

Tea

Food Journey Research Report



Malsa Maaz

Food Politics

Always time for tea

Exploring the significance of tea in the food world

“Thank God for tea! What would the world do without tea! How did it exist? I am glad I was not born before tea.”

— Sydney Smith, A memoir of the Rev. Sydney Smith



<http://www.rivertea.com/blog/tea-production-the-journey-of-a-tea-leaf/>

Introduction

“Would you like some tea or coffee?” is one of the most asked questions of all time. Therefore, it is not surprising that tea, in all its forms, is the most widely consumed beverage of all time after water (Mair & Hoh, 2009). Tea as a commodity and tradition has been transported from one culture to another, adapting and transforming traditions of one culture to the heritage of another (Jolliffe, 2007: 3). Tea drinking has a history of over 400,000 years and the culture is still evolving (Han, 2007: 33). As it has spread across the world, tea drinking plays a significant part in each region’s history as it forms their local cultures and reflect national identities (Han, 2007; Jolliffe, 2007). Millions of livelihood depend on the tea industry, especially in developing countries in which tea is an important commodity in terms of jobs and export (Wal, 2008: 12). This report will examine the sociocultural, economic and political significance of tea drinking cultures in different regions, with a focus on China, Japan, India, Sri Lanka and the UK to explore how it has come to be an important part of modern culture.

Background history

Tea comes from the *Camellia sinensis* plant which is cultivated and processed, which results in a number of types of tea such as white and green (unfermented), oolong (partly fermented) and black (fermented) teas (Jolliffe, 2007: 4). The *Camellia sinensis* plant usually grows in tropical and subtropical regions of the world (Wal, 2008: 17). There are debates on the origin of tea drinking and where it started, but it is generally accepted that tea drinking originated in China. The Chinese legend suggests that tea was first discovered by Emperor Shen Nung and can be traced back 5000 years (Han, 2007: 25). Tea used to be given as a tribute to emperors during the Zhou Dynasty which suggests that there was an organised tea trade and market as early as 1100 BC in China (Han, 2007: 23). It then spread to other regions through the Silk Road and other trade movements (Han, 2007: 25). China started exporting tea to Japan in the 8th century where they are records of tea drinking and tea ceremonies; and by the 11th century, green tea became the main tea of Japan developing their own unique tea custom (Han, 2007: 30).



<https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/04/07/396664685/tea-tuesdays-how-tea-sugar-reshaped-the-british-empire>

In addition to being a part of ancient trade, tea has also played a role in colonisation. When China imposed the embargo on shipments to England during the opium war, the English merchants decided to plant and produce tea products in parts of the British Empire (Han, 2007: 32). By 1835, the British East India company established tea plantations in India and Sri Lanka (DeWolf, 1971: 22), and by the nineteenth century, Indian tea replaced Chinese tea in Britain, as the British preferred the Indian thicker brew (Bhowmik, 1996: 4). Moreover, in their colonisation of tea, ‘the British scooped it up and made it their own identity’ (Jolliffe, 2007: 40). This establishment by the British colonial policies played a critical part in transforming the Indian and Sri Lankan economy (Han, 2007: 32). Even after they gained independence from the British. Eventually, the tea bag was invented in the 20th century and Tetley became the first British tea company to sell the tea bag and popularise it in the global markets (Mair & Hoh, 2009: 250). This transformed the tea cultures around the world, where many had to ‘fight a long-drawn out intractable battle against age old rituals, customs and preferences (Mair & Hoh, 2009: 250). In this regard, tea was more than just an object of exchange and consumption, but also a coloniser of taste and transformer of its drinkers (Ellis et al, 2015).

Social and Cultural Life of Tea

It is evident that it is not just people that move across the globe, it is also food and food products. Mintz & Du Bois (2002: 105) suggested that agents of dietary change are people on the move such as migrants, refugees and colonisers. Migration, colonisation and trade, enabled tea to travel all over the world and adapt to different cultures and societies. The concept of ‘foodways’ are used by anthropologists to explore how different ethnic groups share food habits that respond to local social and economic conditions (Ellis et al, 2015). The countries producing and consuming tea reflect its significance in their cultures as it is a part of their national identities. Moreover, different types of teas have been adopted by different cultures. For instance, the Japanese have identified green tea as their national drink, whereas in England, it is black tea that has some associations as a national drink (Jolliffe, 2007: 4).

