

Fortunetellers and Teahouse Workers

Migrant Peasants in Post-Mao Chengdu

By Di Wang

Is there a better way than drinking tea and chatting in a local teahouse to get a sense of everyday life in Sichuan's capital city? A historian of Chengdu and tea culture explains the role of teahouses in public life and the business opportunities they offer to migrant workers.

The most recent studies of cities and urban life in post-Mao China are mainly conducted by anthropologists, political scientists, and sociologists. They examine changes to the urban population, the transformation from the planned economy to the market economy and from socialist idealism to the social contract. They pay attention to workers, civil servants, intellectuals, and women, exploring their experiences at work and home, as well as how they responded to economic and gender inequality, the worker-management relationship, political participation, the public's response to changes, employment opportunities for women, and the status of women in urban and rural migrant families.

The state gradually weakened its influence on small businesses because of a new political environment. During the 1980s, "the market acted like a giant magnet drawing people into a headlong plunge into the sea of commerce" (xiahai).¹ With economic development, migrant peasants flooded into the cities, state-owned factories laid off workers, and local governments everywhere undertook, for better or worse,

¹ Lowell Dittmer and Lance Gore, "China Builds a Market Culture," *East Asia* 19.3, Sept. 2001, p. 23.

land-clearance and new construction. Many of them found that to open a teahouse might be a good choice. For those who did not have much capital, a small teahouse was affordable. For those who did not have an ability to run a teahouse, many of them made a living in teahouses. Their experience offers us a good example how the Chinese society had changed by the turn of the century and what they had gained and what difficulties they had to face.

The Rise of Teahouses and Public Life

Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan province and one of the major cultural, economic, and political centers in West China, with a population of 16 million inhabitants. Chengdu had one of the largest populations among the country's inland cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1900s-1920s, its population was 340,000-350,000. In 1949, it had 650,000. By 2000, its population reached 6 million. Like all other provincial capitals, Chengdu experienced almost all of the political, economic, social, and cultural transformations from the late-Qing reforms to the Communist victory.² During the early socialist period, Chengdu was gradually developed from consumptive and commercial into an industrial city. From 1964, the central government launched a plan called "Three Lines of Construction" (*Sanxian jianshe*) in preparation of future wars. This provided a new wave of industrial development. During the Cultural Revolution--China's chaotic decade (1966-1976), the city fell into unrest and even a constant sort of violence in the early stage of the movement, when many factories and schools were shut down, and many young people and government employees were sent to the countryside. The Imperial City, a historic site dating to the Han Dynasty, was dismantled entirely.³

The post-Mao reform brought Chengdu rapid expansion and construction. With the advent of this kind of modernization, the pace of everyday life has accelerated. Chengdu succumbed much less than other major Chinese cities to the fast-paced lifestyle of the 20th century. However, Chengdu, like many Chinese cities, has

² In the early 20th century, the Qing government launched a large-scale reform movement to modernize China, which changed China's economy, education, and military.

³ Di Wang, *The Teahouse under Socialism: The Decline and Renewal of Public Life in Chengdu, 1950-2000*, Ithaca Cornell University Press, 2018, pp. 5-7.

experienced development processes that are now commonplace in China and around the world. As a result of China's political, economic, and cultural transformation and the impact of globalization, teahouses, teahouse culture, and the public sphere have seen a shift in both the substance and style of the activities and opportunities offered. Chengdu in the past had more teahouses than other cities because of the culture fostered by its geography and economy. Unlike most regions in China, the rural people of Sichuan, especially on the Chengdu Plain, lived in relative isolation on their farmlands; this prevented the cultivation of village or community life. They relied on rural markets more than did their counterparts elsewhere, who had access to long-distance trade networks. The rural workers of the Chengdu Plain marketed locally and then would stop by a teahouse to socialize or take in entertainment. Some even bought and sold in the teahouses. In addition, the narrow footpaths made the use of transport animals rare; men using equipment such as carrying poles, wheelbarrows, and sedan chairs were much more prevalent. Coolies depended on teahouses as rest places. Poor water quality and limited fuel made Chengdu further dependent on teahouses. Water carriers brought river water from outside town to sell for drinking. Such transport would have been difficult for many families, so it was common to purchase boiled water directly from teahouses. Firewood, the major fuel in Chengdu, was expensive; many ordinary families lit fires only to cook. They patronized restaurants and teahouses in order to conserve firewood, and bought their hot water for washing from neighborhood teahouses.

