When tea was introduced for the first time to Japan around 750, a tiny aristocracy ruled over about 6.5 million inhabitants. Buddhism was becoming increasingly predominant as a belief system within this tiny elite, and to explain and implement Buddhist rituals the court ordained monks and nuns. Compared to these political and religious elites, however, the great mass of the population lived a hard life and existed from hand to mouth. Japanese society resembled a rigid pyramid with a small, pointed tip where the elites enjoyed lives of great opulence while most barely survived.

The nature of Japanese society profoundly affected the way in which tea was received and propagated in the islands. Since most commoners had to struggle to survive, they did not take cultivation of the less than nourishing product too seriously nor was it very widespread. Cultivators might farm tea for a while and then abandon cultivation for another more stable and promising life. When it came to processing the leaves, the kinds of tea available were few in number and the beverage itself looked and tasted nothing at all like Japanese green tea does today. Again, because the number of consumers was severely limited, they usually knew each other and exchanged tea leaves almost exclusively as a gift. There was no need for a market. Finally, in a time when life expectancy even for the elite did not exceed thirty, the primary function of tea was as a medicine to cure ailments of various types. Aristocrats and the clergy seized upon this function and devised rituals stressing the beverage’s supposed health effects. They wrote tracts and poetry about drinking tea. By 1300, the size of the tea-drinking elite had expanded somewhat, but these essential
characteristics remained the same. Indeed, tea retained its role in gift giving and as a medicine into the present.

THE ORIGINS OF TEA IN JAPAN

As noted in the introduction, southwestern China was likely one region where tea flourished. It remained a product primarily of south China during the Latter Han and Northern and Southern Dynasties (25–589 CE), where it was popular with Daoists and reclusive poets, among others.\(^1\) By the 700s, however, it had grown in popularity to encompass north China, too. The scholar Lu Yu (733–803) composed *The Classic of Tea* (*Chajing*) around 760 and described a society that had gone mad for the beverage. Even prior to Lu Yu, “tea had become an integral part in the lives of Buddhist monks,” who cultivated, drank, and offered tea to visitors and the imperial court.\(^2\) By the 760s, migrants headed for south China to work in a flourishing tea industry. As Victor Mair and Ehrling Hoh have written, “the drink spread to every nook of the land and stratum of society.”\(^3\)

Both Korea, where the Kingdom of Silla held sway, and the Japanese court, where Sinophilic leaders such as Fujiwara no Nakamaro (706–764) dominated politics, looked to China for the latest in elite culture. More important, Buddhist monks traveled regularly to China and were familiar with customs there. Each court sent embassies to China to pay tribute items and receive courtly accoutrements frequently during the 700s. The elites of both Silla and Japan could easily have known of the Chinese addiction to tea and fallen prey to the same habit at this time. And yet Japanese wooden tablets and paper documents listing the Chinese character (t’ui) that may mean tea measure the herb in units that cannot possibly have been utilized for the plant or beverage.\(^4\)

Recently, though, biology and archaeology have provided the most convincing evidence to date that visitors carried tea to Japan earlier than previously thought. Japanese and Chinese molecular biologists have examined tea specimens throughout East Asia and have found that all tea in Japan originated in south China and came in waves as the archipelago’s most famous invasive species. The first and most venerable comprised a tea strain with a long pistil that entered both Korea and Japan from south China at about the same time, probably several decades prior to 800. For those with knowledge of the close relationship between the peoples and cultures of the ancient Korean peninsula and Japanese islands, this revelation should come as no surprise.\(^5\) Korean elite tea culture possibly dates back as early as the late seventh century.\(^6\)
Archaeologists in Japan have uncovered additional valuable evidence. Shards of light-green porcelain vessels, many of them tea bowls, have come to light from the foundation of Sūfukujī, the temple where an early ninth-century sovereign is known to have imbibed his tea, as well as the Yamashiro provincial headquarters. More important, archaeologists have found them at Kōfukujī, the famous temple at the Chinese-style capital Nara, dating to the late Nara period (710–794). A site thought to be a detached palace or temple has revealed these treasures for the 730s or 740s. The Ordinances of Engi also refer to tea bowls manufactured in Owari Province, one of the production centers where shards have been recovered. The Chinese Yue ware that served as the model for these tea bowls has come to light at numerous sites throughout Japan for the eighth century. To be sure, tea bowls may be used for many purposes, but the most reasonable hypothesis is that Buddhist monks and court aristocrats in Japan were familiar with tea drinking during its heyday in China in the mid-eighth century.

Scholars will probably never know just who was responsible for the introduction of tea to Japan. One expert has surmised that two little-known monks who spent the years from 750 through 778 in Tang China may have been the first to carry tea seeds from China to Nara. They lived at Daianji in Nara; a list of the possessions from that temple shows items that could have been used for tea drinking. Moreover, Daianji was a center of East Asian culture, with many Tang monks residing there including disciples of the famed Chinese cleric Jianzhen (Ganjin, 688–763). Dōji (?–740), another Daianji priest, wrote odes referring to “fragrant water.” Monks at this temple may well have been the first to grow the tea plant in Japan, given that cultivation of Camellia sinensis in Nara prefecture is probably the oldest in the entire archipelago. Yet court annalists tell a tale of more heroic origins.

TEA DURING THE NINTH CENTURY:
CULTIVATION AND MODES OF EXCHANGE

In the first verifiable written records, tea seemingly makes a dramatic appearance in Japan. Texts link the introduction of tea to two of the most famous men in Japanese history: the Buddhist monks Saichō (767–822) and Kūkai (774–835). To elaborate, it is generally known that each cleric was the founder of a famous school of esoteric Buddhism, Tendai and Shingon, respectively. These sects offered great solace to wealthy Japanese aristocrats in search of the ritual trappings of salvation. To learn about these sects, each cleric went to Tang China in 804; Saichō returned in 805/6, then
Kūkai in 806/10. At the party for Saichō’s departure, there was a reference to “drinking tea”; eight years after sailing back to Japan, Kūkai wrote in 814 that he was “learning Indian writing while sitting and drinking tea.” Both men had frequent experiences drinking the habit-forming herb while in China and are presumed to have carried tea seeds back to Japan with them.

As if to prove this point, in 815, Saichō sent ten “pounds” (kin, about 600 grams) of tea to the monk Taihan, a Kūkai disciple. That year was an important one for tea in Japan. The beverage was apparently quite popular at the court of the current “Heavenly Sovereign” (or emperor) Saga, as there are repeated allusions to tea in Japanese poetry of the time. In that same year, Saga went to Sūfukuji over the mountains from Heian, and the monk Yōchū, who had himself spent thirty years in Tang China, demonstrated his prowess by boiling up some tea leaves for the enjoyment of the weary travelers. Within two months, Saga had ordered eight provinces in or near the Kinai (the Kyoto-Osaka-Nara region), including Yamato and Yamashiro where the capitals Nara and Heian stood, to plant tea and present it as a tribute-tax item. The narrative thus gains the stamp of imperial approval.

There are, however, problems with attributing the origins of tea to these two men. First, all of those traditions date from long after the early 800s, as late as the sixteenth century. Second, neither Saichō nor Kūkai returned to Japan in a season appropriate for the planting of tea. Third, unless the men brought back with them plentiful amounts of seed, they could never have produced enough tea by 815 to quench the thirsts of Saga and his court. Knowledge of the plant’s reproductive processes cast substantial doubt on the conventional tale of tea’s origins.

