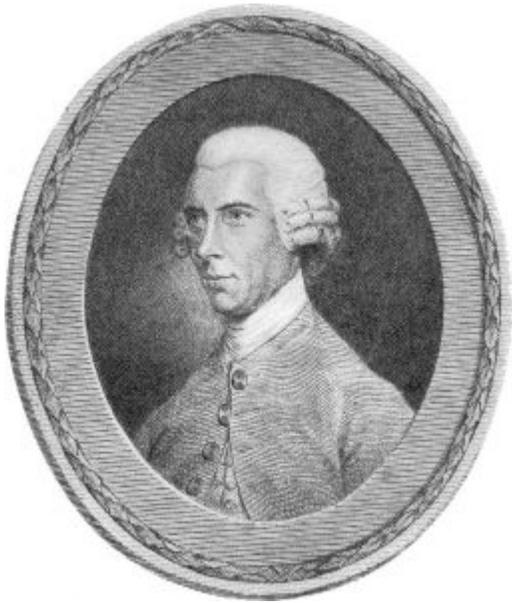


On Lettsom's literary lineage: early European writers on tea

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I've recently been considering the question of identifying the seminal works in tea literature. Every student of tea will quickly learn of Lu Yu's *Classic of Tea* 茶經, around **780**, and of course the landmark work in the English language, *All About Tea* by William Ukers in **1935**. These are the obvious selections which we will cover at a later date.

In my opinion, an early seminal work worth reviewing would be John Coakley Lettsom's [*The Natural History of the Tea-Tree*](#) of **1772**. 160 years before Ukers does the same thing, Lettsom attempted to digest and summarize all of the tea-related information available at his time, collating botanical, medical, and historical writing into a coherent general survey. Lettsom's is also the first English work entirely focused upon the subject of tea, granting it a unique place in its history - published prior to the era dominated by the East India Company, it is a relatively apolitical and objective book. It is also significant for its influence, as much of the West's later understanding of tea was founded upon and shaped by Lettsom's work, which was widely read, analyzed, and cited for many years.



John Coakley Lettsom (1744-1815)

Before we review Lettsom's work in [another essay](#), however, we should probably take a tour of the writing on tea that existed before him - that is, the materials Lettsom himself collected and studied. We're going to focus on European works, as much Chinese and Japanese writing on tea has only become available in modern times. We will also focus on English literature; while the Dutch, Germans and French all had their fascination with tea at one time or another, it was England that most passionately adopted tea into its own national culture, and in turn most greatly influenced today's understanding of tea.

1588-1615 : first & foremost

(*Disclaimer*: if you happen to do a little research on this subject yourself, you will soon come across the assertion that a Portuguese Jesuit, [Jasper de Cruz](#), was the first European to drink tea and/or write about tea and/or bring tea back to Europe, around **1560**. It would appear that de Cruz is included in Samuel Purchas's compendium of explorer's stories, *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, however, this was not published until 1613, and more to the point, there is no reference to de Cruz or Purchas by name in any of the materials I have yet been able to personally review for this essay, so I have chosen not to include de Cruz's story as pertinent to this essay's subject.)

The earliest mention of tea in European literature available in Lettsom's time is Giovanni Pietro Maffei's *Historiarum Indicarum*, Book IV, of **1588**. Maffei was a Jesuit writer who collected his order's correspondence and documentation regarding their missions in the far East - in these letters, the writers describing Asia occasionally mention tea culture. For example, the explorer/conqueror Francisco de Almeida wrote a letter in 1565, included in Maffei's work, that describes Japan's love of antique teapots. There are also notices of tea elsewhere in Maffei's work (Books VI and XII), but unfortunately I haven't tracked these books down yet, so I can't verify them myself - but his work is regularly cited and quoted by many tea authors following.



Title page from Linschoten, 1598.

1596 sees the publication of *Itinerario: Voyage, 1579-1592*. This is the journal of naval explorer Jan Huygen van Linschoten; it was translated into English by William Philip in **1598**, making it the earliest mention I can find in the English language describing tea. Discussing the eating habits of the Japanese, Linschoten writes:

...after their meat they use a certain drink, which is a pot with hot water, which they drink as hot as ever they may endure, whether it be winter or summer.... the aforesaid warm water is made with the powder of a certain herb called Chaa, which is much esteemed, and is well accounted of among them, and all such as are of any countenance or ability have the said water kept for them in a secret place, and the

gentlemen make it themselves, and when they will entertain any of their friends, they give him some of that warm water to drink: for the pots wherein they sieve it, and wherein the herb is kept, with the earthen cups which they drink it in, they esteem as much of them, as we do of diamonds, rubies and other precious stones...

Giovanni Botero's *Tre Libri delle Cause della Grandezza delle Città* is published in Venice in **1589**. Botero's Italian is translated into English in **1606** by Robert Peterson as *A Treatise, Concerning the Causes of the Magnificence and Greatness of Cities, Divided into Three Books*. For a very long time it is this work that is constantly cited as "the first European writer mentioning tea" - this is likely because Botero was the first "serious" writer who documents tea in his work (Maffei's work is the correspondence of missionaries, and Linschoten's an explorer's diary). Botero's work was a philosophical analysis of the culture and structure of Asian cities, many of which were already boasting populations that were simply mind-boggling to the European reader. However, Botero wrote almost nothing about tea - only this one little sentence:

Hanno anco un'herba onde causano succo delicato, delquale si seruono in vece di vino, ma che li mantiene sani, e liberi da quei mali, che suol partorire à noi l'uso immoderato del vino.

or, to update Peterson's translation:

They [the Chinese] also have an herb, from which they press a delicate juice they use for drink instead of wine. It preserves their health and frees them from all of those evils that the immoderate use of wine breeds among us.

