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# Teaism in the Sinophone World and Beyond: Spiritual, Political and Material Explorations

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## Original Articles

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## Abstract

Throughout the Chinese sphere, that is, in the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, tea houses, tea stores, and tea meditation groups often without a particular religious orientation have appeared in the past decades. Tea lovers groups with various philosophical discussions appear throughout cyberspace, where people show their appreciation for tea as a drinkable delicious product and a spiritual tool. The question to be asked here is whether it should be recognized as a religious or spiritual practice agent in and of itself? Should we then talk about the present-day movement of teaism? If we do recognize this as a spiritual phenomenon, should it then be labeled as a New Religious Movement? The trajectory of tea in China is intrinsically connected to religious traditions. This connection is historical, yet it plays a part in the contemporary religious and spiritual sphere. The article explores the continuation and developments of tea culture in the context of the religious sphere of China, looking at practices connected to tea of communities, religious organizations, and individuals. The author explores how tea drinking, commercializing and tea related practices intersect with politics, materiality, and spirituality in contemporary society. In this context it is then argued that tea is a cultural element, religious self-refinement tool, and an active material agent with social-political capacities. The study includes historical narratives, ethnographic data, and literary sources about tea, making up a genealogy of tea which encompasses ritualistic aspects, economic aspects, and power relations related to tea in Chinese society.

**Keywords:** tea, religion, religious movements, theory of religion, Chinese religion

## Introduction

Tea today is a common consumable product in many areas of the world. Its history has been studied from many perspectives, geographic areas, and disciplines. As a consumable and tradable material, tea is observed through the modern study of culture, diplomacy, and economics through prisms such as globalization, capitalism, colonialism, agriculture, and culinary trends. In Asia, asserts Uri Kaplan, there is a phenomenon of “fetishizing” tea (Kaplan 2017). A century earlier, Kakuzu Ukakura had claimed that the fetishization of tea drinking was shared globally as early as a century ago (meaning, from the nineteenth century). “Humanity has so far met in the teacup. It is the only Asiatic ceremonial that commands universal esteem” (Okakura 1964, 9).

South China is the historical birthplace of tea, which is a plant’s leaves with the scientific name *Camellia Sinensis* (or *Asamica Sinensis*). In early imperial China, tea was first ritually embedded as a medicinal and religious drink. In the eighteenth century, Chinese merchants helped popularize it as a global commodity, enabling it to become the most consumed commercial beverage today (Liu 2020). In China today, tea might first and foremost be associated with everyday Chinese as a popular drink. It is served and drunk throughout the day in homes, restaurants, work gatherings, and social and family events. It is common in various regions in China to carry a thermos of hot water and tea leaves throughout the day, as a basic drink, for some people even instead of water.

However, the habit of tea drinking as a regular practice seems to have begun in medieval China with Buddhist monasteries, later spreading to the literati and then, probably quite rapidly, to the broader population, as I will explore further hereafter (Benn 2005; Hinsch 2016). Moreover, in this article, I wish to explore further dimensions of tea culture, drinking, and commodification related to China’s religious, contemporary, religious, and political sphere. For that aim, I will trace the development of tea as a ritualistic, social, and political material, presenting new turns in contemporary tea culture. I will argue that the genealogy of tea had enabled it to play a crucial part in the constructions of religious and spiritual life in Chinese societies. Furthermore, in present day tea continues to act not only as a ritual commodity but also as a political material, an active agent within the dynamic of religion and state and self expression in the Communist state of People’s Republic of China (hereafter PRC).

## Tea and Religious Systems in China

In the domain of Buddha ancestors, drinking tea and eating rice is every-day activity. This having tea and rice has been transmitted over many years and is present right now. Thus, the Buddha ancestors’ vital activity of having tea and rice comes to us (Dogen 1984, 124).<sup>1</sup>

Late medieval China (Tang dynasty, 618-907) witnessed a relatively rapid change in drinking habits as alcohol was replaced by tea in all levels of society. Whereas tea was a marginal (southern) drink at that time, it became the locus of China's most important cultural practices (Hinsch 2016). During the Tang and Song dynasties' pivotal age, Buddhist culture had flourished and impacted society in various aspects. Within this atmosphere, Buddhists were responsible for changing people's minds regarding consuming intoxicating substances such as alcohol, which is forbidden according to Buddhist ethical rules, and spread tea drinking throughout the empire (Benn 2005, 213).

