

# The Universe in a Cup of Tea: Cultural Changes in Social Transformation Seen from the Guanying Old Teahouse in Peng Town

Xiang Li\*

*School of Ethnology and sociology Southwest Minzu Institute, Southwest Minzu University, Chengdu, China*

**Abstract:** Teahouses are vibrant carriers of Chengdu's regional culture and important windows for observing social transformation and cultural change. People from all directions can gather in the teahouse, a public space, to drink tea, chat, and exchange ideas. In the grand picture of China's sweeping social transformation, those seemingly static traditional cultural spaces are often undergoing the most profound and vivid internal changes. The Guanying Old Teahouse in Peng Town, Shuangliu District, Chengdu, is not a museum exhibit sealed under glass but a "living" cultural site. Here, the century-old tea fragrance intertwines with the rapidly changing spirit of the times; the slow daily life of local elders coexists with the footsteps of global tourists, forming a vivid scene for understanding social transformation and cultural change. This article takes the Guanying Old Teahouse in Peng Town, Chengdu, and other typical cases as the core, combining an anthropological perspective to explore the cultural persistence and adaptive changes of old teahouses during social transformation from the simple dimensions of daily practice, social interaction, and functional evolution.

**Keywords:** Social Transformation; Cultural Change; Guanying Old Teahouse; Chengdu

## 1. Introduction

"Sunny days are rare in the sky, but teahouses are many on the ground." This saying accurately describes the important significance of teahouses in Chengdu's culture and the deep connection between Chengdu and tea culture. For Chengdu residents, teahouses have never been merely places to drink tea but public spaces deeply embedded in daily life. Here, people chat casually, mediate disputes, exchange information, and even conduct livelihood

transactions. From the late Qing and Republican era's "half the city's residents are tea drinkers" to today's bustling popular check-in spots, the fate of old teahouses has always been in sync with social development.

Social transformation has brought rapid urbanization, accelerated life rhythms, and diversified consumption patterns, impacting or reshaping traditional cultural carriers. As a place bearing Chengdu's leisure culture and distinctive local flavor, the functional changes and shifts in the audience of old teahouses vividly reflect cultural change. Previous internship fieldwork and related research materials provided me with a research perspective [1]. Taking the Guanying Old Teahouse as the main observation object, this study focuses on the specific changes of old teahouses during social transformation and discusses how culture adapts to the times while preserving local traditions, thereby inheriting culture through adaptation.

## 2. Old Teahouses before Social Transformation

As the foundational form of local public space, old teahouses represented a microcosm of Chengdu's social life prior to accelerated urbanization and the widespread diffusion of the Internet. Centered on the everyday practices of local residents, these traditional venues fulfilled essential social functions including leisure, communication, information transmission, and community interaction [2]. Distinguished by their authentic and regionally distinctive cultural characteristics, old teahouses preserved the unique rhythms, customs, and public life traditions of old Chengdu. Unlike modern commercial and recreational spaces, they maintained a pure, community-oriented character deeply embedded in local daily life. In this regard, old teahouses functioned as critical carriers of urban memory, social relations, and cultural identity, offering a microscopic window

through which to examine the genuine public life and historical texture of the city.

### **2.1 Places for Daily Socializing and Emotional Connection**

From the late Qing and Republican era to the early period of reform and opening up, old teahouses were mass spaces without distinctions of class or group. Whether gentry merchants, intellectuals, porters, hawkers, or retired elders, all could sit around bamboo chairs and square tables, spending half a day with a cup of gaiwan tea and a handful of melon seeds. People chatted casually, covering topics from family matters and neighborhood trivia to local news. Teahouses became bonds for emotional exchange and social relationship maintenance [3]. During the state-owned era, a bowl of tea at the Guanying Old Teahouse in Peng Town sold for only a few cents, with thousands of bowls sold daily. Nearby residents, whether returning from the market, taking breaks from work, or idling, would gather here, making the teahouse the “central hub” of community life.

### **2.2 Bearers of Diverse Social Functions**

In addition to leisure and socializing, old teahouses also undertake a variety of social functions. During the Republic of China period, teahouses were important venues for “eating and talking over tea.” Neighborhood disputes and business conflicts did not require official intervention; instead, both parties would invite each other to the teahouse, where respected elders or members of the guild would mediate the disputes, often resolving conflicts within the time it took to drink a bowl of tea.[4,5] Moreover, teahouses served as information hubs. In an era without mobile phones or the internet, job recruitment information, agricultural product market trends, and news about relatives and friends were all spread through casual conversations among teahouse patrons. For ordinary families, teahouses also functioned as a “living room.” When it was inconvenient to entertain guests at home, bringing them to the teahouse for tea and chat was a common choice.

