



A Short History of Tea

by Paul Rogers

“The best quality tea must have creases like the leathern boot of Tartar horsemen, curl like the dewlap of a mighty bullock, unfold like a mist rising out of a ravine, gleam like a lake touched by a zephyr, and be wet and soft like a fine earth newly swept by rain.” Lu Yu (d. 804)

The origins of tea drinking go back so far they have been lost to time. We know that it began in China, but according to Blofeld, “it can be confidently stated that tea was known in the Three Kingdoms epoch (AD 222-227). During the Six Dynasties epoch (AD 386-589), the habit of tea drinking spread rapidly in the south and more slowly in the north of China. We may suppose, then, that the first concoction of tea was brewed very early in the Christian era, if not before; but it was not until the glorious T’ang dynasty [Ed note: 7th through 10th centuries] that the art of tea came into being and took its place side by side with painting, calligraphy, poetic composition, lute-playing, *wei-chi*, the martial arts, incense appreciation parties, landscape gardening and other scholarly pleasures.” The tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*, is a relative of the ornamental garden Camellia, *C. japonica*, but in some places in China is known to grow into trees 30’ high or more.

Tea was most easily transported in the compressed “brick” form, and travel it must. According to the historical timeline in Microsoft’s Encarta, “According to Chinese legend, the wearing of silk began around the 27th century BC. During the Later Han dynasty (AD 220), Chinese silks were carried by camel across the Gobi desert to the Tarim oases and on through Central Asia to Dimashq [Damascus]. The Chinese shipped porcelain and tea to the East [Ed note: east from a European perspective, meaning the Middle East], but in honor of their chief export, the route was known as the “Silk Road.” Chinese goods were traded in Dimashq for wool, gold, and silver. Some of the silk was shipped to Italy, where it decorated the togas of Roman aristocrats. Recent discoveries of silk strands in an ancient Egyptian tomb suggest that the silk trade may actually have begun as many as 2000 years earlier than scholars had previously assumed.”

140BC “News of Jang Qian and of Serica, “land of silk,” will reach Rome, and caravans will begin to carry the first apricots and peaches (the “Chinese fruit”) to Europe while Jang Qian introduces grapes, pomegranates, and walnuts to China.”

According to Encarta again, “References in the Old Testament indicate that silk was known in biblical times in western Asia, from which it was presumably transplanted to the Greek Islands of the Aegean Sea. The Chinese are believed to have built up a lucrative trade with the West from the days of the Han dynasty in the 2nd century BC. The ancient Persian courts used Chinese silks, unraveled and rewoven into Persian designs. When Darius III, king of Persia,

surrendered to Alexander the Great, he was clothed in such silken splendor that Alexander was completely overshadowed and demanded as spoils the equivalent of \$7 million in silk. Caravans carried silk on camelback from the heart of Asia to Damascus, Syria, the marketplace at which East and West met. Here silk was traded for Western luxuries, some of which survive in China today. Silk became a valuable commodity in both Greece and Rome.”

330 “Constantinople is dedicated May 11 as the new capital of the Roman Empire. The emperor Constantine has spent 4 years building the city on the site of ancient Byzantium (see 658 B.C.).

“Until AD 550 all silk woven in Europe was derived from Asiatic sources. About that time, however, the Roman emperor Justinian I sent two Nestorian monks to China, where, at the risk of their lives, they stole mulberry seeds and silkworm eggs, secreted them in their walking staffs, and brought them to Byzantium. Thus, the Chinese and Persian silk monopolies ended. With the spread of Islam, the silkworm came to Sicily and Spain.”

“Istanbul: Formerly Constantinople. The largest city of Turkey, in the northwest part of the country on both sides of the Bosphorus at its entrance into the Sea of Marmara. Founded c. 660 B.C. as Byzantium, it was renamed Constantinople in A.D. 330 by Constantine the Great, who made it the capital of the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire. The city was sacked by Crusaders in 1204 and taken by the Turks in 1453. Istanbul was chosen as the official name in 1930.”