Pierre de Jarric's *Histoire des Choses Plus Memorables* appears in **1610**. Jarric was not a missionary himself, but he collected and indexed the correspondence and journals of the Jesuit missionaries in Asia into this widely-read survey of the Indian, Chinese, and

Japanese empires. The work was translated into Latin, making it available to academia, in **1615**.

Also in **1615** is the publication of Matteo Ricci's *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas Suscepta ab Societate Jesu*. Ricci was an Italian Jesuit and was the practical founder of the Jesuit mission to China; his encyclopedic notes on China's tradition and society were edited and expanded by Nicolas Trigault. Of course, there is a focus on Chinese religion (and how the Jesuits might open them to their form of Christianity), but the often insightful work provided Europe a valuable introduction to Chinese culture. Ricci's text, with Trigault's liberal additions, establishes a few early beliefs about tea, including some false assumptions that will be repeated for many years thereafter.

1623-1665 : early & erroneous

Gaspard Bauhin includes "Chaa" in his *Pinax Theatri Botanici* in **1623**. Though the text itself is very brief, this is of great importance as the first documentation of tea by a *botanist* in Europe - the West's first scientific writing on tea, if you will. Unfortunately Bauhin had absolutely no information to include other than what he extracted from Linschoten, whom he cites as his only source. The esteemed botanist does not seem to pursue tea any further - the entry is entirely unchanged in the second edition of the *Pinax*, nearly 50 years later.

Simon Paulli includes tea in his *Quadripartitum Botanicum* of **1639**, but we're going to leave this to the side for the moment - Paulli comes back with a vengeance in a few years so we'll check in with him then.

In **1641**, Nicolaes Tulp publishes his three-volume masterwork, *Observationum Medicarum* (or *Observationes Medicae*, as the second edition of **1652** is titled). Tulp was one of the most widely respected medical professionals in Europe of his time, a renowned authority on anatomy, dissection, and biology. His inclusion of tea amounts to a relatively

expansive three pages of text, and presented the European scientific community with its most authoritative writing yet on this plant, with a particular eye towards its medicinal value. In his observations, Tulp asserts the following about tea:

- Tea is the most common beverage in the East, called *Thee* in China, and *T'chia* in Japan. (This last part was incorrect: *thee* (“tay”) was the word in the Amoy dialect used by merchants with whom the Dutch empire traded. In most spoken Chinese, the word was *cha*, as it remains today.)
- A botanical description of the tea plant, outlining leaf color and shape, and root structure, is provided; Tulp cites differences in the Chinese and Japanese versions and mentions it is also grown in Thailand.
- “It is universally believed, that there is no plant so wholesome, both in adulthood and continuing into extremely advanced age, especially to impede whatsoever may inconvenience good health.”
- Tea invigorates (“enlivens the body”) and prevents kidney and gall stones; it is effective against headache, cold, allergies, depression, and indigestion.
- Tea prevents sleep “without any troubling effects”, allowing one to work effectively late into the night without drowsiness.
- Tulp repeats Trigault’s assertion that “the use of this plant was not known in old China, nor has it been in fashion a very long time” because the Chinese character for tea had only recently come into use, and did not exist in any older texts. (This is also incorrect, but would be repeated many times by European writers on Tulp’s eminent authority.)
- He further describes the differences in the Chinese and Japanese methods of preparing tea. In Japan, they “make a powder of these plants, and ground up, place it in a stone vessel of heated water”, while “the Chinese use the plant, with a little salt, loaded with sugar, out of which they decoct the liquor several times”.

Tulp’s errors are innocent enough, in that his information came from an impressive library and is completely derived from the writings of others; he himself never traveled to Asia. Tea had already been imported into the Netherlands for several decades by the Dutch East India Company, and being in the higher class of society as a royally-appointed surgeon, there is no doubt Tulp would have enjoyed the best tea available to his country at some time or another, but this would represent the limit of his personal experience.

Tulp provides his sources and cites Maffei, Jarric, Linschoten, and Ricci. He also cites the *Historia de Japan* by Luís Fróis - Fróis was a Portuguese missionary who worked on a book outlining Japanese history and culture. Technically, Fróis's work would have been among the first European writing on tea, as it was completed sometime around 1590; unfortunately the manuscript was not actually published until the 1900s, and apparently Tulp was one of the lucky few to have seen a copy.

