

Tea Processing and Ceremony in Song Dynasty

In *Tea Processing and Ceremony in Song Dynasty*, Zhang Bo and Ye Guosheng offer an in-depth exploration of tea rituals, festivals, and cultures in the Song dynasty (960–1279). The Song period was characterised by a prosperous economy and a peaceful society in which tea culture became prevalent from the top down. Not only emperors, scholars, and elites, but also all social classes were enthusiastic about tea drinking. Both of the authors are professors of Tea Studies at Wuyi University. In the past few years, the authors have been collaborating on a project titled *Annotation of Ancient Chinese Tea Literature*, which forms the basis for the discussion in this book. The authors draw upon a wide variety of unique primary and secondary sources, including illustrations of classical texts and tea sets, to demonstrate how every aspect of tea culture (e.g., tea drinking, tea festivals, tea halls, and tea plantations) has significantly impacted literary writing, dietary therapy, the Buddhist monastery, and every aspect of life. During this period, tea was not simply a commercial drink, but an inseparable ritual that formed part of everyone's daily routine. The book can therefore confidently be recommended to the general reader as a high-quality academic book that serves as a tribute to tea culture.

The book starts with an overview of Chinese tea culture and highlights what makes Song tea special. While tea has been deeply rooted within society since BC 2000, tea rituals and festivals did not appear and gain popularity until the Song dynasty. The authors demonstrate throughout the book that the emergence and prevalence of Song tea culture cannot be explored in isolation due to the culture being constantly reshaped by economic factors (e.g., widespread new paper money and relatively low tea trade taxes in early Song). The northwest Fujian provinces, particularly the Jian'an District, were famous for tea planting and quickly developed the most profitable tea industry in China. Later, tea festivals originated from the Northern Park in Jian'an. Every spring, when producing new tea, the Northern Park government invited tea connoisseurs to evaluate the tea. Tea planters and merchants in Jian'an County actively participated and competed to earn a high ranking for their tea products. If merchants obtained a good rank, their teas would receive the best price for the

Zhang, Bo 张渤 and Ye, Guosheng 叶国盛, *Song Dao Dian Cha Wen Hua Yu Yi Shu* 宋代点茶文化 与艺术, (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2024)



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year. Thousands of local tea-farm employees gathered to attend these tea competitions, while countless tourists also came to taste the freshest tea.

Notably, the book dives deeply into relevant poetry and literature about the tea festival and contextualises both through literary analysis. During the Song period, 19 tea monographs were written around tea festivals, along with 734 poems describing the building of tea culture; these works were written by 268 authors, including many celebrities and scholars. For instance, Chapter Five details how Emperor Huizong of the Song dynasty wrote *The Treatise on Tea* 大观茶论 and offered a detailed account of the tea festival. The emperor emphasised that tea processing was the essence of the tea ceremony, underscoring the various strengths of the different stages, and the aesthetic harmony between human action and tea tools. The emperor also described the spirit of tea as clear, harmonious, tranquil, and quiet. According to him, tea should be elegant and harmonious, and when tasting tea, one should eliminate distracting thoughts and be calm and concise so as to achieve self-fulfillment, tranquility, and spiritual purification, which aligns with Zen Buddhist teachings.

Chapter Four, the longest and most substantive chapter of the book, focuses on tea-processing techniques and rituals, especially its relationship to Zen Buddhism in the Song Dynasty. The authors introduce the example of *Zen Garden Rules*, a book in which Monk Zongyi summarised the daily rituals and norms of Zen Buddhism—including the use of various teas, soups, and medicines in Zen temples, and the methods of holding and participating in tea ceremonies and banquets. The authors argue that tea is always the core of various social activities in Zen Buddhism and that tea ceremonies provide a helpful opportunity to implement rituals, announce appointments and dismissals, and communicate with the community. Further, Zen Buddhism temples are required to house festive tea parties on a regular basis throughout the year. Tea ceremonies are also held for the appointment and dismissal of monks to show courtesy to the new appointee and gratitude to the outgoing one. Relevant ritual practices are also strict. For example, at a New Year's tea ceremony, one should not hesitate to accept the cup. Neither blowing on the tea surface nor touching the tealight while drinking tea are permitted. Drinking loudly and knocking on the table when taking or putting tea down are also strictly forbidden behaviors. Another example of a special ritual is the dragon and phoenix tea made in Northern Park.

During the production process, tea paste is molded on the stereotyped mold, which is engraved with the dragon and phoenix patterns that form the imperial symbol of the emperor and represent good fortune.

Overall, the book projects open-mindedness through the authors' expansive analysis of Song tea culture, which also includes its global impacts, especially in relation to the Japanese tea ceremony. Tea drinking was initially limited to the Japanese aristocracy and declined for a time. At the end of the 12th century, however, Myoan Eisai (1141–1215) brought tea seeds and habits to Japan from China, and gradually revitalised the practice of tea drinking, which reached Buddhist temples and the samurai class. The authors clearly show how Eisai, considered the ancestor of tea in Japan, was a landmark figure in the development of the Japanese tea ceremony. Eisai visited the Song dynasty twice to study Zen Buddhism, and his long period of Zen meditation nourished his understanding of Song tea culture in China. Readers can also see many illustrations of the famous tea book *Drinking Tea for Health*, which is the earliest known work on tea in Japan, finalised by Eisai just before his death. *Drinking Tea for Health* strongly advocates drinking tea from the perspective of meditation and longevity, and simplifies the complicated Song tea-processing method, including the steps of picking and making the tea in the moment, preserving the loose leaves, grinding them into powder for drinking, and immediately drinking the tea. According to the book, the procedure promoted by Eisai has been practiced until the present day. In contemporary Japanese tea ceremonies, the tea preparation process is called Dian Cha (Pouring Tea). The powdered tea is scooped into a tea bowl which is filled with boiling water, and the tea is then quickly and vigorously stirred with a bamboo tea whisk until a thick, fine froth forms on the surface. Then, the tea is ready for sipping. The authors of this book depict each step with highly detailed instructional illustrations, so that readers can independently replicate the process.

One key disadvantage is the heavy focus the authors place on illustrations of tea ceramics and tea poetry calligraphy. To avoid disrupting and weighing down the narration, the authors should have placed these explanations in footnotes. The book would also benefit from including quantitative analysis using statistical data. In the section on the Japanese tea ceremony, for example, the authors could have included a statistics table depicting the Japanese tea industry and the trade tendency between Japan and the Song dynasty.