



The Tale of Tea

George van Driem

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The tea trade is responsible for paper money, the Opium Wars and the existence of Hong Kong. Tea was a decisive factor in the Acts of Navigation, the Anglo-Dutch Wars and the American war of independence. The economy of tea was crucial to the economy and military defences of Tang and Song dynasty China and moulded the evolution of Chinese art and culture. The tea trade with the West played a role in sowing the seeds of the Taiping Rebellion and so ultimately of the Chinese Revolution led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen and the subsequent Communist Rebellion led by Mao Zedong. Global tea production is well in excess of four million metric tonnes annually, and after water tea has often been claimed to be the most drunk beverage on the planet. Over three and a half million hectares of the earth's surface is covered by tea plantations. Roughly two thirds of the tea traded is black tea, and about one third is green tea. Although tea is an ancient commodity, most of the black tea dominating the global market today is a recent invention. The three largest black tea producing countries are India, Kenya and Sri Lanka, which together account for roughly 70% of all the world's tea production. Yet there were no tea plantations in these three countries when the Dutch and the English first went to war about taxes on tea in the XVIIth century. Japan is famous for its green tea, but the world's largest importer of green tea is the North African kingdom of Morocco. Today some take their tea with lemon, and others take their tea with milk, but the Tibetan custom of salting tea is ancient, and the Burmese custom of eating tea is a practice of even greater antiquity, and the two practices are historically related. The history of tea is the saga of globalisation. Yet much of the popular thinking about tea and much popular tea history is fraught with myth and inaccuracy. Consequently, the present chronological account relates much now recondite knowledge which will hopefully one day be more widely known. This tale of tea tells the story of the hidden origins of tea in the eastern Himalayan highlands and takes us across seas and deserts to the emergence of today's globalised beverage in its many modern guises.

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