*A History of Tea in China,*

*Sometimes Touching on Korea*

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**Introduction**

Tea was a cultural tradition begun in ancient China. Entwined in a vast history, tea was bound to events and people that subtly changed tea from drink and medicine to art and aesthetic. As tradition, tea was the custom of serving the drink as courtesy and the drinking of the brewed leaf as herbal and beverage. As culture, tea was the focus of connoisseurship and practiced as a form of art. It was the use of the brew to inspire wisdom and attain spiritual transcendence.

The story of tea starts in nature and in the garden. The tea plant is a member of the *Theaceae* family and belongs to the genus *Camellia*. Named *Camellia sinensis*, Chinese tea flowers in fall with blossoms of pure white, the pale petals surrounding a dense bouquet of stamens, yellow gold. Tea flowers produce fruit, a round, green husk that in winter turns dry and brown and trilobite bearing three seeds. Its spring leaves are oblong and pointed, serrated and glossy green.

In its native habitat, tea is an evergreen bush or small tree that grows shaded in forests or exposed on hills and cliffs of stony soil. After the cold of late winter, spare shoots and short sprouts quickly give way to a luxurious flush that carpets the fields and terraced slopes in jade and celadon. Within days, the new leaves are picked, processed, and dried to provide an astounding variety of teas in all shapes, sizes, and hues, each offering a brew distinct in color, aroma, and taste.

In China, tea now grows in a large range from the southern island of tropical Hainan north to the temperate coast of Shandong: from the slopes of the mountains of Gansu in the northwest to the southeast and the Wuyi cliffs in Fujian and further across the straits to Taiwan. But in prehistoric times, tea grew in the southwest, a distant realm of great natural riches, a far away cornucopia and the only source of tea. There, the vast, primordial wilderness of Sichuan and Yünnan nurtured ancient trees that grew for a thousand years. The great tea tree was high and broad, its a taproot bored deep into the earth, displacing soil with its girth, the trunk towering into the sky, its branches bearing a perpetual bounty of leaves, dark and shining.

The Tang poet Lu Yü 陸羽 (circa 733-804 C.E.) once wrote in the *Book of Tea*: “Tea is from a splendid tree of the south.” Stately and superior, the tree marked the seasons with abundance. In fall, tea flowered profusely and scented the air, it bore fruit and seeds aplenty, and in the clear cold days of late winter, within the still and somnambulant forest, tea grew and glowed. The majestic tree was radiant: a magnetic, irresistible sight, the early harbinger of spring and the force of life renewed. Insects stirred and fed on its buds, birds courted among its branches, and simians and humans alike sampled its tender leaves. The spirits, deities, and demi gods too were drawn by beautiful tea.

**Pre dynastic Xia and Xia Dynasty**

Tea lore and legend began in the late Neolithic with the myth of Shen Nong the Divine Cultivator. God-like and sage, Shen Nong 神農 (tradition circa 2838-2698 B.C.E.) was expert in husbandry and spread his knowledge of botany, horticulture, and medicine. One day, according to the stories, he discovered tea while under the shade of a fine tree listening to the breeze whispering through its branches. A sprite flew in on a zephyr rustling the leaves and sending a green shower down into the bubbling water cauldron beside him. Enticed by the aroma wafting up with the steam, he tasted the light golden brew and found it pleasantly bitter with a lingering sweetness. Sipping more, he felt refreshed yet relaxed, alert yet calm, clear minded and purposeful.

To name tea, Sheng Nong sought the scribe of the Yellow Emperor 黃帝 (tradition circa 2696–2598 B.C.E.), Cang Jie the Nomenclator, who possessed four eyes to see all the patterns of Heaven and Earth and so named all that he saw. Cang Jie倉頡 (tradition circa 2650 B.C.E.) examined the plant, comprehending its integral parts – herb, man, soil, and tree – and pronounced tea as *tu*荼. Shen Nong spread its name throughout the land. The people, however, called tea according to their native tongues and dialects – *jia*檟, *she* 蔎, *ming* 茗, *chuan* 荈, and *cha* 茶 – but tea was long known and written as *tu* 荼.

Shen Nong continued to drink tea and found its leaves nutritious as food and that its bitter flavor enhanced the taste of other fare. He investigated its medicinal properties and noted its stimulating, purgative, analgesic, and antiseptic effects. He used tea as an herbal remedy for toxins, respiratory and digestive problems as well as physical and mental fatigue. In tradition, his knowledge of tea and medicine were preserved in the *Materia Medica* 神農本草. It was written that Shen Nong said, “Tea, when taken over a long period of time, gives a person strength and contentment.”

Shen Nong, the icon and the legend, remained fundamental to the tradition of tea. He personified tea as the singular gift of Heaven, brought by a spirit to a demi-god then given into the hands of humankind. To Shen Nong, tea was a pleasure, sustenance, and a medicine: tea was essential to good health and long life. His myth, practices, and beliefs persisted for millennia and deeply colored the history of tea.

**Shang dynasty**

After the decline of the Xia, the Shang rebelled and established a dynasty that lasted over half a millennium. The Shang built their capital on the Central Plain. Shang royalty knew of southern products like rice, but they were rare and costly. There was no historical evidence that the Shang knew of tea, and so tea remained a southern phenomenon, unique to Sichuan and Yunnan, isolated and distant.

The Shang king ruled a theocratic state in which he was high priest. He worshipped the supreme deity Lord on High and fulfilled his filial duties with sacrifices to his ancestors at shrines and temples. By means of divination, rites, and sacral offerings, he communed with the spirits, entreating them for success in the hunt and war, and the continued welfare of the state.

Served in fine bronze vessels, meat, grain, and wine were the sacred foods offered to the deity and spirits. The Shang was especially skilled in the casting of drinking vessels and the brewing of wine. It was said that their love of wine corrupted them, and they grew despotic and cruel. The people suffered and the Zhou rebelled.

**Pre dynastic Zhou**

The Zhou were a people west of the Shang. As Shang vassals, the Zhou defended the western borders of the kingdom. Unlike the hunters and warriors of the Shang, the Zhou were agriculturalists with an advanced but highly conservative society. Moral, temperate, and visionary, the Zhou shared their botanical and horticultural knowledge with the people under their influence, creating settlements, trade, markets, and revenue. Oppressed by the debauched Shang, the Zhou allied themselves with the BaShu, a southern people of Sichuan. Like the Zhou, the BaShu were contemporary to the late Shang and possessed a vibrant and highly developed bronze culture. They were reputed to be fierce fighters and skilled in the art of war.

The once vital Shang was a shadow of its former self. Caught between the armies of the Zhou and BaShu, the Shang were defeated in a single great battle and destroyed. In celebration of their victory, the Zhou sent palace concubines to Sichuan, binding the BaShu nobility to the Zhou aristocracy through marriage. In return, the BaShu sent the vast riches of Sichuan in tribute. According to the later record, *Realms South of Mount Hua* 華陽國志, tea was sent to the Zhou from the backwaters of Ba and from Shu, “good tea” from the mountains of Shifang and “rare tea” from Nan’an and Wuyang.

Sichuan tribute bridged the divide between two immensely disparate cultures of the Zhou and BaShu. Tribute was the prelude to taxes and trade, and trade included tea. As a medicinal unique to the south, tea was added to the Zhou pharmacology, but the impact of tea on northern habits and customs remained tentative, open to question and speculation. Not so the mysteries and natural wealth of Sichuan, which drew the attention of power and ambition. Such intense interest foreshadowed the incorporation of Sichuan into the political and economic spheres of the Central Plains.

