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An Analytical Study of Tea Culture in China and Sri Lanka

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සමීක්ෂණය

තේ සංස්කෘතිය යනු චීන සම්ප්‍රදායික සංස්කෘතියේ අනිකර්ග්‍ය ප්‍රධාන අංගයක් වන අතර, එය ඓතිහාසිකව විශාල කාලයක් පුරා පැවති සමාජ නාගරිකතාවයට විශාල දායකත්වයක් සිදු කර ඇත. වර්තමානයේ, සමාජයේ අඛණ්ඩ ප්‍රවර්ධනයත් සමඟ, තේ වැඩි වශයෙන්ම පුද්ගලයන්ගේ සුන්දර ජීවන ප්‍රාර්ථනය සහ උසස් මානව සංස්කෘතිය සඳහා මාධ්‍යයක් ලෙස පත්ව ඇත. එමෙන්ම, එය සමාජ-ආර්ථික ප්‍රවර්ධනයටත් තරමක් බලපා ඇත. තවද, තේ විවිධ රටවලට පැතිරී ස්ථානානුකූල සම්ප්‍රදායන් සහ චාරිත්‍රයන්ට අනුකූලව විශේෂිත කලාපීය සංස්කෘතීන් සෑදීමට පින්සාර වී ඇත. ශ්‍රී ලංකාවද මේ සඳහා නිදසුනකි. මෙම ලිපිය චීනය සහ ශ්‍රී ලංකාව යන රටවල තේ සංස්කෘතීන් සම්බන්ධයෙන් විශ්ලේෂණය කරයි.

Introduction

China, known as the homeland of tea, boasts a history that dates back to ancient legends, where tea leaves were intimately linked with medicine and food. By the Han Dynasty, tea had evolved from merely a medicinal supplement to an independent beverage. Since the Tang Dynasty, tea drinking gradually became a deeply rooted societal custom, captivating the hearts of the royal elite and commoners alike. The flourishing of tea culture inspired ancient intellectuals to create countless poems, songs, paintings, and treatises centred on tea, all of which reflect the elegance and sophistication of tea drinking. Tea ceremonies and tea arts are the treasures of tea culture, showcasing technical skills and embodying a form of life art (Yang, 2007). Sri Lanka, as a tropical island, also cultivates globally cherished tea. The Sri Lankan tea industry boasts a history of approximately 155 years, with Ceylon tea becoming an indispensable part of local daily life. Renowned for its unique flavour and impeccable aroma, Ceylon tea has won the hearts of consumers worldwide. The British introduced tea plants from China to Sri Lanka in 1824, successfully cultivating them in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Peradeniya, marking the establishment of Sri Lanka's first non-commercial tea tree. Today, tea produced in Sri Lanka is commonly referred to as "Ceylon tea." Over the years, the term "Ceylon" has become synonymous with high-quality tea, representing excellence and unique charm.

The Historical Evolution of Tea

(1) The Development of Chinese Tea

Over the thousands of years, Chinese tea's production, evolution, and development have undergone a significant transformation. This journey began with chewing fresh leaves, then progressed to boiling leaves for consumption, sun-drying for storage, steaming and compressing into cakes, and finally to, pan-frying to produce loose tea leaves. Chinese tea culture has generally evolved through various stages: the budding phase during the Han and Jin dynasties, formal establishment in the Tang Dynasty, flourishing prosperity in the Song Dynasty, and simplification and popularization during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Over time, various tea preparation and consumption methods have emerged, including boiling, brewing, whisking, and steeping. Tea has become essential to the intellectuals' refined lifestyle—one of the "seven cultural pursuits" and the ordinary people's daily necessities, deeply integrating into everyday life for centuries.

The origin of tea is rooted in agricultural civilization, encompassing rich cultural and spiritual elements, making it an indispensable part of Chinese culture. Initially, tea was primarily used for its medicinal properties. It was cultivated in monasteries, where monks used it to achieve spiritual tranquility, viewing it as a symbol of humility and respect for nature. The first professional literature on tea dates back 1200 years to the Tang Dynasty, with the “Tea Classic” (《茶经》) authored by Lu Yu, known as the “Sage of Tea.” This was the world’s first monograph on tea. Enthusiasts of tea at the time not only focused on the production and consumption of tea and the spiritual realm associated with it, significantly altering the Chinese perception of tea. Chinese tea ceremony traditions began with reverence for nature and a longing for peace, integrating the philosophical thoughts of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Traditionally, tea drinking was seen as a method of self-motivation for scholars: Taoists used tea to cultivate themselves and achieve a mind-body connection, Buddhists deepened their understanding of Zen through tea, and in Confucian thought, tea was endowed with the qualities of integrity, elegance, and modesty, contributing to a clear mind and peaceful disposition. As Chinese society developed and advanced rapidly, tea production was crucial in driving economic prosperity. The history of tea has been shaped by many significant figures who have contributed to its development.

