

The formation of tea culture in British

Lanxuan Xia

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United
International College, Zhuhai 519000, China.
lilyhsia2022@outlook.com

Abstract:

When foreign people think of British culture nowadays, they can easily picture gentlemen and ladies elegantly dressed, surrounded by fine furniture and utensils, enjoying afternoon tea. The unique tea culture has already become a strong impression of Britain. This article explores the positioning of tea within the map of cultural differentiation, highlighting its status as a significant symbol of British culture, despite Britain not being its country of origin. The success of tea arose from the collision of Eastern and Western civilizations, with Chinese tea being introduced to Britain by Dutch merchant ships in the 17th century, marking its economic rise. The paper raises key questions about how tea transformed from an exotic product into a British cultural icon and whether the promotion of tea culture in Britain is mere imitation or rooted in local traditions. Additionally, it reviews research by Chinese and foreign scholars on British tea culture, focusing on the origins of tea culture in China, including the history of tea cultivation and consumption, and the evolution of tea culture in various dynasties. The second half describes in detail the thriving process of tea trade in Britain since the 17th century, the background of tea culture breaking the gender status and other restrictions in British society, and the different connotations and influences of tea culture in the British upper society and working class.

Keywords: -tea; Chinese tea culture; Victorian culture; working-class culture; cultural identity

1. Introduction

On the map of cultural differentiation and particularities, our contemporary imagological taxonomy places tea definitely in the English territory. The unique tea culture has already become a strong impression of Britain [1]. At the same time, another well-known fact is that Britain is not an origin country of tea. Tea, which launched a remarkably successful economic career in the West, was born out of the collision of two civilizations, the Orient and the Occident, and it was not until the 17th century that Chinese tea was exported to England by Dutch merchant ships under the name of Indian companies [1]. So how exactly did tea become a British cultural symbol from an exotic product? Is the promotion of tea culture under Britain's Sinomania just imitation, or is it actually rooted in local culture from the very beginning? Used as a sort of cultural prism for a wider stage of cultural engagement between Britain and China, how could tea reflect the similarities and differences between different types of imperialism and national identities? This paper will focus on these questions to launch a literature review.

2. Tea culture in Chinese traditions

The tea plant has experienced a process from natural wild

to human domestication. In 2019, Liam Drew wrote in *Nature* that this work was first done by the Chinese. The fact that China is the first country in the world to discover tea trees could be proved by archaeological discoveries and documentary records. From the archaeological data, the earliest tea remains in China can be traced back to the early Warring States period, nearly 2,500 years ago, and 2,100 years old tea was unearthed in the Hanyang Mausoleum in Shaanxi Province, and 1,800 years old tea remains were found in the Ali Guiru Jiamu Cemetery in Tibet [2]. Although there are relatively few documents about tea in the early days, the description in Gu Yanwu's *Ri Zhi Lu* of the Qing Dynasty that "tea drinking began after the Qin people took over Shu" can prove that in the northern Central Plains before Qin entered Shu, perhaps only the emperor drank tribute tea, and the general people did not know about tea. In the Western Han Dynasty, the relevant documents of Wang Bao's "Covenant" can prove that in the late Western Han Dynasty more than 2,000 years ago, there was already a habit of customers to cook tea, and tea had become a commodity traded in the market, thus it can be inferred that tea became a commodity before this time. During the western Han Dynasty, between the Eastern Han Dynasty, the Yangtze River basin, the Huaihe River basin, and the Hanshui River basin planted tea records, the

upper society generally popular tea drinking [3]. By the Tang Dynasty, tea drinking had become popular throughout the country. Lu Yu's list of some important tea-producing areas in the Book of Tea and Feng Yan's account in The Book of Feng's Impressions clearly show that tea has become a universally popular drink [4].

Geographically, tea production and trade first developed in the hilly regions of southern China, but later took root in other Han-inhabited areas, such as Zhejiang Province, during the Tang and Song dynasties [5]. The way of drinking tea in China has gone through four different stages of development: medicinal, edible, mixed drinking, and drinking alone: in the spring and autumn and before, tea is used as food, and tea is used to treat diseases; Pre-qin to Han Dynasty tea and millet and other ingredients boiled into porridge to drink; During The Three Kingdoms period, tea bricks were made with condiments such as onion and lemon, which were ground and boiled when drinking, and remained popular until the Song Dynasty. Modern tea-baking technology originated in the Tang Dynasty and became the main way of drinking tea in China after the Ming and Qing dynasties [6].

