

# The Role of Chinese Tea Shops in Promoting Chinese Tea Culture in Bangkok<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

During the current period of time, there are many tea shops that have recently opened and some old tea shops have been developed to meet the global change. Moreover, there are Chinese restaurants at five-star hotel that have been opened and developed by adding various kinds of Chinese tea to their menu to catch up with the re-flourish of Chinese cultural from the end of twentieth century until the present time.

This article is an attempt to study the role of Chinese tea shops in promoting Chinese tea culture with an assumption that they have a function to provide a public space for people who love to consume Chinese tea. These shops gathered Chinese tea drinkers and Chinese tea porcelain lovers to share their knowledge of Chinese tea, Chinese tea porcelain collecting, and other topics.

The research reveals that some Chinese tea shops not only sell Chinese tea leaves and Chinese tea, but act as a public space for customers to come to learn Chinese tea culture and Chinese tea related things. Although Chinese tea originated from China, when it spread throughout the world, each country developed Chinese tea as their unique beverage. When we consider Bangkok nowadays, we find

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that we have different kinds of tea shops; for instance, English tea shops, such as Witthard of Chelsea; Japanese tea shops, such as Cha Ho, and Chinese tea shops, such as Ong's Tea. These tea shops have tried to create their own brands and improve the uniqueness of English tea, Japanese tea, or Chinese tea. The Chinese tea shops, such as Ong Ew Kee, Ong's Tea, Three Horses, and Ju Rui Tang, bear the function of promoting Chinese tea culture and public space for people who love to consume Chinese tea.

### **The Criteria and Scope**

The criteria for selection of these three Chinese tea shops – Ong Ew Kee and Ong's Tea, Three Horses or Henry Wei, and Ju Rui Tang – is that the first two shops have operated for almost a century; they are representative of old Chinese tea shops that have developed to catch up with the social change. Ju Rui Tang, on the other hand, was just opened about two years ago; this shop is representative of a Chinese tea shop opened recently. Also, the main product item of these shops is Chinese tea, mostly imported from China. Moreover, the owners and the sellers are able to share knowledge on Chinese tea with the customers very well. The customers who come to these Chinese tea shops will be provided with a Chinese tea set ready for brewing and knowledge on Chinese tea from the owners. They also share experience on Chinese tea. In other words, we probably could say that these Chinese tea shops provide a public space for Chinese tea drinkers who love consuming Chinese tea and to have a place to share the Chinese tea experience between the owners and the customers.

The ancient scholars used to pleasantly discuss many topics at the time of tea drinking. The topics that were mentioned during tea time covered all the realms of knowledge, both the sciences and arts. The length of time in the tea meeting could be similar to a meeting where alcohol was consumed. The atmosphere was pleasant for

talking about unlimited topics – knowledge, philosophical ideas, painting, poetry, dances, social and official analysis, because the meetings of tea gangs were small and cozy. All members were well acquainted and like-minded in those topics.<sup>3</sup>

## Ong Ew Kee<sup>4</sup>

### History and Concept

Ong Ew Kee is very old; it has been opened at Phraya Sri Square or Si Kak Phraya Sri, Bumrungruang Road for almost a hundred years, since the reign of King Rama VI. This area was the center of merchandise during that period. Both Chinese and Western merchants opened their shops in this area so that most Bangkokians came to this area to buy goods.<sup>5</sup>

According to interviews with Ms. Nopphorn Phasaphong and Mr. Witchu Phasaphong, the third generation owners of Ong's tea, because of several wars and economical crises in China, their grandfather left Anxi Village in Fujian province, which is famous for making Tie Guan Yin Tea, for Bangkok since the reign of King Chulalongkorn. He was just about nineteen years old. He opened a tea shop at Bamrungruang Road. At that time there were probably other tea shops in Bangkok because his grandfather's cousins also came to Bangkok and they knew the way of producing and buying tea as well. Customers of Ong Ew Kee at that time were the royal elite, the rich, high ranking officials, both Chinese, Sino-Thai, and Thai. These customers bought tea to drink themselves, and to give to the monks to make merit. The Chinese and Sino-Thai also served tea to their gods every day, especially in their rituals. Most of them, after serving tea to the gods, drank that same kind of tea during the day. In fact, many Chinese people keep the best tea only for the gods; for themselves they drink a lower-grade kind of tea.

