

Tea: life before the tea bag

Business



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Tea: Life Before the Tea Bag Steam rises from a cup of tea Inhaling ancient times and lands And we are wrapped in history An exquisite journey between our hands If you were to place a tea-leaf in water, it would color its surroundings. Likewise, when tea was placed on Earth it slowly changed the color of its surroundings, impacting first regions close to its origins and later more remote regions. It brought passion, peace, health, and contentment, as well as addiction, war, and poverty. It traveled at a quick pace and enhanced cultures around the globe. For it is said that tea is wealth itself, because there is nothing that cannot be lost, no problem that will not disappear, no burden that will not float away, between the first sip and the last.

Ideas like this have also helped the leaf evolve beyond its beginnings. The journey of tea is filled with exploration, discovery, ritual, and deep satisfaction. But it all began with a single leaf, picked from a tree over 5 thousand years ago. Why, on that particular day, did our ancestors pick leaves off of a specific tree, and place them in a vessel filled with hot water? Why did they choose that particular plant? Depending on whom you ask it could have been a happy accident, a divine plan, or maybe the result of much trial and error. Fortunately for us, though, they did what they did, and the results have changed the world forever.

Before tea was able to change the world it had to develop beyond its origins. The most popular legend about the origin of tea dates to about 3000 BCE, during the reign of the mythical Chinese Emperor Shen Nung. He was boiling water as a leaf from the tree above him floated into his pot and magically changed the color of the water within. As the newfound beverage flowed through his veins, he was filled with a sense of peace, and he decided to

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introduce this miracle to man. ¹ However, using scientific theory over that of legends, it is suggested that the first tea was consumed by the time of the early Paleolithic period in the region now referred to as China.

What is known is that the tea plant, *Camellia Sinensis*, first evolved in the jungles of the Eastern Himalayas. With great varieties in temperature and the heavy rainfalls of monsoon clouds, the Himalayas were the most varied and rich region for plants. Parts of the tea tree were first chewed by mammals indigenous to this region. In the Paleolithic Age, early tribesmen took their cue from the monkeys, and began chewing tea leaves, finding it stimulating and relaxing to the mind. These early forest dwellers also discovered that rubbing these leaves on wounds can aid in healing, and therefore, tea also developed as a medical aid.

The earliest accounts of the consumption of tea were among forest dwellers in Northern Thailand, Burma, Assam, and south-west China. They describe the chewing of tea rather than the drinking. Later, however, it was discovered that tea could be consumed as an infusion with water. In due course, the tribal peoples in the Eastern Himalayas started trading this useful leaf to others on the edges of their forested mountains, among them the settled people of the great civilizations of China. Chinese traders found a particularly ready market for their newfound tea, temples and monasteries that defined early Chinese civilizations. Tea plants were being depleted, so Chinese began cultivating tea on hillsides, and tea became one of China's most valuable crops.

Religious specialists quickly adopted these new plants, and as their religions spread beyond China, so did their bitter tasting herbs, among them tea. ² As more tea was produced for the huge Chinese market, it moved outwards. Most significantly for the Chinese, it came to the attention of its neighbors in the uplands of central Asia, from Tibet to Siberia. The people in these regions suffered from bitter winds and cold winters. They quickly discovered this strange leaf that the Chinese were willing to sell to them in exchange for native products. Tea provided added vigor and protection against their harsh climate.

Thus, a huge trade of tea grew along the Silk Road and through many other routes, from south-west China to Siberia and as far as Islamic civilizations of the Middle East. Much of the merchandise was carried up to the high regions on human back because the terrain was rough. Tea bricks were so common on the Silk Road that they actually developed as a form of currency in parts of central Asia. Tea became almost as valuable as Chinese silk, mainly due to its widely known nutritional benefits. The leaf helped the absorption of vitamin C, keen to prevent many diseases.

