



IN SEARCH OF NEW WAVE TEA CULTURE IN HUNGARY

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper is part of a wider study into the reinvention of tea culture, which naturally enough has its epicentre in China.¹ The upstream elements in high quality tea production are increasingly dominated by China, where the government is assiduously cultivating a stratified elite market as opposed to the proletarian uniformity of the past. As a result, the Chinese share of the world tea market has increased greatly in the last twenty years. However, we can see some similarities between China and Hungary in the downstream elements, marketing, and consumption, as the middle class in both societies has grown, opening the way to the development of more sophisticated tastes and consumption patterns. We can also see a political closeness along with a vibrant cultural connection between Hungary and China that has endured all the vicissitudes from the 1950s onwards.

This article sets forth to map out and explore recent changes to Hungarian tea life and the emergence of a tea culture of a radically different nature to the one which preceded it. This ‘version’ will be referred to as ‘new wave tea’ culture as an homage to ‘third wave coffee’, a term coined by Trish R Skeie, which is mostly called ‘new wave coffee’ in Hungary for reasons described below (2003). By virtue of their similarity, coffee, and the changes it underwent in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s will be used as a comparator for those that have been happening to tea. The reason for this is quite simple: although both cultures started to transform around the same time, third wave coffee’s epicentre was already in Europe, while the renaissance of tea commenced in Asia. This resulted in a slight time-lag between the points when these two processes had their impact on the wider European community, therefore most people will have already become familiar with some of the changes in question. In addition, as will be explained, coffee is a product more deeply embedded in European culture than tea, a fact which, among others, translates into more coffee-houses than tea-houses. Consequently, people are generally more exposed to and aware of its changes.

The paper comprises four main topics, each divided into a number of sub-sections. First, there is a delineation of the history of tea in Hungary — from its first appearance, through its changing cultural and social status, to initial criticism and other inhibiting circumstances surrounding it. Then, after a comparative overview of the place, function, and legacy of both coffee and tea in European culture from a historical perspective, there will be a brief exploration of third wave coffee, its most notable

¹ Initially intended as a future follow-up study, the present research was brought forward in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The original research proposal, titled *Invented Tradition: Tea in Modern Chinese Culture* was designed to examine how “the blending of historic traditions [is] used in modern China as a means of soft power to promote Chinese interests on the global stage [...], investigate in what ways the Chinese government drives and supports a large-scale process of social engineering and global self-branding with the vehicle of tea, [and] analyse how and why this ‘tradition invention’ is being carried out and what role it plays in current politics in China”.

achievements, its influence vis-à-vis tea, and the unique features that set it apart from earlier manifestations. This is followed by an analysis of how new wave tea culture came into being in Hungary: following its early symbiosis with Bohemian tea life, the driving forces behind its growing popularity, the appearance of specialty teahouses and their impact on Hungarian tea consumption and culinary life. Finally, before concluding the study, China's role in the rise of this new cultural product as well as the subsequent independence of tea from its origins, the ensuing fusion with a wide range of influences, and the cultural implications of this process are examined. The research is based on the work of earlier scholars, my own first-hand experience of working in a Budapest-based specialty teahouse, as well as new data collected from public databases and through fieldwork, consisting of participant observation, an online questionnaire, in-person interviews, and online interviews conducted via Zoom.²

TEA'S HISTORICAL RECEPTION IN HUNGARY

Tea was first brought to Hungary from the Dutch via the Germans sometime in the second half of the 17th century. In her exploration of the history of Hungarian tea culture, *A tea kultúrtörténete* [The Cultural History of Tea], Anikó S Nagy writes that:

“the changes associated with the emergence of the bourgeoisie reached the western parts of Hungary relatively soon due to its proximity to Vienna as well as to the German citizenry of many towns in West-Hungary. Although, it was not until several decades later that the ‘Neuer Mode’ felt its effects in the eastern areas of the country” (1999, 51).

Indeed, Germanophone culture had a defining influence on Hungarian culture, from 1526 (Battle of Mohács), when the Austrian House of Habsburg ascended the Hungarian throne, up until the end of the First World War in 1918, when Austria-Hungary was officially dissolved by decree of the Trianon Peace Treaty. It is unsurprising that Hungarian tea culture's primal source of inspiration should be the teahouses-turned confectionaries of Vienna. Interestingly, the Viennese fashion also served as a role model for the first coffee-houses in the early 17th century, to be then followed by its English and subsequently French adaptations (Oldenburg 1999, 144–45).

At first, tea was a rare luxury commodity, only available to the wealthy. As a curiosity, it became a symbol of prestige, a delicacy offered at elegant receptions — events of this kind are recounted in

² The online questionnaire was filled out by 220 participants between the 25th and 31st of January 2021; in-person interviews took place between the 27th of September and 5th of October 2020; and online interviews were held between the 8th and 11th of February 2021; in total 13 people participated in the interviews, which were all semi-structured with a duration of an hour on average. Participants were contacted through tea houses, tea societies (both on- and offline), friends, and social media.

Marcel Proust's famous opus, *In Search of Lost Time* (Proust 2017) in great detail, for instance. In a Hungarian manual of etiquette from 1884, *thé-soirées* are described as formal but intimate events, typically given by the mistress of the house for a smaller company (Kalocsa 1884, 495–500). Further on, when tea eventually started to percolate to the lower strata of society, critics of the new craze abounded, deeming it a superfluous and wasteful whim of fancy. It was not until tea was 'taken in' by cake shops and confectionaries as per the Viennese fashion that it started to gain ground outside the circles of the elite. Yet, although this association greatly contributed to the spread and growing popularity of tea, given the predominantly female clientele of these establishments, it also endowed the beverage with a feminine connotation³, which inhibited the expansion of tea to the masculine domains that were dominated by coffee (S-Nagy 1999, 51–58).

