

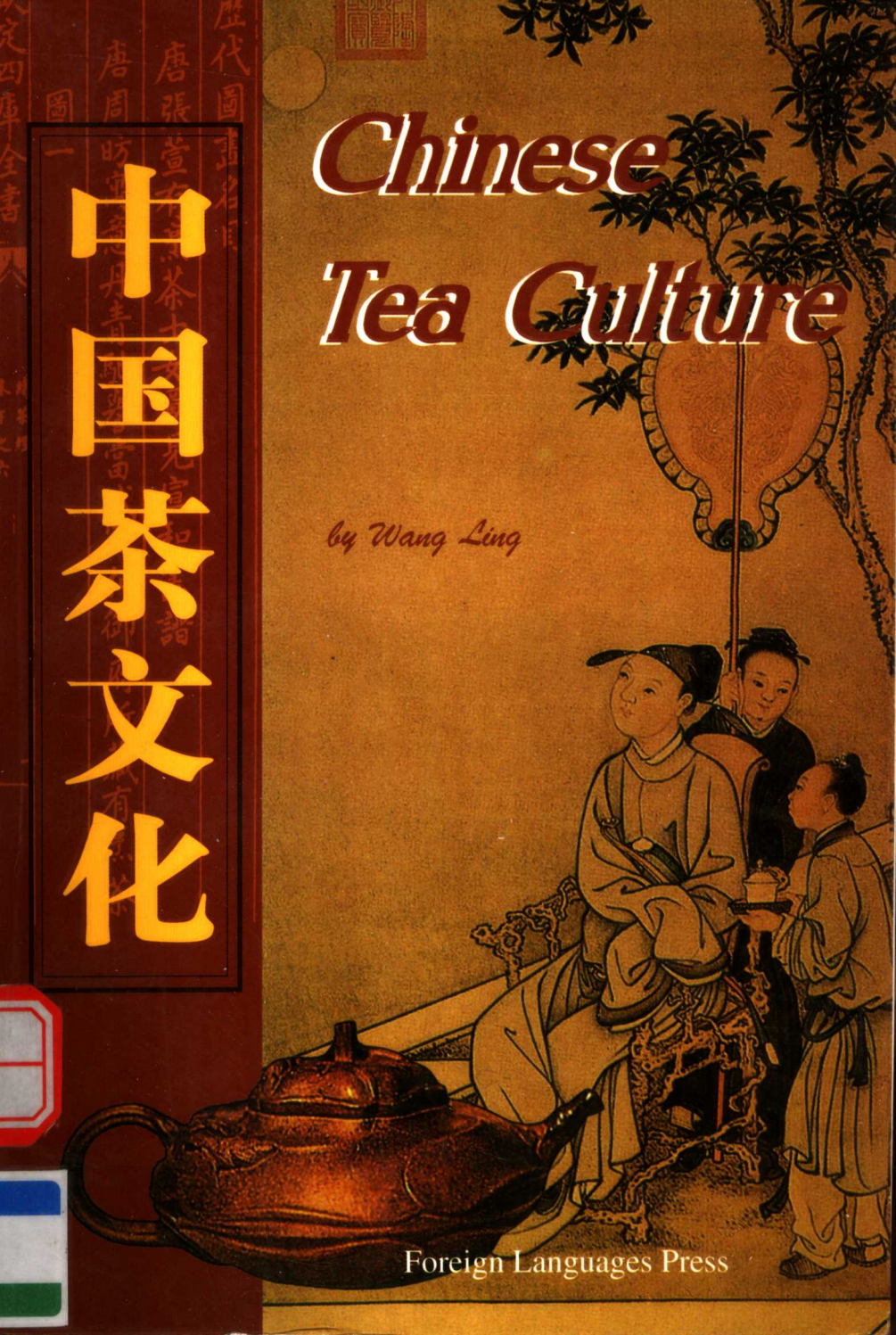
Chinese Tea Culture

by Wang Ling

中国茶文化



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Preface

China, the Hometown of Tea Culture

The tea tree, a perennial evergreen bush, belongs to the camellia family. The processed tea plays an important role in people's social life. A common Chinese saying runs, "When we get up in the morning, the first things we should get ready are firewood, rice, edible oil, salt, soy, vinegar and tea," which demonstrates tea is a necessity of life. Whenever we sit round a table, or have a get-together with good friends, a cup of fragrant tea will give a rich flavor to the occasion. In ancient times, many emperors were addicted to tea. Once, during the Qing Dynasty, Emperor Kangxi (on the throne from 1662 to 1722) arrived at Taihu Lake in Suzhou on his third inspection tour of the south of the Yangtze River, when someone offered him a cup of tea named "frightening and killing tea." After drinking it, Kangxi thought that the tea tasted really nice but that its name was not very elegant. So, knowing that it was picked on the Biluo Peak in spring, he named it Biluochun and added it to the list of recognized tribute items. His grandson, Emperor Qianglong (on the throne from 1736 to 1795), also liked tea very much. In the first lunar month of each year, he would hold a tea party on an auspicious day, drinking tea and composing poems.