It formed an important supplement for green vegetables lacking in the arid zones on the Silk Road. Tea continued spreading also to Eskimos and nomadic herdsmen, who became avid tea drinkers due to its protection against extremes of climate. ³ Other than the Silk Road, tea was exported from China on the Tea and Horse Caravan Road. It was an ancient trade route between Tibet and regions of China where the two most valued items were tea and horses. The Mongol, the Tatar, the Turk, and the Tibetans were all key customers for the Chinese. This was when the Chinese court learned <https://assignbuster.com/tea-life-before-the-tea-bag/>

to take advantage of the power they held over tea and manipulate these far off tribes with the flow of their tea.

When Mongolian tribes were troublesome to the imperial court, tea was withheld from them until they were more cooperative. Mongolian horses proved to be the most valuable item for the Songs. Unimaginable amounts of tea were traded to Tibetans as they realized how much Song warriors craved their native horses. Tibetans lived at high elevations and their diet was highly restricted by geography. They used this large import of tea to add slight vegetation to their animal-based diet.

Tea bricks made in China were carried by camel or yak caravans to Tibet. This mutually beneficial exchange lasted for generations. 4 Tea was later introduced to Japan in about 593 AD, during the reign of Prince Shotoku, when Japanese scholars showed interest in Buddhism. Scholars went to China for religious studies and also learned to cultivate tea. They brought back both tea seeds and the knowledge of how to create a wonder of these seeds.

This trade link was mainly through the Korean Land Bridge, connecting China and Japan. The Japanese, however, acted upon selective borrowing, and used tea for religious purposes rather than an enjoyable beverage. Tea continued traveling to Japan because of its importance in monasteries and its popularity carried from place to place by travelers. 5 Tea finally reached Europe as its many explorers opened up easier routes to Asia. European missionaries were granted to live in China, for they proved to be interesting

to Chinese scholars. In return, the Jesuits and other missionaries picked up tea from monks and it began to spread into Europe through religion.

The Chinese were self-sufficient and desired only gold in return for their treasures, which European explorers now had plenty of. The British East India Company was soon developed which would promote Asian trade, and continue carrying tea to and throughout Europe. 6 Before tea even began to travel, the first region to have a taste of the wonder of tea was China. Chinese traders first began spreading tea in the Tang dynasty, giving its numerous canals much business. The Tang improved processing methods as its environment of refinement influenced the culture of tea. Tea was first only served in the imperial court.

Later it was an essential part of everyday life to both emperors and peasants. The social status of a man in this time period was associated with the type of tea one drank and how often he drank it. Utensils, bowls, water, and a tea caddy also had to meet certain standards. Teahouses and Tea gardens soon sprang up in cities and towns across the empire, which indicated sophistication and refinement of Tang culture. Teahouses were famous for their ease, culture, sweet incense, floral arrangements, decorative scrolls, edible treats, competitive games, and of course tea.

There was also a development of a tea master to find highest-grade leaves. Ceramics and pottery industries now became more sophisticated and elaborate. The demand for tribute began being paid with tea. This had beneficial results for the imperial Tang economy, but also interrupted the peasant's growth of rice crops, bringing famine. 7 When tea was recovered

in the Song Dynasty, court rules for gathering periods and harvesting methods of tribute tea were very strict to ensure the finest tea.

In this era, white tea was discovered as one of the rarest and most expensive teas. This enhanced the new “tea” social classes of the Tang. The emperors of the Song used large amounts of money and labor to produce many trade routes, including the Tea and Horse Caravan Road. By now tea was experienced by many, and had many different ways of being prepared. The Ming Dynasty imperial court realized this and demanded that the tea tribute be paid with a specific tea.

Tea was drunk here mainly for solace and celebration. ⁸ Later, the Ming experienced new trade with Europeans, as the Europeans sought interest in the Ming’s creative development in tea and its vessels. The Ming developed their famous blue and white porcelain due to its ability to enhance the appearance of the tea within. ⁹ Many other East Asian arts were significantly influenced by tea, such as glazes, utensils, ceramics, and pottery. This development in arts caused much contact between East Asian areas.

