The Role of Japan in the First English Encounters with Tea

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1. Introduction

This paper explores Japan's role in the early years of Britain's discovery of what became its national drink. Four hundred years ago, the English had a small, short-lived, presence in Japan, where tea was already an important part of life. Back in England, tea was then unknown. Most people there did not start drinking tea until the early part of the eighteenth century. How tea, an import from thousands of kilometres away, became the British national drink is a fascinating story, inextricably bound up with its worldwide empire. Both the tea, and the sugar, which was customarily added, came from trade, and increasingly, from various British colonies. Japan, of course, was never one of those, and Japan's role in this later, rapid development of the British love affair with tea was actually nothing to speak of. However, this paper argues that the connection between Japan and English merchants living in the country at the beginning of the seventeenth century is significant in the overall story of the discovery by Europeans, including the English, of tea as a hot drink. In fact, as we shall see, Japan played a more significant role than has been widely acknowledged, mainly because one of the key traders was in the capital of Japan, when, for many years it was presumed, and is *still* presumed, according to many publications, to have been in a different

country altogether. Even best-selling history books, and internet sites and books on tea have misinterpreted, or misreported, a key name, *Meaco*, an old alphabetical representation of the kanji 都, and failed to recognize that part of Japan's role in the story. This paper explains how that confusion arose and the truth of the matter.

2. The magnitude of Britain's rapid love for tea

Before going back to the time English traders first encountered tea, some acknowledgement should be made to the rapid development and impact of tea drinking in Britain later on. As the former Director of the British Museum Neil MacGregor points out, it is supremely ironic that one of the quintessential signifiers of British life "has nothing indigenous about it, but is the result of centuries of global trade and a complex imperial history" (601). The rapid growth in the British consumption of tea occurred throughout the eighteenth century, as the population also grew. During the 1700s, British traders and Britain's populace, especially in the cities of England and Scotland, went mad for tea. According to Tom Standage,

> (A)lmost nobody in Britain drank tea at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and nearly everybody did by the end of it. Official imports grew from around six tons in 1699 to eleven thousand tons a century later, and the price of a pound [0.45 kgs.] of tea at the end of the century was one-twentieth of the price at the beginning. (187-188)

The phrase "official imports" is significant, as the true import figures were higher, owing to the amount of smuggling taking place. In fact, there was so

much smuggling, at least until after the import duty was drastically cut in 1784, that the figures could be doubled. Standage notes that, "by the end of the eighteenth century there was easily enough tea coming into Britain for everyone in the country to drink one or two cups a day, no matter what their station in life" (188). Moreover, there was money to be made, by traders, smugglers, and the government (through tax) on tea.

3. Tea for good health: "By Physicians approved"

How and why did this craving for tea come about? In 1641, a book published that year all about hot drinks, the *Treatise on Warm Beer*, has no reference to tea (Griffiths 17), except in a quote from an Italian priest reporting that the people in China "drink the strained liquor of a herb called Chia hot" (Pettigrew and Richardson 13). Although Helen Saberi, without reference or evidence, claims "in England the first tea arrived in about 1645" (91), all other publications the present writer has seen put the date in the 1650s, probably in, or one or two years before, 1657, when the "first concrete evidence of British tea drinking on a commercial basis comes from the account books of Thomas Garway" (Griffiths 17). Documents show his name variously as Garway and Garraway (both Saberi, and Pettigrew and Richardson use the latter), but it is agreed that he opened a coffee house[1] in London in 1657 and sold tea, not only as a drink, but also as a leaf so customers could make tea at home. A year later, in September 1658, he placed the first advertisement for tea in a news periodical. There are two

1 Coffee had arrived in Britain a few years before tea, but did not enjoy the enormous popularity that tea subsequently did. Coffee houses were male-dominated meeting places for discussing business, as well as for refreshment. They were similar to taverns, where ale was the main drink.

noteworthy aspects to the exact wording of the advertisement: first, that it extolled the virtues of tea for health, even saying it was "approved" by doctors; and second, that it shows the English name for this new drink, let alone the spelling of it, had not yet been settled. The advertisement stated:

