

The woman merchant, Oura Kei (1884), who built the wealth of one generation by the exportation of green tea in Japan, and the green tea in that time.

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Summary

Oura Kei was born in 1828. As the daughter of a Nagasaki oil merchant, she helped out with the family business and eventually became a trade merchant herself. In 1853, in search of an outlet, Oura Kei asked a Dutch merchant staying in Nagasaki's Dejima Island to help send samples of URESHINO-Cha to America, Arabia, and England. Almost three years later, a British merchant, William Olt, placed a huge order to Kei. This marked the beginning of the green tea trade from Japan. Green tea in those days was made by an iron pot-roasting method, commonly known as Kama-iri-cha. Kei went all over Kyushu to respond to the order, and narrowly managed to export 9,380 kilogram of Japanese green tea. Soon afterwards, the exportation of tea increased and tea factories were built one after another. On June 2, 1859, the three harbors of Nagasaki, Yokohama and Hakodate were opened and the era of free trade began. Tea shipments from Nagasaki reached their peak around the middle of the 1860s. Kei accomplished great success with the tea trading business, and evermore became known as the woman pioneer who started the export of green tea from Japan.

Keywords

Oura Kei, Kama-iri-cha, Ureshino-cha

Introduction

After Japan became an open country, one of the more prosperous industries was the tea trade. A lot of Japanese green tea was exported from the last days of the Tokugawa Shogunate through the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. I would like to introduce to you a woman called Oura Kei and describe her impact on the green tea industry at that time.

Oura Kei was born into a family of wealthy oil merchants. The Oura family provided oil necessary for lamplight and cooking purposes. They lived in Aburaya-machi, a prosperous oil town in Nagasaki. The Oura family business continued for a period of 200 years, beginning in the 17th century. Kei was engaged to the family's adopted son, who was to become the head of the family business. Unfortunately, he passed away at an early age. After this dramatic event, Kei also lost her birth mother and a huge fire destroyed her family's business. Kei subsequently took a husband when she was 17-years-old, but separated from him because he could not support her.

At that time, the Oura family's oil business was becoming less significant and Kei realized that it could not sustain her. Kei was a person of great forethought, and she began doing research and expand her business knowledge. She subsequently decided to start importing cloth for kimonos and became very interested in the tea exportation business. This provoked her to go to Shanghai in 1848 to investigate the tea market, when she was in her early 20s. Her extensive efforts were rewarded, as her business talent was being recognized, she became head of the Oura family.

Beginning and development of tea trade

Kei perceived the tea trade to be a good prospect at the age of 25. This was about six years before Nagasaki opened its harbor in 1853. Kei requested a Dutch merchant, who lived in Dejima Island, to send tea samples overseas. It is said that these tea samples, which were shipped to England, America and Arabia, came from tea made in Ureshino, Japan. In 1856, an English merchant named Olt William came to Nagasaki and placed an order for over 60,000 kilograms, after he had obtained one of the samples of tea that Kei had sent with the Dutch merchant.

Kei was very happy about this, but was not certain whether she could fill an order this large, since not that much tea was being produced in Kyusyu those days. To meet the demand, Kei and all her employees went to visit tea production places. At that time, they were able to collect over 6,000 kilograms of tea and were finally able to export the tea to the U.S. There were many inquiries after that and the tea trade finally boomed. Because of the large demand, Kei turned the back of her house in Aburaya-Machi into a tea-manufacturing factory.

Around that time, tea was introduced in Europe by the Netherlands East India Company, and tea, known as the mysterious drink of East Asian countries, became an important part of the world market. To play into the popularity of Japanese green tea in the world market, merchants from foreign countries began traveling to Japan to purchase the tea.

On June 2, 1859, the three harbors of Nagasaki, Yokohama and Hakodate opened their harbors and free trade began. However by 1861, tea exportation stagnated for a while when the Civil War occurred in America. After the war ended in 1865, the demand for tea increased by leaps and bounds and exportation from Nagasaki reached its peak in 1866.

Yearly	quantity
1861	2,600,000 pounds
1865	2,240,000 pounds
1867	2,000,000 pounds

(from 'Nagasaki municipality 65 year history')

The tea was mainly exported to England, but it was also successful in Europe and the United States. Kei valued her business relationships with the foreign merchants highly and because of this she became well know and trusted. She was greatly admired for her foresight in the tea exportation business and in turn she became very wealthy. She was a forerunner who poured all of her energy into tea exportation trade and became a pioneer in Japan.

Kinds of tea in that time period

All tea comes from the same type of tea plant, which originated in East Asia. Green tea is generally divided into three kinds, determined by the method in which they are manufactured. These three kinds include 1).tea that is fermented, 2).tea that is half fermented and 3).unfermented tea. In addition, there are two distinct methods of manufacturing unfermented Japanese green tea. One is to roast the tea using an iron pot, the other method is to steam the tea. Both these methods are to prevent fermentation and to inhibit the activity of oxidation enzymes. At that the time of Oura kei, tea was made using the iron pot method called Kama-iri-sei. In contrast, today, almost all Japanese green tea is manufactured using the steaming method called Mushi-sei.

Decline of the tea trade and the Tohyama event

As the 1860s approached, the tea trade in Kyushu began to decline. The main

reasons for this were the appearance of large tea fields in the production district of Shizuoka, which exported their tea from the strategic port of Yokohama, and the fact that they used the steaming method to manufacture their tea. Kei became concerned when she realized that the demand for the tea she was exporting started to diminish, largely due to differences in economies of scale. Therefore, she started to look for new merchandise that could substitute the declining tea demand. In 1871, Kei met a samurai named Tohyama, who took advantage of her enormous efforts to rejuvenate her business. She became involved in a business agreement with Tohyama and some of his close business associates. Kei was uncertain about doing this, but her good friend Shinagawa convinced her it was OK. Unfortunately, Tohyama and Shinagawa conspired and used the arrangement for trickery and fraud. This eventually caused the Oura family's ruin, which is known as the Tohyama event. Kei was around 44 years old at that time.

This was a high profile affair at the time and Tohyama was eventually arrested; however, Kei ended up losing a great deal of money. In addition, Shinagawa worked in public office and the government became fearful that they would be held responsible and felt that they should hide Shinagawa's involvement from Prefectural authorities. Eventually, this became an international incident that involved the Prefectural governments of Nagasaki, Kumamoto and the consul of England. The situation turned unfavorable, and in the end, Kei was held responsible. It was arranged that she had to pay compensation through substantial monthly installments. Thereupon, her mansion and other assets were mortgaged. This is most likely the reason the Oura family fortune was lost. Although she tried hard to recover the family fortune, all of the household goods had already been disposed of. And so, the Oura family's lineage was cut off at that time.

Conclusion

As Japan left behind the feudal Tokugawa Shogunate and adopted an open-door policy under the Meiji Restoration, Kei build a business empire around the exportation of green tea. In the year 1884, the Meiji government officially recognized Kei's devotion to the tea trade and her achievements in this field. Oura kei was rewarded money and a meritorious service prize to commend her services. However, that same year, Kei died at the age of 57. During her lifetime, Kei Oura overcame many difficulties and, because of her foresight and great efforts, she became an icon in the Japanese green tea exportation business. Her accomplishments in this field are worthy of a page in the history of Japan's green tea trade.

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