

# Steeped in

# TEA

Victor Mair spent years immersing himself in tea lore. His new book gives a fresh infusion of history to a venerable subject.

BY SAMUEL HUGHES

**A** couple of things prompted Victor Mair, professor of Chinese language and literature, to embark on *The True Story of Tea*, a project that he had been mulling for the better part of three decades.

The first was that common undoing of writers, a passion for his subject matter. It began in Nepal, where Mair served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the mid-1960s and where he became “deeply enamored” of masala chai (milk tea with sugar and Indian spices). His devotion to Indian tea was deepened by several trips to Darjeeling, “that ‘diamond island’ of the finest teas on earth” in the high foothills of the eastern Himalayas.

The Peace Corps stint did more than just inspire a lifelong love of tea in Mair; it also steered him toward a career in Buddhist studies and Sinology. The former field led to a “keen realization of the intimate relationship between tea drinking and Buddhism,” he notes in the book’s acknowledgements; the latter introduced him to the vital role of tea in Chinese culture.

Perhaps inevitably, his study led to the realization that there were “many myths concerning the history of tea that needed to be exposed and explained.” Given the amount of time he has spent in China and the other sacred haunts of *Camellia sinensis*, and all the reading he has done, he had a pretty good idea where the myths were lurking.

But it wasn’t until he met the Swedish-Chinese journalist Erling Hoh that he found a willing and congenial accomplice. Their three-year collaboration yielded *The True Story of Tea*, published last year by Thames & Hudson. “It was a completely pleasurable experience,” says Mair. “The most fun part of it was when we isolated ourselves—together with the large tea library that we had amassed—at Erling’s retreat in the far north of Sweden near the Arctic Circle. With reindeer and bear for our neighbors, we could concentrate on our writing for as long as we wished without disruption or distraction.”

Having steeped themselves in old volumes and journals, Mair and Hoh dug into the tangled roots of *Camellia sinensis* in Southeast Asia and followed the plant’s remarkable diaspora, the drink it yields, and the cultural traditions it has spawned. While their book is, on one level, roughly what you’d expect from a history of the beverage by a scholar of Chinese language and literature, it’s also a fragrant chest of tea arcana, legends, and personalities.

I recently spoke with Mair—by email, with a mug of green tea steaming beside the keyboard—about his beverage of choice.

## Interview

**Any misconceptions about tea you’d like to clear up?**

There are tons of misconceptions about tea, such as that the Chinese have been drinking it for 5,000 years. But perhaps no misconception about tea is more widespread than the idea that black tea and green tea are from two different plants. Actually, they are both from the identical plant. The difference lies solely in the way they’re processed.

**Did your research yield any particularly surprising stories or results?**

The most surprising result of my research—something that I was completely unprepared for—is that the history of tea drinking in India is so recent. I had been under the impression that Indians—that is, South Asians—had been drinking their beloved, ubiquitous *chai* since time immemorial, but it turns out that the British were probably the single most important factor in introducing the custom of tea drinking to India. That just boggled my mind.

**To what degree did tea drinking develop as an agent of temperance?**

Temperance was clearly a significant factor in the popularization of tea drinking in England, and it also was operative in dissuading some groups from drinking alcohol in other societies as well. We must remember that, before the introduction of tea drinking, non-distilled alcoholic beverages were one of the few safe liquids that could be drunk in some quantity. But, of course, alcohol had its deleterious side-effects. Coffee in quantity does too. Once tea became available, however, the boiling of the water to make it offered a means of killing harmful microbes, and, if you didn’t put in too many tea leaves and didn’t steep them too long, the tea would give you a mild stimulus without making you jittery, even if you drank a number of cups.

**Tea has been used in religious rituals, as an economic weapon, and as a cultural door-opener. Could you talk about that a little?**

Tea has played many important roles in human history during the last thousand years, from an aid to meditation, to an aesthetic ritual, to a means of payment for vast numbers of horses from Central Asia, and so forth. But, as an American, nothing about tea resides more powerfully in my consciousness than that special tea party held in Bean Town on December 16, 1773. It’s interesting that the whole idea of a “tea party” can range from an elegant and even effete afternoon affair to a raucous political outcry—which, as we’ve seen in recent months, is still very much alive as a potent avenue of protest.

**Could you give a few examples of how tea reflects the culture in which it is drunk?**

Some of the most distinctive tea-drinking customs are to be found in the Middle East and North Africa. So part-and-parcel of these societies is tea-drinking, and so distinctive the apparatus, that one can scarcely imagine what life would have been like without them. But the warmest feeling I get from watching others drink tea is in England where, at a certain point in the afternoon, even construction workers take a break and relax with a cuppa their PG Tips or other preferred blend.