Beyond a replacement for alcohol due to the Buddhist restriction, monks saw it as a potential self-refinement tool. They pioneered tea culture and initiated tea-drinking promotion as a lofty pursuit. There is evidence that Chinese Buddhist monastics used tea for wakefulness in meditation as a medicinal herb and a sacrificial offering as early as the eighth century (Hinsch 2016, 55-56, 91; Ludwig 1981). Additionally, as tea is best cultivated in the same mountainous areas where monasteries were usually found, both Buddhist and Daoist monks soon realized the economic benefits of growing and selling this invigorating herb (Benn 2005, 68). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, right before tea production in China was at its peak, monasteries were still in charge of a large part of the production (Liu 2020).

More distinctively, there is a correlation between tea and Chan Buddhism (Li 2012, 13-15). According to the legend, tea, the drink of wakefulness, sprang from the sleepy eyelids of the Buddhist holy man Bodhidharma (Erling and Hoh 2009: 75).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, texts about tea, like the most famous *The Classic of Tea* (茶经, *chajing*) written by Lu Yu (陆羽) echoed the frugal simplicity (简朴, *jianpu*) central to Chan Buddhism (Hinsch 2016: 66). This, modest simplicity was a spiritual ideal influenced by the Buddhist aspiration for renunciation.

Apart from Buddhism, early references to tea in Chinese literature highlight the interaction between tea and various religious systems. The first allusion to tea describes when Laozi, the six century B.C. philosopher associated with Daoism, was offered a bowl of tea of a drink that is likely to be like tea. As Laozi was perceived as a master of esoteric long-life techniques, tea was later unidentified as an "elixir of immortality", tea joined the list of almost magically powerful substances that were lauded on account of their strength and efficacy (Anderson 1991, 14).

As well as being integrated into Buddhist temple rituals and metaphysical machinations of the Taoists, the practice of tea drinking became widespread in the capital Chang'an by the middle of the Tang Dynasty. As a result of its popularity among literati, Confucian elements were beginning to influence tea preparation and consumption, such as the notion of ritual antiquate- li (理) central to Confucian (儒家, *rujia*) thought. According to this social and philosophical system, li is a component of sincere respect. By behaving correctly in social situations and performing traditional

rites properly, a gentleman (君子, *jūnzi*) cultivates his spirit and promotes the functioning of society (Anderson 1991, 16). Li originally meant “a religious sacrifice, but has come to mean ceremony, ritual, decorum, rules of propriety, good form, good custom, and has even been equated with natural law” (Chan 1963, 790). Confucian rules of conduct and elements have spread beyond China to Japan and Korea, where they have continued to influence the tea ritual, aside to Buddhist elements and local esthetics.

James Benn suggested that Buddhist monks were involved in disseminating tea from the south towards central China in the first centuries CE to popularize a common beverage they could share with the literati in formal political banquets (Benn 2005, 214). Tea, therefore, became a significant cultural, ritualistic, and artistic material. Most visibly, emperors employed tea in religious rituals such as sacrifices to the gods and ancestors, replacing Alcohol, the former mark for the sacred (since distant antiquity). Considering the political importance, this substitution had profound implications, elevating the new drink into an essential tool for sanctifying the highest reaches of political power. This gradually became the drink to different courtly festivities, occasions, and celebrations (Hinsch 2016, 35-36).

## Trade, Trends, Geopolitics and Buddhism

While tea had become almost synonymous with Chinese culture, tea production and export levels and popularity trends within China have fluctuated and varied throughout the modern age. For example, tea production and export from China was at its peak in the middle of the nineteenth century when it was traded with the English and the Dutch. However, over the course of the next century the Indian tea industry, operated by British colonial planters and based in the northeast territory of Assam, suddenly overtook China as the world’s top exporter (Liu 2020, 2). The economic systems around tea have gone through a series of changes in the past century, with China going into the Communist era, which included forms of a centered and closed economy. In recent decades, economic reforms allowed Chinese tea to play a significant part in global tea consumption. Consumerist trends have also varied within China and globally in the past century. One example is the popularity of Yunnan tea, especially Pu’er, which had become extremely popular only in past decades (Hung 2015, 5).

Strikingly, the connection described here above between Buddhism and tea remains strong in contemporary China, as in the rest of Asia, where tea became strongly associated with Buddhist identities and memories (Kaplan 2017). However, this article suggests that the relationship between tea and Buddhism in China in the twenty first century is taking new turns. As Li describes it, the Buddhist cultural sphere *fojiao wenhua* (佛教文化) is merging into the Buddhist industry (佛教产业, *fojiao chanye*),

creating what Li refers to as a “Buddhist Tea Culture industry” (佛教茶文化产业, *fojiao chawen chanye*). This development of the cultural industry but also a reflection of social development (Li 2012). This Buddhist Tea Cultural Industry entails various forms, which I argue are related (though not exclusively) to the social and personal aspects of Chinese people’s religious life. Some of these forms will be explored hereafter.