By the end of the twentieth century, drinking water, fuel, and transportation were plentiful and affordable, and people could drink tea conveniently at home. So what has made teahouses endure? There are many factors, but the most important is that teahouses always adapted to changes in society, and adjusted their business model in parallel with cultural, political, and economic transformations. In particular, they have been able to absorb new technology and new demands for pleasure. In the first ten or fifteen years of the twentieth century, for example, even during the Qing dynasty at its endpoint, teahouses introduced movie shows and record players to the public.⁴ In the 1980s, with the rise of videos, many teahouses added video screening equipment. To keep up with economic development and rising living standards, teahouses installed air-conditioning and private box seats. Similarly, teahouses provided space for mahjong. Even the older sort of personal services either survived intact or came back in different forms. For instance, while the hot towel service was

⁴ Di Wang, *Street Culture in Chengdu: Public Space, Urban Commoners, and Local Politics, 1870-1930*, Stanford University Press, 2003, pp. 119-120.

gone, foot-soaking has been added. And fortune-telling, earwax picking, and shoe polishing continue today. Sometimes, people in the teahouse feel that they have traveled to a previous era or are on a bridge linking the past to the present.

Coffeehouses and bars have not replaced teahouses or stolen away teahouse customers. Tea drinking is still the best fit for people with limited economic resources, especially the elderly. The main customer base in the teahouse is the middle-aged and older. Young people who are attracted to international trends go to modern Western-style coffeehouses or bars, while others patronize the less-expensive and old-style ones. Coffeehouses and bars in contemporary Chinese cities are entirely Western, with no reflection of Chinese custom, but teahouses are rooted in China's past. In a coffeehouse or a bar, patrons have no access to peddlers, fortune-tellers, earwax pickers, or shoe polishers. The teahouse has always included more of these aspects of the local society and economy than do the modern coffeehouse and bar. Its patrons can linger for hours or even all day, for very little money, adding boiling water to their tea leaves rather than having to buy another cup. In lower-level and street-corner teahouses, people often strike up conversation, adding thus another dimension of vitality to the teahouse environment.

To open a teahouse during the Reform Era (since 1978) has been easier to do than ever before. In the Republican period, the Teahouse Guild had tightly controlled the total number of teahouses to avoid serious competition within the trade—and even controlled the price of tea. After economic reforms were launched, as long as a person had sufficient capital, he or she simply applied for and received a license. Furthermore, unlike other industries, a teahouse required minimal investments: a rented room, a stove to boil water, and some tables, chairs and tea bowls. In smaller teahouses, one person could handle everything as a manager, a waiter, and a stovekeeper. Of course, the upscale teahouses that started to appear required much larger investments. Before long, Chengdu had more teahouses than at the peak of the Republican era (today, Chengdu has near ten thousand such establishments). The number of teahouses in the Republican period peaked in 1934, at 748 when Shanghai had less than 200.⁵ As a result, business became much more competitive.

⁵ Di Wang, *The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, and Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900-1950*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008, p. 30.

Teahouses and local culture

During the period being discussed here, street-corner teahouses began to co-exist with high-end tea balconies, each one serving different social groups and providing different functions. Their management and operation were virtually the same as in the first half of the 20th century, except for the lack of a guild. The teahouse, as a small business, had its own way of operating. On the one hand, it had to follow the country's overall economic trends; on the other hand, however, it had strong and unique geographical components. Unlike the Republican and Early Socialist periods, there was now, with the ending of the New Teahouse Guild along with other guilds, by the mid-1950s, no guild in Chengdu to control their number, so they increased substantially. There were fewer barriers to entering the business: anyone who went through the easy license and registration process could open up shop. Licensing documents were issued by different government agencies in Chengdu, namely the Bureau of Commerce, Bureau of Industrial and Commercial Administration, and Bureau of Sanitation. They generally required basic information, such as the address and name of the owner, type of services offered, and a period of time. But there was also a large number of unregistered teahouses, operating as "neighborhood centers," "internal services," and so on, plus many located in small alleys and areas adjoining the city and countryside. All of them enjoyed a "free ride" during this "golden time" for small business.