Between Tulp's first and second editions a few more authors add their notes to the mix. Jacob de Bondt publishes *De Medicina Indorum* in **1642**; this work contains an early illustration of tea, though it is not a particularly good one. In **1647** Adam Olearius (Adam Ölschläger) documented his diplomatic travels in *Beschreibung der Muscowitischen und Persischen Reise*, which was translated by John Davies into English as *The Voyages and Travels of the Ambassadors Sent by Frederick, Duke of Holstein, to the Great Duke of Muscovy and the King of Persia* in **1662**. In his notes, Olearius describes the Persian culture of drinking "Tzai Chattai Chane", Chinese tea imported by Tartar merchants through what is today Uzbekistan. Bernhard Varen briefly touches upon Japanese tea culture in his *Descriptio Regni Japoniae* of **1649**, and in **1651** another botanist documents tea (sort of) when Johann Bauhin copies his brother Gaspard's notes into his own encyclopedic work, *Historia Plantarum Universalis*.

We get more reports from an influential missionary in **1653** in Alexandre de Rhodes, *Sommaire des Divers Voyages et Missions Apostoliques*. Shortly after, Ole Worm throws in his two cents - Worm maintained one of the greatest private collections of natural curiosities in Europe's history, and proudly included a real (dried) tea leaf in his collection. Tea is described in his collection's catalog, the *Museum Wormianum*, in **1655**; also included is a terrible illustration.



Tea leaf, from Worm, 1655.

Johan Albrecht von Mandelslo, another explorer-adventurer, mentions tea in his memoirs, *Morgenländische Reyse- Beschreibung*, in **1656**. Athanasius Kircher includes tea in his cultural description of China, in *China Illustrata*, **1658**, in which he describes tea as a wondrously healthy beverage, greatly conducive to the work of an intellectual.

The botanists strike back in **1659**, and it's those pesky Bauhin brothers again! This time it's a book edited by Gaspard Bauhin, *Hortus, sive Index Onomasticus Plantarum*, which contains an extended botanical description of tea by Denis Joncquet.

By this time, tea had been working its way into the culture and economy of England, albeit slowly, and in **1660** we have the first Parliamentary notice of tea under King Charles II - Act 12 Cha. 2 c. 23 declares a duty "for every gallon of chocolate, sherbet and tea, made and sold, to be paid by the maker thereof, 8d." This represents the first English law on tea as a commodity, a quiet harbinger of what would become one of the most notorious eras in the history of human commercial enterprise.

1665-1722 : incensed & inane

The first true enemy of tea was Simon Paulli, mentioned earlier as the author of the botanical-medical treatise *Quadripartitum Botanicum* (1639). In **1665** he publishes what I believe to be the first book **warning** the world about tea, *Commentarius de Abusu Tabaci Americanorum Veteri, et Herbae Thee Asiaticorum in Europa Novo*. Paulli was a respected man of medicine and botany and so his book carried some weight, and he took the opportunity to decry the many terrible consequences of drinking tea. In his long essay he outlines many serious and debilitating effects, most of which were the results of ingesting hot water regularly, which Paulli believed to inappropriately alter the balance of the fluids and biles believed to regulate the body's functions. At this time, tea was also being connected to "nervous disorder", and blamed for causing hysteria, fainting fits, loss of consciousness, depression, flagging of the spirits, and loss of appetite.

Paulli's opinions were founded solidly upon certain core beliefs of the medical profession of his time, but his attack upon tea seems to be at least slightly contrived. Certainly, there may be political-economic reason for this: Paulli was Danish, and Denmark at this time was concerned about the wildly successful Dutch trade in tea. Paulli may have been encouraged by his benefactors - or his own patriotism - to curb Europe's demand for tea. It's hard to be sure, but nonetheless Paulli's work sparks a period of intense, sometimes angry debate about the medical benefits (or threats) presented by tea, and a number of writers and medical men opine both positively and negatively on the subject.

For the next few years we get mostly explorer's books, which were all the rage in Europe at the time. **1668** sees Erasmus Finx publish *Ost- und West-Indischer wie auch Sinesischer Lust- und Stats- Garten*, a descriptive book on gardening that mentions the tea plant. In **1669**, John Ogilby translates Johan Nieuhof's *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces*, in which is described a tea service in the context of a diplomatic mission. In **1670**, Olfert Dapper, a Dutch historian, writes *Gedenkwaardig Bedryf der Nederlandsche Oost-Indische Maetschappye, op de Kuste en in Het Keizerrijk van Taising of Sina* - his observations of China were basically stolen by Ogilby and published in English as the *Atlas Chinensis* by "Arnold Montanus" in **1671**,

and also include a brief mentioning of tea. In **1676**, Thomas Bartholin publishes the essay “De Herba Thé Asiaticorum” in the scientific journal *Acta Medica et Philosophica Hafniensia*.

As Simon Paulli hated tea so much, it was only a matter of time before we would get the equal and opposite reaction, an author who loved tea perhaps a little too much and wrote some nonsense about it. That would be the good doctor Cornelis Bontekoe, who in **1678** wrote the infamous *Tractaat van Het Excellenste Kruid Thee*. This book was the precise opposite of Paulli’s, and Bontekoe portrays tea as a nearly miraculous cure-all, ascribing it all sorts of wondrous qualities both real and imagined. Bontekoe went much too far in his enthusiasm, however – at one point recommending that one could be healthy and happy drinking up to **two hundred cups of tea a day**. As much as I love tea, even I think he may have been exaggerating.