(a) Shennong—Neolithic Era

Shennong is a significant figure in ancient Chinese legend, celebrated as the progenitor of agriculture and the inventor of herbal medicine. While exploring various plants, he made significant contributions to agricultural production and medicine and discovered tea, a unique and mysterious beverage. The story of Shennong tasting hundreds of herbs highlights his bravery and wisdom and reflects his profound care for humanity. During his herb-tasting process, he discovered tea leaves’ unique taste and medicinal value and introduced this mysterious beverage into human daily life. According to the “Tea Classic” (《茶经》), “Tea as a drink originated with Shennong and was popularized by Duke Zhou of Lu.” This statement indicates that the origin of tea as a beverage can be traced back to the time of Shennong, and through subsequent transmission and development, it gradually formed a unique tea culture. Shennong’s discovery had a profound impact on later generations. This mysterious tea became a widespread beverage and gradually integrated into Chinese cultural and artistic forms, becoming an essential element in poetry, painting, and other arts. During the Tang Dynasty, tea culture peaked, becoming a part of cultural arts and beginning to spread abroad, gradually influencing countries like Korea, Japan, and

Vietnam (with significant contributions from individuals in spreading tea). Thus, Shennong, as the progenitor of agriculture and the inventor of medicine, made his most notable contribution in discovering tea as a unique beverage and in his tremendous efforts for human well-being. His story and discoveries will be eternally etched in the annals of human history.

(b) Catherine of Braganza—1662

Catherine of Braganza was a princess from Portugal's House of Braganza who later married Charles II of England, becoming the Queen of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Her marriage strengthened political ties between England and Portugal and facilitated trade between the two nations. Portugal had begun trading with China in the early 16th century, importing large quantities of tea. This trading activity laid the foundation for the subsequent British tea trade. During Catherine's tenure as Queen of England, her introduction to Portuguese culture, especially her fondness for tea, profoundly influenced British high society. Her love for tea quickly became fashionable among the social elite, thus promoting the development of British tea culture. Before tea was introduced to England, the favorite beverage of the English was likely alcoholic. Historical documents indicate that while coffee later gained popularity, it arrived in England after tea. This suggests that contemporary British culture was more closely aligned with the maritime culture, making alcohol a favored drink among sailors (Wikipedia). However, with the introduction and popularization of tea, it gradually became an integral part of British life, becoming a daily necessity. Tea served as a beverage and embodied the essence of British social culture, eventually becoming the national drink. The British love for tea significantly spurred the rapid growth of the tea trade, making tea one of the most crucial commodities in trade between Britain and China. The trade deficit issue became increasingly severe as British demand for tea grew. To address this deficit, Britain began searching for other goods to balance trade. Consequently, British merchants started to export opium to China on a large scale (transporting it through India), which eventually led to the Opium Wars (Wikipedia). Nonetheless, Catherine, as Queen of England, had an undeniable impact on the development of British tea culture through her actions and preferences. The trade connections she represented between Portugal and China also set the stage for future trade relations between China and Britain. Tea became a pivotal commodity in this trade relationship, altering British dietary habits and shaping the trade dynamics between China and Britain.

(c) Robert Fortune—1848

Robert Fortune was a distinguished botanist and explorer who made indelible contributions to the development of the tea industry. In the mid-19th century, due to the significant presence of Chinese tea in the British market, Britain sought to reduce its dependency on Chinese tea by exploring the possibility of cultivating tea in India. In this endeavor, they enlisted the help of Robert Fortune, who had a profound understanding of China and its culture.

