Tea Shops in Myanmar: Micro-Institutional Functions for Rural Migrants and Women

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Abstract: Lahpet-Ye-Hsain, commonly referred to as “tea shops” or teahouses, are versatile establishments that serve as both dining places and social gathering spots. These micro-institutions are fundamental to Myanmar society at the local level, playing a significant role in daily social interactions, economic activities, and political discourse. Operated as private businesses and informal meeting spots, tea shops are primarily staffed by women who serve tea and food to a predominantly male clientele at various times of the day. The size of tea shops can vary, from small snack shops to larger establishments offering a wide range of menu options. In a typical small village tea shop, customers sit on footstools around small square tables, creating a space for sharing tea and food, and exchanging ideas, opinions, problems, hopes, and aspirations. Tea shops attract a diverse range of individuals, as they are known for their inclusive nature that welcomes people from all backgrounds and walks of life, although women are often on the periphery. Historically dominated by men, we suggest that empowering women’s involvement in tea shops could positively impact their agency in other aspects of life, especially during political change. These micro-institutions serve as the initial connection point for residents in the village or neighborhood, traditionally catering to men but now increasingly broadened to women, newcomers, and young individuals exploring new opportunities.

Keywords: tea shops; micro-institution; women; rural migrants

1. Introduction

Coffee shops are often portrayed as one of the world’s most successful retail food outlets, but this is not the case for the least developed country we now know as Myanmar, which was once named Burma (until 1989) in Southeast Asia. Instead, Lahpet-Ye-Hsain, known as a “tea shop” or teahouse, is the most successful retail food outlet. Tea shops in Myanmar consist of various establishments that serve tea and food at different times of the day for other clients. They can be small snacks, large open-air, or covered restaurants with extensive menus. Local patrons visit tea shops and sit around small square tables on footstools sipping tea and chatting about the latest English Premier League Results. The conversation is not limited to business talks, information exchange, and news access for local and national politics. It has been recognized that a cup of tea is a call to socialize with one another.

Takahashi contrasts Myanmar village life with a Japanese community focus on joint production activities; farm cooperatives, irrigation, rice production and land management are typically accomplished by the village as a unit. In Myanmar, however, there are few such collective enterprises. Instead, such local institutions are either short-lived or converge on administrative or individual management. However, Takahashi explains how various groups—namely, consumer cooperatives, celebratory associations, fire brigades, pagoda committees, and drinking water committees—have been set up in Myanmar villages for purposes of living together, in the same way as in Japan. Thus, he concludes that a village in Myanmar is a community of life, but not a collective of production.
Village life carries over to urban neighborhoods [1]. Tea shops are informal gathering places where people with different backgrounds regarding ethnicity and religious beliefs meet frequently and converse. Traditionally an arena of male dominance, we argue that empowering women’s participation in teashops will have a positive effect for their agency in other avenues of life, particularly in an era of political ferment. Myanmar tea shops have historically been venues for dialogue, debate, and reconciliation [9].

Tea shops are ubiquitous Burmese’ institutions that can be found everywhere in the country [10]. Myanmar’s abundant tea shops have become a universal social space and institution sprawling across urban and rural settings [11,12]. Tea shops have been a long-standing part of Myanmar’s cultural history, from the crowded sidewalks of Yangon to the small villages of the country’s northernmost Kachin State. [13].

Data on the number of tea shops in each township in Myanmar are provided in the General Administration Department’s (GAD) 2019 Township Profile. Figure 1 illustrates the number of tea shops in each township in Myanmar.

Figure 1. The number of tea shops in each township in Myanmar.

Despite its widespread distribution, little is understood about these microstructures’ full array of functions in community life. For example, much of the literature on micro institutions in Myanmar has focused on microfinance as an organized mechanism that provides financial services [14]. The Grameen microrcredit model has become a global symbol of economically disadvantaged women’s empowerment and is celebrated for its 98 percent loan recovery [13]. Small loans with favorable terms enable women, small entrepreneurs, and others to advance their livelihoods, particularly in the rural community [14]. Tea shops may serve as a venue for anticipating and facilitating these transactions.

1.1. Objectives and Limitations

This paper examines earlier critical studies that describe tea shops’ social, economic, and political role in Myanmar society. We address gender participation in tea-shop activities
and the role of child labor within the Myanmar tea-shop ecosystem. In addition, we examine how tea shops enable local people and newcomers to connect with each other, access information, and take part in community affairs. The history of tea and tea-drinking culture is considered to provide context for understanding the functions of tea shops in Myanmar social, economic, and peace-making processes. We examine the ways women are beginning to participate in this traditionally male-dominated venue. Finally, the barriers to women’s participation at tea shops and the progress made in some locales are examined.