Teahouses and teahouse life are strong vehicles of local culture; they play a central role in urban life as an arena for social and political activities. The teahouses were a major arena and a reflection of the relationship between the state and society. In the 1980s and 1990s, government controls weakened, and the middle class reinvented itself quickly. The teahouse, as a vibrant public space, helped this along. During the period, partially autonomous organizations emerged, such as associations related to commerce, professions, elderly people, clans, and religions. These inevitably weakened the state's control over the populace. Perhaps it can be stated that "society" had gradually returned, if slowly, based on the growth of these associative seeds. In this period, teahouses consequently returned rather vigorously. With competition came the convenience of large numbers and many types of teahouse. Patronage flourished, and it is this in particular that indicates the real return of public life. With the boom in financing and banking, as well as all manner of rental opportunities and contracts, both prosperous and low-end teahouses promoted the development of the public sphere, and the middle class, often more educated and desirous of intellectual

arenas, became a major factor. Thus, what we are considering is the overall democratization of business ownership, types of patrons, and intellectual pursuits—what we should acknowledge as a stronger public sphere that was forming in the teahouse. Yet it was not always about criticizing local or national authorities; this new sociality also served people’s need to discuss their own lives, as well as social issues and topics, including news from outside just their own city.

Migrant Peasants’ Daily Life in the City

Teahouse culture is so intrinsic to Chengdu that some residents consider it the city’s primary distinguishing feature and even “the most accurate measure of real Chengdu people.” A survey found that 2.9 percent of Chengdu residents went to teahouses every day, 13.5 percent twice a week, 10.3 percent went once a week, and 8.5 percent twice a month. In addition, a large number of the so-called floating population depended heavily on teahouses; one estimate believes that more than 200,000 people in Chengdu patronized teahouses each day.⁶ This number is not surprising given that an estimated 100,000 to 140,000 people visited teahouses daily during the Republican period.⁷

Teahouses provide many work opportunities to migrant peasants. My conversations with them gave me a sense of everyday life as experienced in a small teahouse in an alley and reinforced the close relationships between a teahouse and neighbors, peddlers, and other small businesses. From that spot, we can see people from all walks of life who depend on each other in many different ways. Thus, the street, teahouse, and people are connected, and the combination shows the vivid daily life of ordinary people in a back street of a large and prosperous city.

For migrant workers who did not have family with them, going to teahouses became one of their best pastime. The growing popularity of the VCR in the 1980s and VCD in the 1990s made films and dramas from Hong Kong and Taiwan (especially those involving the martial arts), very popular in mainland China. To attract more

⁶ Shangwu zaobao (Commerce Morning News), May 19, 2000.

⁷ Di Wang, *The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, and Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900-1950*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008, p. 34.

customers, some lower-class teahouses began to show videos, and gradually, this became their major business as they were transformed into “video rooms.” Their customers were mostly teenagers or migrant, peasant workers. Unlike traditional teahouses, where chairs were placed around tables, these rooms arranged bamboo chairs in rows, theater style, so the audience faced the front of the room to watch videos. At night, these places were packed with customers, especially migrant workers who did not have a family nearby and sought ways to kill time. In the 1990s, 5 *yuan* was enough for tea plus an entire day of videos.⁸



A video room in a street under re-construction. Photo taken by the author, June 2003.

