

Dueling Tea Rooms: Japan versus Britain for the US Market at International Exhibitions

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International exhibitions, which commenced with the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, constitute a global trend that ran roughly parallel with Japan's development of a tea export trade. Soon after three Japanese cities were designated as treaty ports in 1859, British and US merchants identified tea as a viable export product and began shipping it to the United States and Britain. Following the Meiji Restoration, the Meiji government nurtured the expansion of tea exports, helping make tea Japan's second largest export good after silk. Because attempts to develop black teas and market them in Australia proved unsuccessful, Japan's tea export trade came to be centered on shipping green teas to the United States, where such varieties had been preferred since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Meiji leaders saw international exhibitions as key to increasing Japan's interactions with the Western world in the realms of culture and art, as well as venues to cultivate consumer interest in Japanese export products like tea. As a result, Japan became one of the more active non-Western nations at international exhibitions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This essay will trace Japan's promotion of tea at international exhibitions in the United States spanning from the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia to the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in St. Louis in 1904. It will highlight how displays of tea became part of Japan's commercial competition for the US market with other tea producing empires: Qing China, which held a monopoly on the world tea market until Japan's entry in the 1860s, and particularly Britain, which around the same time, began to establish a tea export industry in its colonies of India and Ceylon. To illustrate that larger narrative, the essay will focus on tea rooms (which also took the form of gardens and stands) at international exhibitions operated by Japanese exhibitors which competed especially with similar venues created by Indian and Ceylon tea interests. Japanese producers used their tea rooms to promote Japanese teas and also, beginning in the 1890s, as part of a strategy to preserve the long-standing US consumer preference for green teas. Specifically, the Japanese tea lobby implemented strategies to blunt a sustained negative marketing campaign instigated by the India and Ceylon tea lobby, which aimed to convince Americans to choose their black teas. Over the long term, the Japanese tea lobby failed in that effort as by the early 1920s, Americans came to drink more black than green teas. Nonetheless, the dueling tea rooms reveal both the level and intricacies of interna-

tional commercial competition that occurred at world exhibitions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

1 Tea at the First US Exposition: Philadelphia (1876)

At the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, the first world's fair held in the United States, China and Japan had adjacent pavilions placed, as the states were geographically, to the west of the host nation's "central" pavilion. Both East Asian states offered displays of national art, architecture, and agricultural products including tea. The Japanese section exhibited samples, most of them of green teas, from over thirty independent producers.¹ For their part, the organizers of the China section presented teas according to districts and export ports—such as Amoy and Canton—of which US tea drinkers were already familiar. A US commentator noted that visitors had the opportunity to discern the "features or peculiarities" of the Chinese green, black, and oolong teas on display. He stressed the quality and fine taste of many Chinese varieties and noted the "rapidly-increasing addition to the world's tea supply contributed by the Empire of Japan," which he estimated at twenty-five million pounds annually. "This large quantity, coming as it does more and more into competition with the teas grown in China, has naturally had great influence upon the trade, and has caused those engaged in it here to note very carefully the changes that have arisen and that are likely to occur in the future of our tea-trade with China."²

As predicted, Japanese teas subsequently made inroads at the expense of Chinese teas. In the first half of the 1870s, Chinese teas composed 60% of all teas imported into the United States compared to only 27% for those from Japan. In the latter half of that decade, the market share of Japanese teas surged to nearly 45%. Over the next decade, Japan's share remained stable, with teas from China occupying roughly the other half of the US market.³

Meanwhile, the world tea market was undergoing a dramatic transformation. After decades of failure, in the 1860s British planters succeeded in creating large tea plantations in India which focused on the production of black teas. A nascent India tea lobby, composed of planters and merchants, began promoting their black teas on the British home market. Over the course of the 1870s and 1880s, Britons turned to Indian black teas. In 1865, Britain imported 97% of its tea