Fortune first arrived in Shanghai, China, in 1848. With 20 years of experience living in China and fluency in Chinese, he has gained deep insights into Chinese tea culture. This background provided him with valuable knowledge and experience for attempting to cultivate tea in India. After three years of efforts, in 1851, Fortune, following advice from Western merchants and Chinese advisors, successfully recruited eight Chinese workers to go to India. These workers included six craftsmen skilled in tea cultivation and production and two artisans specializing in making tea containers. Their arrival provided critical technical and human support for developing the Indian tea industry. To avoid attracting local attention during his ventures into the Chinese mainland, Fortune employed a clever strategy. He donned traditional Chinese attire, styled his hair in the manner of local Chinese people, and wore a long braid, making it difficult for rural farmers to recognize him as a European. This disguise enabled him to travel to the renowned green tea-producing region of Huangshan, where he studied and collected tea seeds and seedlings. Fortune's efforts ultimately yielded significant results. He successfully cultivated tea in India, and the quality of the tea gradually improved, eventually rivaling that of Chinese tea. This satisfied the British market's demand and significantly advanced the Indian tea industry, establishing India as one of the world's major tea-producing countries. While some may view Robert Fortune's actions as "stealing" Chinese tea plants and related techniques, it is essential to recognize that in the context of the time, this exchange facilitated the global spread and awareness of tea. Had Chinese tea not been introduced to the broader world, this mysterious beverage might not have reached its current level of popularity and might not have become one of the world's most beloved drinks. Robert Fortune's contributions to the tea industry are undeniable. He successfully cultivated tea in India and disseminated Chinese tea cultivation and processing techniques, along with its rich cultural heritage, to India. This effort laid a solid foundation for the globalization of the tea industry and promoted the flourishing of the global tea trade. Fortune's work not only met the British market's demand for tea but also fostered the acceptance and appreciation of tea worldwide.

History of Tea in Sri Lanka

(1) Introduction of Tea to Sri Lanka

The history of the tea industry in Sri Lanka dates back to the 19th century, a period marked by the remarkable transition from introducing tea seeds and experimental cultivation to becoming one of the world's leading tea exporters. In 1824, the British first introduced tea to Sri Lanka, a decision that laid the groundwork for the future development of Sri Lanka's tea industry. The first batch of tea seeds was sown in the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens, symbolizing the future potential of the Sri Lankan tea industry. This move showcased the British influence on the global tea trade and foreshadowed Sri Lanka's significant role in the tea industry. Over time, Sri Lanka's tea industry gradually entered the experimental cultivation stage. During this period, thorough studies of the local climate, soil, and ecological environment were conducted, providing favorable conditions for tea planting. In 1867, Scotsman James Taylor established the first commercial tea plantation in Sri Lanka, marking the transition of Sri Lanka's tea industry from the experimental phase to commercial production. In 1869, Sri Lanka's coffee industry suffered a severe blow due to the "coffee rust" disease outbreak, which decimated coffee production and quality, causing significant economic losses. However, this also provided a rare opportunity for the promotion of tea. With the decline in coffee production, people began to seek alternative beverages, and tea, with its unique taste and nutritional value, gradually gained popularity. The area under tea cultivation expanded rapidly, and production increased yearly. Shortly, Sri Lanka's tea industry began to rise. The local government and businesses invested heavily in tea plantation construction, variety improvement, and technological innovation. At the same time, Sri Lanka actively explored international markets, maintaining close ties with global tea trade networks. These efforts resulted in continuous improvements in the quality of Sri Lankan tea, steadily increasing production and a rising international reputation. Today, Sri Lanka is one of the top ten tea-exporting countries in the world, alongside China and Kenya, ranking among the top three. Sri Lankan tea is renowned globally for its unique flavor and aroma, and consumers highly favor it. This achievement highlights the significant global position of Sri Lanka's tea industry. It attests to the far-reaching impact of the British introduction of tea and James Taylor's establishment of commercial tea plantations.

Differences Between Sri Lankan and Chinese Tea Cultures

The introduction of tea to Sri Lanka came later, resulting in a shorter history of cultural development related to tea. Before tea was introduced, Sri Lankan people were accustomed to brewing various leaves, herbs, and flowers, consumed for their medicinal value and as a relaxing pastime. Consequently, the depth and richness of tea culture in Sri Lanka are less profound and diverse than in China. However, over time, tea gradually integrated into the daily lives of ordinary Sri Lankans, leading to the development of a series of unique habits and cultural phenomena related to tea. These habits evolved and eventually gave rise to various tea-related cultural practices. Below, we will delve into the emergence of these cultural phenomena.

