

livio zanini (2019).
Before the Arrival of Tea in Europe. The Chinese beverage in western sources prior to the 17th century.
In:
(a cura di): Patrizia Boschiero Luigi Latini Maurizio Paolillo,
The Tea Gardens of Dazhangshan. The International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens 2019, 30th edition.
p. 133-145
Treviso: Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche - Antiga,
ISBN: 9788884351500



LIVIO ZANINI

**Before the Arrival of Tea in Europe.
The Chinese beverage in western
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The *Chronica imaginis mundi* written by the Dominican friar Jacopo d'Acqui narrates that as Marco Polo lay dying, his friends gathered around his death bed to beg him to renounce the exaggerations and lies that he had told about his journeys in Asia and that he refused their advice, claiming that he had not mentioned even half of the wonderful things that he had seen.¹

Today we have no way of knowing whether this episode described by Jacopo d'Acqui really did take place or what wonders Polo was alluding to, but we do know that there are numerous gaps in his account of his travels. For example, there is no mention of the Great Wall, of footbinding, Chinese characters,

or tea drinking in *Il Milione*.

Some scholars believe that these omissions prove that Polo never reached Cathay. Others point out that *Il Milione* is actually the work of his Pisan editor who intended to write a chivalric romance based on Polo's notes, which were mainly concerned with trade and other matters potentially of interest to the Mongol ruler in whose service he was.² Moreover, at the time of Polo's journey, the Great Wall had been in ruins for centuries and served no purpose to the new conquerers, footbinding had only been recently introduced to Chinese society, and Chinese characters were just one of the many incomprehensible writing systems encountered by the Venetian traveller crossing the territories of the vast Mongol empire, explaining why he did not notice these things or consider them worth including. As far as tea is considered, it is likely that Polo did encounter this drink, even if there is no mention of it in

1. The departure of Marco Polo, *Livre des merveilles*, circa 1412, ms. Français 2810, f. 4r (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits).

1. MICHELI 1924, p. 158.

2. The doubts raised about the veracity of Polo's journey by WOOD 1995, are refuted with the support of abundant evidence by both HAW 2006 and VOGEL 2012.



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2. Central Asian horse.
Li Gonglin (1049-1106),
Wuma tu, detail, 11th century
(Tokyo, National Museum).

Il Milione. At the time of his arrival in China, the custom of drinking a beverage prepared from the leaves of the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*) had been diffused throughout the country for at least four centuries.³

The *Classic of Tea* or *Chajing*, the earliest known and the most famous of all China's tea treatises, was published during the Tang dynasty (618-906) and the imperial tea gardens were opened during this same period.

Tea reached the height of popularity in the courts of the Song dynasty (970-1279) – whose fall was witnessed by Polo – subsequently spreading through all levels of society. In 1107, Emperor Huizong (reigned 1100-1126), who was famed as a scholar, artist, and aesthete, wrote a treatise on tea⁴ that described Hangzhou, the last Song capital, at the dawn of the Mongol conquest, with its streets lined with tea shops and tea houses.⁵

The monograph also contains a famous passage listing the 'Seven Necessities' that one needed to live: "firewood, rice, oil, salt, soya sauce, vinegar, and tea".⁶ By now tea was an essential component of the daily diet of most Chinese as well as being widely consumed among neighbouring peoples.

Already in the Tang period, tea was exported to Tibet, and during the Song dynasty huge quantities of tea were sent to the Himalayan kingdom in exchange for the horses needed to equip the Chinese armies fighting off the continuous incursions of nomadic peoples pushing at the north-western borders.

The preparation of tea is depicted in a few wall paintings of the Liao dynasty (1093-1117) founded north of the Song empire by the Qidan, a federation of tribes originally from Manchuria whose name gave rise to the term 'Cathay'.

Tea was also introduced to Japan during this period, first spreading through the Buddhist monasteries and then becoming diffused among nobles and merchants. Tea was mentioned in the travel accounts of the Persian merchant Sulaiman al-Tajir who travelled to in the port of

Hánfù (Guangzhou) in the 9th century and described in the pharmacopoeia *Kitāb al-saydana* by the Persian scholar Al-Biruni (973-1050).⁷

After conquering China and founding the Yuan dynasty (1279-1367), the Mongolian court took control of and extended the imperial cultivations established by the Song, imposing strict controls on tea production and trading. So by the time of Marco Polo's arrival, tea was not only widely used throughout the Chinese empire, it was also known in the neighbouring lands.

