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Book Review:

Global Coffee and Cultural Change in Modern Japan

by Helena Grinshpun. London and New York: Routledge, 2021

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> *For centuries, Japan has been associated with its tea tradition and is still largely viewed as a tea-drinking culture. Having popularized coffee in its least subtle package stripped of authenticity in favor of corporatized ubiquity, the chains [Starbucks] have been regarded the antithesis of everything that is indigenous and authentic.* — Helena Grinshpun (2021).

Despite its seemingly straightforward structure, Global Coffee and Cultural Change in Modern Japan engages with three complex sets of research questions concerning the glocal coffee chains, Starbucks, and the broader landscape of contemporary Japanese coffee culture. Firstly, regarding the mass commodification and consumption of coffee in modern Japan, the author asks, is it really about coffee? How much do the actual properties of the raw and refined bean matter? Or is it instead the complex authenticity politics of exotic codes and symbols, and the packaged experiences or "the movement of culture" that helps narrate the cultural story of coffee in Japan? Secondly, viewing coffee as a regime of taste and social class, raises the question: how do consumers in Japanese cities acquire their taste for coffee and their distinct lifestyles? Are their tastes tamed by the civilizing educational process of the powerful global brand? In the author's own words, "Can a brand act as a cultural engineer while simultaneously accommodating consumer agency?" Thirdly, in relation to the city and global coffee chains, the

author asks whether coffeehouses in Japanese public spaces can generate new urban realities and bring about new socio-economic transformations in citizens' everyday experiences. If so, what are these attributes? How do standardized experiences and sites craft the local public space of consumption into new places? Thus, culture is conceived as a combined phenomenon of a mundanely consumed substance and beverage; as a cultivated regime of taste; and as an urban public space where coffee is imbibed as part of ritual, aesthetics, and indulgence in the practice of coffee drinking.

Dr. Helena Grinshpun, the author of the book, is a Lecturer in the Department of Asian Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She received her Ph.D. in Anthropology and Japanese Studies from Kyoto University in 2009. Global Coffee and Cultural Change in Modern Japan, published in 2021, is based on her doctoral dissertation and two subsequent extended fieldworks carried out in 2006–2009, 2011, and 2016–2017. Grinshpun's recent publications include "Japan through the Lens of the Tokyo Olympics" (2021) and "Crafting a New Home: Shared Living and Intimacy in Contemporary Japan" (2022). The book employs a combined methodology of ethnographic research and media analysis. Primary sources include brand-building texts from Howard Schultz's coffee brands, printed materials (brochures, seasonal leaflets, magazines, and advertisements) issued by Starbucks Japan, as well as website content and online advertising. The method of content analysis is applied to examine in-store spatial patterns and décor, as well as online blogs written by regular customers and fans of the chain. Grinshpun visited the Japanese coffee shops, spending time there to experience and observe the customers and employees' behaviors, daily routines, spatial trajectories, and communications. A pilot questionnaire and thirty in-depth interviews at several chained coffee shops in Kyoto, Osaka, and Tokyo were conducted to better comprehend consumers' responses and interpretations of their coffee experiences. Additionally, the author also attended over twenty "coffee education" seminars to document the courses and to interview participants and staff.

The 200-paged volume is organized into three chapters, framed by an Introduction and a Conclusion, each addressing one of the three key research domains of coffee culture in modern Japan—namely, the exotic substance, the regime of taste, and the place. Chapter 1 The Mundane Exoticism, brings together the concept of cultural mélange and the metaphor of code-switching—between various elements of native and foreign (mostly Euro-American) cultures. The author narrates the cultural history of coffee, tracing how the bean traveled from Ethiopia to Constantinople before spreading to Europe, the New World, and eventually Asia. Starbucks Coffee went public in the United States in 1992; in 1996, it entered Japan—the first location outside North America—and by 2016, Starbucks Japan operated more than twelve hundred outlets nationwide. Today, Japan ranks as the world's fourth-largest importer of coffee beans, following the United States, Germany, and Italy. Once taken as a medicine, a medium of informal communication, and a cultural artifact, coffee has become an everyday commodity in Japanese daily life.

