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Tea and China's rise: tea, nationalism and culture in the 21st century

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Abstract Tea has played a prominent role in Chinese history and in China's relations with foreign cultures near and far. It was a luxury product, along with porcelain and silk, that defined Chinese civilisation and was eagerly sought after by all peoples who acquired a taste for its stimulating brew. Tea was also pivotal in the 'opening' of China to the modern world through the first Opium War (Sigmond, in Tea its effects, medicinal and moral, 1839–1842). We tend to only focus on the 'opium' side of the equation forgetting that it was the desire to acquire large quantities of tea that brought the British and other Western nations to the shores of China in the first place. In the 21st Century, as China is on track to become the world's largest economy and reshape the global order in ways that are still difficult for Westerners to comprehend, tea and tea culture is being 'rediscovered' and 'redeployed' within China as a means of reinforcing a sense of unique Chinese identity and national character. In this paper I further explore the place of tea in Chinese and world history. I conclude by examining the rise of Chinese tea nationalism and consider how tea is shaping Chinese identity in the 21st Century.

Keywords China · Tea · Nationalism · Cultural heritage · History

'Man [sic] is so surrounded by objects calculated to arrest his attention, and to excite either his admiration or his curiosity, that he often overlooks the humble friend that ministers to his habitual comfort: and the familiarity he holds with it almost renders him incapable of appreciating its value. Amongst the endless variety of vegetable productions which the bounteous hand of Nature has given to his use is that simple

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shrub, whose leaf supplies an agreeable beverage for his daily nourishment or for his solace; but little does he estimate its real importance: he scarcely knows how materially it influences his moral, his physical, and his social condition: individually and nationally we are deeply indebted to the tea-plant.' (Sigmond 1839, Lecture to Royal Botanical Society).

Introduction[1]

In 1978 forestry workers in a pine timber plantation in Jinggu County, Puer, Yunnan, uncovered a rich source of ancient botanical fossils, a selection of leaves, stems and seed pods. The fossils—examples of which are pictured here—were evaluated by experts in the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS) to be 35 million years old. They concluded that the specimens belonged to the Theaceae Family and were most likely the direct ancestors of the modern tea plant—Camellia Sinensis (Fig. 1).

For Chinese tea historians and aficionados this discovery was seen to put to rest the long standing debate over where the tea plant exactly originated. After sifting through the available historical and scientific evidence Huang Guiqiu, a leading figure in the Puer tea industry, stated in April 1993 at a landmark conference—the International Symposium on Chinese Puer Tea—that the dispute over the origins of tea between Indian and China was finally settled: 'China is the home of tea; Yunnan is the world origin of the tea tree; Yunnan's Simao district and both sides of the Lancang River [Mekong] are the concentrated regions of the source of the tea tree' (in Huang 2003, p. 193).

In reality we can never know for sure where precisely the first tea plants grew. Millions of years ago when the first tea plants opened their buds there were no humans, let alone human societies or nation-states—national borders demarcated by people did not exist. According to Mair and Hoh (2009, p. 27) *Homo sapiens* most likely first encountered the tea plant in the migration out of Africa to Asia approximately 55,000 years ago. In terms of geographical origins, it would be safer to say that the modern tea plant originated in a large area which now includes the lands enclosed within a number of present-day nations including China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and India. However, from the perspective of Chinese patriots, China had endured numerous humiliations at the hands of foreign powers and, hence, claiming tea—the quintessentially 'Chinese' beverage—as distinctly 'Chinese' was an important act of national assertion. I regard this as a salient example of 'Chinese tea nationalism', one of the main themes to be explored here.

Tea has played a prominent role in Chinese history and in China's relations with foreign cultures near and far. It was a luxury product, along with porcelain and silk, that defined Chinese civilisation and was eagerly sought after by all peoples who acquired a taste for its stimulating brew. Tea was also pivotal in the 'opening' of China to the modern world through the first Opium War (1839–1842). Western historians tend to only focus on the 'opium' side of the equation forgetting that it was the desire to acquire large quantities of tea that brought the British and other

[1] Parts of the following are derived from 'Towards a Manifesto for the Slow Tea Movement'. See: http://www.chinawatch2050.com/towards-a-manifesto-for-the-slow-tea-movement.

Fig. 1 *Top* fossilised 'tea leaf'. *Bottom* fossilised 'tea seeds'

Western nations to the shores of China in the first place. In the 21st Century, as China is on track to become the world's largest economy and reshape the global order in ways that are still difficult for Westerners to comprehend, tea and tea culture is being 'rediscovered' and 'redeployed' within China as a means of reinforcing a sense of unique Chinese identity and national character. In this chapter I further explore the place of tea in Chinese and world history. I conclude by examining the rise of Chinese tea nationalism and consider how tea is shaping Chinese identity in the 21st Century.

Chinese tea in world history

Chinese civilisation is famous for giving humanity the four great inventions (*si da faming* 四大发明): paper, compass, gunpowder and printing. Of course, over the last 3000 years Chinese people have contributed a lot more to humanity than just these four items, as the many volumes of Cambridge University's *Chinese Science and Civilisation* testify. Indeed, up until the 18th Century, Chinese society—in terms of the size of the economy, the sophistication of its culture, the technology used to produce everyday items, the Confucian emphasis on meritocracy, and so on—was at the forefront of human achievements (Hobson 2004). It was not until the unfolding of the Western Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and the spread of Western (to which we can add Japan in the late 19th Century) imperialism and colonial power in the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries, that Chinese advances were well and truly surpassed. This eclipse of Chinese civilisation also happened to

coincide with the final century of rule of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) when China was ravaged by rebellions, natural disasters and the steady penetration of colonial powers from the treaty ports on the eastern seaboard and then deeper and deeper into the teeming heartland of China.

