

THE CULTURE, CEREMONY AND RITUAL OF ASIA'S ESSENTIAL BEVERAGE.

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Tea (PART II) S T O R Y



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Left: Tea has an appeal that transcends cultural barriers; for many in England, it is very much a part of daily life.

Right: In its essence, the practice of tea-drinking in China has remained unchanged for two millennia.

Bottom: Sifting tea leaves at the port of Guangzhou during the late 1980s/early 1990s.



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The practice of tea-drinking is easy – take some tea leaves, throw them in a teapot or cup, add hot water and you are all set. That's how the Chinese people did it when they first began drinking tea. Yet the modern practice of tea around the world is rich with numerous ceremonies. There are three reasons for this amazing proliferation of rituals.

Society's Affluence: Periods of social stability and peace are often followed by affluence, and with wealth comes a greater awareness of the finer things in life. During successive dynasties in China, as society and the arts flourished, the practice of tea-drinking grew as well, acquiring a deeper spiritual and cultural dimension.

The Price of Tea: It is a truism that when something is cheap, few people care for it, but when its price begins to escalate, everybody starts wanting it. As the prices of certain varieties of tea increased, it also brought forth new methods of brewing tea. The way the tea leaves were handled, the temperature of the water and the amount of brewing involved – these are all factors that affect the fragrance and taste of tea. As certain types of tea became more expensive, the Chinese began brewing them with the utmost care, in order to create the best brew. These were the roots of the early Chinese tea ceremonies.

The Exchange of Cultures: The exchange of cultural practices between the China and its neighbours has always been an active and fluid process. During the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–904), many students and monks from Japan and Korea came to China. Naturally, they brought back with them whatever customs were in fashion. Among these was the love of tea and its attendant rituals, and by expanding on them, the Japanese and Koreans created their unique tea ceremonies. The results have been fruitful.



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Chinese

TEA CULTURE

When it comes to drinking tea, the Chinese are easy-going. Tea-drinking is not a conscious or deliberate act, but simply a part of life. The tea ceremonies that developed after the fall of the Tang Dynasty began as casual affairs; just a few friends sitting together, chatting and drinking tea. No matter what rituals have grown around tea over the ages, this essential aspect has remained unchanged.

So the traditional Chinese tea ceremony were informal and fuss-free. The guests were often the main focus, and the ceremony would only begin after they had arrived. The appearance of Oolong tea during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) helped to further promote tea appreciation in southern China, and resulted in the use of smaller teapots for brewing tea. Another reason for small teapots lay in the high price of tea leaves. Using a lot of leaves seemed wasteful, and small teapots and teacups allowed tea to be better savoured.

In the modern era, tea-drinking has taken on new forms and rituals. During the 1970s, tea practitioners in Taiwan began to reinvigorate the traditional ceremony by taking more care with rites, cleanliness and the matching of utensils. In the 1990s, these new interpretations found fertile ground in other Asian countries such as China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan and Korea, as well as in North America and Europe. Modern tea ceremonies now thrive in concert with the unique cultures of each country.

The modern Chinese tea ceremony is often based on the use of themes, so that the methods of brewing tea differ according to the practitioner's controlling concept. It is the theme that determines the utensils and corresponding decorations. Needless to say, this practice is very much dependent on the practitioner's individual ideas and skills, which may be why it is becoming more popular around the world.



Above: A traditional Chinese tea setting.
Opposite top: A modern Chinese tea setting with a 'spring' theme by Mrs Konishi Miwa of Liu Hsiang Tea Craft in Singapore.
Opposite bottom, left: The modern Chinese tea ceremony places the focus on the individual and interprets it through themes.
Opposite bottom, right: At the Chinese port of Dalian, traditional teahouses do a brisk business as the public interest in tea undergoes a resurgence.



YELLOW Teas		GREEN Teas			WHITE Teas	
Mengding Yellow Sprout 蒙顶黄芽 Meng ding huang ya (China)	Dragon Well 龙井 Long jing (China)	Green Snail Spring 碧螺春 Bi luo chun (China)	Huang Shan Hairy Peak 黄山毛峰 Huang shan mao feng (China)	Xing Yang Hair Point 信阳毛尖 Xing yang mao jian (China)	Silvery Shoot 百毫银针 Bai hao ying zhen (China)	White Peony 白牡丹 Bai mu dan (China)

OOLONG Teas					BLACK Teas	
Dongding Oolong 冻顶乌龙 Dong ding oo long (Taiwan)	Phoenix Select 凤凰单枞 Feng huang dan cong (China)	Anxi Iron Buddha 安溪铁观音 An xi tie guan yin (China)	Bohee Starlet Robe 武夷大红袍 Wu yi ta hong pao (China)	Oriental Beauty 东方美人 Dong fang mei ren (Taiwan)	Keemun Black Tea 祁门红茶 Qi men hong cha (China)	Yunnan Black Tea 滇红 Dian hong (China)

Japanese TEA CULTURE

Because Buddhist monks were the first to bring the tea ceremony to Japan, the Japanese tea ceremony has spiritual overtones. The Japanese tea ceremony is divided into *matchado* (for green tea) and *senchado* (for an unfermented form of green tea). Despite the deep association of the tea ceremony with Japan, it is rare to find a Japanese who has truly taken part in one; perhaps not more than five percent have done so.

The Japanese tea ceremony emphasises spirituality and harmony – what matters is the entire process of preparing and brewing the tea, as well as its overall sense of aesthetics. The essential qualities of the Japanese tea ceremony are calmness and order.

Bottom left and right: In Japan, various festivals are associated with tea. At the Yasaka Jinja Shrine on Honshu Island, traditional costumes are part of a tea procession.
Bottom right: In the port city of Dalian, traditional teahouses still do a brisk business.



Korean TEA CULTURE

The origins of the Korean tea ceremony are similar to its Japanese counterpart – Buddhist monks brought the practice to Korea from China. The emphasis is also on tranquillity and ritual; and the various rites associated with the Korean tea ceremony has a Confucian influence, and is steeped in an atmosphere of seriousness.

English TEA CULTURE



Top: Modern Korean ceremonies are often innovative in how the tea leaves are steeped.
Above: Traditional Korean tea rites have been refined over a period of 1,000 years.
Left: However tea is prepared and drunk around the world, one thing seems certain – it is now an indispensable part of the modern lifestyle.

The institution of English afternoon tea began in the 17th century, when tea first appeared in Europe. Gatherings were often informal and there was none of the seriousness found in Asian tea rites. It is this (and perhaps the many accompanying sandwiches and cakes) that makes a nice ‘cuppa’ so instantly appealing. As with Asian tea ceremonies, English tea continues to be redefined. ■

JAPANESE Teas



Matcha

Genmaicha
Popcorn Tea

Sencha

INDIAN Teas



Darjeeling

Assam

Uva
(Sri Lanka)

SCENTED Teas



Pearly Jasmine
珍珠茉莉
Zhen zhu mo li
(China)

Rose Tea
(India/Sri Lanka)

LEE CHEE KEONG (李自强) 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, as well as the founder of Liu Hsiang Tea Craft.