Because of its earlier start — about a good century —, by the 19th century coffee had contributed appreciably to the region's social as well as its cultural and culinary life, whereas tea seemed only to be another quotidian necessity. In the westward-looking cultural life of Hungary in the 19th century, the reverence for French (Parisian, chiefly) artistic life and its close ties to coffee-houses elevated these establishments to an unrivalled level of prestige. And while in the great age of coffee-houses⁴ there were notable Hungarian authors (among them Mór Jókai and Kálmán Mikszáth, for instance), who were known to be keen tea drinkers, they were more of an odd minority rather than something *à la mode*. This is not to say that French- and later English-style tea culture had not taken root in the Hungarian food scene, but it was certainly of secondary importance. Records show that well into the 20th century, there was still about ten times as much coffee consumed in Hungary as tea (S-Nagy 1999,

³ While the scope of this study does not allow for a direct discussion on the issue of gender, it seems befitting to dedicate a few words to the topic. Gender inequity and discrimination regarding the production side of both the tea and coffee industries as well as within such fields as gastronomy have been fertile research domains for some time (Cf.: Debarati Sen's *Everyday Sustainability: Gender Justice and Fair-trade Tea in Darjeeling* (2017); Sarah Lyon's *We Want To Be Equal to Them* (2008); the International Coffee Organisation's (ICO) review *Gender Equality in the Coffee Sector* (2018); Deborah Harris & Patti Giuffre's *Taking the Heat* (2015)). Yet, the consumers' end is still relatively under-studied, especially in the case of tea and its most recent history. Apart from the serving staff consisting mostly of women, teahouses were traditionally characterised by an overwhelmingly female clientele on account of their past linkage with cakeshops, as will be shown later. In most traditional teashops (in the European context) this remains so up until today. However, thanks to current trends, which strive to challenge gender stereotypes in virtually all areas of life by highlighting preconceptions that continue to define and distort our perception of practically any given topic, in certain domains of the industry there appears to be a notion of consciously tackling these biases. Within the context of the new wave teahouse, the meeting of a conventionally feminine product (tea) with a male-dominated industry (gastronomy) has prompted changes, which have resulted in a relative gender equilibrium in terms of personnel and customers alike. Although this issue could not be integrated into the present article, it would be worthwhile to explore it from a global perspective, with a more holistic approach.

⁴ The 18th and 19th century's social, cultural, and literary life in Hungary revolved around the coffee-house; it was a living and meeting place as well as an office; the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848 started in a coffee-house; the era's most renowned authors from Sándor Petőfi and Endre Ady, through Dezső Kosztolányi and Ferenc Karinthy, to Gyula Krúdy and Sándor Márai, have immortalised the coffee-house culture in poems, short stories, and novels (Droste 1996; Sánta 1996; Csapó 1996).

56–58; 101–9). The first notable change in Hungarian tea culture came with its independence from the Soviet Union in 1989, but more of that later.

In addition, the deep-rooted tradition of drinking tisanes may also have prevented tea from claiming an autonomous territory. On account of its medical associations, tea was — and, in fact, often still is — conceived as another herb, rather than a distinct culinary product and as such it was sold in pharmacies as medicine (Gáti 1983); hence its Hungarian name, *'teafű'*, derived from *'gyógyfű'*, which literally translates to 'tea grass' and 'curing grass [herb]'. The association of tea with medicine is also evident in the first tea-related Hungarian volume, *A' kávé, thé és csokoládé* [Coffee, tea, and chocolate], which was written by the esteemed 19th century linguist and physician, Pál Almási-Balogh. Although this piece gives a lengthy account of the medical and dietetic use of the tea plant, it scarcely touches upon its history or cultural and culinary significance, unlike in the case of coffee and chocolate (Almási-Balogh 1831, 179–253). During my interview with Anna Wagner, owner of Flying Bird Teashop, she suggested that this association is a hindrance to the popularisation of tea for it binds the beverage to such childhood memories as the (compulsory) herbal infusions that children are often given when sick. This is also true of the general 'child-friendliness' of it, Wagner argues, because

“everyone counts the days until they turn 18 and then they will start drinking wine, whisky, coffee, [and] by that time, of course, they are not interested in tea. [...] So, if it were the case that one couldn't drink tea before they are 18, only after, tea would gain a pretty different status. [...] Here in Europe, tea is not so much of an adult drink. Everything else is” (2020).

COFFEE AS A MODEL

The fact that coffee culture was internalised before tea is manifest in the very naming of the establishment where these beverages (coffee, tea, and even chocolate) were consumed: the coffee-house. Even though tea was regularly consumed and was, by the 18th century, a standard commodity — nay, a necessity — it was always a coffee-house where tea was served and seldom vice-versa. (M. Ellis, Coulton, and Mauger 2015, 179–96). It should be noted that this phenomenon still persists; while tea is often served in traditional and specialty coffee places alike, coffee is rarely included on the menu of teahouses, irrespective of their level of specialty.

The ultimate reason, if there is such, for coffee's dominance over tea in continental Europe as an everyday necessity is not the primary concern of this article, hence it will be dealt with only very briefly. Since recent developments in the world of coffee are used in the present article to illustrate certain changes in tea culture, some of its characteristic features need to be taken into account.

In addition to its relative antecedence to tea⁵, perhaps coffee owes its dominance to the early coffee-house cultures of England⁶ and France, which were greatly influenced by the “congenial, club-like atmosphere [of the Ottoman Empire’s coffee-houses] that combined leisure and business in an almost exclusively male environment” (Intile 2007, 14). Tea may also have been disadvantaged because, up until the 19th century, its source was externally controlled by the Chinese, who wished to prevent such a valuable asset from being produced elsewhere (Rappaport 2017, 24). As a result, in both its price and availability, it was less reliable than coffee, whose monopoly, formerly controlled by the Ottoman Empire, was already broken by the 17th century (Intile 2007, 10–12).

Although initially men-only establishments — women were but respected barmaids⁷ —, thanks to their relaxed ambiance, where “not only was one in a ragged coat free to sit betwixt the belted earl and the gartered bishop, [but] was assured that these worthies would answer him in civil terms”, relatively early on coffee-houses, or ‘*bistros*’ as the French pavement cafés were called, became important platforms of change (Oldenburg 1999, 144–45, 185–86; Clery 1991, 170). They were liberal places, characterised by social inclusion, where the nob and the yob may mingle; women, too, were gradually admitted and included in these realms. Thanks to their innately progressive atmosphere, coffee-houses allowed their frequenters to speak more freely of matters that would otherwise be considered private — thus these places became venues of intellectual life and political discourse, which also earned them the humorous nickname ‘penny universities’ (M. Ellis 2009, 3; Intile 2007, 2–3; A. Ellis 1956). Moreover, coffee-houses, like Jonathan’s Coffee House or the Garraways in London, for instance, can also be regarded as the predecessors of the modern stock exchange (Michie 1999, 20, 31; Intile 2007, 3). In addition to attracting new customers, these trends also lured newspapers to these establishments, for both in political debates and commercial dealings, access to reliable and up-to-date news was of utmost importance. And so the precursors of home delivery subscriptions and the first forerunners of public libraries came into being (Oldenburg 1999, 185).

⁵ Coffee was first brought to Eastern-Europe with the westward expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the mid-16th century. Conversely, France, England, and the Netherlands were only colonised by coffee about a century later, still before the first appearance of tea, thanks to the visits of Turkish ambassadors, who brought coffee as gifts. The first Western-European coffee-house opened in Oxford in 1650 (Kisbán 1988, 149). Tea found its way to the first elite circles of the Dutch around 1660’s (Intile 2007, 10–12; Schlegel 1900). Given its geographical location, Hungary was very early on exposed to the expanding Turkish coffee culture (Kisbán 1988, 152–53).

