

# What Makes Bubble Tea Popular ? Interaction between Chinese and British Tea Culture

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**ABSTRACT.** *this article is about the cultural contexts behind the popularity of bubble tea, which is a kind of novel drink and is well-received by people from all over the world. it offers a comparative historical study of tea culture, especially that of tea-drinking customs in china and britain. the interaction between chinese and british tea culture gives birth to this novel drink. we propose that the analysis of the comparative history of chinese and british tea culture and the interaction between the two kinds of tea culture will offer us valuable insight into the intercultural communication. .*

**KEYWORDS:** *Bubble tea, Popularity, Chinese tea culture, Britain tea culture, Intercultural communication*

## **1. Introduction**

As a novel drink, bubble tea, made from black tea, milk, sugar and tapioca balls has been well-received by people from all over the world. It seems to become popular overnight and has been the object of much scholarly and media over the past several years. If bubble tea is only treated as a Taiwanese delicacy, it's not easy to find out why it can become so popular within only 30 years. However, when we go back to the history of Chinese and British tea culture, the interaction between which gives birth to bubble tea, the popularity of bubble tea can be better understood from the cultural, historical and social perspective.

Tea plays an important role in both China and Britain, two large tea-drinking countries. With its long history in each of the two nations, tea has respectively developed a unique culture in them, and Chinese and British people drink tea in quite different ways. China is universally acknowledged as the origin of tea, and its tea culture makes an impact on that of other countries. With rich resources of tea and under the influence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, Chinese are accustomed to enjoy the primitive taste of tea, without any flavor. After the Great Age of Exploration, tea was passed on to Europe, and British has localized the way of tea-drinking and developed their own systematic tea culture, among which adding

milk and sugar to tea is quite creative. Chinese tea culture and British tea culture, being two popular topics in culture, have been discussed by the academia in the two countries. This article will examine the historical development of tea culture in China and Britain, focusing in particular on the the transition of tea-drinking customs and two-sided influence of the two kinds of tea culture.

## **2. Add Milk, Sugar or Not?**

In order to better understand the popularity of bubble tea, it is useful to go back to the history of Chinese and British tea culture, the interaction of which gives birth to the novel drink. China is universally acknowledged as the origin of tea, and Chinese tea culture has significant impact on the formation of tea culture in other countries. After tea was introduced in England, British localized the way of tea-drinking and developed their own systematic tea culture. Chinese seldom add flavor to tea and enjoy the pure taste of it, while British usually drink tea with other ingredients such accompany it and adding milk and sugar to tea has become a classic British way of drinking tea.

Tea was first considered as a herb in China, and Chinese began to drink tea in the Western Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-8 A.D.). From then on, there was a transition of the mainstream of Chinese tea culture from adding flavor to tea to drinking tea alone. In the beginning, the habit of drinking tea was only popular in the upper class. In the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the people usually drank tea with flavor. As Lu Yu said in *Book of Tea*, people keep tea in a jar and make it a soup with onion, ginger, jujube, orange peel, dogwood, pepper and mint boiling together. However, literati including Lu Yu advocated drinking tea alone, and feeling the real flavor of tea, opposing adding any flavor to it, which laid the foundation of the aesthetic of Chinese tea culture. In the Song Dynasty (960-1279), Emperor Huizong also strongly praised the original, pure taste of tea, the palate of which was already very rich. Simultaneously, the expansion of the citizen stratum promoted the popularity of tea-drinking among people of all ranks. The Song Dynasty was a turning point in Chinese tea culture. After that, tea was popularized among the folk and the orthodoxy of tea-drinking was established. In the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) and Ming Dynasty(1368-1644), due to the predominance of the Taoist ideology of being in harmony with nature, orthodoxy of drinking tea alone was once again enhanced in Chinese tea culture. The Manchu rulers in the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912)brought nomadic-style salty milk tea to the Central Plains, which did not undermine the status of traditional Chinese tea culture.[1] Till today, it is still the mainstream of tea culture in China.

