Tea and Tea Culture

Drinking tea—traditionally a brew made from the leaf, bud, or twig of the *Camellia sinensis*—is today universal in East Asia and much of the world, but the beverage took a long time to catch on. The precise form of tea consumed has also varied over time and by culture, reflecting different times and different tastes.

Tea is a drink made from the leaf, bud, and twig of the *Camellia sinensis* plant, which was probably first domesticated in Southeast Asia, although a number of possible sites have been named, including some in south China. Several varieties exist; some, such as Assam tea from India, are quite distinctive. Tea is cultivated at moderate altitude in China in tropical and semitropical areas, usually in marginal soils not suited to growing highly productive food crops such as rice. This fact was a major reason for tea’s economic importance. During Song dynasty (960–1279) China, for example, tea could be cultivated on a broad scale without limiting food production in any way. At the time it became an economic powerhouse and a primary basis for the prosperity of the dynasty.

Initially tea was grown in hilly areas of Fujian Province and neighboring Jiangxi Province, but its cultivation was later expanded to other suitable areas. It cultivation was later established in Yunnan Province, for example, when Yunnan definitely became a part of China during the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) and Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Fine tea, including some of the most famous varieties, is still grown there.

Tea Drinking

Tea drinking arose in China around the beginning of the first century CE but was at first a localized practice confined to the south. Tea, at first brewed from green leaves, was originally more a medicinal than a recreational beverage. By the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) the practice had become common in the south and north, and during the Song dynasty tea drinking became the rage, as it has continued to be to the present. Song dynasty tea was a product greatly in demand, not only in China but also in Tibet and other neighbors of China, later even in the far West.

Although the first teas were made from leaf, the preferred form of tea during Tang times was brick tea. This tea used large square bricks of pressed tea leaves boiled for long periods of time to produce a strong and thick beverage, consumed with milk and cream in central Asia. Later, particularly during the Song dynasty, powdered teas became common and were the form of tea later taken over by Japan as the basis for its tea ceremony. By late Song times carefully selected leaf teas had also become common, and these were associated with a substantial connoisseurship. More recently oxidized leaf and pressed teas, known incorrectly as “fermented teas” (although some teas were fermented), have been popular and were long the preferred tea for the European and U.S. export market. The story that a shipload of tea rotted and that Europeans, not knowing any better, liked the flavor of...
the rotten tea, although entertaining, is folklore. Some of the oxidized teas are even highly regarded in China to this day.

**Culture of Tea**

China never had a tea ritual comparable with the Japanese tea ceremony, but China had a distinct culture of tea beginning during the period of disunity (third to sixth centuries CE) and continuing many centuries thereafter. Playing a key role in the development of this tea culture were Buddhist monasteries and monks. Like the Sufis (Muslim mystics) of the Islamic world, who helped introduce their favorite beverage of coffee to the Islamic world, Buddhist monks seem to have enjoyed tea as a stimulant during dull monastic work or meditation. Probably because of this practice, tea drinking became a formal part of monastic rituals, which helped stress the elegance, simplicity, and introspection involved. Because monasteries were never isolated from the secular world in medieval and early modern China, laymen soon became involved both in monastic tea culture and their own varieties of it. These varieties were developed outside monasteries but incorporated much of the ritualized content of monastic tea consumption. Tea drinking thus became an important link between the literati and the monastic culture of Zen in particular and was an earmark of Song dynasty culture.

Outside both literati culture and the monastery, strictly speaking, was another area of the Song dynasty’s concern with tea: the tea house. Restaurants, as they exist today, and, for that matter, tea houses, first appeared in China. Places where one could go, eat a few snacks, drink tea, and enjoy the company of others, especially females, were noticed by, among others, the Venetian traveler Marco Polo. He expressed amazement that one could go, rent a space—on the West Lake of Hangzhou, no less, famed for its beauty—and be served, individually or as a group, wonderful delicacies and be provided entertainment. Tea houses were more specialized than restaurants, and from the beginning the society of the tea house was associated with prostitution, but this did not make them any less popular. Tea houses were already present in the Tang capital of Chang’an in large numbers in the eighth century. During the Five Dynasties period (907–960 CE) and Song dynasty, tea houses were associated not only with female entertainment but also with a particular form of poetry, the *ci*. The verses of *ci* were set to popular melodies and usually sung by the women of tea houses and the formal houses of prostitution. During the period the most famous literati wrote *ci*, although they did not originate the form, and through their verses we know a great deal about the popular tea houses of the Southern Song capital of Hangzhou, for example.

The more elegant tea houses had well-kept gardens. One could enjoy fine teas not only in repose but also in the most beautiful surroundings. Chinese teas houses became the eventual model for tea houses in the West.
Today Portland, Oregon, for example, has a fine tea house with scores of wonderful varieties of teas available in a beautiful garden closely modeled on the classic Chinese gardens of Hangzhou and Suzhou.

