**Conclusion**

**Summary of the main contents**

This book addressed the interrelated cultures of tea, aromatic substances, and music in the lives of the scholar-artists in the Northern Song period. The three practices – making and drinking tea, burning and enjoying the fragrances of aromatic substances, and playing the *qin* – were all ephemeral artistic practices that left few records and are difficult for scholars to interpret. By carefully integrating textual, material, and ethnographical evidence and cross-referencing it with simulation experiments, we argued that the three types of ephemeral arts were cultural, economic, and artistic constructs of the scholar-artists.

Chapter 1 introduced the three cultures and illustrated how the elites of the Northern Song participated in them. The elites shared in the experience of these three sensory arts as they enjoyed them together. Thus, they established and formulated similar values and perceptions towards them. A detailed discussion of how tea was prepared in the Northern Song period was provided based on the results of tea preparation simulation experiments. We argued that the appreciation of the cultures of tea and aromatic substances became popular not only because they were effective health products but also because they were cultural constructs favoured by the scholar-artists. The chapter also introduced the important prosodic and melodic patterns of Chinese poetry to aid in discussing how the elites constructed *qin* music and poems.

Chapter 2 explained how the scholar-artists obtained the materials needed for the three types of cultures. It explores the economic and material networks of tea, aromatic substances, and the *qin*. Raw materials such as tea leaves, utensils, aromatic timber, and timber for making the wooden plates of the *qin* had to be acquired from regions distant from the metropolitan areas. The common acceptance of the materials by people from a broad social spectrum inside and outside the Chinese-speaking areas reflected that the governments of the time were incentivised to exert tight control over these industries. The difficulty in producing, transporting, and distributing these materials associated with the ephemeral arts made them rare and precious.

Chapter 3 delineated how the scholar-artists constructed their image in textual and non-textual media. The scholar-artists used paintings and literary works to, directly and indirectly, project their participation in the three cultures and their ideal of living a reclusive life detached from worldly strivings. By exchanging literary works, inheriting values from their mentors, and passing their beliefs on to their disciples, the scholar-artists defined, re-defined, consolidated, and strengthened their common values and ideals among their friends, colleagues, and supporters.

**Formation of the scholar-artist communities**

Having illustrated how the scholar-artists culturally, economically, and artistically constructed the three types of ephemeral arts, we now understand that a set of values and perceptions surrounding them were created and disseminated among social, political, and cultural groups. This set of values and perceptions would serve to link the different members of the group. The shared materials, sensory experiences, and ephemeral practices were part of connecting the community.

Community formation was a process in constant flux. Members could maintain relatively solid relationships, such as existed between Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi, and Huang Tingjian or Huizong and Cai Jing, but the bonds between members were not set in stone. Rather, individuals aspiring to join a certain group could take steps to convince the group that they were of the same mind and spirit and would contribute to the community. Shen Zun’s approach to Ouyang Xiu, who finally joined his group, is a case in point.

The production process of tea, aromatic substances, and *qin* defined the shape, size, colour, smell, texture, and other features of the materials and determined how the scholar-artists perceived them. At the same time, the scholar-artists’ cultural, economic, and artistic choices also defined, in turn, how the materials should be produced. A circular process resulted, with the materials and the users mutually shaping each other. Before the publication of the *Daguan Treatise*, tea bowls of various glaze colours were popular among the scholar-artists, but the authors privileged dark-glazed Jian ware. The scholar-artists’ choices and the production of tea bowls thus constituted a mutually interactive relationship. In turn, the tea bowls and other materials contributing to community formation shaped the scholar-artists’ tastes and provided sources of perception and imagination for them to construct their image.

The five sensory experiences and practices, such as whisking the tea and plucking the silk strings of the *qin*, constituted other essential factors contributing to community formation. The power of these shared sensory experiences in the process of community formation has been overlooked by modern scholars of the period. The shared choices of the colour of the tea foam, the taste of the tea, the sound of the *qin* and the melodies from reading aloud the poems, the smell of the burning aromatic substances, and the sensations of the fingers whisking the tea and plucking the strings – all these were the forces that connected community members when they found themselves in each other’s company in a shared space, like sitting around a table at a literary gathering or relaxing in the cave depicted in the *Mountain Villa*. The spatial proximity, the similarity of ephemeral practices, and shared experiences provided scholar-artists with a powerful symbolic connection.