Rather than attributing the beginnings of tea in Japan to either of these two clerics, it makes more sense to posit that the cultivar was already being grown and consumed in the islands by the early 800s. In other words, the insight that tea cultivation in Japan probably dates to the second half of the Nara period is essential. By the time the two monks had returned from China, modern scientific and archaeological testimony shows that tea had likely been farmed and consumed in Japan for over half a century.

Consider Saichō’s generous gift to Taihan in 815. Most narratives simply assume that Saichō had the tea available from his trip to China, but it had been eleven years since the Tendai prelate had returned from the Asian continent. The tea could not have been left over from his time in China because it would have gone bad in the meantime. It might have been a gift sent from Chinese monks in 815, but there is no record of such a gift, and besides, the amount would have been too large to pass rigorous inspection tests of continental goods conducted at court.
In my view, all the tea-drinking activities of Saga’s court make sense only if tea was already a daily fact of life for the elite in the early ninth century. The nature of tea cultivation supports such an inference. As noted in my introduction, after planting tea seeds, it typically requires eight years before tea shrubs are capable of producing palatable tea. Is it reasonable to believe that Saichō and/or Kūkai and/or Yōchū could have brought enough seeds with them in 805/806 to supply Saga and his court fully by 815, just eight or nine years later? Although it is not completely beyond the realm of possibility, the long maturation of tea bushes suggests that none of these monks who traveled to China could have brought back the seeds for Saga’s tea with them. The truth is more likely that Japan’s elites were used to consuming tea because the plant was already being grown in several places around the capital by that time.

All the tea consumed at the Saga court was therefore farmed in Japan, even possibly at Daianji, where Saichō had a disciple. Sad to say, there is no credible evidence that either prelate ever carried seeds to Japan. There are many traditions that attribute the origin of tea in Japan to Saichō and even Kūkai, but they have no basis in ninth-century sources. The attempt to tie the importation of tea to these famous figures is analogous to similar urges in Japanese tea history to link origins to well-known historical persons.

The tale of Saichō and Kūkai raises the question of the earliest cultivation methods in Japan. How does one interpret the order to establish tea fields in all those provinces in 815? Was the order ever carried out? The answer can never be known for sure, because there are no further references to the command or to tea-farming methods for this era. Yet some historical evidence suggests a more optimistic view of the implementation of Saga’s order. First, at least one of the provincial governors charged with planting tea, Fujiwara no Fuyutsugu, was a frequent drinker of the beverage. Then, too, there was a tea plot located within the imperial residential grounds. Inspired by the example of Yōchū and his apparent tea-making skills acquired after thirty years in China, Saga may well have issued and implemented his command.

Let us assume that tea seeds were planted in 815 and eventually germinated into seedlings. What happened to the resulting bushes? Such a question carries the argument into the realm of speculation about ancient Japanese cultivation methods, but if informed by knowledge of the reproduction of the tea plant, then such speculation can be insightful. First, if the court’s tea plants germinated and the seedlings were cared for by conscientious farmers, then naturally the resulting shrubs were likely productive, but there are no further references indicating that this was so.
What if the tea seeds were planted, the surviving plants tended for a while and then abandoned, a fate that frequently befell rice and other fields? As noted earlier, left on their own, tea flowers are not self-pollinating, that is, the stamen and pistil of the same plant cannot produce seeds. Butterflies, bees, and birds must fly from plant to plant to pollinate the flowers, yielding hard pouches of tea seeds. Without human intervention, the rate of successful pollination is not very high, but if Saga ordered enough seeds planted and they yielded bushes, then undoubtedly some would have produced seed pouches, while others might have died. Whatever seed pouches there were would have fallen to the ground, where they may or may not have germinated. Interestingly, animals such as boars, deer, and monkeys are known to assist in the growth process by eating the seed pouches. These animals then carry potential tea plants inside them until they defecate the undigested seeds, fertilized and ready to germinate.

To summarize this discussion: the tea seeds ordered for planting in 815 may have had a widely varying fate because tea farming in ancient Japan was likely so spotty and simple. From seed to full-grown shrub, minimal care with no fertilizer was the rule. Some attempted tea plots undoubtedly failed and disappeared; some produced seedlings, and then bushes, and grew to large dimensions; and others yielded offspring that traveled a considerable distance before becoming productive. To my mind, there is no reason to assume that the dearth of historical sources means the failure of all the plants. The first cultivation methods for tea during the Nara and Heian periods were rude and exemplified the extensive farming so characteristic of early Japan.

Despite the hit-or-miss nature of ancient tea farming, the beverage soon acquired a limited and slowly expanding appeal for Japan’s civil and religious elites. A major reason for tea’s popularity among ruling cliques in Japan and greater East Asia lay in a second characteristic of early Japanese tea: its utility as a gift, the primary way that the leaves changed hands during this century. The example of Saichō’s gift to Taihan has already been cited, but Saichō also gave tea directly to Kūkai, perhaps from a tea field on Mount Hiei. Yōchū, who was a central figure among Saichō, Kūkai, and Saga, donated tea to Saga on more than one occasion; Saga appreciated the beverage for its addictive ability to transport him to “the world of spirits and immortals.” It is also notable that Yōchū had close ties to the East Asian state of Parhae, where he acted as an intermediary, granting gifts of gold and possibly tea.

Japanese clerics probably learned the custom of bestowing tea upon thirsty guests from their hosts in Tang China. There is no doubt that during his thirty years in the empire Yōchū frequented temples with Kūkai
where the hard work of sutra transcription was taking place. There the pair took tea repeatedly to fight the fatigue that set in during their labors. These Tang temples also carried out ceremonies in which tea played a prominent role. Other clerics, aristocrats, and members of Saga’s family also participated in the exchanges.17

The story of the Tang priest Yi-kong and his travails in Japan help show how the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans eventually came to participate in such a tea gift-giving network.18 The Chinese Zen monk Yi-kong spent the years 849–852 at Tōji in the capital at Heian, where he was close to the Japanese imperial family, especially the Empress Dowager Tachibana Kachiko, teaching her about the virtues of Zen. While he was living in Japan, he naturally grew homesick and corresponded frequently with the Chinese trader Xu Gong-you and his financier brother Gong-zhi. Eventually, the trader brothers decided to send Yi-kong and his servant some presents, including incense, tea, a white tea bowl, and a variety of other porcelains. Since the Xu brothers were from south China, they were giving Yi-kong what amounted to local specialties.

The Heian court, however, had a regulation about commodities shipped to Japan from abroad. Merchants had to stop at Dazaifu in northern Kyushu and off-load their goods for inspection. In doing this, the Heian court was adhering to a law that dictated that individuals could not trade with foreigners without first giving the Japanese government what amounted to confiscatory powers. While no one knows for sure where the contraband ended up, it seems likely that the most coveted goods found their way into the hands of Japanese courtiers. And that is exactly what apparently happened to the goods bound for Yi-kong. They were locked in storage at the guesthouse (kōrokan) at Dazaifu and later transported to the capital, where they were auctioned off to thirsty aristocrats. Yi-kong may have seen some of his gift, but most of the goods fell into other hands.

The story of Yi-kong emphasizes at least three important points. First, the gift-giving network extended from south China to Japan, and probably to Silla and Parhae in northeastern Asia too. Second, tea was an essential good cementing together donors and recipients, who were usually Buddhist monks. Third, the Heian court and its aristocrats had developed a healthy taste for tea from China, and apparently their demands outran supply.

