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# Exporting a National Identity: Green Tea's Entrance into the Global Food Network

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Vassar College

## **Exporting a National Identity**

# Green Tea's Entrance into the Global Food Network

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

by

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# 1. Introduction: a cup of tea at the end of a meal

When sushi entered the global food market as an exotic and luxurious dish, a less conspicuous commodity also followed in its shadow. After satisfying the customers with the delicacy of sushi, Japanese restaurants will typically serve a hot cup of bitter green tea as a palette cleanser and conclusion to the meal. Its mellow taste calms the consumer and instills a sense of leisure. Unlike coffee, which is often consumed in the United States as an energy booster on-the-go, green tea is not meant to be gulped, it is meant to be savored.

But this beverage is no complete novelty for the Western world that has been enjoying black tea for centuries. In fact, green tea can be considered as the bitterer sister of black tea. Yet green tea continues to attract more consumers because of its unique history and its health benefits, and has found its position in the modern mainstream through its constant evolutions. Since its beginnings as a tool for Buddhist rituals, green tea has evolved with the times and taken on new identities. However, these adaptations in the face of today's globalization have also stripped the identity of the object through commodification. In this thesis, I will follow green tea's journey through its different stages of consumption patterns in order to explore the phenomenon of cultural capital and its survival in the global economy, as well as the issues that emerge from a commodity's global success.

Before I elaborate, I will briefly explain my personal motivations for writing this thesis that will give a more profound dimension essential to my overarching argument. Despite being born and having grown up in the United States, my first-generation mother has always ensured that I was exposed to my Japanese heritage. Therefore, I have always had an ineffable affinity towards Japan and its culture. Even though I consider myself American, Japan also feels like home whenever I return to it, and when I visit a Japanese grocery store in the States, there's always a feeling that I can only best describe as "belonging".

Yet some Japan-enthusiasts will sometimes claim to know more about Japan than me because I have not lived in Japan since I was five years old. Worse yet, when I tell people that I am Japanese, they'll respond with their love for a very specific commodity that encapsulates the essence of Japan in their minds. "Oh, you're Japanese?" they'll exclaim. "I love sushi!" This kind of mindset suggests a tendency of many outsiders to generalize culture, to see nationalities through their interaction with a cultural symbol without fully understanding its complicated background. In the end, no outsider can truly understand a culture with its untranslatable nuances and demeanors. Nor can an outsider hope to truly possess it even if he or she attempts to transfer it in its most authentic form. This does not mean that I condemn any kind of cultural sharing. Celebrating diversity is important because it promotes inclusion and discourages racism and ignorance. But I also posit that when enjoying a cultural object, it is important to understand the concept of authenticity in the context of modernity. The authenticity that so many people strive for can never be attained because in the global food network,

commodities lose what Walter Benjamin would call their cultural “aura” (1936). And as I will show in the following chapters, the rising popularity of green tea in the global food network clearly proves this.

In the next chapter, I illustrate the moment when green tea first gained significance as an icon and as a consumption object. As soon as it was transported from China, it became enmeshed into the cultural frame of nation work and the development of a national Japanese identity. Through the tradition of Japanese tea ceremonies, it became transferred from one generation to the next and attained timelessness. However, in my third chapter, we see the dilution of green tea culture in modern Japanese society. In the age of mechanical production, consumers care more about convenience than quality and tradition. This is only exacerbated in other countries as the idea of authenticity sustains false consciousness. As I reveal in my fourth chapter, globalization paradoxically provokes desire for authenticity while also making it impossible to truly attain it. And in the fifth chapter, we can see the consequences of mass production on developing countries.

These issues are important and timely because with the rise of globalization, people have also conceived the idea of a global culture that may result from the homogenization of various cultures. And with the commodification of different cultural objects, this theory may not be so wrong. In fact, as consumers forget the cultural context of a commodity, one may even suggest that the resulting global culture is acultural. But does this form of globalization promote equality? Or does it only encourage racist appropriations? This is my thesis. The crowning argument that I illustrate through the globalization of green tea.

## **2. *Sado*: the Japanese tradition of tea preparation as a class culture**

*Japan's national identity: the influence of Sado's (茶道) religious and aesthetic philosophy*

In today's world, when one investigates on *matcha*, it is always undeniably associated with the ancient tradition of Japanese tea ceremony. In fact, the custom, or *sado*--as the tea ceremony is called--is one of the most popular forms of entertainment that the Japanese use to introduce foreigners to their cultural values. Many Japanese political figures have welcomed foreign heads of state with the traditional preparation and offering of tea. *Sado* has even been featured in several World Expos throughout history (Surak 2013:86). This is because while green tea originated in China, it became the primary subject in *sado*, a distinctive ritual for the Japanese people, which helps define their national identity through its philosophical and aesthetic ideals.

Such customs are important for societies because a representative culture is what binds individuals together and helps them build a sense of nationalism. "...Studies have shown how myths, symbols, customs, memories, and beliefs that more or less loosely bind members of an ethnic community together have provided raw material for nationalists to work into representative cultures, which then have been used to establish the identity and uniqueness of the nation as the legitimate



grounds of its political sovereignty” (Surak 2013:2). This distinction of cultivating an identity creates a divide between “us” and “them” which makes “us” unique. What begins as a common ritual eventually develops into a representation, a cultural act that expresses a common identity and creates a sense of belonging in a certain group.

Japan’s maturation into a nation-state first began when Commodore Matthew C. Perry forcefully opened Japan to foreign trade in 1852. At the sight of Perry rolling into the port with his “black ships”, symbolizing Western superiority in technology, the urgent need to modernize took root in Japanese minds and a cultural upheaval took place as people abandoned old customs for progress (Okakura 1964). Many threw away their kimonos, their swords, and traditional family lineages adopting Western garb and studying Western philosophy instead. But amidst this transformation, there also developed a national consciousness, an inherent desire to battle against Westernization and preserve a sense of Japaneseness.

Kristin Surak states that this need to prove one’s Japanese identity manifested itself in *sado*. In fact, this custom reached a pivotal moment in the Western world’s consciousness when Kakuzo Okakura, a Japanese polymath, began a literary discourse in 1906 over the significance of tea in his work, *The Book of Tea*. While green tea had always been an important part of Japanese culture, Okakura’s treatise inspired other intellectuals to define a national consciousness, a national “we” based on the practice by describing its cultural synthesis of traditional arts and national etiquette. Such discourse helped establish *sado* as a legitimized custom

that wasn't just a deed but had cultural significance that could be explored and described in words. By calling this a nationalist act, it became one.

On the other hand, while almost every Japanese person in today's society has practiced the ritual at one point in their lives, the tradition of *sado* is remote from most peoples' daily existence because it is accepted as a spiritual sacred rite and therefore must be inaccessible to the common man. It is a practice that requires a lot of training because every symbolic gesture, every tool, even the clothes of the participants and the space itself expresses Zen Buddhist ideals on reaching Enlightenment (J. Anderson 1991:24). In fact, it is for this very objective of cultivating the mind for Enlightenment that *sado*, or "the way of tea" became the official term for the custom.

In the end, this religious belief had materialized into a tangible symbol that could be practiced and repeated. As Emile Durkheim explains in *The Elementary Forms of Life*, religion inherently requires expression of worship in the form of rituals (1912). And in turn, when a religion such as Zen Buddhism becomes widely practiced in a nation for many years, it becomes an art woven into the very fabric of the society's national culture. Regardless of whether they practice it or not, this lasting custom has bound the people under one identity and has established a way in which they can express their group's ideals. Even if some of the original motivations for tea preparation have become obscured, the space, objects and performance of the Japanese tea ceremony still upholds the values prevalent in Japan's national personality.

One of these characteristics is the Japanese general tendency towards introspection and mutual respect. In a collectivist society such as Japan's, it is important to belong to a group. "Group identity is strong and there is a definite sense of who is inside and outside a particular group." (J. Anderson 1991:219) In turn, the conforming group is often favored over individual attention. "There is an emphasis on conformity within the group and individuals are discouraged from displaying expertise that is not commensurate with that of the group as a whole." (J. Anderson 1991:219) As a result, the Japanese have come to value cleanliness and a seemingly excessive mindfulness of others in their lives. However, instead of making society more collaborative in nature, this has caused many individuals to interiorize many of their own thoughts. While belonging to a group is important, this self-effacement of the individual has also led people to delve inwards and paradoxically grow more isolated from the group.

This is especially reflected in the slow and deliberate movements of each gesture in *sado* as the person preparing the tea silently offers the finished product to his or her guest. There is no dialogue, no excessive movement as the preparer wipes the cup and bowing, presents it to the receiver. While the initial purpose of the custom is to demonstrate respect, there is also a distance between the giver and the receiver caused by the formality of this exchange. In the end, both sides seem to be experiencing their relationship to the tea rather than to each other.

