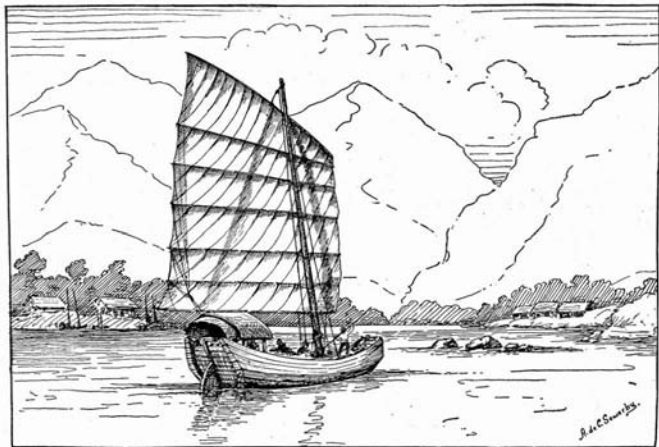




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Rice Boat on the Min River, Fukien.



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## CHINA TEA

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Tea comes from China! This statement some of our readers may remember was one of many such that formed headlines in copy books, in the days when school, even for the very young, consisted of sums, arithmetic, spelling and other abominations, with little enough of real interest to the childish mind by way of relief. Such copy book headlines stick in the memory, which may help to account for the fact that in the minds of the older members of the present generation the words "China" and "Tea" are closely associated, it might almost be said are complementary.

To-day, however, the mind of the average European or American will turn more instinctively to India and Ceylon than to China at the mention of the word "Tea," which may be explained very simply by the fact that the teas from these countries have almost completely superseded those of China in the world's markets.

The reader very naturally asks why this should be, and it is with a view to answering this question that we here take up the subject of China Tea, briefly studying the history of the trade from the days when Foochow was the main point of export from China and China tea was consumed throughout the world, to the present day when Foochow can only be considered a fourth-rate treaty port and its trade in tea is but a very small percentage of the greatly reduced volume of China tea sent abroad.

When tea first began to be consumed in Europe, especially in England and Russia, to any considerable extent, Foochow was the port whence it was exported, and it was the hilly country of Fukien province that provided the fragrant leaf.

In those days merchants in London and Foochow grew prosperous, and once established in a good tea firm, a lad's future was looked upon as assured. As much as £1,000 might be paid by his parents for his

apprenticeship, but this mattered little, since sooner or later he would be a prosperous tea merchant.

It was in those days that the world-famed China tea-clippers used to make their long and rapid runs from Foochow to London by way of the Cape of Good Hope, each captain straining every effort to be the first to reach the home port in order to secure the best prices for his valuable cargo. The captain and crew of the first clipper to drop anchor in the Thames received a special monetary prize (£100 to £300) from the owners, hence the keen rivalry between the ships' masters.

It is recorded that in the year 1866 a number of these tea clippers had a race from Foochow to London. The ships that participated were the *Taeping*, the *Ariel*, the *Serica*, the *Fiery Cross*, and the *Taitaing*. Ninety-nine days after weighing anchor at Pagoda Anchorage below Foochow on the Min River, the *Ariel* arrived at the Downs at 8 a.m. on September 6th. Ten minutes later the *Taeping* dropped anchor beside her, while the last ship arrived in the forenoon of September 9th. Not one of these ships had sighted any other during the whole voyage.

The Foochow tea trade steadily increased in volume until in the year 1878, the number of pounds exported reached the enormous figure of 78,765,247. Sad to say this was the climax, and from that time on the trade with Europe declined, though it increased with Australia for a while. Various reasons have been given for this, but the most universally accepted one is that the growers, most of whom were but small holders of land, rendered foolish by their greed for gain, began to adulterate the tea they sent to the treaty port with leaves of the sweet potato and other plants. Do what they would, the merchants could not secure the same pure tea that had captured the world's markets, and the end of it was tea from other parts of China, notably from the Hankow district of the Yangtzu Valley, began to gain favour.

Once the decline in the Foochow tea trade had set in things went from bad to worse very rapidly. At length most of the Russian tea merchants, whose trade with Siberia overland by way of Peking and Mongolia was developing rapidly, moved from Foochow to Hankow. Other non-Russian firms opened up in the latter place as well, and ocean-going steamers ascended the Yangtzu to this point to take on cargoes of the leaf for European, American and Australian ports.