By 2000 there were still many such teahouse/video rooms, such as the Bruce Lee Video/Poker Teahouse (Li Xiaolong luxiang pai cha) near the rear of the Chengdu Municipal Archives. This teahouse was in poor condition, under a bamboo shed, from which was hung a banner with a Chinese character “*Cha*” (tea). A large wooden board stood outside, on which many color photos of VCD covers were pasted so customers could easily identify the programs they wanted to watch. Four people were playing mahjong at the gate, one of whom was the teahouse keeper, a middle-aged woman. A

⁸ Dai Shankui, “Chengdu pao chaguan” [Frequenting Chengdu teahouses], *Renmin ribao* [People’s daily], July 10, 1998; He Xiaozhu, *Chengdu chaguan: Yishi jumin ban chake* [Chengdu teahouses: Half the residents are teahouse-goers], Chengdu, Chengdu shidai chubanshe, 2006, p. 31.

cup of tea plus videos cost only one *yuan*. The interior was small and dim, with an aisle down the middle, three chairs on each side, in five rows to accommodate a total of 30 patrons. Two small, round stools in each row were used as tables. Only five or six customers, men who appeared to be 20 to 30 years old, were watching a Hong Kong movie. From their accent, they were likely migrant laborers. More than 100 printed covers from VCDs were posted on the wall, mostly from action movies made in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States, such as those starring Jack Chen and Arnold Schwarzenegger. The movie showing when I arrived was a comedy about the conflict between ancient and modern people and policemen and gangsters. The next movie was a story during the War of Resistance against the Japanese when Chinese troops (although not clear whether GMD or CCP) needed money to buy medicine, so a man who was an expert gambler went to a Japanese-owned casino in the Japanese occupied area and won a large amount of money.⁹

These teahouses/video rooms played an important role in migrant peasants' daily life in the city but they went out of business with the addition of dozens of television channels in private homes, the appearance of VCRs and DVDs, and finally the U.S. pressure to enforce intellectual property rights internationally and the subsequent government crackdown on digital products.

Fortunetellers and Earwax Pickers

Many fortunetellers made a living in the teahouse. I had many occasions to talk to fortunetellers. One summer day in 2000, in a teahouse by the Funan River, I had an opportunity to have a chat with an old fortuneteller. He told me that he was 71 years old and had made his living telling fortunes for three years. He previously was a farmer in Hebei Province and only received a few years of education, in a private school. He taught himself fortunetelling in the 1980s. He took out a wrinkled and worn book, *A Comprehensive Collection of Divine Fortune-Tellers* (Shenxiang quanshu) published by an unknown press. At the time, business was not very good, but on his best days he could earn 40 *yuan*, with tips of as much as 20 *yuan* from customers who were happy with his services. His story offers us a great deal of information about

⁹ The author's field work, the Bruce Lee Video/Poker Teahouse, August 8, 2000.

the people who made a living in the teahouse. First, many came from outside Chengdu as migrant laborers who were not skilled in any trade but who took advantage of the opportunity offered by fortunetelling. As long as they could read, they could quickly pick up some basic knowledge from any fortunetelling book and immediately enter the business, and although they might not earn much money, they could at least survive in this strange, new environment. Second, fortunetelling traditionally was a man's profession, but during the post-Mao era more women joined it, reflecting society's growing tolerance for women's engagement in historically male-dominated domains. Third, they operated at different levels in the business; some became rich, while others hardly made ends meet, depending on their experience and reputation. Fourth, fortunetellers provided entertainment and novelty for teahouse-goers. Not all people who paid for this service believed what they were told, but patrons enjoyed the diversion or sought the fortunetellers' blessing, reflecting that, "divination touched every sector of Chinese society, from emperor to peasant," as Richard Smith noted.¹⁰ This was true in the late Imperial period, and to a certain extent, remains true today.

Earwax picking was another old profession in the teahouse, found in almost every teahouse from the late Qing to the Republic. However, like teahouse culture overall, it reached its nadir during the Cultural Revolution. After the reforms and opening-up policies, however, earwax pickers returned. Most were farmers, artisans, and peddlers, with some from rural areas, who turned to earwax picking when they could not find other work. This was considered a skilled trade, an improvement over manual labor in the fields. This was traditionally a man's job although women took up the practice in the late 20th century.