**Zhou Dynasty**

After the conquest, the Zhou established a dynasty lasting many centuries. They built their capital on the Central Plain and advanced their power by exploiting their great knowledge of farming. Elevating their sedentary and conservative culture among the people, they spread eastward.

The Zhou was a theocracy based on the worship of Heaven and sacrifices to the ancestors. The king was known as the Son of Heaven and was high priest performing rites and sacrifices for the benefit of the state. Tutelary deities included the fabled Queen Mother of the West西王母who, according to myth, received the Zhou king Mu周穆王（976-922 or 956-918 B.C.E.) and gave him the secret of immortality, which he squandered.

Early Zhou rulers were considered virtuous and moral, but they decreed austere and often harsh laws. The Zhou restricted the use of wine to rites and ceremony and banned drunkenness on pain of death. Correct and abstemious, the Zhou may well have drunk tea from Sichuan instead of wine, yet there is no contemporary evidence for such a practice. Still, attributions of tea in the Zhou persisted and it was written that the strict Duke of Zhou**周公** (11th century B.C.E.), using the ancient names of tea, said, “*Jia* 檟is *kutu* 苦荼, bitter tea.” Thereafter, the phrase “tea instead of wine” was intimately linked to the notion of temperance and moderation.

As horticulturalists, the Zhou love of plants was clear from the *Book of Songs* 詩經, but there was no record of tea as herb or tree. When the term was mentioned in poetry, *tu* 荼meant sowthistle, a lovely bitter herb used as flavoring and food. Like sowthistle, tea was also bitter and pleasing, the two intertwining, till tea became *nouvelle cuisine* and part of the culinary arts of the time.

**Warring States**

The Zhou slowly fragmented into contending states, each having to institute and administer policy. Questions of governance generated differing theories of rule, including the philosophical principle of *wuwei* 無為or non intention attributed to Laozi 老子 (6th or 5th-4th centuries B.C.E.), regarded as the founder of Daoism.

The many states vied for dominance in a period marked by incessant warfare and turmoil, particularly in the north. Despite the political and military tension, trade continued, and tea reached the eastern state of Qi where the high minister Yen Ying 晏嬰 (578-500 B.C.E.) personified moderation, frugality, and simplicity by wearing plain cloth and eating “only coarse grain, three roasted fowl, five eggs, and tea.” In the sixth century B.C.E., tea was likely a dried leaf, steeped, infused, or boiled as a beverage or soup. As a vegetable, dry leaf tea was reconstituted by soaking in water and then steamed or stewed.

In the south, the state of Chu flourished. By way of evidence, the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng曾侯乙 (died ca. 433 B.C.E.) was laden with treasure: an exceptional set of bronze bells and chimes, wares of precious metals, and fine vermillion lacquers. Strange, antlered guardians and armed, feathered spirits protected the grave from the chaos of the mundane and nether worlds. Within nested caskets, at the foot of the body, was a small packet of herbs and tea seeds. The herbs were all medicinal – treatments for respiratory and stomach ailments – the tea to relieve persistent coughing and labored breathing. Such an offering attested to the use of tea not only as a remedy but also as a gesture to the soul of the dead as it departed on its eternal journey into the heavens.

Such cosmic travel was celebrated in the *Songs of Chu*楚辭which described a shaman casting off his material body to fly in astral form into the Vastness to meet with spirits:

...I departed, and swiftly prepared to start off on my journey.

I met the Feathered Men on the Hill of Cinnabar;

I tarried in the ancient land of Immortality.

Cinnabar was the potent ingredient in Daoist alchemical elixirs of immortality. Its mutability from solid mineral to liquid quick silver profoundly impressed the ancients and symbolized the transformation of states of being. The precious mineral came from the mines of Sichuan and its deep vermillion color was intimately associated with the distinctive shamanistic cultures of the south: Shu, Pa, and Chu. It was believed that by feeding on the large, dark ruby crystals of the mineral, mere mortals became feathered transcendents, gathering on high mounds of cinnabar, winging between the material and immaterial worlds, and living forever.

Though sparse and incomplete, the literary and archaeological evidence suggest that tea was a market commodity traded as far away from Sichuan as Shandong. It was a comestible taken as food and drink, and its use was considered a virtue, representing temperance, thrift, and plainness as opposed to excess and gluttony. As beverage, tea was possibly a libation in ceremony, if not ritual, and its different forms were provided to the dead as tokens of their former lives and relations. As funerary offerings, tea became associated with the eternal spirits.

**Pre dynastic Qin**

A major power among the warring states was the realm of Qin. Ruled by a long succession of able dukes, the Qin often led the hegemony of states in diplomacy, politics, and war. Having supplanted the Zhou in the west, the Qin profited from the trade with Sichuan and grew rich and ambitious. While perpetuating long standing forms and traditions, the Qin were also innovative, acquiring and creating new methods and technologies. In 325 B.C., the ducal heir declared himself King of Qin and within nine years invaded Sichuan to tap its riches. For over a century, his treasury overflowed with the bounty of the south, including tea.

The wealth of the Qin allowed its rulers to support occult practices such as funding the immense costs of alchemy and the creation of the golden elixir. Their desire for everlasting life expressed itself in the love story of the princess Nongyü 弄玉and the courtier Xiao Shi簫史. Nongyü was the daughter of Duke Mu of Qin 秦穆公 (659-621 B.C.E.) for whom Xiao Shi served as palace alchemist. Xiao Shi enchanted Nongyü with gifts of cosmetics and by teaching her to play the flute. Charmed by the music, they soared immortal into the heavens. In tandem, they roamed the universe: he, mounted on a dragon, and she, on a phoenix. Inspired by Nongyü, generations of Qin dukes and kings yearned for immortality, ever searching for the elixir of life, the herb of no death.

**Qin Dynasty**

The vast wealth of Sichuan funded Qin statecraft, intrigue, and the naked aggression needed to conquer the rival states of the Central Plains and the southern kingdom of Chu. The Qin deployed its generals, commanders, and great armies in a campaign lasting seventy years. With the destruction of the state of Qi in 221 B.C., the Qin king (Ying Zheng 嬴政, 259-210 B.C.E.) ascended the throne as First August Thearch 始皇帝to rule god-like over both the mundane and spirit realms of the new imperium.

The First Emperor built his capital in the ancient state of Qin and secured the northern borders with a wall so great that it eventually traversed the continent. He fielded battalions of quadriga, two wheeled chariots drawn by horses four abreast. He built vast and opulent palaces at Xianyang and Ebang filled with the art of imperial workshops commissioned to furnish the vast court complex with beautiful art and music.

To assure that history began with his reign, the First Emperor burned books and buried scholars. Only works and experts on astronomy, astrology, divination, and medicine were spared, and his court was filled with herbalists, physicians, seers, stargazers, and masters of esoterica who catered to his obsession for spiritual power and immortality.