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- 1 *Official Catalogue of the Japanese Section: and Descriptive Notes on the Industry and Agriculture of Japan, International Exhibition, 1876* (Philadelphia: The Japanese Commission, 1876), 32–33.
 - 2 John H. Catherwood, "Tea Exhibited by the Chinese Government," in *United States Centennial Commission, International Exhibition 1876, Reports and Awards, Group III*, ed. Francis A. Walker (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1878), 28–31.
 - 3 Shinya Sugiyama, *Japan's Industrialization in the World Economy 1859–1899: Export Trade and Overseas Competition* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone Press, 1988), 148–150.

from China but by 1871 Indian tea made up 11% of all tea imports. That figure climbed to 28% by 1880 and Indian tea imports reached a majority (51%) in 1887.⁴ In the 1880s British speculators, notably Thomas J. Lipton, purchased coffee plantations in Ceylon recently decimated by a plant disease. They quickly shifted production to tea, and within a decade the island emerged as a leading producer for the world market.⁵

In December 1890, a prominent US monthly magazine proclaimed a “revolution in tea” detailing the significant expansion of the US market since 1866: a doubling of imports of Chinese tea and a fourteen-fold growth of Indian tea imports. The article concluded that Indian, as well as Ceylon teas, would thereafter gain market share in the United States because both produced superior teas using uniform and mechanized production and processing techniques. By contrast, the individual Chinese farm families growing tea and the merchants transporting it within China followed shoddy and inconsistent practices in cultivation, processing, and packing, thereby creating teas of low quality which US consumers increasingly refused to purchase.⁶ In this portrayal, the article echoed the tenets of a marketing campaign that Indian and later Ceylon tea interests had used to great effect in Britain—the characterization of Chinese green teas as dirty, dangerous, and fraudulent compared to Indian and Ceylon black teas made more uniform and “pure” because they were harvested and refined in mechanized plants under white British supervision.⁷

2 India-Ceylon vs. Japan: the Columbian Exposition (1893)

Having achieved success on the British home market, the Indian and Ceylon tea lobbies looked to make inroads in the United States, pinpointing world exhibitions as venues to promote their black teas to a green-tea-drinking US public. Chicago’s grand Columbian Exposition in 1893 became the first world’s fair to include dueling tea rooms operated by representatives from Japan, India, and Ceylon, respectively.

4 J. Berry White, “The Indian Tea Industry: Its Rise, Progress during Fifty Years, and Prospects Considered from a Commercial Point of View,” *Foochow General Chamber of Commerce, Correspondence Referring to the Decline of the China Tea Trade, and Suggested Remedies*, 3rd November 1887, Appendix F, “The Jubilee of Tea” (Foochow [Fuzhou], 1887), 18.

5 The rapid transformation from coffee to tea production in Ceylon is explored in Roland Wenzlhuemer, *From Coffee to Tea Cultivation in Ceylon, 1880–1900: An Economic and Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

6 “The Revolution in Tea,” *Ballou’s Monthly Magazine* 72, no. 6 (December 1890): 496.

7 This development of this negative campaign in Britain is outlined in Erika Rappaport, “Packaging China: Foreign Articles and Dangerous Tastes in the Mid-Victorian Tea Party,” in *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, ed. Frank Trentmann (New York: Berg, 2006), 125–146.

At the Chicago fair, the Japanese exhibition committee offered a range of exhibits that stood out from other participating countries because of the sheer amount of goods on display—a total that topped even Britain. US visitors were excited by the splendor of antique Japanese items on view but paradoxically lamented that many Japanese at the fair wore Western instead of “exotic” oriental attire.⁸ Attendees could also see samples of green tea offered by over 170 different Japanese individual farmers as well as local and prefectural tea associations.⁹

