The Impact of Tea in Song Dynasty China

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Abstract

This thesis is a study on the impact that tea played in Song Dynasty China, 960-1276 A.D. Tea reached a vogue that was unmatched at the time, and it impacted the culture of the time in many different ways. Additionally, tea played a huge role in the Song economy. In a time of almost perpetual warfare, the Chinese needed a way to procure horses. Through the Tea and Horse Agency, the Song Dynasty government was able to trade tea for the extremely valuable warhorses. Without horses, the Chinese had no chance against the powerful, highly organized steppe empires of the time. Tea was the major commodity traded to obtain the requisite horses used to keep peace for over three hundred years.
Tea’s Impact in Song Dynasty China

Tea in China dates back to at least the Han Dynasty. The earliest written records of tea drinking come from “A Contract with a Child Servant” by Wang Bao in the year 59 B.C. (Wang 2). While originally popular mostly among the southern Chinese, tea drinking spread throughout the country. This permeation through China took place mainly during the eighth century. The eighth century saw Lu Yu’s “Book of Tea,” and many poets composed poems to the drink.

An eighth century tea aficionado named Feng Yan also attributes its prevalence to Buddhism. “During the Kaiyuan era [713-41] there was one Master Xiangmo…who propogated the teachings of Chan with great success. When practicing meditation he emphasized the importance of staving off sleep…For this reason, the Master allowed all of his followers to drink tea…From Qu, Qi, Qiang, and Li tea drinking spread eventually to the capital, and tea shops appeared in many cities, where tea was then boiled and sold” (Kieschnick 267). Tea spread across the country during the Tang dynasty of the eighth century, and the officials of the time were especially keen on the drink. “In the Tang Dynasty the habit of drinking tea spread from the imperial court to towns and the countryside; and it was the literati, hermits and Buddhists who played a leading role in the advocacy of tea culture” (Wang 20).

After the fall of the Tang Dynasty and the rise of the Song Dynasty, tea and tea culture reached its peak. It was no longer just the ruling elites and the literati who had a passion for tea. The ordinary people also became obsessed with the drink, and teahouses sprouted up all over the country. “Tea culture at that time was expanded and publicized by two polar strengths—the imperial court and ordinary people” (Wang 20). The imperial court produced extraordinary tribute teas of exorbitant price that could only be enjoyed by the emperor and his empress and concubines. Emperor Song Huizong even famously wrote a treatise on tea. The ordinary people
also became great drinkers of tea. “There were a great many varieties of tea, and everyone was a connoisseur of the different types and flavors…people drank prodigious quantities of it” (Gernet 139). Tea reached an incredible vogue in society, but it also played a huge role in keeping the Song Dynasty afloat in a time of great turbulence.

Before looking at tea’s role in everyday, Song Dynasty China, it is important to see how the drink kept the Chinese nation afloat in a time of great turmoil. The backbone of the Song Dynasty was the Tea and Horse Agency. Without tea, procurement of horses would have been impossible, and without horses the Song army stood no chance against the powerful and organized armies of the central Asian plains. The Tibetan traders from whom the Song government obtained horses were obsessed with tea. Tea drinking had spread from China throughout central Asia, and the Tibetans were especially partial to this new drink. Wang Shao, an official who contributed greatly to the Tea and Horse Trade, said of the Tibetans: “The Westerners have begun to bring good horses to the frontier. All they desire is tea” (Smith, “Taxing Heaven’s Storehouses” 46).

The Song Dynasty was a time of great turbulence in China’s history. After the collapse of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, the Song Dynasty’s founding emperor, Song Taizu, unified China once again. However, from the very beginning of the Song’s unification, China was under constant threat of invasion from all sides. The time of the Song was also the time of the great steppe empires, and the Song Dynasty was surrounded by the Tibetan, Turkish, and Uighur empires. In addition, the Khitan Liao, the Xi Xia, and the Jurchen Jin empires were more than just wild steppe people; they were legitimate threats to the Chinese empire. “Encircled by stable, literate, and often hostile states, the Sung was unquestionably the most beleaguered of the major dynasties, and the only one forced to acknowledge equal players in a multistate Asian
system” (Smith, “State Power” 80). This environment of tenuous stability put the Song in a state of perpetual wartime economy, so that they could maintain constant defensive preparedness.

