George van Driem, *The Tale of Tea: A Comprehensive History of Tea from Prehistoric Times to Present Day*. Leiden: Brill, 2019, xx + 904 pp. ISBN: 9789004382569, price: EUR 249.00 (hardback), 9789004393608, EUR 249.00 (e-book).

What connects Pakistan's internet sensation Arshad Khan to Alexandre Dumas? What do the Opium Wars have in common with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and the *Hell's Grannies* from Monty Python with Doris Day? In one word: tea. In this extraordinary monograph, George van Driem introduces his readers to Yunnanese villagers, Chinese emperors, Japanese poets, Portuguese conquistadores, Dutch capitalists, English anti-saccharites, Parisian culinary innovators (and their Singaporean copycats), miscellaneous aficionados around the world, and even the insects in tea gardens. A history of tea, the book's central message seems to be, is a history of just about everything. And so, just when the reader risks getting lost in detours about obesity, the Fukushima power plant accident, the revelations of Edward Snowden, the unprecedented extinction of animal species, clandestine activism among homosexual men, a proposed new romanization of the Thai language, or the Kafkaesque tax forms that American citizens apparently face, the plot circles back to tea, warmly unfurling and pouring and dripping at every juncture of modern history.

This imposing hardbound tome weighs in at a hefty 2.9 kg. (One could thus serve over 1200 cups from the book's weight in tea leaves.) It contains 12 chapters, 9 maps, and more than 400 pictures, many of which are in color. Its author, a linguist with a profound knowledge of the natural sciences, is best known for his work on the languages of the Himalayas and the Southeast Asian mainland. It is precisely from the eastern Himalayan corridor that the human consumption of tea originated.

A one-page preface outlines the ubiquity of tea in our planet's past and present. "The history of tea is the saga of globalization" (p. 1), and one may indeed conclude that the history of globalization would be incomplete without lingering at considerable length over tea. The following 864 pages offer an exciting dive into the world of *Camellia sinensis*. Where, conventionally, a book's introduction would have been, *The Tale of Tea* commences without much ado with the primordial origins of the tea plant. The author wastes nary a page discussing his methodology, which can be summarized as follows: learn two dozen languages, read all relevant primary sources on the topic, visit every place of importance and then some more, and talk to a wide range of experts. The book has no conclusion or afterword.

The Tale of Tea traces the history of tea from the mists of its mountainous homeland to dynastic China, Japan, Korea, and the Indian Ocean under Portuguese, Dutch, and British imperialism. It highlights the globalizing dynamics,

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including the wars, hierarchies, economical systems, and political structures effectuated by mankind's unquenchable thirst for the beverage. From an elaborate discussion on tea cultures worldwide (including those of Africa, South America, and the Pacific), the book moves to cuisines influenced by tea, the chemistry behind it, and, finally, the interrelated issues of modern-day tea cultivation and environmental sustainability. *The Tale of Tea* is mostly chronological, but occasionally hops between time periods when it is thematically justified. Apart from tea, it also contains a wealth of information on coffee and chocolate.

To my knowledge, this is the first book-length commodity history written by a professional linguist. It comes with a wealth of scripts, original-language quotations, and etymologies. In a publishing industry that increasingly shuns the use of non-western words and phrases, George van Driem pays his respect to the languages examined by providing their romanizations, original orthographies, and phonetic transcriptions. A variety of tea-related nomenclature, poems, puns, and linguistic trivia are foregrounded. We learn, to give just one example, that the /h/ in the Dutch word *thee* primarily served as an artificial marker of erudition (p. 358). Along the same lines, to add a personal observation, its Malay equivalent *teh* was occasionally written with the fancy, foreign-sounding *tā'* (ط) rather than the more mundane *tā* (ت).

The book has a great deal to offer, including for Indonesianists. It contains, among many things, a discussion on *teh botol sosro*, a ready-to-drink variety invented in the 1960s (p. 810), the country's modern tea industry (pp. 732–3), and the anticarcinogenic properties of a hemiparasite known locally as *benalu teh* (pp. 782–3). The role of tea in culinary traditions of the Malay World receives less attention. We may mention in this regard West Sumatra's herbal “tea” made of coffee leaves (*kawa*)—not to be confused with the cardamom-flavored *kahwa* of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Kashmir, which is made of green tea—or the popular frothy black tea mixed with sweetened condensed milk (*teh tarik*), poured from great heights by experienced vendors in a spectacle of liquid jugglery known as “tea pulling”.

The author's combined interest in tea and language is fruitful. Both topics speak so deeply to the human imagination that they regularly spawn the wildest misconceptions. We need look no further than the persistent quarter-truth, audaciously bouncing its way from one website to the next, that there are only two words for tea: one that travelled over land and one that travelled over sea. Van Driem is no advocate of such one-page simplifications. Over multiple chapters, he traces word origins in minute detail. From the relevant terms in Austroasiatic, Trans-Himalayan, Hmong-Mien, and Kradai languages to the ideographic origins of the Chinese character 茶 and the oral transmission of the

associated word—through different Sinitic languages—into Japanese, Korean, Persian, Arabic, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and many, many more.

The book equips beginners and experts alike with the knowledge to talk about tea confidently. It is dazzlingly thorough, yet seemingly indifferent to previous monographs. Rather, the author blazes his own trail, revisiting primary sources afresh. Historians and food scholars may not share his stylistic conventions or preferences in data presentation (on many a page, the footnotes and pictures outsize the main text), yet can only ignore this book at their peril. It is nothing short of a must-read for anyone genuinely interested in tea. Its value for tea enthusiasts outside the academic world, at least those who can afford it, is almost self-evident. I have no doubt it will be warmly received by tea companies, museums, and online discussion groups.

Had the book come out this year, it would have undoubtedly mentioned the recent online attacks directed at the British company Yorkshire Tea, when the conservative politician Rishi Sunak posed with its teabags in an attempt to resemble a man of the people. Amidst the ensuing (Twitter) tempest in a teacup, one viral tweet by the company has now entered the English language: “Sue, you’re shouting at tea”. It would have also connected the consumption of tea to the recent Covid-19 outbreak, which has severely dented China’s economy, including its tea plantations in the months leading up to the lucrative “first flush”. How will this pandemic affect export prospects? How will the world’s greatest tea-consuming countries, such as Morocco, respond to a potentially dwindling role of China on the global market? How are economies reshaped, and tastes reconfigured, in the wake of these developments? The tales of tea are many, and they will continue and multiply as we keep raising our cups.

Tom Hoogervorst

KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian

and Caribbean Studies, Leiden, The Netherlands

hoogervorst@kitlv.nl