It is universally acknowledged that China is the original tea-growing area, as well as the first country to grow, produce and

drink tea. Then, when did China find and start to use tea? According to the *Holy Farmer's Herbal Classic*, 2,700 years ago, the Holy Farmer tasted various herbs he picked, and often got poisoned. Later, he found a plant, tea, which could detoxify him. This story shows that people in ancient times treated tea only as a medicinal herb. It took quite a long time for tea to be used as a drink rather than a herb. Wang Bao mentioned in his "A Contract with a Child Servant," which was written in 59 B.C, that the child servant should boil tea for his master and go to Wuyang (east of Pengxian County, Sichuan Province, then a famous tea market) to buy tea. This evidence reveals that tea, as a drink, started not later than the Western Han Period. In the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280), King of the Dongwu State Sun Hao (242-283) ordered his ministers to drink liquor and gained pleasure from their drunkenness each time he entertained them. Minister Wei Yao could not drink, so Sun Hao gave him tea secretly and let him drink tea instead of liquor. From then on, treating guests to tea became gradually popular among scholars.

In the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589), Buddhism became popular and monks refreshed themselves with tea when sitting in meditation and chanting scriptures. Drinking tea became widespread in big and small temples, where tea trees were grown and tea drinking was studied. This was called the integration of tea and Buddhism.

In the Tang Dynasty (618-907), tea drinking achieved even greater popularity. Since tea could stimulate their thinking, scholars took delight in it and wrote poems and painted pictures using it as the theme. At that time, tea trees grew in Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei, Jiangxi and Fujian provinces and many other places, and the trade volume of tea rapidly increased. Tang poet Bai Juyi wrote, "The businessman stressed profits and belittled the affection for his wife. The month before last he went to Fuliang to buy tea." Fuliang

(today's Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province) was then a distribution center of tea. The businessman gained profit by transporting tea for sale and often rashly took leave of his wife for business. During this period, Lu Yu (733-804) summed up his predecessors' experience of tea and wrote *The Book of Tea*, the first book about tea in the world. In the book, he systematically related the origin of tea, its nature, history and growing area, as well as describing tools for picking tea, processes of producing tea, methods of drinking tea and drinking vessels. Later, he was called the "Saint of Tea."

In the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties a popular custom was tea appraising. To win the appraisal, the tea owner had to have top-quality tea, which was the most important factor, high-quality water, and teasetts of exquisite appearance and nice colors to fully set off the color of the tea. Over the long history of drinking tea, a special and simple Chinese tea culture came into being. Drinking tea was not only for quenching thirst or for enjoyment, but also for the promotion of friendship and mutual understanding. In addition, tea inspired many kinds of cultural activity. For example, the tea-related poems and paintings left by scholars, as well as the songs, dances and local operas about tea, show the close relationship between tea and spiritual experience. Folk customs of drinking tea reflected the ancient Chinese people's great interest in tea culture. The most typical example was the teahouses dotting the streets and lanes of Chinese towns. People from high officials and noble lords to commoners liked to gather at teahouses. Businessmen exchanged information about business, fellow-villagers gathered to extend greetings, and scholars exchanged ideas while drinking tea there. Even disputes among the people were judged and mediated in the teahouses. At teahouses, people could also enjoy variety shows and storytelling. It can truly be said that teahouses were a microcosm of the social life of China as well as its political, economic and cultural center. Today, the

famous teahouses in China include the Lao She Teahouse in Beijing, the Taotaoju Teahouse in Guangzhou, and the Bayu Teahouse in Chongqing. In Guangzhou, people go to teahouses every day enjoying two cups of tea and light refreshments. In Sichuan, people can sit or lie on a row of bamboo chairs, drinking tea while talking about everything under the sun. The teahouses in Beijing have a more cultural flavor, which encompassed drinking tea and eating snacks, enjoying folk art forms, making friends and doing research.

People often used tea as a betrothal gift, for it could not be “transplanted.” After accepting tea as a betrothal gift, a girl could not capriciously change her decision to marry her fiancé. According to *A Dream of Red Mansions*, written by Cao Xueqin in the Qing Dynasty, Wang Xifeng said to Lin Daiyu, “Since you have drunk our tea, why not be our sister-in-law?” This literary quotation is an example of “accepting tea.”

Entertainment of guests to tea is the most fundamental social behavior in the Chinese people's contacts with each other. When a guest comes, the Chinese will offer him or her a cup of tea to express friendship. A poem says, “When a guest came to my home from afar at a cold night, I hastily lit bamboo firewood to make tea to treat him.”

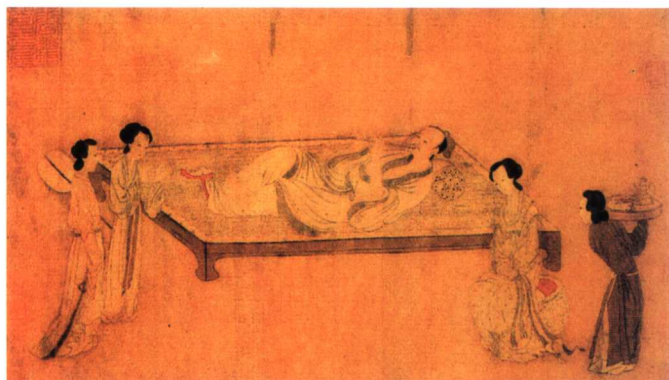
China is the home country of tea. Before the Tang Dynasty, Chinese tea was exported by land and sea, first to Japan and Korea, then to India and Central Asia and, in the Ming and Qing dynasties, to the Arabian Peninsula. In the early period of the 17th century, Chinese tea was exported to Europe, where the upper class adopted the fashion of drinking tea. Chinese tea, like Chinese silk and china, made an outstanding contribution to the world's material and spiritual civilization.

