Tea Q. 44 (1), 4-8. 1974. Printed in Sri Lanka.

WHEN DID TEA USAGE BEGIN ?

*Frederick Fu Hung
(Department of Geography, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada)

The discovery of the tea plant and its use as a pleasant and hygienic drink had been attributed traditionally to the legendary Emperor Shen Nung ('The Divine Farmer') who was said to have reigned from 2,737 BC to 2,697 BC. However, the authorship of *Shen-Nung Pen-ts'ao Ching*[1] (the Pharmaceutical Codex of Shen Nung) ascribed to him, in which tea was mentioned, had been questioned by critical commentators ever since the T'ang dynasty. The famous pen-ts'ao commentator Chang Shih-yü (1st half of the 9th Century) said *inter alia*: "According to the old tradition, *Pen-ts'ao Ching* in three *chüan* (chapters) was the work of Shen Nung. However, nobody had ever seen the original text. Nor was it listed in *Han Shu I-wen-chih* (annotated bibliography of arts and literature, by Liu Hsin, the Imperial Librarian, in 6 BC, listing 596 ancient Chinese books). The T'ang dynasty commentator Li Chi (584-669) thought that *Pen-ts'ao* had been taught by oral tradition before the invention of writing. During the two Han dynasties (206 BC—220 AD) many famous physicians flourished, and it was these people who wrote the *Pen-ts'ao*."[2]

The *Pen-ts'ao Kang-mu* (the Great Pharmacopoeia) by Li Shih Chen (1518-1593) stated that *t'u ming* (tea) was mentioned in *Shen-Nung Shih Chin*[3] (Book of Food of Shen Nung, now lost). However, the earliest Chinese writing dated back only to about 1,600 BC. These were carved on oracle bones, discovered since 1902. Some 3,500 different characters have been distinguished, and about a thousand of these deciphered up to 1972.[4] There is no evidence that tea was used by the Shan people. The earliest Shan writing was twelve centuries after the legendary Emperor Shen Nung. This alone is sufficient for contemporary Chinese scholarship to discount his authorship of *Pen-ts'ao* and *Shih Chin*.

Chia, an ancient word for *ch'a* (tea), as well as *k'u-d'a* (bitter tea) were found in the earliest Chinese dictionary *Erh Ya* ('Nearing the standard'), the original compilation of which was attributed to the Duke of Chou in the 11th century BC, then edited and taught by Confucius, and the work completed by his disciple Tzu Hsia (born 507 BC). Actually, the *Erh Ya* was more probably a cumulative glossary[5] until the definitive edition and commentary of Kuo P'o (AD 276-324). It would, therefore, be difficult to ascertain exactly when the various synonyms of *ch'a* (tea) were accumulated in the dictionary. The *Erh Ya* described the tea plant, and lists its other names: *chuan, t'u, ming* and *k'u-t'u* or *k'u d'a* (the local name for tea in W. Szechwan).

---

* Professor of Geography, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada

The *Erh Ya* was listed among the catalogue of 596 ancient books in *Han-Shu I-wen-chih* but most of these works including the earlier *Erh Ya* were lost. No doubt, many of these books would be lost through the burning of classics ordered by the First Emperor of the Tsin Dynasty in 212 BC. Did any of these lost ancient works mention tea? We have no proof, and therefore no certainty of the reference to tea in ancient writings before the 'Tsin Fire'.

Tea was in the Han dynasty dictionary *Shuo-wen-chieh-tzu* compiled by Hsü Shen (AD 30-120) which included 10,500 Chinese characters classified under 540 radicals. The characters were written in *hsiao-chuan* (Lesser Seal) script which were the standard form of writing in the Han dynasty—but now used only by calligraphers. It has two characters for tea: *ming* and *t'u* (or *d'a*), both under the *ts'ao* (grass) radical. *T'u or d'a* is defined as bitter tea, and *ming* as the tender tea leaf. *Ming* is still used today as a literary name for tea.

The adaptation of the ancient character *t'u* (the *t'u* plant) for the tea plant (*k'u-t'u*) has caused a great deal of confusion, because *t'u* had appeared many times in ancient classics (before Confucius) and had different meanings in different occasions. The character *t'u* is composed of the *ts'ao* radical (= grass), the *ru* (= enter) radical, and the *huo* (=Graminae) radical. *Ch'a* has one stroke less than *t'u*: the only difference being the lower radical of *ch'a* is *mu* (=thee) one stroke less than the *huo* radical in *t'u*. By omitting one stroke, *huo* becomes *mu* and *t'u* becomes *ch'a*'. This was done in the extinct *K'ai-yüan Wen-tzu Yin-I*[6] AD' 735), the standard Chinese dictionary compiled during the K'ai-yüan period (713-742) of the T'ang dynasty. The *Ch'a Ching* (the Tea Classic) by Lu Yü (ca. 725-804) has finally popularized the substitution of the character *ch'a* (tea) for the character *t'u*. Before the *Ch'a Ching* the change from *t'u* was first made in the *Hana Shu Ti-li Chih* (the Geographical Record of the History of Former Han dynasty) when the geo-name of *Ch'a-ling* (Tea Hills) was used instead of *T'u-ling* as in the *Shih Chi* (Historical Memoirs of *Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, who lived ca. 145 BC to 86 BC). It was partly due to the multiple meanings of *t'u* in ancient China that has caused so much confusion and dubious inferences regarding the usage of tea in the Chou period (BC 9-3). This mistake was also made by Lu Yü, the famous author of *Ch'a Ching*, the first book of tea, which publlicized the Shen Nung tea legend, and the dubious Chou period references to tea.[7]