> That Excellent, and by all Physicians approved, *China* Drink called by the *Chineans, Tcha*, by other Nations *Tay alias Tee*, is sold at the *Sultan-ness head*, a *Cophee-house* in *Sweetings* Rents, by the Royal Exchange, *London*. (Ellis et al. 26; Pettigrew and Richardson 18)

In fact, both names for the drink, from different dialects, were used in China, and both were – and are - used outside the country by other nations. Garway, the businessman, continued to sell and promote tea, but by his own admission it was so expensive and scarce it was only used as "Regalia in high Treatments and Entertainments, and Presents made thereof to Princes and Grandees" (qtd. in Pettigrew and Richardson 18). One grandee was the famed diarist and Member of Parliament, Samuel Pepys, who is the first person in Britain credited with saying he had consumed the drink. His entry on 25 September, 1660 included the note that he "did send for a Cupp of Tee (a China drink) of which I had never drank before" (Pettigrew and Richardson 12). The other time Pepys mentioned tea in his diary, in 1667, it was to remark on his wife making tea because her apothecary said it was "good for her cold and defluxions [runny nose and eyes]" (Pettigrew and Richardson 33). This idea of tea being good for health had been even more pronounced when it was first consumed in Japan a few hundred years before.

Tea, writes Saberi, “was considered more as a health drink or medicine than a beverage” (46) when it first arrived in Japan from China, around the same time as Buddhism, in the late sixth century. Its progress throughout society was much slower than it later was in Britain. Tea was regularly drunk by monks and then by daimyo and the Japanese elite, but it did not become a drink for all social classes until the middle of the fourteenth century (Macfarlane loc. 730). At the beginning of the thirteenth century, it had been given a great boost by Sanetomo, the shogun of Japan from 1203 to 1219, who believed tea had helped cure his seriously upset stomach. According to Macfarlane, Sanetomo “became a tea devotee and helped to spread the custom of tea drinking through Japan” (loc. 723). This would not be the first time a ruler would influence people others in their choice of tea as a preferred beverage.

4. Trickle-down tea culture

Attributing the spread of tea-drinking among the Japanese to a shogun is, to some extent, matched by a similar top-down development of tea drinking in Britain. Various aristocratic women towards the end of the seventeenth century and the start of the eighteenth century are sometimes credited with being instrumental in promoting tea as a drink (see chapter 2 in Ellis et al.). The most significant story concerns a foreigner, Catherine of Braganza, a Portuguese princess. The Portuguese, along with the Dutch, had been the first to import tea to Europe in around 1610, write Pettigrew and Richardson, “from their respective trading bases in Macao on the Canton River and Bantam on the island of Java” (11), and Catherine had grown up drinking tea. By arrangement, in 1662, Catherine arrived in England to marry Charles

II. Charles had become King two years earlier, the same year Pepys tried tea for the first time. Princess Catherine's dowry was immensely valuable. It contained trading privileges with Portugal's colonies, including with traders in that small but significant port of Macao in south China; it gave Britain the Indian port of Bombay, later to develop into the East India Company's Asian headquarters; and the dowry also contained a chest of tea. At first sight this seems less important, but the effect, alongside Catherine's personal liking for tea, gave Britain "the beneficent habit of drinking tea," in the phrase of Denys Forrest (21). The story goes that when she arrived at Portsmouth in England, Catherine asked for some tea as refreshment after her journey from Portugal. As we have seen, it was not known much in England at that time, especially away from London, and it is said she "was offered a glass of ale instead" (UK Tea), ale being the most popular drink in Britain at the time.

Once on the throne, Catherine made tea fashionable among high society. The author Helen Simpson explains it "became all the rage at court, taken green without milk or sugar, from handless Chinese bowls of blue and white porcelain, hot water poured onto the leaves in oriental style from red-brown stoneware pots" (12). Ellis and others suggest Catherine's role in popularising tea among the aristocracy has been overblown by royal hagiography (38), but even they concede that in "the elite female court culture" surrounding the King and Queen in the 1660s, "tea was an exotic and expensive luxury whose consumption was conspicuously about display and spectacle, both of tea and its paraphernalia" (31). Then in the early years of the 1700s, as tea continued to be popular among the upper classes, imports increased, and prices fell enough for it to be affordable to an

increasing proportion of the population.