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<sup>3</sup> Rueang-rong Rung-ratsami, *The Scent of Tea*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Interview, Nopphorn Phasaphong and Witchu Phasaphong, Owners, Ong Ew Kee and Ong's Tea Shops, 16 July 2009 and 21 July 2009, respectively. Interview, Prayong Niratprachakul, Staff, Ong Ew Kee Tea Shop, 1 June 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Sansani Wirasinchai, *The First "Western" Trading Centre in Bangkok*, 60-65.

The reason for open a tea shop was because his ancestors owned a Chinese tea plantation at Fujian Province. It was the best place for a tea plantation. However, during that period, the end of the Qing Dynasty, there was chaos in China, an economic crisis, and several wars inside China. A lot of Chinese people emigrated from China to abroad, including Thailand, to find better opportunities.



**Figure 1:** Ong Ew Kee Chinese Tea Shop, Bamrungmuang Road with old chinese tea cabinet keeping packs of tea leaves inside. Photo by the author, 2009.

### The Main Products

At Ong Ew Kee, there are old cabinet with packs of tea inside. These kinds of cupboard can be found at other old tea leaf shops in Yaowarat. There are various brands of tea at Ong Ew Kee, for example, Tra Pan Tea (Cha Tra Pan), Golden Dragon Tea (Cha Tra



Mangkorn Thong), Green Dragon Tea (Cha Tra Mangkorn Khiew), which were very famous in the past, especially in the country side. The lowest price is twenty baht per pack.

Ong Ew Kee now seems to be the oldest tea shop that has kept developing products and markets in Bangkok or maybe in Thailand. After the shop at Bamrungmuang became successful, the owner and their descendants opened other branches under the name of Ong's Tea at Jasco, Yao Han, Gaysorn Plaza, Siam Discovery, and Siam Paragon. They became public spaces for Chinese tea lovers to come and share their knowledge and experience on Chinese tea and other topics.



**Figure 2:** Ong's Tea at Siam Discovery selling Chinese tea, Chinese teapots and tea utensils. The Shop is decorated like a gallery. Photo by the author, 2009.

Inside the shop at Siam Discovery, one may see that the decorations and furnishings are unique, similar to a gallery, with soft

Chinese instrumental songs. The decorations are very beautiful. There are pictures displayed inside the shop, including a picture of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn when she visited the shop. This is the owner's pride. There is also a plaque inside the shop:

Established 20 years in Siam. One of the biggest firms in Siam dealing in Tea. Sole Agents of ANN KHOTO TEA, world-renowned for its excellent flavour and unrivalled in quality. Purveyors of tea to merchants and notabilities, especially to the Lord Chamberlain's Department of the Ministry of the Royal Household. Tea sold by our firm is of superior quality and is unsurpassed in flavour so if you want to get good tea, please come straight to us and get your supply from OUANG EWE KEE, 677&679 Sao Ching Cha Square, Bangkok.

This is an old plaque used for advertisement in the past and also another pride of the shop which confirms the long history of Ong Ew Kee. The customers of this teashop include merchants and nobility, especially the Lord Chamberlain's Department of the Ministry of the Royal Household. The use of English language in the advertisement indicates that at that time Ong Ew Kee's customers included foreigners.

The products inside the shop include teapots. Ms. Nopporn said that there are some people who buy teapots only for keeping and showing, not for use. These teapots are quite expensive and are provided for the customers here. Ong Ew Kee at Bamrungmuang Road, or even other tea shop at Yaowarat, does not have this kind of product. Their products are focused on items imported from China, Taiwan and Japan.

There is a corner for tea making and tea drinking inside the shop. Since their tea is high quality, high priced, and the shop is in an air-conditioned site, and is well-equipped, they can give the opportunity to the customers to taste each kind of tea before making a decision to buy. The shop provides sweets for customers to keep the customers inside the shop and enjoy a cup or a pot of tea with friends longer than

the old tea shop. In other words, the shop functions as a public space for people who love to consume Chinese tea to come and share their knowledge on Chinese tea – its history, leaves, pot, and other topics.

### Customers

Customers can order green tea jellies, green tea ice cream, and green tea in a bottle. They will serve Chinese hot tea for free. They also have a menu for Chinese tea. Customers choose which kind of tea they would like and the staff will make a pot of tea and refill the water as much as they would like.



