A History of Food

by

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Translated from the French

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Chapter 20

Tea and Philosophy

Chinese texts of the first century BC describe tea as the elixir of immortality, referring to Lao-tsze, the founder of Taoism. The first philosophical and technical treatise devoted to the subject, the *Cha-sing* or *Classic Art of Tea*, appeared during the magnificent period of the T'ang dynasty, around the eighth century AD. It was by the Taoist poet Lu-yu. Lu-yu himself was even immortalized by the beverage, for after his death he was supposed to have become Chazu, the genie of tea, and his effigy is still honoured by all tea merchants from Hong Kong to Singapore.

Tea did not become a popular drink in China until about the sixth century. At first it was chewed, as cakes of pressed leaves. Later on decoctions were made of it. Around the year 1000 a powder of dried, ground leaves was mixed with boiling water, and beaten with a thin bamboo stick until it frothed, in just the same way as the Aztecs whisked their chocolate. (The Tibetans still make tea with blocks of leaves which they crumble into water. It is boiled and reboiled, mixed with rancid yak butter, and is eaten rather than drunk, for the resulting mixture is a nourishing and invigorating paste, very useful at such altitudes.)

The way of making tea we now know, as an infusion, soon became the usual one in China, and under the Ming dynasty it developed into a positive ritual, involving an intellectual discipline and symbolizing poetry and beauty, strength and determination. A cup of tea became the mirror of the soul.

Towards the beginning of the ninth century tea-drinking spread to Japan, where it soon became the ritual and sacramental drink of a kind of cult of aesthetics which sought the beautiful in the mundanity of everyday life. The Japanese tea ritual has its code, even its laws. The 'drink of immortality' has to be brewed in accordance with a very precise ceremonial, making each gesture and each mouthful both an initiation and a poetic ecstasy. The tea ceremony, although a domestic affair, is more than just a matter of enjoying a cup of tea: it is an ethic, a philosophy,

it expressed the art of living. It illustrates one of the paths of Zen – 'accomplishing perfectly something possible in that dimension which it is impossible to evaluate, and which we know to be life.'

In China, however, tea houses, with a history going back to the thirteenth century, are still places of great importance for the general public. Like cafés in Turkey, France and Great Britain, they have played a large part in the political life of the country, and the first revolution, of 1911, was planned in the back room of a Shanghai tea house.

Marco Polo, of course, mentions both tea and tea houses in his *Book*, but Western civilization did not encounter the drink until the beginning of the seventeenth century. Around the time of the death of Henri IV of France, a Dutch ship – some accounts say Portuguese, but in any case it came from Macao – brought Europe the first bale of fragrant tea-leaves.

A great many kinds of infusion were already known in the West. They had specific uses, and it did not at once seem obvious what this new one was for. A doctor of Corsican origin, Simon Paoli, tasted it and said in print that it should be banned because it was intoxicating. Other medical men such as the Dutchman Tulpius in 1641 and the Frenchman Jouques in 1657 also pronounced upon the tisane. Jouques, who was very enthusiastic, praised it highly, not hesitating to compare it to ambrosia and calling it the 'divine herb'; cocoa, after all, had just staked its claim to the name of the 'drink of the gods'.

But anything from overseas was bound to become popular sooner or later. Curiously, tea had a dual career. While coffee became the favourite drink of rich and poor alike in the Latin countries of France, Italy and Spain, tea there was a privilege of the upper classes. In England and the Netherlands, however, tea was the favourite drink of everyone, from the gentry to the poorest labourers. While tea swiftly became a democratic beverage – Thomas Garaway opened the first tea house in England in 1640 – Cromwell, scenting profit for the state, decided to put a special tax on it. But in this case he had misjudged his countrymen. They did not cut back on their consumption of tea (Cromwell's judgement was accurate there), far from it. But tea, now a contraband item, benefited from the publicity attached to smuggling, particularly as clergymen were among the best agents in the business: the militia did not like to raid church crypts in which tombs, emptied of the human remains that had lain there for centuries, now concealed fragrant bales of tea. Drinking untaxed tea became a way of opposing Cromwell, and when his chapter in history was over the habit was well established. There is nothing like prohibition for creating appetites, particularly as coffee did not have a very high reputation in England.