Like his Qin ancestors, the First Emperor passionately desired everlasting life, and his emissaries combed the empire for plants and elixirs that imparted the transcendent state of no death. Once he heard of an enchanted island where there grew a miraculous plant. A story from the *Master of the Gold Pavilion* 金樓子described his search:

On top of the mystic isle of Shenzhou there is the herb of no death, the new sprouts of which grow in profusion. The dead are restored with this herb. In the time of the First Emperor, many in [a certain place] were driven to death, but birds resembling crows dropped this herb to the ground and revived the dead, who immediately sat up. The emperor sent someone to enquire [and learned] that on the magical island of Tanzhou in the Eastern Sea, the herb of immortality grew in beautiful fields.

Such descriptions of paradise and the herb of everlasting life resonated deeply with the esoteric masters, and by virtue of its beauty, quality, efficacy, and bitterness, tea was likened to the herb of no death. To purify themselves before the divinities and spirits, the alchemist fasted, drinking tea to purge waste and toxins from their bodies. They drank tea to fortify themselves against the ordeal of the laboratory, a grueling process that exposed them to merciless schedules, noxious chemicals, fire and heat, all while demanding knowledge, nerve, and precision. Through their strict regimen of tea, tea itself became intimately associated with the golden elixir and immortality.

To order the country and align its cosmic points, the First Emperor made numerous state tours. Riding by coach over hundreds of miles, he performed rites at the sacred rivers and mountains of the empire. In his sacrifices on Mount Tai, he sought to confirm the Mandate of Heaven and prayed for revelation in his pursuit of eternal life. He wished to be spirited away to the stars and ascend the ranks of the immortals. Hoping to find the herb of no death, he shipped embassies of young men and maidens into the sea in search of the idyllic isles. On his last tour of Mount Tai, the First Emperor suddenly died. His body was returned to the capital and buried in a massive tomb, the center of an immense necropolis guarded by full scaled armies and graced with the amenities of a lavish and elegant life. According to the histories, the interior of the tomb was an intricate analogue of the universe, a mirror of the emperor’s eternal reign over the empire in harmony with the cosmos.

The Qin longing for eternal life reflected a widespread concern for health, longevity, and immortality that pervaded society at large during a time of uncertainty and war. The aristocracy and wealthy were especially receptive to the notion of prolonged life and perpetual being, prompting their support of pharmacology, medicine, and alchemy. Among herbs, none so perfectly fit the description of the beautiful herb of no death, and none was nearly as benign or as efficacious as tea. Once remote and alien, Sichuan was now integral to the empire, and the cultivation of tea spread rapidly down the Yangzi eastward.

**Han Dynasty**

The First Emperor’s unexpected death triggered internal struggles that quickly destroyed the dynasty. Out of the ruin of the Qin rose the Han.

The Han rulers unified the country and adopted the imperial manner and styled themselves *huangdi* 皇帝, emperor. They built their capitals at Xi’an and Luoyang in the north and continued to draw on the abundant resources of the south. Their palaces were filled with sumptuous works: inlaid, decorative bronzes, fine nephritic jades set in gilt, all lighted with scented oils aflame in golden lamps. Han Wudi漢武帝 (156-87 B.C.E.), the Martial Emperor, employed a host of Daoist masters and surpassed the Qin in his quest for immortality. He took to heart the words of the *Dao De Jing* 道德經, the *Book of the Way and Power*:

The Dao is constant, but nameless.

Although the Primal Simplicity is small,

All under Heaven submit to it.

If lords and princes would but embrace it,

The myriad creatures would do homage to them;

Heaven and Earth would harmonize to send sweet dew.

Sweet dew was a celestial manifestation of harmonious accord that not only affirmed the Mandate of Heaven but also imbued long life. It was said that the Martial Emperor built storied pavilions, climbing their steps to collect sweet dew from golden dishes and silvery mirrors, then drinking the mystical essence for health, longevity, and immortality.

The Han nobles delighted in the depiction of Daoist subjects. Incense burners of inlaid bronze were made as miniature sacred islands and vessels of white jade were carved with winged immortals. The members of the high aristocracy were buried in full suits of nephrite in the belief that the precious stone would preserve their mortal flesh. But jade was not the only alchemical medium. There were masters of esoterica who recommended tea. The earth-bound immortal known as Master Gourd 壺居士 (traditional circa 1st -3rd centuries C.E.) offered prescriptions and predictions: “Bitter tea, drunk habitually over a long time, bestows immortality.” Renowned for the infallibility of his advice, Master Gourd’s teachings were followed by Lady Dai.

Lady Dai 軑夫人 (died ca. 168-164 B.C.E.) was a noblewoman who died over two millennia ago. She was buried in Changsha where her husband was prime minister to the Prince of Chu. Her funeral pall bore her portrait and showed not only her relationship to the Sun and the Moon of the Cosmos but also the sacrificial foods prepared for her grave. Beneath the painted pall, deep within her tomb, Lady Dai lay within nested caskets of wood, lacquer, silk, and feathers, her body perfectly preserved for over two thousand years. She was buried with all she required for her journey, including the *Dao De Jing* written on silk, lacquer ware, especially a set of fine nested cups, and a woven bamboo basket labeled “*jiasi* 檟司, tea case” filled with fragrant tea.

In the Han, as in the Zhou, the finest tea still came from Sichuan. In 59 B.C., the poet and imperial censor Wang Bao 王褒 (active ca. 73-49 B.C.E.) wrote out the duties of his servant, including that “at Wu-yang he shall buy tea...” and that “when there are guests in the house, he shall...boil tea and fill the bowls.” However, in Lady Dai’s life time, tea grew at Tuling near Changsha, and though the tea buried with her may have come from Sichuan, she might well have acquired a taste for the local leaf from Tuling 荼陵, known as Tea Hill. In the Han, the name Tea Hill eventually changed from Tuling to Chaling 茶陵, the word *tu* 荼for tea transformed by the deletion of a single stroke to *cha* 茶.

**Three Kingdoms period**

After the fall of the Han dynasty in the third century C.E., the empire was divided among three major powers: Wei in the north, the state of Wu in the southeast, and in the southwest, Shu Han. Despite the warfare between the three kingdoms, scholarship was kept alive by academics whose glosses and commentaries to ancient texts revealed the early practice of tea.

Around 230 C.E., Zhang Yi 張揖 (active ca. 237-232 C.E.) wrote a supplemental glossary known as the *Expanded Understanding Rectitude* 廣雅which stated:

In Jing and Ba, tea leaves are picked to make cakes. Of those made from aged leaves, the cakes are produced by using rice paste to make them. To make *ming* 茗 tea to drink, a tea cake is first toasted until it is reddish in color. The cake is then pounded to powder and placed in a pottery vessel, using boiling water to pour over and cover it. Brewed with scallions, ginger, orange, and herbs, the drink sobers the inebriated and causes wakefulness.

Zhang Yi noted the use of tea as a stimulant that physicians prescribed to overcome sleepiness: “drink it and awake.” Others, however, feared that tea induced insomnia and was something to avoid, warning “Drinking true tea causes sleeplessness.” Zhang Yi also recognized the analeptic effect of tea on intoxication: “the drink sobers the inebriated.” The sympathetic simply wrote, “This is called tea that dispels wine,” while others dryly observed, “any drunk can use it.”

In the *Expanded Record* 廣誌, Guo Yigong 郭義恭 (3rd century C.E.) described three kinds of brewed tea:

Tea grows thick and dense. Properly brewed, it is called *mingcha* 茗茶. Combined and cooked with the paste or juice of jasmine and dogwood berries, it is called *cha* 茶, tea. There are red colored tea leaves mixed with rice paste and cooked. This is called *wujiu cha* 無酒茶, tea that dispels wine.

