**Geography of Tea – Narrative and Map Activity**

This activity was presented at the 2015 North Carolina Council for the Social Studies conference February 12 in Greensboro, NC. It was part of a session titled “Tea Time on the Map.” While the activity was done on National Geographic’s Giant Traveling Map of Asia, it may be adapted to use without a giant floor map.

**Introduction**

Excluding water, tea is the world’s most popular beverage, with a global consumption that exceeds all other manufactured drinks put together, including coffee, soft drinks, and alcohol.

Tea production is a multi-billion dollar industry and many economies are foundationally tied to it. The way tea is made and consumed differs depending on geographic location. Some countries tend to import a large amount of a particular type of leaf, while others exclusively export a certain variety.

**Origins and Diffusion of Tea - Narrative and Map Activity**

*Camellia sinensis* originated in southeast Asia, specifically around the intersection of *latitude 29°N and longitude 98°E*, the point of confluence of the lands of northeast India, north Burma, southwest China and Tibet. The plant was introduced to more than 52 countries, from this ‘centre of origin’, rather than as a medicinal concoction.

[Move one person to this point on the map]

Tea drinking likely began during the **Shang Dynasty** (1600 – 1046 BCE) in China, when it was used for medicinal purposes. It is believed that, soon after, for the first time, people began to boil tea leaves for consumption into a concentrated liquid without the addition of other leaves or herbs, thereby using tea as a bitter yet stimulating drink, rather than as a medicinal concoction.

[Move one person to the Yellow River south of Beijing]

Tea became widely popular during the **Tang Dynasty** (618-907 CE), when it was spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

[Move three people to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam]

In 1557, **Portugal** established a trading port in Macau and word of the Chinese drink "chá" spread quickly, but there is no mention of them bringing any samples home. In the early 17th century, a ship of the **Dutch East India Company** brought the first green tea leaves to Amsterdam from China. Tea was known in France by 1636. It enjoyed a brief period of popularity in Paris around 1648.

[Move one person to Macau to represent Portugal and move one person to Indonesia to represent the Dutch East India Company. Show the ocean route to Europe.]

The history of tea in Russia can also be traced back to the seventeenth century. Tea was first offered by China as a gift to Czar Michael I in 1618. The Russian ambassador tried
the drink; he did not care for it and rejected the offer, delaying tea’s Russian introduction by fifty years. In 1689, tea was regularly imported from China to Russia via a caravan of hundreds of camels traveling the year-long journey, making it a precious commodity at the time.

[Move one person to Moscow and have two others represent the caravan route. For the caravan route put one person at the Tien Shan Mountains and another north of the Caspian Sea.]

Tea first appeared publicly in England during the 1650s, where it was introduced through coffeehouses. From there it was introduced to British colonies in America and elsewhere.

Tea smuggling during the 18th century led to Britain’s masses being able to afford and consume tea, and its importance eventually influenced the Boston Tea Party. The British government eventually eradicated the tax on tea, thereby eliminating the smuggling trade by 1785. In Britain and Ireland, tea had become an everyday beverage for all levels of society by the late 19th century.

Tea was introduced into India by the British, in an attempt to break the Chinese monopoly on it. The British brought Chinese seeds into Northeast India, but the plants failed; they later discovered that a different variety of tea was endemic to Assam and the northeast region of India. Using the Chinese planting and cultivation techniques, the British launched a tea industry by offering land in Assam to any European who agreed to cultivate it for export.

[Move one person to Assam, India]

Tea became the widely consumed beverage of choice in Turkey only in the 20th century. It was initially encouraged as an alternative to coffee, which had become expensive and at times unavailable in the aftermath of World War I. Upon the loss of southeastern territories after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, coffee became an expensive import. At the urging of the founder of the republic, Atatürk, Turkish people turned more to tea as it is cultivated on the eastern Black Sea coast, which has a mild climate with high precipitation and fertile soil.

[Move one person to Turkey]

Mapping Tea Producers

Who produces the world’s tea? Here are the top 20 tea producers from 2012 data. Units are in million metric tons (1 metric ton = 1.1 US ton).

[Give a card to each of 20 participants and have them walk to the country on the map. If the country is outside Asia, have them stand on the side of the map closest to the continent of the country they represent.]