Tea, accordingly, became a passion with the English, one to be indulged the moment you got out of bed to make a pot of early morning tea and sharpen your appetite for the lavish breakfast which followed – in prosperous Victorian households, anyway – comprising smoked fish, porridge, eggs and bacon, and so on. During the day any social call, any happy or unhappy occasion, called for 'a nice

cup of tea', to keep you going until the time for either afternoon tea, around four o' clock, with cakes, buns, sandwiches, muffins, scones, jam, etc., or high tea, a main meal eaten rather later, and including a cooked dish as well as the items on the afternoon tea menu. The sweet things eaten at either meal used a lot of sugar, much to the advantage of the colonial sugar planters in America.

The French firmly believe that the English like their tea cold and their beer warm. The English tea ritual has nothing in common with the Sino-Japanese ceremony, but runs a very traditional course all the same: milk in the cup first (or very occasionally lemon instead), then the tea, then sugar, the resulting brew to be not so much drunk as delicately sipped. Between every refilling of cups, the dregs are poured into a slop basin. Another French legend has it that even at the height of battle British armies used to observe a cease-fire on the stroke of five o'clock (believed on the Continent to be the traditional English tea-time), and that during the two World Wars their German opponents were gentlemen enough to respect the truce.

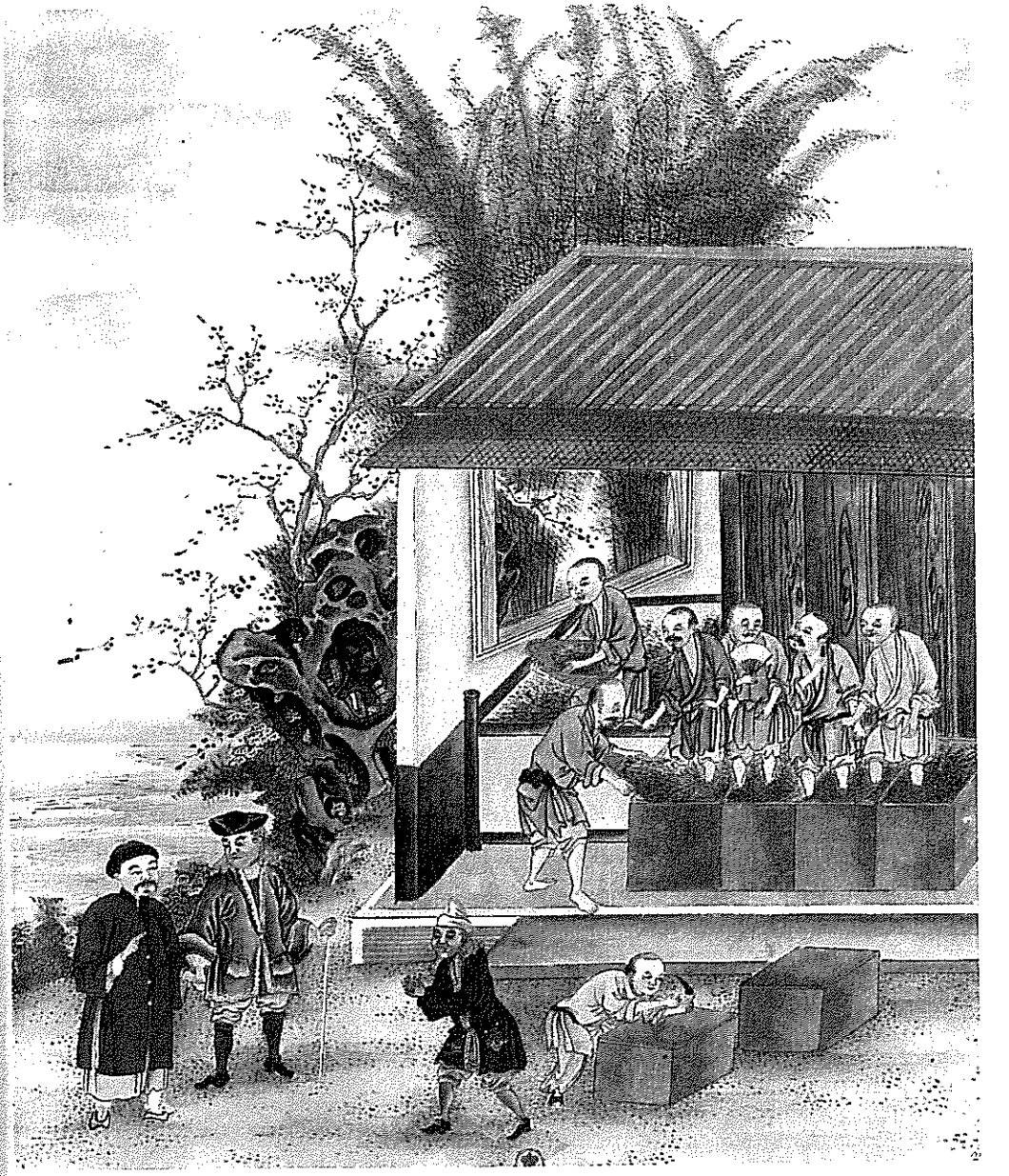
Tea was the occasion of the first long-distance races between transatlantic sailing ships. By around 1770 the English were importing six million pounds of tea-leaves a year, and the Dutch and Danish four and a half million pounds each. This involved what amounted to a special tea fleet, for profitability depended to a great extent on the ships' times of arrival. Another argument in favour of short voyages and speedy ships was that tea quickly went stale during a long journey. In the nineteenth century the shipbuilders created that marvel of the seas, the clipper with her superb set of sails, skimming the crests of the waves in a rapid furrow as she raced across them at a fast 'clip'. The blue ribbon of the tea race, and a handsome reward, were solemnly awarded to the captain of the winning vessel every year.