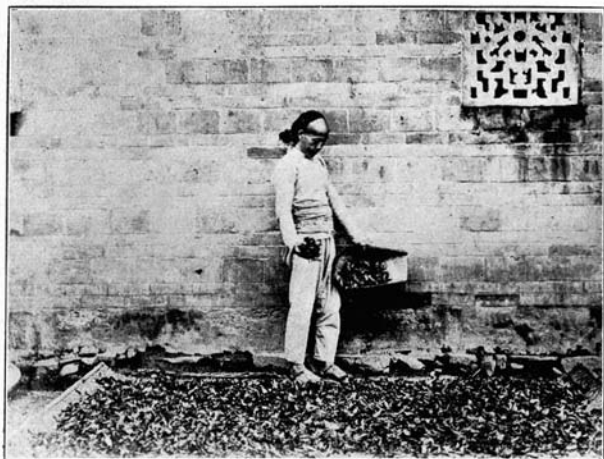
The main centre of the export trade in China tea thus shifted from Foochow to Hankow.

Meanwhile, tea planting had been developing in India and Ceylon, and as time went on great provisioning firms were able to put Indian and Ceylon tea on the market at a price considerably below that of even the poorer qualities of China tea. Not only so, but these teas were found to be stronger and to stand more watering than China teas, which fact made them even more economical.

Thus the China tea trade, and especially that of Foochow, was further hit. The final blow seems to have come during the late world war with the prohibition by the British Government of the importation of China tea into Great Britain, and the collapse of Russia, which country had remained the one great foreign consumer of China tea.



Picking Leaf in the Ningchow District.



Withering Green Leaf before rolling.

To-day not more than 30,000,000 pounds of black and 25,000,000 pounds of green tea are exported from China, of which but 7,000,000 pounds of black, and practically no green tea\* is sent out from Foochow, as against about 550,000,000 pounds from India, Ceylon, Java and Sumatra.

It may well be asked: Cannot this state of affairs be remedied? The answer appears to be in the negative, at all events for the present.

The strongest reason is that China tea is not so suited to general consumption as other teas. There appears to be something in the soil of India and Ceylon that is lacking in the soil of China that gives the tea what is called "body." It was thought at one time that it might be the methods employed in drying and roasting the tea in these countries that had something to do with the matter, and at considerable expense drying plant as used in Ceylon was set up in China, and the leaves treated exactly as those of the Ceylon plantations. The result was a dismal failure. The tea looked excellent, but, brewed, it was anything but a success.

Yet many forms of China tea have excellent flavour, preferred by many consumers to those of India or Ceylon. So it was thought that if China tea could be produced at about the same price as these teas it might command a more ready market. An attempt, therefore, was made to purchase land in Fukien province with a view to establishing extensive plantations as in Ceylon, and so produce the leaf in bulk at a lower price. Immediately land, which formerly could be purchased for a mere song, went up to prohibitive prices, and this new attempt to revive the China tea trade was brought to naught.

In the Hankow district and the Yangtzu Valley generally, the great trouble is labour. The tea crop is what is called a "snatch" crop, labourers from far and near making a six weeks' or so round trip to pick the tea between the sowing and reaping of the harvests of rice, etc., on their own little plots of land. Instead of, as in Ceylon and India, plucking the tips of the shoots on the bushes, they strip them from base to tip in one sweep of the closed hand, coarse leaves and tender shoots being thrown into the same basket, and having to be sorted out later. One stripping takes place in the season instead of three pickings as in other countries, it being impossible to hold labour long enough for the latter operation in China.

Thus with the inferior soil in China, the lack of honesty on the part of the growers, and the utter impossibility as matters now stand of growing and producing tea on a scale comparable with that in India, it is not to be wondered at that China tea has been knocked out of the world market by those of other countries.

If China were not in such a hopeless state of anarchy, and if foreign enterprise were given a chance, something might be done in the way of looking for suitable soils and extensive planting in the regions where such occur. It is well known that some of the China teas are all that could be desired, and if the circumstances surrounding the production of these were investigated, and up-to-date planting and roasting methods introduced, the result might be an article capable of competing with the other teas, and possessing the superior flavour of all China teas.

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\* There is a very considerable trade in China itself in the green teas of Fukien, which are highly prized by the Chinese.

But this cannot even be contemplated till some form of law and order exists in China, and vested interest is safeguarded against the hand of the marauder, official or otherwise. Meanwhile China tea, that once held the proud position of being supreme, remains little more than a cipher in the world's markets, and Foochow, once the centre of a flourishing trade and the most important treaty port in China, is dead.

