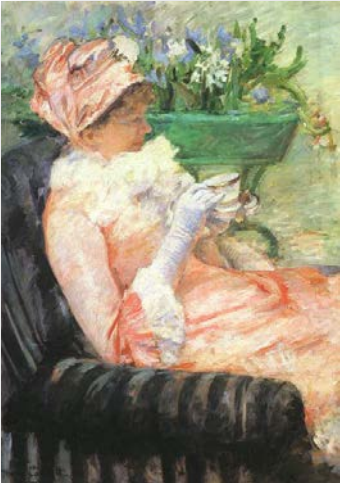


The Green Gold

A short history of tea



If you are cold, tea will warm you;
if you are too heated, it will cool you;
If you are depressed, it will cheer you;
If you are excited, it will calm you.

William Gladstone (1809-1898),
four-times British premier minister

Origins in the Middle Kingdom

It will always remain an unproven legend if Emperor Shen Nung really discovered tea in 2737 BC, when allegedly a breath of wind blew a leaf of the tea shrub into his bowl of hot water, as Ian told Helena in the tea fields of Shikhara.

Undisputed is the fact that the origins of tea lie in China, in Mandarin called *cha*, *t'e* in another common dialect.

Maybe the tale of Shen Nung and the fallen tea leaf really is a myth. But without any doubt, this legendary leaf would have had to be from the shrub of *Camellia sinensis*. Closely related to the gorgeous flowering camellias, the tea shrub is also called *the Queen of camellias*.

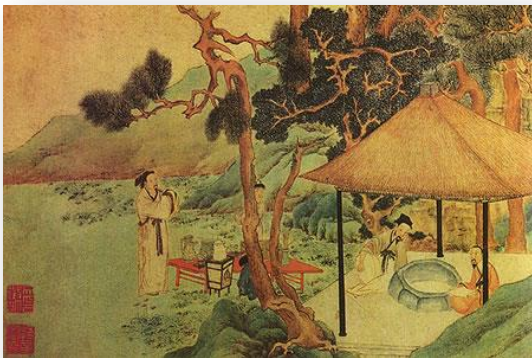
The first written evidence of the use of tea dates back to the third century BC, when a famous Chinese physician recommended tea to enhance the power to concentrate and to invigorate the mind. In the same era, a general of the Imperial Arm, feeling old and melancholic, asked his nephew to get him some “real tea” as a remedy.



In the fifth and sixth century tea, already cultivated and manufactured, saw a boom for its medicinal properties. To meet the increasing demand, soon countless tea fields covered the hills along the Yangtze River.

Tea was a popular gift for the Emperors of China but also offered in taverns and by wine merchants. Compressed into bricks, dried tea leaves were used as medium of exchange in trading with the Turks, and tea merchants amassed great wealth.

Potters and silversmiths followed suit by inventing, manufacturing and selling more and more refined tea paraphernalia.



During the Tang dynasty between 618 and 907 AC, tea had become a popular stimulant, often blended with spices, with peppermint, ginger or orange peel.

It was the golden age of tea, its cultivation a highly specialized technique, its savoring an elaborate celebration.

In the same period, a group of tea merchants asked the poet Lu Yu to write the world's first book of tea: the *Chai Ching*. Tientsin quotes from this *Book of Tea* in the tea garden in Kangra Valley: a compendium about the origins and the characteristics of the tea plant, its varieties, its cultivation and care; about the uses of tea and its

correct preparation and consummation – green tea of course, as the process of fermentation was still unknown.

Preferences of flavor changed during the subsequent Song dynasty. Tea wasn't simply brewed anymore – now an infusion of pulverized tea leaves was whisked up and aromatized with jasmine, lotus or chrysanthemums.

Towards the end of the era, around 1300, tea had become so valuable that tea bricks were used as currency, equal to gold and silver.

During the Ming dynasty, between 1368 and 1644, the method of fermentation was discovered: Tea became black, stronger in taste – and less perishable.

The export to Europe had become possible.

But prior to this, tea travelled from the Chinese mainland to Indonesia, Korea – and to Japan.



In the land of the rising sun

Buddhist monks brought tea to Japan in the eighth century, having come to know and to appreciate this beverage while studying in Chinese monasteries – not least because of its stimulating effect during meditations lasting for hours and in nights spent up studying.

With deteriorating relations to China in the ninth century, tea also fell out of favor with the Japanese.

It was not until a priest called Eisai returned at the end of the twelfth century from his studies in China, bringing with him new tea varieties, that tea culture was revived in Japan. Together with his tea knowledge, Eisai carried with him the rules of Zen Buddhism. Both put down roots on the Japanese islands and got conjoined to the Japanese tea ceremony. This ceremony ought to combine four principles: harmony with mankind and nature, respect for others, purity of heart and mind and finally tranquility of contemplation.

That the ritual of tea is an art of living is still a saying in Japan.