In addition, the Japanese government earmarked a large sum for the construction of a bazaar and tea house. The Japan Central Tea Association operated the “authentic Japanese tea house” which was advertised as a means to show “the people of the United States and visitors to the Exhibition how tea is prepared and drunk in the Land of the Rising Sun.” The house included three tea saloons, the first a “common” one, with a ten cent admission, where a visitor could enjoy a cup of “genuine Japanese tea” accompanied by a Japanese cake, and depart with a present of “some Japanese article.” Paying twenty-five cents allowed one to enter the “special tea saloon” and enjoy a high-grade *gyokuro* green tea, served in “pure Japanese style with a Japanese cake; accompanied with a present of a sample of genuine tea.” For those willing to part with fifty cents, there was the “ceremonial tea saloon,” which offered *tencha* “the best quality of powdered tea, served with the ‘chanoyu’ ceremony,” also with cake and a present of Japan tea. The association no doubt aimed to make the tea-house a venue to introduce *gyokuro* and *tencha*, high-grades of Japan green tea not well known on the US market.¹⁰

According to one account, which portrayed a mother and her young daughter visiting the Japanese tea garden, that goal was achieved. The account begins with the mother hesitating at the garden’s gate, “scandalized” at the prospect of paying 50 cents for a single cup of tea. She nonetheless decides to enter and join other “curious people who have drunk tea all their lives, just as they have eaten steak and pie, and have regarded it perhaps as a necessary filling for their depleted interiors, but certainly as nothing more.” The account goes on to describe, in glowing albeit somewhat condescending terms, both the teas offered and the Japanese staff serving it. A guest could enjoy *tencha* “so startling green that the visitor is almost afraid of it” in the ceremonial tea house, where one could savor a cup on a porch overlooking the garden, watching “the

8 Neil Harris, “All the World a Melting Pot? Japan at American Fairs, 1876–1904,” in *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 29–55.

9 Moses P. Handy, ed., *The Official Directory of the World’s Columbian Exposition, May 1st to October 30th, 1893: A Reference Book of Exhibitors and Exhibits, and of the Officers and Members of the World’s Columbian Commission* (Chicago: W. B. Conkey Company, 1893), 606–608.

10 “Japanese Tea House,” handbill from Columbian Exposition 1893, original held in “Tea, ca. 1816–1963,” Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

little tea-makers hopping about like a bevy of amiable and highly intelligent hoptoads.” Those interested in tasting one of the other available teas—the “common herd who just drink tea”—did so in the “big, cool, shady retreat” of one of the other tea rooms.

With less detail, the account also recreates the experience of visiting the nearby, rival tea room operated by the India Tea Association of Calcutta. Tasked with introducing their black teas to the US public, the room’s attendants, “great swarthy fellows clad in crimson and gold” with uniforms “adapted from that of a viceregal bodyguard,” encouraged guests to bring their lunches and consume as much tea as they liked, free of charge. Visitors could enjoy apparently only one grade of Indian black tea, described as having a “rich amber color” and the aroma of “a hay field in July,” in separate rooms for men and women.¹¹

Using funds from the colonial government and raised from tea planters, the Ceylon commission constructed its own tea house to offer samples of the island’s new export good. With no tradition of tea consumption upon which to draw, the commission created a style that employed grasses and reeds to construct a rustic hut near the Lake Michigan shore. An exhibition memorial album described the hut as displaying the “ingenuity with which the Cingalese utilize such primitive materials in their building operations.” The album called the tea house a refuge from the hot summer weather, and a place where Americans could compare Ceylon teas with those of China and Japan.¹² Tea was also available at the Ceylon Pavilion, where for example, the Spanish royal, Infanta Eulalia, sampled it during her much celebrated day at the fair. It was estimated that six million people visited the Ceylon Pavilion, consuming 4.5 million cups and taking home over a million packets of Ceylon teas.¹³ Over the course of the exhibition, many Americans probably tried their first cups of black tea at the India and Ceylon tea rooms.