5. The English factory: Trading in "rubbish"

The first English person known to have reached Japan was a man called William Adams in May, 1600. He had been born in the same year as another William, Shakespeare, but near the River Medway in Kent rather than the Avon of Warwickshire. The dockyards of Chatham, then London, and then Rotterdam in Holland, became Adams' training ground in the world of ships and naval navigation. After an arduous journey, he arrived in Kyushu as the pilot (the navigator) of a Dutch ship named *Liefde* (Charity), most of whose crew had already died on the way. Adams never returned to England, at first forbidden, then by choice, in the remaining twenty years of his life. He was named Miura Anjin (after the area in Kanagawa where he was given an estate, and the word for 'pilot') by the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, who appreciated his knowledge of ships. The connection of Adams to the story of tea and the English is that he facilitated their trading conditions granted by Japan's rulers, and was employed by the East India Company when it set up shop in Japan. The Japan-based scholar Derek Masarella argues that Adams's "life was neither unique nor his position in Japan quite as influential as he himself liked to suggest or as others have subsequently made out" (loc. 1748-1755). However, his presence and success in Japan were certainly among the reasons the East India Company, which had been founded in London and officially given the go-ahead in 1600 by Queen Elizabeth I, decided to set up a trading post in the country. He was the first person sought by John Saris, the captain of the English ship the *Clove*, when he and his crew finally arrived in Japan in early 1613 after a two-year journey (Keay

56). Adams helped Saris get an audience with Ieyasu, and then his son Hidetada, to get permission in the form of a *shuinjō,* for the East India Company, to trade in, and from, Japan.

By the time the English arrived, the Dutch East India Company had been operating for several years, based on the north Kyushu island of Hirado, while traders from Portugal were mainly based a little further south in Nagasaki. Kyushu also hosted most of the Jesuit missionaries from Portugal and, to a lesser extent, Spain and Italy. Adams advised Saris to set up the trading post around the sheltered bay of Uraga in Kanagawa. Uraga was near the growing city market of Edo, the stronghold of Hidetada, now shogun after his father's semi-retirement. Adams believed Kanagawa would prove more profitable than a base at the remote, western end of the country. However, Saris decided to set up the English factory, as it was called, in Hirado, alongside the Dutch. Masarella explains that the main reason was the English, like the Dutch before them, "found the local people hospitable and the Matsūra [local ruling family] had made great efforts to impress the English and make them feel welcome" (loc. 2807). Hiromi Rogers, a recent Japanese writer about Adams, has a more critical view of the actions of the local daimyo. She argues that Saris fell "into Lord Matsūra's trap," and became "intoxicated with [Matsūra's] hospitality" (214-5). Sure enough, soon after the factory was set up in December 1613, Richard Cocks, the man Saris had left in charge at Hirado, authorised the payment of a cash 'loan' to Lord Matsūra in a letter sent to Adams and another agent, Richard Wickham (Farrington, *English Factory* 123). They had travelled to Edo to establish a subfactory there when Matsūra also happened to be there paying his respects to Hidetada.

The English lasted only ten years in Japan, and for a variety of reasons the factory failed as a business venture. Anthony Farrington, the former head of the India Office Records of the British Library, explains the basic reason bluntly: "Apart from the first ship, the *Clove* in 1613, only three other English ships brought cargoes direct from London to Japan, and they can best be described as ranging from 'difficult to sell' to absolute rubbish" (Farrington and Masarella 32). Farrington points out that goods were often unsuitable and "items arrived in poor condition and deteriorated further in storage. Cocks complained frequently about cloth which was either rot or rat-eaten" (32-33). The English had too little of the good quality silk the Japanese did want, and too many cheap earthenware pots, which were sent out because East India Company directors in London mistakenly thought the Japanese wanted them. According to the factory accounts, in June 1616 there were more than two thousand pots lying around in the Hirado warehouse. The absurdity of this misjudgement was clear seven years later: "Except for a handful given away as presents," observes Farrington, "the shipment of pots was still there when the factory closed" (*Trading Places* 45).

