

Alex Yuan

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ENGL 129

Feature Article: How Milk Tea Opened My Eyes

August 20th, 2014: the day I started at San Jose State University (SJSU). Looking back, it was a surreal experience; I was transitioning from the hell known as high school to an unfamiliar college setting. At the time, I aimed to pursue my computer engineering degree; I never considered other experiences that could potentially change my perspectives.

As I walked around campus, I saw many students carrying drinks. Some were sodas, while others were either Starbucks or Phil's coffee. The majority were milk teas – their tan look with black, round bubbles at the bottom was unmistakable. For those of you who don't know: milk tea is an iced tea drink that comes in various flavors such as lychee, taro, and green tea. What makes milk tea stand out from other iced drinks is the inclusion of “boba pearls” – round, chewy balls that sit at the bottom of the drink.

How did milk tea become as popular as coffee? Milk tea first originated from Taiwan in 1980; although many milk tea franchises claim to have “invented” the drink, it nonetheless became a popular to-go drink world-wide. Today, milk tea is a popular beverage; this is true in many academic campuses, where a combination of students wanting to buy non-school cafeteria food and proximity of milk tea places results in many customers.

Back in high school, I thought that drinking milk tea came off as too “hipster”. Why should I drink it? Water is much healthier. Three years later, I'm sitting here writing this article while a half-full milk tea sits idly on the table. It was lychee-flavored with 25% ice content and lychee toppings; I bought it from Boba Bar half an hour ago. I've become part of the “trend” that

I once disliked; but if anything, it does taste good. My curiosity is what got me into this “milk tea culture” – having seen many students drink milk tea, I wanted to see what it was like. Had I never decided to take the plunge and go to places such as Gong Cha and Amor, I’d probably still be the old high school me today.

My first unofficial milk tea experience was during my freshman year. I was at the “meeting new people” phase; having met some other freshmen, we decided to explore downtown San Jose. Five minutes later, we found ourselves ordering drinks at Thirst Tea – a milk tea franchise. I was astounded by their menu; there was so many flavors! There was standard milk tea, “foam” milk tea (the foam is sort of like whipped cream), and even smoothies.... it was a little overwhelming, to say the least. Curiosity got the better of me; I figured why not, I should buy a milk tea. However, I ended up ordering a mango slushy drink. While the impromptu meetup was fun, and I liked the slushy drink, I didn’t get to try real milk tea.

A few days later, I went to Amor. It was located at E. San Antonio Street – also in downtown San Jose. My first time there, however, was spent meeting other freshmen; I didn’t buy anything. It wasn’t until subsequent visits where I finally got to taste milk tea; I tried out various flavors such as lychee, mango, and honey jasmine. Although the mango and lychee flavors were somewhat dull, I liked how they mixed in with the milk tea flavoring. It was also the first time I tried out honey jasmine; even though I had no clue what it was, I ended up liking the flavor as well.

Over the next few years, I would alternate between Thirst Tea and Amor for milk tea. I also tried out another place called Boba Bar, located at S 3rd Street at downtown San Jose. However, I found that not only their milk tea not as savory as the ones from both Thirst Tea and

Amor, but Boba Bar's menu was also limited. I limited myself to 1 milk tea drink per week; as good as they taste, I didn't want to drink them daily.

Recently, however, I happened to pass by Thirst tea and found out that it had been shut down; the inside was dark and empty. Whatever the reason was behind its shutdown, I'll never know; either way, I'll miss that place and all those times I went there.

This year, a new milk tea franchise popped up out of nowhere. It was known as Gong Cha – all I knew was that it replaced the Quickly's branch near SJSU. Curious about its selection, I decided to check it out during their “soft opening” period. When I first went there during a cold Spring morning, I was greeted by a long line that stretched outside the place. By the time I made it in, I looked at their menu: while it wasn't as expansive, there were interesting variations and combinations of flavors I've never seen before. “Milk foam” drinks? “lychee taro” and “Honeydew green tea”, are a thing. There was even an option to set sugar and ice levels – for me, this was a nice touch as having too much ice in my milk tea seemed annoying.

After all that, I managed to order an Mango green tea drink. It was mostly mango-flavored, with a hint of green tea mixed in – a taste I found strangely enjoyable. Today, Gong Cha is my go-to place for a quick milk tea. Although the wait can feel a little long at times, for me waiting for my milk foam wintermelon drink is worth my time. If anything, it did make up for Thirst Tea closing down; I could even say the milk tea selection beats out Amor.

My milk tea experience at SJSU has changed my perspective on milk tea culture. What started as an impulse to try a new drink spiraled to a semi-habit of weekly runs for milk tea, as well as occasionally trying new places and flavors. Even though those \$3.75 drinks can add up, that won't stop me from enjoying these drinks. If anything, trying out milk tea has gotten me to

become slightly more outgoing; I'm more willing to try out something new because fuck it, why not.