

Peter Peverelli

Many Shades of Earl Grey— Chinese Social Media as a Mirror of Chinese Culture

格雷伯爵茶的不同色彩—
中国文化在社交网络中的反射



Instagram artist: photogarrett

Earl Grey tea is my favorite drink for washing down my breakfast. It has been for years. I was therefore delighted to see Earl Grey's statue in the English port city of Newcastle earlier this year and to learn a bit more about why this particular tea was named after him.

A couple of months later, I read a note on WeChat, one of the most popular Chinese social media, from a former Chinese student of mine: "I love to drink a cup of Earl Grey tea." Interestingly, while the message was in Chinese, the name of the beverage was in Latin letters. Apparently, she regarded it as a very foreign thing, something that did not have a proper name in Chinese. In fact, it doesn't. Lipton is marketing its Earl Grey tea in China as *Gelei*

Bojue, where *Gelei* is the transliteration of Grey and *Bojue* the translation of Earl. So far, so good. I know Nicolette, as she likes to call herself, as someone with an eclectic taste, who can strike a good balance between the Chinese tradition and foreign influence. She is not one of those young Chinese who interlace their language with English words and phrases, as if their own language is insufficient to describe the thoughts of a member of the 'after-ninety' generation, the Chinese designation for people born after 1990.

This is certainly not a typically Chinese phenomenon. I am confronted with it daily in my own country. Many people do not refer to their offspring as *kinderen*, the Dutch word for "children," but as *kids*. Most of the readers

Only a few days after reading that message on WeChat, a friend from China was in town, leading a small delegation from the bank she works for. We had invited her and her party to have coffee at our home. The moment she entered the front door, she stated brashly that she was thirsty, and would like to have a cup of – you guessed it: Earl Grey tea.

of this text will do so, too, but then you are mainly Americans, whose mother tongue happens to be English. The word *kids*, by the way, is always pronounced “kits,” because native speakers of Dutch have a problem with ending words with voiced consonants.

Still, these fellow countrymen do not always refer to their children with that English expression. There seems to be a pattern, a set of contexts in which Dutch *kinderen* becomes *kids*. Someone should set up a research project to check this out, but it won't be me. I was trained as a linguist once, but switched to another field two decades ago. However, I still have my radar open for peculiar language.

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to think that I am a good host, I am not a waiter. However, I also remembered the post on WeChat that had aroused my interest a couple of days earlier. Was this merely a coincidence, or was this sudden liking of Earl Grey tea perhaps a fad, a vogue among young and well educated Chinese women, possibly to differentiate themselves from the others?

After she and her colleagues had left, I wanted to check this little theory of mine. WeChat is an online social medium; call it the Chinese Whatsapp. Was this liking for Earl Grey transmitted through social media. Had it perhaps “gone viral”? Another extremely popular medium is Weibo, the Chinese counterpart of Twitter, which comes with a good search engine and made it a good way to start my little research project.

Weibo literally means “micro blog” in Chinese. Twitter has been blocked by the Chinese authorities for some time. No reason has been publicly announced for that decision, but most people believe it was because the Chinese government had no control over the contents of messages tweeted into China. However, others – in particular those more familiar with the Chinese cyber-scene – have claimed that it was also a move to let Weibo monopolize the Chinese market.

I opened the Weibo app on my iPhone and typed in “Earl Grey” in Latin script in the search box, to focus my search on tweets that regard the beverage as “foreign.” This resulted in an avalanche of Chinese tweets about Earl Grey tea. And that was by no means a collection of posts covering the past few months, weeks or even days, but only of that particular day.

Although the peculiar nicknames make guessing the gender of the writ-



王家慧iisjong

Because I don't wait till Sunday for happiness. Earl Grey Lavender ice cream stood out for @ Sunday Folks <http://t.cn/RzAR9tD>



11月21日05:13 来自 Instagram

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评论



ers behind these tweets more difficult than regular Chinese names, the majority of those twitterers seemed to be female. The two friends introduced above are also female, so that already was a strong link with the outcome of the search. Most netizens, as they are usually referred to in the *China Daily*, China's prime English language newspaper, associate Earl Grey (and Lady Grey, which is also mentioned frequently) with high-end living. When you are tired, there is no better way to boost your spirits as well as your physique than a cup of Earl Grey and a piece of cake. More than a few of the messages are accompanied by photos of a cup of tea and a piece of pie. Let's have a closer look at the first four pages of the search result.

