

Boba? Bubble? Pearl? What's Inside My Tea?

If you live in, or have ever been to any big city like New York, it is hard to not notice this “exotic” yet addictive milky/fruity tea beverage with black little balls filling gradually taking over the place of other drinks like coffee or juice, and becoming people’s new go-to.

Bubble tea, also known as boba tea, or pearl milk tea (milk tea with black pearl), is a tea beverage that originated in Taiwan in the 1980s. This refreshing and easy-to-get drink can be made with any kind of tea as a base, which is accompanied by a certain ratio of milk and sweetener, or no milk at all. The only requirement for marking a bubble tea is the bubbles, “boba” (is directly translated from Chinese, 波霸 Bo-Ba), or we can say, pearls(珍珠 Zhen-Zhu). These are tiny chewy balls made out of tapioca (木薯淀粉). Either “bubble” or “pearl” is not too difficult to understand, it is more than obvious that the names come from how the tapioca balls look like. But where does “boba” generate? If you have ever wondered this question, well, the answer is quite an anecdote. One most recognized saying is that in 1988, a hawker from Tainan City was inspired by the famous female movie star Zimei Ye (叶子楣) who was known for her sexual appealing figure, and made the tapioca balls into a larger size than the previous quarter-inch ones. Bo-ba (波霸) in Taiwanese slang actually means huge breasts.

The key to a successful bubble tea depends, one-hundred percent, on the texture and taste of its tapioca balls. It must not be too slimy or too soft, which will stick on the bottle/cup. It can neither be too hard, or people won't enjoy chewing them. When boiling the raw tapioca balls, it requires extreme accuracy from the amount of water to the heat control. In Chinese, there was once a popular slang for describing something chewy — “QQ” or “Q弹” — which led to a popular nickname for bubble tea back in the last decade, “QQ奶茶” (QQ milk tea). The tapioca balls aren't

born in this deep black color. In fact, they were once white and translucent in the beginning. And today you can still get the white pearl (or even colorful pearls) in most of the bubble tea shops. So what is the origin of these tapioca balls? Or shall we ask, more specifically, what is the origin of putting these tapioca balls inside a tea beverage?

Using tapioca to make dessert and different kinds of street food has a long history in many of the East Asian countries. While regarding the origin of bubbles inside a cup of milk tea, there were two Taiwanese tea businessmen claiming to be the mother of this genius creation. One is Lin Xiuhui (林秀慧), the director of Tea Product Department of Chun-Shui-Tang (春水堂), a well-known tea shop in Taiwan. In 1985, when Lin was just a general clerk, she happened to add Fenyuan (boiled tapioca balls) into the milk tea and found it quite delicious. It firstly became a special private drink for only her friends or familiar customers. Soon it became so popular that it was officially launched as an in-store merchandise in 1987, and was named “Pearl Milk Tea” (directly translated from the Chinese term : 珍珠奶茶”) because of the shape of the tapioca balls.

The other story asserts that Tu Zonghe (涂宗和), the owner of Hanlin Tea House (翰林茶室), was inspired by the white tapioca balls sold by some vendors at the Yamuliao Market in 1986.¹ He bought the boiled tapioca balls and added them to milk tea for just a trial, and, obviously, found that the taste was heaven. Therefore, the first cup of pearl milk tea was invented. It was named “Pearl Milk Tea” because the white tapioca balls were crystal clear like pearls. It was only after the tapioca powder was added with brown sugar, it changed to the black color we most commonly see today.

¹ 孟庆慈. 翰林茶館 自認珍珠始創者. 自由时报电子报 (自由时报). [2004-10-01]. (原始内容存档于 2019-04-01).

In order to argue over who invented the bubble tea, Hanlin Tea House and Chun-Shui-Tang sued each other at the Taiwanese Court.² But the case remained undetermined for a long time due to lack of evidence from either side. On the other hand, it was also because that neither of these two shops had successfully applied for patent or trademark rights, that has made bubble tea the best local drink of Taiwan, as well as the most representative food stall which later on has stormed the world. And it is also these interesting yet undistinguishable anecdotes which has constructed a rich and appealing history of this evolving food culture.