Empowering women to have equal liberty to take part in such daily activities—taking part in tea-drinking meetups at tea shops and Myanmar’s traditional tea-drinking meetups, can change Myanmar’s perspective on women’s participation in political dialogue and other significant discussions. We integrate personal lived experience, scholarly reports, and the experiences of others in Myanmar who have enjoyed sitting in tea shops.

Some suggest that increased levels of women’s participation might be able to improve the quality of local governance in Myanmar [15]. The presence of women in community discussions and leadership may have several benefits for a society in transition. These may include, for example, reducing corruption, improving the completion of projects and service delivery, and reducing discord [16,17]. Therefore, women’s participation in tea shops need further examination.

Habermas’s “public sphere” and Oldenburg’s [18] “third place” concepts, and the idea of micro-institution are used to elucidate the central role of tea shops in Myanmar. One limitation of this study is extended turmoil in the country that limited the conduct of fieldwork [19]. Many local enterprises were shut down due to the impacts of COVID-19 and the 2021 coup [1]. Therefore, 2019 might be different from today. The central sources of information for this analysis were informal interviews, telephone and internet contacts, personal observation, and personal participation. However, intensified conflicts, frequent internet shutdowns, and security concerns sorely constrained extensive interaction with the target population: tea-shop owners, women who work in and occasionally patronize tea shops, and the young rural migrants often employed there. Therefore, this paper relies on sociological perspectives, journalist reports, blog posts, and other materials that concern the role of tea shops in Myanmar society.

1.2. Myanmar

Myanmar society is a highly diverse and divided nation [20] with a population of 55 million [21]. The country’s diversity constitutes 135 ethnic groups with distinct histories, cultures, traditions, religions, and languages. Burma or Bamar is the majority ethnic group, and Buddhism is the state religion [22]. Kramer notes that the data for Burma should be treated with great caution, as there are no reliable population figures [22]. Most of the population and ethnic people live in rural areas, More than 70 percent of the population lives in rural areas [2].

One of the most economically deprived and least-developed nations in Southeast Asia, Myanmar lags behind its more prosperous neighbors [23–25]. A rural-dominated Myanmar heavily relies on agriculture, the country’s main economic activity. It shares 30 percent of the country’s GDP, 25 percent in exports, and 56 percent of the labor force [26]. Slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Texas, Myanmar shares a great land border with five neighboring countries: Bangladesh to the west; India to the northwest; China to the north and northeast; Lao PDR to the east; and Thailand to the east and southeast. The distance of shared kilometers shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Myanmar’s distance of shared land borders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bordering Nations</th>
<th>Distance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China (North and Northeast)</td>
<td>2192 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India (Northwest)</td>
<td>1331 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh (West)</td>
<td>256 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand (East and Southeast)</td>
<td>2096 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos (East)</td>
<td>224 km</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [8].
Over 70 years of armed conflict has contributed to underachievement in social and economic development [27]. Ethnic conflicts often undermine national identity in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies [28,29]. Rural livelihoods are severely constrained due to the low productivity of agriculture and the capture of forest and mineral resources by military elites [30]. Its proximity to mainland China also presents a host of opportunities for corruption and perverse influence. Lack of access to essential services and inefficient public spending also are problems [31,32].

2. Tea Drinking and Tea Eating

A number of writers address the history of tea in Myanmar. A number of authors address the origins and outside influences associated with the rise of tea culture [33]. A legendary Burmese poet “U Ponnya” (AD 1812–1897) is said to have recounted that tea seeds were given to Phyua King Duttabaung (BC 443–372) as gifts. The seeds were received with one hand instead of two to show respect to the king. For this reason, tea in Myanmar was named Lat-Ta-Phet, which means “one hand” in the local Burmese language. However, the truth of this story is unclear [33].

Others suggest that the origin of tea in Myanmar can be found in an oral story that dates to the 5th or 6th century [34]. This oral story–history noted that Burman King Alaungsithu gave tea seeds to the Ta’ang people who lived poorly and struggled on a high mountain. The Ta’ang farmer received the tea seeds with one hand, Lat-ta-phet, from the King. Therefore, the name of the leaf was given as “Lat-Ta-Phet”, and later, it gradually changed into Lat-Phet.

