Tea in China: Where It All Began

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Chinese tea history, in summary:** A UK guide to Chinese tea history: origins, dynasty-by-dynasty development, six categories, global influence, what to buy to explore.

China is where tea began and where most of what we know as tea, the plant, the processing, the culture, was created. This sits in the history cluster beside the history of tea.

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

The origin

Tea is native to the China region and was used there first, medicinally and then as a drink, long before it was written down. China is not one chapter of tea history; it is the foundation, see who invented tea.

Tang dynasty: codification

By the Tang dynasty tea was established culture, and Lu Yu's Classic of Tea set out cultivation, preparation and appreciation, the first great tea text.

Song dynasty: refinement

The Song era refined whisked powdered tea and a connoisseur aesthetic, an ancestor of the style that later shaped Japanese matcha culture, see tea in Japan.

Ming dynasty: loose leaf

The Ming shift to steeped loose leaf tea (after the Hongwu Emperor banned compressed cake tea around 1391) created the brewing approach most of the world still uses, and drove the development of the tea types we know, see tea types.

Processing innovation

China developed the full spectrum, green, white, oolong, black, dark/pu erh, and the regional terroirs behind them, the deepest tea tradition anywhere, see oolong and black tea.

Export and legacy

Chinese tea drove the early global trade and remains central to tea culture and production today; almost every tea tradition descends from it, see the journey west.

What it boils down to

China invented and refined tea across the Tang, Song and Ming, creating the plant culture, the processing and the aesthetics the whole world inherited, see the history of tea.

In short: Tea in China

Period	What happened
Pre-history (around 2700 BCE)	Origin myth attributes tea discovery to Emperor Shennong; in reality wild tea was used in south-west China for medicine and food for centuries before any documented record
Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE)	First written references to tea as a drink; early commercial tea trade emerges in Sichuan and Yunnan
Tang dynasty (618-907)	Tea drinking becomes widespread across China; Lu Yu writes the Classic of Tea (Cha Jing) around 760 CE, codifying preparation and aesthetic
Song dynasty (960-1279)	Refinement of powdered tea (precursor to matcha); imperial tea competitions; tea ceremony aesthetics reach high sophistication
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)	Shift from powdered tea to loose-leaf brewing in teapots; the dominant pattern that continues today emerges
Qing dynasty (1644-1912)	Tea processing diversifies into the six categories we know today (white, green, yellow, oolong, black, dark/post-fermented); export boom to Europe via Canton
Modern era	China is the world's largest tea producer; full diversity of regional and processing traditions continues
Range of categories	All six classical tea categories were developed and refined in China; the entire global tea landscape descends from Chinese processing innovation

Taste Chinese tea

To explore the major Chinese categories, try Longjing green, Tieguanyin oolong, Da Hong Pao, Yunnan Pu-erh or Keemun black. Browse the wider loose leaf range or the full tea shop.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · If a tea on this page sounds appealing, just try it once. You learn more in one cup than in

twenty articles.

More tea history reading

For broader context see the tea growing regions overview and the Chinese tea tradition. For specific Chinese teas see the Tieguanyin, the Da Hong Pao and the Pu-erh. For broader history see tea and the British Empire and the gongfu cha method.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/