The story of Yi-kong and his tea involved primarily Chinese, but the tea network crossed borders and helped knit the diverse East Asian Buddhist community together. For example, not long before Yi-kong spent his time in Heian, the Japanese Tendai master Ennin resided in China for nearly a decade (838–847) in search of the Buddhist law. During his stay, Ennin proved to be a real tea addict, imbibing thirty-four times on the rec-
He drank not only the brick tea that Lu Yu boasted of, but two types of leaf tea. Ennin undoubtedly had first developed a taste for the beverage while on Mount Hiei, where Saichô and so many other monks had garnered their tea leaves. Then again, between 853 and 858, the Japanese monk Enchin followed the same path to China, where he climbed Mount Tientai and examined the tea shrubs there. Enchin was also a correspondent with the Chinese monk Chang-ya, especially when it came to tea matters.

Although Buddhist monks were the primary drinkers of tea during the ninth and early tenth centuries, Sinified aristocrats could also fall under the sway of the tea habit. Sugawara no Michizane (845–903), the famed courtier banished by a Fujiwara plot at the end of his life, probably imbibed the beverage throughout his adulthood. He wrote Chinese poetry referring to tea both during his tenure as governor of Sanuki and while he resided at Heian, where he undoubtedly received many gifts. In 894, he received samples of the plant from a garden in China. After his banishment to Dazaifu he wrote another poem on spring tea in northern Kyushu. His wife, children, disciples, and colleagues enjoyed tea as well.

Michizane’s story is also a testament to the gradual spread of tea cultivation in Japan. When Sugawara was a child growing up in Heian, monks cultivated the plant at various temples throughout the Kinai, such as Daianji, Enryakuji, Tôkôji, and Anshôji. Moreover, while historians cannot be certain how effectively Emperor Saga’s order was implemented in 815, provinces in the Kinai—as well as Tanba, Harima, and Ômi—were supposed to deliver the herb as a tribute item. As noted above, Sugawara served as the governor of Sanuki, where apparently a field supervised by the provincial headquarters yielded tea. Sanuki was also the home province of Kûkai and Ennin, both longtime tea drinkers. Finally, Michizane wrote more poetry about tea when he was banished to Dazaifu in northern Kyushu. A major port of call for Chinese merchantmen and eventually home to a sizable immigrant Chinese community, northern Kyushu may also have been evolving into a center of cultivation. Farming methods may have been simple, but Japan’s soil, climate, and topography were certainly conducive to the diffusion of the tea plant to new regions.

TEA, THE BEST MEDICINE

Farmed in a few regions with little attention and simple techniques and exchanged almost exclusively as a personal gift, tea merited only a small place in Nara and Heian society. The obstacle that restricted the leaf’s appeal was not simply the farming methods, but went to the heart of the way that tea was processed during these centuries. It had big clumps and
tasted quite bitter. The willingness of the elite to imbibe that brown concoction was related to its presumed health benefits. Nothing illustrates both the rude method of processing and tea’s supposed medicinal qualities better than a court ritual involving this unsavory beverage.

In 737, Japan was in the throes of the worst smallpox epidemic in quite some time. Among the palliatives announced at court was the recitation of the *Sutra of Great Wisdom* (*Dai hannya-kyō*) by specially cleansed monks from Daianji. It was apparently believed that by calling upon the name of the Buddha using this particular sacred text, the terrible, death-dealing crisis would abate. The year 737 was only the third time that the *Dai hannya-kyō* had been recited at court following a calamity, and it was certainly the most notable, followed as it was by the placing of that sutra in provincial temples (*kokubunji*) and nunneries (*kokubun niji*) around the country. The actions of Emperor Shōmu (r. 724–749) helped cement the place of this sacred text in court ceremonies for warding off or ameliorating calamities of all sorts.

The problem was, of course, that famines, epidemics, and other disasters were nearly annual events in ancient Japan. By the mid-ninth century at the latest, the seasonal recitation of sutras (*ki no midokkyō*), especially the *Sutra of Great Wisdom*, had become common features of court life. According to *The Ordinances of Engi*, compiled in 925 but reflecting practices of earlier times, the recitation of the *Daihannya-kyō* had been instituted twice a year, in the spring and fall, to take place in the Throne Room (*daigokuden*) of the Imperial Palace. The entire aristocratic class was required to be present; statues of Vairocana Buddha were situated in the flower-laden room and incense filled the air. Eventually, the ceremony was fixed for a propitious day in the second and again in the eighth months, with one hundred monks in attendance to read the auspicious sutra. This elaborate ritual was supposed to have taken four days. Court records describe this rite both in 859 and in 877, as it was already a biennial event by that time.

*The Record of the Western Palace* (*Saikyūki*) also conveys essential facts about this ceremony to ward off disasters. It dictated, for example, that monks should be nominated from elite temples, including Enryakuji, Tōdaiji, Kōfukuji, Tōji, Saiji, and other important Buddhist centers. Most important, *Saikyūki* noted that the court chamberlain (*kurōdo*) requested from the Bureau of Medicine (*ten’yaku-ryō*) payment for the picking and preparation of tea, along with other items such as a Chinese medicine, dried ginger (*kankyō*), a sweetener made from the boiled, dried skins of the persimmon (*chinpi*), and earthenware bowls. According to another source, middle-ranking courtiers served the tea, mixed with the other ingredients, to the sutra-reading monks as gifts for their labors in front of the emperor.
The Record of the Western Palace is important for two other reasons. First, it describes how the Chamberlain’s Office (kurōdo dokoro) received provisions and payment for the picking and processing of the tea. It is quite likely that, since the recitation was a court ritual, the tea was picked from the plot within the Imperial Palace. Second, the large number of officials with backgrounds in medicine is striking. Doctors and pharmacists played a prominent role, and recall that the request for the ingredients went to the Bureau of Medicine. It was as if the tea and those in charge of it could cure the ills of the state.26

The various court handbooks on ritual describe in great detail the actions to be undertaken by each of the participants, but the nature of the tea is only generally clear. One expert believes that the Japanese of the eighth century consumed tea as a kind of soup or gruel.27 Tastes may have changed later, for a fragment from an ordinance for the Chamberlain’s Office writes that the tea for this court ritual was a kind of “steeped” (senjicha) beverage; some scholars apparently believe that this term refers to leaf tea dried or roasted in a rudimentary manner.28

Another stronger possibility is that it was brick tea (dancha; kokeicha; heicha). In his Classic of Tea, Lu Yu had described in some detail how brick tea was prepared, and it took quite a bit of effort. After the tea leaves had been picked on the appropriate day in early spring, they were then steamed, pounded in a mortar with a pestle, formed into round bricks with holes in the middle, dried, and then tied together and sealed against the elements. When the drinker wanted to imbibe, he undertook the hard work of grinding the brick on a druggist’s mortar (yakken; figure 1).

Figure 1. Druggist’s mortar. From Shaanxi Sheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, Famen si kaogu fajue baogao (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2007), p. 62.
Why use a druggist’s mortar? The answer is that, until the mid-1200s, that was the only implement available to grind tea. In other words, the conventional tea grinder (chausu), made of stone with striations to crush dried leaves into a fine powder, had not yet been invented in China (1073) or imported to the Japanese islands (around 1250). Lu Yu described the druggist’s mortar, and the term may also appear in a Japanese encyclopedia of the mid-tenth century.