Chinese tea culture is greatly influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. On the surface, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism each have their own tea ceremony, which is quite different in form and value. Confucianism advocates that tea is a good medium for people to enhance socialization, achieving a better life in the world. Taoists drink tea to seek ethereal quietness, and escape from the hustle and bustle of the world. Buddhists always drink tea in a plain and austere way in order to clear their mind and find the true self. Although such superficial differences do exist, there is one thing in common in the spirit of the three kinds of

tea culture, that is, tranquility and harmony between man and nature. Drinking tea without any flavor, namely feeling the primitive taste of tea, is very consistent with such a spiritual orientation. Besides, the variety of tea produced and consumed in China is another reason. There are six major series of tea, namely green tea, yellow tea, oolong tea, black tea, dark tea and white tea, each of which has unique texture and flavor. For example, white tea tastes fresh and sweet, while the taste of green tea is strong, bitter at first and sweet later. For Chinese, savouring the original taste of different varieties of tea is magical and wonderful. Therefore, it is inevitable that this way of tea-drinking finally became the orthodoxy of traditional Chinese tea culture.

In Britain, tea was first on sale in 1657, but only for aristocratic banquets, by Thomas Garvey, a tobacconist and cafe owner in London. In the early days of the introduction of tea into British society, tea was treated not as a drink but only a medicine to help people to treat symptoms such as weakness and coma. The practice of adding milk to tea had already appeared at that time, and it was considered to have a better effect. Section 12 of the advertising of Thomas Garvey for tea, for example, stated: tea, prepared with milk and water, strengthens the internal organs, prevents lung disease, soothes intestinal pain and promotes relaxation.[2] However, adding milk to tea was not the mainstream of tea-drinking until a century later. In 1662, Charles II's Portuguese queen, Princess Catherine, who was praised as the 'team queen' for her contribution to British tea culture, introduced the habit of drinking tea to the English court. At court, the nobles drank tea almost in the Chinese way and seldom added milk or sugar to it. The supply of tea was totally dependent on import, and tea was sold at 10 to 60 shillings per pound, which was unaffordable for most British people. As a result, drinking tea was far from a fashion among the folk. At that time, in London cafes, tea was a drink served purely to men, sold in small cans, just like ale, and the drinkers did not add anything else to tea as well. [3]

As tea drinking became more and more popular in British society, the trend of tea drinking penetrated downward from the upper class, and the middle class began to follow suit. Since the early eighteenth century, due to the development of the East India Company, tea was imported in great quantity. Therefore, the price of tea experienced a dramatic fall, which prompted the popularity of tea among the middle-class in Britain. By the middle of the 18th century, almost all the family accounts recorded the expenses related to tea drinking, indicating that tea drinking had been basically popularized among the middle class families. Tea drinking spread among the lower classes, mainly in the middle and late eighteenth century. The import of tea of the East India Company continued to grow. In the late eighteenth century, tea was no longer a luxury for the aristocracy, but was also available to the ordinary working class. During this period, milk was added to tea and eaten as breakfast. Thus, adding milk and sugar was generally accepted by the whole British society and became the mainstream of the tea-drinking customs in British tea culture.

During the eighteenth century, black tea replaced green tea in the British tea market, which could be attributed to the drop of the price of black tea due to more

imports of it. Besides, compared with cold-natured green tea, black tea is warm, and can undoubtedly help the British people to adapt to the cold and damp weather. Thus, Britain gradually turned into the country with the best taste for black tea. Progress of localization of tea in Britain gained huge achievements at this period. The practice of adding milk to tea or even boiling tea with milk reappeared in this period. Besides milk, British people also added wine, nutmeg, sweet cream and egg yolk to tea in order to make a new kind of tea. Porcelain was another factor which popularized the practice of adding milk to tea. The quality of British porcelain was so poor that boiling tea could easily burst it, while porcelain from China was extremely expensive. So British people added milk first to prevent the damage of the porcelain cup. At the same time, the development of sugar industry in the West Indies provided another historical condition for the emergence of British tea drinking. For the British, their appetite for sweetness is hardly satisfied for a long time because the supply of sugar could only be imported from other countries such as Portugal. As the British colonized the West Indies and other colonies, sugar plantations and sugar industries grew rapidly, and sugar was encouraged to be added to tea in order to promote sugar consumption. As sugar became more and more abundant, the addition of large amounts of sugar to tea became another feature of British tea drinking.

