

DRAMATURGICAL TACTICS IN A CHINESE TEA
ROOM: TAILORING SELF-PRESENTATION FOR
BUSINESS SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

The current paper* studies the strategic behaviour pursued by individuals in Fuzhou City, China, to enhance reputation, power, and social capital through rituals involving drinking Wuyi Rock Tea. The rituals include people consciously acting to improve their reputation by following specific rules when making and drinking the tea in teahouses. The dramaturgical method of social analysis developed by social theorist Erving Goffman draws an analogy between dramatic performance and social actors strategically “playing a part” when interacting with others. Analysing Chinese Wuyi tea rituals using this approach demonstrates the value of the dramaturgical paradigm within strategic sciences such as business anthropology.

KEYWORDS: self-presentation • impression management • social capital • Wuyi Rock Tea

* This study is supported by the Fujian Provincial Social Science Fund Project entitled Research on the Construction and Promotion Strategies of the Wuyi Rock Tea Culture System in Our Province from the Perspective of Dietary Anthropology (Grant No. FJ2024B195). Robert Guang Tian is the corresponding author.

INTRODUCTION

When people seek to develop an image to enhance their situation, they often respond with a mix of conscious strategy and unconscious reliance on cultural norms and tacit patterns, shaping their self-presentation with the aim of presenting themselves in a style that meshes with their goals. By analysing such goal-directed behaviour, a greater understanding of the tactics of social encounters can be developed.

A Chinese example of strategic interaction within a structured social context involves the stylised and ritualised drinking of Wuyi Rock Tea when conducting business or social activities, such as running business talks or developing and maintaining social relationships. Participants in these activities hope to gain social capital and prestige and advance their social standing and business prowess through involvement with their tea-drinking cohorts. This article provides an ethnographic analysis of Wuyi tea drinking and its implications in order to discuss important aspects of the social context of Chinese business. Such studies are much needed in an age of increased cross-cultural economic contact.

The work of Erving Goffman (1922–1982) provides an analytic methodology to examine the strategic drinking of rock tea and other similar social responses with similar strategic implications. In a nutshell, Goffman (1959 [1956]: 252–253, 255) suggests that in many social encounters, people are “playing a part” in a way analogous to an actor in a play or motion picture. Thus, in many cases, social situations are “scripted”, and people respond in structured and predictable ways. By examining people in situations such as Wuyi tea drinking, the full ramifications of their actions can be better understood. Goffman’s so-called dramaturgical analysis paradigm was introduced in the 1950s. Over 70 years old and yet not outdated, it is ideally suited for our studying Wuyi tea-drinking activities.

This paper has two goals: to explain Wuyi Rock Tea activities using Goffman’s qualitative methodology (including ethnography and participant observation) and to reintroduce the Goffman approach as a vital and powerful tool for business research.

GOFFMAN’S DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS

Goffman was an influential social theorist who focused on how people interact with each other and the strategic implications of their behaviour. Instead of dealing with macro issues (such as social trends or broad characteristics such as National Character), Goffman’s approach is more micro-focused and centres on specific people making ad-hoc decisions within a social context.

In his seminal monograph (and the foundation of his many other contributions), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 1959 [1956]), he uses the theatre as a metaphor to describe how and why people portray themselves in the way they do. When ‘playing a part’, the individual “presents himself and his activity to others... [as] he guides and controls the impression they form of him... [while responding to] the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance” (Goffman 1959 [1956]: 8).

Goffman acknowledges that people inevitably play several roles (lovers, parents, employees, friends, sports enthusiasts, etc.). By embracing these roles in appropriate settings, people can more effectively participate in social encounters. This process is referred to as Impression Management (ibid.: 208–212), a concept developed by Goffman and discussed in one of his later books, *Interaction Ritual* (1967).

Goffman's *Asylums* (1961) presents a case in point. People institutionalised for mental illnesses often hope for a speedy release; as a result, they do their best to portray themselves as ready to return to society. Ironically, when dealing with their doctors, many patients pretend to fear returning home. Goffman suggests such portrayals are a ploy because doctors often believe those who are overly cocky or self-assured are more likely to relapse. Thus, showing trepidation is a part of the patient's presentation of self strategically designed to influence those who control their lives. (Ibid.: 360–361, 363, 370)

Goffman (1959 [1956]: 22–23, 25, 30) emphasises that in many cases, people put up a “front” (a portrayal designed to help them achieve their social, emotional, and economic goals, etc.). These portrayals often include the clothes people wear, how they decorate their living spaces, personal grooming habits, the friends they cultivate, avocations pursued, etc.