In a degree of continuity, one field of influence the tea industry reaches is present-day monasteries. Today various Buddhist monasteries contain spacious tea halls. Some monasteries in the Chinese sphere still include tea as a valuable tool for self-cultivation. This is very visible in the Buddhist Monastic worlds in Taiwan. Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery (法鼓山, *Fagu Shan*), in northern Taiwan, hosts Tea Meditation sessions (茶禪, *chachan*) operated by monastics which specializes in tea (茶主人, *cha zhuren*) guiding the meditations. In influential monasteries such as Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery and Fo-Guang Shan (佛光山) monastery, which have centers in different locations worldwide, tea ceremonies, and meditations are offered to monastics and laypeople alike. In 2013 Fo-Guang Shan International Translation Center (佛光山國際翻譯中心, *Foguang Shan guoji fanyi zhangxin*) issued a short book written by master Hsing Yun explaining laypeople the relationship between Buddhism and the tea ceremony.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, in contemporary times, tea is also used by these monasteries as proselytizing the religion, making it approachable to a wider audience to enter the world of Buddhist self-cultivation.

In mainland China (PRC), tea increasingly plays a significant part among lay practitioners of Buddhism outside temple spaces. In recent decades, we have seen that lay Buddhist believers have found it rather inconvenient to attend religious activities in temples due to the demands of their modern daily lives. According to Gary Fisher, there are various “push and pull factors” for activities outside temple spaces (Fisher 2020). Buddhism in its lay form has become an active social movement today, as seen in the range of activities, associations, and networks in which laypersons take part, both within and outside of Buddhist temple space (Ji and Zhang 2018). Notably, the different modalities of lay Buddhism lack a unified framework, and significant diversity in Buddhist practice is evident, making room for flexibility and development.

## Lay Buddhist Groups

One of the modalities we are witnessing in the past decade is Buddhist study groups, Buddhist cultivation groups, and communities of lay Buddhist practitioners centered around tea houses and tea-related businesses and spaces. Fisher explored this phenomenon throughout Beijing, pointing at tea houses that serve as places for lay Buddhists. I have studied this phenomenon in Shanghai and Shenzhen, where I have documented several groups based in tea businesses and houses, varying in organizational forms. Some are loosely associated with monasteries, and some are

independent (Fisher 2020; Shmushko 2021; Shmushko 2022a; Shmushko 2022b). Generally, these spaces allow the practitioners a more structural form for their Buddhist cultivation (修行, *xiuxing*), which includes chanting and reading groups, meditation, organization of pilgrimage trips, children's Buddhist education, and devotional retreats.

In my fieldwork in the past years, I have been exposed to community-based Buddhist groups, a formation in which tea plays a central role. The first location I incorporate in this study is the village Wutong where I conducted fieldwork in 2019. Wutong is an urban village on the outskirts of Shenzhen.<sup>4</sup> Within the framework of the local government to re-develop this urban village, Wutong had become known as an artist village, attracting floating Chinese people interested in a spiritual, artistic lifestyle (Malcolm 2018). Within this atmosphere, the village also became rich soil for religious and spiritual traditions of individuals and groups, without relation to formal temple spaces.

One case study from the village is The Ru couple tea house. The tea house and guest house owned by the Ru family are located at the village's end. Apart from being a tea house serving both the locals and visitors who hike and measure around the Wutong mountain scenic area, the tea house is also a gathering place for lay Buddhists. It is particularly associated with Chan Buddhist tradition. The tea house hosts meditation and study sessions for local laypeople and is visited by monks from the area. Although the tea house is not officially associated with the nearby Hongfa temple (弘法寺, *Hongfa si*), monks from the temple often come to sit in the tea house, advise and casually talk with the guests.

Situating this group in general lines in the modern development of lay Chan Buddhism, I draw on Ji Zhe's extensive research on the modern changes in Chan Buddhism. Ji shows different types of Chan communities that place Lay Buddhist worship. He argues that Chan Buddhist lay communities are confronted with a challenge: managing the multiplicity and alterability of lay Buddhist individuals' identity. They must develop strategies to facilitate the alternation between community life of a religious character and social life under a secular world (Ji 2016).