The race was enthusiastically followed in all ports of the world, and improbable bets were placed on it. Life on board the tea clippers must have been somewhere between hysteria and hell. But the crew of the winning clipper could be sure of free drinks everywhere, at least until next year.

The tea trade became almost all profit for Great Britain after 1834, when tea began to be grown systematically in the Indian Empire, to the dismay of the Chinese. In the time of the Empress Tzu-hsi of China, the Chinese also saw Ceylon take to growing tea after a disease had ravaged the coffee trees of the island. Thereafter China tea lost its pre-eminence on all markets but those of Russia and the Arab countries, which still prefer it.

In France, tea, like politics, was always to divide the country in two. As I mentioned above, there was a kind of class consciousness attached to it from the first, and after the time of Louis XIV it remained, in the popular mind, a drink for those who did not work (i.e., did no manual labour): intellectuals, idlers or fashionable folk, and above all the ladies. It was associated with silverware, lace tablecloths, elegant slices of cake, and the crooking of the little finger as you drank it.

Louis XIV, who religiously took tea 'to prevent vertigo and the vapours', had it



Packing tea in the presence of the Chinese merchant and the European buyer: eighteenth-century water-colour on fabric, from the series *Récolte et fabrication du thé*

made in a golden teapot given him by the Siamese ambassador. Mme de Sablé, according to the Marquise de Sévigné, thought of adding a drop of milk even before the English.

At Procope's, tea was served in a carafe, sweetened with herbal syrup, and called 'Bavaroise' in honour of the princes of Bavaria who accompanied their princess to her wedding when she became the second wife of Philippe d'Orléans. However, the Princess Palatine, as she was known, continued to prefer choucroute, herrings and Munich fricassees; she thought tea horrible – 'good for nothing but to empty the bladder' – and enjoyed mulled beer spiced with nutmeg instead.