The employment of the druggist’s mortar has important implications for the uses to which tea was put and how it tasted and looked. This druggist’s grinder is molded from metal and looks like a wheel on an axle turning in a metal trough. Experimenters working at the tea company Itoen have found that the druggist’s grinder produces granules much larger than powdered tea ground on a stone grinder, and that the taste is bitter and the color of the tea brown. In a word, the tea consumed as brick or leaf tea ground on the druggist’s wheel would have been quite pungent and rather unpalatable to modern tastes.

It is small wonder that the monks had sweetener, ginger, and other herbs put into their beverages. Why would these monks, not to mention highly placed civil aristocrats and even the emperor, have chosen to imbibe such a concoction? This question goes right to the heart of the reason that the ruling elite utilized tea so widely at this time: it was considered good medicine. That is undoubtedly a major reason that the court served tea to the monks performing sutra recitation. A rite to heal the court and the country required the main participants to have excellent health. It is no accident that tea appears in the court’s first two books of medicine. Even during the mid-tenth century, courtiers knew that a bowl of tea was a good remedy for a hangover.

An anecdote about Fujiwara no Michinaga, the most powerful courtier between 995 and 1024, serves to highlight the expected health benefits of tea. First, Michinaga was an avid fan of the beverage; his diary records four occasions on which the leader received tea utensils, including once from a Chinese. When his child’s house burned down, he was apparently distraught at the loss of all the possessions, including tea bowls. Second, as is well known, Michinaga suffered from diabetes. His relative and confidant Fujiwara no Sanesuke records that for several days in 1016 Michinaga “was always drinking cold water, . . . but that his mouth was still dry and he had no strength.” Doctors prescribed various remedies, but before Michinaga tried them, “from today he imbibed tea once and two or three times arose to go into the other room, but it was always to drink more water.” The point of the story is not that Michinaga’s attempted use of tea seemingly did not work, although it might have helped had he tried more libations, but that he expected the tea to have a regenerative effect on his body.
A later story from *Tales of Times Now Past (Konjaku monogatari)* equally suggests the close tie between tea and medicine. One day the chief of the Bureau of Medicine spied a finely dressed woman in a carriage, but when he asked who she was, there was no answer. The woman left the carriage only to reveal white thighs with a swelling on them. The chief dedicated himself day and night to curing the condition in hope of winning her hand. Eventually, the woman recovered from her condition, and then the chief ground some medicine and put it in a “tea bowl” (*chawan*), stirring the concoction with feathers. In the end, the woman left the chief, so even his medical skills were not enough to make her his own. Yet the chief’s use of a tea bowl and grinder for the medicine shows once again the close connection between medicine, tea, and the metal grinder during the ancient period.

The seasonal recitation of *The Sutra of Great Wisdom* continued until the thirteenth century, and is noted in aristocratic diaries at least fifteen times from 982 through 1110. This ceremony functioned to ameliorate the effects of the numerous plagues, famines, droughts, floods, earthquakes, and other disasters that afflicted both the court and the common people. The prominent role played by the earliest bitter tea in the rite also suggests the medicinal value attributed to this herb, as well as its part in a gift economy. Buddhist monks were the center of the economy for tea, as they grew, processed, and drank tea somewhat more widely beginning in the tenth century.

**THE SLOW SPREAD OF TEA AND ITS CULTURAL CACHET DURING THE HEIAN PERIOD**

In spite of all the considerable problems—spotty farming, processing methods that produced a bitter soup, and exchanges limited to personal contacts—demand for the caffeinated drink apparently continued unabated during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Besides the entries from Michinaga’s journal, several high-ranking aristocrats write of tea. Fujiwara Yukinari (972–1027), holding the Second Rank, reveals his participation in the rite for the seasonal recitation of sutras and describes his tea bowls and possibly other unnamed utensils. Minamoto Tsuneyori (976–1039) of the Third Rank mentions unspecified tea implements and states that the ashes of the former Heavenly Sovereign GoIchijô (r. 1016–1035) were interred in a tea bowl imported from China. Sanesuke (957–1046) was not shy about commenting on his tea bowls and other accoutrements, including gifts from provincial governors anxious for a lucrative appointment at court. The powerful Fujiwara leader Tadazane (1078–1162) listed more
tea rituals at court. Tadazane’s son Yorinaga (1120–1156) recorded in his
diary that he had banquets in 1136, 1151 (twice), and 1152 (twice) where tea
bowls and other items played a prominent role. Even Kujō Kanezane,
the leading courtier of the late twelfth century, had many tea bowls and
was regularly concerned with the rite for the seasonal recitation of sutras,
in which tea was distributed.

Aristocrats of more humble station were involved with the beverage too.
Fujiwara Tametomo (1049–1115) described two court rituals requiring tea
and in 1107 noted the burial of the ashes of two highly placed aristocratic
women in tea vessels. Other lower-ranking bureaucrats, such as Taira no
Nobunori (1112–1187), Fujiwara no Tsunemori (1142–1200), and Fujiwara no
Tadachika (1131–1195), owned tea bowls and other accoutrements. Nobunori
participated in the rite for the seasonal recitation of sutras at least
five times and made trips to Uji. During the 1180s, tea bowls and other
unnamed implements were de rigueur for the great banquets (daikyō)
thrown by Fujiwara leaders at court. Nakahara Hirotoshi, another noble
of modest status, possessed his own tea field. Indeed, these journals
suggest that many civil aristocrats owned tea utensils and that the court
and its members frequently demanded tea.

Civil aristocrats aired their sentiments about tea in their poetry,
suggesting how those elite consumers viewed the beverage. To be sure,
almost all of the poems were written in Chinese, and not in the more fam-
iliar Japanese waka form, but that should not be surprising given that tea
was originally imported from China and had strong associations with
Chinese culture. Between 814 and 1205, no less than twenty compilations
included sixty-three poems referring to tea, its utensils, tea fields, or some
other aspect of tea culture. Consider this verse from the early ninth cen-
tury by tea connoisseur Fujiwara no Fuyutsugu:

To avoid the summer heat I have come to an Imperial Palace.
At a lake pavilion there is a bundle of fishing poles.
The green of the willows lining the banks turns dark at dusk.
The sound of the pines bending on the water’s edge turns the day’s heat cool.
Writing poetry and pounding fragrant tea—neither is to be disdained.

Or these lines from this mid-eleventh century poem, noted previously:

There is a hall in Aoumi District in Mikawa Province
Called The Temple Where Medicine Is King.
Gyōki the bodhisattva founded it in olden days.
Though his saintly remains are old,
The scenery is simply fresh.
In front of it is water of lapis lazuli;  
In back there is a grove dyed in yellow. 
There is a grass hall and a miscanthus hut.  
There is a bell tower.  
There is a tea field and a medicine garden.\textsuperscript{44}

Or this poem from 1135:

The mountains are quiet  
And there is little human society.

The smoke from the tea boiler disappears  
And the kitchen help sleeps.  
The sun sinks behind the crags of pine  
And the crane alights on the moor.\textsuperscript{45}

Poetry, like the entries in aristocratic diaries, suggests that tea remained popular among the civil elite throughout the Heian period. Associations with nature and the hermit life suffuse this poetry, written in Chinese. References to Gyōki and the place in Mikawa help to nativize what must have been an exotic, alien habit for most nobles.