Fleeting visits and souvenirs

The most profitable taxes in in Canton, China, were those on salt and tea, an Arabian traveler reported around the year 880.

In the wake of Vasco da Gama, Portuguese fleets landed not only in India but also in Canton and in Java. From these voyages they brought the pineapple, indigo and oranges – but no tea.

Not even Marco Polo wrote about tea – only insofar that a Chinese minister of finance had been disposed because he had arbitrarily raised the taxes on tea even higher.



The first written accounts in Europe mentioning tea were composed by the Venetian Giovanni Batista Ramusio in 1559: he called it “Chiai Catai”, tea from Cathay – more specifically from “Ca-cian-fu”, from Sichuan.

The Dutch finally brought a chest of these strange leaves home in 1610. At first, tea was sold as medicine in apothecary's shops, just like in ancient China, together with sugar, ginger and other spices to obtain a twice as powerful but also palatable drug. From here, tea took over the houses of nobility, and after prices fell due to increased imports, it also reached the parlors of commoners.

Tea craze spilled over to Germany where a handful of these dried leaves were traded for fifteen guilders in the mid-seventeenth century. But except up in the North, in Friesland, this new beverage didn't meet the taste of the Germans, just as little as in France: In Paris, tea remained a mere fad of the nobility.

Around the same time, the first caravan with tea from China reached Russia, followed by many more, regularly transporting tea into the tsardom – a distance taking more than one year by overland route. Accordingly, drinking tea was a costly pleasure there, and especially popular at the tsar's court.



Tea-time

From their mercantile expeditions to Asia the British brought the first chests of tea home, too. First, from Canton in 1637, then from Amoy in 1644, and after the *t'e* of the local dialect there the British named this new article of merchandise tea.

In September 1658, Thomas Garraway, a Londoner merchant and owner of a coffeehouse, advertised in the weekly paper *Mercurius Politicus* the auction of a new product:

That Excellent, and by all Physicians approved, China drink, called by the Chinese, Tcha, by other nations Tay alias Tee ...



East India House, Leadenhall Street, London: Trading floor for goods from Asia - Th. Sheperd, 1817

Tea owes its rise in England to a marriage: that of Charles II. to the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza. She not only brought Bombay as a dowry into this marriage but also a chest of tea - that finally had found its way to Catherine's homeland Portugal after all. The new Queen of England served tea at invitations to court - and like everything that's new with Royals, this beverage was immediately considered fashionable.

Only a selected few could afford the sinfully expensive tea: Ladies proffered it at home while Gentlemen enjoyed tea in coffeehouses visited by financiers, brokers, politicians, journalists and poets.

In one of these Londoner coffeehouses, situated near the port and frequented by sailors, shipowners and merchants, its proprietor Edward Lloyd provided his guests not only with coffee and tea but also with reliable shipping news – and there also founded the famous insurance company Lloyd's.



In 1706, Thomas Twining, employed at the East India Company, started his own business: the first tearoom with an associated shop dedicated solely to tea. He was so successful that he was able to sell the expensive beverage even more costly: 100 grams of his brand's green gunpowder would cost more than 200 Euros today.

But not only the sparse supply and the huge demand, not only speculators among the traders were responsible for the high prices: tea was heavily taxed. The same tax the American colonies made a stand against, celebrating the famous Boston Tea Party that finally led to the American War of Independence and to the foundation of the United States of America.

As a catalyst for this development, tea had made history.

Meanwhile, one couldn't imagine life in England without tea: in the morning, at noon, in the evening, before the meals as an aperitif, a digestive afterwards and in between for pure enjoyment, at home as well as away from it: there was always a cup of tea.

The Duchess of Bedford immortalized herself in a different way in the history of her country: since the timespan between lunch at noon and the very late dinner used to upset her stomach as well as her mood, she ordered her maid to bring her a small snack, accompanied by tea, at five in the afternoon. This agreed so well with the Duchess that she started to invite her friends to it – who thought this kind of unconventional meal very sophisticated and promptly imitated this new custom. The famous five o'clock tea, up until today as English as fish and chips, roast lamb with mint sauce, rain and bowler hats, was born.

The price of one pound of the cheapest tea almost equaled a worker's weekly pay – and yet, also the common people yearned for tea. As a result, a lively black market grew: tea was imported illegally from the Netherlands or bulked up with additions of liquorice and plum leaves. Or already used tea leaves were dyed with molasses, dried and resold.

Adulteration of tea was severely punished by the government, even with long prison sentences.