Bontekoe’s work has long been accused of being politically motivated, and there seems little doubt that there was some non-scientific element in his thinking. Bontekoe, an accomplished Dutch physician and writer, may have been moved to exaggerate tea’s powers, to raise interest in his country’s exotic and lucrative commodity. While many things Bontekoe wrote were at least partially grounded in truth, his boundless enthusiasm is every bit as suspicious as are Paulli’s gloomy warnings of death and disorder.

After Bontekoe, things settle down a little. The botanist Jacob Breyne attempts an authoritative definition of tea in his *Exoticarum Plantarum Centuria Prima* of **1678**. This is followed by another medical-philosophical essay, this time by Johann Pechlin, who publishes *Theophilus Bibaculus sive de Potu Theae Dialogus* in **1684**. John Chamberlain, in London, gives us *The Manner of Making Coffee, Tea and Chocolate* in **1685**. We get a short description of tea from another Jesuit missionary when Guy Tachard publishes *Voyage de Siam* in **1686** (translated into English two years later).



Tab. 94, from Boccone, 1697.

The botanists are back in action for a few years thereafter; Breyne describes tea again in *Prodromi Fasciculi Rariorum Plantarum* in **1689**, followed by Leonard Plukenet's *Almagestum Botanicum* of **1696** and Paolo Boccone's *Museo di Piante Rare* of **1697**. All three of these works provide illustrations of the tea plant, though they are of dubious quality and likely from long-dead samples. Also around this time (**1692** to be exact), the German gardener and botanist George Meister publishes the account of his personal visits to the gardens of the east, in which he painstakingly describes many new species he discovers there, including tea. His *Der Orientalisch-Indianische Kunst- und Lustgärtner* would be republished in 1731 and was a very respected work among German scientists.

Louis le Comte was an influential French Jesuit who lived in China several years as a missionary. Upon his return, his memoirs were published in Paris in **1696**, and in **1697** an English language edition, *Memoirs and Observations*, is published in London. Le Comte's writings were very widely read and respected, and paint a detailed picture of Chinese life, economy, and culture. Importantly, he provides some of our earliest information regarding the cultivation of tea, a subject of increasing interest to the European powers. Further, he names and describes specific varieties of tea, and outlines their qualities and commercial value. Le Comte's notes on tea would be relied upon and repeatedly cited by European writers for the following century.

William Dampier's *Voyages and Descriptions*, in **1699**, includes a few words on the use and selling of "chau" in southeast Asia. Daniel Duncan provides a medical evaluation against the abuse of tea in *Avis Salulaire, a Tout Le Monde, Contre l'Abus des Choses Chaudes* in **1705** (translated the following year) - as the title indicates, Duncan was a strong opponent of consuming any hot beverages, as unbalancing the body and 'disturbing the animal spirits'. Plukenet publishes another botanical description the same year in his *Almatheum Botanicum*.

In **1712** we get Engelbert Kaempfer's *Amoenitatum Exoticarum*. Kaempfer is a very important figure in our story, but we're going to come back to him in a few years when his writing is translated into English. (*Whatcha gonna do when Kaempfermania runs wild on you, brother?*)

Jacques Barrelier references tea in his *Plantae per Galliam, Hispaniam et Italiam* of **1714**. The German botanist Johann Georg Siegesbeck (curator of the gardens of St. Petersburg) includes tea in one of his early reference works, possibly his *Dissertationem Inauguralem Medico Botanicam de Rorella* of **1716** (I am not entirely sure of this, however, as I've not located and translated this work) - importantly, Siegesbeck strongly asserted that green tea, as it was found in Europe, **must** be artificially colored. The explorer Jean-Baptiste Labat describes the use of tea in the Caribbean islands in his *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de l'Amerique* of **1722**.

1727-1750 : Kaempfer & chemistry

Engelbert Kaempfer traveled ten years in Asia, studying medicine and natural history throughout the eastern empires, with a particular focus on Japan. His *Amoenitatum Exoticarum* of 1712 provided a detailed description of Japanese plants and their medicinal uses, documenting many of these plants for the first time in the west. His work was relied upon for generations of authors studying Japan and botany.

In **1727**, John Gaspar Scheuchzer translated Kaempfer's writing into English, published as *The History of Japan*. It is this work that became so influential in English literature and was cited by nearly every author who followed, down to this very day. Kaempfer's work covered a wide range of subjects and included a vast amount of information, but of greatest interest to us is the essay "The Natural History of the Japanese Tea" appended to Scheuchzer's translation. In this essay, Kaempfer provides us much information about tea in Japan for the first time, and rather than short secondhand notes, Kaempfer researched the subject in detail and provides us fine explanations of the different aspects of tea based on his direct and personal observations. Kaempfer also provides us this illustration of the tea plant, long held to be the most accurate and useful representation in early European literature:



Fig. 138, from Kaempfer, 1906 reprint.

Kaempfer's essay contains detailed descriptions of the biology, cultivation, origin, and manufacture of tea. He precisely outlines the gathering, preparation, and commercial varieties of tea in Japan, then goes on to provide illustrations of a complete set of Japanese tea equipment, along with a description of how each item is used. His observations on tea are wonderfully attentive, and remarkably accurate. He also illuminates his work with a few interesting anecdotes, including a legendary story of the origin of tea (Darma and his eyelids), and a story of the teapots of Maurigasima (basically, the Asian version of Atlantis).