### **2.3 A Living Carrier of Local Culture**

Every detail of the old teahouses shows the cultural characteristics of Chengdu’s local culture. Bamboo armchairs, covered bowl tea, and tiger stoves are iconic material symbols, while customs such as “chatting around” and

“leaving tea” represent unique behavioral cultures. Covered bowl tea consists of a tea lid, tea bowl, and tea saucer, which not only facilitate removing tea leaves and retaining heat but also embody a simple cosmology of “heaven, earth, and humanity.” In the custom of “leaving tea,” when a tea guest temporarily leaves, placing the tea lid askew or leaving a fan signals the tea server to reserve the seat and tea. These details form the core connotation of Chengdu’s teahouse culture. At this time, the old teahouses have a pure cultural atmosphere, fully serving the daily needs of local residents, directly reflecting Chengdu’s urban characteristics of “leisure” and “ease.”

### **3. Old Teahouses in Social Transformation**

**Changes in Function and Population:** With the advancement of reform and opening-up, accelerated urbanization, and the popularization of the internet, profound social transformation has brought multifaceted and far-reaching changes to people’s lifestyles, consumption habits, and modes of information dissemination. Such large-scale social shifts have significantly altered the original ecological system , operational environment, and development conditions of old teahouses, which once served as the most important public space for daily communication, information exchange, and leisure activities. In the wave of modernization, traditional public spaces such as old teahouses were once widely believed to decline or even disappear gradually. Nevertheless, old teahouses in Chengdu have shown strong vitality. Instead of being eliminated by the times, they have actively responded to social changes by adjusting their own forms. On the one hand, they have enriched their internal functions, extending from traditional tea drinking, chatting, and rest to cultural experience, tourism display, social networking, and leisure entertainment. On the other hand, they have reorganized their customer groups, gradually shifting from mainly serving local residents to covering local regulars, tourists, young consumers, and cultural enthusiasts [6]. Through functional expansion and group diversification, old teahouses have completed adaptive transformation in the context of social change, maintained their unique value as traditional cultural spaces, and continued to play an irreplaceable role in urban public life.

#### **3.1 Functional Changes**

From a daily life space to a multifunctional composite space: Before transformation, teahouses centered on local daily needs and gradually expanded into multifunctional spaces for leisure, tourism, and cultural display. On one hand, old teahouses remain a stronghold for local elderly tea drinkers. At Guanying Teahouse, local seniors still pay a 1 yuan tea fee and maintain the habit of arriving before dawn to open the teahouse, boil water, and occupy fixed seats for tea [7-9]. This place remains an important emotional connection for them. On the other hand, tourism and cultural functions have become increasingly prominent. Guanying Old Teahouse, with its distinctive Western Sichuan residential architectural style and historical traces from special periods, attracts many photography enthusiasts and tourists. The owner, Li Qiang, performs the unique skill of swinging water from a copper kettle, which has become a highlight for photography check-ins. The teahouse is no longer just a “place to drink tea” but a cultural stage showcasing old Chengdu culture and meeting tourists’ nostalgic and experiential needs. Additionally, old teahouses are widely promoted through WeChat official accounts and short video platforms. The charging model of “10 yuan for photos, 10 yuan for tea, 10 yuan for both” actively responds to tourism consumption demands [1].

### **3.2 Population Changes**

From local elderly tea drinkers to a diverse population composition: Before transformation, the teahouse population was mainly local residents, relatively homogeneous. After transformation, the population structure presents a diverse symbiotic pattern of “local elderly tea drinkers, photography enthusiasts, and out-of-town tourists.” Different groups form unique interactions within the teahouse. Local elderly tea drinkers are the “living fossils” of teahouse culture, whose presence keeps the teahouse in its ancient state. Photography enthusiasts record the style and appearance of old teahouses through their lenses; their works have become important media for cultural dissemination. The popularity of Guanying Teahouse is closely linked to years of documentation and promotion by photographer Zhong Yuemin. Out-of-town tourists bring consumption vitality, experiencing the leisure image of Chengdu firsthand and gaining cultural recognition through check-ins.

The diversity of the population also brings subtle interactions. Photographers complain that tourists interfere with their work, while tourists feel that photographers’ flash disrupts the leisure atmosphere. However, it is precisely this collision of diverse groups that allows old teahouses to break through regional limitations and enter the public eye beyond local spaces. Notably, a phenomenon of “cultural translation” has emerged in these interactions. The perspectives brought by out-of-town tourists outside the local culture lead to the rediscovery and redefinition of local teahouse culture, while local residents gradually accept the multiple cultural changes of teahouses through contact with outsiders.

### **3.3 Changes in Cultural Connotation**

From local customs to urban cultural symbols. The cultural connotation of old teahouses was originally passed down naturally and unconsciously through people’s daily lives; after the transformation, their cultural connotation gradually elevated to become an urban cultural symbol of “Leisure Chengdu.” In government-led city promotions, teahouses have become a core element. In Zhang Yimou’s promotional film “Chengdu, a City You Don’t Want to Leave,” teahouse scenes appear multiple times, with gaiwan tea and chatting around the table becoming iconic symbols of Chengdu’s leisure image.

This process of symbolization has also made the cultural connotation of old teahouses more distinct, but it has also led to the characteristic of “selective presentation.” Tourists and promotional materials tend to focus on visible elements such as covered bowl tea, bamboo chairs, and historical traces, while traditional functions like “tea storytelling” have gradually faded. At the same time, the cultural connotation has been enriched through adaptation, with performances such as ear-picking appearing in teahouses. These elements combine with the original leisurely atmosphere of the teahouse to form a new cultural experience that not only satisfies outsiders’ imagination of local culture but also injects new content and developmental momentum into teahouse culture.