3 The India-Ceylon Negative Campaign

Following the Columbian Exhibition, British colonial plantation owners and merchants specializing in India and Ceylon black teas in the United States began to cooperate more extensively, and initiated a negative campaign akin to that previously used in Britain. Drawing on funds contributed by plantation owners, merchants selling Indian and Ceylon teas began to run adver-

- 11 Benjamin Cummings Truman, *History of the World’s Fair: Being a Complete Description of the World’s Columbian Exposition from Its Inception* (Chicago: Mammoth Publishing Company, 1898), 435–437.
- 12 Rand McNally and Company, *The World’s Fair Album: Containing Photographic Views of Buildings ... at the World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago 1893* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co, 1893), no page numbers in the text.
- 13 “Queen of the Fair: The ‘White City’ Does Homage to the Infanta,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 9, 1893, 1; William H. Ukers, *All About Tea*, vol. 2 (New York: Tea and Coffee Trade Journal Company, 1935), 306.

tisements in US newspapers aimed at prompting consumers to question the quality of Chinese and Japanese green teas and by contrast, develop a positive image of Ceylon and Indian black teas. For example on April 13, 1895 the *Morning Oregonian* of Portland, Oregon included an advertisement for Blue Cross brand of Ceylon tea, which it claimed is “free from the injurious coloring matter often found in China and Japan teas.”¹⁴ Other advertisements played upon racial prejudice, such as one asserting that the Blue Cross brand of India and Ceylon tea “is carefully prepared under white supervision—China and Japan teas are not.”¹⁵ A few months later, an advertisement for Monsoon brand in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* asserted that its Ceylon and India black teas were the result of “civilized labor and intelligence,” which brought “greater perfection.” It boasted that “there can be no question as to the result when civilized man’s intelligence, backed by capital, is placed in competition with the pauper and Coolie labor of China and Japan.”¹⁶

US merchants specializing in Japanese tea moved to mitigate these negative attacks by appealing for increased federal regulation: purity standards for all teas that would create, at least in theory, a more level playing field. In March 1897, their efforts proved successful when the US Congress passed an act “to prevent the importation of impure and unwholesome tea,” which went into effect on May 1, 1897. The act made it unlawful “to import or bring into the United States any merchandise as tea which is inferior in purity, quality and fitness for consumption.” Going beyond legislation enacted in 1883, it directed that a board of seven tea examiners be appointed by the Secretary of the Treasury. The board would “set uniform standards of purity, quality and fitness,” which involved not merely written instructions but also the choosing of samples of acceptable varieties of tea that inspectors could reference when examining teas entering US ports.¹⁷

On the other side of the Pacific, the leaders of the Japan Central Tea Association also successfully lobbied their central government for funds to expand magazine and newspaper advertising and promotion activities to challenge the increasingly negative portrayals of Japanese tea. One of these new advertisements ran in a prominent national magazine in February 1898. It boasted that Japanese teas have “superior flavor and aroma resulting from the natural advantages of Japanese soil and climate, but equally so, perhaps, because of the clean and careful methods by which it is uniformly prepared for market.” Along with the image of a Japanese woman in a

14 *The Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), April 13, 1895, 8, col. G.

15 *The Oregonian*, April 15, 1895, 3, col. G.

16 *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1895, 43.

17 United States Department of the Treasury, *Digest of Decisions of the Treasury Department (Customs) Board of U.S. General Appraisers, and U.S. Court of Customs Appeals*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 1141–1143.

kimono making tea, the advertisement listed the “official recipe,” urging consumers to use one teaspoon of tea leaves for every cup desired, and to never allow a pot to boil.¹⁸

4 Pushing “Pure” Japanese Tea: the Omaha Fair (1898)

The Japanese marketing campaign began just as the United States prepared for another world’s fair: the Trans-Mississippi and International Exhibition held in Omaha, Nebraska from June 1 to November 1, 1898. The Omaha exhibition sported a much smaller foreign presence, and Japan, Ceylon, and India did not send official contingents. The Qing government operated a Chinese pavilion but apparently did not directly promote its teas, leaving management of a separate Chinese Tea Garden to a US company.¹⁹ For its part, the Lipton Tea Company also ran a small tea stand.²⁰ The Japan Central Tea Association undertook a more comprehensive effort, linking its advertising campaign to the tea garden it operated at the Omaha exhibition. One such advertisement in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* proclaimed Japanese tea to be “absolutely the purest, cleanest, most wholesome,” and that it was “officially inspected before exportation.” The advertisement included a line urging readers to visit the Japanese tea garden at the Omaha fair.²¹