A young girl (she adds a selfie, so we can establish the gender) who calls herself Yvette shares a picture of her cup of tea and her, also female, companion. A boy (again a selfie, with a girl [friend?] in the background) even tweets in English: "A cup of Earl Grey Tea made my day." The photo of the "cup" shows a paper cup with a plastic lid, much less sophisticated than Yvette's picture of a China cup. He also should have left out the word

"tea," which would have produced a rhyming tweet. He had missed that linguistic detail. Anyway, the photo seems to indicate that his lady friend was quite impressed and that is all that matters.

Diana apparently believes that some of her followers are not familiar with this type of tea and volunteers the information that Earl Grey is Lapsang souchong + bergamot oil + Ceylon tea. If you believe that is incorrect, please don't blame me; blame her.

QueenJ confides to us that she is a single-minded woman: her favorite perfume and beverage are both Earl Grey.

CheckPoint Coffee in Bengbu, Anhui province, introduces Early Grey tea from Tea Pigs as the best brand for this product, explaining that it is Himalayan Darjeeling tea scented with Italian bergamot oil. Here we can observe a very Chinese way of thinking: what has come from afar, in particular from abroad, must be good.



Businesses are also active. Check-Point Coffee in Bengbu, Anhui province, introduces Early Grey tea from Tea Pigs as the best brand for this product, explaining that it is Himalayan Darjeeling tea scented with Italian bergamot oil. Here we can observe a very Chinese way of thinking: what has come from afar, in particular from abroad, must be good, so we should not forget to point out the geography of the ingredients, which have been blended in the UK and then shipped to China, to be consumed by high-end tea lovers in Bengbu.

Chinese residing abroad chip in too. A Canada-based Chinese, Leeeeeeeon (sic), tweets completely in English. "Cake is soo good! Earl grey tea is soo good! Sunshine is soo good! Ohsogood is soo good! Everything in my life is soooooo good." Zooming in on his account, I see that most of his posts are in Chinese, so the choice of English for his tweet on Earl Grey also stresses the "foreign" character of this brew. He describes his location as "Overseas, Canada." Canada alone is insufficient, so he adds the emotionally laden expression "overseas" (*haiwai*) to stress how far away from home he lives. His

exaggerations about how all aspects of his life are so good may be a hint that in fact the opposite is true. Many of his posts are reminiscences of Chinese food and how good it tastes at home. So, cake and Earl Grey tea may actually be a poor substitute. Extolling something is a very Chinese way of expressing sarcasm.

The post of Zhang, also living in Canada, strikes me as almost a poem:

A hazy sky, red maple leaves, a wet street; it is the rainy season in Vancouver. The last day of October is already half finished. Drinking a cup of Earl Grey [in Latin script], cleaning my room. Although it is only noon, the unlit room looks gray.

This IS a poem, and a classic Chinese one too. However eager Chinese may seem to learn about foreign regions (and their beverages), in the end there is no place like home. Throughout Chinese history, Chinese residing outside the Chinese homeland have been writing poetry about their anguish for being separated from their hometown and their friends.

The single most famous poem in this genre was written by Li Bai (701-762),

while in exile. It is entitled “Thoughts On a Quiet Night” and runs:

In front of my bed, there is bright moonlight.
It strikes me as frost on the ground.
I raise my head and gaze at the Bright Moon,
I lower my head and think of my hometown.

That lonely Chinese in Vancouver in late October 2014 is expressing exactly the same feelings as those of Li Bai, even using a few analogous symbols.

Now, Earl Grey is no longer a beverage that has come from abroad and gives the consumer the privileged feeling of being able to recognize and enjoy such a rare drink. It is a symbol of being stuck in a foreign land with very little reminding you of home. Even the tea, China’s national beverage, is foreign.