## **4. Discussion on the Causes of Cultural Change**

Persistence and Adaptation in Transformation: The cultural evolution of old teahouses does not

entail a total abandonment of tradition. Instead, it represents an adaptive transformation rooted in the preservation of their core cultural identities. In the process of rapid urbanization, commercialization, and the rise of modern leisure spaces, old teahouses have maintained their fundamental functions as public gathering places, carriers of local customs, and hubs of daily communication. At the same time, they have actively adjusted their operational models, spatial design, and service forms to adapt to new social demands and lifestyles. Such changes are not passive compromises but dynamic innovations that sustain traditional values while responding to contemporary challenges. The underlying logic of such evolution embodies the survival wisdom of traditional culture in the context of profound social transformation, revealing how local cultural forms can endure, renew, and retain vitality amid sweeping social changes [10].

#### **4.1 Upholding Core Culture**

No matter how society transforms, old teahouses always retain the core of Chengdu's leisure culture—the spirit of "comfort" and "ease." Although functions such as tourism and photography have been added, "drinking tea" remains the core of the teahouse. The drinking method of covered bowl tea, the arrangement style of bamboo chairs and square tables, and the form of chatting and storytelling are preserved and passed down. The steadfastness of local regular tea drinkers ensures that the core culture does not break or disappear. Their presence keeps the teahouse warm with local life, to some extent preventing it from becoming purely commercialized. This persistence is not stubborn conservatism but a protection of the roots of local culture, providing a foundation for cultural change.

#### **4.2 Proactive Adaptation and Cultural Innovation**

Facing new demands brought by social changes, old teahouses are actively seeking new roles. They are no longer just places for drinking tea and chatting but have begun to embrace the internet, attracting young people to check in and share through modern means such as social media and short videos. Meanwhile, old teahouses also take on the role of showcasing the city's image, becoming a window to present local culture to tourists from other places. This

change is not a passive compromise but an active self-renewal. Old teahouses cleverly combine traditional atmosphere with tourism experience and city promotion, not only finding their place in the new era but also creating new value for old traditions. Culture continues, and business becomes more vibrant.

#### **4.3 Symbiosis of Tradition and Modernity**

The most distinctive feature of the cultural change in old teahouses is symbiosis rather than opposition. Local regular tea drinkers coexist with tourists from other places, traditional covered bowl tea with modern photography, daily leisure with tourism consumption—these seemingly contradictory elements harmoniously coexist in the teahouse. In the Guanying Old Teahouse, mornings are quiet scenes of local elders drinking tea, and after nine o'clock, photography enthusiasts and tourists gradually arrive [3]. Different groups find their place in the same space; covered bowl tea can be both a daily drink for locals and a "cultural prop" for tourists checking in. This symbiotic relationship proves that traditional culture is not a "sacrifice" of social transformation. As long as suitable adaptation methods are found, it can complement modern society and achieve sustainable development.

#### **5. Conclusion**

From the public spaces of the late Qing and Republican eras to today's cultural symbols, the transformation trajectory of Chengdu's old teahouses serves as a vivid example of cultural change amid social transition. In the waves of urbanization, marketization, and internetization, the old teahouses have both upheld the core cultural characteristic of "comfortable leisure" and completed adaptive changes through functional expansion, population restructuring, and content reconstruction. This process reflects the resilience and wisdom of traditional culture. Therefore, cultural change is not a matter of "either-or"; tradition and modernity can coexist, integrate, and develop together. The key lies in finding adaptive methods that align with the core of local culture. The vitality of traditional cultural carriers depends on "living inheritance." The success of old teahouses lies in their continuous connection with the needs of the people, maintaining interaction with society from local daily demands to diverse consumer needs. Cultural change during social transition is

a dynamic process of local and foreign influences, persistence and adaptation, and this dynamism is precisely the key to keeping culture vibrant.

The story of Pengzhen Guanying Old Teahouse continues, and its future changes will remain closely related to social transformation. However, regardless of the circumstances, the local cultural genes it carries and the adaptive wisdom it demonstrates provide us with a simple yet profound perspective for understanding cultural changes during social transformation. The vitality of traditional culture lies in its ability to both take root in local soil and embrace the changes of the times. Pengzhen Guanying Old Teahouse transcends being merely a nostalgic symbol and has become a socially inclusive gathering point. Here, Lao Qi, a person with intellectual disabilities, can find a job and dignity through self-reliance; migrants away from home can rediscover memories of their grandfather; local residents hold on to the unchanged 1 yuan tea price, witnessing the rebirth of their homeland; outsiders pay 10 yuan to purchase an experience and insight. Ultimately, the tea brewed in this cup contains not only the "half family history" of the people of Pengzhen but also the shared issue of how contemporary China settles tradition and connects with modernity on its path of transformation. The century-old tea fragrance of Guanying Old Teahouse still lingers, telling us that the vitality of culture lies in its constant ability to find new ways amid change to continue comforting ordinary hearts.

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