Maybe it was precisely the wide diffusion of tea drinking that caused Polo to consider it an ordinary custom not worth dwelling on.

Although *Il Milione* contains enthusiastic and sometimes blatantly exaggerated descriptions of twelve thousand stone bridges; of the streets, shops, and palaces in Quisai (Hangzhou) and includes details about its inhabitants who "eat the flesh of dogs and other beasts, such as no Christian would touch for the world,"⁸ there is not even a passing reference to the consumption of tea or to the numerous tea houses serving this beverage in the Song capital.

Over two and a half centuries would pass before tea was mentioned in a text published in the West, thanks to another representative of the Republic of Venice. The Trevisan Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1485-1557) served as secretary to the ambassador of the Republic of Venice for many years before being appointed secretary of the Council of Ten in 1553. Although Ramusio never actually travelled beyond Europe, he collected over fifty memoirs and accounts of journeys and explorations spanning the period from classic antiquity until the 16th century that were published in three volumes under the title *Delle navigationi et viaggi*.

In the *Dichiarazione* included in the preface to the second volume, which was published posthumously in 1559 and contains the travels of Marco Polo and the Venetian ambassadors in Persia, Ramusio describes a dinner party he attended in Murano in

3. ZANINI 2005.

4. *Daguan chalu* (*Treatise on Tea of the Daguan Reign*): CHEN 1999, pp. 70-72.

5. *Mengliang lu* (*Record of Reminiscing on the Past*) by Wu Zimu: CHEN 1999, p. 255; ZANINI 2012, p. 29.

6. ZANINI 2012, p. 29.

7. REINAUD 1845, vol. 1, p. 40; AL-BIRUNI 1973, pp. 105-106.

8. POLO 1845, p. 188. Italian version in POLO 1827, pp. 140-141.



3. Three ladies preparing tea. Wall painting in tomb of Zhang Shigu, detail, Xuanhua, Hebei, Liao dynasty (1093-1117).

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the company of a Persian merchant originally from Chilan called Chaggi Memet (the Turkish translation of his Persian name Hajji Mohammad), who had travelled to Venice with a large consignment of rhubarb. Also present were two of Ramusio's friends: Tommaso Giunti (1494-1566), a Venetian printer and publisher of *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, and Michele Sanmicheli (1484-1559), the celebrated Veronese architect and designer of numerous fortifications in the Venetian Levant. Another guest was Michele Membrè (1509-1594), an "expert in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish"⁹ appointed as the Republic's official Turkish interpreter by the Senate in 1550 and who rendered his services to Ramusio on this as on other occasions. After the meal, the Persian merchant

began his account, explaining that he had bought the rhubarb in person at Succuir (Jiuquan, in Gansu province), which was the first Chinese city encountered by travellers on the Silk Road. Situated immediately after the oasis of Dunhuang, foreign caravans were not allowed to proceed beyond this point. He provided numerous details about rhubarb, which was one of the most important medicinal substances imported to Europe at that time and showed them a drawing of the plant. Then noticing Ramusio's interest in hearing about these matters, Hajji Mohammad told him of another plant grown and used by the Chinese: "he told me that all over Cahay they made use of another plant or rather of its leaves. This is called by those people

9. RAMUSIO 1559, c. 14v.



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4. Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, Stamperia de Giunti, Venice 1559, title page.

5. The first description of tea in a European text: Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, Stamperia de Giunti, Venice 1559, detail, f. 15v.

10. The Chinese province of Sichuan.

11. UKERS 1935, vol. 1, p. 23. Italian version in RAMUSIO 1559, c. 15v (see, here, fig. 5).

grāde, ch'io sopra gl'altri pigliauo di q̄sti ragionamēti, mi disse che per tutto il paese del Cataio, li adopera ancho vn'altra herba, cioe le foglie, la quale da que' popoli si chiama Chiai Catai: & nasce nella terra del Cataio, ch'è detta Caciafu: la quale è comune & apprezzata per tutti que' paesi. fanno detta herba così secca come fresca bollire allai nell'acqua, & pigliando di q̄lla decoctione vno o duoi bichieri à digiuno leua la febre, il dolor di testa, di stomaco, delle coste, & delle giūtture, pigliandola pero tanto calda quāto si possi soffrire, & di piu disse esser buona ad infinite altre malattie delle quali egli p̄a l' hora nō si ricordaua; ma fra l'altre, alle gotte. Et che se alcuno per forte si sente lo stomaco graue p̄ troppo cibo, p̄a vn poco di q̄sta decoctione in breue tēpo hara digerito. & per ciò è tāto cara & apprezzata, che ogn' uno che vā in viaggio ne vuol portare seco, & costoro volentieri darebbono per quello ch'egli diceua sempre vn sacco di rheubarbaro per vn'oncia di Chiai Catai: Et che quelli popoli Catani dicono che se nelle nostre parti & nel paese della Persia & Franchia la si conoscesse, i mercanti senza dubbio non vorrebbono piu comperare Rauend Cini, che così chiamano loro il Rheubarbaro. Quiui fatto vn