10 Richard Joseph Smith, *Fortune-tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society*, Boulder, CO, Westview, 1991, p. 9.



A female earwax picker. Photo taken by the author, July 2003.

In the Museum Tea Garden of the Great Benevolent Temple,¹¹ an earwax picker, between 40 to 50 years old, walked between tables soliciting business and announcing his approach with large iron pincers his hand. Obviously, he knew the waiter very well, going to him to get change for a large bill. When he did not have a customer, he joined the waiter at a table to drink tea. He had made his living there for nine years. After working in a barbershop for a few years, he learned the skill from his father at the age of 17. He still lived in Shuangliu, a suburb of Chengdu. He rode a motorbike into the city each day, storing it at his sister's home on Second Ring Road because motorbikes that did not have a Chengdu registration were not allowed into the city.

When he first arrived here nine years earlier, he charged only 1.5 *yuan*, but now he charged 4 *yuan* for new customers and 3 *yuan* for returning customers. The service lasted from a few minutes to ten minutes. No license was needed, but he had to pay the teahouse 200 *yuan* by the fifth of each month, and he never had been late with a payment. He claimed that all the teahouses in this temple were his turf, and other earwax pickers would be expelled by the teahouses. He could earn 600 to 700 *yuan* monthly, for 500 to 600 *yuan* profit after his fee. His wife polished shoes for patrons in the teahouses, at 1 *yuan* per pair, and could also earn 500 to 600 *yuan* each month. He

11 文博茶园, a teahouse in the Chengdu Municipal Museum.

worked from 9 a.m. to late afternoon, almost the same as hours that the teahouses were open. When business slowed between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m., he might move to the teahouses by the Funan River, where he did not have to pay a fee but had to compete with other earwax pickers. He and his wife had a lunch of porridge and steamed bread with free pickles every day for only 1.5 *yuan* at a small restaurant near the temple. They did not need to buy a ticket (1 *yuan*) to enter the temple because the gatekeepers knew them.

He used five tools. The unique sound of his big iron pincers attracted customers' attention. A long, narrow knife, with a handle, was used to cut the fine hairs just inside the ear that blocked his view into the ear canal. The most important tool, a long and thin brass blade was used to scratch inside the ear, a pleasant sensation. Smaller pincers were used to extract earwax. Finally, the process concluded with several swipes using a small brush made of goose feathers. The tools, some of which he made and others that were made to his specifications by blacksmiths, cost 40 to 50 *yuan*. Then we discussed prices. His bottom line was 3 *yuan*. He said that some, but not many, customers refused to pay. Once, he worked on three young men, but they said his service was unsatisfactory and refused to pay, which resulted in a verbal dispute that became physical. He was so angry that he overturned their table, shattering three sets of tea bowls. With help from other workers in the teahouse, the young men were sent to a local police station, where they were ordered to pay 12 *yuan* for the service and 8 *yuan* for damages.

He had taught an apprentice, his brother-in-law, who now made a living in the teahouses along the Funan River. An apprentice had to learn the skill and practice for a year in order before working independently. He had two sons, one in the elementary school and the other in the middle school. Because it was summer break, both sons hung out in the teahouse every day. He did not want his sons to follow in his footsteps and was thinking of sending the older boy to get training as an auto mechanic. He wanted to open an auto repair shop in the area where he lived, which he said was "a good location for such a business." His sons and wife sat at a table nearby, and his younger son came over several times, seemingly interested in our conversation or wanting to draw his father's attention, but he was pushed away. Later, his younger son returned and said he wanted his father to pick his earwax, but he gave the tools to his son and told him to ask his mother to do it. He also talked about his family in the countryside. He was responsible for a seven-*mu* (about 1.1 acre) rice field, which even during harvest—the busiest season—required only three days of work. His parents helped him take care of the field and his home, where he kept more than 20 each of

chickens, ducks, and pigs, plus a water buffalo. They often sold eggs at the market. The income from the rice paddy, livestock and other cash crops could reach 10,000 *yuan*. Adding earwax picking and shoe polishing brought the family's total income to about 16,000 to 17,000 *yuan* per year. About 10,000 of this went to living expenses and the rest was deposited in a bank account.¹²

