than he could.

At the same time as tea art houses have defended themselves as material expressions of nativist root seeking, tea art houses have had been able to bridge and unite

²⁹ Yuan, 1996.

previously thought unbridgeable ethno-cultural boundaries. As early as the 1983 campaign to “legalize” tea art houses, they have characterized their mission as one of protecting local culture. At some times, and in some tea art houses, the local or native character is easily identified as a period piece, say Qing dynasty Jiangnan architecture. On the other hand, tea art houses like Wisteria have challenged government attempts to erase any trace of the Japanese occupation; they have celebrated every layer of local history as having contributed to Taiwan’s unique historical experience. Qili’an demonstrated that tea is not the exclusive tool of those of Chinese descent, but that others who claim to share in the native can use the medium of tea houses to express that claim. If, as Marilyn Ivy claims, “culture and nation are inextricably linked”³⁰, then we could conclude that tea art houses’ ability to absorb and tolerate a diversity of cultural imaginations reflect both the tensions and promise of a diverse and open nation on Taiwan.

³⁰ Ivy 1995:3.

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