The relatively new development (roughly beginning 2010) of private spaces, which also encompass a section of lay Chan Buddhists, is, in my opinion, one strategy employed by lay Buddhists to tackle this challenge. The grassroots modality of Chan groups meeting for practice in private spaces is a modality many lay Buddhists currently explore. While these groups vary in constellation and characteristics, my observation is that they are largely not entirely disconnected from temple activity and the monastic authority. The laypeople in the teahouse at Wutong village visit the Hongfa temple regularly and are interested in the guidance of the monks there. Nevertheless, they find it essential to create a space for their practice independent of the temple.

Another group I would include in my examples associated with the tea industry is "Pure Light Valley Retreat," which I recognize as an urban Buddhist community. The community is based in Shanghai.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, I note that this name represents the



community and a registered legal business. In this case study, the community facilitates their Buddhist cultivation, taking advantage of both the physical and financial resources of the business and the spiritual and social assistance of the community structure. Starting from a tiny studio in an alley in the Jinshan neighborhood in 2011, “Pure Light Valley Retreat” have gradually expanded their business activities and the community's size. The community currently spans over five locations, some used only for Buddhist gatherings and practices, and some used for visitors and customers. These include two small studio shops in the Jinshan neighborhood, another shop in Tian Shan Tea City (天山茶城, *Tianshan chacheng*), two larger spaces used for gatherings such as group practice (共修, *gongxiu*), and retreats.

As a community, “Pure Light Valley Retreat” comprises a group of Han Chinese practitioners who base their Buddhist practice on The Great Perfection (Tib. Dzogchen). This group is also associated with a master from the Nyingmapa lineage. Their master resides some three thousand kilometers from Shanghai in, Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and trained at the Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy (喇荣五明佛教学院, *Larong Wuming Fojiao xueyuan*). The commodities produced and sold by the group are tea, tea-ware, silk and linen clothing, and handmade prayer beads. There are not many Tibetan temples that offer official seminars for lay people around Shanghai for Tibetan Buddhism. So, many Han devotees conduct their practice at home.

An essential product in the assortment of the community is tea grown in Wuyi Mountain county in Fujian province. Customers at a shop are invited to sit and try the tea and organized tea workshops are occasionally offered as well. The practitioners in the community also treat tea not only as a tasty beverage but as one more means to a meditative state of awareness.

The shop spaces of “The Valley Retreat” offer Buddhist-related activities and commodities related to Buddhist soteriologies and Tibetan Buddhist symbols. The tea-ware features prints and engravings of the eight Tibetan auspicious symbols of good fortune, such as the parasol and the treasure vase. Other products feature verses or phrases with connotations of Buddhist principles or philosophy, for example, “My last name is emptiness” (我姓空, *woxing kong*) or “All is illusory” (一切虚幻, *yiqie xuhuan*) (Shmushko 2022a).

The appearance of tea-related private spaces as modalities for Buddhist practice is connected rooted in various factors. One reason is that these spaces appear more in urban areas where with less access to monastic communities which facilitate practice for laypeople (Fisher 2020). Another factor is the overgrowing use of social media, through which laypeople organize independent groups and communities and therefore do not strictly need the structural form of a temple and can adjust the practice according to their own schedule (Shmushko 2022a).<sup>6</sup>

## Political Dimensions

Furthermore, there is a political aspect to these independent groups and communities connected to the state of religious freedom in the People's Republic of the PRC. Throughout the 20th century, the sphere of religion in China had gone through a series of tremendous challenges; The widely known is the rise of the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) to rule in 1949 and the establishment of the PRC, which included promoting a restrictive atheist policy for decades. After various periods of bans and prosecution of religious practices and institutions under the communist leader Mao Zedong, religious traditions have gone through a period of revival throughout the past decades following the social and economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping. As a point of departure to understand the tea houses modalities of lay Buddhists, it is essential to note the relatively recent “comeback” of Buddhism to the Chinese social and public sphere.

Within this process of religious revival, Buddhist institutions, temples, and monasteries have re-opened their gates throughout the past decades. Monastic communities have recovered from the persecution during the cultural revolution, and laypeople returned to public worship in Buddhist temples (Ji, Fisher and Laliberté 2020, 1-20). But as the religious revival has developed rapidly from the reform era onwards, the PRC has maintained its mobilization of state apparatuses and resources to monitor, control, and selectively suppress types of religious groups or ideologies that seem to threaten the party-state's authority. While the Regulation on Religious Affairs (宗教事务条例, *Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli*) of the PRC includes freedom of belief (中国信仰的自由, *Zhongguo xinyang de ziyou*), as articulated in Article 2 of the regulation, all religious traditions in the PRC today are in fact subjected to a series of restrictions. Regarding freedom of belief and the practice of religion, the difficulty generally begins with the practice of religion in the public and social sphere. The regime's approach includes changing regulations and limitations on religious activities and gatherings. For example, is a regulation restricting religious activity to officially registered religious sites and a ban on religious figures from outside of China teaching or proselytizing (Leung 2018; DuBois 2017).