**Jin dynasty**

The fall of the Han began many centuries of protracted warfare among major and minor states, including the Jin dynasty. The Jin emperors wrested power from the Wei and established their first capital in the north at Luoyang. There the poet Du Yü杜毓 (ca. 282-311 C.E.) wrote the *Ode to Tea* 荈賦, in which he described tea as the sacred herb:

On Spirit Mountain is a high peak where

a wondrous thing gathers.

It is tea,

filling the valleys and covering the hills,

moist with the wealth of the Earth,

blessed with the sweet spirit of Heaven.

Further in the poem, the poet then set out essential criteria for tea, alluding to fine water, beautiful celadons, and ancient rites:

Take water from the flowing river Min,

draw from its pure currents.

Select bowls from lustrous wares

produced in Eastern Ou.

Serve tea with a gourd ladle,

emulating the way of Duke Liu.

The Ode then described for the first time the look of brewed tea, a

Perfect thick froth, afloat with the splendor of the brew,

glistening like piling snow,

resplendent like the spring florescence.

To the poet, the beauty of tea transcended the mundane and brought the mind into accord with Heaven:

Chaste and true like new frost,

pure like the Void,

tea harmonizes the spirit, blending within,

languidly free, effortlessly Empty.

Tea was further elevated by Zhang Zai張載 (3rd century C.E.) who in 280 C.E. traveled to Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan where he became enraptured with the joys of the leaf. He wrote *Ascending the White Rabbit Pavilion* 登成都白兔樓詩in which he described tea in religious terms as first among the vaunted sacrificial wines, sauces, and waters offered to the deities and ancestors:

Fragrant, beautiful tea is the crown of the Six Purities;

Overflowing with flavor to the Nine Regions.

Here Zhang Zai mentioned for the first time in literature the scent of tea and its abundant taste, noting that the use of tea had spread from Sichuan throughout the empire.

Internal strife and foreign incursions forced the Jin to flee from Luoyang to Nanjing where remnants of the imperial house established a capital in exile. Southern life and culture offered an environment conducive to reflection, and the three philosophies of Buddha, Laozi, and Confucius flourished. Daoist and nativist thought dominated at the court at Kuaiji where Prince Yü 司馬昱 (320-372 C.E.) was renowned for his literary salon. Among his courtiers was Wang Meng 王濛 (309-347 C.E.), a man “obsessed with tea.” As a northerner and tea drinker, Wang Meng was something of a rare bird. Unlike many northern émigrés living in the south, he was inured to the effects of tea: its mental sensations, the nervousness, tremors, and insomnia, the irregularity and frequent calls of nature. According to the story Wang Meng promoted tea aggressively:

Whenever people arrived, he promptly ordered them to drink it. All the scholars and bureaucrats detested it and suffered. After each time they went to see him, they would always say, ‘Today, we drowned.’

Thereafter, the phrase “drowning” or “to drown” became derisive slang for tea. Wang Meng and his critics marked the first but not the last time tea would be subject to abuse. But tea had other advocates, especially at the court of Prince Yü.

His prime minister was the Daoist scholar and tea master Liu Tan 劉惔 (active ca. 345-347 C.E.). Inspired by his spiritual attainments and style, Prince Yu simply said, “Liu Tan and his way of tea possess Truth.”

Masters like Liu Tan were alleged to receive visits from spirits requesting their tea. According to the *Record of the Supernatural and Strange* 神異記, the tea master Yü Hong 虞洪went into the mountains to search for wild tea. He met a Daoist leading three oxen, mystic familiars and alchemical symbols of power, endurance, and patience. The Daoist then said:

“I am Master Cinnabar Hill. I have heard that you are superb at the art of tea, and I have long thought to call on you. Within the mountains is a place where supreme tea grows, tea that I will present to you. In return, Master, I pray you make daily sacrifices to me and beg you share with me the bounty of your tea bowl and sacrificial ladle.”

Upon establishing libations of tea to the Daoist, Yü Hong and his family then entered the mountains each spring to gather supreme tea.

During the Jin dynasty, the poets elevated tea by description and hyperbole. Tea was an aesthetic pursuit for which water quality, green ceramic wares, and the gourd ladle were considered requisites for the making of fine tea. Brewed tea was a frothy liquid likely made with powdered leaf whisked to a thick foam. Tea was likened to the highest sacrament and it was a custom throughout the empire. Practitioners of tea were most often Daoists whose mastery of preparation and service was so sublime that the art of tea was considered an expression of harmony with the Universe.

Like the followers of religious Daoism, Buddhists integrated tea into their monastic routine as a beverage and libation, a substitution for wine, and as an aid to meditation. As was recognized, tea caused sleeplessness and was so used extensively by Daoists and Buddhist alike to endure the rigors of prolonged meditation.

The monkish dependence on tea was enshrined in a late apocryphal tale in which the Indian monk Bodhidharma (5th century C.E.) once sat in deep concentration facing a rock wall for nine years in his quest for enlightenment; he suddenly realized that he had fallen asleep. In a fury, he tore at his face, ripping off his eyelids and throwing them to the ground where the leaf-like flesh sprouted miraculously into plants of tea. Instinctively, he plucked some leaves to taste. Upon chewing the succulent herb, he felt refreshed, focused, and ready to resume meditation.

**Tang dynasty**

After centuries of partition, the empire was reunited under the Tang. The Tang emperors created a golden age of high art and culture, establishing their capitals at Chang’an and Luoyang. In the eighth century, Daoism and Buddhism flourished, and monasteries became centers of learning that attracted students from all over Asia.

Around 755 A.D., the Korean prelate Kim Gyo-gak 金喬覺 김교각 (696-794 C.E.) settled in Anhui on Mount Jiuhua, one of the holiest Buddhist mountains in China, where he planted tea on its slopes. His spiritual attainments were such that he was believed to be an incarnation of the bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, the saintly instructor, savior of souls from Hell, and protector of children.

The Tang was the age of poetry, and the empire’s greatest poet was Li Bo 李白 (701-762 C.E). As a lover of wine, Li Bo wrote only of its dizzy delights and muzzy pleasures, he sang no songs to tea. But in 752 C.E., he happened to meet his nephew Zhongfu中孚, Zen Master of Jade Spring Temple, who gave him a present of the monastery’s new tea. The dried leaves resembled the delicate hands and fingers of the deities, so in honor of the occasion Li Bo named the tea *Immortal’s Palm* in his preface and poem dedicated to the Zen master. To begin, he chanted his verse, describing the plant:

Tea grows among the rocks

And along Jade Spring’s ceaseless flow.

Root and stem exude a rich fragrance;

One whiff nurtures flesh and bone.

Lush and voluminous, the green leaves;

Branch upon branch, row upon row.

Then Li Bo sipped the brew and noted the quality of the liquid leaf and its herbal effects:

This tea is pure in fragrance and mellow in taste, different from other teas. Thus, it restores youth and reverses decay, enhancing longevity.

Jade Spring Temple was only one of many Daoist and Buddhist monasteries that produced tea. Monks like the Zen master Zhongfu grew tea as a means to provide their clergy and laity with tea as beverage and libation, and as an aid to meditation. Tea was also an important part of ceremony to welcome the constant stream of patrons, guests, and visitors of the temples. Monasteries had kitchens, cooks, and masters at the ready to prepare and brew tea. Young servants and novices served bowls overflowing with the “splendor of the brew.”