Presentation of self refers to how individuals portray themselves and their activities to others in ways that reflect social strategies designed to construct and portray a chosen identity (Tao and He 2022: 57, 59, 64). Metaphorically, Goffman (1959 [1956]: 77–102) views the world as a stage, with people's interactions analogous to a theatrical performance. To complete the metaphor, Goffman utilizes dramaturgical terms such as front, stage, actor, performance, character, audience, and team. Goffman, furthermore, argues that role-playing might require the social actor to avoid inappropriate behaviour that contradicts the role being played (ibid.: 141–144).

Simultaneously, some unintended content might be expressed covertly or unconsciously, including accents of speech, body language, facial expressions, and so on (Wang 2021: 30–33, 38). Such content can contribute to or undermine performance, depending on the circumstances. On the surface, dramaturgical analysis deals with interpersonal interaction interpreted from a theatrical perspective, but it can also address the social properties of the individual (Wang 2019: 34, 37, 41).

Building upon the Goffman model, this paper examines how micro and small entrepreneurs present themselves within a particular social setting – Wuyi Rock Tea drinking – in strategic ways designed to advance their careers and enhance their status. Specifically, we seek to understand better how people present themselves to interact more effectively with public sector officials or other entrepreneurs.

WUYI ROCK TEA DRINKING: AN INTRODUCTION

Wuyi Rock Tea is a gourmet and high-status product grown in the Wuyi Mountains of northern Fujian, China. The product has been highly regarded for hundreds of years. Because crop yields are low, the price is high.

In China, especially in Fujian province, drinking Wuyi Rock Tea in a formal or ritualised fashion is an activity people use to network and interact with others. Usually, these

activities occur at a formal tea house or a specific restaurant under the arrangement of a local business or a community leader to discuss the crucial and necessary issues with the companies and local communities, without a particular date but randomly from time to time. The organisers or planners would invite those who play a specific role in the community or are essential business partners, such as significant suppliers or firms' critical customers, to participate in these activities. A survey of Wuyi Rock Tea drinkers (Wang and Tian 2022a: 113–117) confirms that many participants are micro and small entrepreneurs from a variety of industries. Many of these individuals use tea drinking to enhance their social capital and compensate for the lack of government resources and support. Our fieldwork included in-depth interviews, participant observation, passive observation and informal conversations. It investigated the tea-drinking habits of micro and small entrepreneurs in Fuzhou City, Fujian Province, where Wuyi Rock Tea is most popular, accounting for about 70% of its total sales volume. We have actively participated in Tea House culture since 2018 and have cultivated close relationships with micro and small entrepreneurs who consume Wuyi Rock Tea. Data regarding the informants are presented in Appendix 1.

Tea drinking is an essential Chinese tradition with complicated etiquette, protocols, and social implications. In Fuzhou, most companies treat their customers by offering a cup of tea, and business negotiations often occur within a tea-drinking context. In addition to such business contexts, tea drinking is a vital social activity among friends. The tea-drinking process is highly structured and can be considered a ritual. The teahouses, furthermore, tend to be lavishly decorated, and the tea sets and paraphernalia used for tea drinking are detailed and often expensive. As a result, Wuyi Rock Tea drinking is a distinctive event.

WUYI ROCK TEA AND THE PRESENTATION OF SELF

Consistent with the Goffman model, Wuyi Rock Tea drinkers seek to present themselves in advantageous ways, and the Tea House provides a specialised venue for this (see also Fang and Guo 2022: 116–117).

Our interviews reveal that small entrepreneurs typically bring their tea to the Tea House and hire the tea sommelier (tea house employee) to brew the tea leaves to share with the other participants. When taking out the tea before brewing, the informants shared their stories about the tea to be consumed.

