

# June 2025 Newsletter

## The Original Luxury Tea: The Tea Tribute System

The craftsmanship of Chinese tea touches every aspect of the process during which it is made. Tradition, craft and ancient knowledge impact all stages of the tea's journey from leaf to cup, from where the tea grows to when and how it is harvested. Everything, including whether the bud or a specific number of leaves are plucked, is a deliberate, pre-determined act. These exacting processes have usually been honed centuries ago and upheld ever since. Even the way the final Chinese tea is packaged, whether as loose leaf tea or in a solid tea cake, is a silent nod to a long and storied history.

Chinese tea is never just a beverage.

Every cup is actually a story of sometimes secret and oftentimes painstaking processes. A cup of Chinese tea is a testimony to entire generations of a single family, or thousands of seasons weathered by ancient trees. Traditions have deep, ancient roots, much like the tea trees themselves. Still, the ancient methods and rituals of Chinese teas are not just a byproduct of the tea's geography, regional cultures or even artisanship. More often than not, the traditions grew in the fertile soil of necessity.

For a thousand years, Chinese tea functioned as [both commerce and infrastructure, funding the entire vast empire](#). Tea did everything ranging from providing revenue for the war horses that kept dynasties in power via the [Tea Horse Road \(茶马古道\)](#) to the more mundane, albeit necessary, role of funding infrastructure for the massive and sprawling nation.

In fact, for many tea families, the quality of the tea their farms and plantations produced 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, led by a dynastic Imperial family. These families were under constant threat from nomadic militaries and disparate tribes, factions and ethnicities, all jockeying for their own power centers or, not infrequently, to topple the central government itself. Maintaining control over such a massive land mass and quarrelsome, diverse population was extraordinarily expensive and left Chinese emperors 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, Nothing illustrated this reality more than the [Tea Tribute](#)

system.

## **The Indirect Tea Tax of the Tribute System**

This Tea Tribute 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 -- who may very well be the Emperor himself -- could result in complete ruin.

For families growing tea, 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, and the environment from which the tea leaves and buds were harvested could not be externally controlled, how the tea was processed became the main method used to coax unique flavors, colors and tastes from the tea.

Meng Ding Gan Lu, for example, was the only tribute tea from the Sichuan province. It was pan fried three separate times and rolled after each time. Then, after the final shaping and rolling, the leaves were 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 processing 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 the creativity and craftsmanship of the tea masters transformed the hearty tea leaves into one of the lightest, most delicate of Chinese teas for its time.

Exactly one bud and only three to four leaves were pan dried. Then, the tea was placed in a humid pot for up to five days. That process was then repeated a second time, which almost magically transforms into its signature yellow color, yielding a light and almost floral tea.

## **Every Chinese Tea Today is a Tribute**

The legacy of tribute teas explains both the continued craftsmanship, enduring nature and deep global appreciation for 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 leaves made into tea enjoyed by an imperial courtesan or royal advisor.

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 very same forest they do today, and

with the same purpose: to pluck tea leaves from the wild tea trees that still offer their leaves in harvest. Today, [Aini Bamboo Shu](#) is made by processing the harvested leaves in fresh cut bamboo, roasting them over a charcoal fire. The tea leaves are then dried outside on special racks. This careful process was undoubtedly passed down through generations of Aini people. It is not unlikely that the current brew master's ancestors, who patiently coaxed flavor from the tea in the same manner, stood before some of 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](#) in a spirit of enjoyment, learning, and discovery.

Though some degree of technology has been introduced into today's processing for some tea farms and plantations – usually in the form of improved temperature control, storage, or processing capacity – many [Tea Tavern teas](#) are made in the exact same way they were hundreds of years ago.

Which makes sipping a Tea Tavern tea more than just enjoying a healthy beverage. When you take part in the process of [brewing](#), tasting, and perhaps even sharing Chinese tea from Tea Tavern, you become another thread in the beautiful, ancient tapestry of the enduring history of tea.

### **Source Materials and Further Reading Suggestions**

#### **The Cambridge World History of Food: Tea (chapter)**

A 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](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”**

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](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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