Ta’ang people, also known as Palaung by other non-Ta’ang communities, mostly live in upland areas [33]. They were known as the first tea cultivators in Myanmar. For generations, tea cultivation has been their livelihood, and tea products have been their primary source of income. Ta’ang people are credited as the first tea cultivators in the country. A common saying translates, “If you want to eat good quality tea, slowly climb up the Palaung’s hill”. Today, other Indigenous people also grow tea. Tea cultivation is widespread across the country where the climate is suitable, as illustrated in Figure 2.

![Figure 2. The tea production area in Myanmar. Source: Myanmar Tea Association.](image-url)
It is not clear whether the tea-drinking or the tea-eating culture began first. In this section, the origins of fermented tea (Laphet-So), pickled tea leaf (Laphet-Nut), and other aspects of tea-drinking culture are reviewed. Each set of practices is discussed below.

2.1. The Tea-Drinking Culture

Like the section on tea history and the subsequent tea-eating culture, this section draws on Myint and Aung [12], as well as older work to examine tea-drinking culture. These two available studies explicitly illustrate the unit of unique tea-drinking arrangements in Myanmar.

Tea-drinking traditions (Ah-Khar-Ye) can be traced back to the last 900 years, during the Toungoo Era [10]. During that time, Laphet-Ye-Daw-Kine, the King's tea server, had a prestigious and influential role in serving tea to the King. Since then, green tea drinking has become a celebration of royal ceremonies at the palace. Decorated teacups, teapots, and bowls became exchanged gifts among the royal families and across the kingdom. King Shwe Htee (1530–1550) exalted the warlord King Bayaintnaung Kyaw Htin Naw Yatha (1550–1581) after marching on Yodaya (Thailand) [12]. King Mindon also gifted a teapot to his younger brother, which was decorated with twelve mosaic mirrors and three rows of rubies.

The tea-drinking tradition, which transformed from an exclusive practice reserved for the upper class and monarchs, is now widespread nationwide [7,15]. In this way, tea-drinking has become an everyday habit of Myanmar people. It is also recognized as a vital establishment in Myanmar’s daily cultural scene. Whether in the city or rural areas, local families serve green tea drinks (Ah-Khar-Ye) or pickled tea leaf salad (Laphet-Thoke) when welcoming guests or visitors. Therefore, every household in the village, city, and monastery has teapots and teacups. Regardless of ethnicity and religion, the tea is drunk by almost everyone, from young to old [35].

Social interaction in tea-drinking meetups includes critical discourse [36]. The tea-drinking meetup is a sphere where tough conversations about community issues, business, and children’s affairs, and casual chitchat happen. It is also a place where close friends are open to one another [37].

In Myanmar society, tea shops are places where people meet and establish mutual respect with each other while discussing personal matters such as children and business. As they are mostly close friends, tea meetups are a way of securely opening up and expressing personal feelings as they mutually trust each other. Myanmar Laphet-Ye-Jan-wine helps create friendships among people and encourages knowledge-sharing. Tea-drinking is one of the favorite pastimes of Myanmar people, regardless of location, occupation, and social status. It is a way in which people relax and establish collaboration, familiarity, and unity [7].

Myint’s analysis of tea culture does not include a theoretical and conceptual framework on how the traditional tea-drinking meetup setting is constructed as a sphere where mutual respect, friendship, collaboration, familiarity, and unity are established [12]. Regardless of this theoretical and conceptual absence, tea-drinking meetups still play an essential role in the daily life of Myanmar people, as exemplified in the findings and discussion.

2.2. Tea-Eating Culture

Myanmar is a country that has habitually eaten and drunk tea for a long time [33]. After the fermenting process, a salad using edible pickled tea leaf is made, called Laphet-Thoke. As for the emergence and influence of fermented tea (Laphet-So) or pickled tea leaf (Laphet-Nut) culture and its wide consumption.

Myanmar fermented tea leaves are a typical signature and ancient national food eaten by everyone in the country, regardless of race or religion, at a get-together in family homes, monasteries, and traditional celebrations. [33]

Tea-eating habits make fermented tea (Laphet-So) and pickled tea leaf (Laphet-Nut) available everywhere in the country. These items are often available at Myanmar stores or markets outside the country [33]. Traditionally, locals eat and drink hot green tea to catch
up on gossip. Furthermore, students and professional workers consume pickled tea leaf salad (Laphet-Thoke) when they have exams and deadlines to catch up.