Meanwhile, by celebrating introspection and respect for others, *sado* invites the participants to contemplate on the aesthetic beauty and balance of such a simple custom. According to Jennifer L. Anderson, while many tea masters have presented

varying interpretations of Zen through the different evolutions of *sado*, Shuko Murata (1422-1502) developed an important style of aesthetic sensitivity called *wabi*, which focused on the simplicity of Japanese tea ceremonies (1991:29). In fact, simplicity is one of the most important characteristics of the Japanese tea ritual. By emphasizing the muted beauty of unadorned tools, clothes, decorations, and space, the *wabi* aesthetic attempts to emphasize details and heighten contemplative awareness of the relationship between people and objects.

Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591), known as the most important tea master in Japanese history, builds on this idea of simplicity by emphasizing its sense of humility and artistic integrity (J. Anderson 1991:34). This in turn suggests the importance of experience rather than the objects themselves. “Zen adepts theoretically reject the mediation of esoteric symbols, relying instead on direct experience.” (J. Anderson 1991:55) For Rikyu, the tools and décor are merely cultural vessels for creating and transmitting a setting, an ephemeral moment that is to be enjoyed by the body.

This correlation between *sado* rituals and collective personality depicts the custom’s important role in Japan’s sense of nationalism. As Okakura described in *The Book of Tea*, not only is the Japanese tea ceremony a cultural symbol representing an identity, but also through its practice, one is able to express and develop truly Japanese values. “...It is not Japanese culture that generates tea, but tea that generates Japanese culture.” (Surak 2013:82) In fact, Okakura goes on to state that “Teaism” defines the very essence of Japanese life.

The Philosophy of Tea is not mere aestheticism in the ordinary acceptance of the term, for it expresses conjointly with ethics and religion our whole point of view

about man and nature. It is hygiene, for it enforces cleanliness; it is economics, for it shows comfort in simplicity rather than in the complex and costly; it is moral geometry, in as much as it defines our sense of proportion to the universe. It represents the true spirit of Eastern democracy by making all its votaries aristocrats in taste.” (Okakura 1964:1)

Through this perspective, one sees the inseparable relationship between *sado*, green tea itself, and the Japanese people. Since its introduction from China, green tea has turned into a cultural symbol that reaffirms Japanese identity time and time again. It’s significant past ensures its survival in the future.

In fact, in the words of Benedict Anderson, this kind of custom creates an “imagined community” which relies on the cultural symbol’s longevity (2006). After all, Anderson argues that nationalism by nature promises a timeless sense of solidarity with a lineage based both in the past and into the future. There must be an imagined sense of continuity and an assumption that one’s beliefs will be inherited and preserved by the community. “If nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical’, the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and still more important, glide into a limitless future.” (B. Anderson 2006:11) However, as nations evolve, so do their culture. What would happen if *sado* were forgotten in today’s society? Can it be replaced by new cultural symbols? Could Japan still retain the same sense of nationalism without *sado*? Such speculation will be addressed later when green tea leaves the context of the tea ceremony.

## *Gender Discrimination and Social Stratification in Modern*

### *Practices*

Over time, people have argued that the tradition of tea preparation has continued to encourage social stratification. After all, since its arrival from China, the preparation of green tea had been primarily practiced by certain elite classes such as the aristocracy and wealthy merchants as an expression of hierarchical distinction (J. Anderson 1991). In addition, it is important to note that while many people believe that *matcha* and green tea can be used interchangeably, *matcha* is in fact *a type* of green tea that is more expensive and higher grade than the average green tea label. As a result, its exclusive use in Japanese tea ceremonies also suggests an elite culture only navigable to those with expendable wealth. Today, many people in the upper classes still believe that *sado* is an art, a cultural capital that should be cultivated for its refinement and its prestige for the family name. They attend expensive classes and buy the traditional *kimonos* and unique tools for tea preparation. “Symbolic capital, especially the prestige and honor of the family name is also a key criterion in defining class” (Chiba 2011:88).

Perhaps it is for this reason that *sado* is sometimes considered a luxury. In an attempt to remain faithful to the customs, one must have the means to attain the tools for the ritual. And the more authentic the tools are, the more expensive and the higher the acclaim the owners receive for their high status. “Practitioners continually display their objectified forms of cultural capital and use them as tools to differentiate themselves from other practitioners” (Chiba 2011:79). In this way, one can observe the distinctions of classes. Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist known for his treatise on French culture in the 60s, would suggest that the ceremony is a form of “symbolic power” that preserves the social hierarchy (Surak

2011:176). By possessing cultural capital, the upper classes assume dominance over others.

On the other hand, in modern Japan, this practice has also been extended to middle-class non-working women who are attracted to its promise of teaching proper etiquette, manners and a certain feminine gracefulness. Attaining the skills of tea preparation is desirable because it elevates those that have been deemed qualified from the rest and gives this person a more respectable reputation. “Thus, in learning chado women are taught all the traditional arts and as a result, are perceived by other Japanese (who may or may not study chado) as intelligent, cultured, talented, and worthy of esteem.” (Mori 1991:94) In this way, middle-class women can seemingly attain perceived social mobility and gain access to a ritual associated with the higher class.

But why did *sado* spread to this demographic when it used to be primarily practiced by male Buddhist monks and the upper class? During the Tokugawa period, *sado* was practiced among the elite and it was only considered as a ritual, which facilitated class distinction. This changed during the Meiji Regime, after Japan opened its doors to westernization, when Japanese girls’ education became one of the systems through which the government attempted to preserve its sense of nationalism (Surak 2013:73). Suddenly, *sado* became one of the important national rituals that would help preserve Japaneseness.

Featuring different *sado* etiquettes in public school textbooks, the Japanese government specifically focused on girls because Minister Kabayama Sukenori believed that as future house makers, women were responsible for building the

foundations of the nation, and therefore it was their duty to “nourish a warm and chaste character and the most beautiful and elevated temperament” (Surak 2013:74). On the other hand, the tea ceremony only appeared briefly in boys’ textbooks as a recreational hobby. This was because with the rise of industrial society, all men were expected to work. They no longer had time for aesthetic pursuits. Thus began the nationalization of *sado* as a feminine culture and its rise as an integrated part of Japanese identity. “The tea ceremony was not simply a flat symbol, but a lived practice, with bodies conveying its national dissemination” (Surak 2013:171).

Some have argued that this has led to women empowerment because while the practice of ritual does not enable Japanese women to acquire economic or political power, it gives them an opportunity to influence and participate in the transmission of Japanese culture. “Although seemingly only a means for subjugating and training women for subordinate roles, chado is also a provider of a place where women are in control of their lives.” (Mori 1991:86) For example, in Kaeko Chiba’s ethnographic interviews with women practicing *sado*, many women affirmed that practicing the custom empowered them because while many of them had less education than their husbands, they felt more cultured (Chiba 2011:112). They believed that by learning the art of an important national heritage, they were closing the education gap between them and their male counterparts.

On the other hand, despite the fact that the tradition is predominantly practiced by women, the *iemoto* or family foundation which has appropriated the entire culture of *sado* in Japan, is completely headed by men (Mori 1991:87). They



are the ones who give permission for tea ceremonies to be taught. They are the ones who authorize every tea preparation tool to be used. Their control over the diffusion and preservation of *sado* is strict. “Within the structure of the Urasenke iemoto system, women still hold lower positions, and their ability to devote all of their energies to chado is doubted, as the roles of wife and mother are expected to compete with dedication to the art.” (Mori 1991:96) While women are allowed to become instructors, they cannot hold high positions in this controlled family legacy.

Such traditions have not been contested because many accept that it has always been the custom and to change the structure, would be to taint its authenticity. It is the same reason that men are the only ones allowed to play the customary instruments in traditional *matsuri* festivals, that women are not allowed to step foot on the floats made for the parades. While Japanese men are allowed to roam freely between cultural practices and the labor force, women generally seem to be designated to lower positions in both aspects and once they are married, their prospects are narrowed even further. In the end, if women’s choices after marriage are to either be a house maker or to be a “cultured” house maker, it is evident that the current tradition of *sado* does not reduce gender inequalities.

This division between feminine and masculine activities can also be observed in the rest of society. As rising Japanese feminists demanding gender equality have started to hold influence, Japanese society has slowly begun to evolve in both the labor force and in education. More women now have attained higher education and work despite the fact that they still cannot hold higher positions in companies (“Holding back” 2014). However, this idea of equality differs from American

feminism in that Japanese women still strive to retain their “feminineness” by separating themselves from men.