The current regime under Xi Jinping (习近平, born 1953) has presided over a significant regression in religious freedom (Leung 2018). In recent years, the PRC has increasingly integrated its supervision of religion into the national system of state governance and party building (Cao 2018). Along the same lines, more specific measures have been taken recently regarding religious groups. As of 2020, new administrative measures were established for Chinese religious groups (宗教团体管理办法, *Zongjiao tuanti guanli banfa*). These measures consist of six chapters and forty-one articles dealing with the organization, functions, offices, supervision, projects, and economical administration of communities and groups at both the national and local level. Every

aspect of the life of religious communities, from formation and gatherings to annual and daily projects, is subject to approval by the government's religious affairs department, the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) (Leung 2018).

These regulations and restrictions make it quite difficult for independent lay communities to form officially. Registration entails a complicated process that would also subject them to further regulations on their practice. Therefore, gathering in private, office, or commercial spaces such as tea houses offers them some resilience when they practice Buddhism "under the radar." This phenomenon does occur in other private facilities. However, I argue that it is not incidental that a significant part of the case studies shows gatherings around tea but connected to tea's long history with Buddhism.

Both in the case of monasteries and in the case of Buddhist lay groups, the presence, and importance of tea is twofold. It is functional and organizational- either in promoting and spreading Buddhist values or as a 'cover story' for the gathering of lay people to practice the religion. Secondly, as in late medieval China, it is also a tool for the Buddhist practice itself. For the two groups mentioned above, tea drinking is a practice connected to their individual cultivation and their community practice. As a ritualistic practice done within the group, tea drinking is grasped by various participants I have discussed as a shared space where they can reflect on Buddhist philosophy chant sutras and discuss their individual practice. At the same time, they sit together, concentrating meditatively on the flavor of tea, the actions needed to prepare the tea. Communities are in fact structures around commercializing the tea, but also its philosophical attributes. These case studies show that tea drinking is a meditative and concentration practice which is today promoted by laypeople and monastics throughout the Chinese Buddhist world, *de facto* re-enacting, and reconfiguring the centrality of tea in the social and material sphere.

## Teaism?

I have so far discussed the historical bond between tea to Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucian traditions and the contemporary predicament of tea within the Buddhist lay and monastic sphere. On top of these aspects, I hold that an inquiry can be made regarding tea as a center of a contemporary religious, spiritual practice. Throughout the Chinese sphere, that is, in the PRC and Taiwan, tea houses, tea stores, tea meditation groups without a particular religious orientation are popping out in the past decades. Tea lovers' groups with various philosophical discussions appear throughout social media, where people show their appreciation for tea as a drinkable delicious product and a spiritual tool.

The question to be asked here is whether it should be recognized as a religious or spiritual practice agent in and of itself? Should then we talk about the present-day movement of teaism? If we do recognize this as a spiritual phenomenon, should it then be labeled as New Religious Movement (NRM)?<sup>7</sup>

Treating tea as a center for an aesthetic, ritualistic practice is not new, and tea ceremonies are common around Asia, particularly in Japanese, Korean and Chinese societies. According to Jennifer Anderson, in contrast to many rituals studied by anthropologists, the evolution of the tea ceremony had been carefully chronicled by an unusually sophisticated body of observers for hundreds of years.<sup>8</sup> These circumstances give modern scholars an opportunity to see the evolution of these ceremonies throughout ages (Anderson 1991, 13). Therefore, we can explore their modern manifestation, considering the interweaving of personalities, artifacts, and ideas that enhance every tea ritual performed today.

Maybe the most popular well-known today is the Japanese tea ceremony known as “The Way of Tea” (茶道, ch. *Chadao*; 茶の湯, jp. cha-no-yu). It is a traditional form of the tea ceremony and cultural activity involving the ceremonial preparation and presentation of Matcha (抹茶, Jp. macca), powdered green tea.

According to Kakuzo Okakura in his famous *The Book of Tea*:

Teaism is a cult founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence. It inculcates purity and harmony the mystery of mutual charity, the romanticism of the social order. It is essentially a worship of the imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we have known as life (Okakura 1964, 3).

Okakura wrote this book directed to a Western audience, describing Japanese tea culture right at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His agenda was to show the strength of eastern culture at the dawn of western colonialism and judgment of Asian cultures. Nevertheless, the observation that tea is in and of itself deserving an “ism” is what I suggest should be explored also within the context of current day Chinese urban sphere.