The Song Dynasty was forced to invest heavily in defensive measures. The three political strategies they undertook to protect the empire were “controlling barbarians with barbarians” (以夷制夷), “halter and bridle” (羁縻), and mutual trade. These three political strategies were implemented to try and control the steppe peoples without lifting a sword. The ideal of dealing with the “barbarians” without using military force was not entirely successful, and further defensive precautions had to be taken.

There were five main components to the Song Dynasty’s defense. The first was the Great Wall itself and the city walls that kept Chinese cities safe. The second was the huge Song standing army. At its peak, the standing army reached over 1,000,000 men. Third, since the Chinese soldiers had to be armed and well-stocked, the government mass produced weapons, iron and steel, and incendiary devices. The fourth measure was the Song Dynasty’s navy; the first permanently stationed navy in the world. Their navy patrolled the eastern coast along with the southern rivers and lakes. These were all not just time consuming tasks; they were extremely expensive. “As of 1065 defense expenditures alone consumed 83 percent of the government’s cash and 43 percent of its total yearly income, surpassing by 35 percent the entire Ming budget of 1502” (Smith, “State Power” 81). Finally, possibly the most important defensive measure of all, the Chinese had to fill the need to provide horses for their soldiers. (Smith, “Taxing Heaven’s Storehouses”).

The Chinese army suffered embarrassing military losses simply due to a shortage of horses. During the Sino-Jurchen war, a group of seventeen Jurchen horsemen came across a Chinese military commander and his 2,000 soldiers on foot, who refused to let the Jurchen pass.
The Jurchen took to battle formation, and in the end seventeen Jurchen horsemen defeated the 2,000 Chinese. Over half of the Chinese foot soldiers were killed. The twelfth century Viceroy of Sichuan, Yu Yunwen, deftly describes the Song Dynasty’s shortcomings: “The Jurchen enemy is strong because it has many horses, and we are weak because we have none. Any three-foot-high toddler knows the difference between strength and weakness” (Smith, “Taxing Heaven’s Storehouses” 17). Procurement of horses, then, became the Song Dynasty’s foremost concern in defending the country.

However, despite the extremely elaborate mechanisms and great effort that the Song put in to obtaining horses, they were incredibly unsuccessful compared to other Chinese empires. The Han had roughly 300,000 horses, the early Tang had a herd of 760,000, the Ming had over 800,000 head. Comparing the Song dynasty’s horse count with contemporary rivals is even more embarrassing. The Khitan Liao had about 1,800,000 mounts, and the Jurchen Jin had over 470,000. At its peak, the Song Dynasty had a count of 200,000 horses (Smith, “Taxing Heaven’s Storehouses” 16). This was mainly due to geopolitical reasons. The concurrent rise of the steppe empires “not only enjoyed abundant supplies of horses of their own, but were also able to deny the Song access to Asia’s most productive pastures and foreign horse supplies” (Smith, “Taxing Heaven’s Storehouses” 20). Without horses, the Song army was no match for the well-trained, well-supplied nomadic steppe armies of Inner Asia. As these steppe peoples rose in power and territory they were better able to cut off the Song Dynasty from horses. It was a vicious circle.

The only reliable source of warhorses came from Tibet, in modern day Qinghai. Since the fragmented Tibetan tribes did not possess the same military might of the contemporaneous Liao and Xi Xia, it was in their best interest to maintain an economic alliance with China through trade. The Song officials recognized the importance of their relationship with the Tibetans both
for horse trade and for protection against the Xi Xia empire. The Song implemented the “halter-and-bridle” technique to link themselves economically with the Tibetans. They also used the “using barbarians to fight barbarians” (以夷制夷) technique to get the Tibetans to fight the Xi Xia. The Song officials noted that the greed of the Tibetans could always be relied on, so to ingratiate the Tibetans with the Chinese and encourage their animosity towards the Xi Xia the Song Dynasty officials would “pay the Tibetans a much more generous price than usual for horses, and to regale them with drink and food, in order to enrich and gratify them” (Smith, “Taxing Heaven’s Storehouses” 28).