About this time, following the division of the Roman Empire into Western and Eastern empires, with the Eastern empire in Constantinople, and the sack of Rome, “foreign trade was conducted with Central Asia and the West over the caravan routes, and merchants from the Middle East plied their seaborne trade through the port of Guangzhou. Under the Tang, Chinese influence was extended over Korea, southern Manchuria, and northern Vietnam. In the west, by means of alliances with Central Asian tribes, the Tang controlled the Tarim Basin and eventually made their influence felt as far as present-day Afghanistan.”

“Tarim Pendi (pùn-dê): An arid basin of western China south of the Tien Shan and traversed by the Tarim He. The ancient Silk Road passed through the region.”

Vikings from northern Europe were even known to travel up the rivers which emptied into the Baltic Sea, and crossing overland into great river watersheds which travel down to the Black Sea and Constantinople. Encarta again, “The Dnepr is the third longest river of Europe, exceeded in length only by the Volga and Danube rivers. The Dnepr rises southwest of Moscow, in the Valdai Hills, and flows in a general southerly direction to empty into the Black Sea, near Kherson, in Ukraine. The Dnepr is navigable throughout its entire course and is entirely ice-free for eight months of the year. ...In ancient times the Dnepr was an important commercial artery between the northern and southern parts of eastern Europe.”

801 “From the semibarbaric kingdoms of eastern and central Europe, and even from Europe’s western edges, the Vikings will take slaves (the word comes from the same root as “Slav”) and sell them to rich Muslims in the eastern Mediterranean.”

“By the middle of the 8th century, China controlled territory deep in Central Asia, north of modern-day Pakistan. To maintain this position, the Chinese had to fight numerous battles against Turks, Tibetans, Arabs, and other enemies. In 751 the Chinese met an Arab army aided by the Prince of Tashkent at the Battle of Talas. The Chinese were decisively defeated and withdrew from this advanced position in the West. The Arab victory facilitated the spread of Islam in Central Asia.”

Blofeld notes, “During T’ang times it was held that the best tea came from Yang-Hsien, which is situated in a mountainous region on the borders of Kiangsu and Chekiang Provinces (not very far from modern Shanghai), so with the growth of tea cultivation much of that region was taken over by tea gardens. At the end of the eighth century an imperial envoy sent to investigate conditions there was presented by a mountain-dwelling monk with some of the Yang-Hsien tea which Lu Yü had lauded as the finest of all. The envoy immediately dispatched a thousand ounces of it to court, which responded by demanding an annual supply. This was the origin of the ‘tribute tea’ that was destined to become so vitally important to the Chinese economy. The annual quantity of tribute tea soon rose to thousands of catties [Ed note: 1 catty = roughly 21 oz] of which the choicest was reserved for the Son of Heaven’s own use and the next best for his thousands of palace ladies and members of the Imperial family, the rest being bestowed on high officials. Throughout the T’ang and successive dynasties the quantities rose by leaps and bounds, causing hardship to peasants in the tea areas (cultivation having spread to several provinces); but it benefited the economy as a whole and gave a powerful impetus to development of the ceramic arts besides playing a role in the defense of frontier regions.”

As China was very much later to experience during the modern Opium Wars, having exclusive control of an important item of commerce, which your trading partners feel they must have, can be good for business but bad for social stability. Blofeld says, “Tea, originally drunk for its medicinal properties, had already become popular as a beverage in court circles by early T’ang times; and we may judge that the habit quickly spread to all classes of the people as it was soon taken up by the Mongol, Tartar, Turkish and Tibetan nomads living north and west of China’s frontiers. Indeed, it soon became essential to the nomads’ diet, for their food consisted wholly of meat and dairy products; tea, drunk in copious quantities, was found to be a satisfactory remedy for the ills resulting from the lack of vegetables and fruit.”

1657 “Public sale of tea begins at London as the East India Company undercuts Dutch prices and advertises tea as a panacea for apoplexy, catarrh, colic, consumption, drowsiness, epilepsy, gallstones, lethargy, migraine, paralysis, and vertigo.”

