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**THE INTERCULTURAL PECULIARITIES OF TEA-DRINKING
CULTURE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC**

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Abstract

Tea-drinking culture in the Czech Republic is unique in the European context and brings many questions why it is radically different (or non-existent) in other European countries. The authors focused on the research questions (a) what are the reasons for the specific tea-drinking culture in the Czech Republic and (b) what are the reasons for these peculiarities. The tea-drinking culture in the Czech Republic is very unique and there is no research into the roots of these specific phenomena. It is very important to understand them from the sociological and historical point of view since they can explain the reasons and also the consequences. Both qualitative and quantitative research was conducted in the form of questionnaires and interviews with observations, respectively, in the Czech Republic and several other European countries. Drinking tea in the tearooms in the Czech Republic is very specific and it is almost impossible to find a similar phenomenon in other European countries. Strange enough, it mixes the influences from, naturally, China and Japan, classic countries with a long tea culture, with Arabic countries where water pipes are popular, alongside with Indian style of decorations, and sometimes vegan food from India. This intercultural cluster is absolutely unique and the authors claim that not only in the European context but also globally.

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Keywords: Travelling, tea-drinking, tourism, tea, Asian culture in Europe, interculturalism.



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1. Introduction

The paper focuses on the rich and relatively long-lasting tradition of tea-drinking culture in the Czech Republic in the context of the mass culture or McDonaldization of the modern Western world. The culture of drinking tea can be described as extremely high and is almost always connected with alternative cultural traits.

1.1. Mass culture and the global world

Famous American sociologist G. Ritzer published an academic paper *The McDonaldization of Society* where he states that it is clear and evident that we are facing new trends in the contemporary American society. The society is driven by new forces, and the speed with efficiency is the most important one. The McDonald's style of operations, all the packaging and service are designed to move quickly and cheaply, moreover, giving customers new eating experience (Ritzer, 1983). "Speed, convenience, and standardization have replaced the flair of design and creation in cooking, the comfort of relationships in serving, and the variety available in choice. McDonaldization has become so pervasive that one can travel to nearly any city or town in America and find familiar chain-style restaurants, shops, hotels, and other avenues for commercial exchange. This has fostered the homogenization of American culture and life, streamlined along a set of rational, efficient, and impersonal principles" (Ritzer 1983). These are the basic principles which underlie the modern food industry according to Ritzer:

- Speed,
- convenience, and
- standardization.

2. Problem Statement

McDonaldization is a process which does not concern only catering services but basically influences all aspects of our everyday life. McDonaldization is closely connected with rationalization of management, standardization of services and production. In tourism this approach is reflected by standardization of hotel chains and mass tourism. Moreover, one of the representations of McDonaldization is also exploitation of environment and marketing manipulation of customers with the aim of high profitability. This very rational behaviour which is totally efficient, however, leads to depersonalization and can also have severe consequences on the local culture and environment.

Despite the fact that these new ways of managing people, companies and societies can bring significant economic benefits, it goes without saying that it also creates many consequences for the customer, society and the environment - the system itself can start to manage people.

After studying basic literature and conducting pre-research, the authors decided to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research in the Czech Republic into the phenomenon of tearooms in the region. Tea drinking culture in the Czech Republic is unique in the European context and brings many questions why it is radically different (or non-existent) in other European countries.

2.1. Tea-drinking as a revolt

As McDonaldization of the society progresses, there is a certain group of people who feel the need to respond to the increasing trend by a revolt. There was a very strong revolt against this McDonaldization in the Western world in the 60s, against the consumer lifestyle and against destroying the environment. The paradigm of Christian civilisation was refused alongside with Western cultural, economic and political imperialism in the so called third world countries. Moreover, a new counterculture was established to balance the discrepancies.

One of the most important characteristics of this counterculture was an interest in Eastern philosophy and religion, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and even natural philosophy of the savage people of Africa (Hall, 2000; Heiss & Robert, 2007). Alongside with the interest in philosophy, people also wanted to change their everyday lifestyle also connected with food and drinks. Vegetarianism and veganism thus became very popular, marihuana discovered and also tea. The combination of Christian mysticism and Eastern philosophy gave rise to a movement of the New Age, which can be described as postmodern spirituality, i.e. almost anything alternative to traditional religion, cultural movement and traditions.

