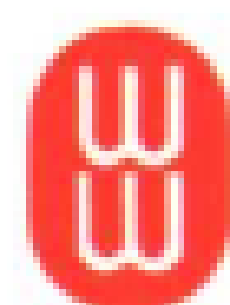


The Art of Tea in China

By Guo Danying Wang Jianrong

茶藝



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A giant wild tea tree in Qianjiazhai, Zhenyuan County, Yunnan Province.

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Old Art of Tea

There is a legend about how people were inspired to take advantage of the tea plant in the first place. About 4,000 or 5,000 years ago, Shen Nong was the patriarch of a tribe in prehistoric China, who possessed the power to bring timely rain and make the sun emit enough light and heat. His other accomplishments included collecting crop seeds and teaching people how to grow them. At that time, the earth was ravaged by pestilence, and people contracted diseases and died in multitudes. In order to find a medicine to fight the plague, Shen Nong tasted all kinds of herbs and plants. So, tea was discovered by chance.



Legend has it that one day Shen Nong tasted 72 poisonous herbs, and was poisoned as a result; it was the leaves of a tea tree he inadvertently picked and tried that saved his life. Although some people are skeptical about this legend, derived from the *Shen Nong Compendium of Materia Medica* (*Shen Nong Bencao Jing*), it makes sense that primitive man, who lived mainly by hunting and gathering, should have found by accident the therapeutic function of tea leaves while they were collecting and trying plants for food.



Shen Nong Compendium of Materia Medica (Shen Nong Bencao Jing).

Shen Nong tasting herbs.





Before the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BC), tea drinking was a practice mainly limited to the areas of Ba and Shu, two vassal states of the Zhou Dynasty (c.11th century-256 BC). The two states covered nearly the same territory as today's Sichuan Province and Chongqing Municipality. The earliest regional annals in China, *The Annals of Huayang State*. *The Annals of Ba*, says, "King Wu of Zhou (the first ruler of the Zhou Dynasty) overthrew the last king of the Shang Dynasty with soldiers from Ba and Shu.... Having conquered Yin (another name for the Shang Dynasty), King Wu allowed the people of Ba to bear the surname of the ruling house, and granted their leader the title of viscount.... Red paint, tea and honey ... were sent as tribute." These words indicate that as early as some 3,000 years ago, tea was already being cultivated in the ancient Ba and Shu areas, and used as tribute paid to the Zhou kings in the Central Plains.

紵魚鹽銅鐵丹漆茶蜜靈龜巨犀山雞白雉黃潤鮮
粉皆納貢之其果實之珍者樹有荔支蔓有辛蒟園
有芳蒨香茗給客橙葵其藥物之異者有巴戟天椒
竹木之瑣者有桃支靈壽其名山有塗籍靈臺石書
邗山其民質直好義土風敦厚有先民之流故其詩
曰川崖惟平其稼多黍旨酒嘉穀可以養父野惟阜
丘彼稷多有嘉穀旨酒可以養母其祭祀之詩曰惟
月孟春獮祭彼崖永言孝思享祀孔嘉彼黍既潔彼
儀惟澤蒸命良辰祖考來格其好古樂道之詩曰日
月明明亦惟其名誰能長生不朽難獲又曰惟德實

A page from *The Annals of Huayang State*. *The Annals of Ba*, a book by Chang Qu of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420), with records of tea growing in the State of Ba.

The Ba and Shu areas played a significant role in the early development of the tea industry after the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC) unified China. In the succeeding Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), these areas were the most important consumer market for tea, and the largest base where tea was gathered and distributed. In 59 BC, Wang Bao from Zizhong, Sichuan, wrote in rhymed prose: "An Agreement with My Servant" (*Tong Yue*). In it, he stipulates that his servant should "make tea with proper utensils, and purchase tea in Wuyang." Wuyang is today's Pengshan County, Sichuan. This indicates that there already existed tea markets in Sichuan in the Han Dynasty, and that tea drinking was a common practice in the Ba and Shu areas. Before the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the Chinese word for tea, *cha*, possessed many aliases, including *tu* and *ming*. It was in the middle of the Tang Dynasty that the word *cha* first came into use. When Lu Yu wrote *The Classic of Tea* (*Cha Jing*) in the year 780, he changed all the words *tu* into *cha*, and listed *tu* as an alias for *cha*. Since then, *cha* has been accepted as the orthodox word for tea, and the meaning, writing and pronunciation of the word established at that time are still in use today.



