A Bowl for a Coin

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In September 2010, I was preparing to order a meal at a restaurant called The Gold of Africa in downtown Cape Town, South Africa. The waitress was dressed in appropriately African garb, and the menu listed specialties from Morocco, Kenya, and Egypt as well as South Africa. As I glanced at the drinks list, however, a most unexpected item caught my eye—Japanese green tea. About six months later, I was in St. Louis, Missouri, to care for my ageing parents. My brother, who had just rescued me from Lambert Airfield, took me for brunch to a greasy spoon called Goody Goody, known for serving the best omelets and hash browns in the area. Once again, while reviewing the beverage menu, I was surprised to find Japanese green tea listed.

It seemed astounding to me that these two restaurants, separated by thousands of miles and a greater cultural divide, had arrived at the decision to serve a drink from a country at least as far away as The Gold of Africa and Goody Goody were from each other. The worldwide appeal and availability of Japanese green tea were clearly evident, but I began to wonder what had made that possible. How had the Japanese come to produce, distribute, and consume tea, and why?

To be sure, historians have authored many excellent and insightful books on the Japanese tea ceremony (called chanoyu or sadō) and related arts. Typically, these studies begin with a general discussion of the early history of tea during the Heian (794–1185) and Kamakura (1185–1333) periods and then shift into a conventional chronology that follows the development of chanoyu during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Often these books either conclude the narrative at that point or touch only
Introduction

briefly on the tea ceremony in later centuries. These works have blazed a wide trail for those interested in the ritualized practice of tea in Japan, but they left me as a social and economic historian with more questions than answers.

If tea had been around in Japan for more than a thousand years, then somebody must have pursued the farming of it. By what methods was tea first grown in Japan? What important changes occurred in the methods of cultivation as farmers learned more about the plant? What were the lives of tea cultivators like? Considerations of farming techniques and development are vital for a full comprehension of the origins and eventual popularity of Japanese green tea.

As I quickly discovered, there is much more to producing a bowl of tea than merely growing the plant. Concerning the processes by which the plucked leaves were converted into a palatable drink, I first asked: What were the forms of tea consumed during ancient times? When and why did powdered tea \((\text{matcha})\) become a type of tea imbibed in Japan? I soon found out that, historically, innumerable varieties of tea had been prepared in the archipelago, and they easily eclipsed \text{matcha} in both quantity and popularity.

Cultivating the plant and processing its leaves may yield a bowl of tea, but it does not guarantee that consumers’ thirsts will be quenched. So I investigated the ways in which tea was exchanged and marketed as a commodity throughout Japanese history. For the Buddhist monks and aristocrats who were the first eager consumers of Japanese tea, usually as a medicine, the commodity first had to change hands from producers to drinkers. In what form did this exchange take place: as gifts, taxation, trade, or some combination of all three? When and how were the first brand names for tea created? What were the lives of tea merchants like? Japanese tea was shipped abroad to Europe from a surprisingly early date, and the modern export trade transformed production and consumption in the archipelago.

Finally and more broadly, I wanted to know how tea made its imprint on Japanese civilization. Although one would never know it today, tea is not native to the Japanese islands. What important ritual, political, and medicinal functions did it serve? How have these functions changed over the centuries? The custom of tea drinking has affected and been represented in Japanese literature and the arts beginning with the first poetry and scroll paintings. From art forms as diverse as prints, plays, advertisements, and Edo-period verse to the radio, newspaper, and television commercials of the modern era—all have featured tea. Examining the cultural meanings of tea in Japan rounds out the picture of this beverage.
Historians interested in the full story of modern Japanese green tea should therefore recognize the need to address these four interrelated aspects—the farming, processing, distribution, and various social and cultural functions of tea—because they supply the broader context within which *chanoyu* was created. Teasing out and describing these threads over nearly thirteen hundred years reveals a far more significant role played by the beverage in Japan’s economy, society, politics, and culture than heretofore recognized. Despite its origins as a cultural item from Tang China enjoyed by only a handful of people, Japanese tea spread gradually but surely to become an important part of the historical record. Several centuries later, by the early 1400s, many commoners were enjoying tea, cultivation was more intensive, the market came to the fore as a means of exchanging the beverage, and most notably, the tea plant originally imported from China lost its exotic appeal and became nativized to Japan. City folk would have been familiar with the cries of street tea peddlers. “A bowl for a coin (*ippuku issen*)!” they would shout, hoping to entice potential customers to try their particular concoctions. Tea went on to become a daily fact of life for all the inhabitants of the archipelago. For this reason, it serves as a lens through which to view the development of Japanese society over the ages.