⁶ An excerpt in Erika Rappaport’s article mentions Samuel Pepys discovering tea in a London coffee-house in 1660, suggesting that, while coffee had already become an established commodity, one that was accessible to most social strata, tea was only becoming to be known and was still a luxury item, as per Pepys’ 1667 journal entry, where he writes that [he and his wife] “both paid a great deal for their tea” (Rappaport 2017, 23).

⁷ As opposed to pubs and various other social establishments, where female staff were often exposed to the sexual advances of their customers and taken advantage of (Clery 1991, 172–73).

'NEW WAVE' COFFEE RENAISSANCE

As hinted at in the introduction, the coining of the term 'third wave coffee' is owed to Trish R Skeie, who, in a newsletter to the Roasters Guild in 2003, wrote "First Wave, Second Wave, Third Wave: this is how I think of contemporary coffee", whilst talking about the 2002 World Coffee Championship in Oslo and recent novelties that emerged on the Norwegian coffee scene around that time (Skeie 2003). What she describes in her review of the Championship is a strikingly similar process to what has been happening to tea more recently. Skeie recounts how mass market coffee brought down prices, made poor quality commonplace, standardised its taste, removing subtle distinctions in coffee; she emphasises that the way forward is to reverse and avoid this approach (2003). And indeed, the importance of tea leaves' inherent qualities, shaped by climate, terroir, cultivar, and many more factors, which were previously blurred during production by the homogenising effect of excessive oxidation and baking / roasting, are today at the core of many artisan tea producers' endeavours. Similarly, prices are no longer kept at the lowest possible — quite the contrary, in fact, as tea shops are often trying to consciously drive up the acceptable price maximum so that the importation of higher quality teas stays feasible.

Direct sourcing is also a key feature of both trends. For tea it is an unprecedented novelty. As for coffee, even though second wave coffee already benefited from the idea of single origin coffee, it mostly extended no further than mentioning the country of origin, perhaps with some additional information on regional characteristics, but seldom reaching the point of having a single farm, or Heaven forbid, alternatively processed coffee beans. Now, blends are also disappearing from many coffee and tea shops' selections and are replaced by small bags with such information as the mountain of origin, altitude, varietal, and similar distinctive details.

Tim Wendelboe, the Norwegian World Barista and Tasting Champion describes third wave as the "no rules' approach to coffee", which I think is an excellent way of describing new wave tea culture as well: something that has limitless sources of influence and no rules whatsoever (Skeie 2003). In a way, disregarding basic rules is much closer to the natural characteristics of tea than to those of coffee. Shop owners and tea drinkers alike have articulated a general preference for tea, because of its inherent liberal quality.

"In the case of tea, [the right preparation] is much more intangible, so there are no very strict rules here. [...] So, you kind of have to get the hang of it. It's difficult to put it into words and rules." remarked Gábor Nemes, the manager of 1000tea (2020).

TEA RENAISSANCE

With the fall of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991 and the preceding years of gradual independence of its former satellites, a new era dawned on Eastern European tea culture. Needless to say, it was by no means a quick process. Since wine or beer were a great deal more integral parts of Hungarian life with their history inextricably woven into that of their host culture, it was only natural that wine, for instance, should be among the first to have a specialised market of its own⁸ and soon turn into a fashionable artisan commodity. Coffee's case was slightly different from both wine and tea. On the one hand, the coffee-house culture was of paramount importance in defining and shaping the cultural and social life of 19th and 20th century Hungary. On the other, due to the Soviet Occupation (1945 - 1989), there was a major delay in the arrival of the so-called 'second wave' of coffee culture. In fact, with Hungary's opening up to international commerce in the early 90's, it arrived almost hand in hand with the then budding third wave. In the resulting amalgam, these two, otherwise distinct approaches to coffee cannot be clearly separated, hence the use of a collective term, 'new wave coffee'. Tea, however, had neither a history rivalling that of wine, nor the cultural gravity of coffee. Consequently, tea culture still had a long way ahead until it could eventually overstep its conventional position and break free from the limits of tea bags.

In Hungary, a key player in what is referred to as 'new wave' tea culture in this article was the Czech Dobra Čajovna, a quasi-franchise teahouse chain⁹ originating in Prague. Possibly owing to the poor tea supplies, in Czechoslovakia (non-herbal) tea did not enjoy great popularity. It was a fringe commodity, a drink of the youth and, by the same token, preferring it to beer and coffee was a sort of rebellion against the conservative norms and the prevailing beer and herbal infusion culture of the Czech — a peaceful protest, so to speak. Perhaps for this reason, it was often in teahouses that the young intelligentsia gathered and held their meetings prior to the Velvet Revolution and the ensuing Regime Change in 1989, whereupon the first teahouse opened in Prague, baptised with the name Dobra Čajovna, meaning 'good tea'. It so happens that Dobra Čajovna was the very channel through which, as a foreign franchisee to the company, 1000tea — the first teahouse in Hungary that could retrospectively be called 'new wave' — was established.

Prior to the said regime change, there was a unique symbiotic relationship between the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian tea scene. During our interview, Gábor Nemes recalled how Czech tea

⁸ Budapest Wine Society was formed in 1993, then, with the opening of its first shop in Batthyány Street, it assumed a Hungarian name, 'Budapest Bortársaság' in 1995. The chain continues to be an influential player on contemporary Hungarian wine scene to date.

⁹ Every teahouse gets their supplies through an 'official' source and all staff are trained by same team, but apart from this, every tea house has a slightly different style, designed according to their owners' taste and preferences.

enthusiasts used to smuggle tea across the border between Hungary and Czechoslovakia during the Soviet occupation, coming on night trains from Prague and returning with their backpacks full of tea (2020). After the late 1950s and early 1960s, Czechoslovakia's relations with the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC) became increasingly strained — principally as a result of the growing tension between the USSR and the PRC on account of their markedly different approach to Marxism¹⁰ — which also entailed a schism in their commercial cooperation, leading to general shortages in Chinese tea supplies (Skrivan 2011, 313–14). Conversely, Hungary, like Romania or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) for instance, was on good diplomatic terms with the PRC and, unsurprisingly, there were no issues with tea supplies (Skrivan 2011, 318–22). Yet, unlike in Czechoslovakia, tea did not evolve into a notable subculture in Hungary, notwithstanding the access to relatively high-quality tea. As told by Dobra Čajovna, their story

“[began] in Prague during the last few years of Communism, where as a group of young tea lovers began meeting to sample rare Indian, Chinese and Japanese teas smuggled into Czechoslovakia. Because of a shortage of foreign currency, high quality teas were then available exclusively to the Party, State and Military elite. Then came the “Velvet Revolution” and the Fall of Communism in 1989. In 1992, “The Society of Tea Devotees,” was formed and the following year [the] first Bohemian-style tearoom, Dobrá Čajovna, opened in Prague. The Čajovna (tearoom) became a shelter, a place for safety, where like-minded individuals could gather and taste the world of tea. Much success blossomed with Dobrá's idea and the company began to spread its tea concept to many small towns throughout Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary” (United Nations 2021).

