

# The Facts About: Tea



Harvesting tea

## Introduction

The Chinese have a saying: “Firewood, rice, oil, salt, sauce, vinegar, and tea are the seven necessities to begin a day.” Though tea is last on this list, it is very important in China. Tea is the second most popular drink in the world. The first is water.

Some people say that tea was discovered by accident. According to the story, Emperor Shen Nong, a mythical figure, was boiling his drinking water when leaves from a nearby shrub fell into his pot. The drink gave the

Emperor “vigor of body, contentment of mind, and determination of purpose.” Tea was born!

At first, people mostly used tea to help with digestive and nerve problems. In 350 CE (Common Era), a scholar named Guo Po added the word for tea to a Chinese dictionary. He described it as a medicinal drink made from boiled leaves.

But over time, the uses of tea expanded. In 780 CE, Chinese author Lu Yu wrote a three volume book set entitled *Cha Jing* (The Classic of Tea). In it, Lu Yu described everything about



Tea plantation

tea—from how to properly grow it, to the best ways to prepare it. He also provided detailed descriptions of a ceremony for preparing and drinking tea. Tea and tea ceremonies first became popular in the imperial court of the Chinese emperors. They also became popular among common people in the countryside.

When Chinese began their love of tea, they harvested it in southern and southwest China. Then its popularity spread following the path of the Yangzi River. Farmers began to grow tea plants wherever conditions supported it.

#### Resources Used to Make Tea and Where They Came From

The first Chinese tea came from a small-leaved evergreen shrub or tree (*Camellia sinensis sinensis*) that grows to be 9 to 10 feet tall. Before farmers domesticated it, this tea tree grew wild in southern China and Southeast Asia (northern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand). A different variety of shrub (*Camellia*

*sinensis assamica*) grew wild in Yunnan province in southwest China and northern India. It has a broader leaf and grows 20 to 60 feet tall. It, too, was used to make tea and was widely cultivated.

Tea plants grow in tropical to subtropical climates and need at least 50 inches of rainfall per year. They prefer acidic, well-drained soil. They do not handle frost well, so they usually are not found in high elevations. However, people have been able to grow some high quality tea plants at elevations of 5,000 feet.

At first, people harvested tea from wild plants. But the demand for tea surpassed what people could harvest from the wild. During the Middle Ages, the Chinese grew tea on large plantations in almost a dozen provinces, from Shandong in the north to Guangxi in the south. The major tea-producing provinces included Yunnan, Sichuan, Fujian, Jiangsu, and Anhui. Some

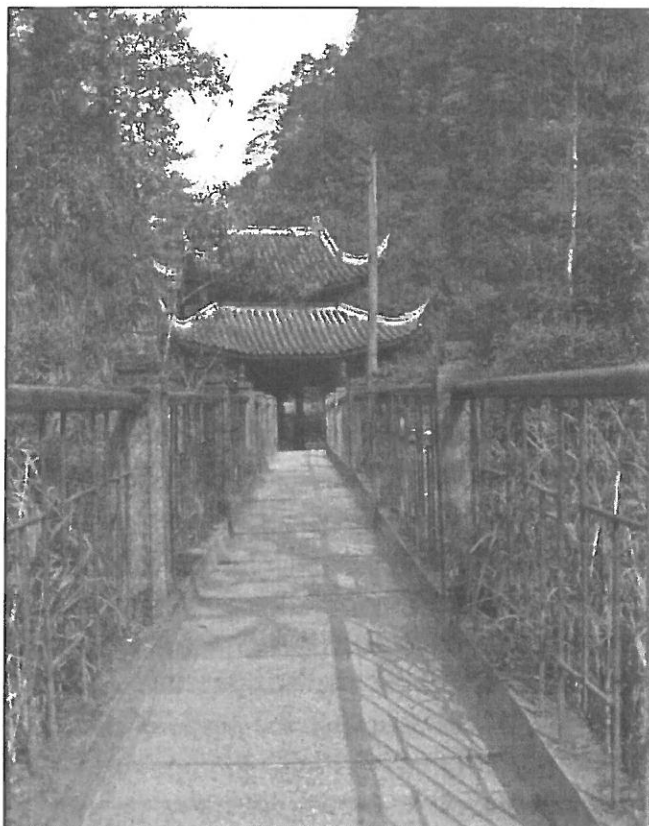
tea was also grown in Hubei, Hunan, Guizhou, Guandong, and Jiangxi.