It has been said that 'a few tea-leaves made the Atlantic Ocean overflow', and tea is indeed involved in the origin of the United States of America, officially at any rate, since almost any other pretext would have served the purpose just as well. The '13 plantations' that had become the English colonies of America had three million inhabitants by the 1760s. They were prosperous people, jealous of their independence, proud of their idiosyncrasies, and they had gradually managed to wrest genuine local power from the government at home. It was as much on their own behalf as on Britain's that they had fought the French Canadians during the Seven Years' War, although they were happy enough to let the mother country bear the cost of the campaign.

As it seemed necessary, after the war, to keep a standing army of 10,000 men on guard at the St Lawrence border, Grenville, George III's prime minister, suggested that the colonists might defray the expenses of the armed peace. Grenville, who had succeeded the popular Pitt, had a reputation for looking for money for the war everywhere. Songs about him were sung in the coffee-houses, and the journals lampooned the man nicknamed 'gentle shepherd' by Pitt.

The reply of the shepherdess, or rather the colonies, to the gentle shepherd was brief and to the point. They said no. To the characteristics mentioned above, the colonies added another: they hated taxes, particularly taxes imposed by London. In a sense they were right, since a British principle had always been 'no taxation without representation', and the benches of the Mother of Parliaments contained no Americans at all.

This was particularly unjust because English trade depended on America, as it did on India. It did well out of the colonies, especially as, in line with the principles of mercantilist doctrine, no one was making the colonists any presents: all merchandise, whichever way it was going, had to travel on vessels fitted out in England, or belonging to English shipowners. The English ports had the exclusive right to trade with the colonies, and sold their goods on at a profit to the Dutch and the French. Without the mother country as an intermediary, the Americans could have made that profit themselves. Finally, they were forbidden to build factories overseas for processing or manufacturing items which were necessities of life.

A tax on molasses, Benjamin Franklin pointed out to the aged Pitt, was already arousing protest from the distillers of rum, and a timber duty would light the tinder.

Pitt, in his old age, succeeded in getting the project emended, but his second successor, Lord North, was intent on preserving at least its principles. With one voice, Parliament voted to tax glass and to tax tea. It had brewed a glass of tea that was to burn English hands, and when she dropped it she lost America.

The colonists announced that they would drink no more tea, and would take their beverages from tin mugs or cups. It seemed inconceivable in London that anyone of Anglo-Saxon origin could do without the sacred brew, especially as it would mean lost profits for the East India Company. The company's balance sheets had always assumed that large quantities would be delivered annually to Boston. To make up for those lost profits the company decided to send over a ship with a full cargo of tea, to be sold direct by the captain to the consumers without the intermediary of dealers, thus recovering the tax which would be tacitly included in the price, bringing it up to that of goods sold retail. This poorly kept secret infuriated Boston, and some very distinguished citizens of a town which still has a reputation for high-mindedness disguised themselves as Indians, raided the ship and threw its cargo overboard. This was the famous Boston Tea-Party. Lord North retaliated with the Boston Bill: no vessels were to put in to its harbour. All the other ports of the colony stood by Boston, and when Benjamin Franklin came home the American War of Independence had begun.

In Russia, tea had been known for generations, but the first surviving accounts to mention it date from 1618 and concern a caravan coming from China. The Russians are still very fond of tea, which they drink in their own manner, slowly and at length. They make a strong black China tea with a special aroma, called Russian tea, in a teapot. Everyone then dilutes it to taste with the water constantly simmering in the samovar, which has a small lamp always burning under it. You add lemon and sugar, or rose petal jam.

In the old days the way in which the Russians sweetened their tea expressed the order of the social hierarchy. The poorest of the *moujiks* contented themselves with hanging a lump of sugar from a string above the table, where everyone could look at it while sipping tea as bitter as injustice. Small free farmers would take turns to suck the piece of sugar before drinking their brew. The rich *baryni* could actually put one or two pieces of sugar in their cups. However, such luxury was as nothing compared with that enjoyed by the Tsar, Little Father of All the Russias, who was said to use a hollowed-out sugar loaf as a cup; his tea was poured into it.