While civil aristocrats imbibed tea readily enough, Buddhist monks and nuns who lived in large complexes were the most frequent drinkers of the beverage. Associations with Buddhism and famous clerics were an important aspect of the cultural meaning of Heian tea. At Enryakuji, the famous chief monk Ryōgen wrote a twenty-six-point opinion piece in which three clauses dealt specifically with tea. The first noted Ryōgen's "surprise at the thickness of the tea smoke" and criticized monks for paying more attention to food and tea than to the required lectures. The second and third admonished monks who just "boiled (tea) and begged." In addition, Ninnaji, which harbored imperial offspring and imported fine porcelains from China, as well as Tōji and Onjōji, were justly famous for their tea.\textsuperscript{46}

More than ever, tea was a common feature of the world that bound Buddhist clerics together from all over East Asia. Jōjin (1011–1081) was one of the most famous Japanese monks to go to the Asian mainland. At the advanced age of sixty-two, Jōjin left northern Kyushu for Song China and stayed there for the rest of his life. He kept a detailed diary in which he mentioned tea in 221 passages.\textsuperscript{47} A great many entries note Jōjin’s participation in banquets or other occasions at which he drank tea, including while boating. The number of drinkers might even be in the hundreds and included Indians as well as Chinese. On one occasion, he imbibed tea with eight other Japanese monks. When asked what was needed in Japan,
he replied incense and tea bowls. He sent tea back to Japan with returning monks on several occasions. Jōjin showed interest in the processing of tea as well, noting the wages of Chinese tea workers. While at these gatherings, he consumed both brick and leaf tea. His experiences are testimony to the role of tea as a lubricant in the social relations of monks from all over Asia.48

By the twelfth century, monks cultivated and processed tea widely in temples throughout the capital region. Major Buddhist complexes such as Enryakuji, Tōji, Kōfukuji, Tōdaiji, Onjōji, Ninnaji, and Mount Kōya had their own tea fields. Even smaller branch temples like Jōshōji in Kyoto and Genkōji in Yoshino raised their own tea for local consumption.49 According to the record for Jōshōji, the temple even had a shop where it may have bought tea when demand outran supply and sold the herb when production went to excess. Poetry written around 1205 even mentions “a person who sold tea.”50 Anrakuji, a small temple in northern Kyushu near the ruins of Dazaifu, was another production center located far from Kyoto.51 As quoted in the poem above, temples as distant from the capital as Mikawa’s Yakuōji boasted a tea plot.52

To be sure, none of these tea fields was very large, and almost all of them were on temple grounds. By comparison with later medieval and early modern Japan, production was still for a small elite class of consumers, usually Buddhist clerics. They were both donors and recipients in the gift economy that bound courtiers in Japan to Chinese traders and to the religious community throughout East Asia. There were signs that the gift economy was just beginning to change, however, as the mention of tea sellers implies. In the next century, the web of gift exchange would remain mostly intact, even as the cultivation and processing of this medicinal herb would continue to spread.

WHY YŌSAI VIEWED TEA AS “THE IMMORTAL MEDICINE”

The monk Yōsai (also known as Eisai, 1141–1215) is one of the most famous figures in Japanese history. He traveled to China in search of the Buddhist law, much like Saichō before him; the parallels between their lives are eerie. Both supposedly carried tea seeds from China that then led to a flowering of tea culture in Japan. Each is supposed to have founded a new sect of Buddhism in Japan, Saichō starting Tendai and Yōsai Rinzai Zen. Each is associated with a different type of tea: Saichō with the brick tea of the early Heian period and Yōsai as the hero who brought powdered tea (matcha) to Kamakura Japan. One other similarity these two men share is that their respective roles in Japanese history are largely mythological,
especially when it comes to their places in the story of Japanese elite tea.\(^53\) Both of them, especially Yōsai, mostly represented continuities with previous aspects of tea’s production and cultural meaning rather than a radical new departure.

Yōsai was born in 1141 in Bitchū Province along the Inland Sea, about midway between northern Kyushu and Kyoto.\(^54\) At the age of fourteen, he traveled to Kyoto and climbed Mount Hieī, where Enryakuji was located. There he took the tonsure and studied the teachings of Saichō’s Tendai school. In 1168, he took passage on one of the many Song junkes ferrying passengers to China. In China, he met the famous monk Chōgen, who would later engage in a campaign to rebuild Tōdaiji after it was incinerated during a battle in 1180. They became fast friends and together climbed Mount Tiantai. Yōsai stayed in China for only about half a year at this time before returning to Japan. One author speculates that the reason for Yōsai’s brief stay was his disappointment that the temple he had visited on Mount Tiantai was no longer following Saichō’s Tendai teachings but rather had turned to Zen Buddhism. Knowledge of Zen in Japan was sketchy at the time, even though Saichō had insisted on meditation as one of the elements of Tendai doctrine.

During the time that Yōsai was in China, unrest mounted in Japan, as warriors began to assert a stronger role for their class in a land of clerics and civil aristocrats. In the outcome, war enveloped much of the archipelago between 1180 and 1185 as rival leagues of fighting men tried to assert the right for their own government, eventually founded by Minamoto no Yoritomo. By 1185 at the latest, the new shogunate, charged with collecting revenues and keeping the peace, was in place in Kamakura. The wealthiest administrators, such as the Minamoto and Hōjō families living near the capital city, had their own sources of revenues. Soon Yōsai would develop a special relationship with these rough-hewn warriors.

By the time Kamakura had become a military capital, Yōsai moved his home to distant northern Kyushu. Then, in 1187, he returned to China aboard a Song trading vessel and eventually climbed Mount Tiantai for a second time. This time he devoted himself to the practice of seated meditation (\textit{zazen}) and received a certificate for his efforts. In 1192, he sailed back home to Hirado in northern Kyushu, where he opened a small temple and built the retreat Fushun’ān. Thereafter he continued his activities near the port of Hakata, and eventually he tried to spread Zen teachings in Kyoto; but the monks of Enryakuji would have none of it, and they used their influence at court to have Zen banned. He returned to Hakata.

In 1199, Yōsai sojourned all the way to Kamakura. He got on quite well with Yoritomo’s widow, Hōjō Masako, and in 1200 he was permitted to found a new temple there called Jufukuji, but it was not devoted to Zen.
The new shogun Minamoto no Sanetomo also took a great liking to Yōsai, donating a large parcel of land to him; and in 1202 the monk opened Kenninji in Kyoto and required that Tendai, Shingon, and Zen be taught there. Yōsai stayed in Kyoto for some time, eventually taking over from Chōgen in the campaign to build a splendid new Tōdaiji incinerated in a battle in 1180. In 1213, he was appointed Extraordinary Chief Monk (Gon no sōjō). Later the next year, he returned to Kamakura to care for the ailing Sanetomo. In the second month of 1215, Yōsai passed away at Jufukujī.

Two points are notable about Yōsai’s life and help to clear up his role in the history of tea at this time. First, like so many young men during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, an apocalyptic time of great spiritual turmoil known as the Latter Days of the Buddhist Law (mappō), Yōsai clutched at the certainty of that age-old institution of Buddhism, Saichō’s Enryakuji. As a monk there, he would have undoubtedly encountered tea, prepared as it always had been, and drunk his fill of it. In fact, Yōsai probably imbibed tea from his early youth. Sad to say, there is no evidence that he ever brought tea seeds with him from China.

