

Material, discursive and linguistic transfers in the field of tea from 1856 to the present day Lyon, June 19-20, 2025

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Objectives and periodization

This colloquium aims to explore the place of tea in our societies, in a transversal and international perspective, for the modern and contemporary period. It will address linguistic and linguistic aspects (evolution of terminologies, discourse around tea), cultural aspects (insertion of tea into our daily lives *via* drinking and eating practices, related material culture), as well as economic aspects (agricultural practices, trade), and political aspects (particularly in the context of decolonization processes). We will focus on the links between these different fields. We will consider the period from 1855-1858 to the present day. From the mid-19th century onwards, there was a break in the history of commercial and cultural flows around tea, with the end of the Opium Wars (1856) and the Crimean War (1853-1856), the forced opening of Japan to foreign trade (Kanagawa Convention, March 1854), and the Cipaye Revolt (1857), which precipitated the proclamation of the Indian Empire. The modern and contemporary period is therefore an ideal time to reflect on tea as a vector of cultural identity and/or material and linguistic transfer.

Focus 1: Transformation of consumer practices: assimilation and appropriation of tea

Tea, consumed in China since antiquity, spread to Japan and the Arab world around the ninth century, before arriving in Europe later, around the sixteenth century. Today, it is the most widely consumed beverage after water, by over two billion people in 125 countries. According to the FAO (May 2018 report, p. 2), global demand remains on the rise, both in traditional producer countries (China, India, Bangladesh), Brazil and the Near/Middle East (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Israel). East Africa (Rwanda, Malawi, Uganda) is a dynamic emerging market. Everywhere, the spread of tea has been underpinned by a (re)adjustment of taste and consumption practices, combining gustatory pleasure, moments of sharing and conviviality, a long-standing but growing interest in its curative virtues and the quest for distinction. Indeed, the growth in demand that has paralleled rising living standards and urbanization has long been accompanied by aestheticization and/or exoticization (even in Japan, the tea ceremony has recently been the object of a desire for reinvention), while increasing attention is now being paid to fair trade and sustainable development issues. Other countries don't seem to have developed, or need to develop, an appeal for tea, so we could also look at the reasons for this uneven appropriation and at aspects of competition with other drinks, such as coffee.

Focus 2: Discourses on tea and infusions

From a linguistic point of view, these questions can be addressed through an analysis of terminologies, particularly from the point of view of borrowings (*umami* "flavor"). A discursive analysis of predicates denoting a long-term socio-historical anchorage ("authentic", "original", "traditional") also raises many questions, whether these labels are applied to teas that have not been processed after export (fr. "thés d'origine") or, even more so, whether they are used to designate blends produced in Europe (all. "Original Ostfriesentee", angl. "Original blend" etc.). What contexts trigger the use of these terms? What associative patterns can we isolate by means of a detailed analysis? Are there other, more discreet lexical transfers designed to "originalize" European or American consumer practices? Do we find, for example, references to a "tea ceremony" in Euro-American regions that is supposed to evoke an equivalence of tradition with Japan? Can these metaphorical transfers, in which Asian tea serves as a source domain, be extended to beverages other than the infusion of the *camelia sinensis* leaf?

Axis 3: Tea culture, wine culture: agricultural practices and their discourse

In the face of changing demand, supply needs to adapt, not only by increasing production, but also by diversifying origins and vintages, with a view to both food security and sustainable development. This has an impact on practices in the field (sustainable plantation management, innovations to promote organic production, etc.), but also on sales strategies (marketing new product ranges, focusing on young people). Another aspect could be the conditions under which tea is stored, which have had a major impact on its worldwide distribution.

In terms of discourse, “original” tea is not just a source domain, it's also a target domain. Its terminology is strongly marked by transfers of patterns from the field of oenology, starting with “grands crus”. Tea sommeliers” are also emerging. Descriptions of tea tastes and scents bear strong constructional similarities to the patterns described for wine. However, papers on the source domains mobilized in tea discourses will not be limited to transfers from the wine domain. We'll be looking in particular at the tension with other source-domains, especially the botanical domain linked to the centrality of the *camelia sinensis* object: thus, the type of plant will sometimes be described as a *cultivar* and sometimes as a *grape variety*.

Axis 4: Buying and describing tea objects: the development of a rich material culture

Tea is more than just a drink. It is, as we have seen, a vector of distinction, which is achieved through a rich material culture and display: kettles, teapots, samovars, bowls, containers, cups (etc.), all tangible products, inseparable from tea culture and a discourse anchored in a specific spatio-temporal context. For high-end ceramics, the production of utensils is rooted in ancestral know-how and/or innovative artistic practices, which constitute a veritable living cultural heritage. As a result, these goods are highly valued in artistic terms (as is the case with tea ceremony utensils), and fuel dynamic domestic and international trade, as can be seen in foreign trade data, world exhibitions and auction house archives. Like other cultural goods, they are subject to fluctuations in fashion (such as the wave of Japonism). In the visual arts, particular attention could be paid to the means of advertising which, through the evocation of tea, can contribute to conveying colonial stereotypes or creating an orientalist culture of tea.

The comparison with wine has its limits here, including at the discursive level. However, specialized discourses on tea are not limited to a linguistic appropriation of the sensory characteristics of the *camelia sinensis* infusion: specialized discourses can also be found around tea objects, and particularly art objects. The colloquium will therefore be open to any contribution relating to the terminology and discourses constructed around industrial and craft utensils formed from clay, kaolin or iron-carbon alloys.