

# Tea Story

## The history, culture and politics of Asia's essential beverage.

Part One of Two

Text: Lee Chee Keong

In Asia, tea is the beverage of choice, drunk throughout the day, by itself, as an accompaniment to a meal – it seems that no aspect of life in Asia is untouched by tea.

Even if one doesn't drink tea, it is undoubtedly an inseparable part of our lives, and our identity. Once we talk about tea, we think of it as a part of harmony. To have tea with someone – a family member, a friend, a business partner – is to engage in a moment of community, to experience a sense of harmony. This feeling is a natural part of tea.

### Beginnings

At its simplest, tea is simply a beverage produced by steeping processed leaves, buds or twigs of the tea plant *Camellia sinensis* in hot water for a few minutes. Its taste is slightly bitter yet pleasing, and it is said to have cooling properties.

The story of tea begins in what is now Yunnan Province in China. Over a long period of time, tea fanned out from Yunnan naturally in two directions: From the east and from Yunnan, Sichuan, the wind direction or the spread of the river flows slowly towards Jiangnan. Gradually, because of the cold weather, what were originally palm-sized leaves of 15 to 20 cm slowly became small-leafed varieties of 3 to 4 cm. From Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Fujian, tea also spread southward towards Taiwan. Because the climate gradually grew warmer, new variants of tea appeared with mid-sized leaves of about 7 to 10 cm.

The second transmission route of tea was from Yunnan to the south, through Myanmar and beyond to northern Thailand, Vietnam and northern India. Due to the colder climate, the size of the tea leaves remained unchanged. These were the natural transmission lines for tea; as tea entered into the daily lives of people, the transmission rate began to accelerate.

### Origins in Myth

How did tea come to be drunk, and when did tea-drinking begin? No one can say for certain. It is only from 841 BC onwards that there are reliable written records of Chinese history. As such, there are no records of tea's discovery and how it was first used.

Chinese legends speak of how the legendary emperor Shennong (also known as Yandi) first encountered tea 5,000 years ago. Shennong was also the god of all plants and collected them in order to test and discover their properties. One day, Shennong tasted some toxic plants and immediately suffered their effects – he became thirsty, his tongue became numb and his organs burned. Knowing that he'd been poisoned, he lay under several large trees to rest. Suddenly, a gust of wind rustled through the trees, and down floated a few leaves. It took little effort for Shennong to put the leaves in his mouth and to chew them slowly. Although he found the leaves bitter, the numbness he felt gradually disappeared, and he emerged refreshed. Thus was discovered the detoxification properties tea.

Thus tea was first used as a herbal medicine in China, where it was chewed. With the passing of time, the Chinese began to ingest tea via different ways, increasingly using pots of water to boil tea leaves, as with soup. This process too has mythic roots. It is said that Shennong often travelled to treat the ill, first preparing a pot of water to be used for boiling herbs and medicines. This was what he was doing one hot summer afternoon. Feeling thirsty, he went to drink the boiled water. But he discovered a few leaves in the pot. Rather than spend time boiling a new pot of water, Shennong drank a mouthful of the brew. Though the taste was bitter, he felt a pleasant sensation. His thirst was quenched and his spirits braced, while he felt cool. His lethargy had disappeared as well. This was how the Chinese came to drink tea boiled in water. This was how the Chinese came to use ceramic to cook tea. Though the taste of tea was bitter, it was long-lasting and had an intoxicating effect, and this led to the habit of drinking tea.

### Classical Tea

From its initial use as a herbal medicine, the Chinese gradually learned the many efficacies of tea, and to attribute to it spiritual properties. Tea was often used as an offering, and as a gift for nobles and high-ranking officials. Though the quality of water in China was often poor, with tea, it tasted better. Hence the popularity of tea.

Before the Tang Dynasty (AD 618 to 904), tea trees grew in the wild and were therefore scarce; only the emperor and high-ranking officials got a chance to drink it. Tea preparation during this era was also extremely simple – just throw a few freshly plucked tea into a pot of water, boil and drink.

