Preface

Tea is a simple beverage, and one that has long been central to the lives of millions of people, originally in the East, and now virtually worldwide. It is said to aid meditation and self-reflection and to induce tranquility, even perhaps inspiring imagination.

There are six major types of tea in China—green tea, black tea, Oolong tea, dark tea, yellow tea and white tea, distinguished mainly by different methods of production. Folklore relates each type of tea to certain human characteristics. Thus it is said that green tea, simple and light, stands for the scholasticism of south China; black tea, mild and reserved, is regarded as rather ladylike; Oolong tea, warm and persistent, resembles the perseverance of philosophers; dark tea, with its lingering aftertaste, symbolizes the wisdom of the elderly, and so on and so forth.

China, the homeland of tea, is a leading producer and consumer, and the discovery and usage of tea there has a history of four or five thousand years. Tea developed from the earliest fresh-boiled tea taken as a kind of soup, to later dried-and-preserved teas, and from simple green tea to the blending of six major kinds of tea. Drinking tea first started to become popular in the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) Dynasties, and has continued into contemporary times. The flavor of tea, which may be drunk weak or strong, contains both bitter and sweet elements. What is more, with its unique appeal, tea has broken free of its region of origin and has been transported to most parts of the world.

The origin of tea is lost among history and legend. What can be roughly confirmed is that tea originated in the southwest of China. In Yunnan, and elsewhere, there are still some wild tea trees that are over 1,000 years old. It is said that the first person to discover the effects of tea was Shen Nong—the father of agriculture and herbal medicine in China. In time immemorial, people knew very little about plants. In order to find out which plants could be eaten safely, Shen Nong tasted various kinds of plants to test them as food or medicine. After he had eaten the plants, Shen Nong observed their reactions in his stomach—he is reputed to have had a 'transparent stomach'! There is a famous legend of 'Shen Nong Tasting A Hundred Plants'. One day, after walking for a long time, Shen Nong felt tired and thirsty, so he rested under a tree and started a fire to boil water in a pot. Suddenly some leaves fell into the pot from a nearby tree. Shen Nong drank the water and found it not only sweet and tasty, but freshening as well. He felt less tired, so went on to drink all the water from the pot. Another version of this tale is a little different, but more amazing. It is said that Shen Nong tried 72 different kinds of poisonous plants in a day and he lay on the ground, barely alive. At this moment, he noticed several rather fragrant leaves dropping from the tree beside him. Out of curiosity and habit, Shen Nong put the leaves into his mouth and chewed them. After a little while he felt well and energetic again. So he picked more leaves to eat and thus detoxified his body of all the poison. Whatever the story, tea interested Shen Nong and attracted him to do further research into its characteristics. The ancient Chinese medical book called the *Shen Nong Herbal*, which is attributed to him, states that 'tea tastes bitter. Drinking it, one can think quicker, sleep less, move more nimbly, and see more clearly'. This then was the earliest book to record the medicinal effects of tea.

By the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC), the function of tea to refresh the body and clear the mind had gradually replaced its function as medicine. People started drying the leaves to preserve

tea. When they made tea, they put the leaves into a pot and made a kind of thick soup. The princes of the Zhou Dynasty were used to this thick soup, but due to its bitterness, it did not become widely popular.

In the Han Dynasties (206 BC–AD 220), both the collecting and processing of wild tea leaves were improved. Tea became a tasty drink and was very popular amongst the nobility. In the Wei Period (220–265) and Jin Dynasties (265–420), tea came to be the drink of banquets and lubricated philosophical and metaphysical discussions. Tea's 'freshness and purity' came to be preferred to the 'violence and intoxication' of wine. The last emperor of the Three-Kingdoms Period (220–280) was Sun Hao (reigned 264–280). He asked his ministers to drink six liters of wine every time he held a banquet. One minister was not good at drinking, so he secretly asked Sun if he could drink tea instead. In fact the relationship between tea and wine has always been subtle. Wine drinking is appropriate for a joyous occasion, while tea drinking is best suited to tranquillity. These two drinks differ in many aspects, but they are also the best partners because tea can counter the effects of drunkenness. In later times, the opposing aspects of tea and wine were reflected in a dialogue between them in a book called *On Tea and Wine*.

Thus by the time of the Shu Kingdom (221–263) tea had spread to the lower reaches of Yangtze River, and by the Eastern and Western Jin Dynasties and the Northern and Southern Dynasties (265–589), rulers advocated drinking tea and eating simple food in order to restrain competition in extravagance amongst the nobility. Buddhism and Taoism also played an indispensable role in the spreading of tea. Buddhists liked tea because it prevented dreariness and languor, while Taoists believed that tea helped people to stay young and become immortal. At that time people also began to make and store tea in brick or cake form. When they wanted to make tea, they ground the cakes into powder and put this, along with other condiments, into hot water.