This was a great catch. So many different shades of meaning given to Earl Grey tea in Chinese tweets, and all in a single day.

Given this function of Earl Grey as a signifier of foreignness, I was curious whether a traditional Chinese tea, like Pu’er, would be discussed in the same media. Pu’er is a special kind of tea grown in southern Yunnan province. It is widely believed in China that after a heavy meal, a cup of Pu’er tea will help to dissolve the grease and remove excessive fat from the body. It is traditionally pressed into bricks, which are easy to transport and store for longer periods. In the old days, traders would sell the tea bricks in Tibet and Southeast Asia. There even was a special Tea-Horse Road, a kind of Silk Road for tea. Nowadays, Pu’er tea is exported to all continents, bringing in more than USD 2 million p.a. in hard currency. It has become such an important product for its home region, that the local government changed its original name, Simao, to Pu’er a few years ago.

The first post on Pu’er captured on still the same day likens various types of beverages to different types of friends:

Some friends are like mineral water: pure and transparent. They are always there for you, when you need them. Some friends are like green tea: fragrant and pleasing. When you are together you feel warm, even when not speaking. Some friends are like Tieguanyin: strong flavored. When you are together, you are never short of a topic for conversation. Some friends are like Pu’er tea: they leave a long after taste. Their deep thoughts stay with you while making strategic decisions.

Wow, the difference with the elegance of Earl Grey is striking! It clearly shows that Pu’er and other indigenous teas have deep roots in Chinese culture.

The next tweet is very down to earth referring to Pu’er’s reputation of decreasing body fat. Nothing philosophical there. Another recommends Pu’er tea for a mental boost, or as (s)he puts it in Chinese: “to make your spirit return (*hui hun*).” I wonder where it went. According to Chinese medicine,

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He Who Carries a Sword, in spite of his mythological cyber-name, gives a scientific explanation about the polyphenols in Pu'er tea, the active antioxidants that play a key role in all those positive effects ascribed to this brew. When you surf to his Weibo home page, you learn that he has a medical background, but is now a tea merchant. He seems like a guy who is literally following that Chinese tradition of mingling food and medicine.

humans have two souls. The *hun*, or ethereal soul, is coming from the father, three days after birth, and the *po*, the corporeal soul, is given by the mother, three days after conception. The *hun* leaves the body immediately after you die, while the *po* remains with the body until it has completely decayed. When your *hun* leaves the body, like the astral body can leave the physical one, during out of body experiences, you are losing something quite essential to your existence. You would want it to return, soon preferably. If Pu'er can help you do so, it is a powerful concoction, a medicine, almost.

I sense a link with the friends that are like Pu'er tea. Such friends are like a mental boost, like people that help you keep your body and (ethereal) soul together. Such friends should be cherished.

Several posts about Pu'er tea of that day follow suit. Some discussants add that Pu'er can also lower hypertension. Stupid Man (sic!) even wants to

make us believe it can prevent cancer. Perhaps that's why he chose such a nickname for his Weibo account. I remember that during one of my longer periods in China, during the early 1980s, I was struck by a beer advertisement in the *China Daily*. It too claimed that drinking it regularly could prevent several diseases, in particular cancer. The next day's issue also carried that ad, but without the strong medicinal claim. This apparent ease in making medicinal claims for everyday beverages like tea or beer is again linked to the Chinese medical tradition, which sees a huge overlap between nutrition and medicine. When you have lung problems, you can visit so-called medicinal restaurants in China and ask the chef to compose a meal from dishes that alleviate lung ailments.

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RED (sic, again) from Shanghai recommends a newly opened restaurant that serves Yunnan food. One of the dishes highlighted is shrimp prepared in Pu'er tea. That doesn't ring a bell. However, my instinct tells me that it is a kind of "local" dish that restaurant owners often create outside their home region to make their dishes even more authentic than genuine traditional ones, like if I would start a Dutch restaurant in New York and put "shrimp prepared in Heineken" on the menu. It would not appeal to the Dutch palate, but Ameri-

cans may actually buy it as typically Dutch.