Nevertheless, the Sino-Tibetan alliance suffered two major setbacks. On the Tibetan side, the tribes allied with China were losing territory and trade routes to the Xi Xia, and their own supply of horses was steadily diminishing. On the Chinese side of things, the financing of the horse trade faced monetary problems. The commodities used to purchase Tibetan horses had to be transported into the region, and this was very costly. The Chinese needed a regional industry to pay for the horses, so they implemented a reform policy by “expanding the frontier, forcibly annexing the Tibetan tribal lands of the northwest, and subsequently establishing a state-run enterprise that nestled markets in the new territories and paid for Tibetan horses with Sichuanese tea” (Smith, “Taxing Heaven’s Storehouses” 30). By 1007 the Song government had created a working trading structure, and their main goal for the next fifty years was to protect that structure against the Xi Xia. By 1026, though, very few trading routes were left available, and major reform was necessary.

Wang Anshi was the man to initiate these changes. At 39 years old, Wang Anshi was chief minister to Emperor Shenzong. The two men together implemented the New Policies to bolster the faltering Song economy. Wang saw the collapse of the horse trade as partly due to not
finding the right man for the job and partly because of the structure of the system. Wang Anshi wanted to fundamentally change the way that horses were acquired, and he thought that regionalizing the market was the best way to do that. He instated an Intendant for Horse Purchases and Pastures in Shaanxi, interpolating a new regional head between the capital and the local markets. He also recommended Xue Xiang as the right man for this job. Most importantly, Wang Anshi insisted that Xue Xiang be given freedom to carry out his post as he saw fit. “Wang urged that he be given a long term in office, wide latitude in the selection of assisting officials, and a broad mandate to experiment in the organization and financing of markets and pastures” (Smith, “Taxing Heaven’s Storehouses” 39). Xue’s method of offering the Tibetans salt certificates that could be exchanged for goods in Sichuan proved to be a transitory solution, though. However, Xue left an impact on the horse trade by carrying it out regionally instead of through the capital.

Wang Shao, “a jinshi degree-holder who had abandoned the early stages of typical bureaucratic career to investigate Shaanxi border affairs,” proposed a reconquering of Qinghai (Smith, “Taxing Heaven’s Storehouses” 42). Due to the fracturing of the Tibetan empire, the Chinese could easily recapture the Tibetan Qinghai lands, and then the Song would have the Xi Xia “in the palm of their hands,” Wang argued. This would provide a stable location for the Song horse markets for the next half-century. After Wang Shao’s “pacification campaign” to reclaim Qinghai was complete, the Tibetan horse traders gradually began to show up in the horse markets. Their numbers steadily grew, and Wang Shao sent urgent messages expressing how interested the Tibetans were in trading horses for tea: “The Westerners have begun to bring good horses to the frontier. All they desire is tea” (Smith, “Taxing Heaven’s Storehouses” 46). By 1074, great efforts were exerted to set up six horse markets to trade tea for horses. Pu Zongmin and Li Qi
were installed as the first Intendant and Co-Intendant for Tea Purchasing in western Sichuan and the Hanzhong Basin. Thus the Tea and Horse Agency was formed.

With tea, the Song dynasty was able to support itself while fighting off the invading steppe peoples. However, tea also played a huge role in Chinese peoples’ daily lives. Other than alcoholic drinks, tea was the only other daily consumption. Since water quality could not always be trusted, the boiled water needed to make tea provided a healthy way to both stay hydrated and enjoy a delicious beverage. Venders and teahouse owners in the Song dynasty’s bustling cities took full advantage of this craze. While street vendors could only sell their tea for cheap prices, teahouses served high-quality teas that cost as much as the finest alcoholic drinks. People of the time even believed that drinking a lot of tea could produce a kind of intoxication, “tea drunkenness.” “It would be difficult to explain the extraordinary vogue that tea enjoyed in China and later in the Muslim world if it was not a drink that produces some kind of euphoria and artificial stimulus” (Gernet 139).