The growing popularity of tea culture had similar causes to that of coffee, which was

“partly the result of the emergence of creative economies, the corresponding concentration of highly educated individuals with a lifestyle focused on consumption, and the development of new forms of modern urbanity” (Rath and Gelmers 2015, 123).

But most importantly, its spread was aided by the return of the bourgeoisie and the growing purchasing power of the average customer. Once independent from the USSR, with the rapid marketisation and steady growth of the GDP — of which the private sector provided an ever-expanding share¹¹ —, an increasing proportion of Hungarian society came to have enough leisure and money to pick up and invest in new hobbies. As a result, along with various cultural segments such as music or theatre, hobbies like gastronomy slowly started gaining in popularity. The forthcoming culinary boom embraced formerly neglected products, like wine, beer, coffee, or, indeed, tea (Bozóki and Simon 2010, 217–19).

¹⁰ Cf. Henry Perritt's seminar notes on *Stalin & Mao: Marxism Two Ways* and James Gregor & Maria Chang's *Maoism and Marxism in Comparative Perspective* (1978).

¹¹ Domestic credit to public sector almost tripled between 1995 and 2010 ('Domestic Credit to Private Sector (% of GDP) - Hungary' 2019).

This process is still well underway and the changes within the domestic tea scene are driven both by a general tendency towards more sophistication and by the changes happening to the international tea market, which are discussed further below. The growing level of refinement, in terms of consumption habits, is manifest in the wide range of goods mentioned above. More and more farmers' markets appear, specialty coffee culture is flourishing with superb micro-roasters and highly trained baristas, and craft breweries, artisan bakeries, and natural wine merchants are thriving. There has also been a growing popularity of artisan potteries, which provide locally produced, high-quality utensils for tea and coffee shops; these workshops often combine authentic East Asian styles with local clay types as well as glazing- and firing-techniques.

NEW WAVE TEA HOUSES

After the regime change, 1000tea was the first non-traditional (in the European sense) tea house to be set up in Hungary in 1996. Since it opened its doors to the public, it has kept its original location in the up-scale, tourism-centred Váci Street in downtown Budapest, although it has expanded noticeably within the building, first by buying the next-door apartment, then extending its rooms into the basement below. Thereafter, it was not until 2000 that another teahouse, called Tea Útja (Road of Tea) was established in Hungary by the Szentirmai Éva, who remained a defining character in the local tea circles to-date. With its high-quality *wulong*s and *puers*, which were first of their kind in the country, Tea Útja was a real watershed in the history of Hungarian tea culture. Unfortunately, the level of specialty, which was also mirrored by the prices, was way ahead of its time and so the teahouse was forced to close shortly after its sixth anniversary. In a reminiscence of the teahouse, it was described as “an incredible place, incredibly early, in a hostile environment” (‘Tea Útja [Road of Tea]’ 2021). In 2001, it was followed by Carpe Diem, later controversially renamed as Tea Útja in Debrecen. The first breakthrough came with the opening of a series of new teahouses, which started appearing both in the capital and elsewhere at a steady, albeit slow pace. However, this first flourishing of new teahouses came to be a short-lived one, with just Flying Bird surviving the first 2-3 years of opening. Although Aranyhold (Goldenmoon, sic.), Fehér Felhő (White Cloud), Marumoto, and Hanami — just to name but a few — all managed to carve out their own clientele — some of whom form the core of today’s Hungarian tea connoisseurs — retrospectively it seems that the tea milieu of the time had not yet reached a size, where it could support such diversity in the long run. Similarly to the case of the first Tea Útja, this inevitably resulted in the closing of most of the aforesaid venues. The 2008 economic crisis and the ensuing recession were also among the unfortunate circumstances that thwarted the teahouses’ struggle for survival. The third wave of teahouses came with the regained

economic stability of the mid-2010s, whereupon a new set of teahouses opened: Levél Teaház (Leaf Teahouse) in 2013, Zhao Zhou (趙州) a year after, and finally Ye Tea Leaves and Teavolution in 2017 — although by that time the latter had already been running an online shop for two years.

1000tea's initial success and the relatively long lapse that followed are likely due to the connection and support — both financial and organisational — of its parent franchise, the above-mentioned Czech Dobra Čajovna. Without such a heartland to support a nascent venture, new teahouses had to wait for the expansion of the pool of potential customers whence they may build a regular clientele. Once this critical mass was achieved, the newly proliferating tea houses established their distinct image by specialising in certain segments of the market. Having settled in comfortably, they also started looking for new directions for possible development and soon they found their way beyond conventional teahouse domains and wandered off into the realms of fine dining. Gastronomy, having recently witnessed the transformation of coffee culture, readily embraced this budding tea renaissance. Before too long, *cafés*, *bistros*, and hip brunch places, as well as Michelin star restaurants or luxury hotels decided to freshen up their tea menu and ditch classic commercial tea brands in favour of newly established specialty teahouse products.

Apart from their alternative positioning and relationship with other establishments on the market, these new wave teahouses also had a different approach to the social functions of tea. Unlike traditional European tea houses, which appear to primarily serve as working or intimate meeting places in a similar fashion to how coffee chains, like Starbucks function, new wave tea houses come across much closer to Ray Oldenburg's concept of 'third place' — home being the 'first' and workplace the 'second' —, "where individuals regularly, voluntarily, informally and happily get together", than to a venue of 'civil inattention'¹², embodied by the aforementioned coffee chain and classic European teahouses (Oldenburg 1999; Rath and Gelmers 2015, 127). As such, they fall more closely in line with the purpose of traditional Chinese teahouses¹³ that primarily functioned as social hubs, where people would socialise, often regardless of prior acquaintance. Naturally, this is not to say that there are no people working in these establishments, nor that their social role would be more defining than their professional function.

Despite being vibrant hubs of a wide range of communities as well as excellent sources of tea and tea-related knowledge, some of the teahouses (e.g., Carpe Diem in Debrecen or Marumoto in Budapest) have ceased to exist in their physical form as actual teahouses and instead moved their ventures

¹² Cf. 'civil inattention' in Erving Goffman's *Relations in Public, Microstudies of the Public Order* (1971).