2.2. Reflection of anti-establishment in tourism, catering and leisure time

All the described needs to change our approach to the modern technocratic society were manifested in the changes in tourism, catering services and leisure time activities as well. The concrete consequences were increased interest in experiences, mental and spiritual transformation, healthy or alternative lifestyle, ecotourism, geo-tourism, organic food, slow food and slow tourism (Petrini & Padovani, 2006; Cheung, 2007; Masset, 2010). All these trends can be supplemented by the phenomenon we are talking about and it is the tea-drinking culture in the Czech Republic as the way of presenting slow food, New Age and Eastern philosophy all in one place.

3. Research Questions

The authors of the research stated two questions regarding tea-drinking in the Czech Republic as follows:

- What are the characteristics of the specific tea-drinking culture in the Czech Republic?
- What are the reasons for these peculiarities?

When observing tea-drinking culture in the countries with a long tradition, it is clear that this culture is not only connected to catering or drinking but it is always connected with some form of spirituality and this is inevitably in the context of a ritual in a certain usually sacred environment. All the preparation of the tea and its consumption is in a direct opposition with the McDonald's style of production, preparation and consumption of food and drinks.

3.1. Historical context of tea-drinking culture in the Czech Republic

All the above-mentioned ideas about counter-culture came to the Czech Republic as late as after the revolution in 1989. The so called high culture of tea-drinking had not had any tradition there, also because of the fact that the tea plant does not grow there and neither had the country any colonies in Asia such as Britain did. Britain is a country where the consumption of tea has had a long tradition due to the connections with India, China and Ceylon; however, it has always been in the style of a regular everyday activity when people drink tea as a beverage without any tea ritual known from Asia.

3.2. The history of Czech tearooms

With the new opportunities after the revolution when many people had a chance to travel abroad, they brought alternative lifestyle patterns from these originally unknown places such as the USA and Asia, and it was also the time when the interest in alternative philosophy opposing the dogmatic communist philosophy of that time. Many books were published with these interests such as esoteric philosophy, New Age, Buddhism and Hinduism as people were eager to discover the unknown (Kobyashi, 2001). Several books about tea were also published at this time. Some people wanted to find an inspiration for their life and they made trips to these, say, alternative culture countries. A few of our respondents in our survey did so and now they are the owners of the wholesale tea companies or of the tearooms.

First tearooms were established were established short time after the revolution offering not only good quality tea but also a certain alternative lifestyle with small shops of organic food or food for vegetarians and vegans. The very first tearoom was established in 1993 known as the Good Tearoom which is now a franchise with branches not only in the Czech Republic but also abroad. The Good tearoom is still the most famous and also the pioneer of the high tea-drinking culture. At the beginning of the year 2016 there were 424 tearooms and 209 shops with tea in the Czech Republic, however, in 2013 it was just 331 tearooms. We can conclude that the number of the tearooms in ratio to the size of the country and the number of the people is definitely a European, and possibly a global, curiosity.

Many of the tearooms have become space for alternative culture, its presentation and development. On one hand, it is the New Age movement, but on the other hand specifically new cultural environment – i.e. oriental interiors, meditative music, no alcohol in the context of beer culture of the country, loose tea of a high quality, vegetarian or vegan food and water pipes. Many educational and cultural events take place there too, such as concerts of ethnic music, lectures and presentations and introduction of new teas. These tea rooms are also active in various cultural events for young people as a movable tea kiosk in many summer concerts and open-air festivals of both pop-music but also alternative genres. There are even a few festivals which specifically focus on tea drinking culture.

There are three types of tea rooms in the country:

- Asian type (inspired by Japan and China),
- North African type (inspired mostly by Morocco), and
- Others (eclectic style usually inspired by India).