As a result, fermented tea (Laphet-So) or pickled tea (Laphet-Nut) became an essential piece of Myanmar’s society. The product was once served after a meal at a local house and during traditional ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals, engagements, and other religious events. It is now portrayed as a national food and drink. For instance, pickled tea leaf salad (Laphet-Thoke) and tea drink (Ah-Khar-Ye) are often served during local, state, and national official meetings. Fermented tea (Laphet-So) or pickled tea (Laphet-Nut) has become an ancient national food [33].

3. Tea Shops

There are varying perspectives on the origin of tea-shop culture. Lu argues that tea-shop culture is not derived from foreign practices because there is a practice somewhat like sitting at a tea shop in Myanmar’s rural livelihood [10]. For example, in rural areas, adults and older people sit on oversized bamboo mats in front of houses and drink tea when the moon shines at night. In their conversation, they share community issues and talk about Vedanyatra, “astrology”, secular knowledge, and planetary systems while drinking green tea and tasting baked fish, fried peanuts, and palm sugar.

Myint and Aung trace the beginnings of black-tea-drinking culture in Myanmar [12]. They assert that the culture of black tea drinking was introduced in the early British colonial forays. For instance, Shar outlines the emergence of tea-shop culture in lower Myanmar following the annexation of the then-called “Lower Burma” [34]. Indian migrant vendors introduced sweetened milk tea to the public, serving as a gateway for Indian influence in Myanmar’s food culture.

An English delegation to the Myanmar palace during King Mindon’s regime (1853–1878) presented a silver teapot and other silverware for drinking English tea (black tea). This historical exchange assumes to be the case at the beginning of the black tea-drinking culture in Myanmar. Rural green tea-drinking met its perfect match. In time, these two cultures merged, and black tea-drinking culture with milk and sugar became widespread. It is served mainly in local tea shops, with complimentary refills for plain tea.

Traditionally, tea shops offer free plain tea refills whenever a table runs out of plain tea. It is a social norm in Myanmar society. Plain meetups are good because they do not present any health hazards or are costly. [7]

Therefore, the development and endurance of tea-drinking meetups in tea-shop culture is the combination of Myanmar’s traditional green-tea-drinking (Ah-Khar-Ye) culture and English black tea. These tea-drinking habits highlight the daily life of local people [7]. The historical context provides a foundation for understanding the new and emerging functions of tea shops in the 21st century.

3.1. Tea Shops in the Public Sphere

Habermas’s “public sphere” anticipates the nature of Myanmar’s people’s daily tea-drinking meetups at tea shops [18]. The “public sphere” is where each of us finds out what is happening in our community and what social, cultural, and political issues are facing us [19]. The “public sphere” is where the public engages with issues and adds their voices to discussions. In a period of political ferment, tea shops offer a venue for dialogue and reconciliation, but also conflict [20].

The public may participate in reaching a consensus or compromise about what they think about issues and what solutions should be implemented. Habermas fixes upon notion of language or discourse as the basic medium of situated intersubjective knowledge [19]. Habermas suggests that the public sphere is where the citizens of a country exchange ideas and discuss issues to reach an agreement about “matters of general interest”. The “public sphere” is where information, ideas, and debate can circulate, and where political opinion can be formed.
3.2. Third Place

In response to the absence of an informal life in today’s modern society, Oldenburg [18] introduced the “third place” concept that forms neutral ground, i.e., where individuals may come and go as they please, in which none are needed to play host, and in which all feel at home and comfortable. The third must be a leveler, an inclusive place [38]. It is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria for membership and exclusion. Individuals can select their associates, friends, and intimates from among the participants. The conversation is the main activity in the third place.

The places must be accessible, i.e., the timing and location, and accommodate the visitor’s need for sociability and relaxation. There must be regulars, customers who come to the place regularly. These places do not necessarily look impressive for the most part. They have a low profile. The conversation and vibe of third places are playful and joyful. The conversation may be low-key or pronounced, but it is essential to have a playful spirit to minimize feelings of anxiety and alienation. Third places must provide the feeling of home, where warmth emerges from friendliness, support, mutual concern, and a combination of cheerfulness and companionship. The traits of third places seem to be fundamental and applicable across different cultures and are necessary for a thriving and informal public life [18].

