Study on tea culture of snowy Murakami in Japan.

Chigusa Tateyama

1: Niigata Women's College, 471 Ebigase, Niigata-shi, Niigata, 950-8680 Japan

Summary
In Japan, green tea has been recognized as not only a taste-drink but also a natural healthy-drink by history and culture. We can always see green tea in the Japanese life. This paper investigates this situation from the aspect of the food culture.

The green tea has been produced in Murakami area (Murakami-tea) in Niigata Prefecture in spite of the snowfall condition. Murakami is the most northern place in the tea-producing area on Japan. Murakami-tea is one of the special-foods of Niigata Prefecture. Most of this investigation was supported by many references. I examined the geographical background, the history, the conditions of production, and the conditions of consumption.

Though Murakami area has a disadvantage of the cold winter, the cultivation of Murakami-tea is successful as a business. This is because the techniques of both the cultivation and manufacture have been continuously improved. This should be evaluated high. The amount of production of present Murakami-tea is very small compared to those of nationwide tea place. This is caused many factors including the decrease of the Murakami-tea farm, a difference in the production system, a geographical factor and a historical change. It has serious tasks.

Keywords
tea-culture, green tea, Murakami-tea, snowfall condition

Introduction
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The green tea has been produced in Murakami area (Murakami-tea) in Niigata Prefecture in spite of the snowfall condition. Murakami is the most northern place in the tea-producing area on Japan. Murakami-tea is one of the special-foods of Niigata Prefecture. Most of this investigation was supported by many references. I examined the geographical background, the history, the conditions of production, and the conditions of consumption. This report takes green tea cultivated in Murakami region, Niigata-prefecture into account from a point of traditional gastronomic culture. Murakami-tea is Japanese green tea cultivated in economical northernmost in Japan and under special climate to tea like snow coverage.

Material and Methods
Related data were gathered, assembled and considered

Fig. 1 Economical northernmost in Japanese tea
through field investigation, document and information. The related regions are indicated in figure 1.

### Results and Discussion

1. Tea in Murakami, economic northernmost

1-1 Climate in Murakami as tea growing region

The basic condition for tea growing is climate. From the view point of tea vegetation in Japan, it belongs to one kind of crop growing in laurel forest zone where occupies mainly south-west of Japan and some part of Tohoku region except middle-height area. It is unique to Japanese green tea, as it has strong cold resistance and even in extreme north region like Tohoku is possible for its cultivation. However as low temperature puts restriction on tea growing, it is said that the best for tea growing is limited to the place where the lowest temperature is not below minus 5 degrees and average annual temperature is more than 12.5 degrees.

Murakami-city, producing region of Murakami-tea, is located in the north of Niigata prefecture at latitude 38.3 degrees north and at longitude 139.45 degrees east. Its climate is special to Niigata-prefecture; it has short sunshine duration, high rainfall and especially both in winter and July rainfall is heavy and humidity is high, while in Spring and Autumn fine weather is relatively frequent and rainfall is low. Temperature is high in August and is the lowest in January. In general, rainfall is high and damage resulting from heavy snow is rare, because of relative little snow in this region. According to the data of Niigata-city local Meteorological Observatory in 7 of the Heisei era, 1995, the average temperature is 12.3 degrees and its lowest is minus 6.2 degrees, while annual precipitation is 2,437 mm and snow fall is 239 cm.

Therefore Murakami meets the conditions as good soil for tea cultivation in terms of location, precipitation and lowest temperature, but it is not the best.

1-2 The history and transition of Murakami-tea

There are two theories about the origin of Murakami-tea. One is the theory that domain head Horitanngo indulging in tea tried to make Zinbei plant tea seed after getting it from Uji to Edo property. As a result, it unexpectedly came out and it was diffused in Murakami. Another one is that Tokumituyatuchida Kakuzaemon living in Kamimachi, Murakami, went to worship the Shinto gods at Ise Shrine in the 6 year of the Genwa Era (1620), he saw tea plants were growing in Uji,Ise. He got tea seeds by his own expense intending to transplant it in Murakami. At that time, being an senior..., he recommended peasants to plant tea widely. As a result, it is said that tea cultivation had became increasingly popular year and year to be industrial base of Murakami.

Although there is any clear evidence about source of those two theories, presumably out of Kakuzaemon hypothesis is influential, guessing from the facts that in after years he planted tea plants for groin and security to protect Murakami from wind-blow sand coming from Japan sea and that he got a permission to have surname and belt on a sward from the domain head. In any case, as that was under the reign of Horitango, tea seems to have close relationship with entering Zen sect of domain head as its origin.

Although tea manufacturing process was not known well at first, “Kuromushi cha”, steamed black tea, had been produced since the time of Kanbun Era. Kuromushi cha”, one kind of fermented teas, was shipped to Echu Fushiki port or Nagaoka region as a brand of Murakami-tea and its annual shipment amount was over 6,000 kg. After that tea garden had gradually expanded. The development is also estimated by the fact that burgrave Sakakibara Masatomo establishes tax system in tea garden in 2 year of the Eiho (1674).