Second, note Yōsai’s close association with northern Kyushu, a region that had probably possessed small tea fields since the days of Michizane in the early tenth century. There, too, he could have had a bowl of tea whenever it pleased him. The existence of a large immigrant Chinese community in northern Kyushu only bolsters this proposition. In a well-known incident that occurred in 1151, two samurai attacked the ports of Hakata and Hakozaki and more than sixteen hundred Chinese merchant families fled. The late eleventh and twelfth centuries were the heyday of the trade between Japan and Song China, with cash flowing into Japan in larger and larger quantities.

According to one tradition, Yōsai was active in Imazu, a center of the Song–Japan trade, and may have founded Shōfukuji in Hakata with the support of Chinese ship captains early in the thirteenth century. Yōsai may well have had a close friendship with the Song captain Zhang Guo-an. Little is known of this particular friendship, but there is no doubt that Yōsai benefited greatly from his association with the immigrant Chinese community in Hakata and environs. They may well have supported him financially and provided a strong link to Song China and its Zen culture.

Understanding the geographical and social context for Yōsai’s beliefs raises interesting questions about the monk and the possibility that he learned about powdered tea there. By the late eleventh century, Song Chinese had invented the tea grinder (chausu) to replace the druggist’s mortar (yakken) and were making a much tastier beverage, probably something close to powdered tea (matcha). As noted above, there was a
sizable Chinese immigrant community in Hakata by the mid-twelfth century. Although archaeologists have recovered no tea grinders from the region, they have found tea bowls (katsuyū tennoku) appropriate for imbibing this tea from soil layers in Hakata dating to the end of the eleventh century. Perhaps these Chinese immigrants had tea grinders and were drinking matcha too.

Did Yōsai learn about powdered tea from his Chinese friends in northern Kyushu and drink it for the first time with these immigrants? Did he popularize the practice of imbibing powdered green tea after learning about that habit from the Song Chinese? Once again, as noted previously, scholars enter the realm of speculation. Fortunately, however, there is a decisive answer to these questions as viewed through Yōsai’s own handiwork.

What, then, was Yōsai’s true role in the history of tea? Two achievements, one innovative and the other conservative, signify his contribution. First, note his close relationship with the warrior class and their capital, Kamakura. Yōsai received both political and economic support from Hōjō Masako and her son the shogun Sanetomo. Early in 1214, he advised his patron Sanetomo to drink tea: “The shogun was a little sick and people were running around. . . . It was probably the result of Sanetomo having been drunk the night before. The chief monk was in charge of arranging the protection of the various Buddhas, removing evil, and giving him medicine. When he heard of Sanetomo’s state, he said that he had some good medicine, and called for a cup of tea from his temple.” Acting as a medical adviser to Sanetomo, the monk administered tea to the shogun after a night of drunken revelry. This story suggests that, despite the use of tea by monks and civil aristocrats for hundreds of years, warriors were as yet unaware of the healing properties of the caffeinated drink. Credit should go to Yōsai for being one of the first people to introduce tea to the samurai class, an addiction that would last until the collapse of the last martial government in 1868.

In the same passage, the Zen monk also bestowed a gift on the warrior leader: “He also presented a one-chapter book to the ailing shogun. It praised the efficacy of tea. The shogun was quite pleased. Last month, in a moment away from seated meditation, [the chief monk] had written this book, at least so he said.” Yōsai’s second contribution to the history of tea was his writing, later entitled Drink Tea and Prolong Your Life (Kissa yōjō ki). This work tells its readers a great deal about how the author viewed the production and function of tea. In this respect, Yōsai was conservative, following the age-old cultural interpretation of the beverage as a medicine. The reasons that he viewed tea as a cure for various ailments were
intimately bound up with how tea was farmed and processed during his lifetime. As it turned out, the Zen monk’s tea was not so very different from that of centuries past when the concoction was part of the seasonal recitation of sutras.

There is much to be learned from this abbreviated text. In his introduction, Yōsai lays out his case for tea as medicine. The very first sentence reads: “Tea is an immortal medicine (sen’yaku) that, during this degenerate age (matsudai), prolongs life and is a marvelous method for extending human relationships.” He then notes that “ever since olden days this country [Japan] and others in every case regarded it highly.” He argues that simply because the current age is one of spiritual uncertainty there is no reason to discard the drink. Yōsai saw his role as a defender of the beverage during the upheaval of the Latter Days of the Buddhist Law.

Next, the author moves to a detailed discussion of just how, according to the precepts of Chinese medicine, tea prolonged life. Here he lays out his thinking about the importance of the heart among the five vital organs of the body (liver, lungs, heart, spleen, and kidneys). These five organs should be harmonized by eating foods with different tastes; the taste that benefited the heart was bitter. In particular, the diet of the Japanese was deficient in bitter-tasting foods, and therefore tea was just the drink to supply the needed antidote. This theory of the five organs corresponding to five tastes was drawn from Chinese thought and esoteric (Shingon) Buddhism.

After a brief exposition on the various terms for tea and the appearance of its flower, Yōsai then quotes numerous Chinese texts to support his belief in the efficacy of tea as a medicine. He writes that tea can help overcome drowsiness, “the root of ten thousand sicknesses.” He recommends tea as a cure for numerous other illnesses, including depression, indigestion, fevers, weak urination, various sores and poxes, and hangovers. In composing this detailed defense of tea as a medicine, Yōsai was, of course, not breaking new ground but rather harking back to a tradition in Japan that had been central ever since the introduction of that libation during the Nara period.

In the final portion of the first and original chapter, the monk discusses the method for processing tea that he had observed in China. After quoting Lu Yu’s Classic of Tea and a later Song book, Yōsai explains that workers have plucked tea during the early spring since the Tang dynasty. During the Song dynasty, they also picked the leaves during the early spring from a tea field within the Imperial Residence. Then, “during the first through third months, they assembled lower orders of people who entered the tea field. Their speech was loud and they ran hither and yon to the
end of the day.”\textsuperscript{67} This passage suggests that Yōsai actually witnessed the picking of tea, maybe not at the Imperial Residence, but in other parts of China. He did, however, know the value of such tea: “a thousand strings of cash.”

Just a few lines later, Yōsai describes how tea was processed in Song China. He wrote that

\begin{quote}
in the morning they pick it, then steam and dry it. . . . If you dry the tea on a shelf, then put down some paper. Without scorching the paper, encourage the fire to come in for drying. . . . Without sleeping for the whole night, finish drying the tea leaves.
Then put them in a good jar and seal it with bamboo leaves. Even though years pass, the tea will not go bad.\textsuperscript{68}
\end{quote}

In this brief passage, Yōsai was relating to his readers the best practice for processing and preserving tea as he had seen it done in Song China. The crucial point is how simple this “best practice” was for processing the herb.\textsuperscript{69} Just pluck the tender shoots in the early spring and then steam and dry the leaves. There is no mention of forming bricks as described by Lu Yu in his \textit{Classic of Tea}. According to \textit{Drink Tea and Prolong Your Life}, the final product was leaf tea. How must the drinker prepare his tea? This question goes right to the heart of whether Yōsai knew of powdered green tea.

