

# THE ORIGIN OF TEA\*

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While China is acknowledged as the first country to cultivate and drink tea, there has existed some controversy regarding whether the tea plant originated in China, in other countries or in several countries independently of each other. During visits to China's tea producing areas, discussions with China's tea historians, and our own research, we have received information which supports the theory that China is the home of the tea plant.

Discussion of this subject seems appropriate at this time, since in 1979 China's tea production figures were second only to India's. After having its tea production almost eliminated during the World War II era, China has restored and expanded its plantation areas, and China teas have again taken their place as a major component of U.S. blends. During the third quarter of 1980, China was in third place among tea exporting countries to the U.S.

According to legend, tea was used in China as medicine as far back as 2000 B.C. Until the third century, tea leaves were used for medicine by boiling fresh leaves in water. Around that time, some people used tea as a daily beverage, and as it grew into a custom, tea processing began. Kuo Pu wrote an essay in the middle of the fourth century which made mention of methods of tea planting and drinking.

In A.D. 780, Lu Yu wrote in his *Book on Tea* that there was a wild tea tree growing in what is now the Sichuan-Hubei border area with a circumference so large that it took two men with arms outstretched to encircle it. In the *TAIPING WORLD CHRONICLE*, written 900 years ago during the Song Dynasty, it was reported that people

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climbed trees to pluck the tea leaves. The YUNNAN DALIFU RECORDS describe tea trees in the mountains growing over 10 feet high.

## WILD TEA TREES

Since 1939, when a researcher at the China Tea Research Institute discovered giant wild tea trees on the Laoying cliffs at Wuchuan, Guizhou Province, China has organized extensive research into the distribution of wild tea trees. Many were discovered growing 40 feet high in southern and eastern Sichuan, southern Yunnan and Guizhou.

Among the 29 trees discovered growing wild in the forests of Yunnan Province's Xishuangbanna area was the "King Tea Tree", over 100 feet high with a diameter of over three feet and more than 1,700 years old. In 1940 a Japanese tea expert reported that in Shandong Province there was a wild tea tree 50 feet high, whose circumference took three men to surround it.

Recently herb gatherers from a commune in Monghai County, Xishuangbanna, discovered tea trees whose trunks required up to four people to encircle them, and China's tea corporation plans to send a group to film this and other ancient trees in the primeval forests of Yunnan.

The wild tea trees provide only supplementary evidence as to where tea trees had their origin. Factors such as geography, climate and evolution are significant. The Yunnan and Guizhou plateaus and the Sichuan basin were part of the tropical northern land mass called "Laurasia" some 250 million years ago. India was attached to the southern land mass, "Gondwana", which was a frigid, barren zone.

The climate in the southwest China region then was ideal for the growth and propagation of plant life, being warm and damp with much rainfall. Since the area was untouched by the glaciers that swept from north China during the Quaternary Period Glaciation, the growth of ancient trees has been uninterrupted. These included the tea trees of the camellia genera, whose existence can be traced back geologically to the Tertiary period. The Botanical Research Institute in

Xishuangbanna has fossil evidence of ancient tea plants, along with many other varieties of ancient botanical life.

Yunnan's soil is red, yellow and grey, with an acidity of 4.5-6.7 in the tea areas. The lowest temperature is in January (12<sup>o</sup>C) and the highest in July (32<sup>o</sup>C). The average rainfall is 900-1800 mm. per year, making it possible for the tea trees to grow with green color all year round. Conditions here are exactly suited to the flourishing of the tea tree.

### WIDE VARIETY IN CAMELLIA FAMILY

In the world, there are 23 genera and 380 species of camellia. Ten genera grow in North and South America, and 13 genera grow in tropical and semi-tropical zones in Asia. All 13 genera and more than 260 species can be found in China, and of the species nearly 200 grow in Yunnan Province.

Of the 100 theaceae species in the world, 60 of them are in China's south-western region, making it a world center for theaceae. The concentration of theaceae species and closely related species here is so great that there is strong indication that this was the birthplace of the tea tree.

### BIRTHPLACE OF TEA

The people of Yunnan Province started planting and cultivating tea trees during the Three Kingdom Period (220-265 A.D), and they took seeds and young bushes to other areas, especially the Yangtze River area. Eventually tea seeds and plants were taken to Japan.

Dispersal of the tea plants also occurred by natural means. Rivers in Yunnan such as the Lan Tsiang, Lu Jiang and Luan Jiang carried the tea seeds to Vietnam and Burma, and from Burma waterways took them to India. Within China, the Yangtze River brought the seeds to Hunan Province, and the Pearl River brought them to Kwangtung. Conditions in other areas contributed to the change in the character of the original Yunnan big leaf tea to a smaller, more narrow leaf. The leaf remained large in Vietnam and India, and in Yunnan itself the tea leaf is

glossy, wide, and as long as seven inches.

The above geological and botanical considerations highlight the evidence supporting the theory that China in general, and Yunnan Province in particular, is the homeland of the tea tree which has given the people of China and the world so much enjoyment.