In the history of tea, one exceptional temple novice was a boy named Lu Yü 陸羽 (circa 733-804 C.E.) who grew up to be a poet, tea master, and the author of the *Chajing* 茶經, the Book of Tea. Published in 780 C.E., the *Chajing* was the first treatise on tea ever written to explain the plant, its horticulture, harvest, and processing. Comprised of ten parts, the *Chajing* also offered an anthology of sources, quotes, and anecdotes on tea dating from the Neolithic to the early Tang dynasty as well as an extensive list of places that produced tea. The book described in detail the implements used in the preparation and brewing of tea as well as its service.

In the Tang, brewed tea was a decoction: the essences of the leaf extracted in water by either steeping, mixing, or boiling. Tea was steeped in a covered jar. A ewer of boiled water mixed tea powder in a bowl by the force of the stream of water. In the art of tea, Lu Yü boiled tea made from a tea cake that was first toasted, milled, and sifted to a very fine powder. Using a brazier to heat a cauldron, the powdered tea was then thrown into rapidly boiling water, the brew tempered with a measure of warm water and allowed to simmer and spume. Floating on the steaming tea, a fine, light foam looked as “lustrous as drifting snow.” Ladled into bowls, the tea was served with ample helpings of froth, the “floreate essence” of tea”

Lu Yü preferred the use of green glazed ceramic bowls and went against the prevailing popularity of white wares in the service of tea. He famously compared the celadons of the Yüe kilns to the white of the Xing:

There are those who judge Xingzhou 邢州 ware superior to Yüezhou 越州. This is certainly not so. If Xing is like silver, then Yüe is like jade. This is the first way in which Xing cannot compare to Yüe. If Xing is like snow, then Yüe is like ice. This is the second way in which Xing cannot compare to Yüe. Xing ware is white, and thus the color of liquid tea in the bowl looks reddish. Yüe ware is celadon, and thus the color of tea appears greenish. This is the third way in which Xing cannot compare to Yüe.

Lu Yü’s preferences in color revived the fashion for green wares and influenced the imperial kilns to produce remarkable celadons for centuries thereafter.

Lu Yü and the *Chajing* made tea accessible than ever before, and such was the trend for tea that it was said that every household had a basket of tea implements. He advised the Huzhou intendant to send the tea named Guzhu to the palace thereby influencing imperial taste. Once an obscure foundling raised in a monastery, Lu Yü became famous and praised, even the dragon throne gave him grants and titles. The Tang tea merchants were so pleased that they commissioned small statues of him and gave them out to favorite customers. Depicted wearing the tricorn miter of a Daoist and reading the *Chajing*, Lu Yü became an object of reverence and was popularly canonized the Saint of Tea.

Tea continued to embody the Daoist desire for immortality. The hermit poet Lu Tong 盧仝 (trad. 790-835 C.E.) famously described his transformation from mortal to spirit in the *Song to Tea*:

The first bowl moistens my lips and throat.

The second bowl banishes by loneliness and melancholy.

The third bowl penetrates my withered entrails, finding nothing except a literary core of five thousand scrolls.

The fourth bowl raises a slight perspiration.

The fifth bowl purifies my flesh and bones.

The sixth bowl makes me one with the immortal, feathered spirits.

The seventh bowl I need not drink, feeling only a pure wind rushing beneath my wings…

In the ninth century, Korean embassies visited the imperial court bringing tribute, diplomats, and students. In exchange, the palace presented the Silla missions with luxuries, ceramics, books, and medicines. Among the rarest and most desired gifts was tea. In 828, the Silla embassy returned from China with tea seeds as imperial tribute to the Korean throne. By royal decree, the precious seeds were planted near Buddhist monasteries on Mount Jiri, a place in the temperate climes of the Korean south.

Among those returning home to Korea was Choe Chiwon, 崔致遠 최치원 (857-? C.E.)who was sent as a child of eleven to study in Chang’an where he later passed the highest examinations and was known for his fine calligraphy and literary composition. He was of such talent that he became a close friend of the emperor Xizong 僖宗 (reign 873-888 C.E.). But after a decade in imperial service, he yearned for home and was granted permission to return to Korea. In 885 at age twenty-seven, Choe Chiwon departed for Korea, taking with him a special blend of green and fermented teas and commemorating the journey with a poem:

Wondering, ‘who from within the seas cares for one from without?’

I then ask where to find the river crossing.

I only sought service, not profit;

To honor my family, not myself.

On the journey, a sorrowful parting: rain on the river.

Returning home: a day in dream, touched by spring.

Crossing the water, I happily meet with broad, favorable waves;

Each washes from my tassels all ten dusty years.

Emperor Xizong no doubt hosted lavish banquets and intimate teas, the many farewell parties for his friend Choe Chiwon. A glimpse of late Tang imperial style was preserved at Famensi, a Buddhist temple patronized by Xizong and the imperial family for over two hundred years.

Known as the Temple of the Dharma Gate, Famensi was celebrated for a relic of the historical Buddha, a finger bone housed beneath the Pagoda of the True Body of Buddha. Having stood for centuries, a heavy rain in April 1981 weakened the pagoda, causing half to fall way. Six years later, archaeologists excavated beneath the foundations to open subterranean chambers where they found a remarkable cache of coins, sculpture, reliquaries, and tea implements. Hidden under the floor of the last and lowest chamber was a nested reliquary containing the sacred relic: the ivory white finger bone of the Buddha. Other objects of silver and gold were found, many of which were related directly to the preparation and service of tea:

Canisters

Baskets

Pestle wheel and mortar

Fine mesh sifting box and tray

Turtle shaped tea box and measuring spoon

Brazier

Cauldron

Saltcellar

Glass tea bowl and stand

*Mise* celadon bowl

*Mise* 密色meant “secret color,” a special ceramic ware sent in tribute from the Yüezhou kilns to the imperial palace. In Tang poetry, connoisseurs praised Yüezhou ceramics, comparing their round shapes to the “full moon” and their light weight to “rising clouds” or “thin ice.” The beauty of Yüezhou glazes was described as “misty and vaporous” with the fine, sensuous qualities of ancient ritual jades. The blue green celadon of “secret color” ware was likened to a “bright moon stained with spring rain” and “green clouds” and “tender lotus leaves soaked in dew.”

Why it was call “secret” may have been because it was imperial and reserved for palace use and prohibited elsewhere. Another legend had the glaze formula kept “secret,” so it could not be reproduced by others. Sixteen pieces of *mise* celadon were found in the sealed chambers beneath the pagoda at Famensi. Until their discovery in 1987, no examples of *mise* ware were known or recognized, and indeed *mise* was thought to be a fabulous myth. Lu Yü and his insistence on tea bowls from Yüezhou may well be credited for the revival of green wares and one of the superb glazes of the celadon tradition.

The plebian crowd, however, prepared and served tea with an array of common ceramics, even implements and wares of stone.

**Liao**

After the fall of the Tang dynasty, remnants of the imperial house took refuge in the south while the north was ruled by a succession of sinicized tribes: the Qidan, Tangut, and Jurchen. The highly cultured Qidan established the Liao dynasty (916-1125 A.D.) with southern borders and settlements that reached beyond the Great Wall into Hebei province. Famed for their exquisite taste in gold and silver, the Qidan patronized the northern kilns for fine ceramics, including innovative white wares and celadons.