² 联合报. 珍珠奶茶发明之争黑、白分明. [2001-11-28]



A Chun-shui-tang branch in Taichung. Wikiwand.



ChunShuiTang in West Kowloon Station HongKong, 2018. Wikiwand.



Boiling the raw tapioca balls. The New York Times.



The brown-sugar boba



Classic bubble tea.



Matcha bubble tea.

How Does Bubble Tea Become Global

In the mid-1980s, bubbling/foam black tea became such a popular beverage all across Taiwan, and beverage shops focusing on bubbling black tea and other popular teas have sprung up on the streets of major cities in Taiwan.¹ This is the forerunner of the popularity of bubble milk tea. In the first half of the 1990s, bubble tea gradually appeared on the menus of many tea shops. Before coffee shops, especially the large chain coffee enterprises landing Taiwan, bubbling black tea shops were the most popular places for young people to meet up, discuss business, or just casual hangout. As a result, bubble milk tea first became popular among youngsters, students, to be more specific. Soon after, vendors of bubble milk tea took over all commercial districts and late night food markets near schools and every densely populated area.

In the late 1990s, some local companies introduced “automatic sealing machines” to replace traditional cup lids. Many new shops, such as Leli Cup (乐力杯), Kuai-Keli (快可立), and Leisure Station (休闲小站), adopted the automatic sealing machines to expand the business of chain takeaway beverage stores. Since then, takeout bubble milk tea shops have become the mainstream. With the establishment of large chain brands, bubble tea has eventually stepped into its new phase - conquering the global food and beverage market.

¹ The bubbling black tea is a cold beverage made by black tea and syrup. By shaking the liquid with ice, a layer of bubbling foam is generated on top of the drink, just like how all the shaken cocktails are made. It is entirely different from bubble milk tea. Most of the stores would assert that the bubbling tea must be freshly shaken.

The first target for bubble milk tea to enter the overseas market is, without doubt, the East Asian cultural sphere in which most of the countries & districts share a similar tea drinking culture. In the 1990s, bubble milk tea landed in Hong Kong, and received enough popularity to open up new branches one by another, such as Leisure Stations and Kuai-Keli. Upon entering the millennial, China mainland became the most overseas marketing target for most of the Taiwanese local tea brands, including Coco (Coco都可), Chatime (日出茶太), Happy Lemon (快乐柠檬), and Gongcha (贡茶). The huge demand in mainland China has also led to a new generation of bubble tea chain tycoons in addition to the Taiwanese old ones. Japan has witnessed its bubble tea food stall boom much more recently, some say in late 2017. But the heat of bubble tea just never cooled down ever since. No one would be surprised to hear that Chun-shuitang and Gongcha opened numeral branches in the most expensive areas in Japan such as Omotesando in Tokyo.

With shared efforts among the brands and supply chain manufacturers, these “pearls” have become the gems on the world’s food industry crown. A very recent New York Times article, Another Unlikely Pandemic Shortage: Boba Tea indicates clearly enough how the modern-day bubble tea business is running globally, “Boba suppliers in the San Francisco Bay Area who are running low on tapioca said their shipments of fully formed boba came from Taiwan, while supplies of cassava root, which is used to make tapioca, came from Thailand and islands in the Pacific Ocean...The boba shortage, which was reported earlier by The San Francisco Chronicle, has boba fans in a panic. A post sharing the

news in the Facebook group Subtle Asian Traits, a gathering place for Asian people around the world, attracted 10,000 comments and messages of dismay and sadness.”²

Though the success of bubble tea in major Asian cities and regions is considered to be an identical symbol of bubble tea drink culture entering the world stage, the historic appearance of bubble milk tea in United States can be found earlier than that — mostly due to the large Asian immigrant population, especially in coastal area metropolitans. In August 1997, two Taiwanese engineers in Silicon Valley opened the Fantasia Tea Cafe, a small local bubble tea store at Santana Row in Cupertino, California. In the west coast, Manhattan Chinatown and Flushing in Queens surpass most of the other neighborhoods on both the quantity and the history of bubble tea shops. It is just natural that bubble tea has become another hit in the recent decade, on the North American continent — or to say, wherever Asian population has accumulated — and yes, we are talking about Queens!

