

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.

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for Tea in China: Where It All Began. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/tea-in-china-history/>*

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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The origin, Tea in China: Where It All Began. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/tea-in-china-history/>*

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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Tang dynasty: codification, Tea in China: Where It All Began. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/tea-in-china-history/>*

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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Song dynasty: refinement, Tea in China: Where It All Began. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/tea-in-china-history/>*

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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Ming dynasty: loose leaf, Tea in China: Where It All Began. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/tea-in-china-history/>*
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

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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

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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 medicinal and culinary purposes 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

Period	What happened
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

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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

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- [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](#).

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