The trade of tea, however, also negatively affected China. China developed many new trade partners, and there was much tension between China and Britain. Both nations acted ethnocentric. Before this forced China to go into isolation for preservation, it caused China to import their finest tea in return for new items such as opium, which demoralized its citizens. The Chinese became very selective, strictly prohibiting its citizens from revealing the secret of tea. This only weakened the once strong nation as Europe finally arose ahead of Asia.

10 Before China fell, it was embraced by Korean scholars who adapted tea drinking for spiritual reasons. It produced a state of alertness, perfect for meditation that was key to native religions, such as Buddhism. Koreans even developed a writing character to recognize tea utilized in rituals. Tea and Buddhism became closely aligned, which led to public tea-houses displaying statues of Buddha, and scholars drinking tea as they discussed the teachings of Buddha. Tea became an important part of the culture, and was drunk at special occasions, including weddings, the death of a parent, during commemoration of ancestors, or simply when welcoming guests, and this became a custom in Korea.

Social classes in Korea were also defined by the reason they drank tea, whether it was harmony or an honorary of ancestors. When tea began to decline, Korea faced the consequences as tea gardens were destroyed and everything associated with tea was left in ruins. 11 Meanwhile, the drinking of tea had a monumental impact on Japanese culture. At first tea was only utilized in Japan for medicinal uses. Renewed relations between Japan and China resulted in a fresh flow of Japanese interest in tea. This time, tea flowed into Japan with Zen Buddhism.

Drinking tea with the elements of Zen was considered to be a spiritual experience that was now desired by religious figures in Japan. During this period where tea was so spiritually inclined, tea was mainly enjoyed by monks, court members, warriors, high-ranking families, and as a daily ritual in monasteries. Monks even began introducing rules for preparing and serving tea. Tea ceremonies, or gatherings in temples to drink tea filled with precise methods and peaceful actions, spread rapidly. Japan was full of <https://assignbuster.com/tea-life-before-the-tea-bag/>

political and social upheaval in this time period, but tea helped create a rich cultural expression during which the country developed a national identity. As more people visited Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, merchants set up carts to sell local tea to travelers.

Tea moved beyond monasteries and began its produce in tea gardens throughout Japan. Tea was available to all social classes and the sharing of tea with others was a manifestation of traditional Japanese values, which placed importance on family and community ties. As “ Age of Warriors” began in Japan, the samurai warriors contributed significantly to tea’s fame. The samurai had a dual identity, the double identity of the sword, as they were both culturally refined and violent warriors. Teahouses were places where samurais put down their swords and enjoyed the peaceful experience of sharing tea.

Political and military leaders saw tea ceremonies as a way to display their wealth and also as a reaffirmation of social and political order. It became a political tool, unifying rank, impressing visitors, promoting peace, and securing political allies. Tea still separated classes in Japan as lowly soldiers enjoyed more festive tea gatherings, while samurai and daimyo had more sophisticated gatherings in tea houses held by tea masters. ¹² Although the British love affair with tea became legendary like that of Japan’s, its popularity was not immediate. Tea was at first considered a medicine and was found primarily in apothecaries.

Soon though it became available in coffeehouses, where coffee and tea was served primarily to men having conversation. The price of tea began high in

England due to its lack of import by the newfound British East India Company. This developed the idea in England that those who drank or served tea must be associated with royalty and the upper class, and it became a social phenomenon. Upper class ladies were very specific with their wares, mostly enjoying the porcelain now being imported from China. A new set of rules even came into being as “tea etiquette” became the rage, and new conventions and vocabulary evolved.

By 1675, tea was readily purchased in food stores, and most of British middle and upper class drank tea daily. It was still expensive, however, and for the working class tea was a luxury. This large availability of tea caused England to have a larger interest in sugar, which was now brought back from the Americas. Tea also began to dominate the use of alcohol at social gatherings. With a growing demand for tea, more merchants began carrying it in their establishments and developing teahouses rather than coffeehouses.