For example, in subway cars, the American idea of equality would be for men and women to sit side by side without any discrimination. However, women in Japan have demanded distinction by claiming that they had a right to reserve “women only” seats to protect themselves from sexual harassment. Such positive discrimination is perhaps the reason why *sado* is considered a tool for female empowerment. By claiming the culture as their own, many middle and upper class women have attempted to elevate the social positions of women in respect to their male counterparts. “Although Japanese society is still a world divide between men and women, with men predominantly active in the public sphere, women have used to [their] advantage the places open to them, such as chado, where they are able to pursue individual goals; exercise limited control and choice; gain skills training, and self-confidence; and somewhat influence the course of their lives and the lives of those with whom they come into contact.” (Mori 1991:96)

In the end, when analyzing the way Japan has addressed its gender gap, it is important to consider the cultural factors which have shaped the Japanese conception of equality. Their values are different from those of the West in that the traditional roles are still widely accepted today. To belittle these values is to disregard the complicated fabric of a nation’s history in favor of Western ideology. And it is perhaps for this reason that both Chiba and Mori have adopted more conservative views on women empowerment in their ethnographic studies by focusing on the women’s individual sense of fulfillment. From an outsider’s

perspective, many would not view women's involvement in *sado* as a sufficient step towards achieving gender equality because despite their majority in the field, they still cannot hold the highest positions in the institution due to antiquated traditions of family inheritance. However, the practice of this ritual has also helped generate a sense of female solidarity which should not be overlooked.

As expected, this desire to practice a culture is not salient among every Japanese person. In today's modern era, less people have been exposed to the tradition, especially in progressive metropolitan cities such as Tokyo. Some Japanese people view the custom as "too strict", "too exclusionary", or "too pretentious" because of its association with the upper classes and its rigidity in terms of manners (J. Anderson 1991:222). With the deterioration of *keigo*, or polite language with every new generation, one also observes the breakdown of social values. In an effort to maintain its position in global competition, Japan has continued to slowly evolve thus neglecting to sufficiently teach the new generation its cultural heritage. Despite Kyoto's attempts to preserve the authenticity of *sado* and its mainstream presence through the media, the traditional values and detailed practice has become more and more obscured due to Western influence.

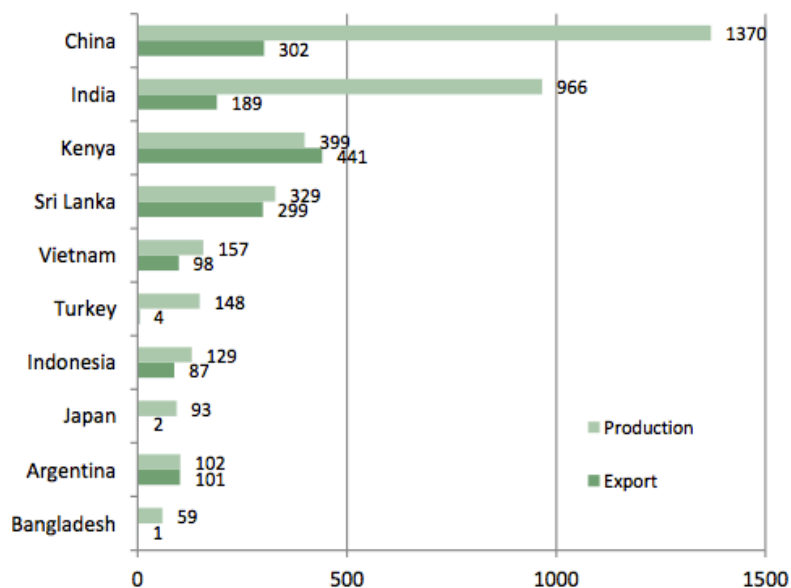
Yet when one asks about *matcha* today, Japanese people still proudly associate it to their national identity and it continues to remain in the media because *sado's* "...cultural synthesis of national architecture, ceramics, cuisine, costume, and other arts..." has become so enmeshed in national culture by the institution of *iemoto* (Surak 2013:186). *Sado's* value as a symbolic capital has continued to sustain the importance of green tea as a symbol itself. In fact, unlike

Japanese incense, which now occupies a more reclusive section of culture in people's minds, *sado* has established itself as one of the most important national rituals to preserve because of the evolution of green tea. "As extraordinary versions of the ordinary, the spaces, objects and gestures of which the ritual is composed offer a shifting balance between the exotic and the mundane that has preserved its aura in the fraught move from nation-building to nation-maintenance" (Surak 2013:186). But as green tea continues to grow as a global commodity, its association with Japanese identity may become more and more questionable.

### *Japanese Green Tea vs. Chinese Green Tea*

While green tea has always been associated with its cultural ties to Japan, today's market shows that Japan in fact exports less than two percent of the green tea in the world market.

(Source: Groosman 2011:6)



**Figure 5** Estimated Production and Export values 2010 in metric tons of top 10 countries  
Source: ITC 2010

So why do many consumers associate green tea with Japanese culture more than Chinese culture? For one, the Japanese tea ritual is more well-known than its Chinese predecessor, *Cha'an*. Since Eichu, a Japanese monk, brought green tea from China in A.D. 804, the Japanese had continued to further develop the Chinese tea preparation ritual so that it became one synthesized art under the banner of nationalism (J. Anderson 1991). "Tea with us became more than an idealization of the form of drinking; it is a religion of the art of life." (Okakura 1964:17)

In effect, Jennifer Anderson argues that while the Chinese tea ritual continued to serve a united purpose of expressing religious philosophies, it was Japan that truly integrated it into its cultural fabric. "But, even though the process of synthesizing Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist cognitive systems through tea ritual had begun, [Chinese] practitioners had yet to address the problem of salvation or use tea ritual as an effective vehicle for transforming their outlook on life." (J. Anderson 1991:22) For the Japanese, tea was not just another ritual; it also helped define their entire lifestyle. Therefore, as Okakura's *The Book of Tea* illustrates, whenever they began to lose a sense of national identity, they always looked to tea to remind themselves and others of their Japaneseness (1964). When the West began to expand its reach in Japan, green tea and the ritual of preparing it helped preserve a sense of solidarity. In other words, one can attribute green tea's prominence in the global consciousness to Japan's constant reaffirmations of their nationalism.

Nevertheless, it is important to not overlook the origin of *sado* and green tea in China. The Japanese cannot deny that their cultural foundation was heavily

influenced by Chinese culture and philosophy. Through travel to China, many Japanese intellectuals transported knowledge and physical objects back to their home where they were adopted and reshaped to fit their values. “Instead of conquering armies, merchants and traveling monks - and eventually Japanese students who studied in China - were the most important agents by which elements of Chinese culture were transmitted.” (Stearns 2000)

Interestingly enough, this transportation was viewed as a threat to the preservation of Japanese culture. Instead of adopting the perspective of Japanese appropriating Chinese ideals, many scholars see Chinese influence on the rest of Asia as an oppressive force which the Japanese thwarted through political independence. “Because the Japanese remained politically independent from China, their rulers could convincingly argue that the adoption of Chinese ways was voluntary and carefully controlled.” (Stearns 2000) In turn, the transmission of knowledge was called “selective borrowing”, which further suggests that the transportation of the tea and its ritual were not a form of appropriation (Stearns 2000). This is because “appropriation” proposes the idea that China was somehow marginalized in this process, which was not the case.

“...In the early days of tea history, the Japanese were intrigued by the splendid products of Chinese civilization but also vaguely threatened by the potential loss of cultural identity their adoption represented. The Japanese responded by integrating attractive features of the resultant synthesis as their own. They did this so successfully that one such amalgamation, tea ritual, became a symbol of ‘Japanese’ culture recognized all over the world.” (J. Anderson 1991:224)

Meanwhile, if one were to ask the average consumer to compare and contrast Japanese green tea from Chinese green tea, most people would not know how to proceed. In fact, the amateur observer would probably not even realize that there is

a difference. However, China's green tea omits a significant step in the processing system which prevents oxidization. Because Japan's processors steam the tea rather than firing it in a pan like China, its green tea remains fresher for longer, giving it a grassier more bitter taste (Becki 2013). In addition, this system gives Chinese green tea a more yellowish hue compared to Japanese tea's vibrant green color. Nevertheless, many consumers remain indifferent to the distinctions, assuming that green tea is the same regardless of its origin.

### **3. Bottled Tea, Instant Tea: the fast food movement and its consequences**

#### *Mechanical Production: Accessibility and the Disintegration of Culture*

In Japan, it is almost impossible to walk the streets in a city without encountering at least one vending machine. In fact, vending machines selling bottled drinks and cigarettes are so prolific, that it almost blends into the landscape. According to the Japan National Tourism Organization, there are currently 5.52 million vending machines nationwide that accumulate annual sales of almost 6.95 trillion yen. Not only do these machines sell drinks and cigarettes, but they also those which sell candy and ice cream, magazines, emergency towels and underwear, flowers, instant noodles, the list goes on and on.

