

# Chinese Tea in World History

BY MARC JASON GILBERT



*Second today only to water as the world's most consumed beverage, tea comes in many forms and has many sources. The four Chinese teas processed from the *Camilla sinensis* plant—green, white, black, and oolong—have played so long and so great a role in world history that it is possible to say that no other commodity is more revealing of the global human experience.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, long before oil assumed the title, tea was the world's “black gold.” Unlike oil, tea is a renewable resource.<sup>2</sup> There is thus every reason to believe that long after the world's last wellhead has run dry, tea will continue to shape both Chinese and world society, as it has for more than two millennia.*

## From Local to Global Beverage

Tea may first have been consumed in China as a beverage as early as 4,000 years ago, and by the classical-era, tea was served as a refreshing stimulant that facilitated seated Buddhist meditation. Its association with Buddhism enabled tea to shape Chinese elite tastes and ultimately much of Asian culture. For example, the need for a drinking vessel that did not adulterate the taste of the finest teas—as did wooden, metal, and clay cups—stimulated the development of Chinese porcelain, whose production became a major factor in Chinese and later global industry and trade. During the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, tea drinking, teashops, and tea as a subject of poetry and art, became part of the fabric of Chinese life. Manuals were devoted to its production and use, the earliest being *The Classic of Tea* written by Lu Yu between 760 and 780. A Buddhist adept, Saicho, is believed to have carried the first tea seedlings to Japan in 805, where Chinese tea-drinking habits evolved into the tea ceremony that came to define Japanese culture.

During the southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), Arab merchants acquired tea from the city of Quanzhou in Fujian Province and carried it to the Middle East and other lands, where Muslims consumed it in place of wine and other forbidden (*haram*) stimulants and beverages. In 1610, a Dutch ship calling at Macau took the first load of Chinese tea to Europe, where it was initially prized for its medicinal value, a quality long recognized by Chinese physicians. By the early eighteenth century, Europeans had come, like many Chinese, to view tea-drinking as a symbol of wealth and sophistication. By the middle of that century, this association drew British merchants to taverns and “coffee houses” (originally modeled on Ottoman examples), where tea quickly replaced the more expensive and harder to obtain coffee that gave these establishments their name. An advertisement in *The London Gazette* in September of 1658 proclaims,

*That Excellent, and by all Physitians approved, China Drink, called by Chineans, Tcha, by other Nations Tay, alias Tee, is sold at the Sultaness-head, a Cophee-house, in Sweeting's Rents by the Royal Exchange, London.*<sup>3</sup>

However, because it served merchants directly engaged in the tea trade, Garraways “coffee house” in Exchange Alley, in London, is generally thought to be the first to replace coffee with tea. Garraways later served as the locale of several stories by Charles Dickens, who was among the first to describe these houses as places where upwardly middle class merchants and stockbrokers with limited means could meet to pool their skills and financial resources.<sup>4</sup> Such egalitarian gatherings encouraged the development of important capitalist economic institutions. The modern insurance industry was born at Edward Lloyd’s establishment on Lombard Street, where shippers sought wealthy merchants to underwrite their vessels, and where Lloyd himself conducted auctions and read out shipping news (hence “Lloyd’s of London”). Such shops also facilitated a British cultural florescence as poets, writers, and playwrights, such as John Dryden, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and Samuel Johnson, made these establishments a second home.<sup>5</sup>

## Sugar, Tea, and the Industrial Revolution

When mixed with sugar, tea also served as an inexpensive means of energizing Europe’s emerging working class. It is generally agreed that tea afforded industrial workers some protection against waterborne diseases through the boiling of tea-water (a process that eventually made drinking the safer boiled water more palatable). One scholar, Alan Macfarlane, author of *The Savage Wars of Peace: England, Japan, and the Malthusian Trap* (1997 and 2003), believes that tea’s health-saving properties played a decisive role in the development of the Industrial Revolution in tea-drinking Britain and, if somewhat later, in tea-drinking Japan.<sup>6</sup> This argument has drawn much criticism, and its determinist element is certainly flawed.<sup>7</sup> For example, the Chinese also drank tea, but only Japan was quick to industrialize. However, tea drinking remains worthy of exploration when tracing what modern Chinese historian Kenneth Pomeranz and others have called “The Great Divergence,”<sup>8</sup> or the different development arcs traced by the Eurasian West and the Eurasian East after 1500.

