
With the prevalence of matcha desserts, as well as the well-publicized health benefits of matcha today, readers might assume from the title of Robert Hellyer’s new book that it is about the American cultural borrowing of Japanese tea practices. Contrary to that expectation, Hellyer tells a story of how the global tea trade facilitated the growth of tea-drinking cultures in both the U.S. and Japan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when tea became an essential component of the national diet. Adopting the term “teaways” from the more well-known concept of “foodways” that investigates all activities associated with food, the book examines how tea played a role in the intersection of culture and history.

Although tea and tea practices came to Japan from China during the Heian period (794–1185 CE), drinking tea became more distinctly Japanese after the late twelfth century. During the medieval era, Zen Buddhist monks promoted tea for medicinal purposes, and social and cultural elites developed “the tea ceremony (cha no yu), in which matcha is prepared, served, and consumed in a series of intricate rituals” (p. 9). At the same time, sites of cultural exchange and production shifted during the Edo period (1600–1868) leading to the popularization of tea within all facets of society from aristocracy to the everyday marketplace. Various regions made their name for their renowned types of teas, and tea was served on many occasions, spanning social divides.

Immediately after the American Revolution, Americans followed the tea drinking practices, such as the consumption of green and black teas, of the mother country, England. However, Americans soon “chose to capitalize on a fruit of independence” (p. 20) and utilize the Canton trade rather than depend on the English East India Company and other European merchant groups to import their teas (p. 21). American ships brought primarily green teas directly to East Coast ports, such as Boston and New York. As result, the chief distinction of American “teaways” emerged: an embrace of green over black teas. As immigration fueled the expansion of cities in the Midwest, increased demand for green tea appeared as early as the 1850s (p. 33). Many Americans consumed their green tea hot, with milk and sugar added. Japanese green tea became prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with its rise in popularity in the Midwest, where it remained a fixture on tables throughout the 1930s. Today, the American taste for tea has shifted back to black tea and other varieties, such as iced and sweet teas. Hellyer argues that the American embrace of black tea can be traced to the early twentieth century when negative campaigns mounted against Chinese and Japanese green teas caused many Americans to choose black teas, most produced in India and Ceylon. The outbreak of war in Asia and the Pacific, and Japan’s attack on the U.S. in 1941, brought an end to the large scale imports of Japanese green tea which had filled American cups since the 1860s.

There are three marked strengths of the book. First, by providing a thorough analysis of the tea business between the U.S. and Japan within global historical contexts, Hellyer shows the way the U.S. and Japan came to establish themselves as modern nations, securing their own places in the international community. By centering on Japanese and American experiences with tea as a factor in diplomacy and an expanding global economy, Hellyer demonstrates how the tea trade prompted Meiji officials to, for instance, strategize maritime defense, facilitating the national boundaries of the Japanese nation-state. The invention of the “Japan Tea” brand in the U.S. and the American preference for it simi-
larly helped create a perceived reality and unity of Japan as a nation-state when Japan was still divided after the civil war following the Meiji Restoration. Second, by weaving threads of family history into the discussion of American tea culture, Hellyer shows how personal history and national history intersect. As he prefaces, the intellectual journey of writing this book originated in his childhood memory of his grandmother’s tea and pies, which he earned for his hard work of mowing lawns. Going beyond his ancestors’ involvement in the tea trade, Hellyer links stories of numerous people: workers engaged in the import and sales of Japanese green tea, traders and merchants who shaped the trajectory of tea consumption in both nations, various Japanese families working in small farms and factories, those who worked as intermediaries, the craftsmen and artists who built the chests and made tea labels, and the like. This point is related to the third contribution of the book, that is, the book revives the value of the practice of “people’s history” (minshūshi). Paying attention to the individuals who made tea culture in both countries, the book exemplifies the author’s belief in the valuable role played by people in making history.

Hellyer writes, “Tea tells a very American and especially Midwestern story of connections with Japan and other Asian states” while “revealing in multiple ways how national history is inherently international” (p. 7). This claim is applicable to persistent assertions of Japanese cultural essentialism, such as that Japanese people have always consumed sencha green tea throughout history. By tracing tea history within global environments, he explores the role played by foreigners, engagement with the outside world, and global contexts in the course of Japan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More precisely, sencha was a popular beverage in Japan since the eighteenth century, but, as the book details, there were regional varieties and tea was served differently. The Meiji government designated sencha as an export good for the growing U.S. market so that 1) sencha exports would provide a source of long-term revenue, and 2) the tea industry could save many dispossessed samurai, who lost the means of living after the Meiji Restoration, by allowing them to become tea farmers. Consequently, such things as regional varieties and the place of origin of tea did not matter, as they were together marketed as Japanese tea.

Interesting anecdotes about Yokohama and Kobe tea factories destabilize some myths about green tea. To meet the American taste for teas with a rich green luster, workers there added Prussian blue coloring to teas being refined for export, a practice commonly employed by skilled, Chinese tea refiners. As Japan’s export trade developed in the 1870s and 1880s, these Chinese experts supervised the shipment of Japanese tea to the United States, teaching Japanese workers how to not only add coloring agents, but also keep the tea dry in wooden shipping crates. The wisdom of various practices from different cultures created a particular type of Japanese green tea, which was exported to the U.S. and drunk by many Americans. They consumed it in their American way with milk and sugar, even though Japanese mediators provided manuals to serve the “proper” Japanese tea without any additives. Moreover, when American tastes began to shift toward black tea in the 1920s, Japanese merchants for the first time actively promoted sencha for domestic consumption by employing marketing techniques that included pseudo-scientific claims: sencha as a rich source of vitamin C, sencha as a cancer preventive beverage, and the like.

In this fashion, Hellyer examines the intertwining histories of tea-drinking in Japan and the U.S. He executes his argument clearly and convincingly, but the claim begins to sound somewhat shaky when the discussion nears the Asia-Pacific war. Even though many Americans liked green tea, and preferred it over other teas, they stopped buying it when, following sustained negative marketing cam-
paigns, lower prices for black teas kicked in in the 1920s. Since the start of the war with Japan in 1941 changed the American taste for tea, and green tea never again achieved it previous popularity it had in the U.S., what does this tell us about American tastes? One might assume from studies such as John Dower’s *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* that wartime image-making was driven by racism, and that such images of the enemy overwhelmingly altered national tastes for almost everything. By not considering Dower’s argument in relation to the American taste for Japanese tea, Hellyer missed an opportunity to make a noteworthy addition to his book.

Beautifully narrating a story about trans-Pacific trade and the growth of tea-drinking culture, Hellyer’s book will appeal widely to scholars and students, as well as the general public. Some of the accompanying images might have been reproduced in color to further enliven the reading experience, but the book nonetheless shows effectively how a new approach of teaways, like foodways, offers promising routes of inquiry that will help us better understand the nation-state and its role in the globalization of modernity.

*Nobuko Toyosawa, Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences.*