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Tea is a drink made by plucking and drying the leaves of a species of *Camellia* bush, then infusing it in hot or boiling water. The origins and date of the discovery of tea are uncertain. One theory is that tribal groups living in the mountainous forests on the borders of Assam and Burma used the leaves of a certain species of *Camellia* which, when mixed with hot water, made a refreshing drink. Tea was perhaps also eaten as a vegetable, chewed, pickled or sniffed like snuff in this area, as it still is today in certain parts of south east Asia. Several thousands of years before the birth of Christ the knowledge of tea was transferred to China. For a long time it was prized as a medicine and as a drink which helped in meditation and concentration. Tea was introduced into Japan in the eighth century AD as a medicinal herb in monastery gardens. It was re-introduced in the twelfth century and praised as of great medical and spiritual importance in the Zen form of Buddhism. It became the centre of Japanese cultural life, deeply influencing religion, aesthetics, social and political life and the economy. It was famously used in the Japanese tea ceremony. It had become established as the national drink of the half of the world that lived in China and Japan by the sixteenth century at the latest.

Tea was first mentioned in European sources in 1559 and Ukers provides a good general survey of the introduction of the beverage into Europe and England. The first tea cargoes are believed to have arrived at Amsterdam in 1610, and it was served to the public in England in 1657, in a manner similar to beer. It was very expensive at first and remained a luxury served in coffee houses until the early eighteenth century. By 1710 about half the tradesmen who left inventories in London had tea equipment. The consumption of tea grew immensely in the period 1720-30 when the direct trade link between Europe and China was established. Some suggested figures for the growth of imports into England are as follows, as expressed in pounds (roughly half a kilo): 4,713 in 1678, 370,323 in 1725; 5,648,000 in 1775, 23,730,150 in 1801. At the end of the eighteenth century in England various estimates suggest that on average each citizen in England may have been drinking up to two cups of tea a day. It was not a drink confined to the rich; there is considerable evidence that ordinary people and even the poor drank large quantities of tea. England, and for a time America, were the main consumers of tea; on the continent coffee and other drinks were preferred.

The economic and other effects of this rapid growth of tea on western civilization are incalculable. It clearly stimulated the trade to China. It led to the rapid development of English ceramics and altered social habits. It may also have had a profound effect on health. When tea was first introduced various doctors experimented with what was known to be a medicinal herb. They found that it seemed to contain strange properties that, for instance, delayed putrefaction in frog's legs. Recently their research seems to have been confirmed in that the polyphenols in the tea, closely related to the antiseptic phenol used by Lister in 1867 to sterilize hospitals, may be a very important anti-bacterial agent. It has been argued that the dramatic fall in mortality in England starting in the 1740's, which has been widely credited as being a necessary pre-condition for the urban and industrial revolutions, and which has hitherto never been explained, may have been one of the effects of the explosion of tea drinking.

Tea drinking continued to expand in the nineteenth century. The British developed tea plantations in Assam and Sri Lanka from the middle of the nineteenth century. This had a very considerable impact on the local populations, often moved in order to supply labour for the plantations. Tea drinking was encouraged to provide markets for the product, and the general Indian population itself began to drink tea on a large scale from the early twentieth century. Again this had considerable effects on health, social customs, trading patterns.

Thus the humble tea bush, which combines the attractive property of caffeine, and the anti-bacterial agent of phenol, has become the most widely drunk substance (after water) in the world. It has stimulated trade, encouraged crafts, in particular pottery, altered religion, become a central social institution in much of Asia and Britain, partially enslaved hundreds of thousands of workers on plantations and possibly allowed the industrial revolution to occur. It is difficult to over-emphasize its unintended consequences.

Further reading

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- Marks, V., 'Physiological and Clinical Effects of Tea' in K.C. Willson and M.N. Clifford, *Tea: Cultivation and Consumption*, London, 1992
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