Rather than suggesting that people were influenced by social norms to form groups,[[1]](#footnote-1) we analysed how community formation provided standards, requirements, expectations, imagination, and inspiration to community members.[[2]](#footnote-2) The scholar-artists, materials, sensorial experiences, and ephemeral practices mutually shaped each other. The expectations and imagination generated from their interactions would inspire the next generation of scholar-artists to inherit or reject their values and perceptions. In any case, the bond between the scholar-artists within the group would be consolidated. Group identity was strengthened by constructing outsiders, such as members of inferior social rank and tea drinkers who liked adding salt and milk to the tea. The more outsiders they created, the more scholar-artists could distinguish themselves from others, and the more solid the bond among themselves became.

Investigating the formation of the scholar-artist communities in the Northern Song enabled us to probe several understudied issues in the history of Chinese art. We now better understand how the scholar-artists made and drank tea, burned aromatic substances, and generated euphoric melodies by playing the *qin* and reading their poems aloud and what these ephemeral practices meant. These issues are also crucial to the political, economic, and cultural histories of the Northern Song as they reflect how governments, merchants, scholar-artists, and ordinary people were involved in the industries.

Their involvement in the cultural, economic, and artistic construction of the three types of practices prompted us to revisit another core issue of Chinese art history – the role of creativity in the scholar-artist communities. Did the scholar-artists employ individual creativity in the three ephemeral arts, or did they merely imitate their predecessors? Our analysis has revealed a common core of practices, experiences, and values that generated literary and artistic works with similar themes across regions and generations, so much so that it becomes necessary for us to reassess our emphasis on individual creativity and to give collaborative creativity the consideration that is its due. Collaborative creativity does not mean that a work is done by a group of artists working together such as a painting created by multiple hands. It refers to the expression of creativity from a community of scholar-artists. It does not focus on the individuals and is not a conglomerate of creative inputs from all individuals. Collaborative creativity is the immediate result of the mutual interactions of all the creative productions of community members.

It is possible that Su Shi did not really like the smell of burning aromatic substances and could not play the *qin* well. If so, he may not have been motivated to participate in these ephemeral arts, even though he could write sophisticated poems about them. If the scholar-artists lacked motivation or perhaps did not even participate in some of these activities, how can we ascribe individual creativity to them concerning these arts? We can also question whether the scholar-artists participation in these arts sprang from their freedom and creativity or was primarily meant to fulfil the expectations of other community members. The scholar-artists, materials, sensory experiences, and ephemeral practices mutually shaped each other, so fixating on individual creativity ignores the interactive processes and contributions from peer members, materials, sensory experiences, and ephemeral practices. Unique and original personal expressions seem to be blurred in the community formation process.

Instead, we see how the exchanges of expressions, mutual interactions, and shaping of values and perceptions in the scholar-artists’ literary works define the collaborative creativity of the communities. The prescribed tea-tippingpractice also meant that the scholar-artists were performing the same repetitive actions to achieve the perfect colour of the tea foam. This is not to suggest that we should completely abandon the idea of individual creativity. Overemphasis on either collaborative or individual creativity would blur our interpretations of the scholar-artists’ world. Collaborative creativity will need to be addressed appropriately in art history.

**Methodological reflections on the history of art**

The historical study of tea, aromatic substances, and *qin* music prompts us to revisit the methodologies adopted in the field of art history. First, we need to distinguish the different sources of evidence and be aware of the extent to which we can or cannot integrate them. Past studies of tea history combined evidence from literary works with tea texts; in this book, these types of evidence are separated into Chapter 1 and Chapter 3. In Chapter 1, we mainly relied on tea texts and argued that tea was a cultural construct in contrast to tea as represented in artistic constructs discussed in Chapter 3. Not differentiating the two incurs the risk of blurring reality and artistic representation.

This book also showed that evidence from simulation experiments and ethnographical studies is necessary for art historical studies of ephemeral practices. The ephemeral arts leave little record, but their sensory impact on people in the past and present is likely to be similar, so we can use the results of simulation experiments and ethnographical studies as complementary references. Although we cannot completely reconstruct the sequence of actions, the tea-tipping practice in the Northern Song was replicated to some extent in our experiments, allowing us to achieve a more holistic understanding of the tea-tipping practice. This proves to be a useful tactic in the study of ephemeral arts.