In his *Dictionnaire de cuisine*, Alexandre Dumas claims that

> the best of teas is drunk at Petersburg, and all over Russia in general: as China shares a border with Siberia, the tea does not need to cross the sea to reach Moscow or Petersburg, and sea voyages do tea a good deal of harm. ... A custom peculiar to Russia, and one which always surprises foreigners when they first encounter it, is that men drink their tea from glasses and women from china cups.

It is a fact that tea-drinkers fall into two camps here. The Arabs, like the Russians,

prefer tea in glasses. Perhaps they seem more virile and less delicate than porcelain (another Chinese invention), which according to other tea-lovers is the only material that suits the taste and beauty of the amber liquid. What could be better than porcelain, especially genuine Chinese porcelain, for a Chinese drink? Chinese cups are actually bowls, without handles or saucers, very small, and with a lid, because the chosen mixture (black or green tea and jasmine flowers) is infused directly in them.

Speaking of teacups, Dumas also tells a tale of Brashov, in the Dracula country of Romanian Transylvania, when the city was still a German colony called Cronstadt:

> The first tea cups were made at Cronstadt. It often happened that, for reasons of economy, the café proprietors put less tea than they should have done into a pot. The bottoms of the cups showed a view of Cronstadt, and if the watery nature of the liquid allowed one to see too clearly, the customer would call the proprietor and show him the bottom of the cup, saying, 'I can see Cronstadt.' As the proprietor could not deny it, and as it would not have been possible to see Cronstadt had the tea been strong enough, he was caught in the act of fraud. Consequently, the proprietors decided to use glasses, where you could see nothing at the bottom, instead of the cups in which you could see Cronstadt.

Offering tea is a delicate expression of Arab hospitality. It is given to all visitors in the most primitive of tents or the most wretched of shacks in the shanty-towns, just as it is in the most fabulous of palaces complete with ornate marble-work and mosaic-patterned walls. In every Arab household, tea is drunk as you sit cross-legged on the floor, on a rug or on cushions, gravely and in silence. The tea tastes all the hotter because of the heat beating down on the countryside.

In Morocco three glasses of boiling hot and very sweet tea are traditionally drunk after meals. They help to digest the sumptuous series of fat, spicy dishes on which guests are feasted. The head of the family or his eldest son always makes the tea: never a servant, and still less – Allah forfend! – a woman. Sometimes the host may wish to honour his chief guest by asking him to make the tea.

The officiating priest – it is really the only way to describe him – first places a large pinch of green tea in the metal teapot, preferably of finely chased silver. He immediately pours a little boiling water on it to remove its bitterness. A handful of fresh mint leaves are added, and a large piece of loaf sugar broken off with a copper hammer as the sugar-loaf is held above the tea-pot. The mixture is then covered with more boiling water, and the pot is wrapped in a hot napkin or a cover. A few moments of meditation follow, and smiles of complicity are exchanged. The officiating priest then stirs the mixture, tastes the tea in a tumbler, nods his head, adds a little bit more of this or a little bit more of that. Then he serves each of his companions, pouring the tea from a great height so that the crystalline sound

of the aromatic liquid falling into the glasses shall echo in the ears of Allah, a true libation offered in thanks for the happiness of the diners.

In the baggage (often just a knotted bundle) of every Arab traveller, pilgrim or dealer, there will be a string of prayer beads and a prayer mat, and the teapot which also, filled with fresh water, serves for the ritual ablutions performed before the traveller's devotions.

Punch does not necessarily contain rum, but must have some kind of spirit in its ingredients; grog does not necessarily contain tea, but may be made with hot water. Those are the only differences between them.

The word 'punch' and the preparation of the drink – a mixture of tea, lemon, sugar and alcohol – appeared in France first as *bolleponche* ('bowl of punch') in 1653. Punch seems to come from Hindustani *panch*, meaning five. It does in fact have five ingredients in it if you count the hot water and tea-leaves in the tea as two.

The Dutch also made punch, and in both Rotterdam and London it was served in cafés or at stag parties; ladies disliked the odour it left on the breath. Procope, yet again, had a good idea: he served punch iced to reduce the alcoholic aroma, and called it Roman punch. At the end of the eighteenth century, the fashion for anything exotic did the rest.