Kaempfer may need his own blog entry someday, but let's move on for the moment, there's much yet to cover. Ephraim Chambers includes an entry on "Tea" in his *Cyclopaedia* of **1728** (one of the first English encyclopedias). Thomas Short publishes *A Dissertation Upon Tea* in **1730**, attempting to understand the chemical properties of tea and its effects on the human body.

By this time, tea's popularity in Europe as a beverage is soaring - so much so, in fact, that "false tea" becomes a serious problem. Particularly in England, dishonest merchants sold the leaves of sloe, ash, and a host of other plants, which had been prepared, scented, colored, or otherwise processed. British Parliament brings the hammer down in **1731** with the "Adulteration Act" (Act 4 Geo. 2 c. 14 s 11): anyone caught adulterating tea would receive the seriously hefty fine of £10 per pound of false tea.

Noël-Antoine Pluche touches upon tea in **1732's** *Le Spectacle de la Nature*, a very well-respected philosophical work on natural history.

In **1733** comes the English translation of Eusèbe Renaudot's *Ancient Accounts of India and China, by Two Mohammedan travelers, Who Went to Those Parts in the 9th Century*. This work is important because, as the title indicates, it reaches further back into history and provides us an early view of tea trade and culture. Renaudot's work itself is his French translation of the writings of Arabic explorers. Since information in these writings refutes some of the then-current European beliefs on tea, Renaudot feels free to present his own short history and scientific essay about the plant.

Jean Baptiste du Halde, in **1735**, unleashes his *Description Géographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique et Physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie*. du Halde's work is some serious business - a four-volume monster that attempts to present the most complete picture possible explaining China. The first English edition is published in **1736** and this popular work was reissued several times in quick succession. Of course there is a description of tea included, but personally I'm having a hell of a time assembling a complete copy of any one edition of du Halde's work, so I can't quite piece it together.

Caspar Neumann publishes *Vom Thee, Coffee, Bier, und Wein* in **1735**. Neumann's analysis of tea was translated into English by William Lewis in **1759**. Neumann was renowned across Europe for earlier scientific work and so his study was very well respected, and considered authoritative by most authors following. Having studied tea in German, he relies and comments most heavily upon his fellow authors Meister, Boerhave, and Siegesbeck, but also writes a few disparaging comments about Simon Paulli's anti-tea campaign, and references some of the English authors of the time. While Neumann was known primarily as a chemist, his essay on tea is not purely chemical in nature, but presents a broad review of the scientific literature up to Neumann's time with a few personal observations thrown in for good measure. Neumann takes a pragmatic view of the medicinal quality of tea, acknowledging that it helps suppress appetite, ward off sleepiness, and is useful for dispelling the headaches that come "after a debauch" (in other words, tea is good for hangovers). He also warns that excessive use of tea would not be without consequences, and touches upon the belief that tea is a narcotic plant unless properly aged - he readily admits, however, that "in Europe there is no danger of its being used too new".

Carl Linnaeus publishes his early work, the *Hortus Cliffortianus*, in **1737**. He includes "Thea" and collates information from Breyne, Kaempfer, Barrelier, Boccone, Bauhin, etc., into his first attempt to botanically define the eastern plant. Linnaeus is, of course, by far the most important figure in the history of botanical study, but this is just a precursor to his masterwork, coming up in just a few years - wait for it!

Simon Mason publishes *The Good and Bad Effects of Tea Consider'd* in London, **1745**; it would be reissued in 1758 for good measure. In it, Mason attempts to present a consideration of both sides of "the tea question" and present his medical opinions on the truth of the matter.

Things get weird again in **1748**, when the moralist John Wesley writes his incredibly bizarre *A Letter to a Friend, Concerning Tea*. Wesley was a very religious man who focused his life on preaching his personal approach to Methodism, what would eventually become known as Wesleyanism. He was quite controversial, directly challenging the religious authorities of England, and exerting his personal influence to recruit and outfit

followers. During his life he published many small works on various subjects, but all were centered on his system of faith.

At his time, there are still plenty of health concerns throughout England regarding the use of tea. Possibly because of the continued plague of falsified tea, many people were reporting health issues arising from the use of too much tea, experiencing general weakness, faintness, hysteria, anxiety, and so on. Wesley himself used tea while a student at Oxford, and in his *Letter* describes his health concerns after drinking too much (basically, his hands shook); he then decided he would quit drinking tea and fight off this “paralytic disorder”.

Wesley’s *Letter* is an excruciatingly detailed guide on how to quit drinking tea. The writing is difficult to parse, in that it continually mixes dogmatic command with specious assumptions about medicine in general, and the chemistry and history of tea in particular. Much of his letter, interestingly, counsels the faithful on how to resist the **peer pressure** associated with tea. Wesley eventually descends into full-on religious fervor, and demands his followers renounce tea as a superfluous and immoral pleasure.

Carl Linnaeus tries again in **1749** with his *Materia Medica, de Plantis*, but we have to wait a few more years before he truly turns the world upside-down.

