

June 2025 Newsletter [DRAFT - DO NOT PUBLISH]

The Original Luxury Tea: The Tea Tribute System

The craftsmanship of Chinese tea touches every aspect of the process of making it, from where it grows and when it is picked (including whether the bud or a specific number of leaves are plucked) to how it is processed and, finally, packaged.

These highly specific, sometimes secret and oftentimes painstaking processes often have deep, ancient roots, much like the trees from which the tea comes from. However, the ancient methods and rituals of Chinese teas are not just a byproduct of their geography, regional cultures or even artisanship. For a thousand years, Chinese tea functioned as [both commerce and infrastructure, funding the entire empire](#) and providing the revenue for war horses that kept it in power via the [Tea Horse Road \(茶马古道\)](#).

But for many tea farmers, their tea could be a matter of life and death, primarily due to the tea tribute system.

How Tribute Became Tradition

Ancient China was a land of ever undulating power centers, usually taking the form of the central Chinese government under constant threat from nomadic militaries. Maintaining control over such a massive land mass was expensive, and Chinese emperors were in a perpetual state of finding ways to finance their own militaries or maintain political control in various regional power centers.

During this time, tea was not the universal beverage we know it as today. Almost no one but royalty and the very elite could afford tea, and nothing underscored this point more than the [Tea Tribute](#).

This system, instituted around 700 A.D. by the Tang Dynasty, mandated that specific geographical regions set aside their finest tea leaves for the emperor and the imperial court. It was a kind of indirect taxation system in which providing the perfect cup could seal the fate of an entire family for generations. A pleasing cup brought the family political favor, possibly military protection, and regional influence. Displeasing the tea taster could result in complete ruin.

This meant cultivating a tribute tea meant more than simply setting aside the best of a crop. The tea had to be memorable and distinct from the other tributes. Since all tea comes from the same plant, the environment from which the tea leaves and buds were harvested, how they were

processed, had to be specifically developed to create a truly extraordinary beverage.

Meng Ding Gan Lu, for example, was the only tribute tea from the Sichuan province. It was pan fried three separate times, rolled after each time. Then, after the final shaping and rolling, dried over a charcoal fire.

Jun Shan Yin Zhen, on the other hand, garnered much of its flavor from its environment, a mountainous, 1-kilometer island perpetually shrouded in fog. What the island lacked in space, however, its rich soil made up for by imparting a distinct flavor to the tea.

Jun Shan Yin Zhen is the epitome of the process of overcoming geographic environment. The soil of Jun Shan is heavy with minerals, which would normally result in a full-bodied, thick, or heavy tea. But craftsmanship transforms the hearty tea leaves into one of the lightest, most delicate of Chinese teas.

Exactly one bud and only three to four leaves are pan dried. Then, the tea is placed in a humid pot for up to five days. When that entire process is repeated a second time, the tea transforms into a signature yellow color, yielding a light and almost floral tea.

Every Tea Today is a Tribute

The concept of tribute teas explains the enduring nature and deep global appreciation for the craftsmanship of Chinese teas.

It's why exactly one bud and two leaves are plucked to make [Dragon Well tea](#). The ancient, centuries-old trees that grow on Pan Yin Mountain, where [GPT's Master Green Tea](#) is harvested, may very well have grown the leaves made into tea enjoyed by an imperial courtesan.

The Aini minority who still live today in the Yunnan province, around the Lancang River region of Xishuangbanna, may have ancestors who ventured into the same forest they do today to pluck tea leaves from wild tea trees. Today, [Aini Bamboo Shu](#) is made by processing in fresh cut bamboo, roasted over a charcoal fire, and then dried outside on special racks. This careful process undoubtedly was passed down through generations, and it is not unlikely that their ancestors, patiently coaxing flavor from the tea in the same manner, stood before the most powerful people in Chinese history.

The Tea Tavern puts forth an extraordinary amount of effort to source the best of Chinese tea. Teas that reflect tradition, honor the Earth, and bring people together [EVENTBRITE] in a spirit of enjoyment, learning, and discovery.

Though some degree of technology has been introduced - usually in the form of improved temperature control, storage, or processing capacity - many [Tea Tavern teas](#) are processed in the exact same way they were hundreds of years ago.

So sipping a Tea Tavern tea is more than just enjoying a healthy beverage. By taking part in the process of brewing, tasting, and perhaps even sharing Chinese tea, you become another thread in the great tapestry that is the ancient and enduring history of tea.

Source Materials and Further Reading Suggestions

The Cambridge World History of Food: Tea (chapter)

— useful scholarly overview of tea’s economic and cultural role in China and beyond.

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-world-history-of-food/tea/F46F27CE8D98EFFFFBF4C8F62B2F58E1>

Britannica — Tea Production and Trade

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/tea-beverage>

Chinese Empire Forced to Evolve the Economic System to Resist the Nomadic Empire--Case: Establishment of the Tea Tax System in the Tang Dynasty

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382402522_Chinese_Empire_Forced_to_Evolve_the_Economic_System_to_Resist_the_Nomadic_Empire--Case_Establishment_of_the_Tea_Tax_System_in_the_Tang_Dynasty

Serious Eats: “Matcha’s 1,000-Year Journey” May use for another future blog; ask Seby

Song-dynasty whisked powdered tea, tea competitions, and the Chinese origins of what later became matcha.

https://www.seriousseats.com/the-ancient-chinese-ritual-behind-the-internets-favorite-green-drink-11891929?utm_source=chatgpt.com

All the tea in China: the political impact of tea

<http://www.china.org.cn/english/culture/231505.htm>

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