

Lecture 35

Horticulture, Politics, and World Affairs: Tea and Colonialism

The Story of Tea

Tea (*Camellia sinensis*, Theaceae) is one of the world's most popular beverages, prepared by steeping the dried leaves in boiling water. Tea is consumed in various ways: unsweetened, sweetened, with milk or lemon, or infused with spices, such as mint. Cup for cup it is much cheaper than coffee. Tea provides a mild stimulant from the alkaloid, **theobromine**, which differs from **caffeine** by a methyl group, and is somewhat less stimulating on the human nervous system.

The word "tea" derives from the Amoy pronunciation of the Chinese word *t'e* (pronounced *tay*, but later changed to *tee*). The Cantonese word is *chah* and this pronunciation is used in Eastern Europe and well as Spain and South America. Legend has it that tea is very ancient in China but the first authoritative reference to tea is mentioned in a Chinese dictionary, *Erh Ya*, published in 350 BCE, and a handbook on the cultivation of tea (*Ch'a Ching*) was written by Lu Wu in 780. A book on tea culture by Kien-Lung published in the 4th century, described a cake of leaves, fried and toasted in salted barley, and steeped in water. Tea drinking became very popular in China during the Tang dynasty (618–907). Tea has always been considered an important medicinal in China. The Japanese tea ceremony, a traditional way of preparing and drinking tea, is an important part of their cultural heritage.

Tea is an evergreen or semi-evergreen tree, closely related to camellia. It is a tree; about 15-m tall, but in commercial production tea is pruned to a shrub-like hedge. Tea is a subtropical plant. When dormant, it will withstand temperatures below freezing. It is adapted to temperatures of 13° to 30°C and is found in the subtropics and mountainous regions of the tropics. It requires evenly distributed rains and the best quality is produced in cool climates, typically mountainous.

There are 2 major groups of tea plus hybrids: Chinese teas (var. *sinensis*, syn. *bohea*, *viridis*, *thea*) and Assam teas (var. *assamica*). The crop is produced by plucking the young shoots which are made into commercial tea by a process that includes withering and drying, rolling and sorting to distribute the sap, and fermentation for the black teas-this step is eliminated or reduced for the green teas, and finally drying.

Tea was imported to Europe in the 16th century but did not reach eastern Europe until after 1650. From 1600 to 1685, the English East India company imported Chinese and Indian teas. The Dutch introduced tea to Java in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) in 1684 and began the trade with Europe. It became common in Europe in the 18th century. Tea became especially popular in England, replacing coffee in esteem, and the tea drinking habit was spread throughout the British sphere of influence. The wife of Lord Bedford popularized afternoon "tea" consisting of a 5 pm break with tea and cakes to slake the appetite of the English gentry which formerly ate an enormous breakfast and then did not dine until 8 pm. In Australia, supper is still called tea. In the late 1800s, the races of clipper ships filled with tea from China to England were an important national event.

Tea and Politics

Attempts to tax tea in the American colonies in 1773 precipitated an incident preceding the American War of Independence called the Boston Tea Party. Rebellious colonists in Indian disguises destroyed a shipment of teas of the British East India Company, by tossing open bales into Boston Harbor. The subsequent distaste for tea in the colonies tempered the desire for tea in the United States by the mid-20th century about 25 times as much coffee as tea was consumed where in England consumption was 5 to 1 in favor of tea. Tea is extraordinarily popular in Eastern Europe and the Arabic countries where sweetened tea is consumed, often heavily fortified with mint.

As tea became popular in England in the 19th century, efforts were made to establish beneficial trading relations between Britain and the other European powers with China. The British East India Company was

granted a monopoly to control the trade in tea between England and China. Because the trade advantage favored China, which demanded gold, England sought to leverage its position in India and trade Indian opium for tea and other important Chinese products such as silk. (The English claimed to consider opium a rather ordinary vice similar to our feelings concerning alcohol and tobacco.) The opium habit had entered China earlier from India but the Chinese were concerned, (similar to our current concern with South American cocaine), and prohibited the importation in 1729 and 1800, and the habit was in decline. The Chinese emperor found importation of opium reprehensible but had not the power to counter the British insistence on trade privileges. The Chinese insisted that the British traders put up bond to ensure their compliance with the prohibitions on opium imports and destroy their opium stocks, measures which the English found arbitrary and dictatorial, and from 1839 to 1844 armed conflict began between China and England to establish English trading demands. China lost the **Opium Wars**, and as a result ceded Hong Kong (!) which was returned on July 1, 1997. The tea trade was to have a profound effect on the relationship between China and the West and had important consequences for the future history of China.