Portrait of Wang Bao.

約
僅約
蜀郡王子淵以事到煎上寡婦楊惠含有一奴
名便了倩行酤酒便了提大杖上家歟曰大夫
買便了時只約守家不約為他家男子酤酒子
淵大怒曰奴甯欲賣邪惠曰奴父許人人無欲
者子即欲賣之奴復曰欲使皆上不上券便
了不能為也子淵曰諾券文曰神爵三年正月
十五日資十男子王子淵從成都安志里女子
王諫議集卷全 物 未
賣席往京都洛當為婦女求脂澤販於小市歸
都擔果得山旁驛牽牛販鵝武陽買茶楊氏池
中擔荷往市聚慎護好偷入市不得夷踣旁
卧惡言詈罵多作刀弓持入益州貨易牛羊奴
自交精意不得疑愚持斧入山斷藥裁較若殘
當作粗机木屐及翫盤焚薪作炭礪石薄岸治
舍蓋屋昔前代讀日暮以歸當送乾薪南三東
四月當收五月當穫十月收豆多取蒲芒益作
繩索雨澤無所為當編蔣織箔植種桃李梨柿

"An Agreement with My Servant" (*Tong Yue*)
by Wang Bao, Western Han.

The earliest method of drinking tea was to put the newly plucked leaves of wild tea plants directly into a pot to boil. Guo Pu of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420) mentioned in the annotation he made to the *Er Ya*, the earliest Chinese dictionary, compiled between 221 BC and 220 AD: “The tree is as small as a gardenia. The leaves, which grow even in the winter, can be boiled and drunk as soup.” During the Three Kingdoms Period (220-265), Zhang Ji wrote in his *Guang Ya* (a book on textual exegesis): “People in Jing and Ba collect tea leaves, and make them into the shape of cakes. The tea cakes are cooked together with rice paste.” This is the earliest record of tea processing in China. At that time, freshly plucked tea leaves were compressed into cakes. When people felt like drinking tea, these tea cakes were roasted until they turned red, pounded into powder, and then put into a porcelain vessel. Boiling water was subsequently added, along with some Chinese onion and ginger, to produce a mixed beverage. The custom of tea drinking spread northward as cultural communication between the north and the south dramatically increased during the Western and Eastern Jin dynasties (265-420) and the Southern and Northern Dynasties period (420-589). In fact, it was during these periods that today’s tea-producing areas along the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River started to take shape.

But tea was not as popular in the Central Plains as it was in the south at that time. It was people from leading families of scholar-politicians in the south who took a most sincere delight in tea. Lu Na of Eastern Jin was one of the tea addicts. When he served as governor of Wuxing, he once served General Xie An of the State of Wei, only tea and dried fruit. That is where the saying “Serving good, incorrupt officials with tea” is derived. Wang Meng, a native of Jinyang in today’s Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, who lived during the early stage of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, was one of the rare tea lovers among the northern aristocrats. At that time, many members of the northern nobility had emigrated to the south. Wang never failed to treat them with abundant tea every time they called at his house. The northerners, however, were unimpressed by this “watery stuff.”

The Tang Dynasty was one of the most open and powerful dynasties in Chinese history. With vastly improved communications in the newly re-unified nation, tea production and distribution flourished. Tea spread from the south to the Central Plains, from the Central Plains to the ethnic-minority regions along the borders, and on to Korea and Japan. In the later part of the dynasty, tea became a “beverage of the whole nation.”



Porcelain kettle used for brewing tea leaves during the Han Dynasty. Pictured is a funerary object, several sizes smaller than the real thing.



A bronze cauldron, also Han Dynasty, into which tea would be poured, and Chinese onion, ginger and other ingredients added.



and only drinking tea. People learned about this, and speculated that there must be something extraordinary about tea. Many set about boiling and drinking tea. Thus it became a custom.”

Tea-producing areas grew more extensive in the Tang Dynasty. The plant was cultivated in 43 prefectures and sub-prefectures scattered in the eight major tea habitats of Shannan, Huainan, Zhexi, Jiannan, Zhedong, Qianzhong, Jiangnan and Lingnan in southern China. In Changxing County, Zhejiang Province, an area was set aside to produce tea for the exclusive use of the imperial court. The first of its kind in Chinese history, the base grew and processed one of the most famous teas at that time: Guzhu Purple Bamboo Shoots. As the tea industry continued to grow, the government began to tax the product, and tea taxes thenceforth became an important source of revenue for the following dynasties. Under the reign of Tang Emperor Suzong (756-762), the government started to exchange tea for horses with the Huihu (ancient name for the Uygur people of northwest China). This trade continued into the Song Dynasty (960-1279).



