

[Article for *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*, written in 2003 and published in amended form in 2005] Alan Macfarlane

TEA

Since its accidental discovery in the jungles in the triangle on the borders of Burma, Assam and China, tea has become the most consumed substance on earth, apart from air and water. This has had immense consequences on almost every aspect of human life and international relations.

Tea is a drink made by picking and drying the leaves of a species of *Camellia* bush (*camellia sinensis*). The leaf is then infused in hot or boiling water. Tea has many advantages as a trade good. It can be produced cheaply, particularly after the introduction of mechanised tea drying and rolling equipment by the British in the later nineteenth century. It grows over a range of climatic zones, from central China to East Africa. Just a few leaves are needed to make a good pot of tea and they can be re-used. Dry tea is very light and stores well, so it can be shipped across the globe with ease and its high value in relation to its weight makes it worth while doing so.

Tea is easily prepared for drinking, but its preparation is sufficiently elaborate to encourage the human love of play and ceremony. So it has had an enormous effect on social life through the tea ceremony in China and Japan. This in turn has influenced religion (especially zen Buddhism), aesthetics (especially Chinese and Japanese art) and the development of ceramics. The Chinese, Korean, Japanese and British developments in porcelain and pottery, themselves highly important trade goods, were centred on tea bowls and other tea ware.

Tea is extremely safe to drink and indeed many believe it has special health benefits. From the first, Chinese and Japanese authors claimed it prevented the development of water-borne disease, both because the water was boiled and because the drink contained some bitter substance that purified the stomach. We have now discovered that this is phenolics, one of the most powerful antiseptics known to man, which even in cold tea will rapidly kill typhoid, cholera and dysentery bacteria. Tea also contains high levels of vitamin C, fluoride and anti-oxidants and other chemicals which are effective against many diseases.

Tea also contains caffeine which makes the drinker feel stimulated and relaxed, optimistic and focused. It is mild enough to be drunk throughout the day without harmful side effects and indeed is drunk constantly and with no alternatives in over half the world. The extra energy it provides was an important constituent of the development of early Chinese and Japanese wet rice cultivation upon which the glories of Tang and Sung culture in China and medieval and early modern Japan were based.

Tea later helped, with the addition of sugar, to fuel the first industrial revolution in Britain. It is unlikely that we could have moved to our industrial world without the health and energy giving properties of tea. Furthermore, the British Empire was to a considerable extent built around tea. The East India Company's profits were largely based on the tea trade and the three-way movement of opium, tea and silver between India, China and Britain was the central focus of much imperial wealth.

Tea moved from the jungles of the golden triangle into the monastic gardens of China before the birth of Christ. It spread across all of China by the eighth century. Soon it became the chief commodity traded with the wandering tribes of central Asia. The Mongols and Tibetans became great tea drinkers and blocks of tea became the local currency. In the thirteenth century it spread over Japan and became the universal drink.

Tea began to be imported to Europe in the seventeenth century. When the direct clipper trade to China opened up in the 1720's the price dropped and the imports soared. By the middle of the eighteenth century it was widely drunk by all classes in England. It was exported to America, but the duty imposed on tea was a major factor leading to the independence of the United States after the Boston Tea Party (1773).

Tea was introduced into Assam by the British from the 1840's and by 1890 there were large plantations and machine-based production in factories. It continued to expand and is now grown in a wide belt of the world, including south India. The Indians themselves became great tea drinkers from the 1920's.

Because it can only be grown in semi-tropical environments and is best grown on plantations, tea played a central part in world trade. It altered the ecologies of the areas where it was grown, unsettled tribal populations, threw hundreds of thousands into boring, miserably paid labour, and made huge profits for investors and tea managers.

Drinking tea altered gender relations, meal times, etiquette, politics and the relations between nations and Empires. It encouraged the development of new types of ship and ingenious factory machinery. It funded great trading companies and inspired literature and philosophy. It is indeed a remarkable plant.

Alan Macfarlane

Further reading:

M.N.Clifford, *Tea: Cultivation and Consumption*, (1992)

Denys Forrest, *The World Tea Trade: A Survey of the Production, Distribution and Consumption of Tea* (1985)

Jason Goodwin, *The Gunpowder Gardens. Travels through India and China in search of Tea* (1993)

Henry Hobhouse, *Seeds of Change*, (1985)

Alan and Iris Macfarlane, *Green Gold; The Empire of Tea* (2003)

William H. Ukers, *All About Tea*, (1935), 2 volumes.