Businesses are posting about Pu'er tea as well, like an outlet of Coffee Accompanies You (*Kafei Pei Ni*) in Luoyang, Henan province. Coffee? Sure, why not. We drink coffee when we need a mental boost, and Chinese drink Pu'er for the same reason. French missionaries must have realized that when they brought a coffee sprout to Dali, another city in that region. This small sprout rooted itself deep into the local soil, and this century-old coffee tree is said to still stand tall today. 98% of China's coffee production is located in Yunnan.

I am reading on, hoping to stumble across more exciting thoughts, like some of the posts about Earl Grey tea. Several tweets tell a little history of Pu'er tea. Not uninteresting by itself, but for whom? They must realize that most of their readers share a basic

knowledge about this famous tea. So why post it after all on this medium? Are they perhaps so proud of this one of China's national treasures? Chinese do have a propensity to stretch patriotism to the verge of nationalism.

Hey, what's this: the Editorial Board of *Pu'er Tea magazine*. So there is a magazine dedicated to this tea? I was not aware of that, but it makes sense. Chinese are not only strong patriots, but even more ardent regional chauvinists. Think of Li Bai's poem that I quoted earlier, where he writes that the moon-lit ground reminds him of the frosty soil of his home town.

If it is Pu'er tea that puts your home region on the map, then it is worth compiling a magazine for it, filled with stories and information, perhaps even more poems. Interestingly, the magazine's logo consists of the stylized Chinese characters for the name and *Pu-erh* in Latin letters. This is the older

 -大益-水中國粹-風華- ▾

大益普洱 "黄金十年" 从2004年到2014年, 这十年有多少茶友在品、藏、送、大益普洱? 在这10年岁月里我一直坚信、好普洱有大益。未来10年、20年、30年。。。我依然信任你--大益普洱茶。成功唯一是坚持! 在成功路上并不拥挤、因为太多人已经倒下!



今天18:07 来自 iPhone客户端

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rdrock

The Brits like to use Royalty names to denote the teas they consume, for example Earl Grey, and the tea shown here, Prince of Wales Tea. It must be the prince from Wales liked this tea very much. If I adopt the same way to name my drink, it would be Lord of Tianjin Tea.



11月30日03:34 来自 iPhone 6

收藏

转发

评论 4



Wade-Giles transliteration of Chinese, devised by Western missionaries in the second half of the 19th century, and the most common one until 1958, when the Pinyin transliteration crafted by Chinese linguists was officially adopted by the United Nations. This was when Peking became known as Beijing; and *Pu-erh* became *Pu'er*.

It is getting time to turn to what the Chinese think about their social media themselves. My dear friend and academic associate, Lynda, was thrilled when hearing about my writing about the Chineseness of Chinese social media. The ideas she shared with me are deep, so I will share them here with you.

She believes that the Chinese feel that Weibo is a way for individuals to promote themselves and for companies to promote their brands. Weibo is also a platform on which friends or relatives communicate on a small scale. According to Lynda, some people say that Weibo “is like putting your stinking socks outside on the street to dry.” Weibo does not have a broad scope, but through word of mouth transfer, rumors can be spread quickly and can be a cause of irritation.

WeChat is a stage on which the entire family can talk, chat, or exchange photos. It’s great fun. WeChat has a function which allows you to exchange short spoken messages that you can play and reply to in your own time. It is like making a telephone call with shorter or longer pauses in between the statements of the interlocutors. When you receive a message at a moment at which it is inconvenient to speak, you listen and wait for the next moment you can record and send your reply. In theory, spouses who are in different parts of the world can be engaged in a continuous teleconversation, starting at home in the morning, continuing in the subway on your way to the office, while at work, during lunch break, any time. Sometimes statements will be seconds between one another, but at other times there can be pauses of several minutes or longer.

And that is not all. WeChat allows you to be engaged in such continuous conversations with several people simultaneously. You can do so by intermittently replying to messages from several contacts, or by grouping close friends, family members or colleagues together in a group, so you can leave

one message that can be read and heard by all group members.