6. Tea in Japan

One of the reasons Saris, and his employers in London thought the Japanese wanted all kinds of pots was because they knew of the custom of drinking tea. In particular, Saris had noticed the importance of the tea ceremony in Hirado. Farrington points out that the Matsūra family "were famous practitioners of their own school of the Zen Buddhist tea ceremony, which deliberately cultivates as part of its ritual the use of sophisticatedly naïve ceramics, the more unusual the better" (*Trading Places* 45). The most

astute and detailed early European observer of tea drinking in Japan, and its accompanying ceremony, was the Portuguese Jesuit, João Rodrigues. He arrived in Japan from Portugal when he was still a boy in 1577 and stayed more than thirty years. Cooper explains that "in the course of his work as missionary, interpreter, and trade negotiator he came into contact with some of the outstanding tea practitioners of the time, many of whom were Christian" (118). Rodrigues devoted four chapters to tea in his treatise on Japanese culture: "Tea drinking is so common in Japan," he reports, "that water is always kept on the boil to prepare the drink at short notice, for this is the principal way in which they entertain their guests" (qtd. in Cooper 122).

For the purpose of this paper, the next section of Cooper's summary of Rodrigues's report is most significant because it mentions the area known for producing the best quality of tea in Japan at the time, Uji, just south of Kyoto:

> At Uji, where the best tea is produced, straw awnings are erected over the bushes to protect the leaves… The staff of the fifteen or twenty houses producing at Uji carefully superintend the operation to ensure that the leaves are roasted evenly… Uji produces annually about three hundred piculs (about forty thousand pounds) of tea, which is distributed throughout the country. (122-123)

It was Japanese tea requested from this region that features in one of the most quoted facts about the early English encounter with tea. In most of the

popular accounts published, however, it is *not* only not recognized as such, but actually misattributed to tea from southern China.

7. "The best sort of chaw", the mystery of Meaco, and their place in historiography

In addition to William Adams, Capt. John Saris left six men working for the East India Company under Richard Cocks, the head of the English trading house. One of them, Richard Wickham, is famed for having made the "first recorded English request for a pot of tea" (Ferguson 13), and he made it in a letter, sent from Hirado on 27th June 1615 to another of the agents, William Eaton. Where Eaton was at the time and where the letter was sent is what has often wrongly been reported. In his international bestselling book *Empire*, Niall Ferguson writes that he sent the letter "to his colleague Mr Eaton at Macao" (13). Nothing in that quote has changed in a later, e-book version (loc. 513). John Griffiths, in *Tea*, writes that Wickham "scrawled a note to his colleague in Macao asking him to send a jar of the 'best sort of chaw'" (17), "chaw" being Wickham's attempt at writing the word now rendered as "cha" in roman alphabet. He is right to say the post-script note was "scrawled," as reproductions of the original show (Forrest 20), but Eaton was not in Macao. Pettigrew and Richardson, too, state that Wickham "wrote to a colleague at the Chinese port of Macao" (13). Current websites also get it wrong. The for-profit, but rarely read, Everipedia page "Tea in the United Kingdom" claims Richard Wickham "wrote in a letter to merchants in Macao requesting that they bring him 'a pot of the best sort of chaw'." In fact, it was addressed to one particular named merchant colleague, not "merchants" plural. The much more widely read online encyclopedia

Wikipedia correctly states the letter was sent to Mr Eaton, but wrongly notes that he "was stationed in Macao [Portuguese domain since 1557] China" ("Tea in the United Kingdom").