Going back further in History, Lu Yu’s *Classic of Tea*, also can enlighten us regarding tea as a religion in and of itself. Lu Yu’s contribution to Chinese tea culture resulted in a posthumous deification of him as the Chinese “God of Tea” (Anderson 1991, 18). The classic of tea was in fact the first definitive work on cultivating, making, and drinking tea. By treating tea as a serious subject, the tea connoisseur Lu Yu convinced legions of readers to regard it with respect. The book subjected every aspect of tea to detailed analysis, proving it worthy of sustained study and reflection. In presenting tea drinking as an elegant pursuit, Lu imbued it with intellectual and spiritual depth. And in addition to writing the most important book about tea, Lu Yu also built up a network of connections with courtiers, literati, erudite Buddhist monks, and other tastemakers, convincing them to venerate this drink as a token of high culture (Hinsch 2016, 55).

The text and its author were significant because they represented a discourse about tea beyond the bifurcation of religious and secular tea rituals. Nevertheless, Lu Yu

synthesized diverse religious philosophies in the text and related them to tea. He employed Daoist symbolism to highlight the individual's relationship to an ordered cosmos. However, He was also expressing concern for proper antiquate in the Confucian way of the vision of the social order (Anderson 1991, 16).

This hybridity of cultural and religious influences is also apparent around tea practices, commodification, and groups today, both in Chinese societies and beyond, East and West. Tea, in that sense, had become a material of worship, spiritual and ritualistic commodity that transcends dichotomies of specific religious sects, cultural contexts or linguistic fields.

## Drinking Tea to Fill a Spiritual Void

We can articulate an independent sociological capacity to the tea-house group modality in its Chinese context, which concerns the place of tea and its effect on the individual. In *The Rise of Tea Culture in China and the Invention of the Individual*, Bert Hinsch argues that the adoption of tea drinking and connoisseurship is connected to a shift to individualism in Chinese society that accrued in the Tang-Song dynasties. The general mentality underwent profound changes, making individualism an essential and valuable cultural trait. Intelligent drinkers quickly realized that drinking tea is a sophisticated style that offered them novel opportunities to express their accomplishments, cultivations, ideas, and emotions—tea culture unfinished individualistic expression (Hinsch 2016, 66).

Relating the place of tea to modern Chinese discourse on individuality, I see tea as a spiritual commodity that enters a discussed “spiritual void” or a “moral crisis” widely acknowledged in popular discourses concerning Chinese society (Palmer and Winiger 2019). While this crisis has its specific trajectory, it can also be helpful to view it in light of young people's global search for a spiritual path to respond to Western modernity (Taylor 2007, 506).

One of the many simplistic explanations of the religious boom in reform-era China is that, disenchanted with the bankruptcy of Communist ideologies, the Chinese people feel “spiritually empty” and therefore want to return to traditional religious practices or to seek new spiritual solace (Chau 2020, 2). The past decades of re-establishing the spiritual and religious sphere in Chinese society (after the damages of the cultural revolution) can be correlated to the third stage in Charles Taylor's *Nova Effect*. The *Nova Effect* described an explosion of secularity, which reached its culmination in the latter half of the twentieth century. The third stage, “the age of authenticity,” describes a generalized culture of expressive individualism, in which people are encouraged to find their own way, discover their fulfillment, “do their own thing” (Taylor 2007, 299). Tea-

related activities do, I argue, resonate with Taylor's notion of "spiritual individualisms," which had been around for a long time (Taylor, 2007, 473). This case study argues that tea in contemporary society enables the individual to distinguish themselves by relating to a product associated with both a long deep tradition and a mystical, spiritual affinity. Furthermore, tea allows Chinese spiritual seekers to "do their own thing" in the sphere of belief, in a state which highly regulates religious practice.

In defining the state of individual freedom in the PRC, Palmer and Winiger argue that the "Neo-socialist governmentality" constructed in the past decades "is not the decentralized and contingent rationality of neo-liberalism, nor is it simply the direct imprinting of the will of the state onto passive, cynical and foot-dragging individual subjects. It operates through the opening of spaces of public discourse and collective action within which neo-socialist rationalities enter into productive tension with popular desires and cultural movements." Drawing on this analysis, I suggest that tea and other spiritual and cultural objects of consumption are currently part of the assortment explored by Chinese subjects. They are negotiating subjectivity, individuality, and religiosity, within the state-defined discourse about religion.