The approaches adopted in the study of poetry in this book also have further implications for studying the prosody of Chinese literature. We attained a deeper understanding of the poets’ intended messages by taking into consideration the acoustic elements, such as the tonal patterns, *ping*/*ze* distinctions, and melodies of the poems. These factors are significant in showing how a poet would construct his relationship with his correspondents, such as displaying respect to his superiors by mimicking their rhyme schemes. Moreover, we should not ignore the words intended to be euphonies because, along with the rhymed words, they would convey euphonic and melodic sound patterns when read aloud. Along this line of thought, the responding poems were not simply reiterations of the previous poets’ messages but were products of collaborative artistic production among the members of the scholar-artist communities. The mirroring of the sound patterns in the scholar-artists’ messages showed how the generations inherited and passed on values and sensitivities. Ignoring these elements puts us at risk of overlooking an essential part of the thinking processes of the poets. In addition, poetic exchanges, echoing, and wordplay in collaborative contexts should not be ignored in the history of literature. This book showed that poems written for these purposes were significant evidence of the mental worlds of the scholar-artists. Historians of literature may need to develop an awareness of the various types of evidence used in this book.

Northern Song poems about tea-making, cultivation and transportation of tea, the tea-tipping practice, and porters’ lives are important clues leading us to explore the stories behind the writing of the poems. Postulating which methods of making tea the poet was describing can change how we understand the settings, scenarios, and contexts described in the poems. We cannot entirely rely on the poets’ descriptions of tea-making methods that they did not endorse because their bias could shape their narrative. Consulting and comparing other kinds of evidence prompts us to locate the historical background and realities behind the poems, which help us distinguish the poets’ favourite methods and their objections to the practices of others. This is a reliable tactic to deal with ephemeral arts that have left scant records.

**Impact on contemporary issues**

The implications of our research inquiries in this book are not limited to the Northern Song period. They can shed light on how we think about contemporary issues, such as how people form groups in today’s world. The far-reaching impact of Benedict Anderson’s book, *Imagined Communities*, has led us to revisit the basis of community formation in the modern world. We must be aware of other factors that contribute to the community formation process, including not just the people but also materials, sensory experiences, and ephemeral practices. It is easy to overlook these elements if we focus only on the inner world of human beings. Abraham Maslow’s (1943) influential theory of human motivations puts self-actualisation and psychological needs on top of the hierarchy of human motivations, while physiological needs are defined as “less prepotent” and less dominating. Eating ice cream to express the desire for love is important, as Maslow argues, while eating ice cream “to cool the mouth” or as “a casual appetitive reaction” is “relatively unimportant”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As discussed in this book, the physiological aspects include the interplay of materials, sensory experiences, and ephemeral practices in community formation. They are not basic and less potent – they are essential forces determining how a community forms and disintegrates. They constitute the perception basis of certain cultures, states, groups, and communities. Not acknowledging their power and potential will lead to disastrous consequences. For example, sensory experiences and ephemeral practices will change how we perceive people. Fan Chengda criticised the local governments for not repairing the roads because he was unaware of the differences between the materials, sensory experiences, and ephemeral practices in his world and those in the porters’ world. If we are unaware of these differences in other people’s worlds, we will easily allow our implicit assumptions to determine our judgments of others. For example, will we, like the elitist scholar-artists of the Northern Song, judge others by their skin colour, perceived coarseness, the lingering odour of manual work, and their seemingly rude manners and behaviours? These judgments are unfounded, but how many of us are guilty of such prejudices? Were police officers implicated in the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020 aware of the differences between their world and Floyd’s?[[4]](#footnote-4)

Tragedies occur from time to time, but we learn that we should be aware of the differences between the people, materials, sensory experiences, ephemeral practices, and other factors that form our familiar community or distinguish ours from those of others. We live a better life by becoming sensitive to these factors, acknowledging their potential and power, critiquing their impact upon us, and avoiding baseless conclusions.

1. See Le Bon 1960: 79-116. Giddens 1984: 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Cf.* Murck 2000: 28-50; Powers 2015: 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Maslow 1943: 392, see also pp. 372, 387-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Klemko and Brady 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)