<http://xiaofan.altervista.org/chinese-tea-culture-philosophy/>



It was not just certain types of teas which was adopted by different cultures and regions, but also the way it was consumed. As Jolliffe (2007: 4) observed “for the Chinese, it is the art of tea...for the Japanese, the way of tea...for the British, the afternoon tea... and for the Russians, tea served in samovar”. Han (2007: 24) states that the tea culture in China is

sophisticated from its selection, consumption to its rituals and still remains a critical part of contemporary Chinese culture. By the Sung Dynasty in China, tea drinking was considered to be a social event; it was a symbol of wealth and was associated with social status (Han, 2007: 35). Moreover, tea competitions took place where people presented their tea collections. This eventually led tea to gain equal status with chess and calligraphy (Han, 2007: 35) which is an important part of Chinese culture, thus reflecting the rising significance of tea.

Due to the Chinese influence, tea became widespread in Japan; by the 11th century, green tea became the most popular tea in Japan. There was a rise in political tensions between China and Japan, however, this facilitated the development of a unique tea custom in Japanese culture (Han, 2007: 30). Japanese tea ceremonies *chanoyu* meaning ‘the way of tea’, has become a tradition in Japan which attracts tourists to experience this culture in the traditional teahouses in places such as Kyoto and Nara (Han, 2007: 31).



<http://beauty-of-japan.com/tour/tea-ceremony-maiko-kyoto/>

Nobody would question the popularity of tea in the UK. The 18th century saw the rise in its popularity as tea replaced alcohol as the most popular beverage in England (Han, 2007: 31). In the 19th century, tea became an icon of English domesticity and rose in prominence, thus gaining the title of the national beverage (Fromer, 2008: 531). The tea culture in England is considered by many to be an important symbol of heritage in Britain, which defined the English identity, therefore it represents the ‘social reality of a country where many still enjoy the afternoon tea ritual’ (Jolliffe, 2007: 40). Moreover, Fromer (2008: 532) states that tea united the English which erased the boundaries between groups temporarily and strengthened the body politic of the nation itself (Fromer, 2008: 532). Today, the British consume 60 billion cups per year (Greenwood, 2016) which demonstrate the popularity of tea in England.



<http://www.metabluedb.com/british-tea-time.html>

As tea became established as a social drink due to its refined methods of preparation and serving, it was initially considered to be an exotic luxury, especially in the 18th century. It was also a socially exclusive as well as a gendered commodity (Brennan, 2013: 360) which was initially embraced by women as their signature drink (Fleming, 2010). Whilst coffee houses and consumption of coffee was considered a male pastime, tea gave women an opportunity to seize tea as their own in order to socialise and discuss things such as fashion (Fleming, 2010). As its popularity increased amongst, it eventually became a symbol of the upper-class, especially upper-class women. This created a new social identity in the tea culture of England as it was now associated with the upper class societies (Fleming, 2010).

Furthermore, it can even be said that tea has religious aspects to it. In China and Japan, Buddhism was one of the main reasons why tea drinking culture was so widespread during the Tang Dynasty, as it was the official drink used to praise Buddha (Han, 2007: 24). Specific rules on tea drinking was established in the Role of Monks suggesting the importance of tea in this region. Tea was also Islam's first official drink as it was a good alternative to wine as alcohol was prohibited in the religion (Han, 2007: 27). This meant that tea was very widespread in the Arabian societies as well.