During this centuries-long rebalancing of world commerce and power from the 'East' to the 'West', Western attitudes towards China also changed from general admiration for its achievements to a position of scorn and contempt for its perceived backwardness (of course there was still a body of Western thought that regarded Eastern and Chinese philosophy and culture very highly, here I am simply outlining a general shift in understanding and cannot account for the diversity that actually existed). Compare, for example, the attitudes of early Enlightenment Western philosophers such as Montesquieu (1689–1755) with those of later thinkers such as John Stuart Mill (1807–1873). Montesquieu, whilst acknowledging that reliable and detailed information about China was at his time very limited, regarded China's meritocratic bureaucracy as an example for Western governments to emulate. Just a hundred years later, John Stuart Mill argued that China had fallen far behind and had nothing worthy of emulation, and even argued that if China was ever to be 'improved' it would have to be done by Western intervention (Sigley 2004). In terms of discussions concerning 'modernity', many Western scholars—and we should also add they were later joined by many Chinese thinkers—saw China as no longer part of 'progressive history'. In terms of the various binaries which were in operation—'progressive/backward', 'rational/irrational', 'scientific/superstitious', and so on, China was invariably placed on the negative side of the equation.

China's 'last Confucians' (Levenson 1958) took this civilisational decline very personally. They lamented the loss of what they regarded as a great treasure of humanity. In response, after a number of false starts and setbacks, Chinese scholars initiated a more than century long period of engaging with foreign concepts (a massive task of linguistic and conceptual translation from foreign languages to Chinese began), and of rethinking the place of 'traditional culture' in a modern world (Liu 1995). The Chinese scholarly camp was often divided on the position of 'traditional culture' with some seeing it as the 'national essence' (*guocui* 国粹) of China that must by hook or crook be preserved, whilst others who fell into the 'complete Westernisation' camp (*quanpan xihua* 全盘西化) regarded it as the very thing that was holding China back. These debates over the place of culture in the modern world and the processes of social and cultural change continue into the present with the important difference that China is now in a position of strength rather than weakness. Chinese people are acutely aware that China—a once great civilisation—had lost its place in the global hierarchy of nations. The last one hundred years of war, revolution and reform are indeed all aimed at restoring China's past glory, with an emphasis here on the notion of 'restoration' (*fuxing*复兴) in terms of 'returning something to its original condition'. Many foreigners tend to see China's rise as a 'new kid on the block' and do not detect the strong sense of 'restoration' that is implied here.

Just as many foreigners do not gather the sense of 'restoration' that is 'natural' to many Chinese people when it comes to the 'rise, fall, and rise again' of Chinese civilisation, they also tend to overlook the significance of Chinese culture's

contributions to humanity in general. In terms of the 'four great inventions' mentioned above, whilst acknowledging that these inventions are Chinese in origin, many a foreign thinker has argued that the Chinese did not use those inventions to maximum effect. In effect this is a way of saying that although the Chinese were good at inventing things they did not excel in taking those objects and using them to advance scientific knowledge. The Chinese invented the compass, but it was the Westerners how first circumnavigated the globe. The Chinese invented gunpowder but it was the Westerners who used it to create weapons that would change the course of warfare. And so on.

There is even an argument that holds that because the Chinese invented porcelain—a superior material for all kinds of utensils including tea cups—that there was no need to invent glass. Westerners, by contrast, without porcelain, developed glass to a higher state of technology which in turn led to advances in ocular devices such as telescopes and later microscopes. In turn these glass based inventions paved the way for the scientific revolution. Hence, the argument concludes, because China invented the porcelain tea cup its scientific development was stymied. This, I hold, is a very prejudiced, narrow and reductionist view of history.

I argue here that 'tea', although not listed as one of the 'four great inventions', is perhaps China's greatest contribution to humanity. Tea has literally changed the course of world history many times. Let's return to the example of the Industrial Revolution. The technological and manufacturing changes in Europe, and then North America, during the 19th Century laid the foundations for the development of the modern world. This process involved the large scale migration of people from rural areas to the rapidly expanding cities (in many ways similar to the experience of contemporary China as it undergoes its own version of the 'Industrial Revolution'). The rapid population increases of cities such as London was accompanied by the spread of water borne diseases like cholera and dysentery. Large urban environments in the 19th Century Western world were not very pleasant or hygienic places for the teeming masses to live—they were crowded, polluted, smelly and diseased. However, coincidentally some might say, when tea became more readily accessible to the vast majority of the urban population—that is, when the price of tea began to drop so it became more affordable—the incidence of these diseases also began to decline rapidly. True, it is difficult to absolutely demonstrate a correlation between the spread of tea and the overall improvement in physical well-being, but it would be fair to say that the act of boiling water for infusing tea—thereby killing waterborne pathogens—certainly was an element in improving the health of urban populations.

The origins of tea

But what factors precipitated a fall in the price of tea thereby transforming what was at first a luxury item into a common household staple and finally to the world's most popular beverage after water? To answer this question we have to return to a more conventional history of tea in China and the world (Fig. 2).

The earliest physical evidence we have of the human cultivation of tea is from an ancient archaeological site in present-day Zhejiang Province, a place called Yuyao

Fig. 2 Shennong (神农)—literally, the ‘Divine Farmer’—is a legendary emperor who is created with inventing agriculture and medicine. He is also credited with discovering the virtues of tea. The story goes that 1 day while out in the forest Shennong was resting and some tea leaves fell into his cup of hot water. He tasted the beverage and found it very pleasant. Tea culture was born. Here Shennong is depicted in a 1503 painting by Guo Xu in typical fashion as a ‘wild man’ (note the horn like protrusions atop the cranium) taste testing herbs and plants for medicinal properties. Tea, it should be noted, was first regarded as a medicinal beverage

Tianluoshan (余姚田螺山). Scholars cannot verify one hundred percent that the plants, planted in hedge-like rows next to what appears to be a dwelling place, are tea, but it seems most likely. The site, first discovered in 2004, is believed to be 6000 years old (4000 BCE).[2]

Yet probably the actual earliest human use of tea goes back many more thousands of years. Most likely the peoples inhabiting the region where the Camellia Sinensis Assamica plant still grows in the wild today were the first ones to harvest its leaves. As is the case of Chinese legends about the origins of tea, and indeed of many other peoples where tea has been an essential part of life since time immemorial, tea was first valued for its medicinal properties. Over time people began to enjoy tea for the sheer pleasure and stimulation it provided. The drinking of tea then became, on some occasions, a highly ritualised event. Tea was also an essential part of the offerings people made on a regular or annual basis to the ancestors.

