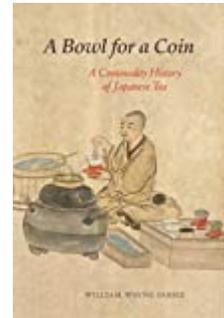




William Wayne Farris. *A Bowl for a Coin: A Commodity History of Japanese Tea.*
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Opening the window, I hear it:

A voice selling tea.

Much like the fourteenth-century Zen monk who composed the poem above (p. 62), in *A Bowl for a Coin*, William Wayne Farris invites the reader to listen for the call of medieval street vendors peddling their brews in the snowy northeast of Japan, or imagine the weariness of a nineteenth-century laborer plucking soft tea leaf shoots for the finest harvest. Farris uses tea as an entry point to place everyday stories of the archipelago within larger historical processes and changes from the year 750 to the present day. What would it look like to tell a history of Japan through a product that has become synonymous with both its contemporary culture and cherished past? This book answers that question.

Through a chronological and thematic approach, Farris addresses several core questions that are laid out in his introduction, namely: how and why Japanese came to produce, distribute, and consume tea; what methods were used to

grow and cultivate tea successfully; what the lives of those responsible for tea production were like; how tea was exchanged and marketed, and, more broadly, “how tea made its imprint on Japanese civilization” (p. 2). The book thus takes an interest not only in commodity history but also in the intersections of culture, medicine, technology, international trade, social custom, and more.

In keeping with his interest in Japan’s *longue durée*, Farris periodizes each of his four chapters by spans of some hundreds of years: prehistory and early medieval (750-1300), medieval (1300-1600), early modern (1600-1800), and finally, modern Japan (1868-present). Aligning the particular histories of tea technologies, trade, and consumption with broader economic, demographic, and social developments over time, this book echoes Farris’s previous contributions to the field but with tea as a distinctive and enticing lens.[1] Although his topical focus is Japan, Farris successfully puts this study into conversation with larger global histories, not only in his discussions of pre-modern and modern interregional and interna-

tional trade but also his inquiry into whether Japan experienced an “industrious revolution,” and when. He argues that although scholars typically see Japan’s early modern period as the moment when the labor needed for cultivation became more efficient, agricultural advances resulted in surplus goods for the market, and an increase in both demand and population drove the commoditization of certain goods to coalesce into a proto-industrial cycle of development, it was in the medieval period, c. 1350, that we first find this incipient consumer society, even if that growth was uneven.

The discussion of this transformation begins with the prehistory of the tea industry from 750 to 1300 in chapter 1. Farris situates early tea exchange within elite East Asian social and political practices, introducing it as a beverage very different from what we imagine tea to be today. At the time, processing methods were relatively underdeveloped and networks of gift exchange among Buddhist practitioners and aristocrats were the primary means of circulation for a bitter drink recognized primarily for its medicinal properties. Neither particularly delicious nor widely accessible, Farris makes the important point that although tea would eventually be domestically produced, poetic ruminations on its consumption reflect both its popularity among the elite and its strong association with continental origins as an exotic, foreign commodity.

Chapter 2 suggests that between 1300 and 1600, although the full commoditization of tea had yet to occur, the swift expansion of the market and consumption patterns that would eventually characterize the “industrious revolution” are present. Spurred by population growth, agricultural development, labor specialization, and the acceleration of regional competition (resulting in large part from the now-expanding warrior society), tea began to spread to the lower classes and generate competition within domestic networks. Farris argues that the emergence of tea “brands” and the use of tea as a form of taxation suggest its entry

into the market as a commercial commodity, alluding to its modern fate (p. 49). Although Farris emphasizes somewhat speculatively that the addictive properties of tea had a notable impact on its diffusion across social groups and geographies, he makes a stronger case for its ubiquity through his discussion of technological changes (like the introduction of the tea grinder or cultivation methods better adapted to cold climes), his collation of fragmentary textual and pictorial sources showing temples and shrines investing in the development of tea plots for local sales, and tea’s growing presence in literary and artistic practices such as tea ceremony, poetry, and theater. Despite the medieval period’s marked increase in tea production, distribution, and consumption, including the emergence of the culturally significant and more delicious powdered green tea from Uji in the late fifteenth century, Farris argues in chapter 3 that it is the Edo period that marks tea’s golden age.

Farris identifies the three core reasons for tea’s “triumph” over this 250-year period: the intensification and improvement of farming, a more knowledgeable and hard-working labor force (motivated in part, Farris suggests, by caffeination from habitual tea drinking), and a consumer society pervaded by tea. He makes his case through a geographical and cultural survey of tea’s preponderance, with a special emphasis on the trial-and-error process of adapting to a new industry as tea took hold in northeast Japan, first shipped into the ports of Tsuruga and Obama, before demand became so high that local production emerged as a profitable possibility. The significance of this period for tea history is underscored by the invention in 1740 of what Farris terms a “genuine steamed steeped leaf tea (*sencha*)” (p. 169) and the untold varieties of tea produced in regions all over the archipelago that became unique “brands” and fully infiltrated the cultural milieu through their appearance in visual arts, printed advertisements, fiction, performance, and tea house culture.