Microsoft’s Encarta provides other clues about the extent of the associations the T’ang dynasty of China with Central Asia. “The early Tang rulers, including the Empress Wu (reigned 683-705), a former imperial concubine, were generally able monarchs. The brilliant emperor Hsüan Tsung, however, became enamored of the courtesan Yang Kuei-fei, a woman much younger than he, and neglected his duties. Yang was allowed to place her friends and relatives in important positions in the government. One of Yang’s favorites was the able general An Lu-shan, who quarreled with Yang’s brother over control of the government, precipitating a revolt in 755. Peace was not restored until 763 and then only by means of alliances that the Tang formed with Central Asian tribes.”

Later Blofeld says, “In T’ang times, as we have seen, tribute tea took the form of caked leaves. Though tea was available to ordinary people in four forms—coarse, loose-leaf, powdered and caked—most tea drinkers preferred the caked form, cutting off small slabs which were then powdered with a special instrument to make it ready for infusion.” He notes that later, during the Sung dynasty, “Although tribute tea remained in the form of caked tea, loose-leaf tea such as we use today was already gaining popularity. The preferred source of tea leaves had changed; so had the favored sources for pure water. Trade with the tribes on the fringes of the empire had become so important that tea, normally bartered for horses from the steppes, could also be used to control those wild nomads. If they grew turbulent their annual tea quota would be withheld. To be sure of having stocks large enough to procure all the horses for the army, the government for a time prohibited all those below the rank of a seventh-grade mandarin from buying tea. Even so, a shortage of tea was one of the reasons why the border tribes revolted and set up an independent state in the northern part of the empire!” So we can wonder whether tea solved China’s problems with its bordering tribes or caused them. Was tea the real cause for building the Great Wall?

No doubt this “tribute tea” is the historic reason tea bricks are seen principally in Central Asia and Russia in modern times, a tradition of a thousand years. Blofeld categorizes teas as:

- loose-leaf, which in order of preference is divided into small leaf, broken leaf, large leaf, fannings and dust,
- tea paste, “archaic and now rarely to be seen”,
- powdered, mostly used in the Japanese tea ceremony,
- caked tea, made from dried tea paste, archaic, “seldom seen today except in the form known as brick tea”,
- brick tea, “Oblong blocks of tightly compressed tea leaves, usually red [Ed note: ‘red tea’ typically refers to the reddish color in the cup, of what is now called ‘black tea’]. They are still popular in Central Asia, Russia and certain other countries, but are rarely seen in Europe and America.”

However, not all caked tea was in brick form. In speaking of Ts’ai Hsiang (1012-), a state official, governor of Fukien, and Tea Master of the Sung dynasty, who composed the *Ch’a Lu*, Blofeld says “Small rounds, the special tea he selected for tribute, was manufactured from a variety of leaf known as Small Leaf Dragon, which after being crushed and pounded was moulded into unusually small round ‘cakes.’ Its excellence was such that the tiny quantity reaching the market was worth two ounces of gold per catty (one and a half ounces of gold per pound)—an exorbitant price even now, let alone nine hundred years ago!”

According to Blofeld little about the story and history of tea has changed since the Sung dynasty. Following the Sung came the Mongols, then the Ming dynasty. During the Ming dynasty “the Horse and Tea Bureau played a vital part in the economy. The demand for tea by the border tribes had become so great that it ranked as a commodity of major significance to the Empire, both militarily and financially. The Bureau, being responsible for the bartering of tea for horses, was put under the control of very high-ranking officials; and as an incentive to the people to grow tea in sufficient quantity to barter for all the horses needed, the tax was reduced to the moderate rate fixed during the T’ang dynasty, namely one-hundredth part of the crop. Otherwise, tea administration followed the Sung pattern.”

1204 “Returning Crusaders plant Damson plum trees from Damascus in France and will hasten the spread to Europe of such Arabic products as rice, sugar, lemons, and cotton.”