It was from the Tang Dynasty onwards that the mass cultivation of tea began. Soon tea had become a part of everyday life, for Chinese people from all walks of life. It was during this period that the icon of Chinese tea, the poet Lu Yu (AD 733 to 804), wrote 'The Classic of Tea'. This was the first volume dedicated to the culture and practice of tea, and to it Lu Yu brought a sense of the prevailing religious doctrines. The book was divided into chapters that set down the major elements of Chinese tea culture. With this volume, more people became aware

of tea. Tea became divided into two sorts, one for the nobility, and one for ordinary people. The aristocracy drank compressed green tea that was then ground into a powder then drank from a cup. The people drank loose tea which was ground into powder, boiled, to which was added onions, ginger and other vegetables, then drunk.

### **Beyond Chinese Shores**

It was also during the Tang Dynasty that tea first began to move beyond China. Tang Dynasty China was the centre of the Asian world, and many travellers from other countries came to China to study. The largest of these groups were Japanese and Koreans, many of whom were Buddhist monks. Studying and translating scripture at temples, these monks learnt the Chinese of drinking tea (perhaps to keep awake as they worked late into the night). The Japanese monk Saicho (AD 767 to 822) is credited with bringing green tea to Japan; he had studied Buddhism at Tiantai Mountain in modern-day Zhejiang province, and carried back tea seedlings to plant in what is today's Ameyama Prefecture.

It wasn't only towards the east that tea was moving. In AD 850, the Arab merchant Suleiman also travelled to China, bringing tea back with him to West Asia. To China's north was Mongolia and western Tibet, the inhabitants of whom also displayed a love for tea (perhaps as an aid to digestion).

As tea began to find a larger demand outside of China, it began to be used as an instrument of royal policy. Tea was often sold to border kingdoms in order to control these regions and to prevent incursions into China. Horses were often exchanged for tea, which helped to strengthen the country.

During the Song Dynasty (AD 960 to 1279), drinking tea became a fashion, such that it was said that wood, rice oil, salt, soya sauce, vinegar and tea were the seven essential items without which ordinary people could not do without. This corresponded to the six essential items of the literati: music, go, literature, leisure, wine and – tea. The literati also enjoyed playing 'tea fights' in which participants would whip the tea into a foam with whisks, and the emperor himself wrote a treatise on tea, an unprecedented occurrence.

In AD 1190, the Japanese monk Eisai brought tea seedlings from his travels in China and popularized the tea ceremony. Eisai also wrote *Kissa Yojoki, The Book of Tea*, the first volume on tea to be written outside of China. So it is that Japanese matcha tea (powdered green tea) is influenced by the tea practices of the Tang and Song Dynasties, which eventually coalesced to form the Japanese tea ceremony.

### **Politics and Trade**

During the Song Dynasty, tea was exported to Mongolia in order to more effectively control it. This wasn't enough by itself to control the Mongols, who conquered large territories in China, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the southern part of the Soviet Union to establish the Yuan Dynasty (1271 to 1368). To these distant lands, the Mongols brought their habit of tea-drinking, one that remains to this day.

Such was the importance of tea that during the Yuan Dynasty, it was, together with silk and porcelain, the three main export commodities. From the southern port of Guangzhou, they were shipped to Southeast Asia, and from the eastern port of Mingzhou (modern-day Ningbo), they were shipped to Japan, Korea and beyond.

This trend continued during the ensuing Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644). Under the orders of Emperor Yongle, the Muslim admiral Zheng He assembled a great fleet and travelled from Southeast Asia to the east coast of Africa. Among the items he traded were, of course, tea leaves.

During the Ming Dynasty, tea underwent a great revolution. Between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, tea merchants in Chong'an, Fujian province, began to pioneer a way of producing black tea. The tea that had been produced in China up to this period was green tea. After tea leaves are plucked, they undergo a process of oxidation. This stops when the leaves are dried through heating. Green tea comprises tea leaves that have only undergone a minimal amount of oxidation before being processed, whereas in black tea, the oxidation process is complete.

There are two possibilities as to how black tea came about: the first is that it was from green tea that had been 'spoiled', and since it seemed a waste to throw it away, didn't taste bad, and was sellable on the market, it seemed wrong not to continue using it (this may also be the story for Oolong tea, for which the oxidation process is stopped somewhere between that of green tea and black tea). The second possibility as to how black tea was formed was that in the course of being transported, green tea became completely oxidised.