In the Book of Odes (*Shih Ching*, collected and edited by Confucius) there are no less than nine references to the character *t'u*.[8] Some of these poems have been used to prove the antiquity to tea, particularly the ode of *Kufen* (the wind of the valley): "Who says that *t'u* plant is bitter, it is sweet as the shepherd's purse."[9] Some authors believe the *t'u* plant means tea plant. However, the *t'u* plant referred to in *Shih Ching* seemed to be weeds (*Sonchus* species, or sow-thistles) or reeds[10] or other herbs, none of which could be identified as the tea tree (*Camellia sinensis* (L.) O.Kuntze.)

During the early Chou period the pale of Sinic culture (to which the Odes refer) lies almost entirely in North China which has ecological factors unfavourable to the propagation and diffusion of the tea plant. The China jat or varieties of tea are subtropical plants that would have perished through prolonged exposure to the freezing temperatures of the North China winter with one to three months of average temperatures below O°C. Ancient Chinese texts describing the tea plant have already recognized it as an evergreen plant of the south (subtropical and tropical).

Chia is an ancient name of *ch'a* (tea) according to the *Erh Ya.* However, at the time of Confucius (BC 551-479) and Mencius (BC 372-289), the character *chia* meant something else. It was used in the *Four Books* and the *Three Chuan* (annals) only to denote the catalpa and catalpa Bungei of North China.

The single reference to *chia* in *Meng-tzu*[11] (Mencius) has been interpreted sometimes as tea, but this seems dubious. James Legge considers *chia* herein used as catalpa.[12]

The dubious reference to tea drinking (*ming*) by Yen Ying (d. 493 BC) was first made in *Ch'a Ching* by Lu Yü (8th Century) who cited the *Yen-tzu Ch'un-chiu* (the Annals of Yen Ying). Besides the controversy regarding the true authorship of this ancient work (which was believed to be written much later) it is doubtful if tea was available at the time of *Yen-tzu* in the Kingdom of Ch'i (Shantung peninsular). The character *ming* in *Yen-tzu* could have been a misprint or an incorrect copy—*Yen-tzu* was written before the invention of printing—of any one of several characters that resemble *ming* such as *k'u* as in *k'u-ch'ai* (edible bitter herbs). or *t'iao* (peas), or *hou* (water chestnut).

The character *chuan*—an indisputed ancient name for tea was said to have appeared in *Fan-chiang pien,* a former Han period lexicon by Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju (ca. 179 BC—117 BC),[14] a native of Szechuan who became a Han court poet. The work was mentioned twice in *Han-Shu I-wen Chi.*[15] Unfortunately the full text has been lost, and only citations here and there from the text have come down to us, among which is a citation in the *Ch'a Ching*[16] which states that the vocabulary in *Fan-chiang pien* included *chuan* (the tea plant). If this reference is accepted, then the tea plant had been recognized and mentioned as early as the second century BC at the time of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju.

The *T'ung Yüeh* ('slave contract'), dated 59 BC by Wang Po,[17] another native of Szechuan who became a Han court poet, also mentioned tea, but the humorous contract looked fictitious, as the author had died in 60 BC.[18]

The earliest work on Chinese dialects *Fang Yen* (ca. 14 BC) attributed to Yang Hsiung (53 BC—18 AD), a native of Szechuan, was cited by the *Ch'a Ching* for the statement that *t'u* (tea) is called *she* among the inhabitants of southwestern Shu[19] (Szechuan), which could have been a local dialect. However, the reference to *she* is not found in the extant text of *Fang Yen,* nor in Kuo Po's famous *Commentary of Erh Ya* who also wrote a *Commentary to Fang Yen.* Yang Hsiung's authorship of *Fang Yen* had been disputed by Hung Mai, a famous scholar and commentator

of the 12th century. However, a modern text of *Fang Yen*[20] has produced an appendix showing the correspondence regarding this work between the author and Liu Hsin, the Imperial Librarian of Former Han dynasty and a contemporary of the author, which seems to confirm Yang Hsiung's authorship. The book was also mentioned in the *Han Shu I-wen Chih.*