- Black Tea

Black tea is made from leaves of the *Camellia Sinensis* bush when it is exposed to an extended period of oxidation. It typically has a stronger flavor and a longer shelf life.
compared to other teas. For this reason, it is the world's most popular and traded variety.

South Asia, along with China and Kenya, produce the majority of the world's black teas. Due to their large size, China and India have great diversity in climatic conditions, allowing them to produce an assortment of leaves at different locations and elevation.

Most sub-varieties of tea are named after the regions they are cultivated in. Darjeeling, Assam, and Ceylon are three of the most popular types of black teas and they are grown exclusively in South Asia.

The Darjeeling region is located in the tiny strip of Indian territory that is north of Bangladesh and between Nepal and Bhutan. Due to its hilly and unique agro-climatic conditions, the leaves here have a distinctive natural flavor that is internationally recognized as a geographical indicator. Darjeeling contributes to 7% of India's tea output.

India's Assam tea is typically grown near sea level, in the valley of the Brahmaputra River just northwest of Burma. During the monsoon season, this part of India receives a lot of precipitation and becomes extremely humid. The tropical climate contributes to Assam's unique malty taste, which is a feature the tea is known for. Due to its high caffeine content and strength, Assam is most often served as a morning tea. The popular "Irish Breakfast" is typically made from Assam leaves and the "English Breakfast" uses Assam and Ceylon as parts of its blend.

Ceylon tea is grown exclusively in Sri Lanka, particularly in the southern regions of Uva and Dimbula. Although the country officially changed its name from Ceylon to Sri Lanka in 1972, its colonial name remains today in the world of tea. Ceylon simply refers to any tea that is grown in Sri Lanka. The taste and flavor depends on the altitude at which the plant is grown and the length of its oxidation. Ceylon tea has an international reputation for quality, especially for its orange pekoe grade black teas - not actually orange in flavor, but refers to the quality, size, and condition of the leaf - which has a woody, floral aroma.

- Green Tea

Green tea is made when the leaves of the Camellia Sinensis plant goes through minimal oxidation. Historically, green tea has been associated with East Asia, but lately, the leaf has become more widespread in the West, where black tea has been the traditionally consumed type.

Although green tea has expanded globally, the leaf is still primarily grown in Asia. China is the world's top consumer, producer, and exporter of green tea. Almost all of China's 18 tea producing provinces grow green tea, with Zhejiang province being the most famous. The region is known for its "Dragon Well," an ultra-high quality tea that is roasted early to stop the oxidation process and sold at a premium. A mid-grade batch of Dragon Well sells for over five dollars an ounce in the United States.

Japan is the world's second largest grower of green tea, contributing to approximately 9.5% of the global production. The country produces almost exclusively just the green variety with 97% of it consumed domestically. The most well-known places for
cultivation in Japan are Uji, Shizuoka, and Kagoshima prefectures, which are all located in the south. Although green tea originated in China, it has become far more significant in Japan. Much of the country's food culture revolves around the leaf and its powdered form. The tea is not only consumed as a beverage, but it is often made into ice cream, candy, and used as a savory ingredient. Green tea is also the central element of the country's famous tea ceremonies.

Mapping Tea Consumers

Who consumes the world’s tea? Here are the top 20 per capita tea consuming countries from 2014 data. Units are in pounds per person.

[Give a card to each of 20 participants and have them walk to the country on the map. If the country is outside Asia, have them stand on the side of the map closest to the continent of the country they represent.]

Tea and Culture

Tea is an important part of the culture of many countries. Here are a few examples:

- Japan – Tea Ceremony “The Way of Tea”
- United Kingdom
  - Afternoon Tea 3:00-5:00 PM – Low Tea (served on low coffee table)
  - High Tea – 5:00-6:00 PM – more of a meal – so named because served on high table
- Turkey - Offering tea to guests is part of Turkish hospitality. Tea is most often consumed in households, shops and social gatherings of Turkish men. Turkish tea is traditionally offered in small tulip-shaped glasses which are usually held by the rim, in order to save the drinker’s fingertips from being burned, as the tea is served boiling hot.
- United States – perhaps our tea is tied to our history, especially the Tea Act and the Boston Tea Party.
- Other tea traditions and ceremonies?

Bibliography


Statistica – “Global Top 20 Tea Producing Countries Worldwide”

Quartz – “The World’s biggest Tea Drinkers are” http://qz.com/168690/where-the-worlds-biggest-tea-drinkers-are/