My tea is Niulankeng Cinnamon from Wuyi Mountain. (FM 2020: M, 45)

The tea is made by my friends and me, tasting somewhat unique. It is made from Rock Tea, but the process is based on Pu'er Tea. You've never known such tea, right? We just made a little for our circles. (FM 2021: M, 66)

The tea is a gift from my customers. They gave me so much good tea that I couldn't tell the difference. Would you like to have a taste? (FM 2021: M, 47)

It is Ruiquan Tea, the best-known brand of Wuyi Rock Tea. It was reserved for high-ranking officials but was unavailable in the market. Now we can only get a little from the market. (FM 2022: F, 50)

Liu Guoying makes the tea. Liu is one of the national intangible cultural heritage inheritors. And the tea he makes is not available on the market. (FM 2021: F, 40a)

The tea is a gift from one of my friends, one of the most expensive teas on the market today. He said he got it from a legitimate source and told me not to give it to anyone else. (FM 2021: M, 54)

By revealing the origin of the tea or telling a story, the hosts present themselves in ways that should enhance their position. As shown above, some connect tea to a precious and desirable cultural heritage from which they seek respect. Others claimed that friends or suppliers provided the tea in ways that indicated they possessed impressive business contacts. Others boasted that their tea was very expensive and claimed prestige accordingly.

We can see that Wuyi Rock Tea is a valuable prop for approaches to presentation of self that people use to enhance their image. In this regard, a tea sommelier observed,

When I make them tea, they [the entrepreneurs who contribute the tea] always tell a story about the tea, where it came from, where it was grown, or about the brand's history, how their tea must be known for something. I've made tea for them many times, but I've never seen them take out tea leaves and let me make it for them without introducing it. (FM 2022: F, 45b)

Those who are most knowledgeable and skilled prepare the tea themselves. They no longer need to buy luxury tea from vendors because they visit the hills where it is produced. Such individuals might also offer their friends the tea they acquired. Such presentations, which portray and underscore their success and status, are observed from time to time. An audience must be present for these self-portrayal presentations to be meaningful (Goffman 1959 [1956]: 208–210, 212): for a successful performance, the spectators must be respectful and attentive, interact at the right time, express surprise, and respond approvingly.

PRESENTATION WITHIN A TEAM CONTEXT

Goffman (ibid.: 77–80) argues that social actors must often cooperate with other participants to effect a specific portrayal or social scenario; such collaborators are a team. Co-presence relates to situations where people, their actions, and their responses become intermingled and interconnected in ways that condition individuals and groups to respond in structured ways.

Wuyi Rock Tea drinking is a typical example of teams working in concert with each other (Wang and Tian 2022b: 159–160). As one tea sommelier observed, “I make tea for paying hosts and their guests professionally so they can concentrate on their conversation while relaxing and having a cup of tea” (FM 2022: F, 45a).

During participant observation, entrepreneurs overtly sought to demonstrate their expertise by smelling the tea leaves before brewing to portray sophistication.

It is no good to make tea with everyone smelling the fragrance because some have sprayed perfume on their body, some have applied hand cream on their hands, and all these smells will be mixed into the fragrance. When the tea came to me after

everyone had smelled it, it was already impregnated with various flavours and had lost its original aroma. So, they do not know how to make tea, but they ask to smell it every time to show that they know much about tea. I know this is not good, but I would never say so, and I would do my best to praise them for their tea knowledge. (FM 2022: F, 45a)

One of the entrepreneurs among us acted like she knew all about every type of tea, but she didn't. She once told us that boiled Wuyi Rock Tea has a more robust flavour and tastes better than brewed tea. Others present agreed and echoed her opinion. I knew it was wrong because theophylline in Rock Tea increases during the boiling process and is enormously irritating to the stomach. Hence, boiled Wuyi Rock Tea loses its original taste and nutritional value. So it's very amateurish to boil Wuyi Rock Tea. However, I won't speak about it. (FM 2022: F, 56)

Wuyi Rock Tea is complicated; usually, we don't know everything, and we all save face for each other. It is impossible to deal with clients in Fujian without drinking tea. I must learn it, too, to communicate with clients better. (FM 2022: M, 34)

When we have tea, some of us might come with tea that is not good, and I won't comment on it. We don't have a competition here, so I wouldn't point it out. (FM 2021: F, 38)

I will not point out when I find someone wrong, as we all run a business and have tea to communicate in our circle. Once someone points it out, we can hardly get together like this. (FM 2021: M, 50)

I do not know much, and I hope others will not mention it, saving face for me (FM 2019: M, 45).

