Published: December 15, 1992
Last Updated: September 8, 2016

COFFEEHOUSE

COFFEEHOUSE (*qahva-ḵāna*), a shop and meeting place where coffee (q.v.) is prepared and served. In Persia tea replaced coffee as the most popular beverage in the late 19th century (see Âčāy), but the term *qahva-ḵāna* continued to be used interchangeably with *čāy-ḵāna* for any establishment supplying tea, soft drinks, and sometimes even light meals. It used to be common for *qahva-ḵāna*s to provide facilities for smoking the water pipe (*qalyān*), but few still do so today.

Places where men gathered to drink coffee, listen to music, and play games like chess were popular at Mecca by the early 16th century; although as a result of religious disapproval these coffeehouses were closed in 917/1511, the ban did not last long (Falsafī, 1333 Š./1954, p. 260). Pilgrims returning from Mecca introduced the idea of coffeehouses in Egypt and Syria. The first coffeehouse at Istanbul was opened in 962/1555 by two men from Damascus; it was frequented by so many dignitaries, writers, and poets that it became known as the "academy of scholars" (*madrasat al-ʿolamāʾ*; van Arendonk, p. 451; Kīk, p. 689). Others followed, and a coffee department (also called *qahva-ḵāna*) was established at the Ottoman court under the supervision of a *qahvačī-bāšī* (Falsafī, 1333 Š./1954, p. 260).

It is probable that in Persia the first coffeehouses appeared during the long reign of Shah Ṭahmāsb (930-84/1524-76), though there is no mention of them in the sources before the reign of Shah ʿAbbās I (996-1038/1577-1629), when several were opened in Qazvīn, Isfahan, and other cities. The rise of the *qahva-ḵāna* in Persia, as elsewhere, was probably partly owing to increasing

urbanization (for detailed discussion of the origin and spread of coffeehouses in the Middle East, see Hattox, pp. 29-45). Under the Safavids the relative political stability and absence of religious discord, the growth of the population, and the improvement of roads were important factors contributing to the spread of the new beverage throughout the country (Ḵosravī, pp. 84-85).

Initially coffeehouses were places where well-to-do men and intellectuals could meet and talk. In Isfahan they were clustered mainly around Meydān-e Šāh and the Čehel Sotūn (q.v.), on the Č(ah)ārbāḡ (q.v.), and near other centers of traffic and commerce, especially in the vicinity of *madrasa*s (seminaries; Olearius, p. 558; Fryer, II, p. 295; Herbert, p. 45; Kaempfer, pp. 116, 155; Valentijn, V, p. 256; Gaube and Wirth, pp. 137-39, 189, 237). Most were large vaulted buildings with central pools and, along the whitewashed walls, arched recesses (*ṭāqnemā*s) with raised floors ca. 1 m high and 1-1.3 m wide; they were carpeted and used as benches for customers. Adjacent coffeehouses were not separated by walls or curtains (Falsafī, 1347 Š./1968, p. 35). The coffeehouses remained open from early morning until late at night, when they were illuminated by “abundance of Lamps lighted, and let down in Glasses from the Concave Part of the Roof, by Wires or Ropes, hanging in a Circle” (Fryer, III, pp. 34-35; cf. II, p. 251); the busiest time was just around sunset (Chardin, IV, p. 67; Falsafī, 1333 Š./1954, p. 261).

Under the Safavids coffeehouses played an important part as meeting places for artists, poets, intellectuals, and even high officials. According to Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, every Persian with leisure time repaired daily to the coffeehouse. “The seats are plac’d as in so many Amphitheaters, and in the midst of every one stands a large vessel full of running Water, where with their Pipes be cleans’d when they are over foul” (p. 154; cf. Fryer, III, p. 34). From time to time the shah himself came in and chatted with customers, sometimes bringing European residents or visitors with him; occasionally he even held official receptions for foreign ambassadors at these places. At such times the coffeehouses were adorned with mirrors and lamps (see Âčerāḡānǰ). For example, in 1029/1619 Shah ʿAbbās summoned the Spanish, Ottoman, Indian, Russian, and English envoys to a banquet at one coffeehouse; its large hall contained a central fountain with several jets, and it was brilliantly illuminated by lamps, candles, and mirrors. After the banquet the guests were treated to a performance by young Circassian and local dancers (Garcia, II, pp. 380-81; Falsafī, 1333 Š./1954, pp. 263-64).

