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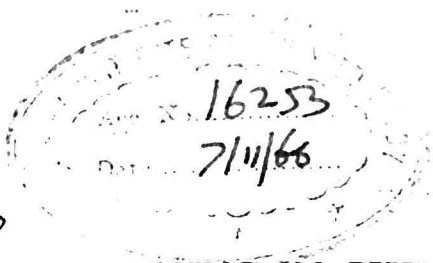
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TEA DRINKING IN CHINA

By J. E. C. BLOFELD

THE Japanese tea ceremony, or "Cha-no-yu," is well known to the West through several excellent books which have been written on the subject by Japanese and Western writers. Though there is, at the present time, no exact counterpart of this in China, the study of tea-drinking habits in that country is, nevertheless, one of considerable interest. To obtain a thorough knowledge of this subject one must traverse the realms of history, literature, geography, botany, industry (for the processing of the leaf), commerce, porcelain manufacture, and even medicine. This has been done very thoroughly by Mr. William H. Uckers, an American writer, who has compiled a volume of some eleven hundred pages entitled *All About Tea*, which deals with every aspect of the subject in all countries where tea is produced or consumed, but some of the passages dealing with China approach the matter from the point of view of the foreign tea exporter rather than that of the Chinese consumer. This article, which is far from comprehensive, is an attempt to describe the part played by tea drinking in the lives of the Chinese.

According to Chinese mythology, the uses to which the tea plant can be put were first discovered by the Emperor Shen Nung nearly three thousand years before the present era. It is doubtful, however, if tea was widely drunk much before the fourth century A.D., and it was probably regarded more as a medicine than a beverage until about the eighth century, when it was popularized by the T'ang Dynasty writer, Lu Yu, in the first book ever to be devoted exclusively to the subject of tea, entitled *Ch'a Ching*, or *The Tea Classic*. The text of this book is corrupt in places and the exact meaning of some of the phrases employed is by no means clear. Nevertheless, it is an interesting work, and inspired at different times similar works by Chinese and Japanese authors. A short extract from the writer's translation is given at the end of this article, together with a poem by the T'ang poet, Lu T'ung.

There is little doubt that tea was first looked upon as a medicine and that it was not drunk purely for the sake of its flavour or mildly stimulating qualities until several hundred years after its discovery. Moreover, it was often adulterated with foreign substances, such as ginger, lemon, etc., much as Westerners adulterate it with milk and sugar to-day. Nevertheless, the eulogy contained in Lu T'ung's poem shows that, by the middle of the T'ang Dynasty, its merits were probably widely recognised. From then onwards the Chinese have always preferred to drink their tea plain, with the exception of certain kinds which are flavoured with fresh or dried flowers. Though there are high grades of "flower tea" or "scented morsels," the best tea is never mixed with flowers, as its own delicate aroma is considered far superior to that of any blossom.

The varieties of tea drunk in China to-day are almost without number,

and, with the exception of teas used for export, have not been carefully classified. The main categories are few in number, but each covers an enormous variety of teas of varying quality and taste. They are as follows :

Green Tea.—The leaves of this category of tea vary in colour from very light green, as vivid as that of young rice plants, to a blackish green, which is hardly distinguishable from black, or, as the Chinese call it, red, tea. The liquid produced by infusing these leaves also varies considerably from pale green to murky amber, according to the quality of the tea and the strength of the infusion. All tea which has not been fermented before firing is known as green tea.

Red Tea (known in Europe as black tea).—This is produced from the same plants as green tea, but fermented before firing.

Partly Fermented Teas.—These are produced largely in the Province of Fukien, particularly the Wu-yi district, and share some of the qualities of both red and green teas. They are not widely drunk except in the southern part of Fukien and the north of Kwangtung.

Brick and Ball Teas.—These are sold in the form of slabs or balls of tightly compressed leaves and are widely in demand in Tibet and Central Asia, where they are sometimes used as currency.

Green teas are used much more widely than any of the other varieties, and the majority of red tea is produced specially for the foreign market. Another way of distinguishing teas grown in China is to divide them into Chinese and China teas, the first intended for home consumption and the second for export. This distinction is due to the fact that most Westerners look for different qualities in tea from those which are admired by the Chinese, and, in most cases, require a flavour which is strong enough to bear adulteration with milk and sugar.