Wuyi Rock Tea drinkers are very proficient in working within a team context. The tea sommelier actively cooperates with the tea drinkers in their performances as a team member. If a tea drinker acts inappropriately during the performance, the tea sommelier will immediately draw attention away from the faux pax. As a result, the error can be ignored or overlooked so the offender does not lose face. Although most tea drinkers have some knowledge of Wuyi Rock Tea, they are not experts. Aware of their limitations, participants often assign others to complete the brewing process so they will not make mistakes. The team strives to present an overall image of successful entrepreneurs who are well-versed in tea.

FRONTSTAGE AND BACKSTAGE

Goffman (1959 [1956]: 112–113, 119) presents a dichotomy between frontstage and backstage. Frontstage behaviour occurs when the social actor knows others are probably watching them in a possibly judgmental way. As a result, they are prone to act in a manner that reflects established norms and sanctioned ways of behaving. In contrast, backstage behaviour occurs when people are not controlled or inhibited by such standards. As a result, in these less formal situations, people let their guard down and relax. Thus, well-structured and executed presentations of self tend to be frontstage in nature, while backstage interactions are less guarded. In a backstage situation, for example, an

ambitious and networking entrepreneur might recall his early life as a poor peasant to his close friends but withhold such information from those he was trying to impress in a frontstage context. Those allowed to enter the backstage are often on more intimate terms. As a result, members of backstage groups are more willing to reveal characteristics that contradict their strategic presentation of self-manoeuvres (Fang and Guo 2022: 117–118).

When some producers or sellers of Wuyi Rock Tea, for example, invite their most favoured clients to visit their tea farms and factories, backstage characteristics emerge. The response of a factory manager who has been producing Wuyi Rock Tea for over 30 years is a case in point. When he was introduced to various teas, he had not seen them before and acknowledged that he was unaware of them. Admitting this lack of knowledge could have caused him to lose face or credibility as an expert in a frontstage situation. (FM 2022: M, 37) Within an intimate backstage situation, however, such revelations were treated positively. Instead of being shocked, the audience expressed admiration. One member observed,

I can see that the factory manager is trustworthy as he did not pretend to know what he did not know. With so many types of Wuyi Rock Tea, we are expected not to know some of them. Some claim to know everything, but that is impossible. I will buy tea from him in the future. I believe he will not deceive me. (FM 2022: F, 45c)

That manager has been selling tea to his audience for many years and has developed intimacy over time. Presenting himself in this way proved to be strategically advantageous.

In another situation we witnessed a tea sommelier hosting entrepreneurs at her private tea house, with only four participants (FM 2022: F, 45; M, 50; F, 48; F, 44). The tea house is the private residence of the tea sommelier. It also has a tea warehouse and a tea packing yard. Tea boxes are piled up in the warehouse, and the tea sommelier designs the logo according to the customer's needs and personalises the packaging before selling it. If ordinary customers saw this facility, they would probably become suspicious and question the uniqueness of the products sold. Thus, in a frontstage situation, the tea sommelier would not disclose such a backstage to anyone except very close customers.

Backstage situations involve intimacy, trust, and a willingness to be candid. In contrast, frontstage conditions are more formal and are not a venue where people will reveal what is inconsistent with the presentation of self being cultivated.

EDUCATION BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCES

Micro and small entrepreneurs strive to present an identity that reflects sophistication. One reason why the participants presented their expertise regarding Wuyi Rock Tea is probably because they lacked impressive academic credentials. Of the 43 micro and small entrepreneurs observed in this research project, only one had a master's degree, 12 had a bachelor's degree, and the rest had no college degree. A few had only a high school diploma or less.

Some found it offensive when those with strong academic records brag about their education. At a tea event, an entrepreneur (Mr X) said that he had graduated from a

famous university in China and had belaboured the point for about ten minutes. The other entrepreneurs with significantly lesser academic achievements did not join the conversation. Instead, one observer noted, “Mr X is still talking about his graduation from a prestigious university 20 years ago, but it was so long ago. Isn’t it strange that he still talks about it?” (FM 2020: M, 46) Another participant said, “He has nothing else to add, but only the past. Graduation from a prestigious university has nothing to do with business.” (FM 2020: F, 45)

Academic qualifications represent the acquisition of explicit knowledge, while tacit knowledge is the opposite counterpart. Tacit knowledge is unwritten and unspoken knowledge that people develop informally by participating in life and is derived from the individual’s understanding of the world (Polanyi 1958: 168–169, 175). In tea drinking, the drinker can demonstrate experience by recalling events connected to tea, travelling, and gaining a more profound knowledge and interpretation of tea. Such portrayals can be used to gain recognition and praise from others (Wang and Tian 2022b). Acquired knowledge is based on personal learning and practical experience (Sternberg and Hedlund 2002: 145–146). Therefore, entrepreneurs who lack formal credentials often seek to display their experiences of Wuyi Rock Tea during tea-drinking sessions.

