An Interlude
I, Li Bo, had heard of Jade Spring Temple with its mountains and clear streams. Stalactite caves are everywhere, and inside them waters from many jade springs blend together. The caves are filled with white bats big as crows — ancient lore calls them “immortal rats.” After a thousand years their bodies turn white as snow. They roost hanging by their feet, drinking water from the stalactites — that’s perhaps why they live so long.

All along these streams are tea plants, thick as gauze netting, their leaves and branches like emerald jade. The Jade Spring Temple master often picks and drinks this tea himself. He’s in his eighties now, his complexion like peaches and plums. This tea is pure, fragrant, smooth and mature. Unlike other teas, it can restore your youth, stop aging, and increase your lifespan.

I traveled to Nanjing to see my nephew, the Buddhist monk Zhongfu. He gave me several dozen packets of this tea, curled and folded into many layers. They were called “tea of the palm of the immortal” because they were shaped like hands. I think they’d just been harvested in the Jade Spring mountains. We hadn’t seen each other in ages, so he presented me with this tea and also a poem. He requested my response, which follows. Now later generations of eminent monks and great hermits will know about palm tea because of the Zen disciple Zhongfu and the Blue Lotus Layman Li Bo.

I’d often heard of Jade Spring Mountain, its caves filled with stalactites.
Immortal Rats like white crows hang upside down over the clear stream moon.
Tea grows in the central part of the mountain,
where jade springs flow endlessly.
Root and stalk dewy with fragrance —
when you pick and drink it, it will moisten your flesh and
bones.
Its green leaves coil thickly,
branches intertwining row after row.
After drying in the sun, the leaves become Immortals’
  Palms —
they’re like the touch of an immortal.
Nobody else has seen this yet,
and who is going to tell them?
My nephew, the Zen adept,
gave me some, and one of his fine poems as well.
By comparison, my own work is so plain
that I’m ashamed, like an ugly woman looking at a famous
beauty.
Mornings I sit in great delight and chant his poem,
broadcasting it through all the Heavens.  

差族侄僧中孚贈玉泉仙人掌茶

答族侄僧中孚贈玉泉仙人掌茶 井序

余聞荊州玉泉寺近清溪諸山。山洞往往有乳窟。窟中
多玉泉交流。其中有白蝙蝠。大如鴉。按仙經。蝙蝠一
名仙鼠。千歲之後。體白如雪。棲則倒懸。蓋飲乳水而
長生也。其水邊處處有茗草羅生。枝葉如碧玉。惟玉泉
真公常采而飲之。年八十余歲。顏色如桃李。而此茗清
香滑熟。異于他者。所以能還童振枯。扶人壽也。余游
金陵。見宗僧中孚。示余茶數十片。拳然重疊。其狀如
手。號為仙人掌茶。蓋新出乎玉泉之山。曠古未覿。因
持之見遣。兼贈詩。要余答之。遂有此作。後之高僧大
隱。知仙人掌茶發乎中孚禪子及青蓮居士李白也。

常聞玉泉山。山洞多乳窟
仙鼠如白鴉。倒懸清溪月
茗生此中石。玉泉流不歇
根柯酒芳津。采服潤肌骨
叢老卷綠葉。楚枝相接連
When this poem was written in 752, tea was just emerging from the monastery. No one else ever much drank it — it was known only as an obscure specialty beverage in the south, or an awake-drug for meditators, or as a *materium medicum*. A decade later China swam in a tea craze, elite and commoners alike, with tea shops, tea plantations, national distribution systems, and, soon enough, targeted commodity taxes.

By 781 even Tibetans were drinking it:

The honorable Changlu was dispatched to Tibet. When he was boiling tea in his pavilion, the king [Ch. *zanpu* 贊普, Tib. *bTsanpo* བཙནཔོ] asked him, “What’s this you have?” He replied, “It dispels enervation and relieves thirst, it’s called ‘tea.’” The King said, “I have some too,” and he ordered it brought out. Pointing to each, he said, “This one’s from Shouzhou, this from Shuzhou, this from Guzhou, this from Qimen, this from Changming, and this one’s from Yonghu.”

The nodal moment: in the early 760s Lu Yu *陸羽* (733–804) produced his *Classic of Tea* (*Chajing* 茶經), and at once there was a pedigree and grammar within which a fast-maturing connoisseurship could develop — how to brew, what implements, what waters, the right leaves. And thus the possibilities of ritualized social gatherings for friendship, poetry, exultation, but sober, such that even poet-monks could join. Alcohol, says James Benn, “was faced with a serious rival for the first time in Chinese history.”