The methods of drinking tea, and, to a lesser extent, methods of infusion or preparation of the beverage, vary considerably from province to province. In Cantonese tea houses a large cup containing a bowl of dry leaves is served to the customer. It is then filled to the brim with boiling water and covered with a lid. When the leaves have been infused sufficiently the liquid is transferred to a small handleless cup and drunk. The advantage of this method is that, as the bowl is much smaller than the average teapot, it is refilled more often and consequently the water does not remain upon the leaves too long. In Szechuan and many parts of Central China the tea is drunk directly from lidded bowls, with the lids tilted in such a way that the liquid can enter the mouth while the leaves remain in the cup. If saucers are used, they are raised from the table together with the cup. In Peiping and North China tea is often drunk through the spout of a small teapot, and, in some families, special individual pots are reserved for frequent and honoured visitors. In Yunnan the leaves are sometimes toasted in an iron vessel held over a fire before infusion. In Tibet and Mongolia they are stewed and the liquid churned with butter and salt, while Tientsin tea-houses are famous for the enormous bowls into which the tea is poured after infusion. Teapots, accompanied by handleless cups, are widely used throughout all the provinces as an alternative to the above methods. In winter, a brass teakettle with a perforated receptacle for live charcoal, and with or without

a chimney running through the middle like that of a Russian samovar, is often used. In modern times tumblers with bases and lids of some plastic material have become common among the more "Westernized" Chinese. These are very suitable for light green teas, as they enable one to enjoy the delicate colour of the leaves and beverage.

The art of tea drinking has undoubtedly been brought to its highest perfection in the Amoy district of Fukien and the Swatow district of Kwangtung. It is true that the Japanese tea ceremony is far more elaborate, but its very elaborateness detracts from the sociable atmosphere which constitutes the chief charm of tea drinking. In these districts everything possible is done to ensure that the beverage is prepared in a way which will produce the best aroma and flavour, but there is no formality or ritual attached to the preparation. It is not uncommon for prosperous business men in Swatow and Amoy to experience a sharp decline in their fortunes owing to their over-indulgence in the most expensive kinds of tea.

The method of preparation is as follows: A fire of charcoal or scentless wood is built in a small earthenware stove, perhaps by the master of the house himself. The water is then boiled in a small brass kettle until the size of the bubbles proclaims to the expert eye that it is a few degrees below boiling point. Overboiling would destroy the "life" of the water—*i.e.*, de-oxygenate it—and produce a "flat" taste. While the water is boiling the host attends to the earthenware and porcelain utensils. These consist of a small, earthenware teapot of about the same capacity as an English teacup, four to six small, white porcelain cups and a tiny porcelain tray. The pot, which should be old and contain the deposits of many years crusted round its inside and absorbed into its pores, is heated, together with the cups, by immersion in hot water. A quantity of leaves, sufficient to fill half the pot, is then dropped into it, no single leaf being allowed to escape and be wasted, and the freshly boiled water is added. After a few moments' infusion, the tea is poured into the cups by a rotary motion, which allows a few drops to enter each cup in turn. To fill one cup first and then pass on to the next would result in each one receiving a liquid of slightly different strength; they are, therefore, placed rim to rim in a circle and the mouth of the teapot rotated above them until every one is filled. Each cup contains about as much liquid as a liqueur glass, extremely strong and dark in colour, by reason of the fact that the proportions of leaves and water are nearly equal. It is swallowed at a gulp and has a bitter taste, which is somewhat unpleasant at first, but which leaves a delightful fragrance in the mouth and throat for several minutes after drinking. All present return their cups to the porcelain tray immediately after drinking, and fresh cups are poured out after adding water to the pot. The second infusion is regarded as the best, since the first may be adulterated with fine powder from the tea leaves which has escaped with the liquid from the pot, and the third may not be quite up to strength. The tea employed for this form of drinking is of the partly fermented variety, and generally known as T'ieh Kwan-yin (Iron Goddess of Mercy) or T'ieh Lo-han (Iron Arahāt). Teas bearing these labels are usually good, but vary enormously in quality and price. The very best may be almost literally worth their weight in gold.

Though the above method of preparation is confined to connoisseurs in certain parts of China only, tea drinking in one form or another is practised universally throughout the country. In almost every household it is available at all times of the day. Quilted baskets containing teapots, thermos bottles and simmering kettles make it possible to serve tea at a moment's notice. No guest is permitted to sit for more than a few minutes after arrival without a cup of tea being placed before him, usually in a handleless cup complete with lid and saucer. Tea is served to old people by their children as soon as they rise in the morning; it is to be found on every office desk throughout the day, and is sipped in the home or in tea-houses from morning till night. In former times the serving of tea to guests by officials had the dual purpose of extending courtesy to them and affording a means to put an end to their visits. When the host raised his cup for the second time the caller knew that he was expected to take his leave, and often the servants started calling for his sedan chair before the cup reached the official's august lips.

In Buddhist temples, tea is drunk at all times of the day and is served ceremonially before meditation, as it is considered a means of soothing the nerves and inducing wakefulness. There is an interesting story in this connection. According to one account of the origin of tea drinking, the Indian Buddhist missionary, Boddhi-dharma, was so vexed with himself for falling asleep during his meditations that he cut off his eyelids to prevent sleep from recurring. From these lids grew a shrub, the property of which was that an infusion of its leaves would induce continual wakefulness. This shrub was, of course, tea.