Things Heard and Seen by Feng (Fengshi Wenjian Ji), by Feng Yan, Tang Dynasty.

The flourishing of Chan Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty stimulated a wider acceptance of tea. Feng Yan, a Tang scholar, wrote in his *Things Heard and Seen by Feng (Fengshi Jianwen Lu)*: “In the middle of the Kaiyuan Period (713-742), a master exorcist devoted himself to the promotion of Chan at the Lingyan Temple on Mount Taishan. He studied Chan doctrine day and night without sleeping, eating nothing in the evening



Portrait of Emperor Dezong (780-805) of the Tang Dynasty. Because the government treasury was almost depleted after the An Lushan-Shi Siming Rebellion, Emperor Dezong started to levy a tax on tea on the advice of Zhao Zan, Vice-Minister of Revenue. This was the beginning of the tea tax in China.

A ruined teahouse on the ancient Tea and Horse Caravan Trail, dating from the Tang Dynasty, in Fengqing, Yunnan Province.



“Since Lu Yu came into the world, people have vied with each other to learn how to make fresh tea.” These two lines of a poem remind us that no history of China’s tea culture is complete without mentioning Lu Yu (733-804), who influenced posterity in a most profound way by exalting tea drinking to a lofty cultural and artistic activity. Lu was from Tianmen, in central China’s Hubei Province. Despite the hard life in his early years, he devoted most of his life to studying how tea should be cultivated, processed, prepared and drunk. He summarized the experiences of his precursors and wrote the first monograph on tea in the world, *The Classic of Tea*. Venerated as the “god of tea” and the “saint of tea” by posterity, Lu laid a solid foundation for tea study in the coming years by his systematic theory of tea-related science and culture.

The Classic of Tea consists of three volumes and ten chapters: Chapter One, *Origin*, describes the physical qualities and features of tea, the ideal environment for tea plants’ growth, and the natural functions of tea; Chapter Two, *Instruments*, introduces the instruments for picking and processing tea; Chapter Three, *Production*, gives the best time for picking tea leaves, the standards for selecting tea and the methods of processing it; Chapter Four, *Utensils*, lists tea wares used for preparing and drinking tea designed by Lu himself,

and their functions; Chapter Five, *Preparation*, describes how to prepare tea; Chapter Six, *Drinking Tea*, discusses his investigation into the history of tea drinking, and explains the methods of tea drinking in his day; Chapter Seven, *Stories*, relates legends and anecdotes about tea from prehistoric times to the Tang Dynasty; Chapter Eight, *Sources of Tea*, introduces the eight major tea-producing areas in the Tang Dynasty; Chapter Nine, *Simplification*, introduces some simplified ways of processing and preparing tea, and some simplified instruments for doing so; and Chapter Ten, *Diagrams*, records the contents of the whole book in diagrams, which serve as a guide for the entire process of producing, brewing and drinking tea.

The most common tea in Tang times was that made into the shape of cakes, called “tea cakes.” Seven steps were required to produce a tea cake — plucking, steaming, pounding, patting, roasting, piercing and sealing. The job involved first putting the newly harvested leaves in a steamer to steam, then pounding the leaves into paste while they were still hot. The paste was poured into molds after that, and patted into the shape of cakes. The next step was to roast the tea cakes over a fire, followed by using a thin strip of bamboo bark to pierce the dried tea cakes from the center to hold them together. Then the tea cakes were sealed and stored.



Making tea with tea cakes demanded particular care. One first had to roast the cakes to get them dehydrated, then crush them into powder with a grinder, sieve the powder, and finally put the sieved powder into a cauldron to boil.

As well as tea cakes, there also existed coarse tea (*cu cha*), loose-leaf tea (*san cha*) and powdered tea (*mo cha*) in the Tang Dynasty, the different methods of drinking them being elaborated in *The Classic of Tea*.



Palatial Pleasure (detail), Tang Dynasty. The painting depicts a tea ceremony held by a group of court ladies.



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Xiao Yi Obtaining the Orchid Pavilion (detail), believed to have been painted by Yan Liben, Tang Dynasty. The painting shows two domestic servants, one old, one young, preparing tea.