Grog, a mixture of rum and water, is said to take its name from the nickname of 'Old Grog' given to Admiral Vernon by his sailors; much like Mountbatten later, he was in the habit of wearing a kind of heavy coat of grogram, a coarse weatherproof fabric (the word comes from French *gros-grain*). Around 1740 he made his crews dilute their rum ration with water. It was discovered that if the water was hot it improved the drink, bringing out the flavour of the modest standard measure of rum. Thanks to the diuretic qualities of tea, tea grog soon proved a good precaution against fever and one of the best remedies for a nasty cold. You put your hat at the end of your bed and drink grog until you see two hats there. You are then cured.

Fourteen thousand cups of tea a second are drunk in the world today, although some countries drink more of it than others; in France the average is a cup and a half per month per inhabitant. According to statistics, the Italians drink only three cups a year each (and for all we know those may be drunk by English tourists passing through). The people of the Latin countries – and this may explain their low tea-drinking figures – have the deplorable habit of buying any kind of cheap tea, making it in a slapdash way, and even, sacrilegiously, using teabags containing the dusty ends of stocks. I will not linger over soluble instant tea for fear of bringing the poet Lu-yu who became the immortal Chazu, spirit of tea, down from his seventh heaven.

But like wine, which the Mediterranean peoples respect so much, tea has its *crus*, poetically called 'gardens', with their different flavours, the various ways of relishing them, and their traditions. Tea has its blends too, and every tea merchant or tea expert has his own secret.

Although tea-leaves look brown, they are classified as either black tea or green tea, depending on whether they have been fermented or not.

Green teas, almost exclusively from China, Japan and Formosa, are the most popular with the Japanese and Arabs (the Koran forbids all fermented drinks). The Japanese and Chinese do not sweeten their tea at all; the Arabs drink theirs very sweet. The best known kinds are gunpowder tea, in which the leaves have been rolled up like beads, and imperial tea, with flat leaves.

After the tea-leaves of black tea have wilted they too are rolled and then fermented, roasted or smoked, and finally dried to just the right stage. A semi-black Formosa tea called *koolong* is the basis of many blends. It has a natural aroma of ripe peaches. But in general the provenance of black tea is varied. As with wine, the soil that grows it, the climate that nurses it and the altitude at which it breathes are the factors that contribute to its *cru* and its special flavour.

China teas are always the finest. They need no sugar or lemon, and they certainly do not need milk. They include pekoe, (a Chinese word meaning 'white down' from the fact that the leaves are picked while young with the down on them), the full-bodied Yunnan (which some say has an aroma of chocolate), the smoky Lapsang Souchong, with its very pronounced flavour, and Earl Grey, named after a British diplomat. Earl Grey, a true aristocrat among teas and flavoured with bergamot, is also made in Sri Lanka and is worth its price. Experts will make a special blend at the last moment with China teas and Indian Darjeeling.

Ceylon tea is the classic kind drunk by the not particularly imaginative. Chosen with care, however, its straightforward, simple taste can be excellent. It goes well with milk, lemon or rum, none of which disturb the flavour too much. It is divided into pekoe, orange pekoe, broken orange pekoe, broken orange pekoe fannings and flowery.

The teas of Assam or Darjeeling, on the slopes of the Himalayas, are the best Indian teas. They are ideal for afternoon tea, and good to drink in the morning too. Assam is fuller-bodied; Darjeeling is the champagne of teas, with an aftertaste of honeyed fruit. It will accept a slice of lemon, and goes very well in partnership with its only equal, Earl Grey.

There are also teas from Indochina, Africa (Tanzania), Brazil and Iran.

Whatever kind it is, tea should be drunk soon after it is sold, kept in a tightly closed tin, and bought in date-stamped packets. A month and a half will already have passed in any case between its preparation in its country of origin, its handling in London, and its setting out on the commercial circuit all over Europe.