The ancestors of the present-day Bulang people (布朗族) are often credited with being one of the first peoples to harvest wild tea. The present-day Bulang people reside on the ‘tea mountains’ of Sipsongpanna. They historically have followed a system of belief that many would describe as ‘animist’, one that proffers the importance of harmonious relations between ‘humans’ and ‘nature’. This is not surprising given that the Bulang have for many generations lived in close proximity to ‘nature’ and have depended on the forests as much as the fields for their

[2] For further details refer to an interview the author conducted with Professor Shen Dongmei from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Source: http://www.chinawatch2050.com/tea-in-chinese-history-interview-with-professor-shen-dongmei.

livelihoods and subsistence. I once visited a Bulang community in Sipsongpanna where the villages have groves of tea trees, many of which are several hundreds of years old. This arboreal form of 'tea plantation', the horticultural method of which is very similar to the principles proposed by modern permaculture, is most likely a living example of the earliest form of human cultivation of the tea tree. It was only later as the demand for tea grew that people began to use more intensive forms of terraced plantation farming (Fig. 3).

I like to think that people like the Bulang, and it should also be noted that there are many other ethnic peoples in the region who have also been growing tea trees in this fashion for as long as anyone can remember, first began to grow the tea trees for their own use. But sometimes the villagers moved and had to abandon the village and its tea trees. This might have been done to avoid conflict, paying taxes, being conscripted into an army or for corvée labour. As James C. Scott (2009) notes in his book *The Art of Not Being Governed*, the people of this mountainous area were very mobile (a geographical region Scott refers to as 'Zomia' and which includes the mountainous regions of Mainland Southeast Asian and Southwest China). Mobility was used as a strategy to avoid the power of the low-land rice states, whether they be Han Chinese or non-Han Chinese Mainland Southeast Asian states (such as Thai, Burmese or Cambodian kingdoms). Once a village moved the original cultivated tea trees 'went wild'. Sometimes they may have been 'forgotten' for generations until 1 day they were rediscovered and harvesting began anew. In this sense when we talk about 'wild tea trees' we are referring to two phenomenon: (1) completely wild tea

Fig. 3 *Left* author with 400 year old tea tree in Menghai, Sipsongpanna. This tree is part of a large grove containing more than 200 ancient tea trees. *Right* an example of a more intensive tea hedge plantation in Puer

trees growing and dispersing naturally in the forests; and (2) once human cultivated tea trees that have been abandoned and 'gone wild'.

When I was visiting the aforementioned Bulang village the village chief took me to his house, a basic wooden structure on raised poles that is very common in the region. On the wall was hanging a large drum which would have been used on festive occasions. On the fireplace was an well-seasoned aluminium kettle. The village chief said that his father used the kettle on a daily basis to make a tea brew. The method was very simple. His father went out to the nearby ancient tea trees (since decollectivization of the communes in the 1980s every family in the village was allocated a certain number of trees based on the size of the household at the time), picked some fresh leaves, brought them back to the fireplace, boiled the water, and then simply deposited the leaves into the water to boil until he was satisfied with the flavour. This is probably the most ancient and simplest way to brew tea. I'm pleased to report that the resulting beverage was very satisfying indeed (Fig. 4).

This method works well for the Bulang since they have a good supply of fresh tea leaves nearby. But it won't work for those of us where tea cannot be grown. If I took the fresh tea leaves back to Australia they would literally begin to rot (and indeed the Australian Customs would for the purposes of quarantine prevent me from bring

Fig. 4 Bulang Village, Menghai, Sipsongpanna. *Top Right* a Bulang woman poses for the camera outside her house. *Top Left* Traditional drums used for festive occasions. *Bottom Left* and *Right* a brew of Bulang-style fresh (unprocessed) green tea, a popular beverage amongst the older folks

Fig. 5 On the *left* is a glass of 'ripe puer' and on the *right* a glass of 'raw puer'

such unprocessed leaves back into the country). Hence, over time people discovered various ways of stopping the process of 'decay'—which we call 'oxidisation' (the same effect you can witness on a ripe banana that 'goes brown' over the course of several days). The most popular methods involve removing the water content in the leaves by either drying them in the sun so they 'whither', or, more commonly, frying them in a giant wok to get the same effect, or indeed a combination of both. These days of course special machines have been designed to do this on an industrial scale. If the oxidisation process is cut short the result is a 'green tea'. If the oxidisation process is allowed to proceed for longer the leaves continue to break down further, getting darker in colour until we get a 'dark tea'. In some 'dark teas' the 'decay' even continues after processing in a process of natural fermentation. Puer tea is very famous for this form of non-alcoholic fermentation and it is one of the reasons why aged puer teas are very valuable (Fig. 5).

Whatever method is used or how much the tea is 'processed' the final product is a generally stable item that can now be stored and transported. This thereby allowed for the development of a tea market in which demand seemed to always outstrip supply. Over several thousand years tea was then cultivated in many places across the Southwest of China, and indeed over the borders in currently defined Mainland Southeast Asia, and in many provinces in Han China proper (some of the provinces more famous for their tea include Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Anhui).