3.3. Understanding Micro-Institutions

Joshi [39] cites Sherry Arnstein’s [40] pivotal ‘ladder of participation’ to describe the type, nature, and evolution of local institutions. This framework addresses who has power and how much power village organizations have. The typology has eight ‘rungs’ based on degrees or levels of participation, from manipulation at the bottom to citizen control at the top. Not presented as a hierarchy, it is a continuum of levels of power from non-participation (manipulation and therapy) through degrees of tokenism (in ascending order, informing, consultation, and placation) to rungs of citizen power (partnership, delegated power, and citizen control) [41].

Tea shops are usually bottom rungs of the participation ladder. Arnstein’s theory shifts the argument away from power as a zero- or positive-sum model. Instead, it emphasizes the potential for agency within village organizations rather than confining it to a project structure. The tea-shop micro-institution is thus particularly important in an era of repressive governance, societal transition for women, and a struggle for democratic participation. They provide a coping strategy when other avenues of problem-solving are closed or otherwise ineffective [42].

3.4. Socializing in Tea Shops

Several scholars include the role of the teashop as a space for socializing. For example, Lu explains that tea shops are accessible to everyone [10]. There is little social class discrimination at tea shops. All kinds of people, such as the jobless, wage workers, street vendors, tricycle drivers, taxi drivers, artists, employees, officials, lawyers, doctors, local teachers, businesspeople, and brokers, are found in tea shops. Those who drink specially blended tea share the same table and seat as those who drink regular tea.

Regarding the role of a tea shop in socializing, one Milko reports that one respondent opined, “Tea shops are not just where people go to get good, cheap food”, says artist Kaung Kyaw Khine, 35, who earlier this year was featured in an art show in Yangon focusing on tea shops. “It’s a part of our culture, history, and where people go for all matters in life”. [37]

In addition, Win describes how tea shops as places for social contact [15]. They are significant places in Myanmar’s society. For example, teenagers use tea shops to listen to popular music or watch sports/movies. Adult men use tea shops to meet and talk with their colleagues. In addition, Win’s study of the spatial distribution of tea shops in the
urban area found that people who live near tea shops have a more comprehensive social network by visiting tea shops and chatting with neighbors regularly [15].

Similar to Milko’s respondent’s opinion, another respondent’s perception of the tea shop was:

“Tea shop is not just a place which only intends to get good taste and cheap foods”. But, he continued, “We are spending time at the tea shop not because we don’t have anything to do. For us, a cup of tea is an opportunity to sit down and discuss: to share knowledge amongst old friends and new”. [7]

Tea shops may be the bedrock of social life in Myanmar [15]. Local people spend hours in tea shops gossiping with friends, chatting, laughing, reading newspapers, and playing on their phones [42]. In addition, artists sometime spent time in teashops creating their work. Tea shops are a social space for the local community to communicate and interact daily [7,22].

3.5. Business Meetings in Tea Shops

The local people use tea shops to conduct everyday business activities. For example, Win describes tea shops as business offices, such as appointment centers and entertainment venues [15]. Likewise, local auto and real estate brokers use tea shops for social networking and information exchange to conduct business activities. Similarly, Keeler describes local people coming to tea shops when a vital soccer match is broadcast live on satellite TV [39]. Indeed, during the English Premier League sports season, the tea-shop owner tries to broadcast soccer matches to attract patrons.

Tea shops sometimes provide access to television and Internet media that residents may not have at home [43]. Sports, particularly national and regional soccer games and cricket matches. Tea shops provide venues for group experiences of contests and wagering, particularly when national sports interest seems to be on the rise [44].

When sports and business are not in focus, political activists often assemble at tea shops and debate and pontificate on issues in the community. Regarding the political conversation in tea shops, a former US. Ambassador said that “all-important words” start in tea shops in Myanmar [42].

4. Barriers to Women’s Participation in Teashops

Myanmar’s women have historically been prominent members of the opposition and protest and active in civil society, demonstrating a desire to advocate for women’s rights. Teashops provide an expanding venue for their participation despite the headwinds of traditional male resistance to their engagement [42].

4.1. Traditional Exclusion

There is a vast disparity in gender participation in tea-drinking meetups in tea shops and elsewhere in Myanmar culture [43]. For example, Figure 3 vividly shows the exclusion of women in traditional tea-drinking meetups in rural settings. However, it is still unclear what the limitations are and how Myanmar’s society disregards women from being included in the tea-drinking meetup conversation [44,45].

