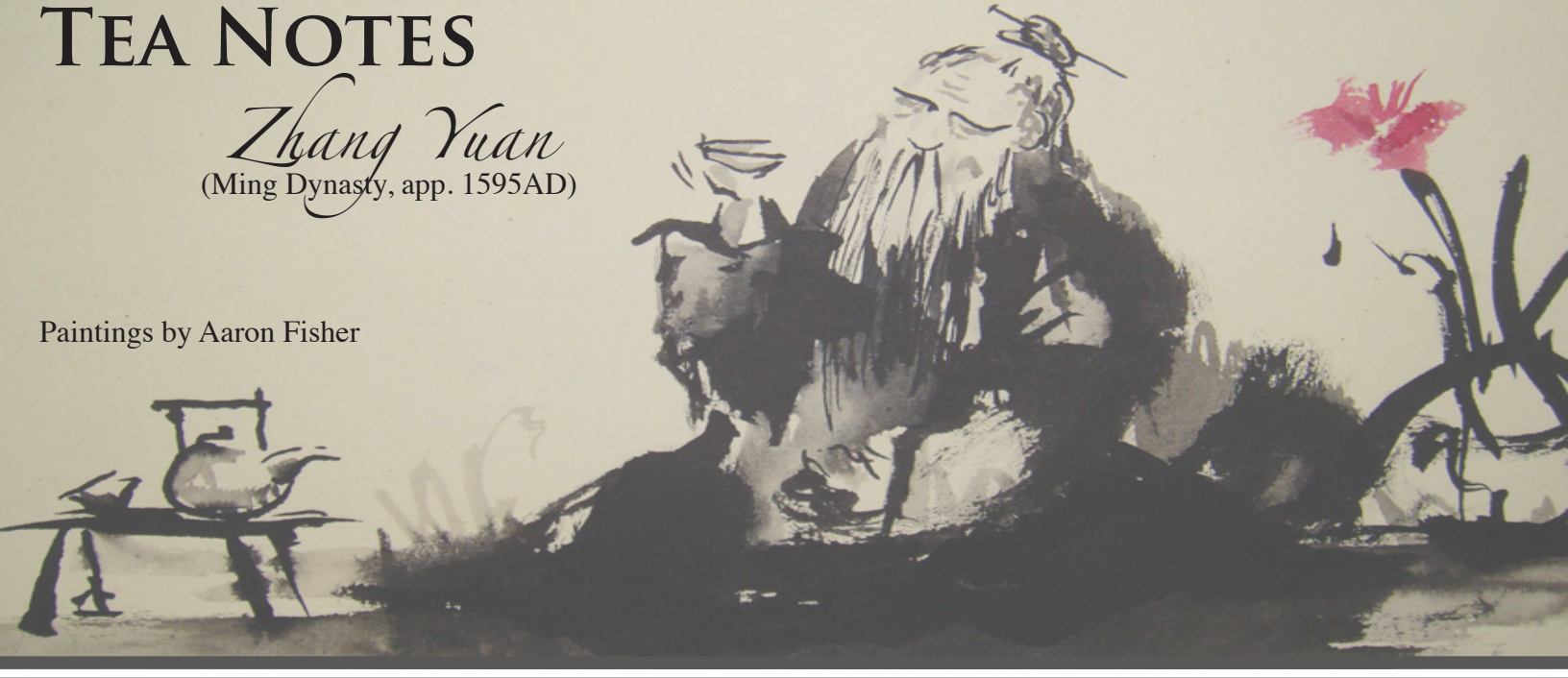


TEA NOTES

Zhang Yuan
(Ming Dynasty, app. 1595AD)

Paintings by Aaron Fisher



Introduction by the editors

The renowned *Chajing*, written by Lu Yu in the Tang Dynasty, has become the greatest example of classical tea in the East and West both. While it will always be treasured for its profundity as well as its poetry and fragrant historicity, it does however offer the modern tea drinker little by way of practical advise. Of course, the general themes concerning one's approach to tea with the spirit, the importance of natural farming, water and fire—all of that is timeless, granting the *Chajing* its rightful place amongst the immortal scrolls.