### Methods of Making and Using Tea

It takes decades for a tea plant to become a high-quality tea producer. Tea is made in four stages. These include growing and picking, aging, drying, and finishing.

Farmers do everything they can to grow and harvest high-quality tea. New growth is the only part of the plant that is used for tea. The best teas are made from the bud and first two leaves at the end of a branch, which are called the “pekoe.”

During the growing season, a plant will grow new buds every seven to ten days. Workers remove the buds by hand so they do not crush them. (They keep the trees pruned to shrub size



Tea house in China

to make it easier to pick the leaves.) Then they trim the plant so more buds will grow. By doing this, they can harvest new growth from the same plant two or more times each year.

Once the tea leaves are picked, they are aged and dried. To age the tea, workers place the leaves out of the sun on a flat surface until they wilt. The longer the leaves age, the darker they become. That is how different types of tea are produced. To stop the “aging” process, the leaves must be dried. Leaves for green teas are aged for no more than two days before they are dried. The leaves for black teas are aged between two weeks and a month before they are dried. The leaves for oolong teas are aged somewhere in between. Leaves for the rarer (and more expensive) white tea are not aged at all. Growers shield the leaves from the sun while the plant grows and dry them immediately upon picking.

The traditional tea drying process changed over time. Originally, growers spread the leaves out in the sun to dry. Then, to make the process go faster, some growers began frying or roasting the leaves. The dry leaves were then either hand-rolled into a small ball or were pressed into blocks or bricks. The grower stamped their name or symbol into the block. Sometimes they added fruit and flowers as flavorings. The Chinese favorites were jasmine, rose, orchid, plum, and gardenia.

During the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), it was popular to crush the dried leaves into a powder and pour hot water into the powder to make a drink. During the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE), people grew fond of putting the dried leaves inside a thin paper bag and allowing it to soak (or “steep”) in hot water until it was ready to drink.

### The Influence of Tea on Natural Systems

If even half of the people living in China right now drank one cup of tea each day, that would be 500 million cups of tea. Some people have estimated that one pound of processed tea makes about 200 cups. It would take about 2,500,000 pounds of tea to make those 500 million cups of tea. Since it takes about three pounds of fresh tea leaves to make one pound of dried tea, then you would need to pick seven and one half million pounds of tea to produce China's daily supply!

China's demand for tea has a long history. To meet that demand, during the Song Dynasty, tea plantations covered 15 of the southern provinces. Some of these farms were 10,000 acres or more. By the 1600s, when China's population reached 300 million, some of the largest tea plantations in China turned out 30,000 pounds of tea a year.

That is a lot of tea! It takes a lot of tea plants to make that much tea and growing those plants affects the natural systems where they grow. People began to farm tea wherever they could. First, they cleared the land of native plants. Then, they dug up the soil and planted tea plants in rows about four feet apart. If there was not enough rain to support the tea plants, they brought water from rivers and streams to the plantations. Weeding was also necessary to keep fungi and pests off the plants. Acres were planted with only one type of tea plant as far as the eye could see.

### The Influence of Tea on Social Systems

For many Chinese, life revolved around harvesting, processing, and consuming tea. Every social group and class built special teahouses and tearooms. Here, they held

elaborate ceremonies for drinking tea. People wanted porcelain teapots to prepare and serve tea. As a result, the porcelain industry grew.

