

*The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, and Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900–1950.* By Di Wang (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008) 355 pp. \$65.00

I have spent time in a Chengdu teahouse only once, but it was a memorable few hours. The tea was good, the company excellent, and the sight of men and women having their ears cleaned as they sat and chatted to friends was nostalgic, if a little unusual (an image of the very teahouse is provided on page 125). Wang's new history of Chengdu teahouses in the first half of the twentieth century places my small experience into a beautifully elucidated context, and it is a pleasure to read. Indeed, I read it happily over several cups of tea.

As a work of accessible history and as a labor of poignant description, the book is a great success. The few criticisms of its methodology must be taken in that light. Briefly, the interdisciplinary nature of the work lies mostly in its sources, which range from archival data to modernist writings (such as the works of Li Jieren), to songs and pictures from the period. The analyses, especially in the final section regarding public space and civil society, show that the author is clearly aware of the scholarly debate since 1989 about that subject in both republican and post-liberation China. Although the bibliography is sound, Wang does not engage directly with the theoretical groundings in that literature, leaving the book conceptually thinner than it might otherwise have been. Perhaps the promised sequel on the teahouse after 1949 could bridge that gap and consider some of the difficult questions around civility, public life, and sociality that are clearly at the heart of the teahouse as an institution. Likewise, a more robust discussion about the place of Sichuanese exceptionalism in the place-politics of the teahouse would have been helpful.

Wang makes reference to the politics of place kinship under a central government, but it is anecdotal rather than developed. Wang divides his story into three sections, broadly covering business and labor, life and entertainment, and politics. This approach allows him to use substantial archival material from a number of different perspectives. For example, a few key "characters" (whose careers as teahouse entertainers and waiters presumably spanned a good deal of the period under discussion) turn up at more than one juncture. Blind Jia, Pockmarks Zhou, and Fatso Si (waiters and peddlers) populate the pages of various sections as though inviting readers to feel like regulars—always demonstrating an awareness of their

status as highly skilled members of the laboring poor and their undoubted vulnerability to the gangs, soldiers, and spies who used the teahouses as a venue for criminal and political activities.

The first section of the book sets the scene, providing financial, topographical, and demographical accounts of the city of Chengdu and the place of teahouses in its social landscape. It gives a detailed and lively account of the interplay between the teahouse union or guild and the organs of local government in the setting of prices, taxes, and regulations (62–65). The most astonishing facts remind us of the scale of inflation during the final years of the War of Resistance (*kangri*): “During 1942–1945, after constant struggle, the guild managed to increase the price from 60 cents a bowl to 12 yuan to catch up with inflation” (64).

The second section again offers a lively and detailed discussion of the skills and conditions of the waiters, and a long section on waitresses, which reveals how women’s access to public life waxed and waned in relation to masculine conceptions of morality and self-interest. Sadly, no improvement in women’s rights to/at work occurred as the imaginative structures of republicanism and modernity took hold in the teahouse. Similarly, Wang’s discussion of how class manifested even in the egalitarian world of the teahouse are suggestive more of contemporary China than of an antiquated past (184).

Finally, the book discusses politics, and relates the struggle between the teahouse as a public space open to political discourse and the teahouse as a site for carefully placed Kuomintang propaganda. Wang’s book makes the travesty of this appropriation clear, clashing with the teahouse of old as a vibrant space of entertainment, cinema, healthcare, politics, small business, and, above all, relaxation.

Stephanie Hemelryk Donald  
University of Sydney

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