It is often said that 'tea started in the Tang Dynasty and flourished in the Song Dynasty'. In the Tang Dynasty a method called 'green steaming' was invented, the aim of which was to rid tea leaves of their 'grassy' flavor. After steaming, the tea leaves were ground, made into cakes, and then dried and sealed for storage. Before the Tang, tea was known by many names, one of these being 荼, a Chinese character meaning 'bitter'. Tang people removed one line from this character and changed it into 茶. This character has many interesting connotations in its shape. Its lower part is 木, meaning 'wood'; the top is 艹, meaning 'grass'; and between them is 人, meaning 'people'. This suggests harmony between people and nature. It was also in the Tang Dynasty that teahouses in their true sense came into being, and in some big cities there were also tea shops, which stored large amounts of tea leaves and prepared tea for their customers. Poems and articles dedicated to tea also appeared, and poets such as Lu Tong and Bai Juyi all wrote about tea. Furthermore, the Tang Dynasty also saw the first definitive publication about tea—*The Book of Tea*, which was the first of its kind in the world. This book, which contained a comprehensive summary of all aspects of the culture of tea, including medicinal uses, picking, tea making, cooking, and utensils, was then a complete synthesis of knowledge about tea. Its author, Lu Yu (733–c.804), was consequently dubbed the 'Saint of Tea' by later generations. During this period, tea became the most popular commodity in foreign trade, and Japanese Buddhists brought tea leaves back from China to Japan. For the sake of easier transportation, tea leaves were made into bricks, from which convenient pieces could be broken off to prepare tea.

The Song Dynasty was a golden age for tea, and the teahouse played a prominent role. The calligrapher Cai Xiang (1012–1067) wrote *Record of Tea* and Emperor Huizong, Zhao Ji (1082–1135) wrote *General Remarks on Tea*. Then, in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), tea culture, which had been set back by the Mongolians, underwent a renaissance with the familiar dark tea, green tea, and

Oolong tea all developed during this time. Zhu Yuanzhang (reigned 1368–1398), the first Ming Emperor, oversaw a change from roll tea to loose tea, and this tradition has been retained ever since.

As their understanding of tea improved, people were no longer content to harvest tea from the wild, but began to plant and cultivate tea trees, while at the same time processing techniques were improving, with different methods producing the six major types of tea. Nor did people continue to take tea simply as food or medicine. Rather, drinking tea began to take on a spiritual dimension, containing deep cultural meanings. The tea ceremony in China consists not only of the choice of tea, but also many other elements such as type of water, utensils, time and presentation. There are also detailed requirements of the drinkers. Meanwhile, with the popularization of tea, people in different regions and of different nationalities developed their own unique customs of taking tea. In Guangdong for example, people like drinking morning tea, in Fujian they prefer Kongfu tea, Hunan has Lei tea, Sichuan people love 'covered-bowl tea', while people of the Bai nationality treat their guests with 'Three-Course Tea'. Tibetan people prefer buttered tea and those from Inner Mongolia like milk tea. These various tea customs constitute the rich and profound Chinese tea culture.

Trade among nations spread tea to all parts of the world. Japanese Monks took tea seeds, the techniques of tea making, and tea utensils back to Japan, which led to the appearance of the Japanese tea ceremony. The earliest record of tea in Europe was in the travel notes of an Arab, while Marco Polo mentioned in his notes that a Chinese minister of finance was deposed because he levied excessive taxes on tea. At the end of the sixteenth century, the Dutch brought word to Europe that there was a kind of magic leaf in the east, from which tasty drinks could be made, and this was the first time that Europeans heard of tea. In 1610, the East India Company was the first to sell tea to Europe, after which the habit of drinking tea took root there. In 1636, tea entered France and two

years later it entered Russia, whereas Britain, a nation famous for its tea drinking, did not have tea until 1650.

Currently over 450 chemical substances have been discovered in tea, some of which are microelements capable of supplementing nutrients needed by human body, while some others can prevent or cure diseases. Green tea is a nutritious drink full of vitamins. It also contains antioxidants such as flavonoids that have been shown to restrain cancer cells and thus prevent or resist cancer. Oolong tea can control the absorption of dextrose by the human body, and can thus help with weight loss. Black tea is mild, which helps reduce phlegm, aids digestion, and stimulates the appetite, being especially good for people with a weak spleen and stomach. Pu'er tea can prevent cardiovascular diseases, and has long been known internationally as the 'Tea of Longevity'. Tea leaves are also helpful in radiation prevention, which is especially suitable for people who have constant contact with computers.

Nowadays tea is no longer confined to drinks. The essence of tea is often found in shampoo, toothpaste, and in other daily necessities. Some healthcare products like ointment also contain tea. The story of tea is far from over.

Fine Tea from Remote Mountains

At first, tea was collected from trees growing naturally in the mountainous and rainy primitive forests in Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan and other provinces. Later they were planted and transplanted by local people, who gradually discovered that tea trees thrived best in warm, damp and shady sites. Generally speaking, the optimum temperature for tea is between 18 and 25°C. They stop growing when it falls below 5°C and are likely to die in temperatures above 40°C. Tea trees like to grow in damp places and are very demanding about the water content in both air and soil. Altitude also has a considerable effect. Take the famous Wuyi Rock tea for example—Zheng Rock tea comes from the top of Wuyi Mountain, Ping Rock tea from the middle slopes, and Zhou tea from the valley. These vary in character, with the higher altitude tea the more valuable. Besides this, sunshine and soil also play a decisive role in the growth and character of tea.

Sanqing tea bowl, Qing Dynasty.

In the early days it was thought that the differences between teas came mainly from their growing conditions. Regions with certain environmental conditions often produce rare types of tea. Thus it is said that 'famous mountains give birth to famous tea'. Indeed some of China's famous mountains do indeed have their own special teas: Rock tea from Wuyi Mountain, Maofeng from Mount Huangshan, Cloud-and-Fog from Mount Lushan, Maofeng from Mount Emei, Maojian from Wuling Mountain, Snow-Bud from Mount Qingcheng, and many other traditional famous teas. This indicates the importance to tea quality of high forest cover, a rich fauna and flora, and a healthy ecological environment.

< A near-natural setting often increases the enjoyment of taking tea. Provided by Huang Rui.

Picking, selecting and roasting tea. Photo by Li Yuxiang.