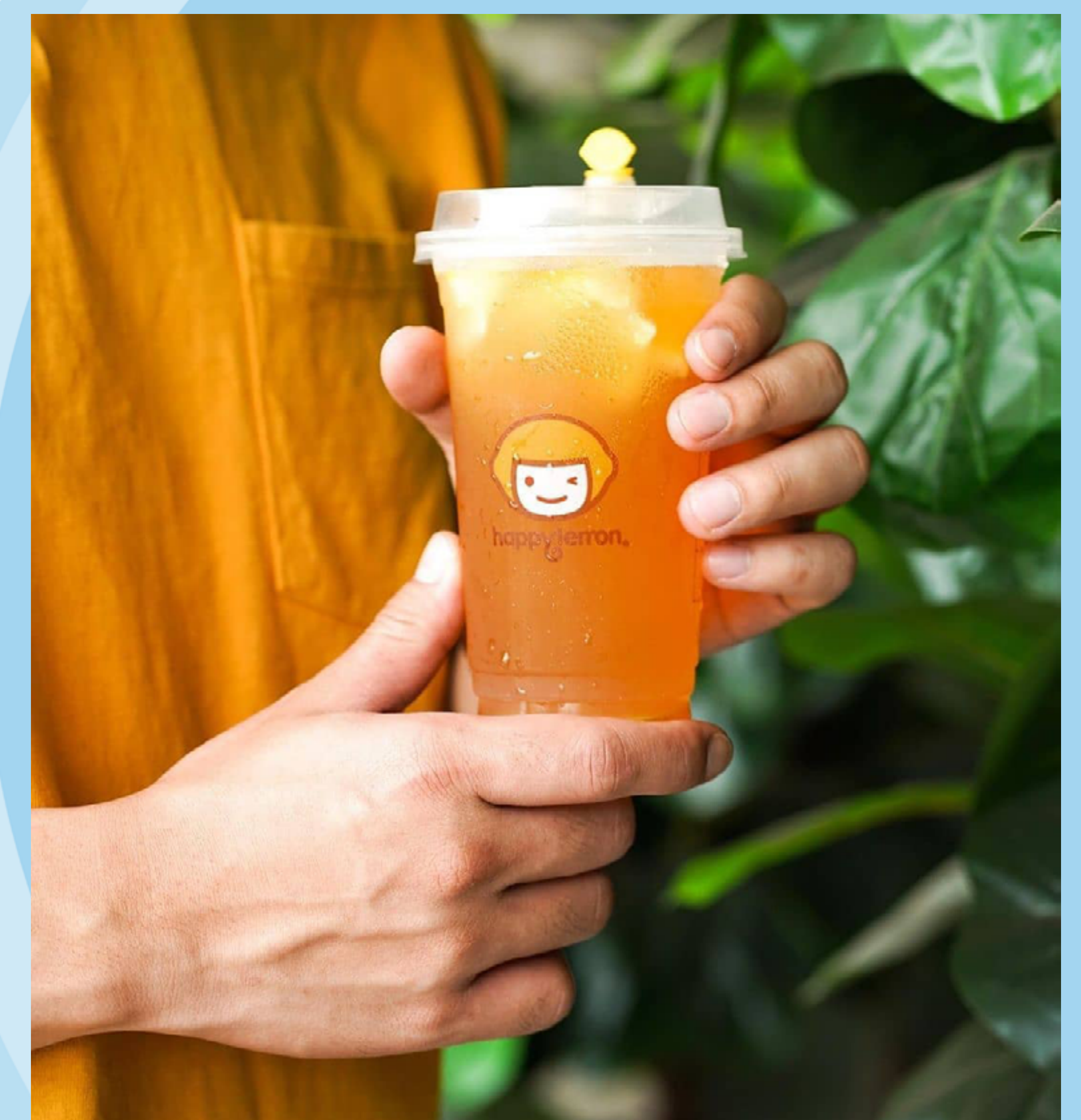
² Kellen Browning, Another Unlikely Pandemic Shortage: Boba Tea. New York Times, April 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/16/business/boba-shortage.html>



Happy lemon line. Happy Lemon China, website.