Since the first vending machine was introduced in 1888 selling cigarettes, numbers have grown so that Japan now holds the record for most vending machines in ratio to the country's total land area (JNTO). But why Japan? According to Robert Parry, this popularity can be attributed to Japan's considerably low crime rate, high land prices, and high labor costs (Parry 1998:124). Not only do vending machines rarely get vandalized, but because vending machines produce more revenue per square meter of land than a retail store, they are more profitable. This



form of mechanical mass production allows beverage corporations to accurately calculate sales without having to account for human errors. Thus the distribution method is advantageous precisely because it is more calculable.

Meanwhile, vending machines offer easier accessibility with less hassle of dealing with a store clerk. As new adaptations emerge enabling greater dispersion, consumers gain more and more incentive to purchase these fast and easy products.

Canned coffee, a product unique to Japan, provides a good example. Sales of cold drinks, the mainstay of vending machines in Japan's sweltering summer heat, not surprisingly sag in winter. However in 1969, the UCC company produced coffee in a can that could be sold either hot or cold. This technological breakthrough freed the coffee machines from the need for water supply. The idea quickly caught on with the public, as well as with UCC's competitors. The innovation helped triple the number of machines in five years, with a sixfold increase in fifteen years" (Parry 1998:125)

This example of the canned coffee innovation demonstrates the Japanese beverage corporations' investment on pre-prepared drinks while also exhibiting their ability to control the production and distribution of their commodity. What's more, by skipping the whole process of having a barista brew the coffee in front of the customer, the customers can now significantly reduce their waiting time to however long it takes for the drink to be dispensed from the shelf, and then enjoy it on the go. Talk about control and efficiency.

Moreover, another advantage to vending machines is their reliability. Since many of the drinks have recognizable brands and uniform prices, the customers can always expect to get exactly what they want. Everything is predictable and as a result, everything is also simplified. "[Predictability] involves an emphasis on, for example, discipline, systematization, and routine so that things are the same from one time or place to another." (Ritzer 2004:105) However, in a system where the

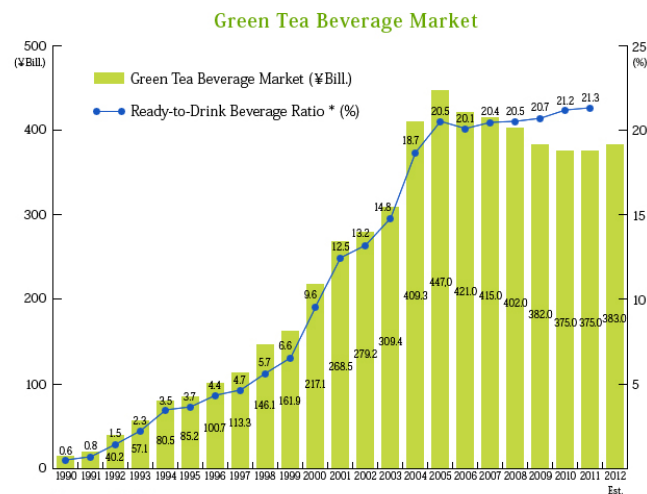
mode of production is completely prescribed, there is no room for innovation or uniqueness. Every time one buys a regular coke in the U.S., one always expects the same taste, a reproduction of the same experience. "In the process, the human craving for new and diverse experiences is being limited, if not progressively destroyed. It is being supplanted by the desire for uniformity and predictability." (Ritzer 2004:147)

In the end, all of these characteristics contribute to the phenomenon called the McDonaldization of society, coined by sociologist George Ritzer. As consumers continue to seek efficiency, production will become increasingly rationalized, de-skilled, and dehumanized (Ritzer 2004:27). Not only will the workers become increasingly alienated from the production process, but consumers will also become more alienated from their purchased product. What was used to prepare the drink in these pre-packaged bottles? How were they made? What are its true contents? Despite all of these concerning questions, the public has seemingly been willing to surrender the quality and knowledge over what they consume in exchange for efficiency and reliability.

As a result, Japanese culture is becoming diluted. Because of Japan's constant desire for progress, many of the old traditions are forgotten and society now sustains a culture that predominantly revolves around consumerism. In fact, even green tea has been commodified by the bottled beverage industry. In 2011, according to a study conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 46 percent of Japan's entire tea market consisted of sales for bottled tea (Akiyama and Aoyama 2013). Initially, green tea was not very popular in

canned and bottled forms because it has always been served complimentary in many Japanese restaurants and consumers did not want to pay for something that they usually receive for free. In addition, many bottled drinks could not prevent oxidation when the drinks were hot, which considerably shortened its shelf life.

However, Ito En Ltd., the leading Japanese beverage manufacturer for ready-to-drink green tea, saw a money-making opportunity in tea so that in addition to adding Vitamin C which slows down oxidation, designed a five-layer bottle which contains an oxygen-absorbing nylon sheet between the layers (Akiyama and Aoyama 2013). With this innovation in tow, under the vanguard of the Oi Ocha brand, Ito En took green tea to the market in 1996 and was met with much success. In the graph below, one can observe the rising sales of Ito En's canned and bottled green tea beverage ratio which has continued to rise and make up over 20% of all green tea consumption in Japan (Ito En, Ltd.)



\* The ready-to-drink beverage ratio for green tea is the share (%) in total green tea consumption (ready-to-drink and brewed from leaves) occupied by ready-to-drink (canned or bottled) green tea.

$$\text{Ready-to-Drink Beverage Ratio} = \frac{\text{Ready-to-Drink Volume (kl)}}{\text{Ready-to-Drink Volume (kl)} + \text{Leaf Volume (kl)}} \times 100$$

What's more, "Market researcher Inryou Souken reported that the best-selling drink in plastic bottles was green tea, which racked up annual sales of 5.1 billion 500-mililiter units, while black tea and oolong tea moved 2.8 billion and 1.7 billion units respectively." (Akiyama and Aoyama 2013)

Meanwhile, corporations such as Coca Cola Japan know that despite the consumers' alienation from the production of tea, the bottled tea industry would become even more profitable if they seemingly maintained its quality (Akiyama and Aoyama 2013). After all, from the consumers' perspective, the ideal product would be both efficient and high grade. As a result, Coca Cola Japan has worked on enhancing their tea's *nigori*, or turbidity, which is often considered to create a richer taste and is associated with higher caliber tea. By partnering with Kanbayashi Shunsho Honten, a Kyoto-based manufacturer that has been running for 450 years, Coca Cola introduced its Ayataka brand tea made with fine green tea powder in 2007 (Akiyama and Aoyama 2013). Because of its success, many other companies have also joined the bandwagon so that these ready-made beverages still manage to retain some sense of quality.

In this age of mass mechanical production, it is interesting to consider the manipulations large corporations have made in order to increase sales. The taste that used to be produced naturally through cultural practices has now been reproduced and perfected to a science by highly bureaucratized large corporations. However, even this does not account for the variability, the unique experiences one attains from preparing one's own tea. Regardless, this resemblance of quality and authenticity has helped convince many to purchase what already promises both

efficiency and security. But as soon as green tea entered the system of mass production, it had become just another commodity, simply a green leaf removed from its cultural context. One could put a label, an image of a traditional woman in the middle of a *sado* ritual on the advertisement, but the rationalization of green tea has rendered it superficial. Therefore, by extension, one can suggest that the consumerist culture facilitated by neoliberal capitalism has inevitably diluted traditional nationalist culture.

## 4. Raising cultural consciousness? Entrance into the global food network

### *Physical modes of entry*

#### *Cafés: selling the experience*

Even before Starbucks capitalized the concept, cafés have been the principal establishments for the many consumers in search of a prepared beverage and a place of repose. According to Ray Oldenburg, an urban sociologist from the 80s, cafés are popular because people often search for a “third space” where they can escape from the social roles that being at home (the first space) and being at work (the second space) require (2013). With their leisurely atmospheres and their sense of public anonymity, cafés allow the consumers to catch a break, to connect with the community and friends, and sometimes even start cultural revolutions all while enjoying a cup of coffee or tea.

However, while small cafés continue to stay in business, large corporations such as Starbucks, the Coffee Bean, and Peet’s Coffee and Tea have established themselves at the forefront of the café industry and continue to carry the most influence on the global market. This is because with their world-renowned international brand strategy, these corporations have been able to expand their branches to many corners of the world. As of March 2014, Starbucks, the leading

corporation in this race, has more than 20,000 stores in 65 countries (Starbucks 2015).

While the café space is an important attraction to consumers, the choices for drinks are also attractive as every menu boasts different coffee beans and teas imported from exotic countries. In fact, stores seem to place great emphasis on the fact that many of the ingredients used to make these beverages have been imported. For example, the Coffee Bean proclaims that its chocolate is from Denmark and the coffee itself is produced in Colombia (Coffee Bean 2015). This kind of promotion is popular because consumers seek authenticity. They often assume that the authenticity of a product will also guarantee its quality.

