

The Bittersweet Symbolism of Coffee

Lixiao Yang

Drexel University

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Dr. Lisa DiMaio

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For many, coffee is a morning pick-me-up or a social beverage, but for me, it is a symbol of my identity as a Chinese student. Growing up, my parents emphasized the importance of education, and they instilled in me the value of hard work. As a result, I was expected to do well academically and work tirelessly to achieve my goals. This mindset led me to have an intense and maybe bitter experience during my last year of high school, preparing for the Chinese national college entrance exam.

The college entrance exams, or gaokao, in China are a rite of passage for many high school students. It is an annual event that happens in June and is considered one of the most critical exams in the country. The exam determines whether a student is eligible to attend university or college and can have a substantial impact on their future opportunities based on their scores. For many Chinese students, the gaokao is a make-or-break moment, and the pressure to succeed can be overwhelming (Ma & Wang, 2016). I can very clearly recall the time I first tried coffee. I had to put in a lot of study time in the final few months before the gaokao in order to do well on the admission examinations. I was worn out and in need of a cool drink because my days were spent reading textbooks and doing practice tests. At that time, I started my coffee journey from Nescafe. Despite not enjoying coffee's harsh flavor, I drank it nonetheless for its cooling effects.

Unlike the sweetness taste from an energy drink, the bitterness that appeared to permeate every sip of coffee astonished me when I first tasted it. I didn't think I'd ever come to appreciate it. However, as time passed, I came to appreciate the amazing beauty and complexity that existed behind the seemingly simple beverage. I learnt about various brewing methods, roasting procedures, and bean kinds, each with its own distinct flavor profile. I



experimented with numerous water-to-coffee ratios and brewing temperatures in search of the perfect cup. I discovered that the more I knew about coffee, the more I came to appreciate it.

As my fond for coffee grew, I began to see parallels between my love of coffee and my experience during the gaokao. Like the bitterness of coffee, the gaokao was a difficult and challenging time for me. The pressure to succeed was intense, and I often felt stressed by the sheer amount of studying I had to do. However, there were accomplishment moments that helped to make the struggle worthwhile. I was proud of myself when I solved a particularly difficult problem or achieved a good grade on a test. I also felt a sense of camaraderie with my classmates, and we supported each other through the long days and nights of studying. These moments of success and friendship gave me the drive to persevere during the challenging gaokao period.

Despite the challenges, I was able to persevere and succeed during the gaokao, just as I was able to learn to appreciate the bittersweet taste of coffee. Now, whenever I enjoy a cup of coffee, I am reminded of the lessons I learned during the gaokao, and the valuable qualities that allowed me to succeed. But more than that, I am reminded of the beauty and complexity that can be found in even the most seemingly simple things. From a single bean, a masterpiece can be created, just as from a difficult experience, a valuable lesson can be learned.

Looking back on my journey with coffee and the gaokao, I realize that both have taught me valuable lessons about resilience, perseverance, and determination. The bitterness of coffee and the challenges of the gaokao were not obstacles to be overcome, but rather opportunities to grow and learn. And while the taste of coffee may be an acquired one, the lessons it has taught me will stay with me for a lifetime.

I can't help but think about the larger significance of coffee in the context of Asian culture when I ponder my personal identity and the link to it. For some of us, coffee is more than simply a daily brew; it is a representation of the struggles we as Asians face on a daily basis (Kuroda, 2013). With high population densities and intense competition in all aspects of life, the bitterness of coffee serves as a poignant reminder of the difficulties we endure. However, our lives also include happy moments amid the challenges, just like the complexity and variety of coffee flavors. Coffee is a tangible representation of hope, strength, and determination that is deeply ingrained in our collective identity.

In conclusion, the aroma, taste, and texture of coffee represent more than just a simple

beverage for me. It is a symbol of my identity, my culture, and the collective experiences of many individuals across different countries. As a Chinese student, I faced many challenges during the gaokao, but the lessons I learned from those experiences have shaped me into the person I am today. Similarly, for many Asian countries, coffee represents the hardships and the unique flavors that come with them. In a rapidly changing global environment, they must balance the need for progress with the preservation of their cultural identity. The fast pace of coffee culture reflects this reality and serves as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of our people.

Works Cited

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