China, tea and cultural exchange

At first, however, tea was a luxury item. Over time as the land under tea cultivation increased and as transport and trading networks matured—as in the case of the Silk Road and Ancient Tea Horse Road—the price gradually decreased. But it was not

until the Tang Dynasty (pp. 618–907) with the completion of the Grand Canal—which allowed the large scale and cost effective transportation of goods—that the price of tea in China was greatly reduced and it finally is safe to say that it entered the homes of ordinary folk as well as those of the social elite. This penetration of tea culture from top to bottom is well captured in two often cited lists of items and activities. The first one—fuel, rice, oil, salt, soy, vinegar and tea (*chai, mi, you, yan, jiang, cu, cha* 柴米油盐酱醋茶)—stresses the importance of tea as a daily commodity. The second—zither, chess, books, painting, poetry, verse and tea (*qin, qi, shu, hua, shi, qu, cha* 琴棋书画诗曲茶) highlights the place of tea alongside the other refined arts of the cultured elite. Thus as both an essential commodity and as a part of more cultured pursuits, tea stands out as an item cutting across broad socio-economic boundaries (Fig. 6).

At about this time the neighbouring kingdoms in Tibet and present-day Mongolia also developed a liking for tea. In fact, any society that came into contact with tea developed a taste for its stimulating brew and found it difficult to live without it.

Fig. 6 The ancient art of 'tea drawing' in which a special tea broth is created as a basis for doing visual art and calligraphy. This art form was popular in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and finally died out in the 19th Century. It has since been restored by the gentleman pictured here. Another part of China's fascinating tea culture revival

The Chinese dynastic governments found that, in addition to the other valuable commodities China possessed such as porcelain and silk, it now possessed an almost addictive beverage ingredient in the form of tea. The Tang Dynasty, and the Song Dynasty (960–1279) that followed, established a monopoly in the tea trade and along the borders of Tibet and elsewhere in the Northwest of China created official 'Tea and Horse Bureaus' (*chamasi* 茶马司). The Tang, and especially the Song, needed warhorses for its cavalry for its ongoing conflict with the nomadic kingdoms of the North and Northeast. The Tibetans had plenty of good horses. In return the Tibetans traded the horses for what they craved—tea. Under the Han Chinese 'tribute system' of trade and diplomacy, tea was regarded by the dynastic government as a special 'gift' to what where regarded as the 'barbaric peoples' of the steppe. Sometimes when the nomadic peoples got a bit unruly and threatened the stability of the Chinese empire the dynastic government would threaten to withdraw the trade in tea and close the 'Tea and Horse Bureau' (Booz 2011). This particular policy went by the name of 'using tea to control the barbarians' (*yi cha zhi yi* 以茶治夷). This policy was still being pursued when the British came knocking on the doors of the Middle Kingdom in the late 18th century, but as we shall see it was in this case very ineffective.

We need to bear in mind that the 'tribute system' was generally projected by the Han Chinese as an idealised system in which the 'civilised centre' would graciously and beneficently share its 'civilisation' with the peoples on the 'less civilised periphery'.[3] Over time through the sharing of its culture the Chinese could exert a 'civilising influence' on other peoples (Harrell 1996). However, in reality it all depended on how strong the dynastic state was in comparison to the other kingdoms and states with which it interacted. With regards to tea, it could not be ignored that no matter how weak or strong the Chinese dynastic government was at any one time, that China maintained a virtual monopoly on the growing and processing of tea (Fig. 7).[4]

This monopoly was the main reason why the Western powers, and especially the British, went to China in the 18th and 19th centuries to engage in the tea trade. The Chinese dynastic governments strictly controlled all trade, especially trade with the 'overseas barbarians', that is those Europeans, and later North Americans, who came to Canton (Guangzhou) to participate in the short window of trading opportunity granted by the Chinese authorities (Dolin 2012). Towards the end of the 17th Century, the century in which tea first began to make a regular appearance in Europe, China was still the most populous country with the world's largest economy. China was a virtual cornucopia rich in many items that foreign traders desired, including tea. But the Chinese state was generally not 'mercantilist' in

[3] The aforementioned 'native chief' (*tusi* 土司) system whereby the Chinese dynastic government since the Yuan Dynasty governed non-Han Chinese peoples in the borderlands through recognising local rulers was another form of civilising strategy. In this case the dynastic state encouraged and provided Confucian-style education to local elites as a way of extending the understanding and influence of Chinese culture. See Herman (1997) and Yang (2008).

[4] From the 12th Century tea was also grown in Japan. However the quantity was very small compared to China and it was primarily used for domestic consumption. Later, Japan firmly closed its doors and the idea of getting tea from Japan was virtually non-existent amongst Europeans until the late 18th Century (Mair and Hoh 2009).

Fig. 7 This gentleman is Kong Ming 孔明 (pp. 181–284), more well known as Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮), an historical figure now with a legendary status as a statesman and strategist. He is reputed to have brought the tea plant to Puer and is an important part of the Han Chinese discourse of 'tea civilisation'. He is revered as a Tea God

nature, that is, it did not place great emphasis on the importance of trade for enriching the coffers. By contrast, sea-faring nations such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, began to formulate a 'mercantilist' form of state craft in which trade—and by no means was it anything like 'free trade', monopolies still abounded—became a central platform for enriching the state.

Hence in 1793 King George III, frustrated at the limitations presented by the 'Canton' system of trade, sent a large embassy to China led by Lord McCartney. Lord McCartney tried to impress the Qianlong Emperor—one of China's longest serving and most powerful sovereigns—by including in his mission a wide variety of recent European technological and scientific achievements. But Qianlong was not impressed and in his written response to King George III famously wrote:

> Swaying the wide world, I have but one aim in view, namely, to maintain a perfect governance and to fulfil the duties of the State: strange and costly objects do not interest me … Our dynasty's majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures.