¹³ Cf. *Teahouse* (茶馆), a play written by Lao She (老舍) in 1957 gives a detailed and fascinating account of what role teahouses fulfilled in traditional Chinese culture (2004).

entirely online. Retaining their commercial and informational aspects in the form of web stores and blogs they continue to operate to date. On the one hand this ‘moving online’ might suggest an unviable business model, while on the other, it could be an indicator of a ‘big enough’ patronage — the next step after the initial growth, which allowed new teahouses to open in the first place — that even with the social and, for some, functional (e.g., work- or study-sphere) aspects gone it can still support the existence of the brand. This ‘big enough patronage’ is confirmed in the results of the questionnaire that show that by now, similarly to traditional teas, the main specialty tea drinking scene is people’s homes. 99.5% of those asked drink tea at home on a regular basis, and only 27% and 20% do so in traditional or specialty teahouses, respectively. Furthermore, 98% have tea more often at home than in teahouses and 66% of them said they ‘seldom’ or ‘infrequently’ go to teahouses. As such, the new wave tea culture — at least some aspects of it — can also be regarded as the rediscovering of a social event that was lost to the war and the ensuing Soviet occupation of Hungary: the tea receptions of the bourgeoisie, where people would meet to talk and socialise in a relaxed and casual manner. Although it is markedly less formal than its predecessor, a sense of the extra-ordinary — in so far as it goes beyond the sheer notion of sipping a mug of tea amidst commonplace sofa chatter — is retained, nonetheless.

With this ‘big enough’ patronage certain questions are bound to arise: how big is this patronage exactly?, how does the revenue of these teahouses compare to the Hungarian tea market in its entirety?, does it have an economic influence worth mentioning? While prior to 2010 specialty teahouses accounted for less than 1% of Hungary’s total tea-commerce, by 2019 this had risen to at least¹⁴ 3%¹⁵. Negligible though this may seem, it is quick and steady growth, especially considering that it is just a few relatively small teahouses that are responsible for it. It is also worth noting how Hungarian tea imports correlate with the pattern of such tea-exporters as China, Taiwan, Japan, India, or Sri Lanka. While the general growth of both Hungary’s imports and the aforementioned countries’ exports could on the international level be attributed to population (or GDP) growth, in Hungary’s case it is certainly not so, since the country’s population has been in steady, albeit slow decline since 1993.

¹⁴ Some of the teahouses wished not to share their annual tea-related revenues and therefore cannot be included in these figures.

¹⁵ See appendix 2.

CHINESE INFLUENCE ON THE MOVEMENT UP MARKET

In his analysis of recent changes in modern Chinese tea culture¹⁶, Lawrence Zhang describes an intricate process of tradition invention, which has been driven by various key actors in the Chinese tea scene — from consumers and collectors, through producers and merchants, to the Chinese government and other large stakeholders in the Chinese domestic and international economy (Zhang 2016). This not only resulted in the re-shaping of a cultural commodity (tea) into a distinctly Chinese product — as opposed to the prevalent English tea culture that was associated with tea and continued to define the international tea market for the most part —, but by developing a more uniform, thus identifiable product image, tea also became an increasingly sought-after exotic on the international market. As the tea boom is primarily driven by China, and as a response by Taiwan and Japan, eventually outpacing Sri Lanka and India in the course of the past 5 years¹⁷, it suggests that these countries' effort to reclaim tea as a fundamentally East-Asian — Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese — product does, in fact, translate into tangible economic changes.

This sudden rise of China's presence on the international tea scene resulted in a rapid price boom. Japan and Taiwan have long been producers of fine teas, selling at a high, albeit stable prices alongside the relatively cheap low quality Chinese teas, most of which were sold to international companies, like Lipton. With China's entrance into the upper tier of tea commerce, the previous equilibrium has been lost. Having to compete with its rivals in terms of quality and dependability, China needed to mobilise a wide range of assets to support its tea industry — governmental aids, through tea contests with merchants and local governments cooperating, official media coverage, etc. (Tan and Ding 2010, 122; 130–31; Sturgeon 2012, 117–21; Ma and Hu 2020). This, in turn, prompted its competitors to expand production, further enhancing quality, and strengthening their media presence, all of which added to the growth of global tea exports, which, then, enabled this proto-new-wave tea to be exported to a growing number of countries. Due to the sudden emergence of this higher-grade tea on the global market, consumers were confronted with the immense difference between the quality of these novel loose-leaf teas and that of the “good old” teabags', which enabled the former to be sold at relatively high prices. Thus, despite production growth, the cost of tea continued to rise steadily. The introduction of such labels as 'hand-picked', 'organic', or 'fair trade' further stimulated the price contest; with an ever-growing popularity, tea found its way to an increasing number of hitherto 'unconquered' territories, a process akin to that of third wave coffee culture, which also underwent

¹⁶ These changes were initiated by the abolition of the Chinese Government's monopoly on tea trading in 1987 (Tan and Ding 2010, 127–31).

¹⁷ See appendix 1.

similar changes whereby the importance of such parameters as terroir, cultivar, altitude, and sundry other characteristics became more and more widely accepted (Sturgeon 2012, 113).

Globalisation and the rising awareness of faraway lands and their cultures have been another propagating influence. In Hungary, the sudden upsurge in Asian martial arts — taiji (太极拳) in particular, thanks to its holistic approach and emphasis on spiritual and noetic balance — has contributed tremendously to the prospering of Chinese and Japanese tea cultures, leading to the formation of small tea drinking communities. Members of the same *dōjō* (道場) would often meet and 'wind up' to the forthcoming training in tea houses, hence these groups quickly became gateways to the new wave tea culture. At first, these people (and those introduced to tea by them) had a tendency to treat tea-drinking as a quasi-religious practice. But as time went by, people of more diverse backgrounds became acquainted with the unfamiliar tea culture and so the milieu gradually started to loosen up. This diversification brought about a need for new teahouses of more colourful background, where people not directly related to Asian culture would not feel excluded. Moreover, it also engendered a fundamental change in the perception of tea in the eyes of those frequenting these teahouses and, with time, even outside these quarters. This way, from a quasi-sacred beverage that stood above all else, tea turned into something similar to other refined commodities, such as coffee, wine, or even whisky and rum. Richard Paterson and Roger Kern befittingly call such processes the transformation from 'highbrow snob to cultural omnivore' (1996).