## A LUCKY YEAR

According to popular Chinese beliefs based on ancient superstitions and traditions, the present year is going to be a prosperous one for the Chinese people, the reasons for which are as follows :

In the first place it is the year of the "Rat" in the cycle of twelve animals. This means prosperity for the farmer.

Secondly it is the first year of the new cycle of sixty years by which the Chinese reckon time, just as we do centuries.

Thirdly the first day of the year coincided with the first day of spring.

And fourthly the first day of the year in these parts (Shanghai district) was bright and sunny.

These four factors, conspire to ensure a prosperous year, especially for the farmer, and therefore for the community at large.

Foreign merchants in China should rejoice at the prospects, for with everything in favour of a "lucky" year, Chinese merchants and dealers will be more willing to go into commercial ventures, and the net result must be good for business.

For the sake of the uninitiated the Chinese system of marking the passing of the years may be explained.

Sixty years is the Chinese equivalent of the century of western nations. This cycle is divided into twelve sub-cycles, each year of which belongs to a special animal. These are :—

- |                  |                          |
|------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Rat 鼠 (甲子)    | 7. Horse 馬 (庚午)          |
| 2. Ox 牛 (乙丑)     | 8. Sheep 羊 (辛未)          |
| 3. Tiger 虎 (丙寅)  | 9. Monkey 猴 (壬申)         |
| 4. Rabbit 兔 (丁卯) | 10. Domestic Fowl 雞 (癸酉) |
| 5. Dragon 龍 (戊辰) | 11. Dog 狗 (甲戌)           |
| 6. Snake 蛇 (己巳)  | 12. Pig 猪 (乙亥)           |

(Each year has a special name, given above in Chinese.)

This cycle of twelve years, of course, comes round five times in each 60 year cycle, and the luckiest of all years is the "Rat" year when it coincides with the first year of the 60 year cycle.

When a Chinese is asked his age he will often reply by mentioning the special name of the year in which he was born, leaving the questioner to decide in which set of twelve years his birth occurred.

It is to be hoped that the popular belief will be justified, as it is about time things took a turn for the better in this strife-ridden country. If any credence can be given to the theory of the power of suggestion, the prosperity of the present year should be assured.

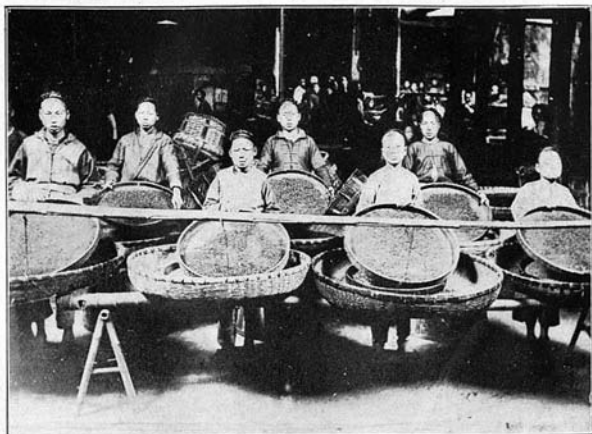


Rolling the green leaf; usually done with the foot in a tub.



The firing process; first firing. Subsequent firings, usually two in number, are carried out in the same way.





Sifting out coarse leaf, stalks, etc., after the first firing.



A further stage in the sifting and sorting process.



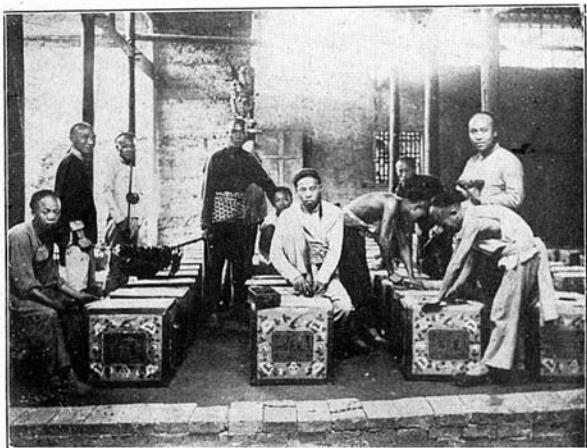
Nothing is wasted. Breaking up tea that has formed into lumps through careless manipulation. This leaf is only used for mixing in inferior grades.



Tea being carried out from the blending floor for packing.



Tea being packed. The best teas are packed while still a little warm from the third and last firing



Sealing up the tea chests. The final stage before being transported to the Treaty Port.