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Chai Catai and grows in the district of Cathay which is called Caciafu.¹⁰ This is commonly used and much esteemed all over those countries. They take of that herb, whether dry or fresh, and boil it well in water. One or two cups of this decoction taken on an empty stomach removes fever, headache, stomach ache, pain in the side or in the joints, and it should be taken as hot as you can bear it. He said, besides, that it was good for no end of other ailments which he could not remember, but gout was one of them. And if it happens that one feels incommoded in the stomach of having eaten too much, one has but to take a little of this decoction, and in a short time all will be digested. And it is so highly valued and esteemed that every one going on a journey takes it with him, and those people would gladly give a sack of rhubarb for one ounce of *Chai Catai*. And those people of Cathay do say if in our parts of world, in Persia, and the country of the Franks, people only knew of it, there is no doubt that the merchants would cease altogether to buy rhubarb.¹¹ Therefore, it was not until the 1550s that the first news of tea reached Europe via a Persian merchant and was then recorded in writing. Nevertheless, some decades before Ramusio collected this information about China and tea, while comfortably seated in a tavern in Murano, the Portuguese had already sailed around the Cape of Good Hope to reach the eastern seas. In 1510, Captain Afonso de Albuquerque (1453-1515) conquered

Goa and the following year he captured the Malacca Sultanate, a tributary of the Ming empire (1368-1644). From 1514 onwards, Portuguese ships began to trade in Chinese ports and three years later King Manuel I sent a letter via a diplomatic mission to the court of Beijing. However, due to a combination of factors including the intervening death of the Zhengde Emperor (1505-1521), the mistrust of the Chinese authorities and the complaints of the deposed Malaccan Sultan, the mission failed. In 1522, the legates were sent back to Canton (Guangzhou) where they were imprisoned, and numerous Portuguese merchants were killed or expelled. The following years were marked by frequent clashes between Portuguese merchant ships and the Chinese fleet. During this period there is no mention of tea among the goods purchased by the Portuguese in China or in the letters sent back home by the members of the unsuccessful diplomatic mission captive in Canton. The mission was headed by Tomé Pires (circa 1465-1524), an apothecary and botanist who had travelled to Asia in 1512 and had been appointed ambassador by the Governor of Portuguese India Lopo Soares (1460-1520). While still in Malacca, Pires collected a vast amount of information on the geography, history, and culture of the various countries in southern and eastern Asia that he included in his treatise *Suma oriental*. The text, which was completed in 1515, contains a description of China and of the Chinese based

mainly on his contacts with Chinese in Malacca and mentions that they enjoyed Portuguese grape wine, tending to drink to excess as well as consuming huge quantities of “all sorts of beverages”¹² – it is extremely likely that these beverages included tea.

In 1554, over thirty years after the breakdown of relations with China, the Portuguese captain Leonel de Sousa signed the first agreement with the authorities of Canton giving Portuguese ships the right to trade legally in that port. In 1556, the Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz (circa 1520-1570) reached Macau, a Portuguese trade colony that was officially recognized and leased to the Portuguese by the Chinese authorities the following year. Da Cruz first left Portugal in 1548 on an apostolic mission, and after founding a house for his order in Malacca, he spent two years in Cambodia where he unsuccessfully attempted to establish a mission. In December 1556 Da Cruz obtained permission to visit Canton where he remained for over a month. During his stay the friar carefully observed every aspect of the city, had numerous contacts with locals, and took detailed notes of the things that he had seen.¹³ His book *Tratado das coisas da China* (*Tractado em que se cotam muito por estenso as cousas da China*), published in Evora in 1569, was the first European account of travels in China to be published after Marco Polo’s work. Da Cruz was also the first western author to taste tea and describe its consumption: “whatsoever person or persons come to any man of quality’s house, it is customary to offer him on a fair tray in a porcelain cup (or as many cups as there are persons) a kind of warm water which they call *Cha*, which is somewhat red and very medicinal, which they use to drink, made from a concoction of somewhat bitter herbs; with this they commonly welcome all manner of persons that they do respect, be they acquaintances or be they not, and to me they offered it many times.”¹⁴ Portugal’s maritime expansion into Asia