Significantly, the growing body of literature on tea cultivation practices, represented by numerous manuals and treatises on tea, attests to the influence of the expansion of print and textual engagement on tea production. In early chapters, Farris takes note of some of the earliest writings on tea that began text-based treatments on tea farming and consumption, such as the twelfth-century monk Yōsai's *Drink Tea and Prolong Your Life* (*Kissa yōjō ki*), but it is worth noting that in the Edo period a much more comprehensive discourse on tea processes and practices took hold that also made production methods and know-how more accessible to lower social classes. The perspective of these lower classes is highlighted in Farris's insightful case study of the Bunsei Tea Incident of 1824, in which 115 tea-producing villages in Shizuoka lodged a lengthy and complex lawsuit with the shogunate against merchant organizations and traders engaging in unfair business practices. This discussion showcases Farris's granular approach to larger-scale historical analysis, using the case's individual grievances, bureaucratic complexities, and the historiographic debates surrounding its events to situate laborers and tea's role as a commodity in the evolving social and political contexts of the Edo period.

Chapter 4 brings the reader through the dizzying changes wrought by Japan's gradual modernization. Two key elements of this shift are increased mechanization and enhanced involvement in global economies on the world stage. Farris divides this era into three subperiods. From 1868 to 1925, investment in overseas trade drastically diminished the regional varieties of tea from the Edo period in favor of streamlined, standardized exports, while a mobile working class of female laborers buttressed labor-intensive tea processing (a tantalizing hint at the gendered politics of domestic labor that this reader would have been interested in reading much more about). Between 1925 and 1980, faltering exports motivated a domestic turn, and tea advertisements within Japan, along with mail-order services, began reinforcing

the already ubiquitous tea as a symbol of a nostalgic, "traditional" past with tea at the center of interpersonal relationships and hospitality. Meanwhile, as Japanese innovators developed forms of mechanization and experimented with new scientific cultivation practices, the postwar decades saw dietary changes and competition from international competitors in the form of black tea and coffee. As of the 1980s, despite an overall decline in tea production and consumption, Farris argues that tea's place in Japanese society and economy stabilized, as much a product of new technologies of PET bottle use and vending machine sales as the renewed legacies of tea's image as a healthful and relaxing beverage. Tea has also secured a new, niche place in international markets in alternative forms, such as confectionaries and cosmetics.

In his conclusion, Farris appropriately warns against considering these modern transformations a success story of industrial "progress." He reminds the reader that there is something to be said for the innumerable tea varieties that once flowered in distant regions of the early modern archipelago that everyday people took pride in, as opposed to today's soulless corporate streamlining of tea primarily for company profit. This personal reflection is a reminder of one of the strengths of Farris's book as a whole, which is his ability to combat "big name" history that focuses primarily on figures like Kukai, Sen no Rikyū, or the many tea-obsessed shoguns. Farris instead interweaves textual, visual, archaeological, literary, and other sources to find the people on the ground and uncover what their lives looked like in a world gradually pervaded by tea.

Though it integrates complex economic, social, cultural, medicinal, political, technological, and food histories into its 1,300-year narrative, *A Bowl for a Coin* is eminently accessible to a lay audience and to students. At first blush, a "commodity history" may seem like a hard sell. However, Farris's writing is clear, his throughlines are easy to follow, and his chapter divisions by time

period allow educators to easily assign individual chapters in their classrooms to offer alternative and interdisciplinary histories that present more holistic narratives of transformation over time. Furthermore, Farris's book is an important contribution as a well-researched foil to popular writings on tea that focus almost entirely on its finished product or received narratives of tea ceremony traditions and legacies as a native Japanese commodity and immutable cultural practice. At the same time, it complements other important scholarly publications that have been or will be go-to sources for researchers and educators over the years, such as Rebecca Corbett's [*Cultivating Femininity: Women and Tea Culture in Edo and Meiji Japan*](#) (2019), Morgan Pitelka's edited volume [*Japanese Tea Culture: Art, History, and Practice*](#) (2003), and Paul Varley and Kumakura Isao's [*Tea in Japan: Essays on the History of Chanoyu*](#) (1995). While providing the reader concrete historical knowledge of tea and the people whose lives were intertwined with its path, Farris's book aptly articulates that this past was as changeable as that of any other historical item or idea.

Note

[1]. This work fits into the pattern of Farris's previous monographs, with a chronological focus on demography, economy, climate, and social change: *Population, Disease, and Land in Early Japan, 645–900*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1985); *Japan's Medieval Population: Famine, Fertility, and Warfare in a Transformative Age* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); *Daily Life and Demographics in Ancient Japan*, Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies 63 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies/University of Michigan Press, 2009); and *Japan to 1600: A Social and Economic History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

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