From the beginning coffeehouses had been favored meeting places for scholars, poets, musicians, and Sufis. Poets, often seated on high chairs in the center of the room (Olearius, I, p. 535; Fryer, III, p. 34), recited their own works, as well as pieces by Ferdowsī and other great masters. For example, Mollā Moʾmen Kāšī, known as Yakka-savār, was renowned for reciting the Šāh-nāma, and Mīrzā Moḥammad Bavānātī specialized in narrating the legend of Ḥamza (Naṣrābādī, pp. 145, 401). Coffeehouse proprietors encouraged such activity because it attracted customers (Bayżāʾī, p. 4). Shah ʿAbbās II (1052-77/1642-66) was fond of hearing Ferdowsī's epic recited by an expert (*Šāh-nāma-ḵᵛān*) like ʿAbd-al-Razzāq Qazvīnī or Mollā Bīḵodī Gonābādī (Falsafī, 1333 Š./1954, pp. 265-66). Sometimes two or three orators would perform simultaneously in a single large coffeehouse: A storyteller might be declaiming in one corner and a preacher in another. After finishing a recitation or sermon the orator expected a reward, and every customer would give as much as he could afford (Chardin, IV, pp. 68-69). In Jean Chardin's opinion, the degree to which freedom of speech was permitted in the coffeehouses was unique in the world. In fact, Shah ʿAbbās, fearing that politics were too much discussed, ordered that mullahs should watch over the coffeehouses. A mullah might enter a coffeehouse early in the morning and, as customers arrived, exhort them about Islamic law and morals and entertain them with poetry and historical tales, in order to distract them; then he would tell them to go about their usual business. At other times of the day he might stand up in the midst of the crowd or in a corner of the coffeehouse and loudly intone a prayer or sermon. Dervishes (q.v.), too, might shout warnings about the fickleness of the world, the impermanence of wealth, and the worthlessness of pleasure (Tavernier, p. 154; Chardin, IV, pp. 67-68, 69; Fryer, III, p. 34). Shah ʿAbbās II, at the behest of his chief minister, even closed the coffeehouses briefly, but they were soon reopened under somewhat better management (Chardin, IV, p. 69).

The poet Mīrzā Moḥammad-Ṭāher Naṣrābādī, active during the reign of ʿAbbās II, spent much of his life in coffeehouses on Meydān-e Šāh, conversing and competing with other poets in contests; he collected many of these works in his well-known *Taḏkera* (pp. 460, 462, 463). To judge by his selection, many poets also devoted themselves to flirting with boys employed as waiters; these boys were required to plait their hair and wear revealing clothing, dance lasciviously, and tell bawdy anecdotes. According to some Western visitors, the more pretty boys a coffeehouse proprietor employed, the more customers he gained (Chardin, IV, p. 69; Garcia, pp. 380-82). In 1016/1607 Amīnā Najafī had received a handsome gift from Shah ʿAbbās I and spent it all on a coffee

boy on whom he doted (Awḥadī, fol. 177). Moẓaffar-Ḥosayn Kāšānī, who also wrote during the reign of ʿAbbās II, and Rašīdā Zargar habitually amused themselves in similar ways with the good-looking coffee boys at the coffeehouse of Ṭūfān (Naṣrābādī, pp. 164-65).

The names of several coffeehouses are known from Isfahan in the time of Shah ʿAbbās II: Beside that belonging to Ṭūfān, there were the *qahva-ḵāna-ye* ʿArab and those owned by Bābā Farrāš, Ḥājī Yūsof, and Bābā Šams Tīšī Kāšī. The shah provided space for Bābā Šams Tīšī's establishment in the Č(ah)ārbāḡ and licensed wine drinking there. Sometimes he would come himself unannounced and chat with the poets whom he found there (Falsafī, 1333 Š./1954, pp. 262-64). He also sometimes visited the *qahva-ḵāna-ye* ʿArab, where he had discussions with such poets as Mollā Šokūhī Hamadānī (Naṣrābādī, p. 239).