The British practice of adding milk to tea is rooted in their distinctive dietary traditions. Since the Middle Ages, milk and dairy products have become an indispensable part of the traditional diet. Therefore, as tea became more and more popular in English society, its combination with milk was a natural result. At first, sugar was treated as a luxury in British society. Adding sugar to tea, which was equally luxurious can not only make the tea taste better, but also demonstrate the high social status of the drinkers, and those from lower social class tried to imitate. In response to the huge demand of sugar, British developed a sugar industry in its colonies. The industry of the West Indies produced large quantities of sugar cane, which was ground to make crude sugar which was brought back by English ships and purified in English factories.[4] In this way, consumers got a continuously growing supply of sugar. As a result, the sugar was no longer that expensive, which backed up the widespread of the practice of adding sugar to tea. This also promoted the formation of British tea culture.

### **3. How Does Bubble Tea Come into Existence and Become Popular?**

Tea originated in China, while milk tea originated in Britain. Although the minority populations in northwest China also have the habit of drinking milk tea, there is no direct relationship between nomadism-style salty milk tea and bubble tea—a kind of popular street drink. It is difficult to determine the exact time when milk tea was introduced into the Chinese mainland, but it is certain that it was introduced in the late Qing Dynasty along with fashionable western food. However, milk was scarce in that era of material poverty, so it was only served in high-end western restaurants. As a result, milk tea failed to turn into a fashion in the mainland. However, milk tea, the European way of tea-drinking has continued to evolve in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

After the defeat of the Qing government in the first Opium War, Hong Kong became a British colony in 1841. During the British colonial period in Hong Kong, milk tea, a drink symbolizing the capitalist lifestyle of the west, was rapidly introduced to Hong Kong. During the continuous popularization of milk tea in Hong Kong society, Hong Kong people also localized the English milk tea. Silk stocking tea and Yuanyang are two typical examples. Now Hong Kong-style milk tea is quite renowned in the Asian and it has become an integral part of Hong Kong people's daily life. As a Hong Kong slang phrase goes, 'it's time to order milk tea at 3:30 pm'.

During the Dutch colonization of Taiwan (1624-1662), the European way of drinking tea-adding milk and sugar to tea was introduced to Taiwan. It did not become a trend but laid a foundation of the creation of bubble tea. In the middle of the twentieth century, under the influence of Hong Kong-style milk tea, milk tea became popular in Taiwan. Unlike Hong Kong-style milk tea, the making process of bubble tea itself is not cumbersome, so it is easy to realize standardization. Within a short span of 30 years, bubble tea has swept across the world. In 1987, Lin Xiuhui, manager of a Taiwanese dessert shop called Chunshuitang, accidentally threw tapioca balls, known as "powder balls," into milk tea during a boring business meeting, only to find that they tasted good.[5] Then bubble tea officially came into being. The rich variety of tea, ingredients and fruit stimulates the further development of bubble tea. Oolong tea and green tea can be alternative to black tea, and other ingredients such as taro, grass jelly, sago can also be added to bubble tea. In addition, to make bubble tea take on the international market, businessmen actively learn about local food customs, and create an attractive image of bubble tea with creative and marketing techniques, using local raw materials to upgrade bubble tea from a beverage without borders. For example, to cater to Americans' sweet teeth, ice cream, honey and syrup are added to bubble tea in the American market, while the French, who care about the appearance of food, chocolate is used to decorate their bubble tea.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The history of Chinese and British tea culture share several similarities. Tea is endowed with cultural connotation in both the two kinds of tea culture. Tea stands for tranquility and harmony in Chinese tea culture, and elegance and gentility in British tea culture. In addition, the habit of drinking tea was first popular in the upper class, and then spread to the whole society in both China and Britain. The turning point in China was the Song Dynasty with the rising of the city class. Tea became a national drink in Britain in the end of the eighteenth century when the quantity of the imports of tea in Britain soared, domestic prices fell and ordinary traders and even the working class began to adopt the fad. However, during the process of popularization, the mainstream of Chinese way of tea-drinking experienced a transition from adding flavor to tea to drinking tea alone, while British drinking green tea alone to adding milk and sugar to black tea, both of which are a matter of course in terms of historical development of the two countries.

The popularity of bubble tea can demonstrate not only the infinite possibilities of intercultural communication, but also the need for a more sophisticated approach to the study of related questions. In this respect, bubble tea is not a creation that accidentally crossed Taiwanese mind, but in essence the result of the intercultural communication between Chinese and British tea culture. Taiwanese create bubble tea by combining milk tea with eastern and modern elements and bring milk tea to the world. While bubble tea is taking on the world, it constantly integrates the dietary customs of other food culture. It can be said that the popularity of bubble tea is the epitome of world cultural exchange.

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