Bubbling / foam black tea. Zhihu (Chinese website).



Happy lemon drink. Happy Lemon Vancouver Facebook.

Booming in Queens

As the Asian, especially Chinese population grows in Queens, so does the boba tea culture and industry. In Flushing, Asian residents, including immigrants, make up over half of its population. Identically enough, the whole downtown Flushing has merely three Starbucks, yet over 20 bubble tea shops. Isn't it competitive? The answer is yes, undoubtedly. At the same time, the demand for high-quality and new-flavor boba tea has never cooled down. The fierce competition among the bubble tea shops has actually created a balanced dynamic which helps maintain the distinctive characters of each chain brand and provokes innovative, even audacious variations of this young and full-of-potential drink.

Coco Fresh Tea and Juice, who has now expanded to 16 locations in the NY & NJ area, opened its Flushing Main Street branch in 2015, and still is one of the most popular bubble tea brands. When asked what is their secret of longevity and popularity, the cashier says, "I guess it's because we always follow the trend and launch new beverage items, but at the same time maintain our own original characteristics and quality. Coco is famous for its classic tea latte (milk tea) recipes, like the Three Guy Milk Tea, no matter where the trend goes, it's just always a staple."

Like he said, as more and more bubble tea shops are opened, the drink itself is being constantly altered and improved. The topping choices have also expanded to a much more broader spectrum rather than tapioca balls - you can see aloe, grass jelly, puree, red beans, and so on. Being much more essential than the flavor of the liquid, it is the topping which draws a conclusion on the integrity of a legit bubble tea. Therefore, the substitution of tapioca balls usually signals a new trend of bubble tea variations, and captures the taste buds of its fans.

Two years ago, cheese tea (or cloud tea), an ice-cold tea topped with a white foamy layer usually made with whipped cream or cream cheese mousse, became the most phenomenal item on every tea shop's menu. While since last year, the craze of brown sugar milk tea has swamped the City until recent days. This trend is ignited by the most reputable Tiger Sugar (老虎堂). Suggested by its name, it is recognizable by its deep-caramel color and brown sugar tapioca pearls. In a Queens Eagle article, Lucy Z., an interviewee, gives a representative comment on how she thinks on the brown sugar milk tea and its origin, Tiger Sugar, "If you are ever in Flushing and see two long lines by the bus stop, the longer one is usually for tiger sugar," Lucy said. "I didn't understand what the craze was about until I had it for the first time and it definitely met — maybe even exceeded — my expectations."

Social media has further expanded the popularity of the famous brown sugar milk tea. During the first couple of months of Tiger Sugar's Grand Opening, you should never expect to see no lines of customers waiting outside. People are drawn here from far-away districts and even New Jersey, because of the posts that went viral on Instagram and Facebook groups, including the famous "SAT" (Subtle Asian Traits). "I spent over 40 minutes waiting in line for the brown sugar milk tea when I first went there. That was only weeks after their opening, as I remembered. My friend shared a post of it on SAT, and we just couldn't stop thinking about it!", says Chloe, a Chinese student who came to the States six years ago, "It looks even better than what I have had back in China."