Thomas Short returns to the scene with his *Discourses on Tea, Sugar, Milk, Made-Wines, Spirits, Punch, Tobacco, etc.* of **1750**. In this work he presents a brief commercial history of the tea plant, documenting the early importations of the East India Company and the history of tea duties in England. He also provides a chemical analysis of the components of tea and a breakdown of the positive and negative health effects of it – he particularly recommends tea for “gentlemen of a sprightly genius” and considers it best when taken in moderation by those engaged in intellectual labor, for its focusing and invigorating properties. This is well in line with common medical opinion on tea throughout Europe, where most doctors believe that those who engage in mental, not physical, labor, are to be most benefited by the use of tea.

1753-1772 : Linnaeus & lunacy

In **1753**, Carl Linnaeus publishes the first edition of his masterwork, the *Species Plantarum*. It would be impossible to overstate the importance of this work on botany in particular, and European science in general, and so even though Linnaeus never directly studied the tea plant, his writings are of such importance that they must be noticed here.

Just in case you weren't into biology, Linnaeus was responsible for codifying the system we use to organize and name species of plants and animals with names like *Homo sapiens* and *Tyrannosaurus Rex*. Linnaeus's "sexual system" worked, and though it was debated for some time, has formed the foundation of modern biology ever since.

Having a standardized system for naming and organizing plants set the botanical world on fire. Not only did explorers and botanists now have an easy way to name the new species they discovered, but researchers were now able to go back over older works, and cross-reference notes from various observers into a complete picture of any single plant. Needless to say, Europe's growing fascination with tea dovetailed very nicely with this, and as Linnaeus is the patron saint of all botanists, of course his notes on tea were cited as gospel for ever afterward. Much to Linnaeus's credit, he was tortured by not being able to observe a living tea plant himself, and much effort and expense was spent on trying to have one brought back to him by visitors to China.

After many failures, Linnaeus did collect a living tea plant, and nurtured it for several years in his scientific gardens in Sweden. This documented fact changed everything - **tea could grow in Europe!** That meant that cultivating tea as a cash crop might be possible, and the enormous wealth that could be achieved by pulling off such a miracle did not escape the attention of the European monarchs.

Linnaeus's *Species Plantarum* would be updated in a second edition of 1762, and a third ("Viennese") edition of 1764. In the first edition, tea is included as a single species, *Thea*

sinensis. But in the second and third editions, Linnaeus lists two distinct species: *Thea bohea* and *Thea viridis*. The *bohea* is the tea plant that is prepared into the [red tea](#) sold to Europe, while *viridis* is the “green tea plant” used only in China and Japan — in other words, Linnaeus supposed that red tea and green tea were made from two distinct species. What is interesting to note is that all of Linnaeus’s reputable citations fall under the *bohea* species - the only supporting reference for the *viridis* species is the opinion of the extremely dubious John Hill. We’ll be getting to that guy in just a few moments.

In **1757** we get Carl Gustaf Ekeberg, *Kort Berättelse om den Chinesiska Landt-Hushåldningen*. Ekeberg was a sea-captain who explored the East Indies on behalf of Sweden in Linnaeus’s time - in fact, it is Ekeberg who is credited with successfully bringing the great botanist Europe’s first living tea plant, in 1763. Ekeberg mentions tea in his writing, which is translated into English in 1771 as *A Short Account of the Chinese Husbandry* - but it is a very short note indeed. Ekeberg’s essay is appended by the translator, John Reinhold Forster, to his translation of Pehr Osbeck’s *Dagbok Öfwer en Ostindisk Resa Åren (A Voyage to China and the East Indies)*, but actually it is in Forster’s footnotes themselves we find the most information on tea.

And so we arrive at Jonas Hanway’s *An Essay on Tea*. Certainly a notorious work, so it’s worth noticing here. Hanway was a malignant self-righteous creature who enjoyed an unreasonable amount of power and privilege. He did good things as a philanthropist, such as founding hospitals, but because of this he thought of himself as morally superior, and constantly tried to push his personal brand of frugality and self-denial onto the rest of British society. He was famous for being the first man in London to carry an umbrella (so he wouldn’t have to pay cab fares), and for his intense personal campaign against the practice of tipping. He was the kind of guy who printed pamphlets of his ‘philosophical’ essays, and brought them to parties to hand out to the other guests. Fun.

In **1756** Hanway self-published a charming invective against tea - *An Essay on Tea, Considered as Pernicious to Health, Obstructing Industry, and Impoverishing the Nation: also an Account of its Growth, and Great Consumption in These Kingdoms, with Several Political Reflections; and Thoughts on Public Love: in Thirty-Two Letters to Two Ladies*. His drivel is exactly as entertaining as it sounds.

Hanway's "essay" is presented as a series of interminable letters to two anonymous women of power and influence. His letters alternately whimper and bark, lecturing his audience on a seemingly random set of subjects that had crossed his mind. He jumps from conclusion to conclusion with no regard to rationality, weaving the whole of his ideas together into a babbling fount of lunacy on patriotism, personal hygiene, moral rectitude, bowel movements, and feminine beauty, among other things.