**Any favorite historical characters or stories?**

I have two favorite tea personalities: Li Yu, who legitimized and dignified tea-drinking in China in the 8th century AD, and Sen Rikyu, who founded the tea cult in Japan, but was ordered to commit ritual disembowelment in 1591 for some unspecified offence to the powerful warlord Hideyoshi, for whom he had served as tea master.

**I'm sipping Tazo's Zen tea as I write these questions. Do you have favorite teas for different occasions?**

Well, I'm a connoisseur of fine tea, and I buy very expensive single-estate, first- and second-flush Darjeeling teas from Upton Tea Imports. These I drink at special, virtually sacred, moments. But my first cup of the day is usually Tazo's Awake, which tastes somewhat like an East Frisian tea to me, and my last cup of the day, when my spirits are starting to flag, is often Lipton's Yellow Label Orange Pekoe and Pekoe Cut Black Tea—makes me feel all perky and proletarian. In between I enjoy various teas from Stash, Rishi, Tea Forté, Twinings, and other major British houses, and many other suppliers. I choose them for my particular mood and for the particular moment. The greatest *masala* (spice) *chai* I know of comes from Travelers in Seattle. Brewed properly, it is simply divine. The Holy Grail of tea for me is still a fine Darjeeling tea with a small amount of half-and-half and a touch of Sugar in the Raw. As I savor the aroma and feel the warmth in my throat, I am transported back to the Himalayas where I spent the mid-Sixties. If you want to gain a sense of the atmosphere such a heavenly tea evokes, watch Satyajit Ray's *Kanchenjunga*. The strangest teas I've encountered are handcrafted varieties from China that come in the form of tiny balls. When you pour hot water over them, they mysteriously start to unroll, and out come magnificent, whole tea leaves. Some of these odd teas will float up and down in the water before they decide to fully unravel. Watching them move around in the water is a captivating, slightly unnerving slow-motion spectacle. Oh, and I almost forgot to mention that I have a habit of keeping a few tea leaves in my mouth after finishing a cup of fragrant tea. They make me feel fresh and alert for long afterward. ♦

**READING** *the Tea Leaves*

It was also during the Song [dynasty] that the peculiar liaison between tea and illicit sex began in the tea houses of Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song, situated on the lower reaches of the Yellow River, where the “lanterns of tea shops burned all through the night.” In Hangzhou, there were tea houses where one could learn how to play a musical instrument; one could go to chat and socialize in *renqing chafang* (“tea houses for human emotions”); and, in the tea houses along the Imperial Way running through the center of the city, the world of sensual pleasure among consorts known as “hot dogs” could be found.



With the burgeoning tea trade, however, China discovered a new weapon (for caffeine addiction is a subtle, but powerful, persistent force) in its Sisyphean attempts to appease and bridle the nomads. This was the beginning of the fabled tea and horse trade, which turned the Tibetans into the most copious tea-guzzlers on the planet, opened up some of the world's most daunting trade routes, and remained a cornerstone of China's foreign policy until the Qing dynasty ... “All the barbarians need tea to survive. If they cannot get tea, they become ill and die,” as one Ming official hyperbolically described the Tibetans' subconscious caffeine addiction fueling the trade and shaping political reality ...

It was not until 1191, when the Buddhist monk Myoan Eisai (1141-1215), having returned from studies in China, began to propagate Zen as a teaching that could save Japan, and tea as a medicine that could restore the Japanese people to health, that Japanese tea culture began in earnest ... As the popularity of tea spread in Japan, it was incorporated into this religious-esthetic way of life, and, precisely situated at the junction of nature, art, and human relations, later evolved into its foremost expression—the Japanese tea ceremony, known as *chanoyu* (literally, “boiled water for tea”). This quasi-religious ritual reached its apogee in the 16th century; some scholars believe it may even have incorporated elements from the Christian liturgy transmitted to Japan by Portuguese Jesuits.

Bounded by a common border 2,600 miles long, separated by histories as disparate as the poles, China and Russia have always had a relationship made up in equal parts of intimacy and loathing, mutual interest and intractable rivalry, understanding and misunderstanding. Yet ever since the two empires first rubbed shoulders in the 17th century, one commodity has run like a red thread through the ups and downs, thick and thin, war and peace ... From the gilded halls of the Kremlin to the tarred cabins of the country's peasants, tea became Russia's national temperate drink, and the samovar, a metal urn used to boil water, the embodiment of the warm, hospitable Russian hearth. “Ecstasy,” as the poet Alexander Pushkin avowed, “is a glass of tea and a piece of sugar in the mouth.”

In 1678, the English East India Company (EEIC) imported 4,717 lb of tea, which glutted the London market. At this time, the Company's most important commodity had shifted from Spice Island pepper to Indian cotton, which threatened the English textile industry. Legislation introduced to curtail the imports of Indian cotton prompted the Company to turn its attention to tea. Subsequently, it was the enormous productivity of the steam-powered British textile industry that devastated its Indian counterpart, and turned India into an importer of British cloth. This in turn spurred the Indian production of opium, which it used to pay for the British cotton, and which the British increasingly used to

pay for its Chinese tea. Later, in the 19th century, the Indians were compensated for the demise of their cotton manufacturing with the advent of tea cultivation in Assam and elsewhere in India, which provided employment for millions of workers and became India's main export industry.