Whether or not increasing demand by Europeans for sugar-sweetened tea helped drive the Industrial Revolution in Europe, it certainly led to an expansion of the Atlantic slave trade to supply more laborers for sugar cultivation. Growing demand for tea in the West drew China closer in to the emerging global trade network, as tea became China’s principal export. Since Europeans increasingly purchased Chinese tea with Mexican silver, the flood of silver entering China led to a sharp devaluation of that metal. This made tea even more expensive (as more silver was required to meet the China price). European and American merchants addressed the rising cost of tea by trading in a commodity that was just as valuable, but illicit in China: opium.

## From Colonialism to Globalization

China’s attempts to halt European efforts to smuggle opium into their state led to the First Opium War (1839–1842). This conflict ultimately led to China’s political and economic subjugation, but the global demand for tea exceeded Chinese production even under European domination. To meet this demand, Europeans flexed their imperial muscles, and established tea plantations, initially in Assam and Sri Lanka and later in East Africa, Indonesia, and South America.<sup>9</sup> Global tea production facilitated a global tea culture. Chinese-style teashops and tea parties became characteristic of European society at the metropole, as well as among imperial officials and their families abroad. Tea drinking also became so ingrained in the cultures of colonized indigenous peoples as to constitute one of Western imperialism’s most visible post-colonial legacies, particularly in India.



James Boswell and Samuel Johnson taking tea at the Mitre Tavern, c. 1763. Illustration from Arthur Gray’s *Little Tea Book* (1903), available through the Gutenberg Project at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19392/19392-h/19392-h.htm>.

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The British iron steam ship HMS ‘Nemesis’ (far right) destroying Chinese War Junks in Anson’s Bay on January 7, 1841, in one of the first actions in the First Opium War. Lithograph from a painting by E. Duncan titled, *Destroying Chinese Junks*, published in 1843. Image source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Juncosob\\_bom.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Juncosob_bom.jpg).



A tea plantation in Yuxi, southwest China's Yunnan province, April 2007.

A local villager picks tea leaves at a tea plantation in Jiaguan Town, Qionglai city, southwest China's Sichuan province, July 2007.

Photos courtesy of ImagineChina. ©2007 ImagineChina.



The once highly profitable tea plantations established in colonial times now face rising production costs and worker unrest. However, whether on the rise and or in decline, tea production, distribution, and consumption patterns were, and remain, potent forces in world history. The past and continuing power of tea in the world economy is clearly illustrated by the role of tea in the rise and development of modern multinational corporations as diverse in origin as Unilever (“Lipton Tea”) and Tata Industries (“Tetley Tea”).<sup>10</sup>

This short narrative history placing tea in a global context helps illuminate China's central place in the early modern world's economy, while at the same time providing insight into the contemporaneous rise of the West as an agent of increasing cultural and economic globalization. It also demonstrates how much of the world's early modern trade was China-centered, while showing how Europe's seizure of the silver resources of the Americas, and Britain's control over India's opium fields, were among the factors that assisted the West to initially participate in and eventually replace China at the center of the world's economy. Models for this discussion can be found in the works of two pairs of scholars: Kenneth Pomeranz (mentioned above) and Steven Topik's publication, *The World Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400 to the Present*, and the landmark essays of Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giraldez, “Born with a ‘Silver Spoon’: The Origin of World Trade in 1571” and “Cycles of Silver: Global Economic Unity through the Mid-Eighteenth Century.”<sup>11</sup> However, students may gain similar insights into the changing place of China in world history through a more overtly materialist approach, one which focuses on a once ubiquitous tea format: “brick tea.”