The discussed subjectivity and individuality are, though they seem to negate the core notion of detachment from distinct Self, are attributed in many of the cases to Buddhist practice. From an emic perspective, they are considered a tool, a skillful mean (方便, *fāngbiàn*). Buddhist practice is individualistic in its methods but not in its goal or ultimate orientation. Therefore, the focus of the Buddhist path is precise to work on the problem of the individual Self by exposing its contradictions and porous boundaries (Van der Braak 2020, 163). After all, as noted through some of these case studies, the phenomenon of teahouses shows a strive for communal religious practice, which is aimed not at the Self, but at the other, through cultivating compassion. On the surface in any case, these are examples of materiality which is shared.

## Tea: A Vibrant, Political Matter

In the earlier sections, I have described a recognized spiritual void and the revival of religion in Chinese society. As a material, I have shown how tea is consumed, used, applied, and even worshiped within these trajectories. Both trajectories can account for the re-surfing or continuing popularity of tea-related practices in Chinese society about other religious traditions and as a spiritual practice in and of itself.

However, can we also open a space for discussion on the possibility of treating tea not only as a material that humans consume and employ but as an active agent in and of itself? Bruno Latour's critique on the social sciences generated a material category of "quasi-agents" situated on a spectrum between nature and society. According to Latour:

Objects are not the shapeless receptacles of social categories... Quasi-objects are much more social, much more fabricated, much more collective than the 'hard' parts of nature, but they are in no way the arbitrary receptacles of a full-fledged society (Latour 1991, 55).

Viewing the examples mentioned above, which show a profound impact on social processes and configurations related to tea, it is helpful to consider Latour's approach as a viable theoretical scheme for tea as a material. Tea, as a quasi-object, is as social as it is natural, as active as passive, and as critically efficient in the human world as in the plant or still world of objects.

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett argues that political theory needs better to recognize the active participation of nonhuman forces in events. This philosophical standpoint is based on a line of thinkers, Spinoza's concept of *Conatus*, which speaks of power present in every body. Consequently, she speaks of materials as possessing a "thing power," as playing an active role in public life (Bennett 2010, 57). "Even a falling stone", writes Spinoza, "is endeavoring, as far as in it lies, to continue in its motion." (Spinoza 1995, 283). Tea has been cultivated, processed, harvested, and drunk by human beings for a couple of millenniums, but it has performed a social role that can be seen as vibrant and not passive. Of boiling water, they are a part of an assemblage of occurrences, exchanges of materials, and transformation of energies, which comprises our precepted social and cultural reality. Tea is, therefore, a mediator, another actor involved in transitions, processes, and political evolutions. Therefore, we can explore the possibility of tea holding its trajectory, potential, and effectiveness and possessing its trajectory, (not in the sense that tea leaves jump into a cup), but as active mediators, in the Deleuzian sense:

Mediators are fundamental. Creation is all about mediators. Without them nothing happens. They can be people but things too, even plants or animals. If you're not in some series, even a completely imaginary one, you are lost. You are always working in a group, even when you seem to be on your own. (Deleuze 1995, 125).

In this passage, Deleuze points to the perception of events as creations of multiple actors. I suggest that tea, within this framework, should also be observed as a player next to religious actors, spiritual individuals, and regimes. In the case of Buddhism and the PRC, I propose that it is a mediator in creating a certain equilibrium, dynamics between religion and state which is constantly being negotiated.

As discussed above, Xi Jinping's treatment of religion contains harsh restrictions, but the strategy is attacking and prohibiting the religion directly when it comes to



Buddhism. The CCP had not opposed the expansion of Buddhism and even formed what Laliberté calls a 'passive form of support' to control the influence of Buddhism and use it for the state's objectives (Laliberté 2016). One element in the CCP's redefining of Buddhism is Xi's ongoing emphasis on the aspect of "Buddhism as culture" that the CCP now considers a core element of Chinese civilization. In recent years, Xi has expressed the idea that Buddhism is a tradition, not a religion (Ashiwa and Wank 2020; Dubois 2018; Shmushko 2022b). His speeches, writings, and media statements contain rhetoric aimed to fuse religious teachings with Chinese culture (Xi 2014). In response, prominent clerics, using variations on the theme of "Buddhism as culture," show people appropriate ways to combine a belief in Buddhism with loyalty to the CCP. Aligning themselves with the state's policy, these clerics have shifted from broadcasting Buddhism as "religion" (宗教, *zongjiao*, i.e., dharma talks, chanting) to relate to it as "culture" (文化, *wenhua*). Ashiwa and Wank have observed that large Buddhist websites, which feature global coverage of Chinese Buddhist temples and events, as well as articles on "Buddhism as culture" (focusing on architecture, music, and the tea ceremony), have turned Buddhist clerics into media stars (Ashiwa and Wank 2020). Within this discourse about Buddhism, I believe that even religious actors who are not officially registered are also affected by this "Buddhism as culture" narrative. Concerning lay practitioners, I have already described here above how tea can act as a shield for religious and spiritual practices by establishing tea houses for Buddhist practice.