Yet, despite this Chinese tradition-centred upheaval in tea life, it appears that most cultures interpret, adopt, and react to the influx of this re-fashioned tea culture in slightly (or at times significantly) different ways. This is also coupled with the average drinkers' general lack of active engagement with the cultural circumstances of a given tea. Even some of the most avid tea drinkers whom I asked about their tea drinking habits agreed that while they thought it imperative that a given tea be prepared 'as it is supposed to be' — i.e., that the right 'tea : water' ratio, temperature, steeping time, etc. be used —, the awareness of its cultural surroundings is of a lower priority. Furthermore, although more than half of regular tea drinkers are conscious of the fact that there is a distinct culture behind each and every kind of tea, most of them show little interest in connecting with or learning more about that particular culture. Whilst the majority of those who know about the existence of the aforesaid cultures confirm having come across tea-related articles, only a third of them read more than everyday magazine articles, and fewer than 20% have participated in any form of tea education. As a result, notwithstanding its Chinese origins, local tea cultures seem to develop largely independently from any concrete cultural influence and evolve into distinct local cultural products; the only reminiscence of its origin is usually a commonly-known tag showing the approximate place whence it comes (e.g. China

and Taiwan, or Yunnan and Fujian, etc.). This shows that tea, as many other culinary products, is not inseparable from its original cultural surrounding — quite the contrary. During our conversation with Anna Wagner, she commented on this question that

“first and foremost it was tea as a refined beverage that caught my attention, rather than [tea as] something that is a part of Chinese culture” (2020).

Rather than an interest in Asian cultures, it is a growing culinary awareness that drives the development in question. Thus, the cultural background of a given tea is but additional knowledge for the curious mind and not something that teahouses are compelled to cater for. This, then, allows for greater liberty in fashioning the venue and the general image thereof. And, as expected, in the Budapest tea scene, where most teahouses in Hungary are located, every teahouse has a distinct character, which is expressed by its tea selection, design, media presence, and general ambiance. In such a tea drinking milieu, there is an evident disparity between those approaching tea as a culinary product with a vast cultural hinterland and those who are predominantly concerned with its functions (e.g., warm, healthy, stimulating, etc.). This is underpinned by both my interviews and the questionnaire conducted as part of the present research. While, in general, the former group is only bound by a given budget, the latter tends not to attempt — or may lack the ability — to overcome their limits in tasting.

In a somewhat similar vein, there is also a vast discrepancy between the types of tea, culture, knowledge, or general attitude that Hungarians (and Europeans in general) seek and those that the Chinese are wanting to sell, which took me by surprise. Tea drinkers and teahouse employees alike have confirmed that in addition to a coffee-alternative or alcohol-alternative, what many people are looking for in specialty tea is simplicity through a plain and refined delicacy — an accompaniment to a slower, mindful, and health-conscious life. Yet, despite an otherwise lively cultural connection, the Chinese completely fail to notice this and keep advertising tea with spectacular performances, showy accessories, opulent packaging, and a general air of exotic mystery. Furthermore, there is also a growing demand for quality *puer* tea (普洱茶), a special type of tea native to Yunnan (云南) Province in South-China, which remains mostly unacknowledged and unexploited amidst the intense campaigns, which almost exclusively focus on promoting such delicate green teas as Bi Luo Chun (碧螺春), Longjing (龙井), or Anji Bai (安吉白).

A NEW APPROACH

Where China undeniably and inevitably holds the position of ‘trend setter’ is in tea sourcing; for anyone who wishes to embark on a Chinese tea sourcing journey it is essential to be familiar with the ‘Chinese way’ of conducting (tea) business, otherwise they risk being cheated and scammed by traders, translators, and other middlemen. The same is true for Taiwan, Japan, or any other tea growing country, but the Chinese tea market is especially notorious for its lack of transparency. A characteristic feature of new wave tea culture is tea hunting, that is: the quest for unique tea gardens in the remotest of tea growing areas. A by-product of the search for single-origin and direct sourcing, tea hunting is a fairly complex phenomenon: it is a business model, a vocation, and a lifestyle. There are numerous indispensable layers to it, ranging from competence in the local language, through an extensive knowledge of and experience with tea, its cultivation, and processing, to the understanding of local social and cultural norms — and the list goes on. Owing to its complexity, there is no defined path to becoming a tea hunter. In his book *Wild Tea Hunter*, Jay Hunter, an American shop owner and tea hunter recalls how it was through countless mistakes and their conscious correction that he came to establish himself as a successful questor of tea, an account that resonates well with the inherent ‘trial & error’ nature of the genre (Hunter 2013, 38–43).

Teahouses that seek to deliver unique teas of the highest quality, knowing exactly where tea leaves come from, and how they were treated and processed, while also eliminating the cost of any intermediary, have but one viable option: to source the tea themselves. This is also true for utensils, for high-quality artisanal teapots are just as frequently counterfeited as the tea brewed in them. In addition to quality control, sourcing one’s own tea (or utensils) and ruling out any previous form of filtering also allows for a more precise selection process, whereby the final assortment will mirror the owner’s taste without the impact of external influences. As a result, the tea menu will be the reflection of the owner’s personality — the same goes for the design, equipment, or preferred brewing style of a teahouse. This not only enhances the business, but also contributes to a more colourful tea scene, since no two owners will have one hundred percent identical tastes, whereas there are only so many wholesale tea companies they can import tea and accessories from. In addition, self-sourced tea will also have a unique sense of first-hand experience to it.

“When we understand from which mountain, from whose farm, and from whose hands the tea we drink everyday originates (...) drinking the material substance of the tea evokes a new kind of lived imaginary (生活想象, shenghuo xiangxiang)”

— write the editors of *Country Road* (乡间小路, Xiangjian Xiaolu) magazine (Yan X 2012).

Apart from ensuring quality and the said sense of exclusiveness, another reason for locally sourcing one's tea is the growing awareness of the industry's environmental impact as well as its health effects. Mass produced tea is almost exclusively harvested from large plantations, which are bound to suffer from two major problems: monocultural farming and excessive use of chemicals. To maximise yield, tea plantations have a tendency to use every inch of a given area of land without having other plants to mitigate the destructive impact of the lack of biodiversity on the soil, leaving artificial fertilisers as the only means to forestall quick soil degradation. Moreover, in such plantations it is typical to use a single cultivar — with plants propagated from cuttings and not germinated from seeds it is more cost-effective —, which makes them prone to pests and disease thus necessitating the use of herbicides and pesticides as well. These chemicals not only destroy the land, but also affect the teas' taste and health effects (Hunter 2013, 44–72).

“Accounts of natural farming depict tea farmers as nurturing a fuller expression of tea plants' 'nature' (性, *xing*). Rather than forcing their crops to develop according to the standardising dictates of industrial agriculture, natural farmers typically limit their intervention in their fields to the clearing of weeds and grasses, which are then laid out to decompose and nurture the soil. Insects and other organisms that otherwise would be wiped out by pesticides are allowed to multiply. [...] Like other 'artisan' foods elsewhere (e.g. Paxson, 2012), producers and tastemakers who champion these methods are keen to represent taste as a co-production between humans and nature.” (Writer 2013, 138)

For this reason, there has been an increasing demand for organic teas but, because of their inherently small-scale and labour-intensive cultivation methods, they tend to have considerably higher prices and are more difficult to find — hence the need for local sourcing.