One of the other Queens neighborhoods which has witnessed an exploding growth of boba tea stores is Long Island City, a rapidly developing area densely populated by Asian immigrants, especially International students and

young people who are new to the workplace. In the past one and a half years, five new boba tea shops has emerged, within a radius of one mile centered the south corner of Queensboro subway station - Gong Cha, Moge Tea (愿茶), Teazzi (瓷禧), Yifang (一芳), and M Tea (铭茶). Most of them are relatively new chain brands which become popular for different reasons - might be a house signature drink that cannot be found elsewhere, a unique style of decoration and design, or an outstanding combination of tasty desserts and boba tea choices. Queens, has certainly become a new Mecca for bubble tea drinkers from all over the State.



The freshly made black sugar boba (Tiger Sugar on Flushing Main Street). Photographed by Yuwen Huyan.

An Evolving Cultural Symbol

The popularity of boba milk tea in the whole Asian market is almost inevitable - when you consider the similar longstanding tea drinking culture and the similar social habits of small gatherings. While its success on the overseas continents is not as simple as that. Of course, there are more and deeper economic and social factors behind it, and the internet might be one of the most substantial ones.

Efforts are certainly being made from all over the place to help bubble tea gain more recognition. In 2018, one of America's biggest boba tea chain brands, Kung Fu Tea, founded the National Bubble Tea Day to, as they said, "honor their growing community of fans who loved bubble tea." Each year, they will launch a themed campaign for the Day. And this year, the campaign is called "WTF is Boba" as they discovered that there is a large social following across platforms like Google, Youtube, Instagram, Reddit, and more, still generally asking, "What is Boba?"

We live in the age of social media, through which the young generation of Chinese/Asian immigrants have created a powerful, evolving, and to some extent, addictive, subculture on this continent that is far away from their origins. You might have heard about a famous Facebook group called "Subtle Asian Traits", the name itself is strong enough to indicate how different the life stories and cultural identities are for these youngsters, and how might the bubble tea as a cultural object evolve — accompanied by polarized interpretations.

In the previous New York Times article reporting the possible boba shortage, an interviewee said to the press that "boba is something that translates across a lot of Asian cultures, something so simple but can bring a lot of people

together." In other words, it has become a "subtle Asian trait" collectively shared by most of the community members who consider grabbing a cup of boba tea as a regular social activity rather than merely a sugary beverage which comforts you after a tough day. In some way, it functions as a hint to the young Asian immigrants who live in Western countries of their own cultural identity. Not only Asians build bonds over bubble tea, but it can also be a great way to socialize with people of other ethnicities by simply introducing them to such a unique, symbolic, and pleasant dessert-drink.

While to some others, boba tea has also been criticized as against "an emerging superficial political identity within the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community: boba liberalism." A recent column article from *Insider* introduced the term "boba liberalism" and how it has been utilized to represent a shallow ideal political image of Asian Americans. A Twitter thread from account @diaspora_red says, "Boba Liberalism is thinking t-shirts, products, and merchandise are the main way of affirming one's racial identity. It's capitalist consumption is presented as 'API-ness' (Asian and Pacific Islander - ness). Buy more crazy rich asians tickets, sell more boba, go to raves, wear this brand. It's reliant on capitalism."

It is indeed, taking over the Western street beverage market at a rapid speed, and so is it intertwining with the American political and social fabric. Early back in 2016, clues were seen when Hillary Clinton visited a Kung Fu Tea shop in Queens and tried boba tea for the first time. Certainly, media coverages were all over the place. One year after, the New York Times caught itself in criticism after publishing a feature article where they described it as a "blob" and used words like "exotic" and "Far East". Clearly, the very outdated

phrasing and rhetoric emphasized on "otherness" which alienated the Asian American culture from the "mainstream" (as indicated from the article's previous wording).

Albeit the author soon responded and the NY Times republished an edited version, we can now understand the rage from those against bubble tea being too symbolized to represent a "good" Millennial-and-Zen Asian American figure, and get a better sense of how it is perceived as just another try of "white adjacency".

While how its cultural meaning will evolve in the future has no certain answer, one thing is solid - the bubble tea craze is not going to be cooled down easily. If you have never tried one yet, go grab one now, and you will know what I'm saying!