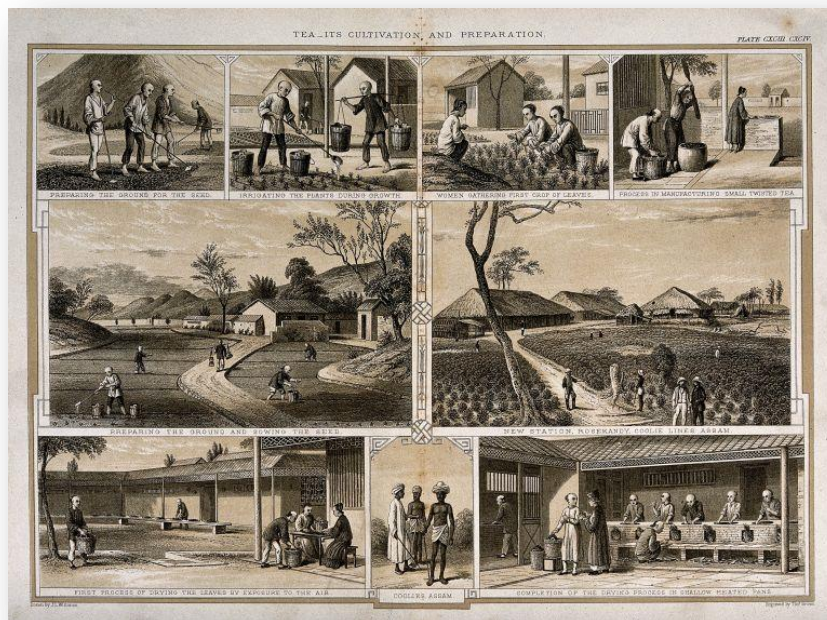


Clipper *Flying Cloud* - J. E. Buttersworth, ca. 1860

In 1701, not more than 30 tons of tea had been drunk throughout the whole kingdom. The consumption multiplied over the next years: 2200 tons eighty years later, and only ten years afterwards, the British consumed already 6800 tons in one year.

The new clipper ships, slender and streamlined and by that, extremely swift, now were able to transport tea in shorter time – and thus more often. It was the era of vociferously announced races between clippers, competing in delivering tea from China as fast as possible into English and American shops. In the end, the increasing amount of traded tea led to falling prices. Reason enough for the revenue board to lower the tax and to make tea affordable. Particularly since China was able to supply an infinite amount of green and black tea, later on by far more popular.

Until the British tripped over their own economic policy.



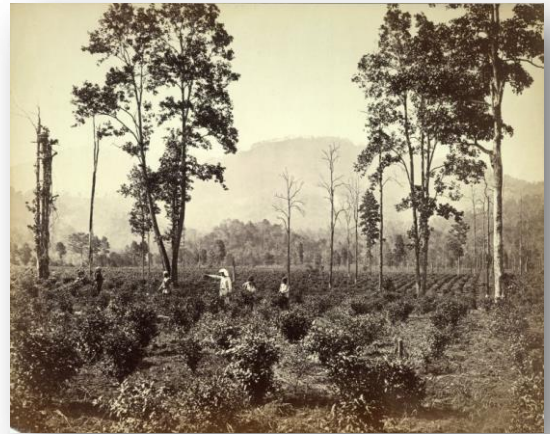
Tea cultivation in Assam - after Th. Brown, 1850

A war and a new realm of tea

For this enormous amount of tea, its counter-value in gold and silver remained in China; precious metals and currency were running short in England. Therefore, the idea came up to sell opium from Bengal to China, to first grateful, then addicted consumers, and the stream of cash was reversed in favor of the British. To the disapproval of the Chinese government though – a conflict leading to war in 1839 and even including a trade blockade for tea.

A decade earlier, the British had already resorted to the proposal of Sir Joseph Banks, president of the Royal Society, who suggested in 1784 that the climate of Northern India might be suitable for the cultivation of tea.

Tea plants promising good results were discovered in Assam; the experimental garden there, supervised by Charles Bruce, produced no outstanding results but nevertheless fairly good ones, and the British started to grow their own tea in their own colony. Test series with different seedlings in different climate zones followed, the experiments of William Jameson, superintendent of the Botanical Garden in Saharanpur, among them; in the novel, Winston is sent by Jameson to Kangra for exactly this purpose.



Tee garden in Darjeeling - S. Bourne, ca. 1860

A crossbred of the Chinese tea shrub and the one from Assam proved to be the most resistant and most fruitful – and this hybrid is the kind of tea we are still drinking today.

India's tea production increased from 366.700 pounds in 1853 to 6.387.988 pounds roughly thirteen years later, in Assam and the adjacent Dooars, in Ceylon, in Nilgiri, in Sikkim and Terai, in Kerala, Madras and Mysore – and in Darjeeling.

Tea takes on the world



Although China, India and Sri Lanka, the former Ceylon, remain the leading producers, tea is also cultivated in other regions of the world. For instance in Cameroon, in Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and South Africa, Uganda, Mozambique, Rwanda, Ethiopia and on Madagascar. In Japan, of course, in Indonesia and Taiwan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nepal, Vietnam, Turkey and on the Azores. In Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru; there are tea fields even in Iran, in Australia and in Papua New Guinea.

And throughout every year, there are many cups of tea on my desk while I am working on a new novel.

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