There were also several, lesser-known tea masters who wrote during the Song and later Ming dynasties. It is the latter which is of particular interest to us, for it was in the Ming dynasty that tea drinkers began using whole-leaf tea the way we do know. There are still some differences between then and now, but there is a lot of insight found in these old texts. While we should never abandon the old scrolls, let us move on and gain an even greater historical perspective.

This *Tea Notes* is the first in a series of translations we would like to publish freely with the help of your support. As far as we know, none of these texts have ever been translated into English. Obviously, translating this kind of classical Chinese isn't easy at all, and we'd like to thank all those who donated time or money to start this project, and all those who plan to help us continue it in the future. Special thanks to Aaron Davis, for his brilliant skills and bright, shining heart.

Original Introduction to the *Tea Notes*

Zhang Yuan of Dong Ting was a man of simple desires who lived apart from society. Consequently, he came to be known as a reclusive scholar. Hidden away in the deep mountains with nothing to do, he spent his time studying the works of scholars of the late Zhou dynasty. At every break in his reading, he drew spring water and infused tea, which formed his life's pleasure. Through an unbroken stretch of summers and winters, thirty years passed by. He tirelessly studied the meaning of tea, producing these *Tea Notes*, which describe the three flavor characteristics of tea. Returning to society for some ten years, he maintained this interest in tea and became a confidant of the imperial court. It could be said that he exhaustively covered every detail of tea. Those who already understood tea found truth in his words. Those who did not came to understand tea through him. How could Zhang Yuan not publish these notes and make them permanent, like Wang Meng and Lu Tong before him?

—Introduction by Gu Dadian of Wujiang—

Picking tea

Time is an essential factor when picking tea. If picked too early, the flavor will not be fully developed. If picked too late, the essence will have diffused. The best tea is picked in the five days leading up to the Grain Rain. Next best is the five days following the Grain Rain. Less desirable still is the five days after that. The best tea buds are purple. These are followed by those having a wrinkled surface. Tea is best picked in the middle of the night when the leaves are damp and covered in dew. Picking the tea in the middle of the day is somewhat less ideal. Overcast and rainy days are not suited for picking tea. Fertile fields produce the best tea, while tea from trees growing among bamboo is slightly inferior. After that is tea growing in areas with scattered rocks; and, finally, tea growing in yellow, sandy soil.



Processing tea

Old leaves, branches and stems, and small broken pieces should be separated from the newly picked tea. A wide wok of 2.4 chi ($1\text{ chi}=1/3m$) in diameter should be used. Roast the tea in quantities of 1.5 jin ($\sim 0.75kg$). The flame should be extremely hot and, as the tea is rapidly stirred, the flame should not be allowed to cool. Only when the tea is cooked should it be removed from the fire and placed in a sieve. Slowly dry it over the fire. There are subtleties involved which are difficult to describe in words. When the heat is evenly applied, the tea's color and aroma will attain perfection throughout. If the subtleties are not properly understood, however, the tea's essence and flavor will be lost.

Judging tea

Excellent tea is the result of meticulous initial production, proper storage, and appropriate brewing. The quality of the tea, good or bad, is determined by the initial cooking of the tea leaves. The slightest variation in the flame can affect the quality of the tea. If the flame is too weak, the wok will be cold and lack energy. If the flame is too strong, the slightest mistake will burn the tea. Also if the heat is applied for too long, the tea will be overcooked. Conversely, if the heat is applied for too brief a time, the tea will still be raw. Overcooked tea turns yellow, while undercooked tea turns black. Properly cooked tea will be sweet and pleasant, while improperly cooked tea is bitter and astringent. There is no harm in tea with some white specks, but tea without burnt spots is best.