was not just economically motivated but also driven by the wish to evangelize the newly ‘discovered’ territories, which is why it was common to find religious on most Portuguese naval expeditions. After the foundation of the Society of Jesus in 1540, numerous members of this order, originating from various European countries, set off on Portuguese vessels travelling along the *Carreira da Índia*, the route from Lisbon to Goa, and from there onto Malacca and ports in the far east. Epistulary exchanges and the sending of reports was officially encouraged by a directive of 1553 urging the members of the Society of Jesus to collect information on the countries to which they travelled, including details on geographical position, climate, latitude, neighbouring countries, clothing, food, housing, and the customs of the inhabitants.¹⁵

The publication of letters and accounts written by the Jesuits ushered in a new phase in the diffusion of knowledge in Europe about China and the other Asian countries.

The first Jesuit to travel to Asia was Francis Xavier (1506-1552), one of the Society’s founders, who landed in Goa in 1542. In 1547, Francis was in Malacca, waiting for a ship to India after an expedition to the Moluccas, when he met a Portuguese captain called Jorge Álvarez who had just arrived from Japan where the Portuguese ships had been trading since 1543. Álvarez wrote an account for Francis Xavier of the things that he had seen in the country of the Rising Sun, including a brief description of the eating habits of the locals.¹⁶ He mentioned that the Japanese drank a wine made from rice and “another beverage that everybody in general drinks, both adults and children”. He also stated that “in summer they drink hot barley water and in winter a herbal infusion, though I did not discover what herbs they were. They avoid drinking cold water either in summer or in winter.”¹⁷ In all probability these unknown herbs were tea leaves. The Portuguese captain’s account convinced Xavier to travel to Japan in the belief that there were good chances



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6. Portuguese fleet, in *Livre de Lisuarte de Abreu*, 1565 (New York, Morgan Library and Museum).

12. CORTESÃO 1944, vol. 1, p. 116; vol. 2, p. 393.

13. BOXER 1967, pp. LVII-LXVII.

14. BOXER 1967, p. 169. Portuguese version in DA CRUZ 2010, p. 164.

15. DE LOYOLA 1903, p. 330.

16. RUIZ DE MEDINA 1990, pp. 1-2.

17. WILLIS 2012, pp. 396-397. Portuguese version in RUIZ DE MEDINA 1990, pp. 12-13.

7. Chinese literati drinking tea:
Wen Zhengming, *Pincha tu*, detail,
1531 (Taipei, The Collection of
National Palace Museum).



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of evangelizing the country. After his arrival in the Japanese archipelago in 1549, Xavier founded a Jesuit mission, which remained open until the prohibition of Christianity in 1614 and the subsequent expulsion of all of the missionaries from the country.¹⁸ In 1551, Xavier left Japan for China but died before reaching his destination.

In 1555, Luis de Almeida (1525-1583), a merchant and licensed surgeon from Lisbon who was visiting Japan decided to join the Society of Jesus.

A letter written by Almeida in 1565 contains the first detailed description of the equipment and method used to prepare tea in Japan: “there is a custom among the noble and wealthy Japanese to show their treasures to an honoured guest at his departure as a token of their esteem.

These treasures are made up of the utensils with which they drink a powdered herb, called *cha*, which is a delicious drink once one becomes used

to it. To make this drink, they pour half a nutshell of this powdered herb into a porcelain bowl, and then adding very hot water, they drink the brew.

All the utensils used for this purpose are very old – the iron kettles, the porcelain bowl, the vessel containing the water to rinse the porcelain bowl, the tripod on which they place the lid of the iron kettle so as not to lay it on the mats.

The vessel containing the *cha* powder, the spoon used to scoop it out, the ladle to draw the hot water from the kettle, the hearth.”¹⁹

In the follow-up to his letter Almeida wrote about a formal tea ceremony to which he had been invited by a Japanese merchant from Sakai who had converted to Christianity, describing the room where it took place and the precious objects displayed by his host. The letter was included in the *Historia das missões do Oriente*, a text drawn up by the procurator of the Jesuit college in Coimbra, Manuel da Costa (1525-?).