## Brick Tea as an “Exchange Commodity”

In pre-modern China, tea was hydraulically pressed into embossed molds. The resultant bricks (most often smooth and rectangular, but also round and/or textured) had the virtue of being standardized by type of tea, weight, and purity of content. Rectangular bricks were usually scored into standardized sections, which allowed such pieces to be broken off, and yet remain convertible in value. Brick teas were easily transportable and at any point could be eaten as food, crushed into powder and consumed as medicine, or mixed with water and drunk as a beverage. They were also easily convertible into silver.<sup>12</sup> As a result, brick tea was widely used as a medium of exchange throughout pre-modern Afro-Eurasia. Mongols and the various Chinese dynasties used brick tea as currency when purchasing their warhorses. Both the Tibetans and Yuan Chinese had a state office called “Tea Horse” to supervise the trading of Chinese tea for Tibetan horses. Scholars consider this trade as warranting consideration alongside the Silk Road as a route for material and cultural exchange.<sup>13</sup> Even today, the “Yunnan-Tibet Old Tea Horse Road” draws tourists.<sup>14</sup> Imported tea bricks (often amounting to 6,500 tons a year) continued to serve as currency in Bhutan and Tibet until slowly replaced by British-Indian silver rupees (1874–1935).<sup>15</sup> Brick tea was in great demand by the Russian aristocracy and served as currency in the eastern Soviet Union as late as the second World War.

Brick tea had much earlier constituted a major form of both trade and currency in the Middle East and North Africa, where, as mentioned above, tea sweetened with sugar replaced wine as a social beverage with the rise of Islam. The prevalence of tea bricks in these economies has led to speculation as to their penetration into neighboring European markets. However, there is no doubt regarding their presence as an

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Top: Brick tea was pressed into many designs and shapes depending on weight and type of tea. Image source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:BlackTeaBrick.jpg>.

Left: Brick tea shaped into the form of a giant Chinese coin. Photo courtesy of ImagineChina. ©2007 ImagineChina.



The Tea Horse Trail between Yunnan and Tibet was still functioning when this photograph was taken in 1946. Image source: <http://www.thelongridersguild.com/word05.htm>.

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In Western Szechuan, men laden with approximately 300 pounds of brick tea each depart for Tibet. (Photograph taken on July 30, 1908 at an altitude of 5,000 ft.)

Image source: [http://www.arboretum.harvard.edu/programs/eastern\\_asia/wilson.html](http://www.arboretum.harvard.edu/programs/eastern_asia/wilson.html)

“exchange commodity” in the daily life of Britain’s North American colonies. There, tea bricks (along with barrels of molasses and specific amounts of other forest products, such as pine timber) were legal tender in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This hard evidence of China’s global reach extended to future American President James Monroe’s plantation in Virginia, whose material needs and operational expenses were paid in tea bricks.

Brick tea played a major role in the American Revolution in which James Monroe fought and was wounded. It was brick tea that was thrown into Boston Harbor by the Sons of Liberty on December 16, 1773, a development that precipitated the final break between the Tory-controlled British Parliament and its American colonies. For much of the preceding decade, Parliament had attempted to circumvent their American colonists’ resistance to direct taxes by enforcing what was known as the Navigation Acts, laws that secured the privilege of trading to and from the Americas for British-owned ships sailing to and from Britain. It was in part to prevent the colonists from circumventing these restrictions by smuggling that Parliament gave the British East India Company a monopoly of the tea trade to the Americas. This monopoly would not raise the price American colonists would pay for tea, but would serve to undercut the prices charged by American smugglers. This monopolist gambit backfired, as evidenced by the chests of brick tea thrown into Boston Harbor. The draconian Tory response to the “Tea Party” in Boston—their closing of its harbor, the quartering of British troops there, etc.—ultimately inspired Patrick Henry of Virginia’s famous speech on the evils of British rule which closed with the words, “I know not what course others may take, but, as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”

The Boston Tea Party ushered in an era of global war and revolution that led to the destruction of much of the so-called First British Empire in the North Atlantic. However, it also gave rise to a Second