**Literature of Tea**

Going along with a distinct culture of tea was a distinct literature of tea. The most famous work in this genre is the *Chajing* (Tea Classic) of Lu Yu from the late eighth century. His ten-volume work is a compendium of tea lore, including its Daoist connection as a magic herb, the medical qualities of tea itself, its food value, even tea bowls. Other important books on tea were the *Chalu* (Record of Tea) of Tsan Xiang (1012–1067) and the *Daguan chalun* (Discussion of Tea of the Daguan Period) by Song Emperor Huizong (reigned 1101–1125), who was known for his painting, calligraphy, and refined tastes.

**Porcelain**

Porcelain tea bowls, created in special shapes, textures, and colors, and made just for tea drinking, became a key component of tea culture during Song times. Porcelain differs from other potteries in its raw materials and high firing temperatures. Although not invented during the Song dynasty, porcelain reached its first high point then. Most famous of Song porcelains were its celadons. They were created in a blue-green color by applying a thick glaze to a relatively delicate base. Celadon was the preferred porcelain of the court, but the Song period is also known for its blackware, including Jian tea bowls. On these bowls a black glaze was intended to contrast with
the green color of the tea consumed in them. The body of the bowl, relatively thick, helped maintain the temperature of the beverage. Although considered a popular ware, such bowls were still used at court, by the literati, and at monasteries. Song porcelain was imitated throughout East Asia and beyond, and fine examples continue to be highly prized today.

Mongolian Tea

Although brick tea was already exported to Tibet during the Tang dynasty, tea drinking began much later as a general central Asian practice. The earliest reference to traditional Mongolian tea, long-boiled (later brick) tea with thick milk or cream, for example, dates only to the fourteenth century, where an apparent recipe is found in the imperial dietary for Mongol China, the *Yinshan zhengyao* (Proper and Essential Things for the Emperor’s Food and Drink). In addition to its early recipe for Mongolian tea—in this case a powdered tea boiled with liquid butter and mentioned in the dietary under a Turkic name, suggesting that the Mongols may have borrowed it from local Turks—that same source mentions the following kinds of tea as being drunk at court: jade mortar tea, made from tea and roasted rice; golden characters tea, a presented powdered tea from the south; Mr. Fan Tianshuai’s tea, a tribute bud tea from south China; purple shoots sparrow tongue tea, made from new shoots; another variety of swallow tail tea; Sichuan tea; clear tea, made with tea buds; Tibetan tea, made with liquid butter and highly bitter and astringent; roasted tea, tea buds fried in butter oil and orchid paste; and a powdered tea, flour, and liquid butter made into a paste and boiled in water as a kind of *tsampa* (a Tibetan staple foodstuff). The central Asian interests of the text are obvious, although one cannot be
sure that the teas in question are purely central Asian. The same source also lists a number of herb teas from various sources and even rates fresh waters.

With these beginnings, tea caught on in Mongolia in a big way, as witnessed by the position of tea in the Ming dynasty’s trade with the north. Similar to the Tibetans, who were Song China’s source of horses, Ming China traded masses of tea to the Mongols for ponies. In Mongolia itself tea quickly became a way of life. Not offering a visitor tea became unthinkable, and Mongols, like Tibetans, added barley and other ingredients to their tea, along with butter, to provide a hot staple that is still consumed today.

**Tea in the West**

Not only the central Asian peoples but also the Iranian west, then the Turkish world, and finally Europe became fond of Chinese tea. In Iran, where tea was first a medicinal (as in China) from as early as the ninth century, it has now become the drink of choice and has many local variants, although black teas are preferred. In Turkey tea drinking took hold, but after the sixteenth century coffee became the beverage of choice. Because Chinese tea bowls were preferred over cups with handles in many areas of the West, the tea cultures of Iran and Turkey were not that different from that of China. Even the tea gardens were similar.

Europeans were exposed to tea (and coffee) drinking by those in the Islamic world, but Europe still obtained most of its tea from China, as did the North American colonies. Although Britain tried to push the teas of India, where tea was domesticated and developed independently of China, Chinese teas continued to be imported both to Britain and elsewhere in Europe, leading to a vast trading crisis as European silver went east to pay for Chinese tea, the first true mass commodity of the European trading system, if one excludes slaves. The attempt by Britain to substitute Indian opium for silver to cut its costs ultimately led to a series of wars with China, but the tea trade continued, right down to the present when Chinese teas are making a comeback on the world market. This is the case in spite of the fact that coffee has been of growing importance in Europe and the United States since the eighteenth century. Coffee simply lacks the delicacy of tea, and coffee drinking lacks the simplicity and elegance of tea drinking, thus tea enjoys a continued importance throughout the world.

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**Further Reading**


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*No wind, no waves.*

*Wú fēng bù qǐ làng*