Many earwax pickers, like other teahouse workers, came from rural areas, juggling the supervision of crops in the field with making a living in Chengdu. They represented hundreds of millions of migrant workers nationwide who came to cities for jobs, profoundly influencing economic development and urban life across China. However, unlike the majority of migrant workers, this earwax picker continued to live in his rural hometown, thus avoiding the pain of long-term separation from family. Furthermore, his wife worked in the same place, so that the family could always be together. Of course, this arrangement was not without costs. Their children spent their days in this bustling place filled with all kinds of people, often not hospitable toward children. They could not provide their children a quiet and safe environment and the education necessary to get ahead substantially in life. Their situation reflected the hardships of migrant workers in the city. Compared with many others, their income and overall situation were not bad at all. They accrued some savings after each year of hard work. This earwax picker was wise, planning a better future for his sons, although he prioritized vocational training over a college degree. To a great extent, his situation and his approach to the future limited his children's potential, and at the end of the day, they might have to follow in his footsteps, after all.

Conclusion

The floating population, especially those from rural areas known peasant workers, became one of major forces for enriching urban life as both servant people and customers, bringing prosperity to the city. As Li Zhang points out, migrant workers worked in construction, restaurants, factories, domestic service, street cleaning, and other jobs that "most urbanities are not willing to take." They had to "break through the constraints of the household registration (*hukou*) system to work and trade in the cities" and overcame many obstacles of causing by "social and

¹² The author's field work, the Museology Tea Garden, the Great Benevolent Temple, July 5, 2000.

political tensions exist between migrant newcomers, the state, and urban society.”¹³ The household registration was established in the 1950s, in which a person could only live, get education, and work in the place where his/her household was registered. Moreover, such a system divided people into urban and rural residents, which did not allow rural people to move into a city for a job. This system still exists in today's China although it has been much less restrictive. Dorothy J. Solinger points out that definition of “floating population” were not urban citizens because they did not have urban registration “there were denied free compulsory education, deprived of many of the perquisites that went with permanent employment in state-owned factories.”¹⁴ Therefore, such small businesses as teahouses provided them job opportunities for survival in the city.

All these professions had a long history in the teahouse. Although every aspect of the city—its politics, economy, culture, and society—had been fundamentally transformed, the teahouse remained as a space where many people could earn a living, further demonstrating the vitality of tradition and enduring qualities of traditional culture. Although vendors came back to teahouses, they might find that they entered a different environment, where, unlike before, not all teahouses welcome their service, especially in the middle or high-level ones, whose customers liked more privacy and undisturbed. Anyhow, in those open-air teahouses and lower-class teahouses, they enjoyed good business and welcome by patrons. These workers and peddlers became part of teahouse culture and continued to play an active role in everyday life although no one could predicate how long their prosperity could last under waves of commercialization and globalization.

Further Reading

- Dai Shankui, “Chengdu pao chaguan” [Frequenting Chengdu teahouses], *Renmin ribao* [People’s daily], July 10, 1998.
- Lowell Dittmer and Lance Gore, “China Builds a Market Culture,” *East Asia* 19.3(Sept. 2001).

¹³ Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China’s Floating Population*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴ Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999, pp. 4, 15.

- He Xiaozhu, *Chengdu chaguan: Yishi jumin ban chake* [Chengdu teahouses: Half the residents are teahouse-goers], Chengdu: Chengdu shidai chubanshe, 2006.
- Richard Joseph Smith, *Fortune-tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991.
- Dorothy J. Solinger, *Chinese Business under Socialism: The Politics of Domestic Commerce in Contemporary China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.
- Di Wang, *Street Culture in Chengdu: Public Space, Urban Commoners, and Local Politics, 1870-1930*. Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Di Wang, *The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, and Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900-1950*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.
- Di Wang, *The Teahouse under Socialism: The Decline and Renewal of Public Life in Chengdu, 1950-2000*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.
- Li Zhang *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China's Floating Population*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.