Tea-houses are extremely common in the streets of most Chinese cities, especially in West China. In Szechuan and Yunnan no food is served in these tea-houses except nuts and melon seeds, while, in the smaller eating-houses no tea can be obtained unless it is specially sent out for. In Peiping the tea-houses are much the same, but tea is invariably served in restaurants as well. In Kwangtung, tea-houses provide a great variety of hot snacks and even meals. These Cantonese tea-houses are usually tall buildings, and the tea served on each floor is slightly more expensive than that served on the one below, thus making it possible to drink tea in company of varying exclusiveness. In Soochow and other parts of Kiangsu, tea-houses have their own special clientele, and the larger ones have certain rooms for business men and others for the *literati* and professional men. Of course, there is no hard and fast rule, but people habitually go to the room where they are likely to find a few acquaintances. Some of the lovely pleasure pavilions in the Winter Palace in Peiping have been converted into attractive tea-houses for the general public.

The teas most prized by the Chinese are the light green Lung-cheng (Dragon's Well) from the mountain of that name in Chekiang, the semi-fermented T'ieh Kwan-yin (Iron Goddess of Mercy tea), and various high-quality green, red and flower-scented teas from Fukien, especially in the area of the Wu-yi mountains, and, to a lesser degree, the Pu-êrh tea from Yunnan. Anhwei, Hupeh, Hunan and Kwangtung also produce good teas. Szechuan, though one of the first provinces to grow tea, produces very little that would appeal to a connoisseur.

The following T'ang Dynasty poem is a good example of some of the literature inspired by the delights of tea drinking :

A SPONTANEOUS POEM OF THANKS TO THE CENSOR*
MENG FOR HIS GIFT OF FRESH TEA

By LU T'UNG

As the sun rose to its zenith, my sleep was still profound,
When a captain beat upon my door, frightening my dream[†] away,
And crying "I bear a letter from the Censor."
Wrapped with white silk, it bore three seals and,
Opening it, I seemed to see you face to face.
I held it up and read that you had sent three hundred *Chin*[‡] of *Yueh-T'uan* tea.

I have heard that when at New Year[§] one roams among the mountains,
The hibernating insects are startled by the rising wing of spring.
As the Son of Heaven^{||} desires the taste of *yang-hsien* tea,
Of all the myriad plants it puts forth blossoms first,
The kindly breeze mysteriously producing buds of pearl and leaves of jade.
Then Spring draws forth the golden shoots.
These should be freshly plucked, dried until fragrant and wrapped
around,

And so become the finest and the best, but yet by no means dear.
This is the drink of emperors and nobles,
How comes it thus to my poor mountain home?
When the timbered gate is shut that no common guest may enter,
Wearing my gauze hat, I myself prepare and drink the tea.
Green clouds travel on the ceaselessly blowing wind,
The radiance of white flowers is reflected on the surface of my bowl.
One bowl moistens the throat and lips.
Two bowls and loneliness is banished.
Three bowls and, even in the mind's most deep recess,
A mere five thousand volumes can be found.
Four bowls produce a gentle perspiration.
And all my life's injustices are through the pores dispersed.
Five bowls and flesh and bones take on ethereal state.
With six I join the company of fairies and immortals.
Ah! Seven bowls are the most that I can drink!
Hsi, hsi, a soft wind issues from the armpits.
The Fairy Mountain,[¶]
Whither can it be?

* An official who was permitted to memorialize the Emperor if his actions seemed to call for disapproval.

† Literally "Chou Kung," referring to a saying of Confucius in the Lun Yu.
" 'Tis long since last I dreamt of Duke Chou."

‡ Pronounced "jin." Slightly more than one pound.

§ Usually towards the end of February by our calendar.

|| The Emperor.

¶ Literally "Peng Lai Shan," the island of fairies in the Eastern Ocean (probably Japan).

The Sage of the Jade Stream*

Wishes to return there, riding on the gentle wind.
 On this mountain are the Fairies holding sway o'er the earth.
 Ethereal is their state and far removed from the storm of woe!
 How can they know the lives of the myriads of mortals,
 Falling 'mid mountainous precipices into sorrow and bitterness?
 You may ask the Censor concerning these mortals,
 Whether they can at the last attain to peace.

The following is a short extract from the Ch'a Ching (Tea Classic), composed by Lu Yu in the T'ang Dynasty :

"When it has been dried, tea takes on all kinds of shapes. In general the leaves look like shrunken Tartar's boots, or the breasts of oxen, . . . or drifting clouds arising in spirals from the mountains, or the effect of the wind playing upon the water, ruffling its surface, . . . or the effect of rain suddenly running in rivulets over newly cultivated ground. All these are excellent kinds of tea. Some are like bamboo shoots, firm, solid and difficult to steam and pound. . . . Others are like a lotus touched by the frost with withered stem and leaves."

* A name used by the poet of himself.

