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Tea culture and China are synonymous, but even old-style teahouses have to change with the times

Xinquan Tea House is filled with old men who seemingly have known each other for years. They share unrestrained and far-ranging conversations on topics that range from tea ceremony culture to how to sort out all the world's troubles.

Situated in De'nei Dajie street in downtown Beijing, this teahouse is known as a *qingchaguan* (teahouse serving tea without refreshments) and it is steeped in history. One of the elders known to all and sundry, Yang Quanfu, is a regular at the teahouse. He hung his birdcage up carefully outside then ventured in to chat....

Yang said for as many years as he can remember he has had a pot of tea in the early morning after a walk with his bird. He liked nothing more than to shoot the breeze with his old friends and pass away his leisure time. While some people look down on these old-style teahouses, they stand as records of time and the history of Beijing. Foreigners in search of “old Beijing” are also seeking out these teahouses, said Yang.

Yes, it seems things are changing. Teahouses in today's China have emerged to become fashionable. The old-style teahouse is becoming trendy, while newly built teahouses are adapting to the needs of modern society.

“Tea drinking and tasting tradition was born along with China's folk culture and stamped with Chinese flavor,” said Professor Wang Congren at the Shanghai Normal University. “Its recent rejuvenation is a signal showing that city people are searching for the tradition and roots of the nation, by exploring their peculiar social functions and meanings.”

More than just tea

China's teahouses were first called *chafang* or *chasi*. Tracing back in historical records, as early as the third century, old ladies would bring pots of fresh tea to downtown markets to sell. Until the seventh century, there emerged teahouses in towns and cities, and in the 10th century, the drinking of tea prevailed with teahouses scattered along streets. Later in the 17th century, the teahouse business became rife and the variety was enormous. Take Beijing for example. Teahouses are endowed with rich meanings such as *dachaguan* (teahouse where tea and snacks are served), *qingchaguan*, *shuchaguan* (teahouse where storytelling is performed), *xichaguan* (teahouse where opera is performed), *qichaguan* (teahouse where chess is played) and *yechaguan* (teahouse located in suburbs).

Handed down throughout the history of Beijing was *dachaguan*, which served as much more than mere teahouses. Visitors could drink various teas and sit among the many business people and intellectuals who frequented these houses. When social unrest or some form of disaster took place, teahouses were used as places to get and exchange information. The social function they served was really vital for a society that needed to communicate. Tianhuixuan Teahouse at Di'anmenwai and Huifengxuan Teahouse at Donganmenwai were the two most famous old Beijing *dachaguan*.

The scene was dramatically different in old-style *shuchaguan*, where audiences could enjoy storytelling by folk artists, while sipping their favorite brew. The usual programs were well-known Chinese ancient novels such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Pilgrimage to the West*. In old Beijing, such *shuchaguan* were congested in the eastern part of the city, like Donghuamen's Dongyuexuan or Di'anmen's Tonghexuan.

An older clientele gave the *qingchaguan* a bygone feel, no matter what generation it was. These houses, with their simple décor and neat interiors, were for drinking tea served in covered bowls. In the late Qing Dynasty (1616-1911, the last feudal authorities in China's history), aristocrats of the royal family were frequent visitors to *qingchaguan*. Today, most Beijing teahouses are in this category. After retirees are done with their

morning exercises, they make a beeline to these establishments, hanging birdcages outside, and settling down to a refreshing pot of tea and chat.

Yechaguan set in suburbs of old Beijing also originated in the Qing Dynasty. Since imperial gardens were for the privilege of lords, common civilians began to head out of the city on short excursions, giving rise to the *yechaguan* boom. Usually located in places with beautiful scenery, such teahouses gave visitors a chance to sip tea and get back to nature.

Along with these, *qichaguan* and *xichaguan* also left their own marks in history through their own unique characteristics.

Modern teahouses

Situated in Beijing's Zhongshan Park, Laijinyuxuan Teahouse is 90 years old. According to teahouse owner Zhai Qiang, it opened to business in 1915. In the first half of the 20th century, many eminent intellectuals were frequent guests here. Though the teahouse endured a tough period after 1949, being converted into a restaurant at one stage, it resumed its tea operation in 2004.

Occasional salons are held and the Chinese Calligraphers Association often invites prominent masters to sip teas here, said Zhai....

Boguanmingcha Teahouse in Beijing's Xuanwu District looks like a library at first sight. With an extra wide hall, the teahouse provides a tranquil place to read, away from city chaos. French sashes and wall-to-wall bookshelves provide an ideal environment for tea drinking. At the Penglaixuan Teahouse in Chaoyang District, however, a tranquil water theme and goldfish, backed by live music, bring a classic element to tea drinking.

The rush of competition in the teahouse industry means customers should benefit, as service is becoming a decisive factor, as shown at Beijing's Wuyutai Tea Shop, which produces tea gifts, along with scented teas and music CDs for tea ceremonies. Tea lovers

interested in the elegance of the tea ceremony are also being catered for by such teahouses as Mingren and Guozong, which hold regular courses on this ancient art.

Professor Wang analyzed that contemporary teahouses embrace at least three new functions. First, teahouses not only provide a chance to sip fine teas, but also provide a place for entertainment. Customers regard them as information distribution centers. The second lies in the matter of culture. Although people drink tea to satisfy their taste and thirst, there is also a healthy aspect on a psychological level and the aesthetic manner in which tea is drunk. Third, there are networking opportunities. Valuable business contacts are made in teahouses as they have always maintained the function of being communication hubs.

In addition, Professor Wang said the many movie salons, classic arts and folk music shows and literary salons help tea drinkers unwind.

Holding the market

Zhang Danjiu is the owner of Beijing's Mingren Teahouse in Haidian District. In early 1997, when the teahouse was launched, Beijing had a mere 20 teahouses in total. The country's emerging industry at the time, coupled with his low operating costs, earned Zhang big profits in double quick time. "During peak periods, we covered our costs in three months. A teahouse measuring 100 square meters could rake in profits of at least 1 million yuan (more than \$120,000) annually," Zhang recalled.

From 1998 to 2000, he registered another five chain teahouses under his name....Zhang said things haven't been all that rosy since 2002, when a stream of teahouses flooded the market. Beijing now has over 500 teahouses and according to Zhang, the many bars and cafes now found in the capital have split the allegiance of former tea drinkers....

Chen Baixiang, a consultant with the China Research Association of International Tea Culture, said the teahouse business is not exclusive from tea culture, but just another vital component. He suggests aspiring teahouse owners should research the market and

location of their intended business, incorporating Chinese characteristics in the design....
In creating teahouses that are sustainable in the long term, Chen believes it will also
maintain the country's rich tea culture.

Source: Lu Ling, "Still Brewing," *Beijing Review* January 19, 2006.