A first discussion with a Kachin ethnic scholar who has experience seeing tea-shop culture in Myanmar commented that the “traditional labor division” is one barrier that blocks women from participating in tea shops. During teashops’ busy hours in the morning, women in Myanmar remain home to complete household work and prepare food for the family. Men usually have no obligations to complete household work. This is culturally accepted. Therefore, men go out to meet friends at tea shops and build social capital.
walks of life, yet the role of women is hardly visible [19]. Regarding this, Hilton, Maung, want to enter and be stared at. As a result, fewer women visit teashop unless with friends 

women’s participation in tea-shop culture, suggesting that it is worth considering the labor division within the shop. From the consumer’s side, the participation of women may be hardly visible. However, he mentioned the role of women in the tea shop’s labor force. Young girls usually work as waiters to provide services to patrons—some function as junior chefs to cook and prepare subsidiary food at the back of the tea shop. Some work as cashiers at the counter.

Myint and Aung elucidate the cultural dynamics of gender participation at tea shops [12].

Where the *Laphet Yay Gyan wine* is considered a gender-neutral custom, the tea shop has historically tended to be regarded as a male-dominated space. No law has ever been written prohibiting women from tea shops, but they have been seen as less-frequented spaces for women and, instead, as a place for men to meet outside of the home away from their families. However, this culture appears to be changing, with many women now accompanying their male partners and friends and even sitting alone or in groups in tea shops. Yet even though everyone drinks tea in Myanmar society, whether young or old, male or female, tea shops are still generally set up to cater to a predominantly male clientele. [12]

4.2. Male Domination

Gora described men’s domination is a central downside of tea houses for women in Myanmar [38]. Gora’s conversation with the co-owner of Rangoon Tea House mentioned that many women might be intimidated because there are a lot of men, and they do not want to enter and be stared at. As a result, fewer women visit teashop unless with friends or partners. Sports and gambling also are traditional interests that may exclude women.

Regardless of the change and growth of women’s participation in tea shops, Milko [13] notes that both men and women own tea shops in Myanmar. However, the patrons are traditionally men. Tea shops are where a diverse range of characters come and mingle, interact, and chat. They have a reputation for welcoming people from all backgrounds and walks of life, yet the role of women is hardly visible [19]. Regarding this, Hilton, Maung, and Masson [11] responded that

For years, these have been no-go zones for women, where men congregate to ponder on news events and politics and access information, including on climate
change. While tea shops have increasingly accepted female patrons in urban settings, these spots remain exclusively for men in rural areas. Women in these areas have few avenues to access information on the weather and rely primarily on radio programming. [11]

When women do not have opportunities like those of men to take part in such everyday activities, they often struggle to secure participation in decision-making positions [12]. As a result, they are often excluded from public life [8]. In contrast, men establish their social capital, sports teams allegiances, and other bonding mechanisms. These male-focused processes while seemingly essential for resilience across social levels and communities, yet they often function to exclude women.

Concerning the time spent by men in tea shops, Keeler notes the growth in the number of tea shops [39]. He finds that many patrons, or at least more males, had nothing better to do with their time than sitting in tea shops, whiling away the hours in conversation, smoking, or watching TV. In this regard, Myint allows,

It is usual for Myanmar men to go to tea shops, gather around small square tables, sitting on footstools. Myanmar men can sit for long periods in this position, sipping tea and chatting about many topics. Tea drinking in Myanmar is one of the main ways people (especially men) socialize. [7]

According to the different scholars’ discussions, the role of women’s participation in tea shops is not fully encouraged due to cultural norms and the social structure, such as the “traditional labor division”, and neither is it supported by the opposite gender. While Myint and Aung record a change in women’s participation, the number is still significantly low [12]. The low status of women in tea shops is often exacerbated by their young age, poverty, and non-local origins [45].

5. Child Labor and Rural Migrants in Tea Shops

Tea shops are often the first place of employment for young people, particularly women. But such employees are often underage and exploited in many ways [45]. When young workers are from other locales, sometimes separated from their families, tea shops can facilitate exploitation. Poverty and economic hardship are the main reasons for too many child laborers in most developing countries [46]. However, child labor in Myanmar may be somewhat unlike elsewhere; it is often socially accepted and conducted widely and openly [47].

Domestic demand, familial poverty, cost of education, the social value placed on education, disregard for international policies, insufficient regulatory policies, insufficient enforcement of national policies, and a culture of filial piety are the factors that seem to sustain child labor in Myanmar [47]. In addition, financial need, displacement, and school-leaving during COVID-19, as well as instability from the 2021 coup have all contributed to increasing child labor in Myanmar [48].

