Chinese tea and Asian societies

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Tea originated in China and has spread worldwide over the past two centuries. Tea plants are highly sensitive to their natural environment and, even today, are mainly cultivated in subtropical Asian countries. The cultivation, processing and consumption of tea has influenced Asian societies for centuries, in various ways. In this edition of ‘China Connections’, inspired by Appadurai’s ‘Disjunction and difference in the global cultural economy’, we explore how tea, as a commodity critically involved in modern world history, affected ancient China’s regional politics, and how it still permeates ordinary people’s lives in Asia.

The extensive influence of tea has also challenged researchers’ assumptions and knowledge, making an interdisciplinary approach and methodology essential for the study of tea. From China of the Tang Dynasty to California in America, from British Indian tea plantations to teahouses in Chaoshan, tea has influenced our societies dynamically and is still shaping our modern world. We hope that the following articles will unveil some of tea’s mysteries and enable you to enjoy more than just a cup of the beverage.

The first finding that became apparent to me was how deeply Gongfu tea was integrated into the everyday lives of people of all kinds of social background. As one of my interviewees explained, it has ‘seeped into our bones’. People who were born and raised in Chaoshan did not consciously learn about Gongfu tea, they simply came to know about it as they grew up. The integral place of Gongfu tea had three dimensions: spatial, temporal and social. Temporally, Gongfu tea is everywhere. In the workplaces, shops or homes that I observed, a Gongfu tea set was always found in regular use. Temporally, Gongfu tea is woven into the rhythms of everyday life: at home, after dinner, in shops, wherever trading is slow, out comes the Gongfu tea set. Above all, drinking Gongfu tea can be considered to be a social activity, nurturing relationships with family, friends and associates, and in doing so, affirming the drinkers’ identity in a network of social relationships through which a distinctive and valued regional culture is transmitted. Gongfu tea, as the interviewees tell us, Gongfu tea is a highly refined way of preparing and drinking tea, using small teapots, preferably of Yixing clay, or porcelain gaiwan, in which to prepare a very strong brew, most frequently of the locally grown, semi-fermented Fenghuang Dancong (凤凰单丛) tea. This is poured into small cups of around 30 ml capacity for drinking repeated infusions from the same teacup. From my observations, preparing and drinking Gongfu tea requires attentiveness to procedural details – to being jiangju (讲究) – but this was achieved, not by slavishly following a rigid sequence of steps as some literary accounts suggest, but by showing skill and dexterity. A Gongfu tea-drinking occasion creates its own tempo. Regardless of whether the occasion lasts ten minutes or two hours, during this time participants put aside the incessant demands for haste that punctuate the world around and appreciate the tea tea.

For most of my research participants, drinking Gongfu tea was seen as “part of our lives”. Some participants, however, had chosen to elevate their tea-drinking to a kind of art. Again, this was accomplished by cultivating expertise and discernment in one or more of several domains, for example, creating a special space for drinking tea; seeking out high quality tea utensils; exploring philosophical and spiritual aspects of tea-drinking; developing a capacity to understand and appreciate the qualities and properties of any given tea leaves, and knowing where and how to purchase teas of the finest quality. Today’s globalised world is characterised by what some sociologists have described as transnational streams of ‘cultural capital’, in which cultural objects from one place are appropriated, redefined and repackaged for deployment as commodities elsewhere. In the case of Chaoshan Gongfu tea, it is possible to detect at least three such ‘streams’. Firstly, within China, Gongfu tea modelled on Chaoshan practices has been taken up by many non-Chaoshan people, particularly in business settings, as a vehicle for interacting and negotiating with associates. Secondly, in the emergence of contemporary tea art in Taiwan that began in the 1970s, a style of drinking adapted from Chaoshan Gongfu tea to be regarded not as one among many regional styles in China, but as Chinese tea art per se.

Thirdly, outside China Gongfu tea is being promoted as an authentic, national Chinese ‘tea ceremony’, by implication analogous to the well-known Japanese tea ceremony, with cultural roots that go back to ancient times. This last claim is bolstered by historically dubious suggestions that Chaoshan Gongfu tea is a modern manifestation of Tang dynasty tea-drinking practices as described by Lu Yu in the oldest and most important book on tea, the Cha Jing (茶经). Where these cultural streams will flow in future is a question for another day. In the meantime, in at least one region of China, traditional tea culture continues to enrich the lives, not just of a privileged cultural elite, but of people everywhere.

Notes


China Connections

Tea and everyday life: observations from Chaoshan, Guangdong

Peter d’Abbs

We encourage our readers to consider tea in both its macroscopic and microscopic contexts. On the one hand, tea is associated with regime change, long-distance transportation, the organization of production, and global capitalism, and so has propelled the emergence of the world trade system. On the other hand, tea is closely related to our consumption habits, our social organization and life-styles, and to some extent reflects our bodily perception of the environment.

Following the ‘the flow of tea’, five articles outline the transmission of tea and the interplay of tea-tasting arts in Asian societies, including China, Britain, India and Taiwan. Researchers working from the diverse backgrounds of history, art history, anthropology and substance abuse, reveal in their studies the hidden nature of tea’s impact on economics, politics and people’s daily lives throughout Asia. These fascinating research findings also remind us of Okakura Kakuzo’s claim made approximately 200 years ago, when he asserted that “Asia is one”, a possible contemplation on his latter even more renowned work, ‘The Book of Tea’.

However, a discussion about tea in Asian societies should never ignore western influences. We cannot imagine these tea plantations in Darjeeling and Assam without the enthusiastic British search for the taste of tea. The circulation of Chinese tea around the world occurred at the same time as westerners invaded the old empire. Thus, global capitalism has been a critical factor, infecting and becoming rooted in Asian societies. In the modern era, tea’s globalisation is significantly accelerating and becoming more widely appreciated than ever before.

The cultivation, processing and consumption of tea has influenced Asian societies. In the modern era, tea has influenced our societies dynamically and is still shaping our modern world. We hope that the following articles will unveil some of tea’s mysteries and enable you to enjoy more than just a cup of the beverage.