For a mercantilist and trading orientated nation such as the United Kingdom this represented a significant slap in the face. The mission also floundered on agreement

on the correct diplomatic protocol when the monarchs and their representatives were to meet. There was much debate over whether Lord McCartney should kowtow to the Emperor. The Chinese side insisted that he should. The British side argued that he could not insofar as he did not recognise the Emperor as his own sovereign. Compromises were made but at the end of the day the mission was a complete disaster and possibly laid the foundations of major cultural misunderstandings that were to characterise Chinese and Western relations for the next one hundred years.

The British East India Company (BEIC) continued to maintain the monopoly on British trade with China, a monopoly that was granted by the British Government. The main focus of trade was tea. As Qianlong himself noted, however, there wasn't much that China desired from Britain. This meant that instead of trading tea for other British manufactures or commodities, the BEIC had to pay in silver. The BEIC, therefore, looked for a substitute for silver and finally decided that trading tea for opium would be a good resolution (Hoheneggerm 2006, pp 128–137). We know how tragic this trade in opium was for the Chinese people and society, and the Chinese authorities were right to seek its complete abolition. Unfortunately a combination of corruption and weakness meant that ultimately when the Chinese and British conflicted militarily over this matter of the opium trade the Chinese lost. In 1842 the Qing dynastic government was forced by the British to open China to foreign trade on a regular basis across a number of treaty ports—not just Canton. China was also forced to allow the influx of foreign Christian and Catholic missionaries. It is not surprising that many China historians take 1842 as the beginning of the 'modern era' in the context of China. Tea thus played an important role in 'bringing' China, albeit violently, into the modern world. A number of Chinese scholars have written important reassessments of this event through the lens of tea. Zhou and Tai (2012) book on this subject has the provocative title of *The Tea War* (茶叶战争), of which more will be discussed below.

However, there is another event leading up to the first Opium War (1839–1842) that we must note for its significance in the story of tea and modern China. The British Government declared that it would finally end the BIEC's exclusive monopoly on the tea trade in 1834. In response the BEIC decided that it now had to expand its business interests from the purchase and selling of Chinese tea, to the production and selling of its own tea, thereby breaking the Chinese tea monopoly and putting the BIEC on a more competitive footing when other British and foreign companies entered the tea trade. In the 1830s the BEIC began experimenting with the growth and processing of tea in India, deriving its stock from the native tea trees found in the Indian province of Assam (*Camellia Sinensis Assamica*). However, its efforts in this regard were not productive as the BEIC lacked the technical skills and knowhow in the production of tea suitable for the British market. Note that up until the 1840s the Western world did not even know that 'green tea' and 'black tea' were actually from the same kind of tea plant, the difference being a result of the production process. Westerners had assumed that the plants for green and black tea themselves were different (Fig. 8).

The foreigner credited with revealing the specifics of the Chinese tea production process—Robert Fortune—plays an important role in the BEIC's mission to break the Chinese tea monopoly. Robert Fortune was a Scottish horticulturalist and

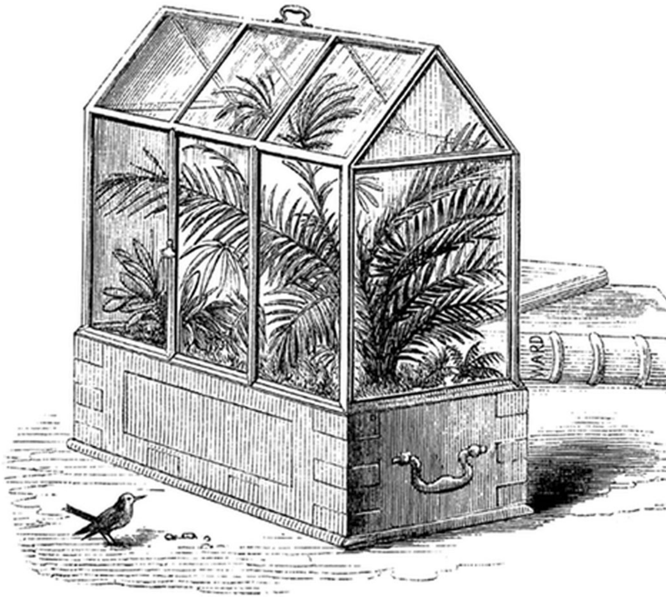

Fig. 8 The wardian case, pictured here, was invented in Britain around 1829. Similar to a terrarium, it is a glass box that enabled live plant specimens to be transported via ship from the far corners of the globe to the centre of empire. It was this device that enabled Robert Fortune to transport his booty of tea plants from China to India in the 1840s

adventurer who before the Opium War travelled to China to collect flowering plants. At this time in Europe with the rise of the middle-class and the use of private glasshouses, there was a growing market for exotic flowering plants many of which came from China, such as rhododendrons, azaleas, roses, and camellias (the ornamental flowering variety). Robert Fortune was one of many such ‘flower hunters’ who over the course of the 19th and 20th Centuries travelled to the four corners of the globe, including China, to seek out exotic plants for the Western market (the United Kingdom, continental Europe, North America and Australia) (Gribbin and Gribbin 2008). Robert Fortune travelled to China on a flower and plant collecting mission in 1847. Upon return to the United Kingdom he wrote about his adventures in a book titled *Three Years’ Wandering in the Northern Provinces of China, A Visit to the Tea, Silk, and Cotton Countries* (Fortune 1847). The book offered insightful glimpses into a ‘hidden China’ that was just ‘opening up’ and was very popular at the time. Fortune later became the curator of Kew Gardens (Rose 2010).