Wuyi Rock Tea is grown in Wuyishan City, Fujian Province, and is affected by the climate, rainfall, and temporary weather changes. Therefore, the quality of the tea varies from year to year. Evaluation criteria are primarily based on appearance, colour, aroma, soup colour, taste, brewing, and leaf base (Wang et al. 2019: 36–37). Despite these characteristics, each producer has unique evaluation criteria; as a result, no standardised or universal judgment can be made about Wuyi Rock Tea. Producers and customers, therefore, judge the tea’s quality and taste based on subjective perceptions, allowing tea drinkers to display their knowledge of Wuyi Rock Tea.

Tea is the best topic for me to chat with other business friends, as I can show them my taste without anything unpleasant (FM 2021: F, 55).

I’ve worked since I was very young and didn’t receive much education, so I can’t talk about anything profound. It’s best to talk about tea. I especially learned about rock tea. (FM 2022: M, 50a)

We can discuss anything related to tea, like how to grow, pick, make, brew, the weather, taste, etc. There are a wide variety of rock teas, so we can discuss a new topic every time we talk. (FM 2020: F, 38)

The last time we went outdoors for tea, we brought a miniature gas stove, mineral water, tea sets, portable tea table and chairs, boiled water and drank leisurely at the park table. Others beside us admired us because they all drank with ordinary kettles, and very few drank as we did. We even treated them to a drink. (FM 2022: M, 46)

Impression management tactics helped these social actors positively and strategically portray themselves within a public setting. While drinking Wuyi Rock Tea, people demonstrate their cultural cultivation by exchanging appreciation and comments on the tea they drink with their peers. At the appropriate time, they freely shift the topic of tea appreciation and comments to community development or business topics. Specifically, in the process of tasting the tea leaves they drink, tea drinkers usually express

their gratitude for the colour of the tea leaves and the taste of the tea soup, demonstrating their cultivation of tea culture. At the same time, they will also evaluate the craftsmanship of tea-drinking vessels and express their opinions on the history of tea and the technological process of tea planting and production. In their interaction with tea service providers and other tea drinkers, they fully demonstrate their character traits of gentleness and mutual respect. During this period, they will try to integrate their cultural heritage into their interactions with others, forming their unique self-expression. After gaining recognition and appreciation from the partners participating in tea-drinking activities, they will seize the opportunity to shift the discussion topic to something related to their interests, usually community development and business transactions.

Participants in tea-drinking activities strive to showcase their long-accumulated knowledge and experience in life and business practices. The knowledge they demonstrate includes both systematic knowledge formed through formal education and implicit knowledge accumulated through life and production practice. It should be pointed out that due to the solid subjective factors in judging tea soup, tea drinkers need to engage in various practical activities such as long-term tea drinking, learning, and travel to have a profound understanding of tea leaves or taste, and to form specific experiences and judgments, naturally revealing their knowledge and experience, and thus constructing a unique self-image. In short, different tea-drinking processes or habits are considered appropriate ways of self-expression at the cultural level in Fujian, especially in the Fuzhou region. Hidden knowledge enables them to showcase their wealth of wisdom and talent, thereby facilitating the acquisition of necessary social capital and combining their self-awareness with business goals. This combination is crucial in the tea production and circulation industry, as subjective judgment is indispensable.

INTEGRATION INTO SOCIAL CIRCLES

Like other cultures, cultivating a social identity is critical in Chinese society (Cheng 2016: 15–16). Drinking tea is a necessary earlier procedure to getting business deals done in Fujian. A male informant, for example, observed: “If you want to run a business in Fujian, you must learn to drink tea. You can only integrate into the circle quickly by drinking tea.” (FM 2022: M, 50b) This informant is an entrepreneur with only a junior high school diploma, and his background does not match his economic prosperity. However, he can develop the cultural capital needed to embrace his desired status by engaging in tea-drinking activities. Eventually, he felt he achieved his goal after continuous efforts.