Due to its popularity, tea has been capitalised as a theme for developing tourists attractions and products; this is known as tea tourism (Han, 2007: 36). Tourists are able to experience the tea cultures of different regions including its history, production, blending and consumption (Jolliffe, 2007: 10). Tea tourism generates local income and reduces poverty as it has the potential to be an instrument of social

change and bring sustainable development to the tea producing countries (Jolliffe, 2007: 6). Moreover, the tea industry also provide opportunities to develop and strengthen regional culinary heritage and identities (Huang, 2006: 586). Jolliffe (2007: 8) notes how the tourist plays a part in changing and adapting the culture of tea as tradition becomes attraction. Moreover, when the cultural and social dimensions of tea drinking is combined, it lets the tourists experience the tea drinking customs in its most authentic ways which would help them understand the visiting regions better (Han, 2007: 35). Tea plantations now offer the chance for tourists to stay in the estates where they can take part in activities such as plucking the leaves to get an authentic experience of tea production.

It is evident that in all these cases, the consumption of tea plays an important part in cultural and social relationships (Jolliffe, 2007: 4). In addition to shaping the foundations of culture and heritage, it also formed the nature of regional identities. Tea can be considered a truly global commodity, given its rich history and how much it has travelled all over the world. Moreover, it is also evident how different regions have developed their own 'ways of tea'. The adoption of various tea traditions demonstrate the changes taking place in society, therefore, tea can be considered as a barometer of social change (Jolliffe, 2007: 5). Tea has played a role in social events, religion, gender and class; therefore, its significance in shaping the culture and society in different regions is apparent.

Political and Economical Relationships of Tea



In order to trace the social, political and economic relationships created in the movement of tea as a commodity, it must be analysed in a commodity-system approach. This would allow for it to be examined starting from its production to its consumption and how it shapes cultures and societies.

The production of tea is labour extensive, as most of the work is done manually. The leaves are plucked and collected into a bag, often by women who carry the bags on their backs (Wal, 2008: 17). Hand plucked tea leaves are considered to be of higher quality than the mechanically plucked leaves (ILO, 2018: 49). During the processing stage, the teas are distinguished into black (fermented) and green (unfermented) tea, and then dried and crushed (Wal, 2008: 17). Unlike in the production of coffee or cocoa where companies only have a specific part in the production chain, there is direct communication between manufacturers and producers in the tea industry (Wal, 2008: 24). Tea plantation usually takes place in developing countries. For instance, after the British East India Company set up tea plantations in India and Sri Lanka, they became leading countries in the industry. However, it comes with its costs.

Large tea plantation companies have benefited from low cost labour for decades. Bhowmik (1996: 1) states how the problems of tea plantation workers are often overlooked despite the millions of people working in the industry with low wages and poor working conditions. The large tea companies kept the costs of production low through low wages for the workers which allowed tea to be marketed in other countries at a low price (Jolliffe, 2007: 5). In Sri Lanka, the local producers earn USD 2.80 a day, and similarly, local producers in India get USD 1.19-90 a day (Wal, 2008: 27). On top of the low wages, living and working conditions of the workers in the tea industry are also problematic.

Workers often live in old barracks without the access to basic needs like piped drinking water and sanitation facilities (Wal, 2008: 29). Moreover, tea plucking is hazardous work which takes requires health and safety measures. International Labour Organisation (2018: 42) observed that tea plantations in Sri Lanka did not have first aid kits readily available for the smallholders despite the heavy usage of agrochemicals and mechanical weeding.



In India, female workers were preferred for the role of plucking leaves due to their ‘sensitive fingertips’ (Sharma & Das, 2009: 69). Similar to the workers in Sri Lanka, the workers in India also lived in little enclaves where families lived and brought up their children (Makita, 2012: 90). Moreover, as the workers were paid low wages, it resulted in high mortality and low fertility (Makita, 2012: 90). Although there was a shift in power relations after gaining independence from the British empire, the industry was still controlled under a hierarchal system. However, Makita (2012: 91) notes how this system further widened the social gap between the management who issues the orders and the workers, as it functioned under a system of upper and lower rungs.

