

Care.

Chair of Architecture and Care

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TEMPEL und TEEHAUS in SICHUAN

He Ming Teahouse, taken by 风追着云跑 on REDnote

■ TEMPEL und TEEHAUS in SICHUAN

Destination: Sichuan

Cost range: B (250–500 CHF)

Including hostel, local transport, entry tickets, tours and lectures, and three collective meals (excluding transport to and from Chengdu).

Dates: 13.06.25 – 19.06.25

(Please be aware that this is an off-calendar seminar week)

Participants: 12 – 20 ETH Students

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■ In 1943, Bertolt Brecht premiered his theatrical piece *Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan* at the Schauspielhaus Zürich. The play explores the conflict between altruism and the capitalist ethos of exploitation through the character Shen Te, a female sex worker known for her good-hearted character. In the plot, Shen Te uses the money the gods give her to rent a humble tobacco shop to care for the homeless. Eventually, as the story unfolds, Shen Te is compelled to crossdress as the cold and stern male cousin Shui Ta in order to have the agency needed to make the ruthless business and personal decisions necessary to keep her shop afloat, revealing how the division of gendered care work is fully dictated by the societal economic system. While Brecht fictionalised Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, as an abstract city of systemic exploitation, the play vividly captures the unique street culture shaped by small mobile urban businesses, where relationships of care are constantly negotiated between public and domestic spaces.

Should Brecht have the chance to visit the real Chengdu today, he might find that its food culture plays a significant role in shaping these kinds of “in-between” spaces where the domestic and the public intersect. Through the fluid preparation, provision, and consumption of food, these spaces manifest a variety of architectural forms that reflect the complex interdependencies between social groups. Examples include restaurants hidden within multi-story apartment buildings run by older women in their domestic space, street food stands with mobile kitchens, or tiny eateries that extend onto the street to increase seating capacity. These affordable food spaces have sustained the city for decades, relying on the labour of women, lower-class workers, rural migrants, and other marginalised social groups.

This street culture has been carefully studied by the urban historian Wang Di. He highlights Chengdu’s teahouses, for example, as unique hubs of public life, where individuals from diverse social classes, occupations, and political affiliations convene. He argues that this teahouse culture fosters resilience and adaptability, enabling these institutions to thrive amidst the social and political transformations of the twentieth century (Wang, 2005). According to Wei Wei, teahouses also served as cultural spaces where new identities were formed, such as the “wandering men” of Chengdu – a localised, culturally embedded form of male homosexual identity distinct from the globally recognised gay identity. He argues that this indigenous homosexual identity has conflated into the more global, Western gay identity since the 1990s (Wei, 2012). This is also echoed by Travis Kong’s argument that under the neoliberal market economy, homonormative masculinity in China since the 1990s has perpetuated normative gender performance, coupled intimacy, middle-class sensibility, and political conservatism (Kong, 2023).

It is worth noticing that this change coincides with a larger shift in Chengdu’s street culture driven by technological advancements and their economic, political consequences. Social media and app-based delivery services have changed the way we relate to food and how public/private or urban/domestic divisions were previously understood, as has already been widely researched. Many food service waiting jobs in Chengdu, previously done by older women, are now being replaced by robots. Still, the street and its spatial network remains a crucial political arena for Chengdu. For example, Wang Ping Street, known for its representative role in Chengdu’s food culture, provided space for the 2022 protest. It belonged to a series of protests referred to as the White Paper Protests, which began in many cities in mainland China during November 2022. The protests grew from discontent around the

measures taken by the Chinese government to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the country. They triggered a critical transnational reflection on contemporary Chinese society.

During this seminar week, we will closely examine Chengdu’s food culture and its role in producing architectural and urban spaces that empower marginalised social groups and contest the division between public and private, productive and reproductive spaces. We will explore the city’s rich culinary traditions, visit historical and contemporary architectural sites, and engage with local communities, researchers, artists, and architects. From Chengdu, we will also visit neighboring sites and outstanding architectural examples around Sichuan.



Teahouse, taken by Bill Hock, 1981

■ REFERENCE LIST

Brecht, Bertolt. 2013 (originally published in 1943). *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan: Parabelstück*. Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Wang Di. 2005. *The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, and Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900–1950*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Wei Wei 魏伟. 2012. 公开:当代成都“同志”空间的形成和变迁 (*Going Public: The Production and Transformation of Queer Spaces in Contemporary Chengdu, China*). Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore.

Kong, Travis. 2023. *Sexuality and the Rise of China: The Post-1990s Gay Generation in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China*. Durham: Duke University Press.

■ VISA

From November 30, 2024 to December 31, 2025, ordinary passport holders from 38 countries will be exempt from visa requirements to enter China for stays of no more than 30 days for business, tourism, family visit, exchange visit and transit purposes.

The list of these countries can be found here: bio.visaforchina.cn/DEL3_EN/tongzhigonggao/327343163872251904.html

■ INSURANCE

Students are responsible for their own travel insurance and whether it will provide cover for mainland China. If not, we strongly recommend they purchase travel insurance to cover their time as participants in the seminar week.