One of the most prominent international appearances of green tea was when it entered the Starbucks menu in the form of a green tea latte. Suddenly, *matcha*, which had originally been served in traditional *sado* settings, was now a mainstream flavor. And while its popularity had been growing throughout Asian countries in the form of green tea ice cream, chocolates, and other fun foods, the powder had now entered the western world, thanks to the far-reaching influence of coffeehouse chains such as Starbucks.

In visiting Starbucks's online menu, the page dedicated to the green tea latte mentions *sado*. "The Japanese tea ceremony emphasizes the virtues of humility, restraint and simplicity, its practice governed by a set of highly ritualized actions. But this smooth and creamy matcha-based beverage can be enjoyed any way you like. So by all means, slurp away if you want to." (Starbucks 2015) Starbucks makes this reference to Japanese culture in order to make the consumers believe that the

green tea in this latte is an authentic ingredient comparable to the high quality of green tea used in Japanese tea ceremonies. By making consumers presume that Starbucks's green tea is authentic, they attempt to appeal to the consumers' desire for authenticity, while also allowing the consumer to disregard *sado's* customs.

In fact, Starbucks's very foundation is based on the idea of imitating "the Italian coffeeshop" and they have built a language around their store transforming employees into *baristas* and cup size options to *tall, grande, and vente*. "[Customers] want things that are locally made and closer to nature or to their original source, and as untainted as possible by commerce and the naked ambition to get rich" (Simon 2009:26). Starbucks knew this desire for more authentic and personal experiences and thus began its enterprise as a sincere attempt to expose North Americans to the European coffee experience.

For example, for most of its early developing years, Starbucks followed the traditional methods for preparing its drinks. "In those days, Starbucks used semiautomatic Marzoco machines, meaning that employees needed to know how to make the drinks" (Simon 2009:39). What's more, Howard Schultz, one of the corporation's founders, used to proudly report that Starbucks didn't advertise. Until 2007, Schultz never ran commercials or radio promos to advertise his brand because he was aware of the public backlash against cheap ploys that other corporations like McDonalds and Dunkin' Donuts used to manipulate consumers (Simon 2009:40). And while this did not keep him from finding subtler means to broadcast the Starbucks image, the strategy gave off the sense that the corporation was connected to customers on a more intimate level.



Meanwhile, Schultz also decorated the interior of the coffeehouses in natural hues and packaged products in brown paper to give them a more local feel. By selling pastries that weren't all perfectly shaped, the company tried to distance the image of mass-producing factories from consumers' minds. "At first not many people knew just what a scone was, but with its awkward shape and fruit filling, it looked at a glance to be healthier and more natural than an Egg McMuffin" (Simon 2009:41). Such counterculture tactics illustrated an image of rebellion against the traditional conception of large corporations which in turn helped develop a closer bond with consumers based on trust and familiarity.

However, when Starbucks went mainstream in 1992, the quality of the beverages declined as the business expanded and generated more demand. Not only did Starbucks begin to roast its beans in large factories, but it also had them pre-ground. Giving into the demand for efficiency at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the company replaced its Marzocco machines with Verismo machines which now only required knowing how to push a button (Simon 2009:46). "Really, each and every Starbucks these days operates like a mini-assembly line...It's hard to be authentic when you make products with the steely efficiency of a McDonald's franchise or a Toyota plant" (Simon 2009:47).

In addition, Starbucks receded further from its original mission for authenticity when it began introducing blended drinks. While many people like the taste of pure coffee, there is also a sizeable portion of the population that does not. And in order to appeal to this other population, Starbucks began to adopt mixed beverages that dilute the coffee with milk and sugar. The green tea latte has also

faced the same fate. While it still retains a very faint bitterness, it is almost completely overpowered by the sweet taste of sugar and milk. The dilution of these commodities demonstrates America's general tendency to prefer sweeter flavors. This also benefits large companies because the overpowering sweetness can mask the declining quality of the coffee or tea. Through the literal dilution of taste, one can even suggest a disregard for the authentic taste that the commodities' countries of origin have valued. By altering the taste, milk and sugar have become tools in facilitating indifference towards a commodity's authenticity. And by extension, they have helped large Western corporations dominate and appropriate a new standard for coffee and green tea.

Needless to say, despite their efforts to prove otherwise, mass production has deteriorated the quality and authenticity of coffee and other ingredients at chain coffeehouses. So why are consumers still inclined to go to Starbucks or the Coffee Bean? According to Bryant Simon, not only do these coffeehouses provide a reliable gathering third space, convenience, and familiarity but they also offer a form of individual expression in terms of status and identity making because of its emergence as an "affordable luxury" (Simon 2009:7). "It became a cultural shorthand, a way to read, and be read by, others." (Simon 2009:7) As a result, people continued to purchase the different beverages with the green mermaid logo, advertising their belonging to a specific projected group of seemingly successful, hip, people. Buying had become a form of self-expression, and a way to gain a sense of belonging into the ideal social group. It had become a tool for class distinction. And

the more people continued to consume the Starbucks experience, the more exposure and popularity green tea lattes gained as a part of the company's menu.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes staged by such large corporations, independent coffee shops have also attempted to introduce more green tea to their menus. While they distinguish themselves from bigger businesses by offering higher quality beverages, many of the cafés emulate the same dilution of culture as Starbucks. None of these businesses prepare *matcha* in the traditional way with specialized tools used in a *sado* setting. Like Starbucks, they may preserve the term *matcha* under the guise of authenticity, but many of these green tea drinks are often blended with milk and sugar to weaken the bitter taste that is often undesirable for western taste. Even Asian boba houses discard the traditional for "modern" sweetness as they advertise green tea boba milkshakes. One of these exceptions is the recent opening of the MatchaBar in Brooklyn, New York.

Founded by New York natives Max and Graham Fortgang in the fall of 2014, this new business has been endeavoring to preserve *matcha* preparation in its most close-to-authentic form while also introducing it to the modern café setting. Not only do they prepare their tea with the traditional whisk at their location, but they also offer classes encouraging customers to learn the proper methods. Establishing their own brand sourced directly from an independent family farm in Nishio, Japan, these entrepreneurs hope to "uplift and motivate" their community "with the power of matcha" in its most high-quality and authentic form (MatchaBar 2014).

In this new age when start-ups are becoming more common and counterculture is the new trend, it may be possible that this new introduction to real

cultural capital may take flight and inspire more cultural exposure. However, in this scenario, the question of cultural appropriation comes to light. Can one truly own culture? And what constitutes the boundaries where this becomes an act of racism? Perhaps in order to determine whether MatchaBar is a form of cultural appropriation, one must first understand the difference between exchange and appropriation.

According to Jarune Uwujaren, cultural appropriation occurs when the dominant Western culture attempts to possess a marginalized culture without respecting its origins while also trying to impose its own dominant culture. "One of the reasons that cultural appropriation is a hard concept to grasp for so many is that Westerners are used to pressing their own culture onto others and taking what they want in return." (Uwujaren 2013) Starbucks's green tea latte clearly illustrates a case of Western dominance over a Japanese cultural object.

On the other hand, this definition extends to the idea that one can also exercise appropriation by treating marginalized cultures as exotic pastimes to be experienced and then quickly forgotten. Does MatchaBar exoticize green tea? Unlike Starbucks's green tea lattes, the case of MatchaBar is more difficult to define. Nevertheless, the one thing that we can determine from this is that the Western consumption of other cultures is a form of privilege. "...Using someone else's cultural symbols to satisfy a personal need for self-expression is an exercise in privilege." (Uwujaren 2013) Many marginalized cultures do not have the luxury to enjoy their own culture without being stigmatized, and when they consume Western culture, it is viewed as an act of assimilation.

### *Retail tea shops*

While large corporations like The Coffee Bean and Starbucks diffuse large quantities of foreign commodities to the global market, mass marketing and the efficiency of pre-made beverages can often dilute the very authenticity the providers advertise. As a result, consumers delve elsewhere for higher quality tea. For such consumers, retail teashops such as *Teavana*, *Ito En*, and *Lupicia* are the best destinations for the real tea experience. While *Teavana* is an American brand, *Ito En* and *Lupicia* are both originally Japanese enterprises. By purchasing and preparing the drink themselves, consumers gain greater control over the quality and supposed authenticity of the tea. They are able to take it home with them and enjoy it in the comfort of their private space. Sometimes, in order to truly experience the tea, they even learn the proper way to prepare it and purchase the traditional bamboo whisk. As a result, in this way, a commodity also seemingly becomes a more authentic cultural capital.

