

## INVENTED TRADITION: TEA IN MODERN CHINESE CULTURE

How is the blending of historic traditions used in modern China as a means of soft power to promote Chinese interests on the global stage?

With this research I intend to investigate in what ways the Chinese government drives and supports a large-scale process of social engineering and global self-branding with the vehicle of tea.

The Chinese tea ceremony as a distinct and well-defined ritual has never existed—at least not in the sense of the Japanese *chadō* (茶道, lit. tea ceremony), a relatively unchanged tradition which has existed ever since Sen no Rikyū (千利休) laid its foundations in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, for the last two millennia, Chinese history has been inextricably linked with tea. Records show that it was consciously consumed for its health benefits even before the Han dynasty (206 BC - AD 220), although it was not until the Sui dynasty (AD 581 - 618) that tea became a beverage of pleasure. In subsequent centuries, tea gradually changed from being a rare luxury of the rich to a part of everyday life in China. It was enjoyed in dozens of forms as each dynasty, religion and philosophical school interpreted it according to their own ideas.<sup>1</sup> Amongst these, however, there is not one which could be labelled as 'the authentic Chinese tea ceremony'. The authentic tea culture showcased by modern-day China is a historically non-existent phenomenon, which has been—and is still being—invented in the course of the past few decades.

There are many reasons why this new invention appeals to China. After the turmoil of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the People's Republic of China is as stable as it has ever been—both politically and economically and has become one of the world's leading powers. By re-claiming tea, a beverage of paramount importance all over the world, as an essentially Chinese product with a glorious history stretching back more than 2,000 years, the Chinese, in fact, are abolishing the picture of a backward China and strengthening their legitimacy as a rival of other superpowers. Tea in this way is used as a cultural instrument to stir up and support nationalistic sentiments.<sup>2</sup>

This research aims to examine current trends in Chinese tea—especially puer tea, a special type of tea native to Yunnan Province—its industry, the values and ideas represented by and attached to it, whilst also tracing them and their elements back to their historical origins; to analyse how and why this 'tradition invention' is being carried out and what role it plays in current politics in China. By identifying the source of this tea-related cultural venture, which is often equated with the *gongfu method* (功夫茶, skilful tea preparation) and referred to as the *Chinese tea ceremony*, I hope to gain insight into the purpose of this newly invented tradition.

In the first year of my research, I am planning to establish the theoretical background of my project via both an examination of tea utensils in different times and an analysis of historical and contemporary texts: literary products, such as the tea poetry of Li Bai (李白) and Du Fu (杜甫), tea-related philosophical oeuvres, like the *Classic of Tea* (茶经, Chajing), records of tea drinking fashions, articles on religious practices, tea advertisements of tea products and accessories, reports on the tea industry and statistics on tea production and consumption.

I am planning to start the second phase of my research whilst still being in China on my year abroad. During this time, I will be carrying out interviews in local teashops and tea markets, in tea growing areas and potteries. I plan to engage with producers, merchants, craftsmen, shop assistants as well as consumers and collectors as a participant observer, in order to evaluate, verify, and correct the hypotheses I developed in the preceding year.

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<sup>1</sup> Benn, James A. (2015) *Tea in China, A Religious and Cultural History*. University of Hawaii Press: Honolulu p. 21-28, 198-204.

<sup>2</sup> Sigley, G. (2015). "Tea and China's rise: tea, nationalism and culture in the 21st century." *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, vol 2, no. 3, pp. 319-341.