A history of Japanese tea may encompass many local points of production and chronology, but it also highlights at least three historical themes with more universal application. First, I have already mentioned that tea was served early on as a medicine. By the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), the beverage was being drunk by much of the population. Did the widespread consumption of tea, the preparation of which included boiling water, have effects on the health and longevity of the archipelago’s population? Did it also stimulate people to work harder in an ongoing “industrious revolution”? Tea may have played a central but little noted role in Japan’s economic and social transformation from a land of peasants to one of office and factory workers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The second and third themes are interrelated and concern the economic development of modern society since the Industrial Revolution, circa 1750. During the 1950s and 1960s economists wondered why certain regions of the globe industrialized while most did not. It seemed like a simple problem of money and technology, so economically advanced countries spent large sums of money trying to force-feed industrialization upon so-called backward countries. Unsurprisingly, these attempts failed. In recent decades, economic historians have realized that the process of industrialization is much more complex than simply parachuting in advanced technologies. At the very least, there are two crucial prerequisites: (1) the development of a productive agriculture that yields a surplus; and
(2) the creation of classes of people with extra cash to spend on commodities in an evolving consumer society. Of course today, as humans face a looming environmental crisis, citizens may not necessarily view these twin accoutrements of modern society as unalloyed “goods,” but they are undeniable factors in the evolution of the contemporary world nonetheless.

The history of tea in Japan speaks to issues of agricultural development and the rise of consumer society for what is often called a “late developer” but looks increasingly like an early one. First, the history of tea cultivation serves as an example of how Japanese farming intensified and matured over the centuries. It is no accident that by 1850 tea production was so sophisticated that it could help to bankroll Japan’s industrialization. Second, as many have noted, tea is a commodity with a mildly addictive property. An examination of the growth of demand for the beverage over thirteen hundred years reveals important points about how peasants became consumers and their numbers multiplied until they embraced all of Japanese society.4

The overwhelming preponderance of tea currently produced in Japan is “steeped” tea (sencha) for home consumption.5 Japanese continue to drink green tea for its good taste and as part of their highly varied contemporary diet. As modern consumers outside Japan have learned to enjoy Japanese foods and become obsessed with health concerns, Japanese green tea has come to enjoy a niche market and a worldwide reputation for good taste and purported effectiveness in fighting cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and Alzheimer’s.6 It is a tribute to the modern Japanese green-tea industry that its product saturates the domestic market and reaches places as diverse as Cape Town and St. Louis.

Today in Japan, green tea is so common that restaurant patrons are almost never charged for repeated servings. It is served at birth, marriage, and death ceremonies. People of all social classes enjoy the beverage, although not always in the same way. It carries medicinal, ritualistic, religious, economic, social, and political meanings. The history of green tea takes the reader to the heart of Japanese society and culture and underscores themes that appear again and again in the Japanese and global past.

Tea, or Camellia sinensis, is a dark-green shrub with leaves of an elliptical shape. Shoots are soft, while older leaves are leathery and may be serrated. The tea plant has white flowers about an inch in diameter with five to seven white petals and containing stamens and a pistil that allow the plant to reproduce freely in the proper climate and soil conditions. The shrub may grow as high as forty-five feet but is usually much shorter. The tea
plant is native to southwest China and/or northeast India, where the climate is subtropical with lush vegetation. There mists fill the air and rainfall is plentiful.

Successful cultivation of the tea plant requires three environmental conditions: relative warmth, plentiful rainfall, and the right kind of soil. The ideal temperature for growing tea ranges from thirteen to seventeen degrees centigrade and should never fall below minus ten. The tea plant needs lots of rain—more than 15,000 millimeters per year. Soil should be relatively fertile and porous; good drainage is necessary and heavy clay soils will not do. For much of its history the plant was grown on mountain soils in Japan.

Traditionally, the propagation of the tea plant begins with the appearance of the blossom in November. It is important to note that the cultivar is not self-pollinating, that is, the stamen and pistil of the same plant cannot reproduce. With the help of bees, butterflies, and birds, the flowers will yield hard, full seed packets within a year. Normally, human intervention is necessary for the maximum number of tea plants to reproduce, but under the right conditions some tea shrubs may make seed packets on their own. Whether sprouted from seeds or cuttings, as is the case today, tea bushes never yield a harvest right away. Typically, it takes about seven years for a new bush to make an average crop.

There are about as many ways to prepare and drink tea as one can imagine. It has been made into blocks, ground, steeped, and combined with rice, butter, yogurt, jam, and many other foods. Black teas commonly consumed in Europe and the United States differ from Japanese green tea only in their mode of preparation, being oxygenated to reduce the bitter taste. This processing permits manufacturers to produce their black teas on large plantations and in factories on a scale unimaginable for Japanese green tea.

Tea is different from most other beverages in that it naturally contains caffeine and catechins. Caffeine stimulates the nervous system, inhibiting sleep and rejuvenating a tired body. It strengthens the heart, encourages blood circulation through frequent urination, and makes the body’s metabolism more efficient. According to the Mayo Clinic, coffee contains anywhere from 95 to 200 mg of caffeine per eight-ounce serving. By comparison, tea has less: black tea has 14 to 61 mg in the same serving, while green tea holds 24 to 40 mg, again in an eight-ounce serving. It takes about 100 mg of caffeine a day to lead to addiction, so while coffee drinkers frequently become psychologically addicted to their beverage, such a state is rarer with tea. That is not to say that repeated servings of strong tea may not lead to addictive behavior, and perhaps even hallucinations.
The antioxidant tannin in tea has been proven to strengthen the body’s immune system and fight off bacteria and viruses. Habituation to tea’s caffeine, however, was likely the initial reason for the popularity of the beverage. How the residents of the islands became such avid consumers of green tea is a story that begins near the dawn of Japanese civilization.