But can a culture completely retain its original form when it has been sifted through the global market? While people know that the Ethiopians were the first people to develop the preparation techniques of Arabica coffee, not many actually replicate their elaborate ceremony or their etiquette. And even as consumers accurately execute the correct steps for preparing powdered green tea, they don't follow any of the prescribed ceremonial rituals taught in *Sado* that inspire Buddhist philosophy. Evoking the writings of Walter Benjamin, Russell Cobb argues that while we strive to retain the "aura" that the original artifact inspires, in this age of globalization where mechanical reproduction has made everything into a copy,

where everything has become “packaged”, true authenticity is unattainable. “Commodification—or the transformation of a good into a product whose value is determined by the market—is a phenomenon that destroys the artifice of authenticity, even though all cultural products have a market value” (Cobb 2014:6). As in cafés, the relationship between the provider and the consumer in a retail tea shop is too distant for any kind of cultural transaction to take place. Even if customers purchase the bamboo whisk, commodification has inevitably rendered the supposed cultural capital, almost accultural.

### *Sado Tea Houses*

In today’s world where mechanical production has degraded the authenticity of many artifacts, not only do consumers seek a commodity’s authenticity in the sense of high quality, they also sometimes search for cultural authenticity. “Ever since the advent of the age of the copy, we continue to demand cultural artifacts that—following Benjamin—occupy a unique ‘presence in time and space in the physical world’” (Cobb 2014:3). While consumers hope that simply possessing a symbol can transmit its culture, they cannot truly attempt to possess culture without interacting with it. “Since the Japaneseness in tea is objectified, seen as separate from the Japanese, it must be re-internalized through learning.” (Surak 2006:836) In the end, it is because of this search for authenticity that Japanese traditional tea houses have expanded beyond Japan and attempted to translate the Japanese symbol of nationalism in its entirety.

Various tea ceremony schools have emerged all over the world promising exposure to real Japanese culture and many who have the leisure and curiosity to

pursue these have been able to taste a hint of authenticity. But even in its most authentic setting, somewhere in *sado's* translation, there is a certain "aura" that is lost when the receiver of the culture's exposure is too brief. Most people only take a few classes for an entire ritual that takes years to perfect. And in this sense, what seems to be authentic, in fact becomes a superficial hobby.

### *Through other foods*

While many people enjoy a regular cup of tea, *matcha* has also expanded to other consumers as a flavor in foods. This adaptation of *matcha* from the traditional sphere has been crucial in its survival because it changed the perception of *matcha* from an object of the cultural past to a modern commodity. In fact, as sweet snacks such as matcha cookies, cakes, and ice cream emerged in Japan, not only did it reaffirm its status as a national symbol, it also helped the object become mainstream and in turn rendered it valuable as a commodity. Perhaps the most visible entry of *matcha* in the West is through the expansion of Japanese cuisine itself. As Japanese restaurants gain popularity across the globe, green tea has also been transported into the consumers' drinks and desserts.

However, while green tea seems to be taking off abroad, one can also observe a reverse effect where green tea is serving as a glocalization tool for exterior companies to access Japanese consumers. Many large Western manufacturers such as KitKat and Hagen Dazs have introduced popular green tea products in Japan in order to appeal to Japanese tastes. Even Krispy Kreme has introduced a *matcha* donut at its branches in Tokyo. This trend is interesting because not only does this reveal the West's appropriation of *matcha* through its control of domestic sales, it

also suggests that *matcha's* popularity has merely circulated and grown within Japan. In fact, the exposure to green tea as an option on the Starbucks menu or as a complimentary afterthought to a Japanese dinner seems too insignificant to create a rising impact on the global market. After all, it only caters to a small niche of consumers. So why is green tea awareness crossing frontiers? In the end, green tea has been gaining more attention because of its advertised health benefits.

### *Perception in the media: health benefits*

“Why go green?” asks *Women's Health Magazine*, with a picture of a triple layered ice cream cone conservatively sprinkled with what seems to be green tea powder. According to the magazine's site, because green tea does not oxidize like other teas, it retains more antioxidants called catechins which are good for one's health. In addition, green tea contains epigallocatechin-3-gallate (EGCG), which fights cancer. Therefore, the magazine recommends its readers to incorporate small amounts of the ingredient into “your everyday dishes” (Girdwain).

Over recent years, some studies such as the one published by *Harvard Health Publications* have proven that green tea lowers the risk of heart disease and stroke (Watson 2013). But there have also been many medical studies conducted which have contested the claim that green tea can help fight cancer and that it can help reduce weight (CTCA 2014). Regardless of the studies, articles continue to emerge advertising the various prolific health benefits of green tea. In fact, accuracy seems to be irrelevant to many of the writers who continue to advertise green tea's weight curbing benefits. “Whatever it is, it's good for you”, they say.



As a result, the media has seemed to create an image of green tea as a healthy green, natural, and easy way for consumers to get in shape without providing much detail. Its attraction lies in the fact that it is a natural, accessible commodity that requires little change in the consumer's lifestyle but promises better mental and physical performance (Girdwain). It appeals to many consumers' desire for a quick cure, for instant gratification. And especially with the recent rise of organic movements and food sustainability movements, people seem to be more attracted to the idea of returning to basic nature and its remedies over synthetic ones.

*Bon Appétit*, a popular culinary magazine, has also jumped on the bandwagon, featuring green tea as the new trend to follow (Bilow 2015). In an interview with the founders of MatchaBar, the Fortgang brothers observed the recent consumers' attraction towards healthier alternatives for a more sustainable lifestyle. "In the modern world, people don't want to just be successful; they want to be healthy in a sustained way." (Bilow 2015) And green tea is seen as one of the more effortless ways to keep the body healthy. But as this image of green tea as a health booster continues to grow, there is no mention of the commodity's cultural ties to Japan. Once again, one observes the American media's commodification of green tea resulting in the loss of its cultural context.

### *Migration of Bodies for Tourism*

On the other hand, despite its commodification, as the global consciousness of green tea grows, so does the interest for an authentic interaction with the commodity. For those who have the means and are enthusiastic about culinary

practices, this means traveling to the source of the commodity and experiencing the culture surrounding the object first-hand. “This is clearly tourism related to experiencing the many aspects of tea, including its history, growth, production, processing, and blending and consumption.” (Jolliffe 2007:9) But why do these consumers go to such lengths to find and perhaps possess authenticity?

According to Dean MacCannell, professor at Temple University, people search for authenticity because the structure of modern society makes solidarity difficult to maintain (1973). This in turn makes the individual feel like some kind of action is necessary for one’s position in society to be sustained. “Under modern conditions, the place of the individual in society is preserved, in part, by newly institutionalized concerns for the authenticity of his social experiences.” (MacCannell 1973:590) This is similar to the former idea of self-expression through consumption as mentioned earlier in the section about cafés. The quality of life, the development of one’s identity, is best measured by one’s ability to legitimize one’s experiences. Thus the tourists continue to migrate to different parts of the world in search of gaining “true knowledge”.

In addition, in the case of food, many base its authenticity on taste. Considering the concept of *terroir*, consumers believe that truly authentic foods would inspire the specific place in which it was grown. In fact, many people intrinsically associate foods with places because every natural element present in the food’s original setting can supposedly change the quality of taste. “Whether or not we actually talk about *terroir*, we seek connections between taste and place.” (Ferguson 2010:105) Thus tourists come to consume the commodified experience

of green tea, hoping to savor the Japanese soil itself. In the consumers search for true authenticity, migration is important because location is important.

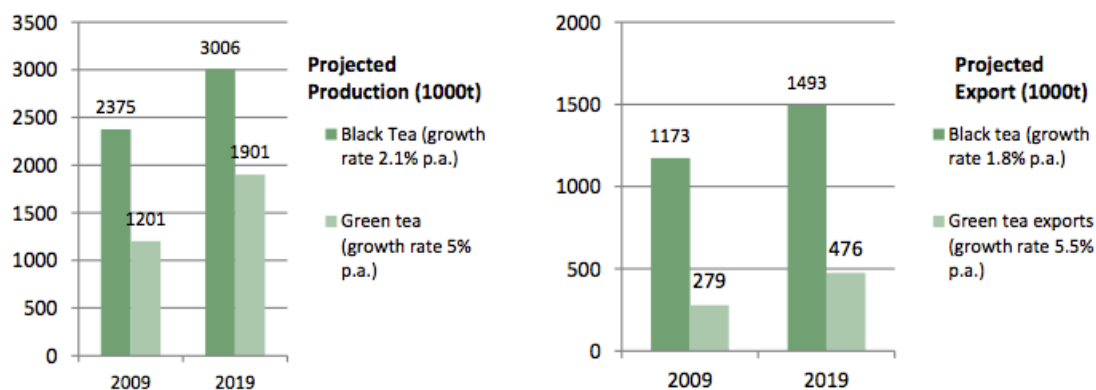
But in many cultures, the label of “tourist” has also gained a negative connotation because many of these consumers seem to mar the culture they hope to possess. “The term ‘tourist’ is increasingly used as a derisive label for someone who seems content with his obviously inauthentic experiences.” (MacCannell 1973:592) Perhaps the natives intrinsically know the impossibility of gaining true understanding. They often also assume that the consumers’ desire to experience the culture is superficial because many often seek out the “tourist traps” which only demonstrate an idealized performance and promise a “staged authenticity” (MacCannell 1973:595). In turn, for those who have traveled for this experience, this temporary dabbling is sufficient and satisfactory because by paying money to gain tour access to various places both historical and modern, they feel as if they have been permitted to peek into the backstage area where most aren’t authorized to venture.