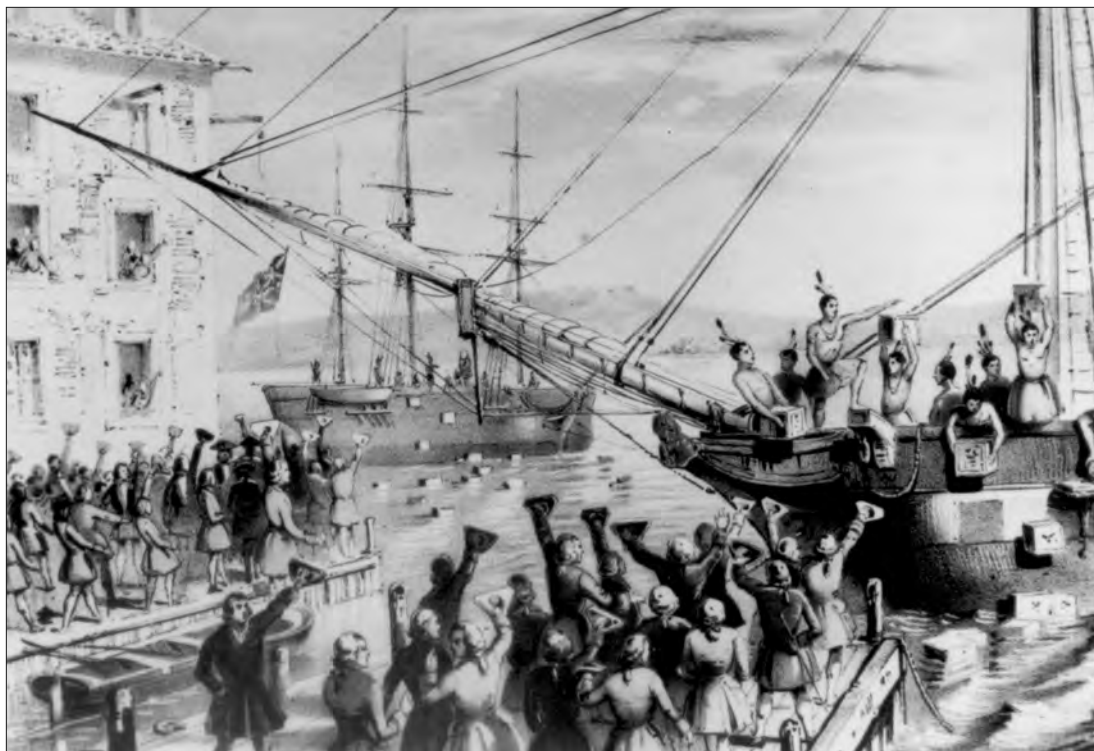
British Empire in Asia that came to eclipse China’s centuries old dominance in that region. The return to power of the Tory Party after its short post-American Revolutionary War political exile saw the eventual rise of Tory Prime Minister William Pitt (1759–1806), who sought compensation for the loss of Britain’s thirteen American colonies on the subcontinent of India. This was accomplished by Parliament’s seizure of control over the direction of the British East India Company’s political affairs under the Regulating Act of 1784. By 1818, the British East India Company’s Crown-appointed governor-generals had conquered much of India. In the 1820s, Assam was annexed and tea plantations quickly established there. By the 1830s, the “Honorable Company” had secured control of many of the opium fields of India, whose product was processed and sold at auction in Calcutta (now Kolkata). As mentioned above, this opium helped the West to resolve its trade imbalance with China and to acquire China’s centuries-old economic pre-eminence. Although this chain of causation may seem attenuated, the course and impact of brick tea’s history, running from China to Britain, to Boston Harbor, to Calcutta and back to China, nonetheless runs parallel to the larger narrative of tea in modern Chinese and world history.