If Eaton was not in Macao, why do so many publications state that he was, and where was he instead? The aforementioned books are all truly scholarly works by experts in their field, and Wikipedia, too, provides plenty of correct and useful information. However, as well as lacking knowledge about Japan, they have depended too much on older accounts and not looked at more revelatory recent scholarship. The key publication of older scholarship that Ferguson, Griffiths, and Pettigrew and Richardson have used, according to their list of references, is one by Denys Forrest, published in 1973. It is an excellent work, and tracking it down and reading it is rewarding still today. However, it does state that the letter sent by Wickham was "to his colleague Mr. Eaton at Macao" (21). Possibly inspiring Griffiths to use the word scrawl, Forrest notes that "Mr Wickham wrote a pretty tortured script, but I think we can trust the graphologists that the words overleaf are as quoted" (21). Indeed, unlike the other books mentioned, Forrest reproduces a copy of the actual note Wickham wrote. The key phrase, which the 'trustworthy graphologists' have written out clearly, is: "Mr Eaton, I pray you buy for me a pot of the best sort of chaw in Meaco" (20).[2]

It seems Forrest assumed that Meaco meant Macao. It is a wrong assumption, but at first sight not an unreasonable one. The Portuguese were

2 For its source for Eaton being in Macao, Wikipedia cites a book, also cited and highly praised by Forrest, which was published in 1935, by W.H. Uckers. For other information, the same article also cites the excellent book published in 2015 by Ellis and others, which places Eaton where he really was. Yet it strangely prefers the 1935 book for this wrong 'fact.'

running regular trade crossings between Macao and Nagasaki. Macao was in the south of the greatest tea-producing nation, and tea was being imported from there to Portugal. In addition, at first glance, for Wickham to have spelt Macao as Meaco might not seem unreasonable. A quick look through the many letters exchanged between the various merchants, as well as with their bosses in London (Farrington, *English Factory*; Purnell), and through the impressive diary kept by Richard Cocks, makes clear that Adams, Cocks, Wickham, and Eaton, all used a variety of spellings of place names and even common words. This was a time before dictionaries were compiled, before schooling for most people, and indeed, is still the age of Shakespeare, who famously signed his own name in several different ways (Bryson 8-9).

The historian Giles Milton points out that although Adams, Cocks and the others use language that is "quirky and rich… their eccentric spelling often makes their diaries and letters hard to read" (loc. 4596). Presumably, Forrest took Meaco to be a two-syllable word, *Mea* (pronounced to rhyme with 'tea') plus *-co*, which would not be so far from Ma-cao. However, a closer look at Japanese place names, and the English merchants' spellings of them, show a connection between sound and written form, even though erratic. Hirado, for example, is variously written as Firando, or Ferrando. Sometimes Edo is Edo, but more often Edowe, Edou, Edoo. Osaka is written variously as Osaakey, or Osacay. Kyoto, which was the capital of Japan at the time and where the emperor lived, is ostensibly never mentioned. How could that possibly be? The answer is in the character 都, pronounced みやこ, and which is now romanized as miyako. It means capital city and is, in fact, mentioned throughout the remaining documents from that time, albeit in different spellings. William Adams writes to Wickham on the 14th October

1616 that, “when travelling back to Meaco, there came a messenger-express with letters from the emperor, that at Meaco, Osacca and Saccay it had been prohibited for any foreign nation to trade except at Firando and Nangasaki” (Purnell 274). Here are five place names which would now be rendered as: Miyako/Kyoto, Osaka, Sakai, Hirado, and Nagasaki. Later in the same letter Adams mentions the capital in two different spellings, first as Meaco, as before, then one line later as Miaco (272), which is closer to the current romanization. Wickham, the key letter-writer in question, is no more or less consistent in his spelling. In a letter to Adams on 16th June, 1614, he writes Osacay for Osaka, and signs off by “wishing you to take heed in whose house you eat or drinke in at Meaco” (280-281). The journals of a contemporary and fellow merchant based at Bantam, Java, Edward Saris, refer to both Macao and Kyoto. In his account of a voyage to Siam (now Thailand), he spells the Portuguese colony “macawe” (285) and the Japanese city “meaco” (292), to which the early twentieth century editor Purnell has added a footnote, “Miako, or capital.” If the spellings are divided into syllables for pronunciation, it is clear that me-a-co is very close to mi-ya-ko (three syllables each), whereas ma-cawe (two syllables) is much closer to Ma-cao (two syllables, or three if we count the diphthong at the end as two). In a slightly crude way Google’s N-grams function gives further support for the idea that there was a shift from spelling *Meaco* to *Miyako* for capital city, meaning Kyoto. Neither spelling is common, but Figure 1 shows the former was more prevalent until the early twentieth century, whereas Figure 2 shows the latter has been more usual since 1900.