Our fieldwork revealed that entrepreneurs are very conscious of the norms of their social groups. When someone made a mistake in social performance, the whole team was silent or covered up for him. This response is consistent with the traditional Chinese value system. Traditional Chinese values are derived primarily from interpersonal relationships and social orientations. In China’s long history, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have played vital roles in shaping the value systems (Zhang 2005: 6–7). Confucianism is based on the connections between individuals and social groups and emphasises kind, respectful, and civil relationships that pursue social harmony (Zhang 2006: 25–26).

As China is a relationship-oriented society (Liu 2015: 95), the Chinese people are deeply influenced by social connections, rules, and responsibilities – an unwritten code of conduct and the tacit agreement that evolves among people who drink tea together. As a result, goodwill and trust develop within the group in ways that allow individuals to share resources more effectively. Thus, a tea-drinking circle can collectively function in a manner that reflects the Confucian way of life, which is illustrated by the following examples:

I attended a photography class, and all the trainees in this class were self-employed business owners. And they wanted to learn how to shoot and advertise their products. The photography class is over, but we still get together frequently. Every time we meet, we start with a cup of tea. (FM 2021: F, 46a)

I think it's relaxing and helpful to have tea and chat together. I often learn rock tea from one group and share it with other friends. (FM 2022: M, 45)

The group I often gather with has been drinking rock tea for a long time. During the [COVID] epidemic, everyone suffered from being locked up, but we didn't feel it because we relaxed by drinking tea, which remained the same. (FM 2021: M, 52)

Our group members meet at least once every two weeks. We mainly exchange messages and discover what's new or valuable for our business. (FM 2022: M, 44a)

Thus, the presentation of self takes place within a social context. As a result, the context and the standards of behaviour within this social setting need to be recognised and adhered to.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

With the term social capital, we refer to the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively (Hidalgo et al. 2024: 183; Xu and Huang 2023: 2–3). It can include interpersonal relationships, shared norms or beliefs, and a willingness to cooperate. An intentional presentation of self can be valuable when exploiting opportunities social capital provides. Social capital, furthermore, can be a surrogate measure of personal quality; thus, acquiring social capital can be invaluable within a business context (Hu 2006: 107–108). Our fieldwork found that entrepreneurs use Wuyi Rock Tea drinking to display and exchange their social capital strategically.

Social capital is one of the critical competency indicators for entrepreneurs. Social capital is essential for acquiring, coordinating and organising resources, saving transaction costs, and improving business performance. Individuals nurture social relationships to maintain and deepen such associations and satisfy immediate needs (entertainment, emotional exchange, etc.). Such behaviour typically involves accumulating and enhancing social connections that can be used to achieve personal goals (Luo 2011: 138–143).

As discussed above, our informants are not highly educated, do not work in the public sector, and lack direct relationships with government officials. Unlike large private enterprises, they do not have access to social capital through their relationships

with the government, which can help entrepreneurs cope with regulatory barriers and improve or protect their property rights (Faccio 2006: 369–370).

Entrepreneurial social capital is a broad concept related to business and innovation (see Hirsch and Levin 1999: 120–121) and can be very important as enterprises develop (Sun et al. 2020: 155–156). Entrepreneurial capital refers to the tangible and intangible resources that the individual entrepreneur possesses (Zhang et al. 2022) that influence entrepreneurial activities (Firkin 2003: 57–58), including human capital, social capital (Sirmon 2003: 339–340) and intellectual capital (Crespo et al. 2021: 333–334).

The importance of social capital within the presentation of self is illustrated in the following examples.

