

“Development from the Grounds Up: Coffee for Schools in Rural Cambodia”

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The origins of coffee and its global travels as objects of inquiry take us far from the coffee shop on the corner into realms of value construction, commodification, branding—and more concretely, economic and social development. Recent changes in the coffee industry’s marketing strategies and consumer behavior have led to the privileging of “terroir” or the community and culture of beans in their point of provenance. Professor Merry White spoke of the developments taking place in Cambodian coffee production and how changes in advanced industrial societies’ coffee consumption have made “Cambodian coffee” a quasi-brand, especially in Japan. Professor White works with a team of coffee experts from Japan and America in supporting Cambodian coffee farmers and their communities in the far northeastern province of Ratanakiri, producing a product saleable for its quality and its virtue-added charitable functions.

Japan is the third largest importer of coffee beans, following the U.S. and Germany. Coffee in Japan is the “pre-eminent” social beverage and the specialty coffee industry in Japan is the most demanding in the world, having high expectations for every aspect of coffee growing, processing and consumption.

The history of coffee in Japan is one of constant growth. After the Portuguese and Dutch introduced coffee to Nagasaki in the 16th century, the taste for it grew steadily, first as a medication and then as a drink for pleasurable stimulation. Cafes and coffeehouses became popular social

spaces at the end of the 19th century and by the Taisho period, they had saturated the growing urban scene, carrying and creating fashion and trends, both local and international. They were the entry point for new products, foods, apparel, music—a depot of globalizing consumption. The earliest coffee houses were modeled on the English “men’s club” style, with billiards, libraries and writing rooms, allowing gentlemen to sit for hours over one cup of coffee—not the most profitable of institutions. The social space of the café diversified with other influences from the Continent, most particularly from Shanghai, and artists, writers, feminists and politically-interested intellectuals would convene, as they did elsewhere, in spaces that began to have their own “third place” identity.

Cafes (kissaten, koohiihausu, cabarets, etc.) are now well entrenched in Japan and most have lost their original foreign “cultural odor” (Iwabuchi Koichi). They are Japanese, or more often “mukokuseki” - bearing no country’s stamp. And the new Cambodian coffees are served not to “westernized” Japanese connoisseurs, but to knowing coffee-drinkers. The current trends, not only for good coffees but for the representation of Japan’s relationship with Southeast Asia where it is the largest aid donor, help to promote these coffees as well. Each roaster creates its own brands of Cambodian coffee, such as “Kiri Blend: the coffee with a heart” or “Volunteer Coffee” demonstrating the charitable “civil society” voluntarism that is also a selling point.

Cambodia’s rural villages have significantly under-developed infrastructures and also bear signs of the devastating era of the Khmer Rouge. The people living there suffered an internal “genocide” and hardships of the most extreme kind. They need everything to support life and community. It was these needs that inspired Bernard Krisher, former Tokyo bureau chief for Newsweek magazine, and Richard Dyck, Tokyo-based businessman and philanthropist, to work to build schools and clinics, and support other rural projects. Professor White became involved with

the projects in the Ratanakiri district, exploring ways for farmers and communities to develop by means of the improvement and dissemination of the coffee crop.

Other projects supported by Krisher and Dyck include a telemedicine program that connects rural doctors in Cambodia with physicians in the United States including some at Massachusetts General Hospital. The project is designed so that crucial medical information can be exchanged via satellite internet connections with rural areas rather than the more costly alternative of transporting sick patients from rural locations to city hospitals. Similarly, the village Motoman project provides village schools, often without electricity, with internet connections for computers donated by Japanese companies, with power created by a generator (or in one case, by a stationary bicycle attached to a generator storage battery). Motorbikes, equipped with satellite uplink devices built by MIT scientists, park near the schools and while they are there, students and teachers can use internet facilities. Children in one school, the Ezra F. Vogel School, donated by Richard Dyck, now have email pen pals in Cambridge.

Conditions in Cambodia today, post Pol Pot, are unique for this kind of entrepreneurial activity. Within the organization and its networks are many Cambodians, who, trying to put the past behind them, choose not to discuss their personal history. This has meant rather unlikely co-workers, considering that the web of associates may include people of very different political persuasions and experiences who work alongside each other, perhaps maintaining a communal silence about the past.

The coffee market in Cambodia is not yet stable. Developed by the French at first, and further exploited by Vietnamese who would buy the Cambodian beans to be sold as Vietnamese, at very low prices, the coffee orchards now need a lot of attention to thrive. Because of overplanting in Vietnam, the price on the world market for these beans has plummeted and Cambodian farmers

with no market for their beans are ripping out trees to plant cashews. The Ratanakiri coffee project has brought Japanese agronomists to help develop and create a healthy harvest. In 2002, the first beans were imported, roasted and blended in Japan. With regard to international trends in coffee consumption, and especially in the specialty coffee field, Professor White noted that Fair Trade and other large organizations which seek to assure consumers that farmers are fairly compensated will not be appropriate to the scale and model of coffee work in Ratanakiri—at least not yet. In fact, coffee farmers in these areas receive compensation that exceeds Fair Trade standards, and in addition, the organization is at present subsidizing the crops by paying for expert consultations, fuel for pumping water, and modern sizing and moisture-measurement machinery, as a cooperative is established to share technologies and agronomists' suggestions.

Japanese markets demand the highest quality of beans, and without that level of quality, it is not enough to describe the conditions of work in Cambodia, the more than fairly traded compensation to farmers, and the effort to grow beans sustainably. These hardships and benefits do have an impact on the reception of the coffee, as will a move towards organic growing in the future. But for now, the project strives to meet the Japanese specialty coffee consumer more than half way, and if you can sell in Japan, you can sell anywhere.