Figure 1: The rate *Meaco* is used in books scanned by Google

Figure 2: The rate *Miyako* is used in books scanned by Google

In addition to the spelling issue, the travels and likely whereabouts of William Eaton support the idea that Eaton was in Kyoto at the time of Wickham's letter. There is no evidence that he, or indeed any of the other English factory agents, ever went to Macao, whereas there are accounts of travels to Cochin in China, Siam, and Bantam in Java. Working nominally from the English factory base at Hirado, Eaton's beat as an agent was what is now called Kansai. As Masarella points out, Eaton spent much of his time moving "between Kyoto, Osaka and Sakai" (loc. 3346). In fact, it was not until

twenty years later, well after the English trading house had closed, that Macao was open to English traders "because of the Anglo-Portuguese Truce signed in Goa in 1635" (Masarella loc. 7660). Furthermore, there is no reason that Wickham would have needed tea from Macao. He was in Japan where high quality tea was plentiful, had been drunk for centuries, and which had developed the *chanoyu* of which the local ruling family were exemplary exponents. As already noted, the best quality tea in Japan came from Uji, just south of Kyoto. If Eaton were travelling and working in the Osaka-Kyoto region, it would make sense for Wickham to ask him to pick up some high quality "chaw" for his friend back in Hirado.

It is disappointing that so many scholarly works published this century have been relying for a key 'fact' on a book written in the early 1970s, which, in turn, depended so much on a publication from 1935,[3] excellent though both undoubtedly are. Sadly, this is partly because the most impressive and essential resource on the story of the English trading house at Hirado by Anthony Farrington is not readily or inexpensively available. It was published in 1991 but is now only available in specialist libraries. In that work, Farrington not only reproduces the post-script note Wickham added to his letter, as Forrest did, but he adds a vital footnote to Meaco. Farrington does not directly state that Meaco means Kyoto, but the footnote explains that the "tea grown in the Uji district, south of Kyoto, enjoyed a high reputation and was once reserved for the Emperor and the Shōgun" (*English Factory* 296). This information was recognized by the authors of the recent, majestic book on the story of tea by Markman Ellis and others. In that there is this phrase: "Wickham wrote plaintively on 27 June 1615 to his friend

3 *All About Tea*, by W.H. Uckers

William Eaton in metropolitan Meaco (Kyoto)…" (23). The parenthesis explains simply and effectively the truth of the matter. Sure enough, the bibliography lists not only Forrest, relied on by so many other writers, but also that essential contribution to the story by Farrington.

Milton maintains that despite the tea ceremony being "quite beyond the comprehension of Cocks and his men" (loc. 2849), they tried the drink and Eaton and Wickham, at least, liked it (loc. 2854). Nevertheless, there is no evidence that Eaton, the only member of the trading house who lived long enough to see England again had, or mentioned, tea in his later life.

8. Conclusion

This paper has explored the significant role that Japan played in the early British, in particular English, encounters with tea. Well before tea was available in the British Isles, it was in Japan in the early seventeenth century where an English person first asked for some tea, at least in print. Less well known is that the tea being requested was Japanese tea of the highest quality, from the Uji area south of Kyoto, then Japan's capital city. Many historians and writers about the story of tea have wrongly believed the person receiving the request was in southern China rather than in Japan. In fact, as we have seen, he was in Kyoto. The British were slower to import tea than some other European powers at the time, namely the Portuguese, Dutch and French. However, once they did import tea in sufficient quantities for the price to be affordable and the product to be widely available, they took to it more enthusiastically than other Europeans. Tea became not just an integral part of British culture, but an obsession, and sharing a tea culture is something that still today links Britain and Japan.

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