Once China was ‘opened up’ after the first Opium War, the BEIC employed Robert Fortune to engage in an act of industrial espionage. He was given the task of travelling to China, and in particular to the tea growing regions of Fujian and Anhui, to collect tea seeds and live tea seedlings and transport them back to India. He was also directed to obtain as much knowledge about the tea production process as possible. Robert Fortune’s mission was very successful. He collected a large horde of tea plants and seeds and also convinced a number of tea farmers from Anhui to go with him to India to assist in the growing and production of the tea. Hence, after

some minor setbacks the BEIC eventually managed to establish the first viable tea plantations in Darjeeling. From here, in the following decades, the BEIC and other British tea entrepreneurs, began to expand tea production throughout India, Sri Lanka and Africa—indeed almost anywhere in the British empire that was thought suitable for tea growing and where there was a large native labour force to exploit.

The crucial difference between the Chinese and British approaches to tea production also reveals the gap between the two countries in terms of engagement in modern industry and agriculture. Tea production in China was for thousands of years a small-scale family affair (or sometimes a Buddhist temple sideline). Tea farms were small and employed farming techniques that had not changed for centuries. By contrast, the British in India established tea plantations on an industrial scale right from the very beginning. They established large tea plantations and used modern agricultural methods of cultivation. They also drew upon the local Indian population—a cheap and reliable source of labour—to work on the large tea plantations (Sharma 2011; Besky 2014). Thus whilst Chinese tea was still cultivated and processed on a largely 'premodern' model, the British in India, and later elsewhere, started their endeavours based on a large modern industrial agricultural model. This is an important distinction with consequences and reverberations in the present which I shall discuss further below.

Chinese tea nationalism: a form of product cum cultural nationalism

Once the British tea plantation system got started and began to expand it quickly grew in size and scale. The price of tea also fell, thereby truly making tea a beverage within the reach of peoples from different classes around the world. Tea truly became the global beverage in the course of the 19th and 20th Centuries. Not surprisingly, within a number of decades the Chinese monopoly on tea was broken. China still remained an important centre for tea production, especially for the many distinct varieties of tea and teas of high quality. The British were, in general, never aiming to create the refined and exquisite teas you find in China. As a bastion of modern capitalist industrial production British tea companies such as Lipton, of which more below, simply aimed to create a standardised tea that was affordable and easily found within the local market throughout the British Empire. To put it crudely they were aiming for quantity not quality, so long as the 'quantity' produced was standardised and appealing to the basic demands of the average person.

At this time China also entered a period of internal chaos, revolution and war. The tea industry was, in short, not in a strong position to respond effectively to the challenges of modernisation and commercialisation. After 1949 with the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese tea industry also experienced the ups and downs of socialist transformation. China was relatively isolated from global markets during the Maoist period (1949–1978) and the tea trade never fully recovered. For instance, exports of tea from Yunnan Province fell from seven million pounds in 1965 to only twenty-seven thousand pounds in 1973, giving some indication of the drastic effect of Maoist policies on the tea industry (Reid 2011, p. 59). After the launch of 'reform and openness' in 1978 Deng Xiaoping took

China out of isolation and the Chinese economy began to accelerate in growth and trade. When China embraced the 'socialist market economy' in 1992 it entered the 'golden era' of double digit expansion. We see during this period the process of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, and most significantly, the emergence of a large consumer middle-class.

When any nation enters a 'golden age', whether it be the United States of the 1950s and 1960s or China in the post-1992 period, the question of 'cultural identity' naturally becomes increasingly important. As China is emerging as a major player on the economic and political world stage it is also asking the question as to what kind of 'Chinese culture' should be encouraged into the 21st Century. China is rapidly changing and the government and people look to cultural identity as a means of creating a stable and common set of meanings to help bind the people and nation through this transition. 'Culture', in this regard, in contemporary China is undergoing a remarkable transformation. The combined forces and effects of urbanisation, industrialisation, globalisation, consumerism and myriad other social and economic transformations taking place at the level of the individual, the family, the community and the nation are creating the conditions for both the 'invention' and 'reinvention' of 'culture'. At one end many of these cultural projects are supported and engineered by the party and government. In this sense 'culture' is an artefact of government, something that can be developed and guided and put to specific social and governmental uses. At the other end of the spectrum is culture at the grass-roots of society. In this sense 'culture' is closely tied to economic opportunities, to localised identities, subcultures and ethnicities in which it can be both a reaction to social change as an 'economic opportunity' or as a means of highlighting one's 'identity and difference' (and other things besides). Whatever the case may be it is clear that 'culture' can refer to many different things and is not readily reducible (nor should it be) to one essential 'substance'. Here I am simply reflecting on culture as a form of 'resource' open to interpretation, meaning and redeployment in certain contexts.

Tea culture is no exception. Tea culture and consumption in China has developed rapidly over the last two decades. Many Chinese people are 'rediscovering' the allure of tea and its intoxicating elixir. As Zhang (2014, pp. 19–20) notes, the fortunes of tea drastically declined during the Maoist period, but now in the age of 'reform and openness' (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) it has made a remarkable recovery and been catapulted to centre stage in a renewed cultural nationalism and vibrant consumerism. Key notions of personal self-identity and the shared being of the nations cape/nationalism have coalesced around tea.