### Conclusion

Chinese tea provides a host of opportunities to study both the ancient and early modern world economy and opens many windows into Asian and world history. These include the role of food and foodways in society (such as the spread of the “tea ceremony” in Japan and Korea, and tea drinking throughout the Christian and Muslim worlds); the function of “commodity currencies” (an excellent means of introducing students to the “world system”); regional varieties of commodity exchange and beverage consumption (such as sugar and tea-horse); the place of “coffee houses” in the establishment of global trading and insurance networks; the spread of plantation economies; and the influence of both diet and disease on the Industrial Revolution in the West and in Japan. These issues can be explored through a variety of in-classroom activities and student research. Many of these activities offer highly visual and even tactile approaches to the global aspects of the culture and economy of tea. Classroom applications of brick tea-related lesson plans abound and are supported by a variety of traditional and online resources. The sim-



plest approaches need employ only the accompanying photographs, though students' eyes do light up when they are permitted to handle a readily available tea brick.<sup>16</sup> (See Teaching Suggestions on page 14.) However, teachers and students will greatly benefit from first consulting Tim Keirn's entry on "Tea" in the new *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World*.<sup>17</sup> Thomas Standage argues that world history can be encompassed in "six glasses,"<sup>18</sup> but Keirn suggests that much of Chinese history, as well as world history, is revealed by examining a single glass of tea. ■



1846 lithograph of the Boston Tea Party.  
Image source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston\\_Tea\\_Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston_Tea_Party).

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Woodruff D. Smith, "Complications of the Commonplace: Tea, Sugar, and Imperialism," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23 (2): Autumn 1992, 259–278.

### NOTES

1. To learn about Chinese tea, its many varieties, and tea consumption patterns, visit <http://chineseteas101.com/>. Accessed June 10, 2008.
2. Recent scientific research has proven that green tea is of great value in promoting vascular health. See "Benefits of Green Tea in Reducing an Important Risk Factor for Heart Disease," in *Science Daily*, July 3, 2008 at <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/07/080702080624.htm>. Accessed July 10, 2008.
3. From Bryant Lillywhite, *London Coffee Houses*, cited at British Muslim Heritage, [http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BMH-IRO-coffee\\_houses.htm](http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BMH-IRO-coffee_houses.htm). Accessed June 10, 2008.
4. For a complete list of Dickens' references to Garraways, see Alex J. Phillips et al, *The Dickens Dictionary* (Research and Education Association, 2001), 137.
5. See Godfrey Hodgson, *Lloyd's of London* (New York: Viking Adult Books, 1984), Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Phoenix, 2005), and J. Pelzer and L. Pelzer, "Coffee Houses of Augustan London," *History Today* (October 1982), 40–47.

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ushered in an era of global war and revolution that led to the destruction of much of the so-called First British Empire in the North Atlantic.

## Teaching Suggestions

An accessible short history of tea consumption at <http://www.stashtea.com/facts.htm> examines the socio-political and cultural factors in the spread of tea culture across Asia and to Europe (though it ignores mint tea consumed in the Middle East). This site also notes the first European use of milk in tea.

A *Wikipedia* article on tea at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea> is also useful as a general reference. A timeline tracing the use and distribution of tea from 2737 BCE to 1910 CE can be found at <http://www.2basnob.com/tea-history-timeline.html>.

An eyewitness account of the Boston Tea Party that also provides a lively discussion of its historical context is offered at <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/teaparty.htm>. The role of trans-Atlantic politics in that event is explored at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston\\_Tea\\_Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston_Tea_Party).

Thomas Standage (*History of the World in Six Glasses*, 2005), offers a mainstream view of the role of tea in the Industrial Revolution, which is redacted for classroom use by Deborah Johnson in “Research and Teaching: A History of the World in Six Glasses,” *World History Connected*, the free online journal of world history currently available at <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/whc/3.2/johnston.html>, soon to be offered via the JSTOR database.

Alan Macfarlane (*The Savage Wars of Peace: England, Japan, and the Malthusian Trap*, 1997 and 2003), discusses his controversial views on the relationship between tea and the Industrial Revolution via a streaming video-supported Web site at <http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/savage/tea.html>. Macfarlane’s views are also summarized at <http://www.aim-digest.com/gateway/pages/book/articles/tea.htm>.