I can get many updates over tea with my friends in my circle. Someone mentioned last time that they had resources for top high schools, and it just so happened that a while ago, one of my friends had a child about to attend high school and was looking for information on that, so I introduced them right away. (FM 2022: M, 44b) Many of the people I had tea with became my clients. I made tea for them, showed professionalism, and then shared it with them whenever I got good tea. Over time, they think my products are highly cost-effective, and I think they will later become my clients. I joined this circle long ago but never rushed to sell my tea. (FM 2019: F, 45)

The last time I had tea with a government official, I learned from him that the government had introduced a policy of subsidizing green agriculture. Still, many people didn't know about it. I've not engaged in agriculture myself, but I immediately told another friend in agriculture, and he directly applied for many subsidies. Likewise, he will inform me immediately if he has any valuable messages. (FM 2020: F, 48)

We all help each other in many matters. In our circles enjoying tea, we are engaged in various industries. Some of us work in food service, some in beauty salons, some in securities investment, some in private equity, and some in agriculture. (FM 2021: F, 46b)

Many of my clients are introduced by some of my friends who have tea together, and they feel I am trustworthy, so they introduce their acquaintances to me. (FM 2021: F, 40b)

Social capital includes social connections, acquiring scarce resources such as capital, information, opportunities, etc., and generating revenue through such relationships (Bian and Qiu 2000: 88–89). Social capital helps people obtain financial backing, gain marketing support, acquire government aid, etc. (Huang and Jie 2018: 27–28). During the transition period in contemporary China, the government's control over information has been highly opaque and difficult to understand; as a result, entrepreneurs were motivated to use social capital to compensate for the scarcity of data (Chen and Zhou 2001: 3–4). To some extent, the social circles formed by entrepreneurs can provide an alternative source of strategic information. Entrepreneurs often gain strategic insights through tea with government officials who quickly transmit strategic information to their friends. Several entrepreneurs observed that trusting relationships had been enhanced by sharing intimate knowledge in a backstage context (FM 2022: F, 45; M,

44; M, 50; M, 34). Such revelations can lead to stronger partnerships and the creation of smaller and more intimate social circles.

Those lacking access to social capital will probably establish tea-drinking groups to compensate for their situation spontaneously. In tea-drinking activities, entrepreneurs seek to maintain positive social relationships while using their social capital to achieve economic or other goals. Thus, the presentation of self is a tool people use to advance their interests. In doing so, cohorts or friendship groups might emerge in ways that allow audiences and teams to advance the goals of both the individual and the group.

CONCLUSION

After an era when qualitative social research methods have been downplayed within business research, such tools are gaining recognition (Guang Tian et al. 2024: 862–863). The ethnographic and other qualitative naturalist methods (including participant observation) are suitable and promising techniques. Our ethnographic analysis involving interviews and participant observation examined 43 micro and small entrepreneurs and their tea-drinking habits. These informants used tea-drinking sessions to help solidify their chosen identities, integrate into coveted social circles, exchange cultural and social capital, and gain strategic benefits.

The methodological foundations provided by Goffman (1959 [1956]: 238–239, 253) regarding the presentation of self and impression management were used as the primary analytic paradigm for this investigation. The Goffman approach is suitable for examining Wuyi Rock Tea drinking, a method that remains fresh, vital, and appropriate even though it dates back to the 1950s. The Goffman model was helpful because Wuyi Rock Tea drinking occurs when participants present self-strategies within relevant social and economic contexts.

We observed that the tea drinkers acted strategically to enhance their images. In other words, their behaviours are deployed in structured and synergistic ways that facilitate impression management. Some of these actions occur in frontstage circumstances when the social actor is “playing a part” and, therefore, adhering to expectations, social norms, and codes of appropriate behaviour. The frontstage, however, is mirrored by backstage behaviour that is less guarded, more spontaneous and takes place among friends.

This paper demonstrates the value of the Goffman paradigm when examining micro issues of social interaction and their relationship to strategic actions. As qualitative analysis gains traction within strategic research such as business anthropology, dramaturgical investigations will have a significant role to play.

Appendix 1.

Fieldwork overview: micro and small entrepreneurs' observations and interviews

Item	Attribute	Sample size (43)	Percentage
Gender	Male	20	46.51%
	Female	23	53.49%
Age	20–29	2	4.65%
	30–39	8	18.60%
	40–49	21	48.84%
	50–59	11	25.58%
	60–69	1	2.33%
Business Type	Food	10	23.26%
	Services	10	23.26%
	Finance	7	16.28%
	Daily necessities	7	16.28%
	Apparel	3	6.98%
	IT	2	4.65%
	Agriculture	2	4.65%

SOURCES

FM: authors' fieldwork materials from 2018 onwards. We used participatory observation and in-depth interviews to obtain ethnographic materials. We clarified the ongoing research project and content to the informants. Gender, age, and area of occupation is provided for each informant.