**Figure 3:** The atmosphere and tea accompaniment inside Ong's Tea at Siam Discovery. Photo by the author, 2009.

Some customers come to the Ong's Tea shop to drink Chinese tea and talk about Chinese tea leaves; although some customers talking about other topics. Some customers bring new Chinese tea leaves to try and exchange with other customers in their gang, and

some customers bring their new Chinese teapots to brew Chinese tea to try its taste. This represents that Ong's Tea Chinese tea shop unexpectedly has assumed the duty of promoting Chinese tea consumption, and also serves as a public space for sharing information.

The reason to open the branch at Siam Discovery and Siam Paragon relates to the stream of change and development. During the period of Ong Ew Kee at Bamrungmuang Road during the reign of King Rama VI, that area, Si Kak Phraya Sri, was a very famous commercial zone. There were both foreign and Chinese department stores along the road. Ms. Nopphorn has heard from some elders that there was a horse cart that came from the palace and parked in front of the shop to buy things and ended up buying tea leaves at Ong Ew Kee before returning to the palace. Thus, the idea of selecting a place for a Chinese tea shop of Ong has tended to be in the center of the merchandise zone, the center of community, from the past until the present.

Since then, the shop has developed quality products and packaging. But their business was side tracked by World War II. Some children of the grandparents were sent to the countryside at Pathum Thani Province, some children left for Taiwan to organize a tea plantation. During that period, the Thai government abolished diplomatic relations with China. The Chinese government confiscated all tea plantations in China. The shop could not bring Chinese tea leaves from China, but they solved this problem with the tea plantation in Taiwan instead. When the Chinese and Thai government reestablished diplomatic relations in 1975, the shop started to buy Chinese tea from China again. Tea prices from China were lower than from Taiwan. For the quality, they cannot compare to each other as it depends on who likes which kind of tea; however, the Chaozhou and Fujian people in Thailand prefer tea from Fujian province.

There are more customers at the present because of the new trend for the health benefits of Chinese tea. Ong's Tea is focused on the high market and the middle-high class. Some old Chinese tea shops have faded away because they do not continuously create new markets.



## **Three Horses or Henry Wei<sup>6</sup>**

### **History and Concept**

Three Horses Tea Shop was established in 1940. The tea merchant started the business by riding a bicycle to sell Chinese tea leaves to their customers. Then, when the business was enlarged, the ancestors opened a Chinese tea shop on Charoen Krung Road. At the present, this Chinese tea shop is the oldest and biggest Chinese tea shop in that area. According to an interview with the Chinese tea expert of the shop, they have four kinds of Chinese tea leaves: Wu long Shui Xian, Wu long Tie Guan Yin, Green tea, and Jasmine tea. They provide cool and ready drink Jasmine tea for all customers of this shop to try. In other word, this shop is a public space for customers to try their first sip of Chinese tea and sharing experience and with the staff of the shop.

### **The Main Products**

Tea leaves are imported from China and Taiwan. The decoration inside the teashop is mixed between the new and old style. They cut and paste columns from the newspaper regarding the benefits of Chinese tea to promote their own tea leaves. The strong points that have kept the shop operating for a very long time are the quality of the tea leaves and honesty towards the customer. In the past, every year in September the shop would open a booth at Makro Department Store to demonstrate the way of brewing Chinese tea, letting the customer try Chinese tea and buy Chinese tea leaves. Religious and New Year festivals are the periods when the shop does their best sales because people want to offer a package of tea leaves in alms presented to the Buddhist monks. According to an interview with Mr. Ekkalak Anurakthada, a specialist on Chinese tea leaves, nowadays the young people do not know how to brew Chinese tea, thus the shop innovates Chinese tea leaves in teabags to be more convenient for consumption.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview, Ekkalak Anurakthada, Expert Staff, Three Horses Tea Shop, 16 June 2012.



**Figure 4:** Boxes of Henry Wei Chinese Tea for sale inside Waterdrop Tea House and Restaurant. Photo by the author, 2012.