Tea storage

When the processed tea has first dried, it should be placed in an old box and the outside sealed with paper. Wait three days until the tea's intrinsic nature has been restored and then return it to a light fire and roast until it is absolutely dry. Once it has cooled, store the tea in a jar. Lightly fill the jar with tea, covering it tightly with bamboo skin. Seal the opening of the jar with bamboo leaves or paper and weight the top down with a brick, which has been baked over a fire and allowed to cool. Be careful that the jar is not exposed to wind or near fire. If exposed to wind, it may be too cold. If near fire, the tea may quickly turn yellow.





Fire used to brew tea

No aspect of brewing tea is more important than the heat of the fire. Only after the stove fire is red through and through should the ladle of tea be placed over it. At first, fan the flames lightly and quickly. Gradually increase the fanning slightly, taking into account the intensity of the flame. If the fire is too gentle, the water will overcome the flavor of the tea. On the other hand, if the fire is too strong, the tea will dominate the water. The key lies in finding the proper medium.

Judging boiling water

Boiling water can be distinguished in three major ways and fifteen minor ways. The first of the major distinctions is based on the appearance of bubbles in the boiling water. The second is based on the sound of the water as it boils. Finally, the third is based on the steam let off by the boiling water. The appearance is an inner trait, while the sound is an external trait. The steam is a rapid trait. “Shrimp eye,” “crab eye,” and “fish eye” bubbles (*increasingly large bubbles in the water as it boils*) are all characteristics of water that has just begun to boil. Only when the churning waves and the steam are completely gone is the water ready. The initial sounds, turning sounds, shaking sounds, and galloping sounds are all traits of water that has just begun to boil. Only when there is no sound, is the process of boiling the water finished. If the steam floats up in one thread, two threads, or three or four threads, all chaotically and thickly intertwined, it has just begun to boil. Only when the steam is rushing straight upward is the water ready.

Old versus young hot water

Cai Junmo (**Note:** Song dynasty tea master who published a different Tea Notes, written between 1049 and 1053) recommends using “young” hot water rather than “old” hot water when brewing tea (**Note:** here young and old refer to heat of the water and strength of the boil). This is because the tea produced by ancient people was ground, crushed, and sifted. It was like powdered airborne dust. As soon as the tea touched the hot water its essence immediately floated upward. Young water should be used for this type of tea, while old water should be avoided. Today, however, we do not take the time to grind and sift tea, instead leaving it in its original form. The water must be completely hot to allow the essence of the tea to be absorbed. Therefore we say: “Water requires five boils. Tea is added in three ways.” (**Note:** the five boils refer to the five ways the bubbles in boiling water are described. The three ways of adding tea refers to lower, middle, and upper techniques described below)



Brewing technique

Once the water is well heated, remove it from the flame. First, pour a small amount into the teapot in order to warm it. Pour this out and place the tea in the pot. The amount of tea to add should be considered. One should not add more than a suitable amount. Too much tea causes the flavor to become bitter and the fragrance to become too strong. If there is too much water relative to tea, the color will be weak and the Qi will be lacking. After two pots of tea, use cold water to wash out the teapot, leaving it clean and cool. This should not wash out the aroma of the tea. If the brewing vessel is overripe, the spirit of the tea will not be healthy. If the pot is clean, the nature of the water will be clear. Wait a bit before pouring the tea into cups for drinking. The tea should not be poured too soon, but should not be drunk too late. Too early and the essence of the tea will not have been distributed. Too late and the subtle fragrance will have already disappeared.

Adding tea when brewing

There is an order that dictates when to add the tea leaves. Adding the tea to the brewing vessel before the hot water is known as lower brewing. Adding the tea to half of the hot water followed by rest of the water is known as middle brewing. The third type, upper brewing, consists of first pouring hot water into the brewing vessel and then putting the tea leaves into the water. Spring and autumn are well suited to middle brewing, while during summer upper brewing is appropriate. Winter, on the other hand, is suited to lower brewing.

Drinking tea

Tea should ideally be drunk with a small number of guests. Many guests lead to a noisy atmosphere, which diminishes the refined pleasure of tea drinking. Sipping tea alone can be called spiritual; two people is superb; three or four is entertaining; five or six is excessive; and seven or eight is charitable alms-giving.