On this point Yōsai’s little book is just as valuable for its omissions as for its contents. Since his first chapter was what he presented to the shogun Sanetomo, readers of \textit{Drink Tea and Prolong Your Life} will note that there is no mention of how to grind the tea. Indeed, based upon his reading of the later second chapter about the consumption of mulberry leaves, one authority has argued that Yōsai still used the druggist’s mortar, popular during preceding centuries.\textsuperscript{70} Another possibility is that Yōsai merely boiled up the leaves and drank that concoction.

Nowhere in his little book did Yōsai explain how to drink tea. There is no mention of a whisk, probably in use initially during the Song period. Instead, tea drinkers used a spoon to ladle out the rough tea flakes. Whether it was the method for planting tea, processing it, or grinding the tea leaves, each seems to have been the same one popular earlier during the Heian age. The consumer could make no powdered tea, but merely the same types of tea beverage consumed previously, as he had no new technologies or implements.\textsuperscript{71}

As was the case for Saichō, the role of Yōsai in the history of tea should not be ignored, but neither should it be exaggerated. Although he innovated when he introduced tea to the warrior class of Kamakura, in all other
respects the monk was deeply conservative. Tea was of use exclusively as a medicine. The processing of the tea leaves, still accomplished with the aid of the druggist’s mortar, undoubtedly yielded the same bitter brown liquid that Buddhist monks and civil aristocrats had been imbibing for four hundred and fifty years. In the elite Japanese society of 1200, tea held a minor and restricted but curious place.

INCIPIENT CHANGES IN TEA DURING THE 1200s

Despite its popularity during the 1600s, scholars of the medieval era (1185–1600) roundly ignored Yōsai’s Drink Tea and Prolong Your Life. Rather than marking off a new era in the history of tea, the book served to summarize things as they had already evolved. During the thirteenth century in particular, the state of tea remained very much as it had always been: part of a gift economy and ritual life among the Buddhist clergy.72

Buddhist institutions were the main setting in which ceremonies involving tea occurred. A religious ritual of 1202 refers to the intoning of sutras and the drinking of tea at Tōdaiji.73 In 1225, on the thirteenth anniversary of the death of Jōkei, a cleric of the Hossō sect, Buddhist prelates recited sutras and utilized tea.74 In 1270, appropriately enough, a tea bowl was involved in a Mount Kōya ritual (mieiku) honoring the memory of Kūkai.75 In 1290, medicine, tea, and tea bowls appeared in a funeral ceremony for the monk Eison (1201–1290), associated with the venerable traditions of centuries-old sects such as Shingon and Ritsu.76 Inventories of several temples mention tea implements, usually bowls, including Tōji, Mount Kōya, Daigoji just outside of Kyoto, and Daijiji in northern Kyushu. In the case of Daijiji, the list includes some five hundred tea vessels used for serving the drink.77

Retired emperors, holding the reins of power at court during much of the epoch 1100–1300, were closely involved in the world of tea. In 1215, when a ceremony (gyakushū) took place to assure GoToba his heavenly reward before his death, his consort Kamegiku presented him with various types of Chinese medicine, some of it in tea bowls.78 In 1256, Retired Emperor GoSaga sponsored a ceremony (hokuto goshūhō) to pray for his own good health and that of the entire realm; Buddhist monks were instructed to “steep tea” (cha o senzu beshi).79

One theme runs throughout these Buddhist rites: none involve Zen. Rather, the older sects of the Nara and early Heian periods are prominent. There is a saying that “Zen and tea are one,” but such a notion does not fit the period before 1300. Rather, the esoteric schools of Buddhism played a
much more important role in the initial popularity of tea among Buddhist clerics and their institutions.\textsuperscript{80} The critical role played by the clergy of the older sects in promoting the use of tea through their rituals is yet another continuity with the preceding period.

Conservatism defined the role of tea for the 1200s. At the same time, there were a few faint signs of what would later become crucial harbingers of change in a tea world that had been nearly static for more than five hundred years. Three stand out: the appearance of the first tea “brand name,” the growing participation of the warrior class as tea aficionados, and the conversion of tea gifts into taxes and commercial items. These changes were signs that tea was becoming a beverage with much broader appeal. Naturally enough, all the innovations came through the most frequent imbibers of tea, Buddhist clerics.

Myōe (1173–1232), the founder of a temple lying in the hills north of Kyoto, started cultivating the tea that would soon be known as the first “brand” in the land. Like Yōsai, with whom he is almost always associated, the myth of Myōe has obscured his true role in the history of Japanese tea. Accordingly, Myōe is supposed to have gone to China and brought back tea seeds, or struck up a friendship with Yōsai, from whom he received seeds. In fact, neither of these stories is true. While Myōe did give and receive tea, he did so, like many other Buddhist clergy, as part of a larger gift economy.\textsuperscript{81}

Myōe’s life reads like a novel written during the tumultuous twelfth century. Born to warrior (Taira) parents in Kii Province, he was orphaned at the age of eight. It fell to his uncle, a Buddhist prelate at a temple in the hills to the north of Kyoto, to raise him. At sixteen, Myōe took the tonsure at Tōdaiji, which was still undergoing rebuilding after the disaster of 1180. There he studied the precepts of one of the oldest sects in Japan, the Kegon school, as well as other doctrines of esoteric Buddhism, especially Shingon.

While still in his youth, he fell ill and returned to his native Kii Province. There he practiced seated meditation and refined his understanding of Kegon principles. He planned a trip to India, which was never realized. In 1206, Retired Emperor GoToba donated to the monk land to the north of Kyoto at Toganoo, and Myōe proceeded to rebuild the burned-out temple Közanji on the site. Myōe was active in the same religious debates as Yōsai during this age of spiritual turmoil called the Latter Days of the Buddhist Law. For his part, Myōe advocated a return to the strict rules that had previously governed the clergy as a remedy for the ills of the day. He is also famous for writing about sexually charged dreams in which he had intercourse with a bodhisattva. He died during a widespread famine in
1232, still trying to enforce the time-honored precepts of Kegon and esoteric Buddhism.

In the first missive below, written between 1210 and 1226, Myōe reports receiving and returning tea seeds from his teacher:

O Tsuru Zen Master, my deepest appreciation . . . Since the tea seeds that you spoke of from before have not yet ripened completely, even though it is just a little I present these to you.

To [a monk] From Myōe

In this second letter, written around 1230, Myōe prepares for a meeting with an unknown noble called Lord Hyōe no jō

O Lord Hyōe no jō, you will be honoring my humble living quarters with a visit . . . When you arrive . . ., I'll give you some tea . . .

To Hyōe no jō From Myōe

These two letters confirm that Myōe received tea seeds while in residence at Kōzanji and that he was eventually successful in cultivating tea at the temple. To be sure, it is likely that there had already been tea fields at Kōzanji before the fire that destroyed the temple, but Myōe took great pains to rejuvenate those fields. Remember that the temples were located in the northern Kyoto hills at a place called Toganoo. Shaded from the effects of the sun, Toganoo tea seemed sweeter than the others grown in open areas. Eventually the tea from those fields at Toganoo would become renowned as the most delicious in all Japan and represent the first tea “brand.” Even in the highly restricted tea world of the early 1200s, consumers searched for the beverage with the best reputation. Of course, applying a brand name to a commodity is one step toward a market for discerning consumers.