With Chinese tea and tea culture as the object of study, this book deals with the origin of tea, its history, the methods and

customs of drinking tea, drinking vessels and other rich and vivid information. In this book the reader can read many interesting stories about Chinese tea and tea culture.



Xiao Yi Wrangles Over the Masterpiece of Calligraphy Lan Ting, by Yan Liben of the Tang Dynasty



Auspiciousness and Happiness, by Zhang Xuan of the Tang Dynasty



Han Xizai Attending an Evening Banquet, by Gu Hongzhong of the Five Dynasties



Children Playing in Spring, by Su Hanchen of the Song Dynasty



Compatriots with One Mind,
painted in the Yuan Dynasty

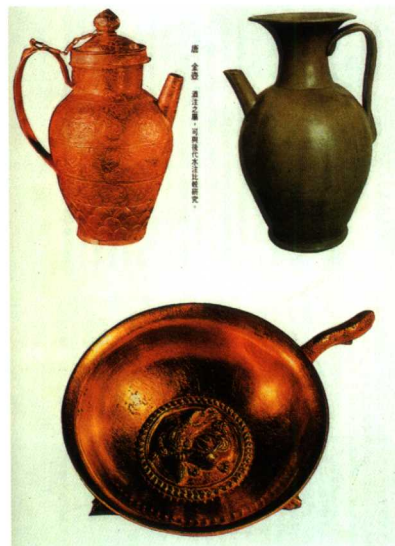
Enjoying the Moon, by Leng Mei of
the Qing Dynasty



Yangliuqing woodcut of the Qing Dynasty



Teahouse, painted in the early Republic of China period



Tea bowls and pots of the Tang Dynasty



Teapots of the Ming Dynasty



Teapots of the Qing Dynasty



Teapots of the Qing Dynasty

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Chapter 1

The Origin of Tea Drinking and the Embryo of Tea Culture

The Holy Farmer Tasting Herbs

This book tells of the spirit and culture of tea. But, our study begins with the material effect and the use of tea as a drink.

The discovery and the use of tea in China can be traced back to the ancient time of Holy Farmer (a legendary ruler, the second of the Three August Ones, who was supposed to have invented the plough and discovered the curative virtues of plants). The Chinese people often call themselves descendants of Yan Di and the Yellow Emperor. According to historians' research of the texts, Yan Di refers to the Holy Farmer. About 5,000 years ago, the Holy Farmer, who was thought of as the God of Farming, invented many farm tools and taught people how to grow crops. China is a country where the ancient farming revolution was accomplished very early. Archaeological excavation and historical records prove it is a reliable fact rather than a legend that the Holy Farmer founded methods of agricultural production. The Holy Farmer was also the God of Medicine in Chinese legend. To save the common people from pain, the Holy Farmer selected various wild plants as medicine. Fearless of the sacrifice, he tasted the wild plants himself to learn their effect on the human body. It is said that one day he

got poisoned seventy-two times when gathering and tasting herbs on a mountain. Later he found a plant, which was tea. He brewed the leaves in a pottery tripod and then drank the liquid. As a result, the toxins in his body disappeared. Since then, the Chinese people have treated tea as a precious medicine bestowed on human beings by the cosmos. The story illustrates that the Chinese people first used tea as medicine.

Early in the Zhou Dynasty (c. the 11th century-771 B.C.), tea was used as medicine by people from commoners to the royal family. For example, the Sichuan people paid tribute, including tea, to the Wu Emperor (living in about the 11th century B.C.) of the Zhou Dynasty. In the *Ritual of Zhou* (an ancient Chinese codex and record reportedly written by Lord Zhou about 3,000 years ago) there are more records about the officials in charge of the use of tea in the royal court of the Zhou Dynasty.

Some people think that tea was regarded simply as a vegetable for some time. However, tea was specially used as a magical drink in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). In the Han Dynasty tea was universally grown, laying a foundation for its wide use. In the famous Tombs of the Han Dynasty (built in the second century B.C.) at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan Province, a box of tea was discovered. In tombs of the reign of Wendi (on the throne from 179 B.C. to 156 B.C.) in Jiangling, Hubei Province, a corpse and a box of tea were found. All these finds show that in the early Han Dynasty nobles used tea and buried it with the dead as a treasure.

After discovering tea, the Chinese people used it as a medicinal herb, a vegetable, and a drink successively over 3,000 years. During this period, the use of tea did not have a spiritual dimension, though it was used as a magical medicinal herb. The great leap for tea occurred once it began to be used as a drink instead of a medicinal herb.