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A Sip of China

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Shunan Teng presents a tea brewing workshop to foster a deeper fascination for Chinese tea and culture in her audience. Photo by Jimin Kim (Nov. 15, 2014)

By Jimin Kim

Social Media Manager

Shunan Teng pours a cup of Chinese culture.

The New York City tea master hopes to bridge Western and Chinese worlds by instilling a fascination for authentic Chinese tea in her guests.

As the founder and owner of [Tea Drunk](#), a Chinese tea house in Manhattan's East Village, Teng quit her job in finance two years ago to start her own tea business. She hopes to use tea as a lens through which people can better understand Chinese culture—a rich topic, yet one often misunderstood by many Westerners.

"Chinese culture, to be fair, is not very tangible," said Teng. "Tea is relatively more tangible. You can taste it. It's a more direct feeling. So I hope to use tea as a centerpiece to introduce all of the other cultural aspects around it."



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Tea can explain the multiplicities within Chinese culture through a study of the geographic origins of tea leaves and the designs of brewing utensils, among other aspects. Teng compared Western confusion of Chinese culture to mainstream Chinese consumers' exposure to Western commodities.

"In China, certain concepts about wine and cheese, the usual Western kind of enjoyments, are just starting to emerge," Teng said. "People often have much misinformation about it. So, the appreciation sometimes is not at the right level. I think that's only normal."

Teng immigrated from Dalian, a coastal city in northeast China, in 1998. Since she was a child, brewing and drinking tea in the traditional Chinese fashion has been a part of her life. She equates her initial tea drinking experience to learning how to ride a bike.

Now, at the age of 31, Teng visits Stony Brook University to host a [tea workshop](#) for nearly 40 guests in the Charles B. Wang Center.

Barbara Kenny, who made the 40-minute trip from Shoreham, NY, learned how to pour tea out of a gaiwan, an ancient Chinese teapot invented during the Ming dynasty consisting of a lidded bowl and a glass or porcelain saucer.



Barbara Kenny practices how to pour tea in the customary Chinese way for the first time. Photo by Jimin Kim (Nov. 15, 2014)

"It's very delicate, the instrument itself, and so that's something that Westerners are really not used to," said Kenny. "That fine China when we're drinking something, it felt a little awkward, but also sensuous-pleasing."

By discussing the original source of her tea leaves, Teng explained to the

audience the diversity of China's immense landscape and local cultures. She has journeyed across remote areas of southern China on two six-week trips to secure suppliers for her shop's inventory of nearly 70 different teas. A firm believer of the pure tea drinking experience, Teng seeks genuine products for both newcomers and "tea nerds," tea enthusiasts who are often fans of other elements of popular Chinese culture, such as kung fu movies.

At the end of the 90-minute workshop, SBU student Joseph Saypoff was pleasantly surprised by his first experience savoring a true-origin tea. "It has a

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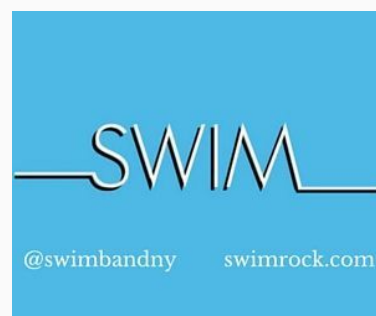
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very interesting taste on the center of your tongue on the back, the bitter taste buds,” Saypoff said. “But it doesn’t taste bitter. It’s very good.”

Although Teng is aware that not everyone will fall in love with Chinese tea, she finds hope in the open-mindedness of some of her guests. As her tea house enters its second year, she believes she can steadily tie the gap between Western and Chinese culture through what she knows most, tea.

“Tea is a lifestyle,” said Teng, wrapping up her utensils for the train ride back to Manhattan. “Tea drinking takes time and effort. There’s a lot of wisdom in tea drinking.”

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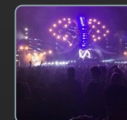
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