

Forgotten Imperial Culture: The Spread of Taiwanese Oolong Tea in Early Twentieth-Century Japan*

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ABSTRACT

British tea preferences underwent a significant shift from bohea tea to congou tea or, in contemporary terms, from oolong tea to black tea, toward the end of the 18th century. The Formosa Oolong Tea Room at the Japan–British Exhibition of 1910 enjoyed considerable success and was expected to catalyze the popularization of oolong tea in Britain. However, oolong tea failed to establish a significant presence in the British market. In contrast, during the 1920s, oolong tea remained synonymous with high-quality tea in the United States.

Shortly after Taiwan’s annexation in 1895, Japanese colonists cherished oolong tea as a souvenir from Taiwan to Japan. The opening of a Taiwanese tea house in Ginza in 1905, with the support of the Taiwan Governor-General’s Office, played a central role in promoting Taiwanese oolong tea. Oolong tea emerged as a modern favorite beverage in Japan, following the trajectory of black tea and coffee, as its production and export were encouraged for colonial development.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Mitsui & Co. and Mitsukoshi consistently utilized katakana, commonly associated with Western culture, to advertise Taiwanese oolong tea, as opposed to kanji, which was more closely linked to China. Most oolong tea images featured in newspaper advertisements adopted Western or tropical aesthetics, causing it to be easily confused with black tea. Despite being a domestic tea, oolong tea, popular in Japan during that era, was frequently misconstrued as an upscale imported commodity, much like black tea.

In 1903, the Taiwan Governor-General’s Office inaugurated the Taiwan Pavilion at the Fifth Domestic Industrial Exhibition in Osaka, where the Taipei Tea Merchant Public Association established a tea house. Subsequently,

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Taiwanese tea houses became a standard feature at Japanese expositions. The 1910s and 1920s marked the initial period of oolong tea gaining widespread popularity in Japan.

Keywords: Taiwan Governor-General's Office, Formosa Oolong Tea, Taiwanese Tea House, Taiwanese Tea Party, Mitsui & Co., Ltd., Emperor Taisho, Fifth Domestic Industrial Exposition (1903), Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis (1904), Japan–British Exhibition of 1910