Today there are also all kinds of perfumed teas, flavoured with rose, mint, lotus, jasmine, orange or bergamot peel, cherry, lychee – something for every taste. The art lies in making tea (like coffee) with pure spring water, demineralized and not chlorinated. The Queen of England always takes supplies of pure spring water when she travels.

In general tea is grown, like coffee, in the shade of tall trees. Altitude improves its flavour. The tea shrub is pruned back to remain at a height of about a metre,

since the leaves are picked by the small hands of women and children. In the time of the emperors of China, the pickers were supposed to be virgins aged less than 14, and were to wear a new dress and new gloves daily; these garments were perfumed, and so was their breath. They had to preserve complete silence as they worked.

Every 10 to 15 days the terminal shoots of the stems are cut. The fresh tea, once gathered, is spread on wicker trays to wilt for 24 hours. Then the leaves are crushed and bruised to release the aroma, a process now carried out mechanically. They are then fermented for several hours in a hot, humid place. To stop the fermentation the leaves then go into a drying room. They are sifted, graded, selected, and sent off to London, the world centre of the tea trade, where the tea is blended, packed, distributed – and quoted on the stock exchange.

'Tea-leaves', said the Chinese poet Lu-yu, 'should have folds like the leather boots of Tartar horsemen and curls like the dewlaps of a mighty ox, they should be moist and soft to the touch, like the earth freshly swept by rain.'

Tea in Legend

In China there is a legend that the Emperor Chen-nung invented tea in the year 2374 BC by accident. One summer's day he stopped in the shade of a shrub and put water to boil to refresh himself (hot water is more refreshing than iced water). A slight breeze plucked several leaves from the tree. They fell into the boiling water. Cheng-nung did not notice until he breathed in the subtle aroma of the miraculous brew as he raised it to his mouth to drink.

In India, however, a legend goes as follows:

Long, long ago there lived a prince called Darma. After a wild youth, he embraced the way of asceticism, became a begging monk called Bodhi Dharma and went to China as a Buddhist missionary, vowing never to sleep again in penance for his wild nights of debauchery. For years his faith helped him to keep his vow, but one day, when he was meditating on the slopes of the Himalayas, the sleep so long postponed overcame him. On waking, overwhelmed by remorse for breaking his word, he cut off his eyelids, buried them and set off again, tears mingling with the blood on his face. Years later, passing the place of his sacrifice once more, he saw an unknown bush on the spot. He picked the leaves and steeped them in the hot water which was his only nourishment. After the first mouthful, his weariness was gone and his spirit, suddenly stimulated, attained the greatest heights of knowledge and beauty.

Continuing on his way, he distributed seeds of the miraculous tree as he passed. Ever since, monks have drunk tea to aid their meditation.

The Symbolism of Tea

In Japan, only five persons may join in the tea ceremony at once – 'more than the Graces and fewer than the Muses', it has been said, five being the symbol of union, like the fingers of the hand, of harmony and equilibrium, the figure of hierogamy, the marriage of the celestial principle (signified by the number 3) with the terrestrial principle (signified by the number 2), and also the symbol of yin and yang. The five qualities of knowledge are those of Buddha: perfection integrated into a whole.

'Tea is not only the antidote to drowsiness', said Lu-yu, over 13 centuries ago, 'but one of the ways whereby man may return to his source.'

> The first tea ceremony, according to the Taoists, was held when Yin-hi offered Lao-tsze the cup of immortality [in the sixth century BC]. Lao-tsze was about to give him the Tao-te-king, the Book of the Way and of Virtue. The tea ceremony has all the appearance of a religious rite, which it probably once was – it is claimed that the object was to calm rough manners, master the passions, overcome antagonism and establish peace. It is chiefly marked by sobriety; the relinquishing of action is intended to encourage the relinquishing of individuality. As in all the Zen arts, the end to be attained is for the action to be carried out not by the ego, but by a person's essential nature or emptiness. Tea, finally, is the symbol of the essence in which the self participates, but the 'emptiness' involved is not the oblivion of slumber; it is intense watchfulness in contemplative silence.
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> Pierre Grison, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, Seghers, Paris