Tea has also had somewhat of a rebirth on the diplomatic front. In recent times President Xi Jinping has mentioned tea in numerous state visits to countries like Russia, Belgium and Brazil, highlighting the significance of tea to Chinese culture and offering these insights as a way to understand the Chinese psyche. On 23rd March 2013 in a speech in Russia, President Xi drew upon the recently coined 'Ten Thousand Mile Tea Road' (*wanli cha dao* 万里茶道)—an overland trading route from the tea growing regions of Fujian that crossed China and Mongolia on its way

Fig. 9 *Top* a map of the' 10 Thousand Mile Tea Road' from its starting point in Wuyishan, Fujian to its final destination in Saint Petersburg. *Bottom Left* a heritage courtyard mansion in the historic village of Xiamei (下梅村) that made its fortunes on foreign tea trade. *Bottom Right* a 2014 Summit of Mayors from China, Mongolia and Russia from cities along the 10,000 Mile Tea Road

Russia—to emphasise the close relations bound in trade and culture between the two countries (Fig. 9).[5]

In a speech given in Brussels on 1st April 2014 President Xi used beer and tea to note that whilst there are cultural differences between the West and China both cultures embody an acceptance of cultural plurality:

> Just as Chinese like to drink tea and Belgians like to drink beer, the reserved style of tea and the passionate style of wine [from this point forward 'beer' (*pijiu* 啤酒) is referred to as 'alcohol/wine' (*jiu* 酒)] represent two different approaches to experiencing life and interpreting the world. But there is [no reason why] tea and wine cannot coexist; we can 'raise countless glasses of wine to our close friends' (*jiu feng zhiji qianbei shao* 酒 逢知己千杯少) and also 'savour tea, savour flavour and savour life' (*pincha pinwei pinrensheng* 品茶品味品人生).[6]

[5] For more on the 'Ten Thousand Mile Tea Road' see: http://www.chinawatch2050.com/wuyishan-cross-straits-tea-expo-and-the-10,000-mile-tea-road; for more on the history of the tea trade between China and Russia see Avery (2003).

[6] For the full text in Chinese see: http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-04/01/c_1110054309.htm (accessed 2nd September 2015).

On 16th July 2014 during an official state visit to Brazil, President Xi highlighted the long history of economic cooperation between China and Brazil by noting the contribution Chinese tea farmers had made in Brazil over 200 years ago when they shared knowledge of tea production and help establish the Brazilian tea industry (introduced by the Portuguese in 1812 but which later collapsed after the abolition of slavery in 1888).

At the same time, as China has joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and opened up its consumer economy to international corporations, the tea industry has had to compete with multinational rivals. In a sense the previous mentioned difference between the British tea industry as a modern industrial enterprise and the Chinese tea industry as focused on relatively small-scale tea farms has not radically changed. So ironically when Lipton came back to China in the 1980s it did so not as a small-scale enterprise but as a modern day professional tea and beverage business that was part of a much larger multinational corporation (in this case Unilever). Lipton enjoyed the benefits of being part of such a large commercial organisation and was able to launch professional marketing campaigns, engage in state-of-the-art market research, develop products especially for the Chinese market, and use its corporate network to get its product right to the point of purchase. If you enter any major convenience store in cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou you can be sure that the tea brand that has the most prominent place is Lipton. It is therefore not surprising that, based on the available statistics, that the tea brand with the greatest market share in China is Lipton. What an irony this is given that it was an act of war and industrial espionage that gave the British the opportunity to break the Chinese tea monopoly in the first place. One hundred and sixty years later the foreign multinational tea corporation returns to China and finds itself in a position to dominate the modern consumer tea market (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10 Lipton is part of a large multinational product grouping headed by Unilever. It has decades of corporate capitalist market experience. Since the time it returned to China in the 1980s it has quickly come to dominate the shelves of major Chinese retail outlets, so much so that it now dominates the market share in China

Although the challenge represented by beverages companies such as Lipton, Nescafe and Coca-Cola is huge, the Chinese tea industry is now exploring ways in which it can revitalise Chinese tea culture. The aforementioned scholar Zhou Chonglin and his colleagues have even launched a 'Revitalise [Chinese] Tea' (*chaye fuxing* 茶叶复兴) movement in which they hope to attract the younger generation of Chinese, many of whom they hold have been seduced by the slick marketing and lifestyle appeal of foreign beverage products, to embrace a contemporary Chinese tea culture:

> Nowadays [Chinese] people eat popcorn and drink cola whilst walking into the cinema and waiting for the next Hollywood blockbuster. Starbucks, Pizza Hut, MacDonald's and KFC are found encamped in every corner of the city. The multitudes sit eagerly in front of their computers awaiting the latest update on an American TV drama and jump for joy at the arrival of the latest iPhone. At that very moment they forget that China has its own great culinary culture. Their taste buds have amnesia. They also forget that [China] is a nation of 'appreciating tea and discussing the way' (*pincha lundao* 品茶论道). They forget Peking Opera and forget the tea house … When tea was at its height China was the most powerful country in the world [before 1820] … The fate of tea and the fate of China are inextricably tied. As tea declined [in China] so too did China eventually become one of the world's poorest countries … Everyone says that the 21st century is the China century, but it would perhaps be better to say that it will be the tea century. (Zhou and Tai 2012, p. 136)

I refer to this particular field of product and cultural contestation as 'tea nationalism', an example of which I will now illustrate.[7] Starbucks, known worldwide for its coffee shops, now includes tea on its beverage list in its Chinese outlets. Starbucks has approximately 500 outlets in mainland China with plans to reach 1500 by 2015 (Starbucks Newsroom 2011). Although tea is still the most popular beverage in China, coffee has begun to make some serious inroads especially through the younger cohort of college students and office workers. Yet coffee consumption is still less than five cups per year per person, compared to 400 cups per capita per year in North America (Coonan 2011). There is still a long way to go but the trend of drinking coffee is certainly making headway. Indeed companies like Starbucks (for which the average price for a cup of coffee is much more than ordinary Chinese folk can afford) and Nescafe (which has aggressively marketed its series of instant coffee) see their future in China. Most recently the celebrated and controversial writer Han has just launched an advertisement for Nescafe. (There are of course Taiwanese style coffee houses in mainland China which are somewhat different in terms of how they are marketed and used as sites of consumption, but I will leave them out of the picture for now).