(1) Tea Preferences

There is a strong preference for black tea in Sri Lanka, which has gained global acclaim for its distinctive flavor. In Sri Lankan culture, tea is an indispensable part of daily life and plays a significant role in special occasions. Black tea captivates people with its unique appeal, whether at family gatherings, workplaces, or when hosting guests. In contrast, Chinese people tend to favor green tea. Their tea preferences vary according to the seasons to meet different needs. In spring, many Chinese people choose floral teas to enjoy the season's fresh ambiance; in summer, green tea is preferred for its refreshing and thirst-quenching qualities; in autumn, they opt for oolong tea to appreciate the tranquility of the season; and in the cold winter, black tea is chosen for its warming properties. This tea-drinking habit highlights the diversity of Chinese teas and the deep appreciation of Chinese people for tea, reflecting their harmony with nature.

(2) Tea Drinking Habits

In Sri Lanka, tea drinking has become a way of life and a deeply ingrained habit. People typically have a cup of black tea in the morning and afternoon. Whether at home, in the office, or at a company, hosts will warmly offer guests a cup of aromatic black tea. For farmers and workers, enjoying a few cups of black tea after a long day's work is the best way to rejuvenate and relieve fatigue. In China, tea-drinking habits are more varied and flexible. Although there are places in China where drinking tea in the morning and afternoon is common, people often

choose tea times and methods based on personal preferences and the occasion. Generally, Chinese people drink tea in the afternoon or after meals. Standard tea-drinking practices include savoring tea in tea houses, brewing tea at home, and sharing a good teapot with friends. These diverse tea practices reflect Chinese tea culture's rich and multifaceted nature.

(3) Tea and Special Occasions

In Sri Lanka, tea plays a significant role in special occasions. For example, at traditional weddings, a table with traditional sweets and tea is set to welcome the groom's relatives. This practice reflects Sri Lankans' fondness for tea and demonstrates their respect for and preservation of traditional culture. Tea is an indispensable beverage at any festival or gathering in Sri Lanka. Although Sri Lanka does not have traditional "tea houses" in the same way as China, the influence of tea culture is pervasive. Every restaurant serves guests hot tea, showcasing Sri Lankans' love and respect for tea. In rural "*kadamandiya*" (local markets), tea is central to socializing and relaxation. Villagers gather in the afternoon to enjoy tea while engaging in activities like checkers and card games or simply sharing stories, reading newspapers, and chatting about everyday life. This unique tea culture highlights Sri Lankans' love for life and reflects their strong community cohesion and cultural traditions. In China, tea also plays a vital role on special occasions, but Chinese tea culture emphasizes the performance of tea ceremonies and the spirit of tea. Tea ceremonies transform the process of brewing and tasting tea into an art form and a means of self-cultivation. The spirit of tea emphasizes harmony, nature, and personal refinement. Through brewing and savoring tea, people experience relaxation and pleasure while appreciating the profound depth of Chinese culture.

(4) Tea Production

Sri Lanka has a long history of producing black tea with unique characteristics. The production process and quality of Sri Lankan black tea involve brewing with copper kettles and adding sugar and milk. These unique production techniques and flavors have earned Sri Lankan black tea a renowned reputation worldwide. In contrast, tea production in China is more diverse and complex. China cultivates and produces a variety of tea types, including green tea, black tea, and oolong tea, each with its methods and styles. Chinese tea's production

processes and quality vary depending on the region and the tea variety. Each step in the process—such as picking, fixing (kill-green), rolling, and roasting—requires meticulous care and precise control to produce high-quality tea. Sri Lankan tea habits are characterized by their deep tea culture and unique drinking methods. Although the term “tea” in Sri Lanka often refers to tea with sugar or milk, “some still enjoy plain tea” or “*Kahata*” (black tea). The distinctive features of Sri Lankan tea habits include its rich tea culture, unique drinking styles, and high-quality tea resources. Together, these elements contribute to the unique tea culture landscape of Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

China and Sri Lanka have unique tea cultures that reflect their histories and values. Chinese tea culture is ancient and profound, characterized by refined tea arts, a deep tea philosophy, and a diverse range of tea varieties. It embodies a respect for nature and health. Sri Lankan tea culture, though younger, is distinct and charming in its own right. It is particularly notable for its tea-drinking habits, such as the preference for milk tea and the tradition of drinking “*Kahata*” (black tea), as well as the social functions of tea. Both countries’ tea cultures highlight respect for nature, health, and social connections, showcasing their national charm and regional characteristics.

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