At the tea garden, association representatives implemented several steps to assure that visitors could appreciate the “true taste” (*shinmi*) of Japanese green tea. Deeming Omaha’s water to be unsanitary, they employed water filters to assure that better quality water would be used for brewing. They also offered a variety of Japanese and Western sweets so as to meet the widest demand. In addition, the Japanese contingent served iced tea, especially during hot days, hoping to overcome the perception that their green teas were ill suited as a chilled beverage. Visitors gave the iced tea only mixed reviews. Finally representatives sought to convince US consumers to refrain from the common practice of adding milk and cream and thereby appreciate what the representatives believed was the fine, pure flavor of Japanese green teas. They therefore did not provide cream and milk, and only when pressed gave guests a small amount of sugar to add to their cups. Stipulating so strongly to visitors the “proper” way to consume Japanese green tea was a bold move that potentially alienated some committed tea drinkers. Tea association representatives no doubt believed it a necessary step to demonstrate the inherent, fine flavor of “straight”

18 *Godey’s Magazine*, February 1898, 240.

19 The McCord-Brady Company apparently provided all the teas for the Chinese Tea Garden. Omaha Public Library, Trans Mississippi & International Exposition Digital Collection, <http://www.omahapubliclibrary.org/transmiss/regions/eastmid/east.html>. Accessed May 7, 2016.

20 F. A. Rinehart, “Lipton’s Teas Display, 1898,” Omaha Public Library, Trans Mississippi & International Exposition Digital Collection, <http://www.omahapubliclibrary.org/transmiss/research/cleanhtml/tmi00417.html>. Accessed May 7, 2016.

21 *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 28, 1898, 4.

Japanese green tea in light of the sustained negative campaign. It is unclear how many tea drinkers changed their minds about Japanese green tea because of this approach. Exhibition officials, however, judged that tea garden staff had promoted Japanese teas in an impartial and fair way, giving it as one reason for the Japan Central Tea Association to receive one of the 100 gold medals awarded to the roughly 12,000 exhibits at the Omaha world's fair.²²

5 Recreating Kyoto in St. Louis (1904)

In 1904, yet another US Midwest city hosted a world's fair: St. Louis. Although their nation was at war with Russia beginning in February of that year, Japanese leaders deemed it important to send a strong contingent that occupied twice the space of the Japanese exhibits at the Chicago world's fair. Japanese officials, led by a tea man, Ōtani Kahei, who served as head of the exhibits, chose to showcase their nation's green teas in a version of the iconic Golden Pavilion (Kinkaku-ji). The tea room, which sported far less gold leaf than the original pavilion in Kyoto, formed the kernel of a larger garden that also included a reception hall constructed in the style of a medieval lord's estate and a bazaar selling Japanese wares. As Japan had expanded its empire in 1895 to include the tea-producing-island of Taiwan, the garden had a Formosa Tea House, which served varieties of oolong and other Taiwanese teas.²³ In a newspaper interview just prior to the fair's opening, Baron Matsudaira, the vice commissioner of the Japanese contingent, drew attention to the exhibits showcasing Japan's recent industrial advancements, and the tea gardens, "which will excel [sic] anything of the kind we [Japanese] have attempted before."²⁴ In July, Matsudaira hosted exhibition administrators at a dinner held at the pavilion where guests were treated to several courses of Japanese dishes along with tea, a dessert of green tea sherbet, and "sake, sake, sake always." As entertainment, "geisha girls danced an allegorical charade. The performance was a dramatic epic of the tea fields of Japan, composed by Mr. Yamaguchi, concessionaire of the Kinkaku pavilion, and was a very pretty performance."²⁵

Accounts of the St. Louis fair offered some positive portrayals of the Japanese green tea available at the pavilion. A widely-read, fictional tale of Samantha, a woman from a rural town visiting the fair, described eating a good but "queer" meal accompanied by "the best tea I ever

22 Chagyō Kumiai Chūō Kaigisho, ed., *Nihon chagyō shi* [The History of Japan's Tea Industry] (Tokyo: Chagyō Kumiai Chūō Kaigisho, 1914), 145–146.