Content at these sites explains why Macfarlane thinks tea replaced beer and ale in Britain, as well as why he believes tea helped control waterborne diseases, limited fatalities, and improved worker health—and thus played a role in the Industrial Revolution, a thesis which has a flawed, Jared Diamond-like simplicity that students familiar with the latter’s *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997) can easily critique/explore and teachers can employ to develop their analytical skills.

6. This issue is directly addressed at Alan Macfarlane’s homepage to be found at <http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/savage/tea.html>. Macfarlane also contends that the pace of Japan’s industrial growth was initially slowed by its tendency to reject labor-saving devices in order to maintain employment opportunities for its population. Thus, while Britain was launching its Industrial Revolution, “Japan was undergoing an industrious one.” See an essay encapsulating Macfarlane’s views entitled “Did Beer and Tea Make Britain Great?” at AIM, the Alcohol in Moderation Digest Web site at <http://www.aim-digest.com/gateway/pages/book/articles/tea.htm>. Accessed May 10, 2008.

7. For a world historian’s contrarian view, see J. R. McNeill, “Review of The Savage Wars of Peace: England, Japan, and the Malthusian Trap by Alan Macfarlane,” in *The Journal of Modern History*, 77: June 2005, 415–417. For the critique of a Japanologist, see Karen Wigen, “Review of *The Savage Wars of Peace: England, Japan and the Malthusian Trap*, by Alan Macfarlane,” in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 53 (2): Summer, 1998, 273–276.

8. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

9. See Woodruff D. Smith, “Complications of the Commonplace: Tea, Sugar, and Imperialism,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23 (2): Autumn 1992, 259–278.

10. For Unilever see its homepage at <http://www.unilever.com/>. Accessed on May 10, 2008. For the Tata Group (Tetley Tea and other

brands), see [http://www.tata.com/tata\\_tea/index.htm](http://www.tata.com/tata_tea/index.htm). Accessed May 10, 2008. Unilever has recently attempted to spruce up its global image by promoting its commitment to “sustainable and ethical” tea production, a sign, if market driven, of the growing confluence of globalization and environmentalism.

11. Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999) and Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giraldez, “Born with a ‘Silver Spoon’: The Origin of World Trade in 1571,” *Journal of World History*, 6 (2): 1995, 201–221, and “Cycles of Silver: Global Economic Unity through the Mid-Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of World History*, 13 (2): 2002, 391–427.
12. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the third quality of the five quality levels of tea brick was the equivalent of the Tibetan “brgyad pa” (“eighth”), which was then worth eight standard Tibetan silver coins (*tangkas*) weighing approximately 5.4 grams. See Wolfgang Bertsch, *The Use of Tea Bricks as Currency among the Tibetans - Der Gebrauch von Teeziegeln als Zahlungsmittel bei den Tibetern* (Landau, Germany: European Union to Search for, Collect and Preserve Primitive and Curious Money/ European Association for Collecting, Preserving and Researching of Original and Unusual Forms of Money [EUP-RIMO], no. 75, 2006). See also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea\\_brick](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea_brick). Accessed on May 10, 2008.
13. See “The Ancient Tea and Horse Caravan Route: The ‘Silk Road’ of Southwestern China,” at <http://www.silk-road.com/newsletter/2004vol2num1/tea.htm>. Accessed on June 10, 2008.
14. See “Tea Horse Road” at [http://www1.chinaculture.org/created/2005-09/16/content\\_73021.htm](http://www1.chinaculture.org/created/2005-09/16/content_73021.htm) and K. Gabrisch, *Geld aus Tibet, Rikon: Stadt Winterthur Department für Kulturelles -e-Tibet-Institute*, 1990, cited at <http://www.tibetancoins.com/III%20Tibetan%20Trade>. Both sites accessed June 10, 2008.html.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Tea bricks are widely available on the Internet for \$14.00–\$20.00 or less.
17. Timothy Keirn, “Tea,” in Peter Stearns, editor-in-chief, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World, Vol. 8* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 211–213.
18. Thomas Standage, *The History of the World in Six Glasses* (New York: Walker and Company, 2005).

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