One still wonders if prior to “modern” times some of the brick tea that was going overland into Central Asia for Kazakh horses didn’t also go down the Silk Road to the Middle East and reach Europe with the spice trade long before the 16th century voyages of exploration, at least in small quantities. Arab culture has a strong tradition of drinking a sweetened mint-flavored tea, originally just the mint herb but later with black tea. The Moors crossed into Spain and were stopped in France by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732AD, so there was opportunity enough. Contemporaneously, China was in the T’ang dynasty, 618AD-907AD, which Blofeld has already demonstrated was when tea became prominent in China itself. So we have feudal Europe in contact with Arab culture in the west across the Pyrenees in Spain, and certainly in the east through trade in Constantinople and Damascus, not only going into the Mediterranean but also into Northern Europe. And we have the Islamic empire in contact with China, its eastern tribes receiving tea as tribute for horses. So then did the tea make it as far as Europe consistently, or was it consumed along the way?

1317 “The Venetian galleys carry sugar, spices, currants, dates, wine, paper, glass, cotton, silk, damask from Damascus, calico from Calicut, alum, dyes, draperies, books and armor. The great galleys return with hides, leather, tin, lead, iron, pewter, brass, cutlery, bowstrings, Cambrai cambric, Laon lawn, Ypres diapered cloth, Arras hangings, caps, and serges that include serge de Nîmes (denim) used for sailcloth - all obtained at Bruges, Europe’s most important commercial city outside the Mediterranean.”

So, we have seen that at a time when Europe was in the feudal Dark Ages, China was in the T’ang dynasty, and the Islamic empire controlled the lands from Spain to India. Silk had been exported west to the Middle East and Europe for a millenium, to have been recently stolen and established in the west. Tea is being exported north to the Mongols (who, following the Sung dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries, conquered China, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe and laid siege to Vienna) as well as west to pacify and obtain horses from the western tribes in Central Asia. From there it is going to Russia and certainly into the Middle East. Silk, tea, porcelain, gun powder, block printing, all these certainly went along the Silk Road to the west. These goods were certainly in part responsible for re-establishing culture in Europe beginning with the Renaissance in Italy.

1597 “The first English mention of tea appears in a translation of Dutch navigator Jan Hugo van Lin-Schooten’s Travels. Van Lin-Schooten calls the beverage chaa.”

Blofeld notes, “It was during the late Ming times that tea first reached Europe. Of those Europeans wealthy enough to afford it some were enthusiastic, but a rumor spread that tea weakened a person’s vitality and was being exported to sap the energies of potential enemies of China!”

1684 “England’s East India Company gains Chinese permission to build a trading station at Canton after years of having to import Chinese silks, porcelain, and tea by way of Java.”

Ships from Europe arrived in the early 16th century. The Portugese arrived in 1514AD, obtaining the trading concession in Macao. The Spanish came to the Phillipines later in the century and Dutch in the early 17th century established positions in Formosa. So by this time it's pretty clear that following the Sung custom, and with transport available, it was loose leaf tea that reached Europe, and consequently America.

1824 "Cadbury's Chocolate has its beginnings in a tea and coffee shop opened by Birmingham, England, Quaker John Cadbury, 23, who has served an apprenticeship at Leeds and for bonded tea houses in London. Given a sum of money by his father and told to sink or swim, Cadbury starts his business next door to his father's draper's shop, will install Birmingham's first plate glass window, employ a Chinese to preside over his tea counter, and experiment with grinding cocoa beans, using a mortar and pestle."

In the seventeenth century England successfully switched from coffee as the preferred beverage to tea when sources in the Middle East and Ethiopea became unstable and the prices too dear, but the habit of drinking tea can be a hard one to break, as evidenced by the 'Boston Tea Party' during the American Revolution—even though the tea tax revolt was largely symbolic.

1840 "Afternoon tea is introduced by Anna, the duchess of Bedford. The tea interval will become a lasting British tradition, but the English still drink more coffee than tea."

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