

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History*. By JAMES A. BENN. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 304 pp. \$65 (cloth), \$44 (alk. paper).

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Tea is probably the most widely consumed beverage in the world and commercial and scholarly writings about its history are abundant. Most recently, *The True History of Tea* (Thames & Hudson, 2009), by Victor H. Mair and Erling Hoh, tells its history as a story of the triumph of the meek and a story of colonial powers and religious forces. The Tang volume of the *History of Tea in China* (*Zhonghua Chashi: Tangdai juan* 中华茶史唐代卷) by Li Bincheng 李斌城 and Han Jinke 韩金科 (Shanxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2014), on the other hand, illuminates how tea became an essential part of Chinese literati identity from the Tang dynasty onwards. The newest study in this vibrant field is presented by James A. Benn in his new book, *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History*. He expands this field by making a very convincing case on the crucial role of Buddhism in the creating of tea culture in Chinese history.

Employing the concept of “invention of taste” (a term coined by Craig Clunas), Benn sets out to prove that the history of tea in China has been closely intertwined with religious and cultural values. Throughout the book, Benn explores the ideas, institutions, and individuals that had the most profound influence on the development of this tradition. He concludes that the key ingredient in this process is Buddhism.

While providing a brief account of the early history of tea (Chapter 2), tea culture in Japan (Chapter 7) and in the Ming dynasty (Chapter 8), the book largely centers on the Tang and Song, “the most innovative and exciting period in tea culture” (3). It was during this time that “most of the major developments in tea cultivation and drinking occurred” (3). Scholarship on tea culture during this period is copious, especially in the Chinese and Japanese languages, but Benn’s work certainly moves the field forward in that it not only presents a comprehensive case for Buddhist influence in the construction of the “taste,” but more importantly, delineates the evolution of the tea culture through its complex relation with other beverages. These two themes are well developed in Chapter 3, “Buddhism and Tea during the Tang Dynasty.” Subsequently tea culture spread to the literati and then rapidly to the wider population, as Chapter 4, “Tea Poetry in Tang China,” vividly illustrates.

While we learn that Buddhist (and, to a less extent, Daoist) institutions were forceful in growing, processing, and marketing tea, and especially in presenting tea as a best choice for temperance and as a medicinal tonic, it is Benn’s portrait of the individuals, such as Li Bai 李白 (701–62), Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 (708–84), Monk Jiaoran 皎然 (730–99), Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), Su Shi 苏轼 (1037–1101), and Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1082–1135), who contributed to the invention of “taste” that makes this book such an exciting read. Chapter 5, devoted to the life and work of Lu Yu 陆羽 (733–804), the author of the *Chajing* 茶经 (*The Classic of Tea*), is probably the most insightful and important study of Lu to date. The appearance of Lu’s work, as Benn puts it, “marks the definitive shift from drinking tea primarily for medicinal/wellness purposes to the much broader consumption of the beverage in all kinds of private and social situations” (98). The chapter highlights how Lu Yu’s background in Buddhist practice and doctrine (Lu was raised by a Buddhist monk) influenced the content and structure of the *Chajing*, as well as how

his vast network of contacts with literati and monk-poets contributed to the transformation of tea drinking from a localized custom into a practice which became a defining feature of the larger culture milieu during the Tang.

Besides being presented as a substitute for alcohol, both in terms of temperance and ritual among Buddhist communities and beyond, tea also had to compete with a vast array of medicinal tonics. The reorientation process is detailed in Chapter 6, “Tea: Invigorating the Body, Mind, and Society in the Song Dynasty.” The author describes how Song Buddhist institutions and monks were instrumental in forming the ritualized communal consumption of tea (as a healing decoction) in Chan monasteries. Furthermore, a similar pattern of monk-literati connection was central to the tea culture of the Song time.

Benn should be applauded for his exhaustive effort in combing through various sources, including Dunhuang manuscripts, anomaly accounts, monastery regulations, poems and essays, local gazetteers, and the *gong'an* 公案 (public cases) and *denglu* 燈錄 (transmission of the lamp). His analysis of Wang Fu’s 王敷 (Tang dynasty) *Chajiu lun* 茶酒論 (*A Debate between Mr. Tea and Mr. Alcohol*), an early Tang text discovered in a Dunhuang cave, is the most invigorating example of how Buddhist ideas constructed the taste for tea and also influenced the attitudes toward tea in early Tang. Understandably the sources represented in the book were almost all written by monks and male literati; I wonder, however, if a woman’s perspective could be represented one way or another. Yu Xuanji’s 魚玄機 poem depicting her visit to a female Daoist (“Fang Zhao Lianshi buyu” 訪趙煉師不遇 *I Pay a Visit to Refined Master Zhao Without Meeting Her*) certainly comes to mind (“On the warm stove: remains of your steeped herbs, in the adjoining courtyard: boiling tea”<sup>1</sup> 暖爐留煮藥，鄰院為煎茶).

I share Benn’s interest in Eisai’s (1141–1215) essay, *Kissa yōjōki* 喫茶養生記 (*Drinking Tea for Nourishing Life*), and believe that the text indeed proves the book’s two main themes, Buddhist influence in the Tang and the medicinal shift in the Song. However, structurally speaking, Chapter 7, “Tea Comes to Japan: Eisai’s *Kissa Yōjōki*,” is a bit out of place. In addition, there is also no mention of the Mongol empire’s contribution to the spread of tea culture, or of the rich sources on tea in Yuan literature. Some more recent scholarship is not included in his narrative, notably Chinese work on tea culture from the last decade. More importantly, *The True History of Tea*, which has explored the influence of Buddhism and Daoism and how tea was used as an alternative to alcohol and agent of temperance (Chapters 3 and 4), is not cited.

Overall, the book is fluently written with many insightful discussions throughout. It is a wonderful contribution to the fields of medieval China and Chinese religions.

*Gender and Chinese History: Transformative Encounters.* By BEVERLY BOSSLER, ed. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015.

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*Gender and Chinese History* is a collection of nine essays, originally presented at a research seminar held at the University of California, Davis, in 2010. Editor Bossler introduces these studies in an admittedly too brief overview of how attention to Chinese gender history has

<sup>1</sup> Translated by Suzanne Cahill in “Resenting the Silk Robes that Hide Their Poems: Female Voices in the Poetry of Tang Dynasty Taoist Nuns.” In Deng Xiaonan, Gao Shiyu, and Rong Xinjiang, eds. *Women and Society in Tang-Song China (Tang Song nuxing yu shehui)*, Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2003, p. 548.