With access to a growing array of teas, new ways to define and categorise them are becoming increasingly important. Such categories are the age of the tea trees, their location, mode of cultivation, and many others, which were overlooked or ignored until quite recently. A new set of terminology has also started filtering through to Western tea circles; these include *gushu* tea (古树茶, teas coming from old trees), *yesheng* tea (野生茶, teas coming from wild-grown trees), *dancong* tea (单丛茶, single-bush tea¹⁸), or *zhengyan* tea (正岩茶, real rock tea¹⁹) to mention but a few.

Finally, there is an element of Chinese tea culture (which is present in other Eastern tea cultures as well, albeit to a varying degree) that is yet more difficult to comprehend for the West: the way tea influences the mind *and* the body. A myriad Chinese poems, Buddhist meditation instructions, and sundry other accounts have been written on these effects, but such information has seldom found its

¹⁸ Tea, mostly *wulong* tea (乌龙茶), where every batch is plucked from one single tree, or bush.

¹⁹ *Wulong* tea coming from the central parts of the protected Wuyi Mountain Scenic Area (武夷山景区).

way to the western ear. These phenomena are often referred to by the umbrella term *chaqi* (茶气, tea energy), which hints at its close association with traditional Chinese / Eastern medicine and philosophy. Some teahouses do take *chaqi* into account, especially when choosing or presenting teas. For instance, at the end of our interview with Gábor Tálos, owner of Zhao Zhou teahouse he added that

"for us it has always been about calmness, a peace of mind. This is what we use, and it transcends what we use: this is a famous *chan* (禪) saying²⁰. [...] So, for us the most important thing has always been *tigan zenmeyang* (体感怎么样), what the body-sensation is like, pay attention to yourself, what do you feel, what does the tea bring out of you. But most people are not there yet." (2020)

Nevertheless, these concepts are not widely understood and recognised just yet and are of secondary importance compared to tea types, growing regions, etc. for most consumers.

The change in tea selection and definition and the influx of unintelligible information has entailed a brand-new issue: the need to educate the public to justify the price increase this change has inevitably triggered as well as to provide them with the necessary knowledge for choosing the right tea and understanding the subtle differences between them. Despite the possible alienation of a certain proportion of the patronage, this change has turned out to be a marketing coup: instead of concealing or explaining away the price changes, some Hungarian tea houses took a bold approach and used it as a selling point. By taking the risk of such a potentially divisive step, they were able to position themselves at the top of the tea market thereby contributing to the elevation of tea to the level of fine dining as an unashamedly luxurious item. This refinement of an otherwise wide-spread commodity is appealing and conducive to "the upper-class propriety which treats taste as one of the surest signs of true nobility", whereby its cultural superiority is re-enforced (Bourdieu 1994, 11). With it there came the formation of a small but growing group of connoisseurs, similar to what Jan Rath and Wietze Gelmers describe with regards to third wave coffee enthusiasts, as follows:

"The coffee corner thus provides us not only with a view of a hitherto unknown world but also a podium to showcase one's in-depth knowledge and refined and developed taste" (Rath and Gelmers 2015, 124).

This, however, is yet to grow out of its preliminary phase, where connoisseurship is principally driven by snobbery, and turn into a less pretentious and more casual trend of tea appreciation, where the aforementioned cultural omnivores dominate the tea scene.

²⁰ Originally appears in a record of the meeting of two Tang dynasty *chan* masters, Baizhang (百丈懷海, Baizhang Huaihai, 720-814) and Mazu (马祖道一, Mazu Daoyi, 709-788); 即此用離此用; *ji ci yong, li ci yong* (Miaozong and Grant 2017, 80).

Despite the growing number of connoisseurs, the sudden influx of hitherto unknown data still proves to be difficult to handle by a significant proportion of customers. With many people lacking adequate knowledge and the necessary tea-related experience, it remains a great challenge to extract meaning from these novel terms, which are often derived from Chinese words, as exemplified above. This necessitates more extensive endeavours at customer education, lest tea be stuck forever in the extravagant luxury category. In our conversation with Tamás Tardy from Levél Teaház [Leaf Teahouse] we briefly touched upon this issue. Tardy remarked that

“it is apparent that the demand for information on tea has grown considerably. But I also sense that only a very small number of people can make sense of all the data in a way that it can become information with real meaning” (2020).

Teahouses tackle this issue in various ways. Some hold tea classes, where those interested in expanding their tea knowledge can learn about tea culture in general, or specific tea types (shaded Japanese green teas, for instance) and growing regions (like the Phoenix Mountains [鳳凰山, Fenghuang shan], home of the fragrant *dancong wulong*s). Others write articles or online blog posts on topics ranging from tea hunting experiences, through rare cultivars and new fashions in tea utensils, to the clever method of water temperature approximation by the size of air bubbles. In addition, there are interviews with culinary magazines, and there is also a precedent for printed materials, although it seems to be less widespread a practice for the time being. And, of course, there are the books decorating the shelves, tables, and cupboards of teahouses, which people may either purchase for themselves, or read alongside a cup of freshly brewed tea. These books, sourced from all over the world, cover a wide range of topics, including, but not limited to, the history and production of tea or tea-related cultural phenomena. Last but not least, there are the shop owners and assistants as ultimate sources of tea-knowledge, ready to satisfy the unflagging curiosity of customers. Besides this education-centric marketing approach, the influence of burgeoning culinary magazines or fashion blogs has been assisting the spread of the new wave tea culture and a distinctly Chinese tea culture in another, even more direct way:

“I think if someone writes about us now [...] there will be new people coming. [...] You see, we got 70 new followers on Instagram in one night [because] Mauner Zsófia from Chili & Vanília²¹ wrote that we are a ‘must-see’ place in Budapest. So there still remains a segment that only follows the whims of fashion.” said Tálos Gábor (2020).

²¹ A prominent Hungarian gastronomy blog by Zsófia Mautner.

CONCLUSION

Tea is a unique beverage with a complex, millennia-long history as well as considerable cultural gravity both within its immediate, East-Asian context and elsewhere across the globe.

This present paper was intended to be preceded by an in-depth analysis of various tradition-related manipulations, which are being carried out principally by the Chinese government through both official and informal channels. Although that research has yet to be realised, its key point — the identity-forming influence of a tradition — bears high relevance in the present case as well. Whether a shop owner (as shown above) or the average customer, the personality of an individual is omnipresent in the way they approach or prepare tea: while the beverage is essentially the same (dried leaves and hot water), and there are but the most subtle differences (packaging, temperature, steeping time) setting it apart from another tea drinking fashions, the connotations behind these variances speak volumes.

