

No smoking

No smoking

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In November, 2012 I spent a month travelling across China to learn more about the Chinese Teahouse culture. The experience inspired six short stories, which are currently circulating in a single-box book. This is one of my reflections.

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Ten of us sit around a large wooden table as Miss Chen stands on the opposite side gracefully moving from left to right, right to left as she refills our cups. We learn that the tea, which is bright green in colour, comes from her parent's garden just outside of Jinan. It's where she first learned the art of tea service as a child.

“Having a teahouse is a good job for a woman,” she tells a friend in Chinese, who translates for us.

I ask about several black, heart-shaped bowls laid out on the table, which are partly filled with water. I am told they are ashtrays.

“But why are there ashtrays? I thought people couldn't smoke when they drank tea because it can ruin the smell and flavour.”

Miss Chen looks half annoyed, half amused as she answers still pouring tea: “Business men smoke. They are our clients. We give them ashtrays,” she says.

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