In the Qidan tombs of the Zhang family at Xuanhua, a wall painting depicted servants carrying red lacquered cup stands and bowls of tea, using a wheel pestle and mortar to grind tea into powder, and heating a tall water ewer on a pedestaled brazier. Various implements and equipage stand ready on a table nearby: ewers, bowls, brushes, tongs, and so on. The absence of the cauldron and the prominence of the spouted ewer signaled the change in brewing tea in the late Tang. Tea was no longer boiled as soup but rather mixed like an instant powder with hot water using a spouted ewer.

Lacking the temperate territory for tea production, the Qidan depended on Song China and Goryeo Korea for caked tea known imperially as “tribute of new tea” and “for examining the new tea.” The Goryeo bordered the Liao who alternately courted and intimidated the peninsula as well as the Song in the south. In 925, Goryeo sent Liao thirteen pounds of tea as tribute. In the tenth century, caked tea was known as rounds, wafers, balls, and bricks. One of the most costly cakes was flavored and scented with a rare import known as “dragon brain.” Dragon brain龍腦was Borneo camphor, an aromatic, peppery additive to soups, drinks and caked tea. The Korean court created its own version of dragon brain called “brain of the primordial” (*nao-yüan ch’a* 腦元茶; *noe-won cha*뇌원차): a fragrant tea that was sent as tribute to the Qidan Liao in 1038.

**Song**

In the south, the Song defeated the failed remains of the Tang and built capitals at Kaifeng and later Hangzhou. During the tenth century, tea processing reached an apogee of refinement; the best known came from the imperial tea estates of North Park or Beiyüan in Fujian. As different teas were developed, they acquired descriptive epithets and associations with the reigns of specific emperors. In 977, North Park sent emperor Taizu 宋太祖 (reign 960-976 C.E.) “dragon and phoenix” rounds impressed with the design of the creatures for which the caked tea was named: large dragon, small phoenix, small dragon, and so on.

Under the influence of the palace official Cai Xiang 蔡襄 (1012-1067 C.E.), caked tea became more refined. Cai Xiang was a native of Fujian, a celebrated calligrapher, and a connoisseur of tea. Between 1041-1048, emperor Renzong 仁宗 (reign 1022-1063 C.E.) assigned Cai Xiang to oversee the annual tribute tea from North Park to the capital at Kaifeng. As the official in charge, Cai Xiang developed finer and finer teas to send the palace each spring. In his *Record of Tea* 茶錄, Cai Xiang wrote about tea and tea utensils, noting a change in taste wherein “tea has its true fragrance” and that “among the people of Jian’an [Fujian] who practice tea, none add aromatics lest they take away from tea’s true fragrance.”

In a letter to a friend, Cai Xiang wrote that he enclosed as gifts a “large cake, an extremely precious thing, and a Yüe celadon bowl” with which to drink the tea. It was later written that like the emperor, Cai Xiang drank tribute teas made from the tenderest tea buds and that a single measure of this tea was worth 40,000 in silver.

In 1078, a fortune in tea was sent to Korea. Thirteen pounds of Chinese dragon rounds and phoenix cakes were sent as tribute to the court of King Munjong文宗 문종 (reign 1046-1083 C.E.). Befitting the enormous value of such a gift, the tea was presented in fine bamboo boxes decorated in gold and silver in red lacquer cases.

The emperor aesthete Huizong 宋徽宗 (reign 1100-1126 C.E.) was an exceptional figure in art and culture. Known for his exquisite taste, his palace kilns produced the ceramic known as Ru ware, a celadon of pale glazes that blushed subtle rose to warm cool blue green hues. Made for the exclusive use of the palace, Ru remains the epitome of imperial ceramic production.

Huizong was an avid and expert practitioner of tea. He favored unscented teas that produced a pale cake and a paler powder as “white as fine paper.” As a connoisseur, he examined and tasted teas, playing games that highlighted the fragrance, sweetness, and smoothness of the brew. As a tea master, he challenged aristocrats and courtiers to best him at the art of tea making. He was a painter and calligrapher, who produced remarkable scrolls like *Literary Gathering*, which depicts a garden banquet set with a fine table and featuring rare palace teas. The scene of young servants busily wiping the board, measuring tea into bowls, and tending the brazier and water kettles used a standard set of about one dozen utensils, including:

Wooden mallet and pounder to crush caked tea

Stone mortar to grind the tea into powder

Bamboo and gauze sifter to refine and gather the tea powder

Bronze kettle to boil and pour water

Bamboo whisk to blend tea and water to a thick froth

Ceramic tea bowl to mix tea and water and to drink from

Huizong preferred dark colored bowls, especially the Jian wares from Fujian. Made of coarse stoneware covered in a thick black, blue-black glaze, Jian was just a common ware used by the people of Fujian for tea. But under first Cai Xiang and then Huizong, the utilitarian Jian bowl was elevated to the heights of palace taste and games of tea. The close examination of white froth was easy against the dark glaze of a fine Jian bowl and fostered competitions. One contest was judged on the way the tea froth clung to the sides, known as “biting the bowl,” and whether or not the foam betrayed unwanted traces of liquid, or “water scars.”

Cai Xiang praised Jian bowls of “purple black with hare’s fur markings,” a transmutation of thick, unctuous iron glaze that had many forms, including an effect known simply as “butterfly,” a blue black color with clusters of luminous spots that appeared to vibrate and flutter. Others were indescribable yet strangely appealing, some prompted names such as partridge feather. Northern kilns produced patterned bowls fired with leaves placed in them. Extraordinary designs achieved the look of blossoming plum branches silhouetted against a starry night sky. Bowls of such rarity and beauty are still filled with measures of powdered tea. In Korea and Japan, whisked green tea remains an art of great mastery and meditation.

Beyond the palace walls, Kaifeng was a bustling city alive with the hurly burly of an imperial capital. All manner of trade was conducted within the shops and on the thoroughfares where street vendors sold everything, including tea. Taking respite from their work, a group of tea sellers serve out tea to one another, demonstrating their personal styles and skills. Without using a whisk, tea powder and water were mixed with just the force of the liquid stream, a precise technique known as *diancha* 點茶, “pointing tea.”

In the twelfth century, cordial relations between the Song and Goryeo encouraged the exchange of tribute and envoys. In 1123, Xü Jing 徐兢 (1091-1153) was sent with imperial gifts to the royal court of King Injong 仁宗 인종 (reign. 1122-1146), where he noted the difference in tea practices. He recorded that Koreans held ceremonial tea three times daily with tea implements arranged on a red tea table covered with a red cloth. A bamboo stick was used to crush the leaves and a device with several rings attached to a handle was used to stir and whip up foam in the tea bowl. He noted black bowls decorated with gold flowers, small bowls of a deep green jade-color, lotus-shaped basins, silver stoves and braziers in imitation of Chinese style. Highly critical and impolitic, he observed that Koreans regarded tea as medicine, something that they drank not slowly but compulsively and quickly. He further described the tea as bitter and astringent and “undrinkable.” When offered tea at court, he did not drink, writing that he “never drinks cold tea.”