Habitués of coffeehouses also indulged in narcotics, particularly opium. These vices became so common that by the last decades of Safavid rule coffeehouses were regarded as dens of iniquity, in which no respectable man would set foot. A contemporary author, Moḥammad-ʿAlī Qazvīnī, wrote a pamphlet warning young men that visiting coffeehouses and smoking tobacco or opium would weaken their characters, plunge them into misfortune, and waste large parts of their lives.

In the Qajar period new coffeehouses were opened on several streets in Tehran (Garakānī et al., p. 72). Most of those mentioned, however, were not in cities but in caravansaries (q.v.), at road stations, and clustered around city gates. In contrast to the ornate coffeehouses of the earlier period, simple structures were the rule. In the peaceful later reign of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah coffeehouses flourished at Tehran, though the availability of alcoholic drinks in many of them sometimes gave rise to disorder. In 1296/1879 Count Antonio di Monteforte, adviser to and subsequently chief of the police, proposed that the existing coffeehouses should be closed and replaced by properly supervised new ones in all quarters of the city. The draft regulations (*ketābča*) that he submitted to the shah include a clause (art. 26) about maintenance of order in coffeehouses, with penalties for offenders (Ḥasanbīgī, pp. 304-05).

Among the Tehran coffeehouses established in the reign of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah the finest was considered to be the *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Yūzbāšī behind the Šams-al-ʿEmāra palace; it was frequented by princes and notables, who heard recitations from the *Šāh-nāma* and the *Eskandar-nāma* (Najmī, p. 190). Also

highly rated was *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Qanbar at the lower end of Nāṣer-e Ḵosrow street near the present junction with Būḏarjmehrī street. The proprietor, Qanbar, a former slave of the shah, was black, and at first his shop was patronized by men who amused themselves by mocking black people; it was, however, visited occasionally by the shah himself and gradually earned a good name (Šahrī, pp. 30-31; Ḵǰosravī, p. 91). Although reading newspapers was forbidden at *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Qanbar, story recitations by Darvīš Marḥab and illustrated shows (*maʿraka*s) by men known as Lūṭī ʿAzīm and Lūṭī Ḡolām-Ḥosayn took place in the back (Najmī, p. 190). In Tehran the name *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Qanbar is still a slang term for a place where idlers gather (Ḥasanbīgī, p. 297). The *qahva-ḵāna-ye ʿarš* (throne coffeehouse) was up a steep flight of stairs in Čerāḡ-e barq street in the Pā-Menār quarter; its twelve intercommunicating rooms were a notorious haunt of opium addicts and drinkers of arak. In fact, the *qahva-ḵāna-ye loqāṇṭa* (restaurant coffeehouse) at the beginning of Bāb-e Homāyūn (q.v.) street was the only coffeehouse where coffee could actually be obtained, as all the others had ceased to supply it and sold tea instead (Šahrī, pp. 14-15, 141).

Until after World War II coffeehouses, serving mainly tea, continued to provide centers where people could gather to transmit and obtain news, play chess and other games, and listen to recitations. At the end of the Qajar period one American writer described them in glowing terms: “The tea-house is the democratic Persian’s political and social club, a splendid institution for which we have no adequate equivalent in America . . . [It] may be in external appearance anything from an adobe hut with a few crude benches to the glorified cafes of Lalehzar, but it always possesses those unfailing essentials, a big, brass Russian samovar, an adequate collection of little tea-glasses, bright-colored saucers, and filigree spoons, a bubbling hubble-bubble or two for public use, and a genial atmosphere of camaraderie . . .” (Bird, pp. 383-86). Such places were especially popular among intellectuals, who met to discuss cultural, social, and political matters. There was often a reserved space, the *sardam*, a platform usually covered with lambskin or other pelts, where the storyteller, preacher, or poet might sit while he declaimed (Rahbarī, p. 82; for detailed description and illustrations, see Bayżāʾī, 1344 Š./1965, pp. 68, 77). Recitation programs were often arranged for winter nights; although once they might have included excerpts from *Romūz-e Ḥamza, Eskandar-nāma, Ḥosayn-e Kord*, and *Ḵāvar-nāma*, later recitations were almost always from the *Šāh-nāma*.

