Who Invented Tea? Legend vs Evidence

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Who invented tea, in summary:** A UK guide to tea origins: Shen Nong legend (2737 BC), Lu Yu Cha Jing (760 AD), and the answer. Why nobody "invented" tea.

"Who invented tea" has a charming legendary answer and a clear historical one, and the gap between them is itself the lesson. This sits in the history cluster beside the history of tea.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in May 2026.

Nobody invented it

Tea was not invented like a device; it was discovered and gradually developed as a use of a native Chinese plant over a very long period. The question itself slightly misframes how it happened: there is no single moment from "not tea" to "tea".

The Shen Nong legend

The famous story credits the mythic Chinese emperor Shen Nong, around 2737 BC, with discovering tea when leaves blew into boiling water. It is a cultural origin myth, charming and meaningful, but legend, not record.

What evidence suggests

Tea use developed in ancient China, first as medicine and food, later as a prepared drink, with solid documentation by the Tang dynasty when Lu Yu wrote the classic tea text, see tea in China.

Why the legend persists

Origin myths give a culture a tidy founding story; the Shen Nong tale endures because it is memorable and culturally resonant, which is exactly why careful history flags it as legend, see tea folklore.

Discovery vs spread

The more answerable questions are when tea became documented culture (Tang China) and how it spread (monks to Japan, traders west), see tea in Japan and to Britain.

The answer

If pressed: ancient China developed tea; no individual invented it; Shen Nong is legend; Lu Yu codified it. That is the defensible reply, see the history of tea.

Summary

Tea was discovered and developed in China over millennia, not invented by anyone; the emperor story is myth, the Tang era record is history, see the timeline.

Who invented tea? at a glance

Question	Answer
Did anyone "invent" tea?	No, tea was discovered and developed gradually over millennia
Legend says	Emperor Shen Nong, c. 2737 BC, leaves blew into boiling water
Status of legend	Cultural origin myth, not historical record
Earliest evidence	Tea residues in Han-dynasty tombs c. 200 BC; first used as medicine
First codified text	Lu Yu's Cha Jing, Tang dynasty c. 760-780 AD
Plant origin	Camellia sinensis, native to southwest China and northern Myanmar
Reached Japan	Buddhist monks brought tea c. 805-815 AD
Reached Europe	Portuguese and Dutch traders, 1500s-1600s
Reached Britain	Royal court 1662 (Catherine of Braganza), mass adoption 1700s
"Answer"	Ancient China, gradually, nobody specifically

Other origin legends

Shen Nong is the dominant Chinese myth, but not the only one. Buddhist tradition credits Bodhidharma, the monk who founded Chan/Zen: frustrated at falling asleep in meditation, he is said to have cut off his eyelids, which grew into the first tea plants. A Tibetan-Mongolian tale credits a steppe nomad. None are historical; each reflects a different cultural framing: imperial and medical, Buddhist and contemplative, nomadic and practical.

Taste the origin

The clearest way to meet this history is in the cup: a Chinese green tea or Dragonwell for the origin, a Pu-erh for the ancient post-fermented style, or the wider loose leaf range and full tea shop.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Spend less on prestige, more on freshness. Ancient as tea is, your own leaf should be young: two months on a supermarket shelf is fine, three years in a gift tin is not.

More tea history reading

- The history of tea
- Tea history timeline
- Lu Yu and the Cha Jing
- Tea in Japan
- Tea superstitions and folklore

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
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- Herbal tea
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- How to make tea properly
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