Work in the agriculture sector in developing countries have evolved over the years due to key factors such as globalisation (ILO, 2018: 44). Workers in almost every industry face exploitation due to factors such as globalisation. Moreover, it is necessary to have food safety and quality standards in the tea plantations for the smallholders. Maintenance of such things will also result in better quality tea leaves. For instance, it is evident that tea smallholders in Sri Lanka were unable to maintain proper plucking rounds which resulted in poor quality hand plucked leaves as a result of poor working conditions (ILO, 2018: 49). So, who should be responsible? Wal (2008: 67) proposes that all the parties entangled in the production and consumption of tea should be responsible from tea producing companies, tea-trading companies, governments, NGOs and lastly the consumer. He suggests that providing support to smallholders is essential through proper technical, financial and marketing assistance; governments should be responsible for ensuring that the labour laws are not violated in the tea plantations; NGOs could raise awareness on issues faced in the tea sector to support the marginalised groups and the consumer should pay attention to the tea or tea brands they purchased which are fair-trade and produced ethically (2008: 68). Pritchard (2013: 174) suggests the concept of traceability which would ensure the safety standards in accordance with proper environmental and human rights practice. The United Kingdom Ethical Tea Partnership use traceability to provide assurance to the consumers that the tea being consumed was produced under proper labour standards.

The global food system portrays how foods can be dis-embedded and re-embedded across space (Pritchard, 2013: 173) and politics. The British colonisation of tea provides a good example to demonstrate how tea has shaped power relations in the UK and the colonised countries. The exotic origins of tea was always troublesome in the UK as it was considered to be the national beverage. However, the establishment of tea plantations within the British Empire in countries such as India and Sri Lanka meant that England no longer had to depend on ‘uncertainties of foreign merchants’ as they themselves took over the production of the commodity which was crucial to the English culture and identity (Fromer, 2008: 536).

Conclusion

The story of tea is the story of humankind in a nutshell as its history portrays the many networks it is entangled in (Martin, 2007). Moreover, it connected the world together like no other beverage has, from the workers, to the monks, to the pluckers, to the emperors, from the Chinese, to the British, and to us. Tea drinking spread across many regions and into various cultures. As Han (2007: 33) states, even though some cultures may not consider tea-drinking as serious as other cultures, it remains an important part of modern culture nonetheless, and still continues to evolve. It is evident that tea became a global commodity a long



<https://daily.jstor.org/the-extremely-un-british-origins-of-tea/>

time ago, as it played a role in the ancient trade. From having its origins in China, and roots in the colonial British Empire, it has transformed cultures, societies and economies.

Tea also demonstrates how foods move across the globe just as people do, and how it has the potential to shape cultures and identities. As tea spread across various regions, each region adopted their own ways of consuming tea, thus developing a unique tradition in their culture. For instance, tea was imported to Japan from China, but the Japanese soon developed their own tea ceremonies which is now an essential part of their national identity today. Another example is the tea culture in England; although it was initially an exotic and luxurious commodity, today it represents tea as the quintessential British culture and heritage. Moreover, tea has also played a significant role in different classes, gender and even religion. The role of gender in both its production and consumption is evident, as it was initially women who were associated with tea.

In the production of tea, the consequences of issues such as low wages were highlighted focusing on India and Sri Lanka. To ensure that the smallholders worked in an exploitation free environment with safety procedures required, responsibility should be taken by all the parties entangled in the network of tea starting from the producer to the consumer. Whilst producers ensure safety and regulation for the workers, consumers can purchase ethically produced tea leaves which would undoubtedly support the tea plantation workers in the developing countries India and Sri Lanka.

The popularity of tea is apparent, especially with the rise of tea tourism. It has facilitated the consumption of tea to a new level, where the tourists can now experience and take part in the process of production as well. This illustrates how the contemporary tea cultures experienced through tourism has the ability to influence the tea traditions of other societies (Jolliffe, 2007: 6). Moreover, it would influence the network of tea as all the parties involved are entangled from producers to consumers. Mair & Hoh (2009: 257) narrates how tea for most who consume it, is part of the daily ritual and ‘an excuse for a well-needed break, a philosophy, a search for those moments of quietude and companionship when the world subsides and all becomes one. Drink in that spirit, and health, happiness and eternal life will follow’.

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