### Customers

The elderly customers prefer Wu long Shui Xian, while the middle-aged customers prefer Wu long Tie Guan Yin, and the younger ones prefer green tea. Their customers are Thai, Chinese, and foreigners, both women and men. They can come to learn Chinese tea knowledge from the experts and the staff of the shop. Also, the customers and staff share their experience on Chinese tea. Demonstrations on Chinese tea are organized to present to the customers inside the shop – a public space for people who love Chinese tea consumption.

## Ju Rui Tang<sup>7</sup>

### Concept and Products

Ju Rui Tang or JRT Chinese tea shop is situated near Chong Nonsi sky train station. The shop distributes Pu-er Chinese tea leaves and various styles of Chinese tea utensils, especially Chinese teapots: Yixing, porcelain in various auspicious meaning patterns such as *bat*,<sup>8</sup> plum, bamboo, and pile tree – these trees and flowers bear the meaning of friendship. This knowledge is gained from the owner of the shop. This shop has provided the second floor as a public space for Chinese tea drinkers.

The shop's owner is Paulla from China. She can speak Chinese, English, and Thai. She can give a lot of information on Chinese tea, especially Chinese tea brewing, the proper temperature of water for brewing each kind of Chinese tea, as well as the benefit of Pu-er tea that was planted in Yunnan.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, Paulla, Owner, Ju Rui Tang Tea Shop, 29 May 2012.

<sup>8</sup> The Chinese pronunciation of *bat* is similar to the word meaning lucky in Chinese character.



**Figure 5:** Various styles of Chinese tea sets for sale inside JRT Chinese Tea Shop. Photo by the author, 2012.



The decoration of the tea shop is in the style of a gallery. Chinese tea leaves are on the left side and paintings on Chinese tea topic are on the right side. There are Chinese paintings depicting Chinese tea drinking as well. In the middle are various kinds of Chinese tea porcelain. All products are imported from China. Chinese teapots at this shop are not as expensive as the ones at Ong's Tea; however, the customers are the middle-high class as well. A glass Chinese teapot costs about 450 baht, one Chinese tea brewing cup costs about 300-400 baht. They also sell the paintings which cost almost one hundred thousand baht each.

The second floor is for Chinese tea drinking; the drinkers may reserve the table in advance, then Chinese tea utensils will be prepared to serve the customers. According to Paulla, some customers come often to this public space to drink or sip tea. The occupations of the customer are reporters, businessmen and officers who work near the tea shop. They are 30-40 years old. Some customers have already consumed Chinese Pu-er tea before coming to the shop, some customers started to drink it here. Women prefer fermented Pu-er tea, for the men, they preferred green Pu-er tea because it is stronger than the fermented type. Both Pu-er teas benefit reduced fat and weight; reduced cholesterol; the fermented Pu-er tea has no caffeine so the customers can drink all day. The older Pu-er tea is the better. There are also some quite inexpensive products here, for instance, a package of Pu-er tea, three years old, weighing 100 grams, produced on 13 July 2008, costs 160 baht.

### **Customers**

According to Paulla, for those who would like to drink tea, they have to learn about Chinese tea first because there are several kinds of Chinese tea and each Chinese tea has different benefits. Then, they need to know about themselves to realize which kind of tea they like, and which kind of tea is appropriate to their health. This knowledge we can learn during the period of drinking Chinese tea together with other people who drink tea or with the sellers in this public space.

With respect to sales, firstly, customers can use a credit card for large amount of sale, for example one thousand baht or more. Secondly, Tou tea was given as a souvenir for customers who come in the first day the tea shop was opened. Thirdly, Chinese tea knowledge is given to the customers. This shop has become a public space especially for people who love to share their knowledge and learned about Chinese tea.

### **The Role and Characteristics of Chinese Tea Shops in Promoting Chinese Tea Culture in Bangkok: Public Space for People who Love Chinese Tea Consumption**

When entering these kinds of Chinese tea shops, various kinds of Chinese tea leaves presented on the shelves can be seen, along with Chinese tea sets, both for demonstration and sale. The owners or the sellers know about various kinds of Chinese tea leaves and Chinese tea brewing very well, and they are able to give knowledge and information on Chinese tea to new customers. A demonstration of each kind of tea brewing process and its benefit will be made. For brewing Chinese tea, stress is put on selecting the Chinese tea leaves and the water, preparing the tea utensils, especially a Chinese teapot that suits each kind of Chinese tea. There are both Gong Fu and Gai Wan.



