



Tea Philosophy

A healthy lifestyle and intangible cultural heritage By Bai Shi

Every spring, Chinese indulge in drinking copious amounts of fresh green tea picked and processed in the country's southern mountain areas. In particular, several days before and after the Tomb Sweeping Day (April 4), tea trees blessed with faintly scented buds and tender leaves at Longjing in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang Province, is regarded as one of the finest green teas in China.

Tea, as well as coffee and cocoa, are the world's three major non-alcoholic drinks. As the most popular drink in China, tea has a very long history and deep cultural tradition. In China, a popular proverb reads, "Rather go without salt for three days than without tea for a single one." In both ancient and modern times, drinking tea has formed an important part of daily life. In East Asian countries in particular, it is regarded as a graceful social activity.

Along with high-speed growth of the Chinese economy since the 1990s, tea culture has yet again come to the fore, with demand ever increasing and teahouses sprouting across the country.

Today, tea is widely planted in China with several hundreds of varieties. Tea is mainly divided into seven major categories including green, black, oolong, scented, white, yellow and dark green. People drink different teas in different seasons. Generally speaking, people usually drink scented tea in spring, green tea in summer, dark green tea in autumn and black tea in winter, in order to help the drinker adapt to changes in the weather.

Since time immemorial, tea has been a daily necessity in China, and drinking it a lifestyle preserved over centuries. It has maintained its popularity in China mainly because of its health

benefits. For example, in summer, green tea seems to dispel the heat and increases feelings of relaxation, while in winter, black tea helps warm the stomach and mitigates cold weather. It is particularly good for elderly people to regularly drink tea. For this reason, tea-houses can be seen in towns and cities across the country, providing elderly retirees with a spot to meet and chat over several cups.

When the Chinese first discovered wild tea shrubs 2,000 years ago, tea leaves were mainly used as herbal medicine. Today, according to medical research, tea contains a number of chemicals, of which 20 to 30 percent is tannic acid, known for its anti-inflammatory and germicidal properties. It also contains an alkaloid (5 percent, mainly caffeine), a stimulant for the nerve center and the process of metabolism. The aromatics in tea may also help digesting meat and fat. The drink is also rich in various vitamins and, for smokers, helps to discharge nicotine from the lungs.

Despite the many benefits, there are several rules to tea drinking. For instance, people should not drink tea before meals because it could stimulate an empty stomach and not before sleep because of its caffeine content. Drinking of over-strong tea may also induce heart and blood-pressure disorders. Do not drink tea steeped overnight, as its chemicals could harm the stomach. Last but not least, never drink tea water to help swallow medicine as it could adversely impact the effect of drugs.

Though China has long been home to a tea culture, this intangible cultural heritage underwent a serious decline due to war and political unrest in the first half of the 20th century. Most classic books about tea culture were lost during this time.

However, some of the traditions of tea culture were preserved and passed down. Kungfu cha (cha means tea in Chinese) is a popular tea-



TEA BUSINESS: Two customers inquire about newly arrived green tea at a shop in Beijing on April 11



FRESH GREENS: Farmers harvest spring tea from a hill in Hubei Province on March 24

drinking etiquette from Guangdong and Fujian provinces. The tea name kungfu in this sense relates to the time and work that go into brewing, serving and drinking and not the martial art kung fu.

Kungfu tea serves as an important tradition uniting families. In the past, a great number of people in Chaozhou, a coastal city in Guangdong Province, went abroad to make a living. In doing so they made kungfu tea wherever they resettled. Though these overseas Chinese have lived abroad for an extended period of time, drinking kungfu tea was a reminder of home.

"The survival of kungfu tea relies on unity of the family," said Chen Xiangbai, an inheritor of kungfu tea tradition and researcher at the China International Tea Culture Institute. "As long as families exist, kungfu tea will not disappear," he added. ■

History of Tea

The earliest record of tea is found in the ancient medicine book Shen Nong's *Herbal Classic*, compiled by various practitioners during the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.) to the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220). According to the text, tea leaves were first discovered and tested to be healthy for human consumption by Shen Nong (also called Yan Emperor), a great ancestor of the Chinese nation who lived around 5,000 years ago. Until the Western Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-A.D.9), tea was mainly used as herbal medicine before it gradually became a daily drink.

Tea drinking has been popular in south China over a long period. Not until the Tang Dynasty (618-907) did tea drinking spread across the entire country, in part helped by a poet Lu Yu's (733-804) *The Book of Tea*, the first and most comprehensive academic

take on the origins, processing and drinking of tea in ancient China.

In the year 760, the poet secluded himself in a small village in the mountains of east China's Zhejiang Province to focus solely on the completion of his book on tea. Lu often explored the woods and mountains alone to look for sweet spring water and collect wild tea leaves as well as revel in the beautiful landscape. According to his book, natural spring water and wild tea are the best match for that perfect taste.

Advocated by Lu, tea culture should not only concentrate on the taste and color of the drink, but also emphasize the ware, environment and season for drinking it.

Thanks to his book, tea ascended to the level of art. During the Tang Dynasty, the culture of tea reached great heights and eventually spread to Southeast Asia and Japan.