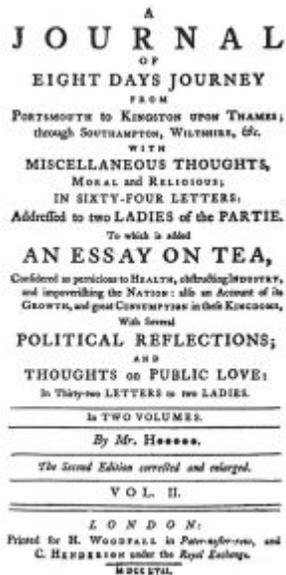
Hanway insists that tea is every bit as awful as gin, a source of death and destitution to the poor, debility and depression to the rich (my words, not his - I'm a much better writer). He was particularly concerned about children, being the founder of the orphans' hospital, but how many homeless kids could possibly have been chugging gin and tea? He informs his readers that their interest in tea is a symptom of moral weakness, and admonishes that if they really loved their country, they would only drink beverages made from plants grown in England. He even suggests some recipes, most of which, sadly, taste like horse farts.

He is at his craziest and most disturbing when his rant turns to "won't someone think of the children?" territory. At his lowest moment, Hanway insists that large numbers of children die every year **because** their nannies are away drinking tea, and seriously suggests that nannies deliberately murder children under their care, so that they could enjoy longer tea breaks!!! This is merely one of Hanway's many bizarre accusations against tea, but it is the most indicative of his flimsy grip on reality, his incredible prejudices against the poor, and his fervent desperation to shock his readers into action.

Hanway printed the work himself and distributed it to people in high society at every opportunity. I have no personal doubt that many of those people found Hanway as ridiculous and repulsive as I do, and therefore it is not difficult to imagine someone having great fun getting a copy to Dr. Johnson for him to skewer.

Samuel Johnson was king of the intellectual mountain in London, beloved for his witty literary reviews. In 1756, he receives a copy of Hanway's "letters", and he mentions them in passing in the *Literary Magazine*. He openly identifies the author as Hanway (the

book's title page had only shown "Mr. H—") and explains that the letters "were not written to be printed; they were printed, perhaps, only because they had been written".



Title page, from Hanway, 1757.

Hanway makes the terrible mistake of telling Johnson to wait for a second edition before daring to review the work. Hanway's new "expanded" edition is published in **1757** and Johnson pounces, absolutely savaging it in a scathing and hilarious review. It is brilliantly funny and Johnson seems to genuinely enjoy taking Hanway apart - many writers have commented that Johnson's already keen wit was on an even higher level because of his personal love for tea. In his review, Johnson famously describes himself as:

...a hardened and shameless tea drinker, who has for twenty years diluted his meals with only the infusion of this fascinating plant, whose kettle has scarcely time to cool, who with tea amuses the evening, with tea solaces the midnight, and with tea welcomes the morning.

Johnson was a formidable influence in London in his own right, and there is no question that most of the ladies and gentlemen who read Hanway's work shared in Johnson's great amusement, and love for tea. Unfortunately, however, Hanway was a proud and

powerful man himself, and he did not take at all kindly to Johnson's treatment. He writes a bitter little paper in the *Gazetteer* in **1757** and, for the one and only time in his entire career, Johnson responded to the attack upon his review, in the *Literary Magazine* the same year.

Truth be told, it is **solely** for this reason that Hanway's book is remembered at all. The incident is remarked upon by every biographer of Johnson - Boswell even predicts that the only result of Johnson's stooping to respond would be Hanway's lasting infamy.

On to **1759** which brings us John Hill, *Exotic Botany*. John Hill was a strange character out of Britain, who gained fame as a botanist and writer. Trouble is, Hill was also a bit of a charlatan, having made a career of writing about plants and vegetables and then concocting useless medicines from them. He is said to have published several papers under false names, made up of outright lies, as part of a personal feud with the Royal Society, and was denounced as a quack and a liar by many scientists of his generation. In *Exotic Botany*, Hill, despite no direct experience with the tea plant whatsoever, delineates *Thea viridis* as separate and distinct from *bohea* - in other words, he documents "red tea" and "green tea" plants as biologically distinct species. Linnaeus then takes this information into his own studies and also lists the two separate species of tea - although there is evidence Linnaeus remained unconvinced and wanted to answer the question by virtue of his own direct experiments.

In **1763**, we get several snippets of tea information from John Bell's *Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia, to Diverse Parts of Asia*. In **1764**, Walter Harte mentions tea in his *Essays on Husbandry*, suggesting that tea consumption may lead to depopulation, and expressing a concern for the trends in the British trade with China.

Samuel-Auguste Tissot, *Sermo Inauguralis de Valetudine Litteratorum* appears in **1766**. Tissot's influential work is translated by James Kirkpatrick in **1768** as *An Essay on Diseases Incidental to Literary and Sedentary Persons*. Tissot was one of Europe's most revered physicians, admired as an expert on nervous disorders. His writing was considered indispensable by generations of doctors and philosophers for centuries

afterward. His opinion of tea, therefore, carried considerable weight, and his opinion was not a positive one:

Amongst the favorite beverages of the learned, the worst is the infusion of that famous leaf, so well known by the name of tea...