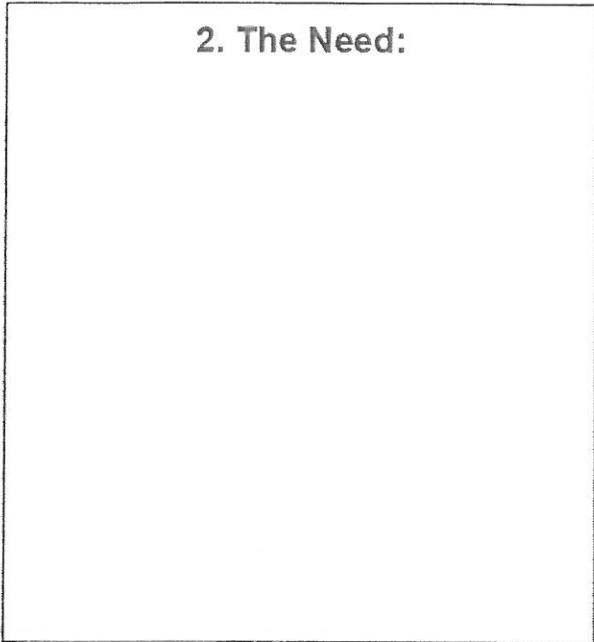
As tea drinking became more popular, the imperial court attached great importance to tea farming and production. During the Tang Dynasty, tea became a form of tribute paid to the emperor. At first, "tribute teas" were the finest teas that a village or region grew and processed. In time, the emperor established royal plantations to grow tea under close supervision. The emperor's agents oversaw all parts of the production process. They set rigid standards and collected the tribute from the villagers who worked on the plantations. Custom dictated that green tribute teas be harvested and processed in a single day. The emperor took the very best.

By the time the Song Dynasty was in power, the tea harvest had become a time of big celebration. Before it began, officials made sacrifices to mountain and hillside gods. Men, women, and children picked leaves to the rhythm of a drum or cymbal. Young girls kept their fingernails a certain length so that they could pick the tea without the leaves touching their skin.

People grew and processed tea throughout China. Mostly people used tea that was grown locally. Village marketplaces and teahouses sold tea. However, a merchant class developed to move tea throughout China. These tea merchants created internal trade networks for transporting tea from place to place. They built big warehouses to store the tea. They soon had the responsibility of shipping specialty and tribute teas directly to the emperor and to other high-ranking officials throughout the country. Shipping tea became one of the uses for the famous "Silk Road."

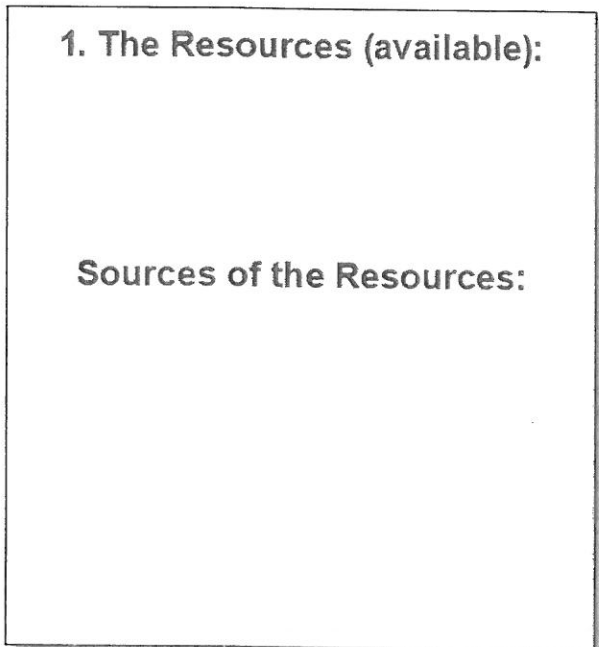
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**2. The Need:**

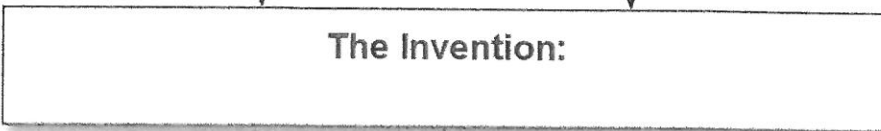


**1. The Resources (available):**

**Sources of the Resources:**



**The Invention:**



**The Influence**

<b>3. On Natural Systems:</b>	<b>4. On Human Social Systems:</b>