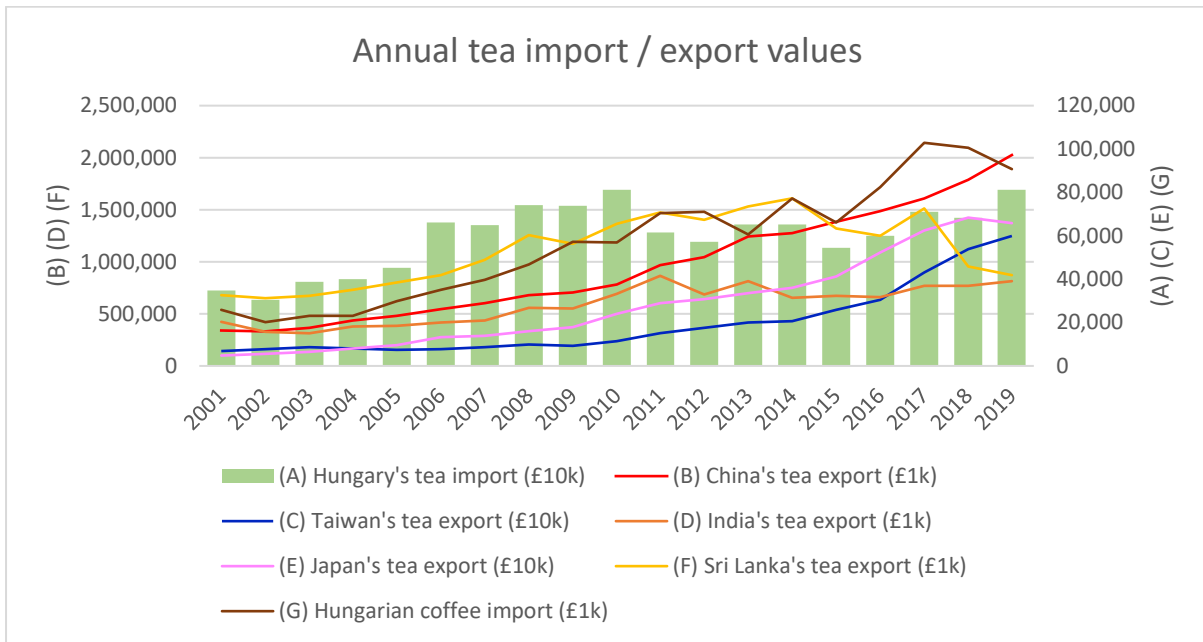
Though by no means a novelty, tea and all its associations still prove to have the potential to reform important aspects of the culture and society wherein it exists and expand its range to areas that were not associated with it before — such as gastronomy, for instance.

The focus of this article is only partly tea-related culture per se. For, while it is important to see whence it comes, it is even more so to understand its context, the influences it interacts with, and the nature of these interactions. Consequently, the study is also concerned with the way it responds to various demands, satisfying them in a quasi-instinctive way, which comes from its inherently adaptive nature. For example, it provides neutral meeting places with the appeal of a refined coffee- and alcohol-alternative; a fresh niche curiosity for the cultural elite; a new framework for discreet social events, and so forth. What is fascinating to see is the incredible versatility with which a tradition-centred tea culture assimilates a myriad different influences to form a brand-new cultural entity. Whilst this entity retains lively connections to its origins it also develops into something that is substantially different — simultaneously traditionalist and avant-garde.

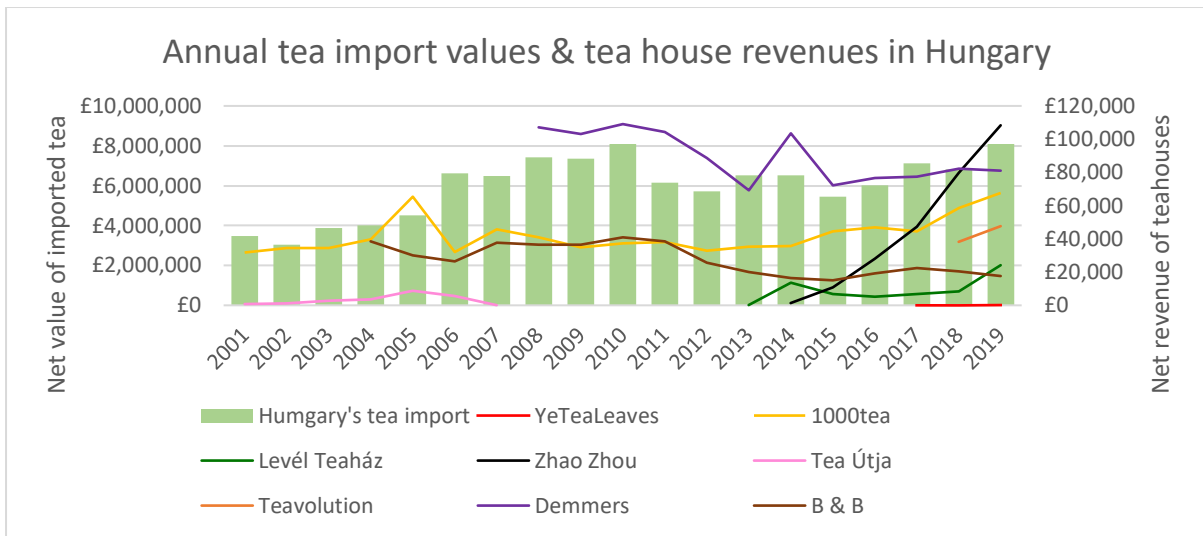
As it was exemplified through the present case study, set in the Hungarian tea scene, new wave tea culture is a quickly evolving phenomenon, which continues to find its way to new, previously unrelated territories. However, due to its relatively short existence, it is still under-represented in comparison to such commodities as wine or coffee. For this reason, it would be beneficial to run a follow-up survey in a decade's time to evaluate the progress that tea has made by then and also to analyse how, to what extent and, if it did, why its trajectory changed. It would be equally interesting to see how tea culture in those European or non-European countries' that are not included in this

paper compare to the Hungarian trends described above and examine the universality of the path of an imported cultural product in a substantially different environment from its own. In addition, a more thorough investigation of how the cultural phenomena discussed in the article translate to economic changes — both in a given country's import and tea-producing countries' exports — would also be beneficial so as to assess the commercial influence and momentum that trends of this kind potentially have. Finally, a review of the topic from a gender-centred point of view would make up for the shortcomings of the present study, which stem from its limited scope.

APPENDICES



Appendix 1.: all data derived from the International Trade Centre's (ITC) online database.



Appendix 2.: data derived from the Hungarian government's official company register & ITC's online database.

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