Fragrance

Tea possesses true fragrance, orchid fragrance, delicate fragrance, and pure fragrance. When the tea's aroma matches its appearance, it is said to have pure fragrance. Tea that is neither fresh nor fermented is said to possess delicate fragrance. If the tea has been evenly cooked, this is called orchid fragrance. Tea picked before the Great Rain is said to possess true fragrance. Tea may also possess submerged fragrance, escaped fragrance, excessive fragrance, and questionable fragrance. These are all undesirable fragrance traits.

Color

The best tea is fresh and verdant. Waves of bluish white are also a sign of fine tea. Yellow, black, or dark red teas are all lesser grade. Snowy white waves are superior. Emerald green waves are of moderate desirability. Yellow waves are inferior. The ultimate cup of tea is a result of new spring water, a charcoal fire, mastery of the art of steeping tea, and fine tea leaves that look like icy waves of jade.

Flavor

The flavor of tea is best if it is sweet and moist. Bitter and astringent tea is considered inferior.

Tea becomes spoiled and unusable

When first processed, tea is fresh and verdant. If improperly stored, it first turns green. It next changes to a yellow color. This is followed by a third change to a black color and, finally, a white color. When consumed, this spoiled tea brings coldness to the stomach. It may even sap the energy from the body.





Ranking mountain spring water

Tea is the spirit in water, while water is the body that carries tea. Without pure water, the spirit will not show itself. Likewise, without excellent tea, its body will be obscured. Mountain top spring water is clear and light. Spring water from the bottom of a mountain is clear and heavy. Spring water from rocky soil is clear and sweet. Spring water from sandy soil is clear and cold. Spring water from topsoil is thin and white. Water flowing from yellow stone is excellent, while water leaking through blue stone is useless. Gently flowing water is best. Additionally, water flowing in shady places is preferable to water flowing toward sunlight. A pure spring has no flavor. Pure water has no aroma.

Well water is not suitable for tea

According to the *Chajing*, “mountain water is best, river water is second best, while well water is least desirable.” If one is not near a river or mountains with spring water, the only suitable option is to store rain water. Its flavor is sweet and mild. This is the water that nourishes all living creatures. Although snow water is clear, its nature is heavy and dark. It brings coldness to the digestive organs and is unsuitable for accumulation in large quantities.

Water storage

The water jar should be kept in a dark room and covered with silk cloth. This allows the water to breathe, but prevents its essence from escaping. If the jar is weighted with wood or stone and sealed with paper or thin bamboo, exposure to the sun causes its spirit to be exhausted while its vapors are trapped. This drains the spirit of the water. The most important factor in drinking tea is that the tea is fresh and the water vibrant. If the tea loses its freshness or the water loses its vibrancy, then one might as well drink swill from an irrigation canal.

Tea tools

Sang Zhuweng (**Note:** another name for Lu Yu, author of the Tang dynasty *Chajing*) brewed tea using a ladle made of silver but felt it was too extravagant and switched to using porcelain. This also did not last and he later switched back to using silver. In my humble opinion, silver is well-suited for use in elegant surroundings. If in a mountain hut or a thatched cottage, using a tin ladle will not harm the aroma, color, or flavor of tea. Bronze or iron should be avoided, however.

Teacups

The best teacups are snow-white. Second best are bluish-white, as long as they do not detract from the color of the tea.

Cloth for wiping the cups

Before and after drinking tea, a thin linen cloth should be used to wipe the teacups. Other types will easily become soiled and are not well-suited to this purpose.

Box for dividing tea

This should be made of tin. Tea leave should be taken from a large jar and held here. When empty, more tea should be added to the box.



Tea Ceremony

When tea is produced, precision is essential. When stored, dryness is most important. When brewed, purity is crucial. Precision, dryness, and purity—the tea ceremony is complete.

— Zhang Yuan —
1595

The Leaf