The authors of the two or three earliest dated references to tea were all from the Szechwan region. The ancient names used in Szechuan to denote tea (*she, ch'a, k'u-d'a*) were all indisputable names for tea, whereas those names for tea in the Chinese classics (*chia* and *t'u*) all denoted other plants as well, and seemed to be borrowed words which were closest to the sound of *Ch'a* or *d'a.* Szechuan possesses favourable ecological factors for the tea plant, such as a long hot season with high humidity, a short, mild and foggy winter, a fertile and slightly acidic soil suitable for tea, numerous slopes with natural drainage, and much hilly land that is ill-suited for paddy but suitable for tea. All these facts indicated that Szechwan was indeed the original habitat of the plucked tea plant and where tea drinking originated.

The diffusion of the knowledge of tea and tea usage, and the expansion of tea cultivation and manufacturing undoubtedly had been facilitated through the unification of ancient China by the Tsin dynasty (221-207 BC). The independent Kingdom of Shu (Western Szechuan) was invaded by the state of Tsin in 316 BC and reduced to a Tsin commandery in 311 BC, later governed by Tsin prefects after 285 BC, thus bringing the region into the Chinese realm. Szechuan was largely outside the pale of Sinic culture. It had a different written language, and its people followed customs at variance with the Chinese.[21] This may explain why so little was mentioned about tea in Chinese literature before the second century BC, while its usage in Szechuan must have been established long enough to become a commodity by the first century BC.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am much indebted to my eldest brother William Hung for his help in interpreting several difficult passages in old Chinese text. I wish also to thank the staff members of the research libraries that I have been privileged to visit and read, particularly the Bodleian Library, the British Museum, the Harvard-Yenching Library and *La Bibliothèque Nationale.* The Canada Council has supported my tea research for which I am deeply greteful.

LITERATURE CITED

1.—The Library of Congress (U.S.) has four different editions of this work, two printed in 1626, another in 1813, and a Japanese edition of 1854.

2.—Prefactory Monograph of Li Shih-chen (1552-1572) in his *Pen-ts'ao Kang'mu.*

3.—SHEN-NUNG SHIH-CHING, cited in *Ch'a-ching* by Lu Yü (d.804) and *Pen-ts'ao Kang-mu.*

4.—YU SHEN-WU, in *Wen-Wu,* No. 201 (Feb.1973), pp. 32-35. Peking.

5.—INDEX TO ERH YA (1941) (Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, ed. by W. HUNG, NIEH CH'UNG-CHI *et al.* Preface.

6.—CH'A-CHING, Sect. 1, explanatory note.

7.—*Ibid,* sections 6 and 7.

8.—H.I.I.S.I.S. No. 9, *Index to Shih Ching* (1934).

9.—KARLGREN, B., *Book of Odes—Chinese text, transcription and translation.* Stockholm (1950). *The Ku-fen.*

10.—COUVREUR, F. S., S. J., *Dictionnaire classique de la langue chinoise.* Peiping (1947). See also E. BRETSCHNEIDER, *Botanicum Sinicam,* 1892, II, p. 3, and III, 407-410 for an extensive botanical discussion of *t'u* and *k'u-ch'ai.*

11.—H.I.I.S.I.S. Supplement 17. *A Concordance to Meng-Tzu,* with a preface by Chao Feng-t'ien. (1941). *Text in Meng Tzu,* Bk. VI (*Kao Tzu*), Pt. 1, Ch.14/3.

12.—LEGGE, JAMES, *The Chinese Classics,* Vol. II (1895) *The Works of Mencius,* pp. 416-7.

13.—PELLIOT, P., "Bulletin critique" in *T'oung Pao,* 1922, p. 436.

14.—For the year of Ssu-ma Hs iang-ju's birth see Yves Hervouet, *UN poete de cours sous les Han: Sseu-ma Siang-jou* (1964) p. 1.

15.—See *Combined Indices to Han Shu, op.cit.*

16.—LU YU, *op.cit.,* section 7.

17.—For an exhaustive discussion of this work see C. Carrington Goodrich and C. Martin Wilbur (1942) "Additional notes on tea", *J. of Amer. Or. Soc.,* 62, 195-196.

18.—*Han Shu,* 25 B. 14a.

19.—LU YU, *op.cit.,* section 7.

20.—*Index du Fang Yen.* Université de Paris, Centre d'etudes sinologique de Pékin, 1951.

21.—*Hua-yang-kuo Chih* by Ch'ang Chu (347 A.D.), *Chuan* 3, f. lb. This was the earlies regional compendium in Chinese, and contained the early history of Pa and Shu (E and W Szechuan). Ordinary and fragrant tea were mentioned as local products of Pa.

Accepted for Publication—1st October 1973.