23 Imperial Japanese Commission to the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition, *The Exhibition of the Empire of Japan, Official Catalogue* (St. Louis: International Exposition, 1904), 2–6.

24 "Japan's Tea Garden at the World's Fair," *Washington Times*, April 25, 1904, 7.

25 "Native Japanese Dinner Party," *St. Louis Republic*, July 14, 1904, 6.

drinked [sic].”²⁶ Many articles in the Missouri press lauded the ambience of the tea garden as well as the stalls and amusements around it that formed a cluster known as “Fair Japan.”²⁷ Moreover in a wrap up piece published just before the conclusion of the fair, the *St. Louis Republic* strangely opined that “while drinking tea with Japan, the world learned to appreciate the sturdy little brown men.”²⁸

Yet a few months earlier, the same newspaper ran an article proclaiming the beneficial attributes of teas available at the Ceylon tea room. The article noted how the colonial government of Ceylon had funded the construction of the “attractive and picturesque Ceylon building” to display Ceylon products including tea. It quoted an unnamed dealer who offered many of the same points about Ceylon tea highlighted in previous marketing campaigns. The dealer stressed how Ceylon tea’s “virgin purity, greater strength (hence greater economy), its scientific manufacture, together with its delicious and delicate flavor,” make it appealing to “all lovers of tea.” The merchant concluded that British grown-tea would therefore soon displace Japanese and Chinese varieties on the US market just as had transpired in Britain. “Free from adulterants and deleterious substances,” he affirmed that Ceylon tea is handled only by “approved and scientific machinery.” He concluded that “another reason for its great popularity is because it is midway between the weak teas of Japan and the stronger teas of India.”²⁹

The following month, a newspaper in the small town of Lexington near Kansas City, reported the comments of a London tea merchant who identified an imperial patriotism as propelling the growth of Ceylon tea consumption in Britain. He concluded that the success of Ceylon tea demonstrates that “the British people are willing to support each other, although they may be of different hue and thousands of miles apart.”³⁰ A few weeks after the close of the St. Louis fair, the *St. Louis Republic* also ran an advertisement for a tea brand which trumpeted that Ceylon tea surpasses Chinese and Japanese teas in purity and economy.³¹

These laudatory views of Ceylon tea foreshadowed a larger trend that would shape the US tea market in subsequent decades. Although the racially-charged critiques grew less overt, merchants promoting Ceylon teas would continue to question the ability of Chinese and Japanese producers to offer quality teas. They would simultaneously play up the “scientific” and “mechanized”

26 Marietta Holley, *Samantha at the St. Louis Exposition* (New York: G.W. Dillingham, 1904), 197.

27 “Fair Japan,” *Rich Hill Tribune* (Rich Hill, Missouri) June 30, 1904, 1.

28 Supplemental Magazine, Missouri, the World’s Host, *St. Louis Republic*, October 23, 1904, 1.

29 “Ceylon Tea is Rapidly Displacing Other Brands,” *St. Louis Republic*, May 27, 1904, 8.

30 “Patriotic Tea Drinking: The China and Japan Products are Ousted by the British in Ceylon,” *Lexington Intelligencer* (Lexington, Missouri), June 18, 1904.

31 *St. Louis Republic*, December 16, 1904, 9.

virtues of Ceylon and India tea production to chip away at China's and Japan's respective shares of the US market. Japanese producers and merchants specializing in Japanese green tea held off this growing black tea wave on the US market for another fifteen years, continuing to actively promote their teas at for example, the Panama-Pacific Exhibition in San Francisco in 1915. Nonetheless by the early 1920s, American tea drinkers came to choose Indian and Ceylon teas in increasing volume, beginning the transformation of the United States into the black-tea-consuming nation it remains today.