A few years ago Starbucks was embroiled in a major controversy that generated a great deal of heated discussion about China's cultural heritage. In 2006 Starbucks opened an outlet within the confines of Beijing's Forbidden City, the centre of political power in China for much of the Ming and all of the Qing dynasties. It is a

[7] For a broader discussion of foreign products and product nationalism in China see Hooper (2000).

World Heritage site (one of the first such sites to be inscribed in China after the People's Republic of China joined the United Nations in the early 1970s). The presence of Starbucks within this iconic site attracted the heated attention of online discussion. Indeed it is often regarded as the first major instance of 'online public opinion'. Many netizens felt affronted. Rui Chenggang, a well-known TV anchor-man, called for a web campaign against the outlet that he said, 'tramples over Chinese culture' (cited in Watts 2007). Rui said:

> The Forbidden City is a symbol of China's cultural heritage. Starbucks is a symbol of lower middle class culture in the west. We need to embrace the world, but we also need to preserve our cultural identity. There is a fine line between globalisation and contamination. (ibid)

In response to the controversy Starbucks soon closed the Forbidden City coffee house. The Starbucks/Forbidden City case is interesting insofar as raises the complex intersection of practices of consumption and the manifestation of 'cultural' values. At the moment there are no tea house chains of any significant size that can compete with outlets such as Starbucks. There are many tea houses especially in cities like Beijing, Chengdu and Hangzhou (approximately 60,000 nationwide according to a survey from the China Tea Marketing Association), yet they are small-scale and scattered. As Xu Fuliang, a tea industry expert at Achieve Brand based in Hangzhou, said, 'Chinese tea houses lack strategic planning and a standard production process … I know some tea house owners in Hangzhou. They run tea houses based on their personal interest and don't want to enlarge their businesses'. (quoted in Chen 2010). This is confirmed with my own interviews with tea house proprietors.

But coffee and the coffee house is not the only challenge facing the consumption of tea in China. Probably an even more serious challenge is the growing market share of Lipton's in the actual tea market itself. There is a widely known saying in the Chinese tea industry, 'in terms of turnover seventy-thousand Chinese tea companies are only equal to one Lipton.' In 2008 Lipton's market share in China was approximately 43.4 % with annual turnover of 23 billion yuan, which is almost equal to the entire output of Chinese tea production at 30 billion yuan. As already noted, Lipton's has at its disposal over one hundred years of research marketing experience and through its parent company, Unilever, access to distribution channels and to sales points across urban China (supermarkets, convenience stores, hotels, etc.).

Lipton entered the mainland Chinese tea market in 1992 and it brought with it the humble 'tea bag'. Tea aficionados often look down on the tea bag, and in terms of the general quality of the tea they seem justified. But by no means should we overlook the massive cultural and social impact that the tea bag represents. The tea bag personifies the 'values' of modern urban consumer life: standardised, convenient and fast. In the 1960s in places like the United Kingdom and Australia most people still consumed loose leaf tea. However, by 2007 tea bags made up 96 per cent of the British tea market (UK Tea and Infusions Council 2015). Since 2004 Lipton's has also introduced other teas, such as green tea, into the Chinese market indicating that it is quite capable of adapting to local conditions in order to increase

market share even further. Wu Xiduan, general secretary of Chinese Tea Marketing Association, is quoted as saying, 'The hundreds of different types of tea drunk by Chinese people mean it's not possible to develop the Chinese tea industry into a company like Lipton's, which is standardized with no difference in quality' (cited in Yue 2011).

Conclusion

As we can see from these examples of production nationalism, tea continues to play an important role in the construction of a Chinese identity. Tea cuts across a broad range of areas—some of which we have only touched upon here—in terms of economic relations, cultural production and signification, national identity and even in the development of foreign relations.

Tea is one of China's greatest contributions to human civilisation, providing many peoples around the world with a stimulating habitual beverage. Of course we have also noted that the very origins of tea itself stem well beyond the borders of the nation-state and that it was only with societal and cultural development that tea become firmly embedded in the Chinese cultural and national imaginary. The Chinese dynastic state used tea in three major ways, two of them very explicit and one rather more implicit. Firstly, tea has been part of the Chinese discourse of civilisation and the associated 'civilising process'. As we have seen figures such as Shennong and Kongming (Zhu Geliang) are closely associated with this discourse of civilisation, and Kongming in particular is tied to the story of tea dissemination in Yunnan. Secondly, the dynastic state used its monopoly on the tea trade to attempt to control the various non-Han peoples on the border lands. More implicitly tea became a major part of the Chinese dynastic economy, especially once it was established as a daily necessity.

During the course of the last two hundred years the Chinese tea industry suffered at the hands of China's violent incorporation into the modern world economy. Through a relatively unknown act of industrial espionage the British East India Company established a modern plantation style tea industry in India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, thereby bringing to an end China's monopoly on the tea trade. The Chinese tea industry, which also declined in the wake of Maoist policies that focused on grain production and the development of a rubber industry, has since been in a state of decline. It is only in the last three decades, and in particular since the 1990s, that the Chinese tea industry has experienced a revival. This revival, as we have seen, has also been closely tied to the emergence of a revived tea culture and a form of assertive 'tea nationalism'.

Despite the change in its fortunes tea in China continues to face numerous obstacles. In terms of competing with the likes of multinational beverage corporations such as Lipton, the Chinese tea industry is in an inferior position. Tea also has to compete with the arrival of new food and beverage fashions such as coffee. Nonetheless, whatever the fortunes of tea may be, it is clear that it will continue to have a prominent place with an emerging cultural nationalism and that over time it may develop a new set of associated practices of daily life more suited

to modern living. As far as the research of cultural and social life in contemporary China goes it is therefore paramount that we pay attention to the trials and tribulations of the tea plant and the associated beverage and culture that it produces.

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