Although the term "tea culture" was not put forward until the mid-1980s, it has been generally accepted and widely used throughout the country. However, it does not exist only in contemporary Chinese society but has a long history of development. In terms of connotation, tea culture refers to the abilities and qualities related to tea inherited by certain members of society, including ideology and morality, religious beliefs, literature and art, institutional rules, knowledge systems, customs, habits, etc. From the perspective of extension, it ranks alongside the tea industry and tea technology, takes the humanistic level as the core, involves social science and natural science. From the Western Han Dynasty to the Sui Dynasty, the written records related to tea gradually increased, and the trend of tea becoming a culture became more and more obvious. This period can be regarded as the beginning period of Chinese tea culture. Chinese tea culture came into being and flourished in the Tang Dynasty. As far as tea culture is concerned, since the formation of the Tang Dynasty, the same "every generation has a generation of tea culture". The cultural atmosphere and historical accumulation of different times give tea culture a heavy background color, reflecting a distinct unique temperament and the spirit of The Times. The tea culture of the Tang Dynasty is characterized by norms and laws, like the tea culture of the Song Dynasty is characterized by luxury and romance, full of prosperity and artistic atmosphere. After a short period of low tide in the Yuan Dynasty, the tea culture of the Ming Dynasty changed, characterized by a natural and light wind. From the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of

China, the transformation of tea culture was realized, and tea drinking truly became an organic part of secular life, which was fully reflected in teahouses [2].

Chinese tea culture also has a long history of spreading to the outside world. As early as the Han Dynasty, tea may have traveled to Afghanistan, Iran, Persia, and other countries in Central Asia and West Asia along the Silk Road. According to Emperor Wudi of Yun Han Dynasty, the Han culture was introduced into Korea with the conquest of the Far East, and tea drinking was popular among the people of the dynasty. It was introduced to Japan around the Sui Dynasty [3].

3. The popularity of tea among the aristocracy

The first mention of tea in the West is in a 1559 travel document called *Voyages and Journeys*, edited by Giambattista Ramusio, which describes tea as a hot drink with medicinal properties. Portuguese and Dutch traders did not bring tea to Europe until 1610 [7]. In 1619, the Dutch only supplied a small amount of Chinese tea to the British royal family, and when the tea was sold directly by the British, it gradually became popular in London [3]. After the East India Company monopolized the right to import goods from outside Europe in 1637, there was the first record of tea trade with China in 1644. During the following centuries history of drinking tea in British, tea has brought great influence and change to people's way of life [7]. Tea has permeated British culture. Many kinds of tea are mainly black tea, known as the British national drink, because of its full fermentation can adapt to long-distance transportation and the UK's wet and rainy climate environment, long-term storage can also maintain the original flavor, mild nature, can be mixed with milk, juice, wine and other drinks, drinking in a cold and wet environment has a warm stomach effect. The merchant Thomas Garraway was one of the first people to trade tea in England. Garraway published a broadsheet selling tea at £6 and £10 per pound. He claimed that tea was good for health, maintaining perfect health into old age, helping to clean the eyes, treat stomach upset, colds, edema, and scurvy, while it also made the body active and energetic [2].

Because of the British habit of drinking hot tea, its ceramic manufacturing industry developed rapidly, producing handled teacups and teapots. At the same time, it also imported a large amount of porcelain from China, especially before it mastered the essentials of porcelain manufacturing in England, that is, before the middle and late 18th century [8]. This kind of long-distance trade at sea not only consumes a long time, but also is easily affected by wind and waves, and has not low difficulty and risk. As

a result, tea and tea sets were considered extremely valuable commodities in Britain at that time [9]. “The retail price of tea at the beginning of the second phase of the 17th century was about £3, and by the end of the century it was £1. Such a price restricted its main consumption to the rich, for at that time a skilled worker could not earn more than £1 a week.In 1685, Miss Margaret Russell, daughter of the 1st Earl of Bedford, received a set of tea trays, bought by her father’s butler for £1 and 14 shillings.[10] “ Since the drinking of tea was initially dominated by the royal family and aristocrats, the British tea culture has a strong sense of court nobility from the very beginning, with a wide variety of exquisite tea sets. Tea drinking has also become a symbol of noble status because of the royal family and has been recognized by all the people [8]. The nobility of the upper class demonstrated their status and wealth by using their own fine tea and tea sets to entertain guests [9].

Expensive and beautifully made tea sets not only reflect the wealth of their owners, but also show their noble family origin and good breeding. Tea drinking appears in various social occasions such as visits, banquets, gatherings, etc., and people use this time to talk about various topics. Tea drinking began to involve complex rituals, requiring specific patterns of dress, and requiring specific tea utensils. Drinking tea changes etiquette and habits, especially spawns new rituals and etiquette of family and friends sitting around, and gives new meaning to traditional hospitality. The complex social rituals associated with tea drinking make how tea is consumed a test of manners and taste. Because of this, when consumption was no longer confined to the privileged, tea’s role as a symbol of elite culture was not affected. It still costs a fortune to enjoy high-quality tea under a fine tea set, and what’s more, drinking tea is still fully in line with society’s ideal of polite elegance, which is the cultural connotation that tea presents [8].