**Figure 6:** A Whole Chinese Tea Set for Demonstration of Chinese Tea Brewing at JRT Chinese Tea Shop. Photo by the author, 2012.

They also stress taking care of the customers, not only sharing knowledge and information on Chinese tea, but also to remember each customer's preference for each kind of Chinese tea. When new Chinese tea leaves arrive at the shops, the owner or the seller will call the customer to tell them about the new Chinese tea. Not only Chinese tea leaves, but also Chinese teapots, they all know and remember the preference of the customers. When good Chinese teapots come to the shops, they will tell the interested customer not to miss these quality ones. This is a way to get more customers, as well as to treat and keep the customers. For the customers, they will receive knowledge on Chinese tea from both the sellers and other customers. Among the customers are members of Chinese tea gangs who bring new Chinese teapots to try brewing Chinese tea. They talk about Chinese tea legends, Chinese teapots, Chinese tea leaves, and other topics. In this

way, the Chinese tea shop is a public space to promote Chinese tea knowledge and to share information.

## Conclusion

Bangkok is a big metropolis with a long history. As its foundation, various nationalities came to here to settle, bringing their culture and way of life. Particularly, the Chinese culture was powerful because of good diplomatic relations between the government of Siam and China. Chinese tea consuming culture was a precious value for the royal court, which can be seen during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. A trace of this Chinese culture still exists in Bangkok, even though it is less popular than in the former time. However, the influence of materialism and globalization has resulted in the Chinese tea consuming culture resurging and being adopted as a value by the middle class in Bangkok.

Nowadays, in this chaotic capital city, where appropriate places for people who love to consume Chinese tea to meet and share their knowledge on Chinese tea are rarely found, public gardens, Chinese restaurants, and Chinese tea shops bear the function of gathering Chinese tea drinkers. Many tea shops are opened for people who love Chinese tea consumption. In these shops, they not only sell tea leaves, but they provide a place for meeting and drinking for their customers. Chinese tea shops have become a public space where Chinese tea knowledge and experience is shared. The owners and the staff of these shops seem to be the lecturers of Chinese tea leaf selection, Chinese teapot selection, Chinese tea brewing techniques, etc. Thus, some Chinese tea shops are not only the places for selling Chinese tea, but they also help promote Chinese tea culture.

Naturally, Chinese tea drinkers who are able to brew Chinese tea at home have to have knowledge of Chinese tea brewing and especially how to take care of Chinese tea. Thus, Chinese tea drinkers or customers of these kind of Chinese tea shops that help promote Chinese tea culture not only gain knowledge on Chinese tea history, Chinese teapots, Chinese tea sweets, and Chinese tea brewing technique, they also study Chinese tea knowledge and know that Chinese tea drinking with companionship increases joyfulness. Such



joyfulness leads many customers to spend their time in this kind of Chinese tea shops longer. The joyfulness of talking about Chinese tea includes how to brew Chinese tea, each kind of tea leaves, which should be paired with which kind of sweet, and what kind of teapot should be used, although sometime the conversation leads to other topics apart from what is all about tea. This is the role of Chinese tea shops in promoting Chinese tea culture in that they provide space for giving, exchanging, and sharing the drinkers and collectors' experiences and knowledge on Chinese tea.

Chinese tea drinkers are not limited by a range of gender, age, and nationalities. How much time they spent drinking tea for pleasure should be considered. These kinds of tea shops serve a very good role in promoting Chinese tea culture. The shops have become public spaces for Chinese tea drinkers, Chinese tea experts, and Chinese tea amateurs to come and share their knowledge on Chinese tea. The young and the elderly drinkers and collectors of Chinese tea ceramic sets meet here to exchange their experience on Chinese tea.

As there are various groups of customers, when you come to this kind of Chinese tea shops it is recommended to leave enough time to pay attention and appreciate the tea drinking while accessing Chinese tea culture. Affection for Chinese tea plus knowledge of Chinese tea by the Chinese tea drinkers, Chinese tea set collectors and the staff of Chinese tea shops make this kind of the Chinese tea shops a place for gaining and giving knowledge and pleasure on Chinese tea consumption. This is why at present this kind of Chinese tea shop is a very good place for promoting Chinese tea culture and serves as a public space for people who love the same thing – Chinese tea consumption.

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