My wife became an ardent user of WeChat almost from the moment it was launched. She is Chinese residing in The Netherlands. Her two sisters live in Beijing, and until the WeChat era, they stayed in contact through email and cheap telephone schemes. Once they had all installed WeChat, they formed a group called Three Sisters, and they are exchanging spoken messages, photos, links to interesting web sites, and even making video calls, all using their respective homes' existing Internet connection. My friend Lynda introduced me to a group of Chinese academics active in the same field. Whenever someone has read an interesting article, (s)he immediately shares it with the group on WeChat. They also share useful contacts and links for collecting data, communicate dates and venues of seminars and guest lectures at their respective universities.

This suits the Chinese collectivist culture. Take a ride in the underground of any major Chinese city and you will see people of all ages fiddling with their cell phones, typing or recording messages, reading or listening to the replies, looking at pictures sent by that cousin who is on a trip in the UK. WeChat is still the favorite medium.

So, are online social media in China one big success story? Not quite.

A Chinese organization has tried to launch a Chinese version of Facebook, which is also blocked in China. The name again reflects the collectivistic inclination of the Chinese: All People Net (*Renren Wang*). It was not a success, and very few people are actively using it. WeChat is imitating many features of *Renren*, while WeChat still has the edge in possibilities for instant communication.

Similarly, a company has attempted to establish a Chinese competitor for LinkedIn, Ushi (*Youshi*, which is homophonous with the Chinese word for "advantage"). However, that experiment has failed completely. I tried to visit the site while writing this article, only to find out that it is no longer on the web.

LinkedIn is not blocked by the Chinese authorities. Many Chinese professionals have joined and use this platform actively for networking and profiling themselves in general, or seeking jobs, or business for their companies. LinkedIn seems to work well for them for these ends, but from a Chinese cultural perspective it is too cold, too impersonal – it misses what the Chinese like to call *renqi*. This expression literally means "people spirit." It can be used to describe an event like a trade fair or a location like a shopping street that attracts many visitors, whose collective presence constructs a lively atmosphere. The total impression of

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people, their chatter, their diversity, is what constitutes *renqi*.

And that is probably what makes Weibo and WeChat so successful. They are virtual reconstructions of locales high in *renqi*. You connect there with existing contacts and pick up many new ones, who share some of your own interests. Even professionals like my friend, Lynda, who joined LinkedIn on my advice, are far more active on WeChat than LinkedIn, even in their contacts with professional relations.

Why? Because WeChat beats LinkedIn in *renqi*.

Am I advising that LinkedIn should adapt? I don't think so. LinkedIn needs to stay as it is, to serve a global cross-cultural community. Moreover, the very fact that it lacks *renqi* is probably the reason that it has not been blocked by the Chinese cyberpolice. LinkedIn is therefore an important link between the indigenous Chinese online media and the outside world.

Let Chinese media serve the Chinese people; they are doing a good job.

Peter has been part-time affiliated with the Faculty of Economics & Business Administration of VU University Amsterdam since 2001, alongside his consulting practice. His core academic interests are organization theory, corporate culture and identity and entrepreneurship. Peter laid the foundation for this expertise at the age of 14, when he started to learn Chinese in an evening course, purely out



of personal interest. This resulted in a PhD in Arts (Leiden University, 1986). After his freshman year, in 1975, Peter was one of the first Dutch students to be selected to go to China for a year. As that was the final year of the Cultural Revolution, it was quite eventful, which he has recently re-captured in his book, *One Turbulent Year—China 1975*. Peter moved back to China to teach Dutch at Peking University from 1982 to 1984 and while there, apparently did more than teaching, as he got married to a Chinese national as well. From 1986 to 1991, Peter represented a Dutch firm in China, after which he established his own consulting practice. During his work as a consultant, Peter developed, and is still developing, an organization theory. This has led to a second PhD in Business Administration (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2001). His co-authored book

Understanding the Basic Dynamics of Organization is his core work explaining his thinking on organizations. After several years of publishing academic books and articles, Peter has recently grown an interest in more popular writings. His book about his year in China as a student is the first product of that change.