In 2015, 1.13 million children aged 5 to 17 were engaged in the workforce; 58.3% were employed in agriculture, 17.5% in industrial jobs, and 24.2% in services, mining, construction, and tourism [46]. Furthermore, Augustus states that there are gender discrepancies in the type of work, with boys primarily working in tea shops while they are young and construction sites when they age [46].

Child laborers often are from rural areas [46]. They leave school to help the family’s income. Poverty and structural inequalities are the factors that force young people to drop out of school [49]. Here are legal, semi-legal, and under-aged employees at tea shops [47]. Working at tea shops does not require complex labor skills; they receive practical training to serve and communicate with patrons. The owners or managers teach them basic calculation methods. Typically, young women carry out domestic tasks; boys work in tea shops as waiters and gravitate toward higher-paying casual manual labor jobs in urban centers as they age. The informality and permissiveness of tea-shop employment often makes child labor exploitation an accepted entry point to the labor market [50].
The persistence of youth migrant workers in Myanmar is one result of poverty, the social choice of dropping out of school, and the militant culture of schooling [50]. These persistent poverty and economic hardship have pushed young men and women from rural areas to move to large, overcrowded cities in search of employment. This increases outmigration across the country when there are not many options to consider regarding opportunities or resources to start their own small businesses. Moreover, this rapid outmigration reinforces the economic crisis in rural communities, potentially causing young men and women to leave their home place for longer [3].

Yangon, the commercial capital of Myanmar, has been the major recipient of internal migrants. Those migrants were from Ayeyarwady, Bago, Magway, Mandalay, and Rakhine. Figure 4 shows the number of recent internal migrants reported in 2014. Figure 5 shows the recent internal migrant flows between the states/regions other than Yangon Region and to and from Yangon Region. Ayeyarwady is a delta province that produces rice and timber, with a significant number of landless laborers seeking employment in the capital city.

![Figure 4. The number of recent internal migrants [17].](image)

Although there is minimal empirical study on the demographics of those internal migrants, some studies mention young children, saying that these young children work in tea shops. Most are from Ayeyarwady. The teashop workforce is transient, and many workers come from villages or smaller towns (especially from Ayeyarwady Region) [6].

Mahato, Paudel, and Baral identify a series of factors driving rural youths to migrate [3]. Social factors include: status, living standard, personal development, household capabilities, lack of awareness, and personal aspiration. Family factors include: support, pressure, and family decisions. Economic considerations include: financial aid, economic security, job unavailability, a low incentive for educated manpower, and better opportunity for earning as economic factors. Schooling issues include: the pursuit of study, high investment and low returns, quality of education, and investment in education for lifelong learning as educational factors. Context concerns include: political instability and previous experience of conflict. Matters pertaining to farming include: lack of land to plough, the boredom of farming, and natural environment as environmental factors. Finally, institutional considerations include: nepotism, corruption, and harassment [3,51].
6. Social Cohesion for the Peace Process

Many peace and conflict resolution projects, such as training and workshops, were conducted in response to armed conflicts in 2014 [30]. However, the training and workshop time needed to build the necessary trust to allow for deeper sharing and, therefore, deeper learning among diverse groups of people was not supplied. Such training and workshops often lead to greater understanding resulting from increased intergroup contact and, so, a higher likelihood of relational transformation. In addition, a lack of understanding and appreciation for diversity is limited. Many other groups are marginalized, such as LGBTQ people and those with disabilities [52].

A challenge in promoting dialogue in Myanmar in finding ways to honor these cultural norms while offering an opportunity for people to learn about each other [7]. There is a traditional dialogue in Myanmar called Laphet-Ye-Wine (“tea circle”), which is commonly understood, regardless of religion or ethnicity, to refer to tea shops as places to gather and discuss the issues of the day [12].

6.1. Teashops and the Struggle for Democracy

The 1962 coup d’état led by General Ne Win isolated the country from the rest of the world [53,54]. During the military regime, one common way local individuals found contact with one another was regularly gathering at tea shops. Steinberg describes tea shops as where open discussions happen [4]. Frequent visits form a “bridging” tie between
the local individuals. A music video released before 1988 by a famous local singer Khaing Zar encouraged local individuals to visit tea shops to connect to the world and exchange knowledge until a small incident changed the political culture in Myanmar.