Had he deigned to look beyond his nose, Xü Jing would have marveled at the Goryeo response to the gifts of palace tea and ceramics that Xü himself had presented to the king. For centuries, Korean potters had studied continental wares. Now, Goryeo celadons rivaled imperial ceramics in every quality. The Goryeo minister Yi Gyu-bo李奎報 이규보 (1168-1241 C.E.) solemnly declared, “Tea and the Way are one” and described one exquisite celadon as “stolen from ‘heavenly harmony.’” Chinese connoisseurs echoed Yi Gyu-bo’s profound sentiments: astonished by Korean celadons, they bestowed their highest accolades, calling them Goryeo *mise* “secret color” or Goryeo Ru “palace ware.”

**Ming**

The Ming dynasty was founded in the brief wake of Mongol rule. The rebel Zhu Yüanzhang朱元璋 (1328-1398 C.E.) had fought the Mongols and wrested the empire from alien rule. Reigning as emperor under the name Hongwu洪武帝, he established his capital at Nanjing and designated a key principality encompassing Beijing, later the second capital. During the Ming, relations with Korea were fitful but constant.

In 1388, the Korean scholar and envoy Yi Saek李穡 **이색** (1328-1396) presented to the Ming court gold and silver plate, fine cloth, and decorated mats. Educated in China, Yi Saek was known as one of the “Three Recluses” of the Goryeo, a philosopher who promoted the art of tea as a spiritual discipline and as a means to enlightenment. On his return home, Yi Saek carried caked tea as presents from the imperial court to the Goryeo king. Soon after, however, Yi Saek learned that emperor Hongwu had radically changed the art of tea by subverting the whole notion of caked tea.

In the late summer of 1391, Hongwu issued a decree directed at the tea industry. Like the Song emperors before him, Hongwu praised the imperial gardens at Fujian: “Of all the tribute tea under Heaven, only that of Qianning is supreme.” But to the civil official and five hundred households of Qianning, he ordered the abolition of caked tea. In its stead, Hongwu instructed that four exceptional leaf bud teas - named Plucking Spring, First of Spring, Next of Spring, and Russet Sprouts – be sent to the palace.

The imperial decree established the state monopoly on tea, a move in concert with Hongwu’s extensive land reforms to make the people more productive, relieve them of unnecessary corvée labor, and to disturb the entrenched bureaucracy and its deep seated patterns of corruption. The change in labor practices meant an end to the expensive and time consuming making of caked tea throughout the tea growing regions. The fabled dragon and phoenix rounds began fading into history.

In the following year, the Korean King Taejo太祖 태조 (reign 1392-1398), founded a new dynasty. Wishing to establish relations with the Ming court, King Taejo requested Hongwu to name the new regime. In 1393, Hongwu granted the dynasty the name Joseon after the ancient manner and sent a gold seal investing King Taejo as sovereign. Tea was sent to Korea to celebrate the inauguration, though caked tea became rarer as imperial stores were depleted.

As a man of common birth, Hongwu favored whole leaf from Guzhu and drank steeped tea. But caked tea was still used by members of the imperial family and aristocrats who kept the old traditions. The emperor’s son, Prince Ning寧獻王 (1378-1448), exemplified the conservative elite, a connoisseur who persisted in practicing the art of tea with caked tea. Known as the Slender Immortal and Master Cinnabar Hill, Prince Ning was Daoist and an alchemist, a true master of tea in later times. He extolled the virtues of caked tea in his work of 1408 *Startled Immortals, Gods, and Hermits* 瞿仙神隱, still listing all the Song dynasty implements. But thirty years later, his cache of caked tea all but exhausted, the prince succumbed to reality and in his work *Treatise on Tea* 茶譜 admitted that tea “need not be made into paste for cakes.”

**Ming Literati**

During the late fifteenth through the sixteenth centuries, the literary and artistic elite was concentrated in the south on the shores of Lake Tai located between Nanjing, Hangzhou, and modern Shanghai. Lake Tai was literally and figuratively the “great lake,” the heart of Ming tea culture. The region was celebrated for its rare teas, fine Yixing ceramics, and the sweet water springs at Wuxi and Suzhou.

According to Ming sources, there were more than fifty famous teas in production during the sixteenth century, including teas from Guzhu and Tiger Hill. Most were green teas, but white, yellow, red, and black teas were being produced by at least the sixteenth century. Yangxian tea was especially popular among the literati. Historically and geographically related to the great Guzhu tea of the Tang dynasty, Yangxian was produced in Changzhou near the famous pottery town of Yixing near Lake Tai. Yangxian tea was noted for its leaf being “pale yellow, not green” and unlike the pan-fired teas of the Ming, its leaves were first steamed and then dried over a low fire. Brewed, it was “clear like jade dew.” Once lauded as Tang and Song imperial tribute, Yangxian was enjoyed as a rare tea in the repertoires of Ming tea masters such as Wang Lai and Wu Lun.

Wu Lun 吳綸 (1440-1522 C.E.) was from Yixing, living in the surrounding “hills and streams” as a reclusive tea master known as Hermit of the Distant Heart. He was friends with the renowned painter Shen Zhou 沈周 (1427-1509 C.E.) and crossed Lake Tai to visit the artist in Suzhou. As a tea master, Wu Lun was overtly partisan in his appreciation of the products of his hometown Yixing. He was not only partial to Yangxian tea but also promoted the teapots made at the local kilns by Gong Chun 供春 (variously 龔春, active 1506-1521 C.E.), a young servant in Wu Lun’s own household who learned to make ceramics from an old monk at nearby Jinsha Temple. Gong Chun perfected the use of the local clays and their special properties, creating teapots supremely suited for steeping tea and thus giving name to the Yixing tradition of tea wares. His master Wu Lun, by serving Yangxian tea infused in a fine teapot made by Gong Chun, attained an extraordinary level of tea that was rarely surpassed by other tea masters in the Ming.

Gong Chun’s successor was the Yixing potter Shi Dabin 時大彬 (circa 16th-17th centuries C.E.) whose initial works were large. Urged by the literati to make smaller pots to capture and contain the essence of tea, Shi Dabin reduced the size of his works to hold about half a pint of liquid or less. He became a famous artisan among the intelligentsia who quickly acquired his works from across the lake in Suzhou.

Suzhou was famous for Tiger Hill, a place of sweet water and fine tea where an old pagoda overlooked the canals below. Near the top of the hill were three springs noted for fine water: Sword Pond, Hanhan Spring, and Third Spring Under Heaven, also known as Lu Yu’s Well.

Beneath the high tower, the slopes of the hill were devoted to tea gardens that produced Huqiu, a superior tea named after the place. Huqiu tea noted for its scent of “wintry beans” and a taste like “the scent of bean flowers, the flavor tended to being “pure and light.” When properly brewed, the tea was “like the color of moon light” or “white like jade.”

For the literati, tea was an aesthetic realm removed from the mundane, a sphere of refinement and sophistication shared among friends on visits around Suzhou. The style of the time used unglazed ceramic wares from Yixing, brewing the tea in the pot, and drinking from early Ming porcelains or Song and Yuan celadons. At gatherings, the tea master was the center of a day devoted to artistic, literary, and culinary pursuits; his role was something akin to a master of ceremony. Wang Lai 王淶 (1459-1528) was a favorite in Suzhou circles, traveling by boat, leisurely wandering here and there, “whistling and swaggering about in the mists and waves.” Remembered as a witty and brilliant conversationalist, Wang Lai often stayed as a guest in the garden studio of Shen Chou, frequently presenting the elder gentleman with a gift of rare tea.