London’s teahouses, however, were rowdy places with dancing, games, fireworks, Indian jugglers, boat rides, and circus acts. A few of the more sophisticated gardens were for the upper class and were attended also by women and children. The teapot, elegant or plain, became a household fixture in both mansions and humble cottages in England. It became a symbol of the love for tea, which crossed class and geographic lines in England. 13 Literary figures became advocates of tea and included the beverage in poems and plays.

The government was also making large profits from tea, due to its heavily imposed tax. A black market for tea now arose, where smugglers brought tea into England wherever they could get it. The parliament and the British East India Company became intertwined and soon enough there were revolts on taxes. Smugglers gained support of the common people and grew very successful. The British East India Company was also very successful with its increased political power. The company helped England become intimidating to a point where it forced the great nations of Asia into isolation.

14 As England grew in power it sought new ways to expand its borders. England had also used the production tea to take control of India and Sri Lanka. When China retreated into isolation, England sought out new opportunities for obtaining tea. The Indian countryside was suited for growing the crop and there was ample cheap labor. Indian farmers were forced by the British East India Company to dedicate their land to tea crops and also to opium crops to be used for Chinese trade.

The land for food and cotton was reduced, and the result was widespread hunger and a greater decline in the textile industry, all of which was devastating to the economy. India was in no shape to fight for their rights, and after many battles, the British controlled almost half of Indian land. Native people received heavy taxes, and opium slowly spread demoralizing India and China alike. Sri Lanka, likewise, was slowly taken over by British armies. Child labor was now accepted and there was a rush of immigrants to Sri Lanka due to the creation of many more jobs for the preservation of crops.

This created ethnic conflicts that continue to exist today. 15 Likewise, conflicts were also sparked in the Americas as a result of tea. Tea was brought into America due to its popularity in Europe. Tea took on a monumental importance as the symbol of the American Revolution. The tax on tea that the British parliament imposed on its own country was also applied to Americans.

A band of angry colonists gathered in Boston, disguised as Native Americans, and trashed East India Company ships by throwing over their tea cargos. These acts and other untimely revolts led to the American Revolution. While these revolts were happening, it was assumed that drinking tea was unpatriotic and most citizens switched to coffee. Once tea regained its popularity, tearooms were developed in department stores of American cities. This made tea a more important part of lives of the affluent. 16 While becoming important to affluent, tea was devastating to farmers and laborers.

A vast industry of producing tea sprang up in the leading European nations, such as the British and the Dutch. As these nations gained power, they used their colonies and other weakening empires to enhance their industries. Citizens of these regions were taken advantage of and used as laborers to process and prepare tea. As the tea industry grew along with European power, it brought devastating results for those working behind the scenes in the production of tea. 17 From a medicinal leaf to an instant tea bag, we have watched the wondrous leaf flourish and benefit humans throughout.

Tea became much more than the beverage it began as, a bitter substance found on apothecary shelves. It became a primary motor for the

development of great empires whose health and strength could not have been sustained without tea, thus the enormous pressure on those who produced it. It became also the last straw on the camel's back, destroying nations who were on the verge of a breaking point. Tea was powerful, obtaining certain qualities that allowed it to overpower other worldly beverages, as it became a sort of bewitched water. For the drinking of tea may have made it possible to maintain a relatively healthy population on a huge scale, despite the dangers of water pollution and its diseases.

Tea will leave a stain in both our past and present. It continues to be produced in regions such as China, Taiwan, India, Japan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, East Africa, South America, and the United States. Innovative methods are breaking through creating a complexity of flavors and easier processing methods, while evidence of brutal labor and forgotten empires still exists. So what began as a simple leaf, continues as a selection of green, white, yellow, black, and oolong. And what began as a happy accident, a divine plan, or maybe the result of much trial and error continues as a worldwide sensation.

Next time, when looking into your cup of tea, look beyond your own reflection, and ponder the complex journey of the modest green bush, whose final destination was in your own special cup. Footnotes 1 Laura C. Martin, *Tea: The Drink that Changed the World* (North Clarendon, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2007), pgs. 24-26 2 Alan Macfarlane, *The Empire of Tea* (New York: The Overlook Press, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc., 2004), pgs.

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