### **To the West**

It was inevitable that having become an integral part of Asian culture, politics and trade, tea should find an eager market beyond Asia. This began in earnest during the early 1500s when Portuguese merchants first began shipping tea to Europe. This was the period when the European states first made their forays into Asia in search of spices and other precious goods. The Netherlands were particularly ambitious in their quest for Indonesian spices, as well as to develop new markets in China. By the early 1600s, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or Dutch East India Company had begun shipping green tea to Europe where it was praised as a 'cure-all medicine'.

Due to the Dutch monopoly of trade with China and Indonesia, the British East India Company had no choice but to focus on establishing trade links with India (there was no tea in India during this period, though the English were to discover tea trees in Assam, India, in the 1800s). In 1624, the Netherlands conquered Taiwan in order to more effectively control the tea trade with China. From the 1630s onwards, the popularity of tea had soared in the Netherlands, and Dutch merchants made huge fortunes tea.

Tea is universally recognised as the quintessential English brew, but it wasn't until the 1650s that the English first began drinking tea. In 1662, the Portuguese Princess Catherine de Braganza became the queen consort of King Charles II of England. It was Catherine who introduced the fashion of tea-drinking to the English, and from this

period onwards, tea became the rage in Britain. As in Asia, the fashion for tea followed British spheres of influence, spreading to Europe, the Americas, Oceania and Africa.

It seemed inevitable that the two seafaring nations of England and the Netherlands should go to war over the lucrative trade routes, in what was the start of the Anglo-Dutch Wars of the 1600s and 1700s. With the Revolution of 1688, Dutch merchants began operating directly from London, and Chinese tea began circulating in Britain. The British East India Company set up a base in Xiamen, Fujian province, to better facilitate its acquisition of tea. It was from this interaction that much of the language of tea was formed. For example, the Fujianese pronunciation of words such as 'teh' evolved to 'tea'. 'Pekoe' was originally 'be ho', 'souchong' was 'sio chong' and 'bohea' was 'bu gee'. In 1763, the great Swiss botanist Carolus Linnaeus named Chinese tea plants as 'bohea'. After that, 'bohea' became synonymous with Chinese tea, and was often quoted in poems in Europe.

With tea becoming part of European life, the British soon developed their unique tea culture.

Tea played an integral part in the fortunes of one of England's colonies – America. In 1765, the British imposed a stamp duty on the United States. The American colonists, angered by the tax decision and a lack of representation in the British parliament, launched a campaign to boycott British goods, including tea. The Boston Tea Party happened against such a backdrop. Ships carrying tea to America were stopped from landing, except at Boston, due to the assistance of the British-appointed governor. On 16 December 1773, protesters opposed to the tea tax pretended to be Native Americans and attacked a commercial ship of the English East India Company at Boston Harbour, throwing 342 boxes of tea into the sea. Following this, large quantities of tea were also destroyed at Philadelphia and Annapolis. And so began the first steps towards the American Revolution.

### **Into the Modern Era**

The international appetite for tea remained insatiable, and in the early 1800s, it was not uncommon for ships to leave Europe for the port of Guangzhou with empty holds, but to return laden with tea. This trade imbalance was soon addressed most painfully via opium, which the British East India Company imported into China through its south.

At the same time, the British continued to look for new sources of tea. In 1823, the British adventurer Robert Bruce, discovered in India's Assam region wild-growing tea trees. It had previously been thought that only tea from China was suitable for commercial use, but assam tea was soon proved acceptable, and began to be grown in large quantities. It was in India that tea, already a commodity, assumed its modern form – a product, part of an industry. The British standardised tea production via grades of tea, the regions in which these were grown and the type of processing involved. By the end of the 1800s, India had supplanted China as the leading tea-producing country in the world.

In China, the Qing government was soon to discover the dangers of opium on the populace. In 1839, the Qing official Lin Zexu enforced China's longstanding ban on opium by confiscating an enormous quantity of it at Guangzhou and destroying it. Britain launched the Opium War (1839–1842), resulting in the Treaty of Nanking, in which Hong Kong was ceded to Britain while the ports of Canton, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai were opened to international trade. Hence the modern history of Asia was changed by tea.

**In Part Two of 'Tea Story, appearing in our February issue, we explore the many variants of tea, the ceremonies and rituals that have grown around it and modern interpretations of this age-old beverage.**

---

**Lee Chee Keong discovered the wonders of tea at the age of seven when his father introduced him to it. He is the founding chairman of the Tea Cultural Society (Singapore) and an advisor to tea organisations in Singapore, China and Japan.**