Once in the winter of 1497, Shen Chou was joined at his house by four other literati for an intimate gathering at which Wang Lai prepared and served tea. The marvelously subtle art demonstrated by Wang Lai during the party so moved Shen Chou that he wrote an essay in praise of the tea master. The work no longer survives, but it was recorded that: “Shen Chou dedicated ‘Gathering for Tea’ to Wang Lai. Wang is fond of tea and his style of tea preparation is especially wonderful. He often brings Shen Chou beautiful tea, brewing and serving it to the old man, always in this fine manner. At this gathering, the old man sipped through seven cups and savored the full beauty of it all.”

**Late Ming**

For over a millennium, the history of Korean tea grew in complexity and depth, spreading throughout the culture until one day a Joseon king declared that Korea had no custom of tea. The king’s declaration baldly contradicted the long Korean tea tradition. That anyone, even a king, should utter such a thing was astonishing. But in fact, the king’s statement accurately reflected the extraordinary pressures on the kingdom in the late sixteenth century and the desperate circumstance of Korean tea.

In the spring of 1597, the Wanli emperor 萬曆帝 (1572-1620 C.E.) received an urgent message from King Seonjo [宣](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E5%AE%A3)[祖](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E7%A5%96)선조 (reign 1567-1608) of Korea. The king reported that Toyotomi Hideyoshi豐臣秀吉 (1537-1598 C.E.) had once again sent an army across the straits and on to Korean soil intent on conquest and destruction. In response, Wanli dispatched emergency troops under the general Yang Hao to defend the Korean capital.

Yang Hao楊鎬 (died 1629) was a scholar from Honan and a former magistrate of Kiangsi, both provinces lying in the heartland of China’s tea culture. During his military inspection of Korea, Yang Hao noted a variety of tea growing in the southern province of Jolla near the ancient town of Namwon. In an audience with King Seonjo, General Yang recommended the cultivation and production of tea. His plan included the sale of Korean tea to the traders and merchants on the northern borders, lucrative sales that could provide the silver for the purchase of Tibetan horses to use in the imminent fight against the Japanese:

“Your esteemed country has tea...it is a product of Namwon and its quality is very good...If picked and sold in Liaotung, it is worth a tenth of an ounce of silver for every ten catties and thus tea could become a means of national support. The western tribes [Tibetans] delight in fatty and oily foods; a day without drinking tea and they would die. China picks tea to sell to them and receives in return an annual herd of ten thousand horses of war.”

The general further observed the marked lack of tea drinking among the Korean populace generally and specifically the absence of tea at court in official etiquette. Yang Hao pointedly asked the Korean sovereign, “Why does your country not drink tea?”

The royal response took the form of a simple but remarkable statement: “Lord Yang...it is the custom of our country not to drink tea.” Standing before the serene sovereign, Yang Hao hid his surprise and amazement. Then, Yang slowly realized the truth of the king’s words.

In Korea, tea had long been relegated to ceremonial use, and by the late sixteenth century tea had all but disappeared from daily life. Drinking tea may have survived among Buddhist monks and villagers, among distant temples and hermitages of the south, but it took two hundred years before the *literatus* Dasan Jeong Yak-Yong茶山 丁若鏞 다산 정약용 (1762-1836 C.E.) started introducing tea to Zen masters. When Dasan met the learned and Venerable Cho-ui Ui-son艸衣意恂 초의의순 (1786-1866 C.E.) the event began a remarkable friendship and sparked a brief revival of tea Koreana.

**Qing dynasty**

In 1644, the Manchu tribes rode off the northern steppes to conquer the Ming, taking over the Forbidden City in Beijing as their Chinese capital and establishing the Qing dynasty. The most glorious ruler of the dynasty was the Qianlong emperor乾隆帝 (reign 1735-1796), who ascended the throne in 1735 at the age of twenty four to reign for sixty one years. This is a story of Qianlong and his fondness for milk tea.

In middle age, the emperor had long settled into a daily routine. After hold court and meetings all morning, he retired to the private residences at the rear of the palace where he lunched and then spent the rest of the day at his pleasure.

As Qianlong began his afternoon of reading, painting, or writing poetry, he nodded to his eunuch to call for a pot of tea. The attendant bowed and hurried to relay the order through the palace to a special place known as the “tea kitchen” where a Mongolian tea master waited on call to prepare the beverage. Shortly, a train of servants arrived bearing a subtly decorated bowl of white jade, a carved jade teapot, and a small jade tray of pastries. Qianlong looked up from his book gratefully to receive the bowl, now filled with his favorite drink, a rich, coffee-colored liquid known as milk tea. Milk tea was drunk by all the nomads on the grasslands of the vast steppes. Made with tea, water, milk, butter, and salt, milk tea had sustained the tribes for over a thousand years.

The milk tea bowl of white jade was kept in the Hall for Nurturing the Heart. Unlike the huge, cavernous halls of the outer palace, the Hall for Nurturing the Heart was Qianlong’s private study, a very small, secluded apartment at the back of the inner palace, protected by many gates and walls, and near the emperor’s garden. Off the study was a tiny sitting room was just comfortable for but a single person to lounge or stand in. An extremely close and intimate space, it was the emperor’s sole place of refuge from family and court. Here, Qianlong read and wrote poetry, peacefully enclosed in a cocoon of favorite books and art, nodding to his eunuch now and then to order milk tea. The bowl that he kept by him and always used was made of a lovely white jade finely carved with very faint floral designs and handles of pendant flower buds.

Setting aside his books, Qianlong lifted the jade vessel with two hands and took a long draught, filling his mouth with the full weight and feel of the hot, creamy mixture before swallowing. A small sigh escaped his lips as he took another sip and thought how utterly satisfying milk tea was to him. Qianlong then smiled as he remembered when once asked how the empire could do a day without its emperor, he had waggishly replied, “How can the emperor do a single day without his tea?” -- an oblique but mischievous play on an old Manchu saying, “Rather go three days without eating than go a single day without tea.” Although made in jest, the remark revealed that Qianlong was truly addicted to milk tea and, indeed, could not do without it.

But Qianlong never worried about his favorite drink. He drank it throughout the day, and it was always at hand, made by the tea master, and supplied by the abundant tea tribute and milk from the imperial herd. The emperor had fifty head of cattle that produced one hundred thirty pounds of milk a day. According to palace regulation, Qianlong’s daily allowance of milk tea required the entire herd’s production, twelve pitchers of water from Jade Spring at the Summer Palace, one pound of butter, and seventy-five packets of tea at two ounces a pack. Although the emperor might never drink all of the milk tea allotted to him, he would never lack for it either. When the emperor drank his last bowl of milk tea for the day, the tea master was sent out of the palace, returning the following morning to repeat his single task.

In 1781, at the age of seventy, Qianlong composed a poem to honor the white jade bowl he enjoyed using and had the inscription engraved around the body. Qianlong praised the fine color and look of the jade as “mutton fat,” but he struggled to describe the “fluttering and fleeting” quality of the carved design, ineptly comparing its ephemeral character to the fragility of mulberry paper. Finally, he surrendered and confessed to being positively abashed, unable to justly express the full and virtuous nature of the bowl. But in penance and in adoration of its singular beauty, Qianlong always kept the bowl in his little study and within his easy reach. Until the very end of his days, the white jade vessel remained the emperor’s favorite bowl, and from it Qianlong drank his fill of milk tea, his favorite drink.

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