As the tourist leaves with a greater understanding of the cultural context, one still can’t help but wonder if this isn’t once again a form of appropriation. After all, the very concept of tourism often evokes a consumption culture based on the exoticization of the foreign and a desire to possess cultural capital. By accepting staged authenticity, it is questionable whether tourists are truly respecting the culture they’re consuming.

## 5. Conflict in the Midst of Global Diffusion

### *Social Issues*

For many of the top leading tea-producing countries, the tea industry has provided millions of jobs. In fact, the Indian tea industry has given direct employment to 1,258,800 families making it the second largest provider for employment in the country's organized manufacturing sector. (Van der Wal 2008: 22) Meanwhile, in today's global tea economy, green tea holds the second largest share after black tea at 32 percent (Dufrene 2013). This market only seems to be growing as the FAO has predicted a production and export growth rate of approximately 5 percent by 2019 (Groosman 2011:5).



**Figure 4** Projected production and export values of black tea and green tea in 2019. Source: FAO 2011

This seems like good news for those working in the green tea industry because it would mean that this growing demand will most likely generate more jobs. However, many social issues are also still present thus tarnishing the very image of sustainability many marketers have advertised for this growing commodity.

For example, in many of the top tea-producing countries such as Kenya, Indonesia, and Malawi, regardless of whether they are working on a smallholder garden or a large plantation, almost none of these workers receive wages that can provide a decent standard of living for the worker and his or her family (Van der Wal 2008:28). Precariously hovering on or under the minimum wage line, many tea pickers have not accumulated enough income to send their children to secondary school, and suffer from overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions (Van der Wal 2008:29). This can be attributed to the fact that there is often an overproduction of tea which makes the commodity lose much of its value when it enters the market. “The cost of labour represents about 55 to 73% of made tea production costs (tea processing factory gate price not retail price). Picking makes up approximately 75% of these costs. Pickers' wages are therefore under pressure when market prices for tea go down.” (Van der Wal 2008:27) Despite the consistent rise of the tea industry, wages remain consistently low. As these conditions continue, we can also attribute this poverty to the exploitation of the tea workers who seem to provide few rights for the underrepresented pickers who do most of the work.

Meanwhile, since its original conception in the 60s, the Fair Trade movement has grown as a helping force to combat poverty and labor inequalities. It stands on the principals of establishing fair prices and credit, fair labor conditions, trade which is as direct as possible, and supports the growth of democratic and transparent organization (Fair Trade USA 2011:3). This movement, along with others such as the organic movement and the Rainforest Alliance, is a form of rebellion against large corporations that have continued to exploit the resources in less developed

countries. In addition, the movement hopes to encourage community development in developing countries and overall environmental sustainability. According to Fair Trade USA, “Today, Fair Trade benefits more than 1.2 million farming families in 70 developing countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America” (Fair Trade USA 2015)

Nevertheless, while there have been certain economic movements of solidarity such as the Fair Trade movement for workers’ rights in developing countries, progress is slow. “In India and elsewhere, workers in tea gardens are often isolated from mainstream society and interaction with mainstream society is very low. The low rate of literacy and deprived health status among workers always stood as major constraints in giving them access to major health, educational and development initiatives and programmes of the state government and other organisations.” (Van der Wal 2008:31) After all, while the Fair Trade movement attempts to create fair labor conditions, they cannot account for the discrimination stimulated by both racist political climates and established notions of gender hierarchies.

In Kenya there are also serious problems with discrimination. Most workers interviewed in Kenya <sup>51</sup> report that promotion and employment in tea estates are largely determined by ethnicity. The violence in Kenya at the time of the 2007 elections illustrates that this aspect can lead to serious ethnic and political tensions. The majority of the country's tea is produced in the western part of Kenya. This is the part of the country most affected by the violence. Thousands of people working in the tea industry have left the plantations following threats by local residents, who told them to leave for their ancestral homes or risk attack. At least 14 people were killed on Unilever’s plantations in the country <sup>52</sup>. Apart from political antagonism, local Kalenjins reportedly feel disadvantaged because the migrant ethnic group (Kisii) that came to pick tea live in better conditions than them <sup>53</sup>. (Van der Wal 2008:32)

Meanwhile, while men occupy the position of supervisors on plantations, the field workers are predominantly women. This has led to much exploitation that has

even escalated to sexual violence in Africa. “It should be stressed that in Africa, discrimination also often takes the form of sexual harassment. Women workers are asked for sexual favours in exchange for favours by superiors, and refusal can lead to repercussions, such as being allocated too much work or being sent to work in lonely or dangerous plucking zones.” (Van der Wal 2008:32). These horrifying demonstrations of discrimination are never mentioned in the global market. When consumers in the United States reach for a pack of teabags from a grocery store shelf, they know nothing of the product’s story.

### *Environmental Issues*

As tea production continues to grow on a massive scale, the environmental repercussions have also snowballed to the point of no return. The continuation of today’s capitalist market intrinsically relies on the accumulation of wealth. But in this system of excessive buildup, there is also an indifference to the means by which one attains capital. As a result, in this epoch of the Anthropocene, the earth is beginning to retain some long-term damage.

For example, in the tea industry, one of the biggest environmental issues is the habitat conversion of countless rural areas into tea plantations. Not only does this greatly impact the region’s biodiversity, but habitat conversion also has the potential to cause significant soil erosion. “If a forest is replaced with a tea plantation, the same surface area may lose from 20 to 160 tons of earth each year.” (Van der Wal 2008:37) Even in the attempt to provide natural healthy foods, the earth still suffers at the hands of market growth.

In addition, as mass production continues its incline in under-developed countries, the desire for cheap, speedy, productivity has overlooked energy efficiency and the brooding problem of agrochemicals in the form of pesticides and fertilizers. For example, in countries such as Kenya and Sri Lanka, producers dry the tea using firewood from nearby forests (Van der Waal 2008:37). Not only has this caused significant deforestation but it has also generated acid pollution in Sri Lanka, where high-sulphur rubber wood is burned for tea processing. Because energy costs only make up 30 percent (at factory level) of total production costs, many producers have often neglected to address this issue (Van der Wal 2008:38).

Furthermore, conforming to the common strategy of plantations, green tea is grown in a monocultural setting. This means that instead of imitating nature's diverse growth, farmers have chosen to isolate tea production so that it is susceptible to countless pests. In order to prevent crop loss, which can range from 14 to 50 percent in India, many producers have adopted indiscriminate amounts of pesticides (Van der Waal 2008:38). And while there have been global measures taken in order to re-establish pesticide management, many production companies still manage to exploit consumer ignorance.

For instance, a recent study by Greenpeace revealed that some of the top selling tea brands in China, the leading country in tea exports, have been carelessly using pesticides such as methomyl and endosulfan, both of which have been banned globally under the Stockholm Convention (Tan 2012). And while every sample tested contained at least three types of pesticide, 14 of the 18 "were found to have the kind of pesticides that may affect fertility, harm an unborn child or cause



heritable genetic damage.” (Tan 2012) Whether it’s because consumers aren’t aware or because they just don’t care, these tea companies have managed to get away with selling dangerous commodities.

Meanwhile, because plantation farming tends to use the same land for the exact same crops, farmers must often rely on fertilizer to enrich the nutrient-starved soil. But fertilizer is never a one-time solution. Its use renders the soil completely dependent on its reuse. “This all leads to a negative spiral in which increasing amounts of agrochemicals are needed in order to maintain production in inverse proportion to the decreasing soil quality.” (Van der Wal 2008:38)

In the end, studies have shown that as much as 70 percent of soil life on tea plantations has been lost compared to other nearby ecosystems due to an excessive use of agrochemicals (Van der Waal 2008:38). As the pesticides and fertilizers used to grow tea continue to corrupt nature, it becomes more difficult to agree with the media’s portrayal of green tea as a healthy and natural crop. Its health benefits seem to be canceled out by all of the dangerous pesticides used in its production.

Furthermore, when grown on large plantations, not only does the tea cease to become a plant in its natural form, it also becomes commodified so that it is almost impossible to see it as anything other than an expendable object separate from nature. As a result, one can observe that as the green tea industry continues to grow in the global markets, consumers don’t merely lose their perception of the commodity tied to a national cultural heritage. In fact, they also forget green tea’s original place in the natural world, which has then led to indifference towards the earth itself.