I wish to stress that this dynamic in the PRC comprises various actors. It includes the CCP actively deciding their agenda towards religion, creating policy, and informing it. It, of course, includes Buddhist institutions, groups, and individuals who react to these policies, whether by implementing them fully or partially. These actors, agents of social reality, are manifestations of the political reality of religion in the PRC.

## Conclusion

This article attempted to broaden the discussion about tea in Chinese society, building on the religious attributes of tea and by looking at the materiality of tea in the contemporary social and religious sphere. While I relied on literary sources and historical details, the article was contextualized to shift to the material. As a field of academic inquiry, religious studies have begun to be marked by this material turn. This emphasizes the importance of objects, sensation, and commodification in religious subjects and societies. A growing body of scholarship within this movement focuses on materiality in the study of religions which "signals the need to pay urgent attention to a real, material world of objects and a texture of lived, embodied experience." (Pintchman 2016, 4). Material culture is a fruitful way to understand how religion works. Many scholars have come to regard belief as shifting practices, as what people do rather than



only or primarily the doctrines or texts they observe. Even when some religious actors destroy or change the use of objects such as images and larger objects such as spaces of worship, we can see material culture at work (Morgan 2008, 228–229). This means that as a researcher I let myself be led in the trajectory of the material - tea - to ask question regarding social and cultural and religious spheres, themes and actors.

I have shown that tea is a spiritual or religious practice in distinct religious traditions such as Buddhism or Daoism and in hybrid or diverse forms of religiosity. Within this inquiry, I have explored the growing need for redefinition and articulation of religious and spiritual individual and communal realms within Chinese society, currently also filled with tea-related practices. This is visible in various levels of religiously and building of spiritual worlds; from monastic communities in Buddhist to lay people as well as secular people. I have also explored the possibility of tea standing as a tradition, practice, and maybe even religion in and of itself. Finally, within this material inquiry of tea, I have gone further to inquire into the new-material philosophical perspective and how it can contribute to our understanding of the materiality of tea in China. Within this exploration is a call to view critically and particularly the material components constructing our contemporary realities, putting them at the center of the stage of inquiry into cultural and religious phenomena. In the case of tea, it is evident that in China, it is a vital component of social, political and spiritual matter, contextualized deeply in the workings of social conceptions, ethical values, ritual traditions, and religious-political power dynamics.

## **Conflict of Interest**

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The thirteenth century Japanese Zen master Dōgen Zenji writes (Dōgen 1985, 124). The Chan School (禪宗, *Chan zong*) is an indigenous form of Chinese Buddhism that developed from the sixth century CE and subsequently spread to the rest of East Asia. In Japan, as well as in Western societies, it is referred to as Zen.
- <sup>2</sup> A semi mythological figure in the early history of Chinese Buddhism.
- <sup>3</sup> For more about these two major monasteries in Taiwan see: Jens Reinke (2017); Richard Madsen (2008).
- <sup>4</sup> The rapid urbanization of the PRC since the mid-1980s has led to the development of a new spatial category, which describes rural villages that have been absorbed by urban spatial or administrative growth. In the Shenzhen area, these are informal urban developments constructed by indigenous villagers outside of the regulatory planning apparatus of the state. They are typified by their appearance; dense clusters of poor-quality buildings and a degraded environment. They are home to those on the fringe of city life and are increasingly seen as informal, transitional, and flexible spaces. See Zhan Yang (2021); Wang Y., Y. Wang and J. Wu. (2009); Wu, F., F. Zhang and C. Webster (2013); Mary Ann O'Donnell (2017). References should be consistent in presentation.
- <sup>5</sup> To maintain the anonymity of my informants, I have assigned pseudonyms to the community itself as well as to the master and all lay actors.
- <sup>6</sup> See Zhang Yanshuang (2017) and Stefania Travagnin (2018).
- <sup>7</sup> New Religious movements are religious and spiritual groups which appear in the modern era as peripheral to society's dominant religious culture (that is, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam). There are various criteria to what this category entails, with various controversies among scholars. More on NRM see for example Michael W. Ashcraft (2018).
- <sup>8</sup> Tea drinking and ceremonies appear in a wide spectrum of sources in China and Japan, from poems and prose to imperial historical documents.

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