In fact, tea reached such a vogue that there was even “game tea,” a tea that was used in competitions. Since there were so many different kinds of tea and teashops during the Song dynasty, tea competitions first appeared as a way to judge whose tea was the best. These were fierce competitions taken very seriously by all parties present. A famous Song dynasty official named Fan Zhongyan described the game tea. “Before presenting the tribute tea to the emperor, tea men in the Beiyuan hills gathered to compete with each other…when the game was set, the winner would be elated as if walking on air, and the loser feel as shamed as a defeated soldier” (Wang 23).

In these tea competitions, apart from its taste and fragrance, one of the most important factors in judging the tea’s quality was its consistency and color. During the Song dynasty, tea
was not brewed full-leaf like it generally is today. Instead, tealeaves would first be pressed into bricks. Then, a piece would be broken off of the bricks and hot water would be added. The person about to enjoy the tea would then whip the tea into a kind of froth, until the tealeaves were no longer visible. This was known as “mo cha,” and this practice is still preserved in Japanese matcha tea. “People usually poured boiling water into cups where tea dust was placed, and stirred the water with a bamboo brush to make the tea and water completely blend with each other and foam grew like the head on a glass of beer” (Wang 23). This foam also produced whiteness in the tea.

The importance of the color can be seen in the names given to different Song dynasty brick teas: “Bai Cha” (“White Tea”), “Long Yuan Sheng Xu” (“Dragon Garden Exceeding Snow”), “Bai Ru” (“White Milk”), “Di Ru” (“Milk”), and “Shi Ru” (“Stone Milk”). A Song poet, Mei Xiaochen, highlights the importance placed on the color of the tea in a poem:

味余喉舌甘 色薄牛马 渍

The aftertaste in throat and on tongue, sweet;

The color, paler than milk of cows or mares.

This obsession with the whiteness of the tea also impacted the accessories that came with tea making. Special black Jian-ware cups were used in preparing these teas. “Against the black background of these bowls, the tea’s fine grains could clearly be seen floating in the hot water in a state likened to the movement of clouds through the sky” (Tadahiko 41).

Apart from the tea enjoyed by the public, there were special Song tribute teas enjoyed only by officials and the Emperor’s court. These teas were made by a different process than
normal teas, and they were formed with intricate embossing on them. Their distinguishing feature was the roasting part of the tea making process that took place in drying furnaces, 焙.

There were sixty-four total government-owned tea-processing stations that implemented this drying feature. “These were the most prestigious tea stations during the Sung and the home of the renowned tribute teas sent to the Emperor’s court” (Needham 523). In addition to the drying, the tea cakes would be dyed and pressed into different shapes, embossed with dragon or phoenix images. Additionally, after the cakes were completed, they were packaged beautifully. “It goes without saying such tea cakes were luxuriously packed, first in the leaves of a special kind of tree, then in layers of yellow silk, and then in red laquerware caskets with gold padlocks and official red seals, and finally in special bamboo cases” (Wang 22). These tribute teas were extremely expensive to manufacture, and only the emperor and his empress and concubines could enjoy them. Officials had little hope of ever receiving a tribute tea, and even celebrated officials maybe only obtained one in twenty years of service.

**Conclusion**

Whether common or regal, everyone in the Song Dynasty enjoyed tea. From the common man just trying to quench his thirst, to the scholar drinking tea while practicing calligraphy or music, to the emperor himself. By the Song Dynasty, “tea had already been ranked, together with firewood, rice, oil, salt, fermented soy paste, and vinegar, as one of the seven proverbial necessities of daily living” (Needham 527). Street vendors and teahouses sold it, merchants competed with one another in tea games, poetry was written on tea and its intoxicating properties, and imperial tribute tea were enjoyed only by the Emperor and his closest court members. Tea reached a vogue in the Song dynasty that has remained unmatched through the present day.
However, it was not just a commercial and cultural success. Tea played a huge role in the Song dynasty economy. Bolstering the economy through the Tea and Horse Agency, tea was traded for horses that kept the military strong. While eventually overrun by the Mongols and Ghengis Khan, the Chinese of the Song Dynasty were able to remain in power for over three-hundred years during China’s arguably most turbulent times. During these violent times, China under the Song dynasty had a bustling economy and a vibrant culture. Without the tea industry, the Song could not have lasted anywhere near as long as it did.
References