In the month of Moḥarram it was customary until quite recently for mourners to reenact Imam Ḥosayn's martyrdom in a large coffeehouse with a courtyard measuring several thousand square meters; the walls would be draped in black and a pulpit erected in one corner for the *rawżaḵᵛān* (narrator of the martyrdom of Ḥosayn; Maḥjūb, p. 530; Maier and Gramlich). The rule book of the Tehran guild of coffeehouse proprietors (*qahvačīān*), which remained in force until 1357 Š./1979, includes special provisions for Moḥarram mourning ceremonies (Ḵosravī, p. 87). In Ramażān, too, many customers, particularly tradesmen, would remain in the coffeehouses all night, enjoying special recitations. The storyteller would begin his narrative on the first night of the month and finish it on the last, often accompanying it with pictures (Maḥjūb, 1337 Š./1958, pp. 531-32; idem, 1971; Maier and Gramlich).

Story telling and poetry reading at coffeehouses persisted until quite recently, but both are uncommon in Persia today. There are still some traditional coffeehouses in Tehran: *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Bāzāṛča-ye Marvī, *qahva-ḵāna-ye* ʿAbbās Takya, *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Bāzāṛča-ye Saʿādat, *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Goḏar-e Wazīr-e Daftar, *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Ṣābūnpaž-ḵāna (Rahbarī, p. 87), *qahva-ḵāna-ye* ʿAbbās Morḡī, *qahva-ḵāna-ye* ʿAlī Loṭfī, *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Ḥabīb Esmāʿīl, *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Ḥāj Āqā ʿAlī, *qahva-ḵāna-ye* ʿAlī Ebrāhīm, *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Mašhadī Taqī (Maḥjūb, p. 532), *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Zargarābād (Garakānī et al., p. 72), *qahva-ḵāna-ye panja-ye* ʿAlī (recently closed; Ḵosravī, p. 91). In Isfahan the best-known traditional coffeehouse is *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Golestān, on the Č(ah)ārbāḡ, where until recently Moršed ʿAbbās Zarīrī gave recitations that were much appreciated (*Dūstḵᵛāh*, pp. 73, 75).

Coffeehouse paintings were a special genre of Persian folk art, showing some affinities with Persian miniature painting. Where there was enough room in the coffeehouse a storyteller, usually illiterate, would erect a screen (*parda*) painted with a narrative scene and explain the story to interested customers, who would reward him with money. The pictures were usually of episodes from the *Šāh-nāma*, for example, the tragedy of Rostam and Sohrāb or the exploits of Esfandīār, or from such romances as *Yusof o Zoleyḵā* or the lives of the Shiʿite imams (Emāmī, pp. 558-60). Screen painters were generally specialized in such work (Emāmī, p. 558; Bayżāʾī, p. 31). Most were anonymous *bāzār* artists, but a few signed their works at the bottom. The most admired of these artists in recent times were Moḥammad Modabber, Ḥosayn Qūllar-āḡāsī and his son Fatḥ-Allāh Qūllar-āḡāsī, and Ḥasan Esmāʿīl (Nabawī, pp. 63-69). Like other traditional genres, coffeehouse painting is in danger of extinction

under the impact of Western tastes (Nabawī, pp. 63-69), but many examples have been preserved by collectors (Iran-America Society; Kalantari).

In 1308 Š./1929 there were approximately 711 coffeehouses in Tehran, owned by 613 proprietors and employing 777 employees at all levels (*Sāl-nāma-ye dovvom*, p. 81, where data are broken down by quarter). In 1302 Š./1923 there were seventy operating in Isfahan, compared to an estimated nineteen in about 1870 (Janāb, p. 79). After the introduction of radio broadcasting in Persia in 1319 Š./1940 the character of coffeehouses began to change. Customers were more interested in hearing news of the world, particularly World War II, than in listening to stories or poems, with the result that reciters soon began to disappear. The popularity of television after 1357 Š./1958 hit the profession even harder (Ḵosravī, pp. 89-90). Furthermore, under Western influence, most former patrons of the coffeehouses preferred to spend leisure time in modern cafes (*kāfa*) or restaurants. Today the few remaining old coffeehouses are frequented mainly by the lower classes, manual laborers, and elderly men and are located in poor districts (Garakānī et al., p. 75). According to a survey conducted by students of the Institute of social studies at Tehran University in 1339 Š./1960, there were 1,500 coffeehouses between Nīāvarān and Šahr-e Rey, 1,336 in Tehran proper and the rest in suburbs; 783 were in the poorer southern part of the city, 451 in the northern part. Under a rule of the coffeehouse proprietors' guild then in force, no coffeehouse could be established on a site less than 100 m from an already-existing one (Garakānī et al., p. 75). Subsequently there must have been a resurgence of coffeehouses, as a survey in 1361 Š./1982 revealed that, despite the popularity of cafes and cafeterias, 2,000 coffeehouses were in business in Tehran (Ḵosravī, pp. 90-91). Although working hours were limited under the former guild rules, most coffeehouses stayed open from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.; those near bus garages opened earlier and closed later, as they still do today (Ḵosravī, p. 91).