**It was in Queen Anne's reign** that the nobility created a scandal by substituting tea for ale at breakfast. The tea, served in porcelain cups not much larger than thimbles, was taken together with another novelty from across the seas, sugar, introduced from the Americas by the Spanish and Portuguese. In 1660, the average annual consumption of sugar in England was 2 lb per person. By 1700, this number, spurred by the vogue for tea (and coffee), had doubled, as the English wrested control over the sugar trade from the Spanish and Portuguese by establishing plantations in their new dominions in the West Indies, where African slaves toiled under inhuman conditions to plant, harvest, and process the sugar to be stirred into high-society teacups.

**Of these commodities, it was tea,** the new British national beverage ... that became the embodiment of the mother-country's despotism. Newspaper articles, town meetings, and handbills competed in formulating the most indignant, inflammatory invective against the "enervating" plant. "Can the spirit of man submit to the insolence of a crew of little dirty tyrants?" one patriot railed in the *Boston Gazette* on 15 August, 1768. "Let us abjure the poisonous baneful plant and its odious infusion—poisonous and odious, I mean, not on account of its physical qualities but on account of the political diseases and death that are connected with every particle of it."

**In India, which after the loss of America** became the new jewel of the British Empire, tea arrived as a double-edged sword—a tool of subjugation as well as a new industry and livelihood. The tea plant thrived in India, and by the back-breaking work of tea planters and laborers, new gardens were established at an astonishing speed. After a mere 50 years, India's infant tea industry was exporting more than its 2,000 year old competitor to the northwest.

**The story of Thomas Lipton** and his ubiquitous Yellow Label are inextricably intertwined with Ceylon. Lipton, the son of a grocer who had built an empire selling bacon, butter, and eggs in 300 provision stores across Britain, made his first trip to Ceylon in 1890, when he purchased the Monarakande, Mousakellie, Lyamastotte, and Dambatenne tea estates at cut-rate prices, set up his "Lipton's Circus" headquarters at Colombo, and built his own "eagle's nest" on a rocky shelf above a 1,000 foot cliff at his favorite estate, Dambatenne. His plan was to cut out the middleman by producing tea on his own estates and selling it directly to the consumer under the slogan "Direct from the Tea Gardens to the Tea Pot," and his success was beyond all expectations.

**At the beginning of the 20th century,** Australians were the greatest black tea-drinkers in the world, brewing 7 1/2 lb of the leaves per person a year. Tea had its own ritual in the rough life of an Aussie bushwacker. You made a neat fireplace with stones, filled it with fallen eucalyptus branches, and built a tripod to hang the "billy" from. The billy, a simple tin can with a metal wire handle, was filled with water from a nearby creek. Usually, a few eucalyptus leaves were allowed to fall into the can ... The smoke from the eucalyptus spread a wonderful scent, giving the tea a special flavor. After steeping for a minute or two, the billy was swung round the head three times to settle the leaves, and the tea served in tin mugs, with milk and sugar if one happened to have these at hand.

*Oh there once was a swagman camped in the billabong,  
Under the shade of a Coolibah tree,  
And he sang as he looked at the old billy boiling,  
Who'll come a-Waltzing Matilda with me*

The poet Banjo Paterson wrote this song in 1895, perhaps in memory of Samuel "Frenchy" Hoffmeister, a striking sheep shearer, who, having set fire to a woolshed at the Dagworth Homestead, was chased by the farm's owner and three policemen, but shot himself at the Combo Waterhole rather than be captured. In 1903, the popular tune was adopted by the Billy Tea Company as an advertising jingle, and while "Waltzing Matilda" has never managed to become the national anthem of Australia, it has always been the country's most beloved song, a homage to the simple, open life of the Australian bush, and the hard-drinking, tea-guzzling, freedom-loving men who built the land.

**In the small hours of New Year's night,** 1908, the French writer Marcel Proust sat reading in his apartment on Boulevard Haussmann in Paris, still shivering with cold from a late-night walk, when his maid Céline admonished him to take a cup of tea. "When he idly dipped in it a finger of dry toast and raised the sodden mixture to his lips, he was overwhelmed once more by the mysterious joy which marked the onset of unconscious memory. He caught an elusive scent of geraniums and orange-blossom, mingled with a sensation of extraordinary light and happiness ..." wrote Proust's biographer George Painter. This Zen moment provided the creative key to Proust's masterpiece, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, in which the ordinary tea and biscuit were transformed into the recollected lime tea and madeleine, resurrecting the hidden life of memories "like the Japanese paper flowers which only come to life when we drop them in water."

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