During the time of Genroku Era (1688–1704), tea merchant Sato Gizaemon required handpick technique to pick top of parts of leaves. This picking method is to pick tea leaf in young bud by which Gyokuro tea, refined gree tea called “Bekkou Cha”, amber colored tea, (or Jiseicha) was produced ranking more than Sencha tea, natural leaf tea, in comparison with conventional method to pick middle raking tea between Bancha tea, coarse tea, and Sencha tea, natural leaf tea. After that, by the encouragement by the feudal domain, tea garden had reportedly expanded to 110ha in the 2 year of Eiho Era (1704).

In Bunsei Era, high quality of Sencha tea, natural leaf tea, was shipped and also its marketing
outlets were expanded. Takinami Fujibe not only developed its outlet to Ohu regions, but also recommended tea industry by sending tea seed to Akita region in the first year of Tempo Era. Furthermore worrying that tea industry would peaked, domain head of the day Naito tried to protect tea industry by doing research about tea cultivation and its manufacturing process to improve old process.

In Meiji Era, there is a good document to show further development of outlets; such as trade with tea merchants in Yokohama, export to Vladivostok and Sakhalin, and production of black tea and its export to New York.

At that time, tea was cultivated not only in Murakami, but in other towns including Yahiko, Niitsu, Muramatsu, Gosen, Sasakami, Shibata, Nakajo and Kurokawa Niigata prefecture raked No. 8th in the tea producing regions. And Murakami tea is said to have accounted for 16%.

However because of the recession resulted from big financial panic in the aftermath of the First World War, tea industry had gradually deteriorated. Medium-and small size of tea merchant transferred most of their tea gardens to the big tea merchants and became catch crop farmers (tenant farming path between tea garden). Some farmers converted tea plant to another crops and on the other hand tea garden was transformed into residential land by urbanization.

Tea growing area, where has 650ha in its best days, reduced to approximately 300ha in Taisho Era and to 100ha in starting time of The Second World War. During and after the war, policies of both supplies increase production and emancipating of farming land spurred on cutting tea garden, it had decreased in a little less than 60ha by around in the 25 year of the Showa Era, and at last to approximately 42 ha at present.

This sharp decrease of tea garden did not result simply from social condition and wave of the day, but low productivity by other conditions like climate in Murakami. Present Murakami-tea is touched upon in next chapter.

1-3 Production circumstances of Murakami-tea 8) 9)

Murakami-tea is manufactured mainly by self-garden and made-oneself system. The annual output is approximately 300t which accounts absolute minority in nation tea production amount. The production rates of tea variety are 80% for Bancha tea, coarse tea, 17% for Sencha tea, natural leaf tea and 3% for Gyokuro tea, refined green tea, and its annual production amount accounts for approximately 200 million yen. The most of refined tea is consumed mainly in lwafune, Murakami-city, and the rest is shipped to tea commission agency in regions including Shizuoka, Uji and Hokkaido.

As for the main variety of cultivated tea, 97% of cultivated tea in the garden are local breed and the rest of 3% accounts for the variety introduced from out region like Nara and Shizuoka. Tea in Nara and Shizuoka is cultivated in simple plant such as “Yabukita” and “Sayamamidori”, while Murakami-tea is produced by natural mating cultivating in mixed plants of 6 species classified by leaf shape. Because Murakami-tea has weak assimilation process affected by weather conditions like short sun light hours which is unique to Hokuriku region, it contains low tannin and high sugar. Tannin produces astringent taste. According to those circumstances, Murakami-tea is characterized by sweet and mild taste compared with tea produced in other regions.

Accordingly growing area of Murakami-tea at present is very narrow compared with other big tea cultivation regions. As for Murakami-tea, there are lots of problems to be solved. Its grow is worse because of snow and cold climate and its production is half of that in warm climate. Furthermore crop yields are low because of small-scale business. However the taste is excellent according to repeated improvement of both cultivation and manufacturing technology over
People now try to maintain and nurture development of Murakami-tea day and night. The fame of it has still been kept even today.

1-4 Consumption of tea in Niigata prefecture

According to household expenditure survey conducted by Statistical Department of the Management and Coordination Agency in the 11 year of the Heisei era 10), the annual tea expenditure pattern per household in Niigata prefecture is almost similar to that of the whole country and any distinctive feature as tea habitat cannot be admitted.

When we look people's taste for tea in Niigata prefecture, there are varieties according to the regions. It is often said that both refined green tea and high-quality natural leaf tea suit their taste in Murakami, toasted leafy tea like refined green tea and high-quality natural leaf tea in Jyoetsu region and Chuetsu centered in Nagaoka, and toasted less-leafy stalk tea (they often call it coarse tea in Niigata) suits the taste in Sanjyo and Niigata. 1) Although it is said that tea is not so popular among people in Niigata, special taste for tea has still be there.

Conclusion

Though Murakami area has a disadvantage of the cold winter, the cultivation of Murakami-tea is successful as a business. This is because the techniques of both the cultivation and manufacture have been continuously improved. This should be evaluated high. The amount of production of present Murakami-tea is very small compared to those of nationwide tea place. This is caused many factors including the decrease of the Murakami-tea farm, a difference in the production system, a geographical factor and a historical change. It has serious tasks.

References

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