The employees of coffeehouses had quite specific responsibilities. They might include the *ūssā* (i.e., *ostād*, or *čāyforūs*), the proprietor, who functioned as cashier; the *čāybedeh*, responsible for equipment and supplies, supervision of other employees, and pouring tea; the *besāṭdār*, responsible for brewing the tea; the *vardas(t)*, assistant to the *čāybedeh*; the *čāybar*, the inside server; the *bāzārrow*, responsible for delivering cups of tea throughout the *bāzār*; the *estakānjamʿkon*, who collected the used teacups; the *estakānšūy*, the dishwasher; the *jāṛčī*, who passed orders to the proprietor, often conveying additional information (for example, his opinion that a customer would not be

able to pay), by means of changes in his tone of voice; the *qandī*, responsible for the sugar supply; the *ḵalīfa*, responsible for putting tobacco and hot charcoal in the water pipes; the *dīzīpaz*, who was responsible for preparing the bean dish known as *dīzī*; and the *jārūkaš*, the sweeper (Ḵosravī, p. 91; Garakānī, p. 72)

In addition to providing refreshment and entertainment, until recently certain coffeehouses functioned as employment exchanges. Traders and artisans generally found it useful to frequent particular ones. Employers would seek workmen at coffeehouses, and unemployed men would seek work. Particular coffeehouses catered for particular trades; it could almost be said that each guild had its own. In Tehran the large *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Ḥāj Āqā ʿAlī in Kūča-ye Amīn-e Darbār was frequented by carpenters and sawyers and the famous *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Qanbar by builders, bricklayers, and other construction workers (Maḥjūb, pp. 530, 531). Among other coffeehouses with such special clienteles were Tolomba in the Kūča-ye Marvī (butchers), Sangtarāš in the *bāzār* (stonemasons), Sayyed Walī in the *bāzār* (entertainers, *moṭreb*), Pāsāž-e Moʿtamadī off Nāṣer-e Ḵosrow street (house painters and decorators), Sayyed ʿAlī (garment peddlers), and Darvāza-ye Šamīrān (other peddlers). Some coffeehouses served particular groups of immigrants to Tehran, for example, *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Panja-bāšī in Nāṣer-e Ḵosrow street near the Šams-al-ʿEmāra, where people from Arāk liked to gather. Burglars and pickpockets gathered at a coffeehouse near Darvāza-ye Qazvīn (Ḵosravī, p. 91). The *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Tanbal at the Sūskī crossroads was a notorious haunt of hoodlums and gangsters (Ḥasanbīgī, p. 401). Until 1357 Š./1979 the coffeehouses of Tehran were subject to special rules drawn up by the guild of coffeehouse owners (*ṣenf-e qahvačīān*) and were sometimes inspected to ensure observance. In the last phase of the war between Persia and Iraq the guild office was hit by a missile, and all its documents, including the rule book, were destroyed. At the time of this writing a new one had not been drawn up. Since 1359 Š./1980 guild members have been subject to the provisions of a general guild-organization law.

According to the leaders of the guild, 3,500 coffeehouses were open in Tehran in late 1357 Š./early 1979, but since then business has declined so sharply and so many proprietors and employees have shifted to other work that in 1369 Š./1990 the number of coffeehouses still open in Tehran was a little over 900. The famous *qahva-ḵāna-ye* Qanbar is one of the many that have been closed.

For a music sample, see Šāh-nāma.

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