FM 2019: F, 45. Food. Muchu Teahouse. May 8, 2019, 15:00–17:00.

FM 2019: M, 45. Daily necessities: shoes. Qun Xiang Ge Teahouse. November 26, 2019, 20:00–22:00.

FM 2020: F, 38. Beauty services. The teahouse of Fujian Xizheng Tea Co., Ltd. September 30, 2020, 10:00–12:00.

FM 2020: F, 45. Hospitality industry. Family Tea Room. April 5, 2020, 15:00–17:00.

FM 2020: F, 48. Finance. Zuohai Yipin Teahouse. November 28, 2020, 19:00–21:00.

FM 2020: M, 45. Annual automobile inspection. Muchu Teahouse. March 2, 2020, 19:00–21:00.

FM 2020: M, 46. Finance. Family Tea Room. April 5, 2020, 15:00–17:00.

FM 2021: F, 38. Beauty services. Han Du Yan Beauty Salon. April 25, 2021, 20:00–22:00.

FM 2021: F, 40a. Beauty services. Han Du Yan Beauty Salon. April 25, 2021, 15:00–17:00.

FM 2021: F, 40b. Beauty services. Muchu Teahouse. October 16, 2021, 14:00–16:00.

FM 2021: F, 46a. Technical consultation. Shanyaju Teahouse. August 2, 2021, 19:00–21:00.

FM 2021: F, 46b. Cold-chain transportation. The teahouse of Fujian Xizheng Tea Co., Ltd. August 16, 2021, 14:00–16:00.

FM 2021: F, 55. Apparel. Muchu Teahouse. February 20, 2021, 15:00–17:00.

FM 2021: M, 47. Finance. Kejia Shidai Teahouse. October 10, 2021, 17:00–19:00.

FM 2021: M, 50. Food. The teahouse of Fujian Xizheng Tea Co., Ltd. June 3, 2021, 15:00–17:00.

FM 2021: M, 52. Technical consultation. Muchu Teahouse. July 14, 2021, 19:00–21:00.

FM 2021: M, 54. Routine hardware or instrument retailer. The teahouse at Mindu Manor. December 7, 2021, 19:00–21:00.

FM 2021: M, 66. Agriculture. The teahouse of Fujian Xizheng Tea Co., Ltd. April 25, 2021, 10:00–12:00.

FM 2022: F, 45; M, 44; M, 50; M, 34. Tea sommelier; finance; agriculture; finance. Muchu Teahouse. December 30, 2022, 19:00–21:00.

FM 2022: F, 45; M, 50; F, 48; F, 44. Tea sommelier; agriculture; finance; researcher. Muchu Teahouse. October 22, 2022, 19:00–21:00.

FM 2022: F, 45a. Tea sommelier. The teahouse at Mindu Manor. January 23, 2022, 14:00–16:00.

FM 2022: F, 45b. Tea sommelier. Muchu Teahouse. November 12, 2022, 15:00–17:00.

FM 2022: F, 45c. Tea sommelier. Family Tea Room. December 16, 2022, 18:00–20:00.

FM 2022: F, 50. Food. The teahouse of Fujian Xizheng Tea Co., Ltd. May 10, 2022, 10:00–12:00.

FM 2022: F, 56. Apparel. Outdoor teahouse in Jiangbin Park. February 27, 2022, 13:00–15:00.

FM 2022: M, 34. Finance. Muchu Teahouse. May 16, 2022, 15:00–17:00.

FM 2022: M, 37. Food (Tea Factory Manager). Chiyan Tea Factory. May 7, 2022, 16:00–18:00.

FM 2022: M, 44a. Finance. The teahouse at Kaiyue Hotel. February 4, 2022, 15:00–17:00.

FM 2022: M, 44b. Food. The teahouse at Garda Co., Ltd. February 11, 2022, 15:00–17:00.

FM 2022: M, 45. Car insurance services. The teahouse at Fuzhou Xinjinghao Trading Co., Ltd. February 14, 2022, 19:00–21:00.

FM 2022: M, 46. Finance. Homestay teahouse in Xianghu Village. April 17, 2022, 11:00–12:00.

FM 2022: M, 50a. Food. The teahouse at Fudaojia Hotel. February 25, 2022, 16:00–18:00.

FM 2022: M, 50b. Food. Family Tea Room. September 12, 2022, 14:00–16:00.

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