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TEA

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Human beings consume more tea than any other substance except air and water. It is the most important medical plant on this planet and its effects have been enormous. There are several varieties of tea, but they all derive from a species of camellia (**camellia sinensis**). Green and black tea are from similar leaves but are processed in different ways. The tea bush originated in the area where India, China and Burma meet, in the hot wet mountainous regions of the Eastern Himalayas. It was originally eaten and drunk by tribal groups in this area. Over two thousand years ago it was used as a medicine and aid to concentration in China, being helped by the expansion of Buddhism. By the eighth century it was very widely drunk through most of China. In the thirteenth century it spread to Japan and by the fifteenth century had become a central part of Japanese life, particularly in the tea ceremony. During the same period it spread through central Asia. As 'brick tea' (compacted lumps) it became the most important trading object and absolute necessity in the form of 'brick tea' to the Tibetans, Mongolians and Manchurians.

Rumours of tea reached the west in the sixteenth century, but it only began to be imported in any quantity from the middle of the seventeenth century. Its importation took off from the 1720s when the direct clipper trade to China was established by the Dutch and British. While it had early success in much of north western Europe, it was in Britain that it became the central drink. By the later eighteenth century it was drunk throughout this Britain and by all social groups. It was drunk both in the home and in tea houses and gardens. As the British Empire grew it was re-exported and became the favourite drink of the white Empire, though after the Boston Tea Party (1773) when tea chests were thrown into the harbour as a protest against taxes, there was a diminished trade from Britain to the United States. India itself only took to tea drinking when it was introduced by the British in the first half of the twentieth century. The growth of tea drinking continued so that by the late twentieth century it was the main drink of the inhabitants of the three quarters of the globe who live in East Asia, the former British Empire, Russia and much of the middle east.

Tea originally grew wild. When it was domesticated it was grown as a peasant product. The manual labour was intensive and based on the family. The leaves were picked, dried, rolled and crushed. Failures to introduce the bush into the west led the Dutch (in Java) and the British (in Assam and then Sri Lanka) to experiment with tea production. By the later nineteenth century the application of industrial methods, capitalistic funding and rigid discipline had created the tea plantation system. Huge profits were made by the British and Dutch. The labourers on the tea estates suffered enormously, with horrendous conditions and very high mortality rates. Yet the system was so efficient that it undercut the Chinese production and destroyed the Chinese export trade in tea by 1900. In fact, China had already been weakened by the Opium Wars of the 1840s which had also been linked to the British desire for tea, which they had increasingly only been able to purchase by selling opium to the Chinese.

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Much of Chinese and Japanese life has been influenced by tea drinking, most famously in the aesthetics and ritual of the ornate tea ceremonies with their effects on ceramics, furniture, architecture, gardening and literature. Similarly in the west, the introduction of tea gave a great boost to the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century, in particular the development of pottery and porcelain, furniture and tableware. Through the development of tea gardens in the west, tea drinking encouraged new forms of sociality which stimulated music, literature and garden design. It also added greatly to the influence of oriental civilizations on European cultures in the eighteenth century.

Tea has altered the relations of social classes, gender relations, relations within the family. For example, it gave a new role to women as tea mistresses and encouraged family meetings over the tea. It changed the patterns of eating, altering the nature of breakfast, allowing the evening meal to be later. It encouraged the growth of clubs and social recreations outside the home. It led to the elaboration of a great deal of social ritual around the serving of tea.

The trade in tea created the first large scale global market, and the promotion of tea in the west was the first example of modern consumer marketing. It made the fortunes of Dutch and British merchants and in particular the East India Company so that, ironically, without Chinese tea it is doubtful whether the British would have absorbed India into its Empire. The extra energy supplied by tea with sugar and milk helped sustain the enormous effort needed to create the first industrial revolution in Britain between 1750 and 1850. In Asia the effects were no less great, for tea provided the energy needed for the gruelling work of intensive wet rice cultivation in China and Japan.

Tea was originally recommended for its effects on health. It is known to contain substances (polyphenols, caffeine) which kill water-borne bacteria, which supplements the fact that it encourages the boiling of water. So it has had a massive effect on dysentery, typhoid and other water borne diseases. It has recently been suggested that it also has beneficial effects on many other disease. Various cancers, heart attacks, strokes, muscular problems, tooth decay, influenza are just a few of dozens of conditions which are currently being investigated in relation to tea.

If we add up these and other effects hardly touched on here, for instance on politics and religion, it is not difficult to argue that this apparently small and insignificant plant has had more impact on human happiness and misery than any other on this planet. In turn its cultivation changed the ecology of the considerable areas of Asia, Africa and South America where it was grown.

Further Reading

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