A fight that broke out at a tea shop between students near Rangoon (now known as Yangon) Institute of Technology and local youths over the choice of music to be played on the shop’s cassette player [53]. When one of the youths was injured, a student was arrested and then released because he was a son of a member of the local People’s Council; the students then took part in a protest march for justice. However, the riot police (known as Lon Htein) murdered several students. The protest rapidly escalated, increasing tension between the riot police, Tatmadaw troops, and students. Many students were killed. The demonstration was later known as the “1988 Student Uprising”, often referred to as the origin of the democracy movement by students in the modern history of Myanmar.

When having information first in hand was important during the 1988 uprising, military intelligence operatives were known to spend time in tea shops to crack down on student protests [53]. The mistrust flourished. However, the slow shift to democracy in 2010 reframed tea shops as hubs for lively conversation. These circumstances highlighted tea shops as a symbol or an icon of where the democratic movement started [4].

6.2. Teashop as Community Resistance

Thein-Lemelson describes tea shops as where the local community regularly gathers [51]. These establishments have the stable and characteristic features of informal gatherings. Mullen for example, describes tea shops as the local people’s everyday spaces and the community’s opportunity to discuss resistance techniques [5]. The modern history of Myanmar is marked by repressive rule, clear human rights violations, and prolonged armed conflicts (civil war). Media censorship, the military’s oppression of freedom of speech, and poor access to information have shaped tea shops’ role in connecting and unifying local people to resist political repression [55,56].

Oak and Brooten described tea shops as where local people sat every morning for the 8 o’clock news and to receive information before the military government was established in 2010 and allowed social media to spread. During the years of censorship, local people had to visit tea shops to be informed and stay up-to-date [57].

After the military junta took control of the country from the free and fairly elected government [4], the military often shut down and restricted internet and mobile network access and cut off electricity to control access to information and to conceal violence by the military junta’s police, as reported by many international news agencies. The military junta imposed increased restrictions on internet access to suppress protests [58]. In addition, news agencies based locally, such as Radio Free Asia (RFA) [5], Voice of America (VOA) [6], and Myanmar Now [7], have also reported frequent electricity outages in Myanmar. Under these circumstances, rural people, and those in towns, especially those without television or electricity, visit tea shops for news and information.

7. Conclusions

Teashops are a social space where local communities encounter friends, conduct business, engage in resistance, and learn of local affairs. We have provided a perspective to understand tea shops’ social, economic, and political role in Myanmar society. We also analyzed Myanmar’s tea-shop culture to portray the role of gender participation and child labor within the tea-shop ecosystem.

Despite changes in women’s participation in tea shops compared to the past, several scholars have discussed stereotypical cultural norms and social structures as persisting limitations for women to enjoy their freedom of involvement in public life. Additionally, the “traditional gendered division of labor” is a barrier to overcome when encouraging women’s participation in public life and their empowerment in decision-making.
In order to empower women to have equal opportunities to men to engage in such daily activities, participating in tea-drinking meetups at tea shops can change Myanmar’s perspective on women’s participation in political dialogue and other significant discussions. Tea shops present an entry point to local life for rural migrants. Nonetheless, they also present an opportunity for exploitation; across the landscape of tea shops, child labor is still widespread. Economic and political instability fuel rural outmigration and persistent child labor in tea shops and elsewhere. Unrest is a major obstacle to social research in Myanmar, as it fosters suspicion of inquisitive outsiders, and this reinforces the need for observers of both genders to explore the topic.

The main lessons from this study connect to the importance of local institutions when national and formal governmental institutions are dysfunctional, fragile, or repressive venues for citizen participation. Further research on tea shops should respond to the “labor division” in tea shops. More specifically, it should examine the social and spatial origins of people who work in tea shops. These micro-institutions provide a citizen’s first bridge to the village or neighborhood, traditionally for men but now for women, newcomers, and young people seeking new possibilities.

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**Notes**

1. Arendorst (and others) explicate the political controversial name change [1–5].
2. AJL, a Kachin ethnic woman from Myanmar, is a graduate student at a U.S. university.
3. KMO, a Shan ethnic from Myanmar, is a graduate student at a U.S. university.
4. The election was held in November 2020. The National League for Democracy (NLD) won the election. The military claimed there were significant fraud in the election and demanded to re-hold the election. The objection entered the military to seize the state power on 1 February 2021 [51,53].

**References**


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