4. The spread and transformation of tea culture in the working class

Tea quickly became popular in cafes and other places. After 1662, as the amount of tea consumed increased year by year, not only were special teahouses established in urban areas but also into the daily lives of ordinary families. By the middle of the 18th century, tea had replaced wine as the most popular drink in England. Almost all British people drink a lot of tea, in the north of England and Scotland, people can drink an average of 10 to 20 cups of tea a day [7].

Historical responses to working-class tea usage have been left relatively unexplored. In the mass temperance tea par-

ties’ culture that emerged in the 1830s and 1840s, with the support of middle and working-class followers, drinking tea produced well-behaved and energetic workers, as well as rational consumers [11]. As the century drew to a close, the habit of drinking tea became increasingly national in the British Isles, so said the *British Medical Journal* in 1888. After the late 19th century, tea drinking went from being a pastime mainly attended by aristocratic women to becoming popular among all classes of British society. This transformation is due to the increasingly cheaper price of tea, coupled with a general increase in wages. Peter Mathias observed that wages in Britain doubled between 1850 and 1910; Between 1870 and 1895 commodity prices fell by as much as 40 percent. Sidney W. Mintz, who studies the popularization of luxury goods, argues that starting around 1850, workers’ choice to drink tea did not simply mimic the respectability of the upper class. Instead, they associate the drink with saving time and providing physical strength, allowing them to work efficiently in a modern industrial system. In the consciousness of the working class, tea changed from a luxury to a necessity of life. However, in the 20th century, the popularity of cheap tea products in working-class communities raised concerns among people. There is a dangerous phenomenon of over-dependence on tea among the working class, and excessive drinking of tea can stimulate the heart and stimulate the gastric mucosa, which is the main cause of indigestion. A product that has been regarded as a symbol of middle-class civilization was misused. In their view, the unchecked abuse of tea is the epitome of the neglect of the nation’s health as social tensions develop [12].

5. Conclusion

This paper reviews the research on British tea culture by Chinese and foreign scholars, mainly focusing on three aspects: the birth of tea culture in China and the history of its introduction to Britain, the impact of tea culture on upper class and working class in British society. It is hoped that future research will further explore the imperial colonial hegemony reflected by tea culture and the comparative study between British and Chinese tea culture. Besides that, a new round of tea culture exchange projects and achievements between China and the UK in the contemporary more inclusive and open international environment is also an interesting academic topic to work with.

References

- [1] Irimia, M. (2011). Beyond Cultural Borders of Classic Modern British Culture: The Cultural Institutions of Tea, Coffee and Chocolate and the Literature. *Anuarul Institutului*

de Cercetări Socio-Umane »Gheorghe Șincai« al Academiei Române, 14, 5–26.

[2] Song, S. (2022). Formation, Development and influence of Chinese tea culture. *People's Forum*, (19),96-99.

[3] Zhuang, W. (1984). The spread of Chinese tea culture. *Agricultural History of China*, (02),61-65.

Gao, Y., & Li, Y. (2023). Analysis of Tea Material Culture in China and Britain. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 159, 2008-. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202315902008>.

[4] Jiang, T. (2006). On the formation and development of Chinese tea culture. *Journal of Northwestern University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, (06),30-32.

[5] Tong, L., Anne, T., & Wang, L. (2021). Cultural motives affecting tea purchase behavior under two usage situations in China: a study of renqing, mianzi, collectivism, and man-nature unity culture. *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, 8(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-021-00092-6>.

[6] Li, X. (1993). Chinese Tea Culture. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27(2), 75–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1993.00075.x>.

[7] Wang, N. (2011). A Comparison of Chinese and British Tea Culture. *Asian Culture and History*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v3n2p13>.

[8] Gao, Y., & Li, Y. (2023). Analysis of Tea Material Culture in China and Britain. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 159, 2008-. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202315902008>.

[9] Yu, W. & Yang, S. (2023). The uptake of Chinese tea culture in Early Modern Britain and its influence. *Journal of Zhaotong University*, (04),86-91.

[10] Ma, X. (2008). *The multidimensional charm of tea -- A Study on British Tea Culture*. Zhejiang University.

[11] Rappaport, E. (2013). Sacred and Useful Pleasures: The Temperance Tea Party and the Creation of a Sober Consumer Culture in Early Industrial Britain. *The Journal of British Studies*, 52(4), 990–1016. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2013.121>.

[12] Miller, I. (2013). A Dangerous Revolutionary Force Amongst Us: Conceptualizing Working-Class Tea Drinking in the British Isles, c. 1860-1900. *Cultural and Social History*, 10(3), 419–438. <https://doi.org/10.2752/147800413X13591373275240>.