## *Economic Issues*

As in any large market, the tea industry's economic issues are complex and difficult to resolve. When considering the supply chain, large corporations dominate each step in the form of a very strong vertical integration. In fact, "...at the global level, 85% of global production is sold by multinationals" (Groosman 2011:1). This form of vertical monopoly encourages a deterioration of integrity because the desire for efficiency and greater profit makes these companies less inclined to practice corporate responsibility. Not only have they excluded many small-scale farmers from the competitive market, they have also caused an uneven value distribution as more of the profits are accrued downstream in the supply chain.

"Plucking and primary processing (withering, rolling, drying, grading, bulk packaging...) is carried out in producing countries, while blending, packaging and marketing, the most lucrative part of the tea trade, is mostly carried out by the tea companies in buyer countries. The largest proportion of the profits therefore do not accrue to the tea-producing countries, but are made abroad." (Van der Waal 2008:24)

In response, various counter-movements such as Fair Trade have attempted to establish a certification system that holds large corporations accountable. "Certification entails the written assurance by an independent third party certification body that the quality of the tea and the production process has been assessed, and conforms to specified requirements." (Groosman 2011:10) However, despite their best intentions, this attempt also relies on the willingness of consumers to be more socially conscious of the social injustices behind their purchases and to pay more money for the sake of those less fortunate. And even if

these consumers are willing, there has also been a lack of evidence as to whether this is actually effectively helping the right people.

An article by Phyllis Robinson criticizes Fair Trade USA's strategy in 2011 to include large-scale plantations in its purchases in order to expand its influence in the market (Hoffner 2014). When Robinson wrote his critique in 2009, 98 percent of the tea supported by Fair Trade had been grown on plantations, something which the Fair Trade Impact report failed to mention in 2011 (Robinson 2009). Robinson claims that the movement's inclusion of plantations contradicts its very mission to help small-scale farmers gain access to the global market and build a sense of community (2009). After all, plantations already have easier access to the market. They are also traditionally "undemocratic" and "anti-worker institutions" (Hoffner 2014). As a result, while the Fair Trade Federation seems to maintain its original motivations to expand sustainable systems, Fair Trade USA seems to have diverted from its supposed goals.

Therefore, when searching for systems that will keep large corporations in check, it is important to ensure that these movements remain faithful to their original purpose: helping marginalized populations gain greater access to the global market while also encouraging ethical practices that respect the earth. This does not mean that the certification approach does not work. On the contrary, other movements such as Equal Exchange and Rainforest Alliance show promise in their efforts for facilitating greater sustainability and corporate responsibility. "Certified tea is commonly defined as tea that includes the three pillars of sustainability, namely 'economic viability for farmers,' 'environmental conservation' and 'social

responsibility.” (Groosman 2011:10) But just as large corporations need to be held accountable, so do the programs that keep them in check. The public cannot remain alienated from the process of capitalism. Because in the spirit of Marx, to be alienated from the procedure, is to be alienated from the self.

## 6. Conclusion

While coffee has had an extensive history in the West, tea actually holds the global status today as the most consumed drink after water and only continues to grow in popularity. Over the past 10 years, production for tea in general has increased by 36 percent with green tea being the second most popular tea after black tea. (Dufrene 2) These statistics show that green tea will continue to be an important commodity in the global market. Therefore, if countries are to understand the effects of globalization, it is important to study these recent transports of objects and what happens to them when they cease to be a cultural tangible heritage. Globalization can cause the dilution of culture and even homogenize it. But at the same time, there is also a resistance to this in the form of cultural heterogenization as certain nations fight to preserve their identity. Consequently, the outcome is neither black nor white as tensions between the dualities seek to overpower each other in the blurring of national metaphysical frontiers (Ritzer 2007:140).

Some theorists have even argued that these tensions resolve in the birth of a new hybrid culture which follows the inevitable evolution of technological progress (Pieterse 2004). Just as certain animal species come and go, so do different cultures in the face of modernity. While some die off, others evolve and change shape. As a result, some would argue that preservation impedes innovation and is thus rightly neglected. Thus emerges a hybrid culture where chefs can explore and market

fusion cuisine. When culinary cultures are blended together, it is questionable whether or not they are able to retain their integrity in terms of authenticity. Perhaps this depends on a case by case basis, as some chefs try to preserve the authentic tastes of the cultures involved during the fusion process, and others don't. Either way, this entire argument that cultures come and go presumes that these changes are the natural course of life without even considering the involvement humans have had in its transformation. Just as we have finally begun to acknowledge our position in the age of the Anthropocene, we must also admit responsibility for the impact we have caused due to a dangerous indifference towards marginalized populations and the earth itself.

The increasing influence of the global market has exacerbated inequalities in developing countries that provide for this market and worsened environmental conditions through pesticide. In fact, one could even say that the global market is founded upon the exploitation of these impoverished people and the earth so that the whole system is redolent of post-colonial racism. In the end, the inequalities facilitated by the current system have been met with dissenting organizations such as the Fair Trade Movement. But despite its great efforts to instate fairness, it is clear that there is still room for further development and expansion not only in the literal sense, but also in the minds of the people. After all, while green tea used to be valued for its symbolic status in Japan, its integration into the global food market through cafes, retail stores, and as a flavor has stripped it of its cultural "aura" and now rendered it just as valuable as the next commodity. Despite their desire for

authenticity, consumers no longer consider the beverage in the context of *sado* so much as a health supplement.

Needless to say, with the improvement of technology, there is no denying that the global economy will continue to thrive and various cultural objects will continue to be integrated into the market. Some of the recent trends along with green tea include Levantine hummus and quinoa, which is originally from the Andean region. While these commodities have grown in popularity, its association with its country of origin has become more and more obscure. As in the case of green tea, many other foods have lost their cultural ties and as a result, diminished in value. While they used to be esteemed for their unique cultural status, their worth is now entirely based on how well they can sell in the global food market.

Therefore, it is the peoples' duty to ensure that in the new birth of a global culture, one also maintains awareness of the issues at hand. In fact, one of the benefits of globalization has been the growing potential for development of a collective consciousness on a global scale. "...The gradual emergence of a global consciousness, an awareness of the world as a single place, signals a Durkheimian collective conscience that becomes now a global consciousness." (Ritzer 2008:140) Through this awareness, we have the opportunity to cooperate and collaborate in the search for a more ethical system of exchange. Through a global understanding, we have the chance to exact more change that will improve social structures and help restore the environment. But for this to happen, we must first establish a global consciousness that can lead to global action. Every single person on this earth is accountable for the inequalities that exist. Therefore, we must dissent the

process of appropriation. For a fair world founded on mutual respect and equality, there first must be desire to achieve it. And if certain movements fail to encourage equality for all, we must also be willing to continue searching for alternatives that can better improve global markets.

Clearly, if anyone should be protesting the growing globalization movement, it's the oppressed producing countries. But in our state within the Anthropocene, are we not all oppressed to some extent? Are we not all silently exploited without our knowledge as we consume highly processed food which continues to scar the earth and deteriorate our health? On the internet, there has been a quote circulating by an unknown author which states that, "If you're not angry, you're not paying attention", and this clearly illustrates the alienated state of capitalist societies today. As Marx would state, the complex division of labor has alienated both consumers and the laborer from the mode of production, others, and the self. Not only are we oblivious to the inequalities which globalization has exacerbated within developing countries, but we are also unaware of the fact that the food we consume may contain dangerous pesticides in an effort to increase efficiency.

So what kind of outcome do we want from our global dissent? What form of change will help us coexist with the earth so that it can continue to heal and restore itself? Reform or reconstruction? According to Noam Chomsky, the best solution is for persistent reform. By constantly experimenting and practicing different principles, we can begin to envision the kind of society we'd like to live in. And I believe that we have taken the right step through the efforts of the Fair Trade movement. While the American branch has failed to remain faithful to the original



mission, this global movement among others is a great attempt at developing a fairer form of globalization because its down-up structure promises greater communication and transparency.

In the end, this movement for greater environmental accountability does not impede progress, which has so often mistakenly been associated with the growth of capitalism. While creating boundaries may slow efficiency, it will also enable us to be efficient in other ways by stopping over production and enabling social progress. If executed correctly, preservation does not necessarily lead to regression; it can actually lead to a greater quality of life for all. Therefore, if we were all able to realize our responsibility as citizens of the earth and develop a global consciousness, our dissent would finally be able to take us to a new age of restoration beyond the Anthropocene. Green tea is not just another commodity on a shelf at the grocery store. Like many other foods, it has a story. And if we are to truly liberate ourselves from the chains of inequalities, we must remember its history. For only then can we begin to question the dominant power structures that exploit the underprivileged. Only then can we truly attain progress.

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