Over the past 150 years, Japan has developed its own coffee experience. The kissa (local Japanese café) style is characterized by a set of key features: "an emphasis on manually drip-brewed coffee, a small pool of regular clients, a

relatively small store space, and a limited food menu designed to complement the offered coffee." Much like the Way of Tea, the Way of Coffee has evolved into a peculiar Japanese art form. Although Starbucks takes pride in its own formula of authenticity, standardized and predictable—it nonetheless has to glocalize its products. "With latticed windows, a tiled roof, and wooden frames reminiscent of traditional Japanese architecture… both exterior and interior, the 'harmonious hybridity' characterizes" both Western lifestyle and Japanese self-presentation. In this cultural landscape, Japan and the West form an integrated whole, each assigned its own role. Codes switch and cultures move—between Japan's "self" and "other," "native" and "foreign," "tradition" and "modern," "local" and "global"—creating a dynamic and multifaceted reality in which conversation unfolds over a cup of coffee. In this sense, global coffee chains serve as markers of ordinariness and stability in Japanese everyday life.

Chapter 2 Acquiring the Taste for Coffee, examines coffee as an acquired taste constructed by global coffee brands. The author argues that cultural and social aspirations are translated into coffee-drinking habits, linking taste to lifestyle choices associated with social belonging and class identity. While the kissa's taste regime is shaped largely by the owner's personality and relationship with customers, Starbucks exercises a more effective and inclusive taste regime—one that is framed and institutionalized by the brand's authority. To fully enjoy the coffee-drinking experience, customers need to learn the ordering procedures and a set of vocabulary. At educational events and seminars, coffee is first deconstructed as a matter of objective taste and then reconstructed as a matter of subjective value. Acting as an arbiter of taste, the brand awards certificates to customers who complete all three levels of its seminars. In contrast to the concept of the middle class as a socioeconomic position, Grinshpun asserts that visiting a global coffee chain offers consumers a sense of middle-classness—one centered on lifestyle images and consumer choices that align with a middle-class agenda. Coffee is a complicated matter in this framework. By incorporating coffee drinking into one's personal lifestyle through experience, taste, self-indulgence, and a sense of belonging, individuals use coffee as a source of leverage in defining their social position in relation to others—thus accumulating into cultural capital.

Chapter 3 The City and the Chain, explores the duality of local and global within the dynamic setting of the city. The rise of virtual communication has produced catchphrases such as "thumb tribe," "cell phone youth," and "technoculture," which dominate discussions of social change in Japan. The global coffee chain emerges as a heterogeneous public space where customers' interactions shift from face-to-face encounters to virtual communication, and from civic engagement to consumerism. A neighborhood Starbucks is neither home nor office—it is a "third place." There, people spend long hours working on their Macs, doing "their own thing." The café thus serves simultaneously as a study, living room, dining area, waiting room, and occasionally even a bedroom. Individuals reinterpret, adopt and adapt urban spaces to their personal needs. Elements of décor are designed to build a narrative of traveling and symbolic interconnectedness in the Starbucks milieu. A chain café provides easily accessible public space—particularly for women—while redefining sociability through a

"common experience of silence" that enables privacy and escape. The author argues that Starbucks creates spaces that organically integrate the logics of online experience and face-to-face communication, thereby merging public space with electronic circuits. These changes may signal the emergence of a new kind of public space—one that defines place through new values and infuses it with new meanings. Such spaces, the author suggests, can generate new subjectivities, translating them into new geographies of connection and identification of placeness.

In Conclusion: Not on Coffee Alone, the author summarizes the book through an anthropological lens, suggesting that there is no single Japan nor one contemporary Japanese culture, but a plentitude of forms—both indigenous and hybrid—each defining its own way. Coffee is one such manifestation. Because of its ordinariness, its cultural baggage, its embodiment in everyday bodily practices, and its association with public space, coffee offers a fascinating perspective to explore the cultural plentitude of the society in which it is embedded. Finally, Grinshpun challenges the prevailing notion that the proliferation of standardized consumption sites necessarily leads to the degradation of the city.

> *The ground bean did not change its substance; instead, it changed its environment, turning hot water into a noble drink. Likewise, some people do not change under circumstances, but change the circumstances to be able to bring the best out of them.*

Global coffee chains, she argues, alter the urban fabric by infusing it with new meanings, simulations, and abstract affiliations materialized through goods and services. For Grinshpun, these chains can dictate the very nature of public space. They may be "bad places" concealing themselves as "good places," yet what is evident is that they are important places.