A second notable departure from tradition was the ferrying of tea leaves from the Kinai to Kamakura to slake the thirsts of parched warriors. According to The Record of a Journey to the Kanto and Back (Kantō ōgenki), the Saidaiji monk Eison (1201–1290) received an invitation from the leader of the Kamakura bakufu to make the long journey from Nara to the warrior capital in 1262. Nine times along the way, Eison prepared, drank, and offered to others the tea that he had brought along with him from the fields of Saidaiji. Once in Kamakura, he participated in Buddhist ceremonies involving tea. His journey undoubtedly helped to spread the custom of tea drinking eastward to the warrior capital during the mid-thirteenth century.

At the time of his arduous journey, Eison was sixty-one years old. It is hard to imagine the old cleric making the long trek, even with the aid of
his followers. For this reason, it is likely that Eison himself partook of the tea to relieve the exhaustion arising from his trip and to help his body stand up to the rigors of so many days on the road. Eison’s expedition to Kamakura not only served to spread the news of the healthful beverage eastward to the warrior city but also reinforced the idea that tea was a potent medicine in those Latter Days of the Buddhist Law. At about the same time, the otherwise unknown cleric Son’ei played an even greater role in acquiring the beverage for the military residents of Kamakura. Son’ei, who lived during the mid-thirteenth century in Kamakura, is strongly associated with tea and the gift economy. Around 1249, he wrote to the clerics of Kōfukuji in Nara:

Among the tea harvests of recent years, this year’s tea was especially superior in quality. The monks of my entire temple [in Kamakura] were happy. They came and looked on from all directions, and because they all desired to drink some, in just three or four months it was all used up. Next year prepare for this eventuality and take six measures (rokuto) to hand and please let us receive your beneficence. . . . Select some workers for this purpose so that they can take some tea and bring it here from Nara.

Besides providing insight into the donation of tea among Buddhist clerics in Nara and Kamakura, the cited document gives an impression of wider cultivation of tea in Japan. It also supports the proposition that the drinking of tea was becoming a growing enterprise, driven by the demand of drinkers for more and more of the habituating caffeinated beverage.

Just five years later, in 1254, Son’ei reveals how the tea was moved from Nara to Kamakura: “Also, take one bushel (ikkoku) of tea, and as in previous years send it to Kenninji as soon as possible. When you do so, next seventh month entrust it to [the samurai] on guard duty (ōban) and at his convenience take and send it down here [to Kamakura].” In this case, a large amount of tea (one bushel) was to be sent to the temple Kenninji in Kyoto from Kōfukuji and shipped by means of a warrior returning from Kyoto to Kamakura on guard duty. This route of shipment seems to have been customary; a samurai was used as the courier. Apparently, the clergy of Kamakura were leading the warriors down the path of habituation to their drug.

Later in 1254, Son’ei brushed another letter showing two more important points about the cultivation of the herb in Nara and its presentation to the thirsty fighting men of Kamakura:
This autumn, the [warrior] land steward (jito) of both Tomi and Yata Estates will come to Kamakura. I wish that he would be entrusted with some mountain tea (yamacha) for us.

From Son’ei

To Gonren

First, the term “mountain tea” provides a clue about tea farming, suggesting that the herb was grown deep in the mountains of Nara. Perhaps it spread there naturally as part of a slash-and-burn farming regime. Second, the tea was being shipped from two revenue-producing farms (Tomi and Yata Estates) located in Yamato, the home province of Nara. To elaborate, estates (shōen) such as these two had begun appearing as early as 1050. Cultivators paid various dues in kind to landlords residing both within the estate and in the capital at Kyoto. Apparently, Tomi and Yata Estates produced tea as part of a tax mechanism. In other words, what was once a gift was slowly becoming a routine obligation. As in so many other cases from the ensuing centuries, however, tea was a near tax, not quite the same as a government-mandated labor duty or rice impost.

Indications that tea was becoming a tax suggest that there was an incipient change in the gift economy by the late 1100s. As early as 1191, tea served as revenue sent from northern Kyushu to Kyoto. Recall that a poem of 1205 mentioned “a person selling tea.” Tea was no longer simply a gift exchanged among friends in a tiny elite; instead, impersonal mechanisms were arising to facilitate the shipment of the habit-forming leaves. Like the invention of the Toganoo brand name and the wider inclusion of wealthy warriors among the consumers, the evolution of exchange mechanisms was a change pointing toward the future.

Tea’s new status as a near tax or a commercial item was probably an outgrowth of its original place as a gift item. The transition from gift to tax or trade commodity was easily effected. When a temple or individual had too little or too much of the herb, then the would-be consumer might turn to trade. Furthermore, when gift obligations became routine, it was easy to turn tea into a tax item. Japan’s economy was changing and along with it the restricted appeal of tea to a narrow elite. At this stage, however, because tea was still predominantly an elite beverage, donating tea as a gift was still by far the most common form of exchange.

The shipments of tea cited above all turned out well, as the recipients praised their patrons. Such was not always the case, however: “Yesterday I thought to speak to you at my convenience, but I forgot. I received some bad tea (waroki cha). Even though it was bad, I ought to . . . receive a lot more [good tea]. I’ll have a person go over there for that purpose.”
The mention of “bad tea” in this letter, written by an unknown monk in Kamakura, suggests that the beverage was becoming plentiful enough for consumers to distinguish among the varying qualities of tea. By the late 1200s, members of Japan’s political elite had been transformed into a tea-mad ruling class.

In contemporary Japan, green tea is a beverage enjoyed by millions in a thriving consumer society. Cultivated and processed according to the most scientific methods, the drink is proudly displayed in stores and vending machines around the nation. Television and other media promote the purchase and consumption of Japanese green tea throughout the islands and around the world by appealing to the residents of the archipelago to be real “Japanese,” or to drink the beverage to improve the quality and length of their lives.

The tea produced in small plots here and there in Japan between 750 and 1300 betrayed almost nothing of this modern character. Cultivated rudely within a few patches in the archipelago, the Japanese herb of this era was processed in just a few ways that yielded a bitter brown concoction. Drinkers of the beverage, usually familiar with each other, exchanged their leaves almost exclusively as a gift. Because the plant had been introduced from China, the tiny elite of civil aristocrats, Buddhist clerics, and later high-ranking warriors associated the herb with the exotic land of its origins and the hermits, poets, and adepts there who were famous for their cultural exploits. The elite that composed much less than 1 percent of the population used Japanese tea mostly as a medicine in rituals designated by the government and Buddhist monasteries.

The period lasting from the introduction of *Camellia sinensis* around 750 until the late 1200s constitutes the prehistory of the modern Japanese green tea. Although it is easy to dismiss that period as having little relevance for modern consumers, it is interesting to note that tea retains its ancient function as a medicine and is still the object of gift giving throughout Japan today. The medicinal effects of tea may have even contributed somewhat to the health of those who imbibed it, a precursor to the “industrial revolution” that occurred centuries later. Even the simple agricultural techniques employed during tea’s prehistory contributed to the wisdom of later generations of farmers who cultivated more and better tea. Gift giving evolved into the routine of taxation and the mechanism of the market.

By 1200, the signs of change were inchoate but unmistakable. Some evidence, scant to be sure, suggests that a few individuals and institutions were becoming involved in the trading of the herb, a new form of economic
transfer. Then, too, by the second half of the twelfth century at the latest, some gift relationships were routine enough to be transformed into a near tax. During the thirteenth century, the habit of tea drinking was spreading to the elite samurai who guarded Kyoto and had a chance to imbibe there. They carried the tea that supplied Kamakura, the next great center of production and consumption in a new age.