4. Purpose of the Study

The tea drinking culture in the Czech Republic is very unique and there is no research regarding the roots of these specific phenomena. It is very important to understand them from the sociological and historical point of view since they can explain the reasons and also the consequences. The tea rooms create specific lifestyle, ethnic culture and these places are so specific that they deserve our undivided attention not only from a sociological and psychological point of view but also from the viewpoint of leisure studies and tourism.

5. Research Methods

Both qualitative and quantitative research was conducted in the form of questionnaires and interviews with observations, respectively, in the Czech Republic and several other European countries. The research was conducted in the capital city, Prague, and several regional cities and towns (Pardubice, Hradec Kralove, Kolin, Podebrady, Kutna Hora, Benesov, Sedlcany, Vlasim, Ceske Budejovice).

Seventeen interviews were conducted with the owners of these tearooms, two managers of the tearooms, two owners of the wholesale companies with tea and one employee of the wholesale tea company. The respondents had had some experience in the business, minimum five months, maximum 25 years, so the respondents proved to be well established in the tea business. The authors also use the techniques of direct observations and personal reflections of our experience with tea not only from Europe but also Asian countries where the tea culture has been existent for centuries.

The respondents were not directly asked about the connection of the tea-rooms with alternative culture, and all the interred conclusions are based on the experience of the authors of the paper.

6. Findings

Drinking tea in the tearooms in the Czech Republic is very specific and it is almost impossible to find a similar phenomenon in other European countries. It mixes the influences from, naturally, China and Japan, but also Arabic countries with Indian style of decorations. In the orthodox tea rooms there is no space for alcohol drinking and neither smoking of tobacco. However, the specific role has smoking of water pipes and marihuana. For many of the tea rooms water pipes are an important source of income mostly during summer months when the people would prefer other soft drinks. Some of the respondents who run tea rooms answered that water pipes are not acceptable for them in the context of Chinese and Japanese culture of drinking tea, but this orthodox approach will then mean a lower number of clients visiting the tearooms. Still, the biggest number of visitors to these tea rooms are young people who want to smoke a water pipe and possibly drink tea, which may even become an unwanted must (when smoking a water pipe, it is obligatory to buy some tea, however, when drinking tea, it is not obligatory to smoke a water pipe).

One of the biggest problems is the increase in the number of tea rooms and tea shops in the country, which leads to the drop in the number of clients and turnover. The respondents view this as a challenge to increase the number of items and services they provide, such as vegetarian and vegan food, books etc. A paradox thing is that despite the fact that these tea rooms are against standardization which is

well-known from McDonalidization, the franchise of the Good Tearoom is in a way also standardized and tries to provide uniform service and products. One of the biggest threats can be seen as the future development of these tea rooms into so called shisha bars, popular in the UK not only in immigrants from the Near East and North Africa.

7. Conclusion

The culture of tea drinking entered the country in a large scale just after 1989 and was closely connected with the alternative culture against the standardised pop culture. The tea rooms became the centres of cultural diversity and were spreading the ideas of the New Age (and ideas of the cultural revolution of the 1960s). The philosophy of tea drinking is in contrast to McDonalidization of the modern society, unification of products, services and general standardization. On the contrary, speed and standardizations is not desired here, quality and the experience is valued more than pure consumption. Tea rooms are considered to be ideal places for people who are looking for peaceful and quiet atmosphere.

Tea-drinking culture in the Czech Republic is on a very high level. It reaches almost the same quality levels as in the cradle of tea, i.e. Asia, however, curiously combines other cultural influences and thus makes it a very unique phenomenon not only in the Central Europe, but globally. The syncretism is the most typical characteristics of it, combining almost incompatible items. The practical consequences are very important as it may be very interesting for Asian tourists visiting the Czech Republic and can function as an incentive for them to visit the country. We can see there is a huge potential in travel and tourism industry. This Czech peculiarity can in a way attract many tourists from Asian countries where the tea drinking culture has a strong and long tradition. Moreover, the authors have experienced that in some of these countries with a long tradition the tea drinking culture has ceased (Taiwan, Japan) mostly in younger population, as it is not very trendy and modern, the older generation in these countries still considers tea drinking as the part of their culture and could potentially attract their attention to the Czech Republic.

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