In accordance with, and in response to, the author's three thematic arguments, my comments on the book are also threefold. Firstly, despite the book's detailed descriptions of Japan's coffee-drinking culture, there are very few critical responses, negative reactions, or reflections on the global coffee chain and culture collected from customers, baristas, or even the author. Given that most of the responses highlight positive impressions of the exotic substance, the taste regime, and the brand culture, it is difficult to fully grasp the contradictory reactions or inner conflicts between "self" and "other," "native" and "foreign," "tradition" and "modern," and "local" and "global" among Japanese consumers and non-visitors of Starbucks (or visitors of kissa and other Japanese coffee chains). It is a pity that the book does not offer empirical discussions of Japanese people's mundane struggles or reconciliations (if there are any)—their daily negotiations between feelings of love and hate, the exotic and the indigenous, or the global and the local that revolve around coffee drinking. Without such perceptions, readers may find it difficult to fully understand the complex processes of code-switching, the formation of multifaceted cultural realities, and the shaping of the so-called Japan's "harmonious hybridity."

Secondly, regarding the acquired taste regime, cultural capital, and sense of middle-classness, I agree with the author that the glossary of global coffee chains, along with Starbucks' educational events and seminars, has helped cultivate a specialized and standardized body of knowledge, as well as an aesthetic regime, surrounding coffee drinking in Japan.

However, as studies on the historical popularization of tea culture suggest, a key factor enabling broader participation in the tea tasting art, is to allow individual flexibility and interpretation within standardized knowledge and aesthetics—by adapting to local socio-economic-cultural circumstances and by lowering the level of cultural capital required (Liu, 2011)[2]. Unlike many Asian teahouses, where customers are often expected to brew their own tea and thus engage in the spontaneous "civilizing process" of tea-making through individual bodily and mind control, Starbucks is primarily a place for coffee consumption. Despite offering separate coffee seminars, the forms of cultural capital associated with modern or postmodern artistic and cultural practices surrounding coffee drinking in Japan—such as social media blogging, Google Map tagging, project meetings, casual conversations, or street photography—are comparatively mundane compared to the artistic forms that are historically associated with tea art, including classical literature, ink painting, poetry recitation, and philosophical dialogue. This difference may partly explain the widespread consumption of coffee in contemporary Japan.

Thirdly, regarding the emergence and new transformation of public spaces created by global coffee chains in Japanese cities, I would like to highlight the unsettled nature of such a "third place." In introducing the historical rise of European coffeehouses, the author rightly notes that this "new sociability attracted scientists, philosophers, and other intellectuals, making the coffeehouse a space not only to gather information, but also to disseminate and probe it." As Jürgen Habermas (2023) points out in A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics, a mode of semi-public, fragmented, and self-enclosed communication now seems to be spreading among exclusive users of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. These algorithm-driven commercial platforms are disintegrating and distorting users' perceptions of the public sphere. The "thumb tribe" in Japan—whose mobile texting, virtually connected experiences, and online communication via social media in chain cafés—may be transforming public space into a more private, individualistic cultural "place" and new urban reality. Nevertheless, such practices are not very conducive to the integration of a divided cultural public sphere.

Overall, this is a fascinating book on the glocal coffee culture in Japan. The contribution and originality of the work deserve recognition and appreciation. As the author notes, the societal and cultural changes brought about by coffee drinking and the global coffee chain in the Asian region remain surprisingly understudied. This book fills that gap through in-depth surveys, interviews, and insightful ethnographic investigations conducted in Japan. The Japanese socio-cultural context of coffee drinking is well constructed, and the writing style is clear and fluent, making it accessible to readers. Moreover, the book offers a novel theoretical lens for analyzing the socio-cultural aspect of urban public coffee spaces in Japan. I agree with the author that global coffee chains can shape the very nature of public spaces and transform the urban fabric of places. Whether these spaces are "bad places" disguising them-

[2] Lu Yu's *The Book of Tea* (8th century) documented the spirit of tea-drinking culture. The ninth chapter, entitled "Omission," purposefully offered pieces of advice for those aspects of tea processing and tea brewing that could be simplified for various occasions within daily tea-drinking routines (Liu, 2011).

selves as "good places," or new spaces acquiring unique cultural connotations and dynamics, remains to be seen—but they are undoubtedly significant places. It will be interesting to explore whether East Asian countries such as China, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan—where global coffee chains are also widespread—have developed similar or distinct forms of glocal coffee culture and public cultural spheres.

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