Tissot echoes the medical concerns common at this time, that drinking tea weakens the digestive system, alters the consistency and flow of blood, and leads to loss of energy and vitality, eventually disabling and killing the inveterate tea-drinker. What is amusing is that the translator Kirkpatrick is so bothered by this, that in the second English edition (in **1769**) he includes a quite lengthy “Translator’s Note” presenting his own essay on the subject - writing more about tea than Tissot himself does! Kirkpatrick outlines counterarguments justifying the reasonable use of tea, and politely points out that in sixty years of enjoying it himself, and seeing others enjoy it, he has seen no reason to be concerned of any ill effects from its use.

Thomas Percival, in **1767**’s *Essays Medical and Experimental*, describes a few chemical experiments he performs on tea leaves and demonstrates that tea has antiseptic properties. He also addresses the medical concern of tea “binding the stomach” - something that has been debated a long time by this point - and attempts to answer whether it is the tea itself that upsets the digestive system, or if it is the effect of the consumption of hot water. Lastly he acknowledges many respected authors’ concerns about tea, but outlines its “very important medicinal purposes” and particularly its usefulness to “studious, sedentary men”.

Arthur Young, in *The Farmer’s Letters to the People of England* (also **1767**), calculates the average daily expense of drinking tea - this is part of the ongoing argument that the high price and popularity of tea was draining money from the poorer classes, and therefore tea itself contributed to the growing problem of infant mortality in England. This calculation gets quoted for a while, including by Lettsom himself.

William Buchan, the well-respected physician of Edinburgh, in **1769** publishes the first edition of his *Domestic Medicine: or, the Family Physician*. It was not the first “popular medicine” book ever written, but it was far and away one of the most successful – multiple editions were issued for many years afterwards and the book was widely translated and published across Europe. Buchan does not specifically address tea, except as part of a sedentary, reclusive lifestyle. Upon tea itself, he simply writes:

Much has been said on the ill effects of tea in diet. They are, no doubt, numerous; but they proceed rather from the imprudent use of it, than from any bad qualities in the tea itself.

1770 gives us John Ellis, *Directions for Bringing over Seeds and Plants, from the East Indies and Other Distant Countries, in a State of Vegetation*. There is a great change afoot now in Europe. Governments are well aware of the wealth possible from trading with China, and Linnaeus’s garden had proven that transplanting tea to Europe was possible. Ellis’s book was directly responsible for a sudden influx of Asian plants into British collections and gardens – and he is very aware of the specific interest in tea, referring to it frequently and describing methods particularly effective for that plant.

We’ll close out not with a bang but a whimper, with tea getting included in the new sorts of general reference works that are starting to come into vogue at this time. Colin Milne includes tea in his *Botanical Dictionary* of **1770**, for example, and in **1771** the third volume of the very first *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is published. Here is its entire entry for tea:

TEA, or THEA, in botany, a genus of the polyandria monogynia class of plants. The corolla consists of nine petals, and the calyx of five leaves; and the berry is tricoccus. There are two species, both natives of China.

This shrub grows to five or six feet high, and is very ramose: the leaves are about an inch long, near half an inch broad, serrated, and terminating in a point. The traders in

tea distinguish a vast many kinds of it, as they differ in color, flavor, and the size of the leaf. To enumerate the several sub-distinctions were endless; the general division is into three kinds, the ordinary green tea, the finer green, and the bohea; to one or other of which all the other kinds may be referred. The common green tea has somewhat small and crumpled leaves, much convoluted, and closely folded together in the drying. Its color is a dusky-green, its taste sub-astringent, and its smell agreeable. It gives the water a strong yellowish green color. The fine green has larger leaves, less rumped and convoluted in the drying, and more lax in their folds; it is of a paler color, approaching to the blue green, of an extremely pleasant smell, and has a more astringent, yet more agreeable taste than the former. It gives a pale-green color to water. To this kind are to be referred all the higher priced green teas, the hyson, imperial, etc. The bohea consists of much smaller leaves than either of the other, and those more crumpled and closely folded than in either. It is of a darker color than the other, often blackish; and is of the smell and taste of the others, but with a mixed sweetness and astringency. The green teas have all somewhat of the violet-flavor; the bohea has naturally somewhat of the rose-smell. The leaves when gathered are dried with great caution, partly by the help of heat, partly by the air, and when thoroughly prepared will keep a long time fresh and good. Every parcel, when dried, though gathered promiscuously, is separated, according to the largeness and smallness of the leaves, into three or four different kinds, each of which is of a different price, and has its different name. The bohea tea is gathered before the leaves are perfectly opened, and is made to undergo a greater degree of heat in the curing, to which its color and peculiar flavor is in a great measure owing.

Tea, moderately and properly taken, acts as a gentle astringent and corroborative.

Bye-bye & bibliography

And that brings us up to **1772**, the year in which Lettsom publishes *The Natural History of the Tea-Tree*, giving us a general understanding of Europe's depth of knowledge about

the tea plant at Lettsom's time. As one can see, there was still much to learn about the plant and the beverage, and Lettsom probably had as much trouble sifting through all of these conflicting sources as we ourselves have.

I must here apologize that this overview is necessarily incomplete – there are certainly many writers and works I have neglected to include, in many cases because I am extremely unfamiliar with the original language. But, again, we can excuse ourselves for these omissions in that these materials perhaps would have been similarly inaccessible to Lettsom himself.

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