18. BOXER 1993, pp. 309-361.

19. MAFFEI 1589, c. 372r.



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It was first published in Dillingen in 1571 as a Latin translation by Giovanni Pietro Maffei (Bergamo 1533-1603) – who had entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus – under the title *Rerum a Societate Iesu in Oriente gestarum*. Later, Maffei used da Costa's text as the basis for the history of Portuguese voyages and missions to the Indies that he wrote at the invitation of King Henrique I of Portugal. This work was published for the first time in Latin under the title *Historiarum Indicarum* in 1588 and in Italian the following year. Information on the use of tea in Japan could also be found in *L'universale fabrica del mondo*, a work compiled by Giovanni Lorenzo d'Anania (1545-1609), a geographer from Taverna near Catanzaro in Calabria. This text, which was first printed in Naples in 1573, provides a picture of the most recent geographic knowledge in Europe at that time. Regarding the customs of the Japanese nobility, it notes that instead of wine "they drink water mixed with a very sweet powder that they call Chiam."²⁰ The members of the Japanese mission had an active interest in the art of tea,

which was experiencing great popularity in Japan at that time and which had to be mastered in order to be able to interact with the Japanese elite. During his first visit to Japan from 1579 to 1582, the inspector general of the missions in the Indies, Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), aware of the importance of the ritual use of this beverage, gave precise instructions on how the drink was to be served to the mission's guests.²¹ In 1580, João Rodrigues (1561-1633), who had arrived in Japan as a sixteen-year-old only three years earlier, joined the Society of Jesus. He acquired a deep knowledge of the Japanese language and culture that would allow him to play a key role within the mission until his expulsion from Japan in 1610. He went to Macau where he spent the next decade, working on a history of the introduction of Christianity to Japan at the request of his superiors. He dedicated three chapters of the first book of the introductory volume to the tea ceremony, describing the process and the aesthetic principles in great depth.²² Unfortunately, Rodrigues' history of the Japanese mission was never published and was

8. View of Macau: Theodore de Bry, *Amacao*, circa 1598 (Hong Kong, Museum of Art).

On pp. 140-141:

9. Abraham Ortelius, *Indiae Orientalis, insularumque adiacentium typus*, 1570.

10. Gaspar da Cruz, *Tractado em que se contam muito por estenso as cousas da China*, 1569, title page.

11. Matteo Ricci and Nicolas Trigault, *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Iesu*, apud Christoph. Mangium, Augsburg 1615, title page.

20. D'ANANIA 1576, p. 238.

21. COOPER 1989, pp. 105-III.

22. COOPER 2001, pp. 272-308.



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forgotten in Macau for over a century. The book containing his description of tea is one of the few parts to survive.²³ At the end of the 16th century, the Portuguese trade monopoly with the East was threatened by the arrival of new competitors. Jan Huyghen van Linschoten (1563-1611), a Dutch Catholic who served as the secretary of the archbishop of Goa from 1583 to 1589, secretly wrote down in great detail everything that he could find out about trade and navigation routes in the eastern seas.²⁴ A few years after his return to the Netherlands, in 1596, he published *Itinerario, voyage ofte schipvaert van Jan Huyghen van Linschoten naer Oost ofte Portugaels Indien* and *Reys-gheschrift vande navigatien der Portugaloyzers in Orienten*. The first of these two works was

translated and published in English in 1596 by John Wolfe under the title *John Huighen van Linschoten. His discours of voyages into ye Easte and West Indies*. Van Linschoten's text was the first to provide Dutch and English navigators with the cartographic and nautical knowledge necessary to embark upon voyages in the eastern seas. It also contained a description of the custom of tea drinking in Japan, the first notice of this beverage in the Dutch language.²⁵ While the Jesuits were able to send detailed information on the art of tea in Japan from the mid-16th century onwards, there was still little information about the consumption of this beverage in China, its country of origin. After Gaspar da Cruz, the second European to travel to China and

23. COOPER 2001, pp. XIII-XL.

24. KAMPS 2001.

25. VAN LINSCHOTEN 1596, pp. 35-36; VAN LINSCHOTEN 1598, p. 46.

26. BOXER 1967, pp. LXVII-XCI.

27. SOUZA-TURLEY 2016, p. 582.

28. CAI 2015.

29. GONZÁLEZ DE MENDOZA 1853, p. 142. Spanish version in GONZÁLEZ DE MENDOZA

write about his personal tea-drinking experience was the Augustinian friar Martín de Rada (1533-1578) from Pamplona. In 1564, after a period as a missionary in Mexico, de Rada joined the expedition of his Basque fellow-countryman Miguel López de Legazpi (1502-1572), after which the Spanish settled in Philippines. In 1575 the Spanish governor placed de Rada at the head of a small delegation travelling to the coastal province of Fujian, with the hope of being able to establish a base there, as the Portuguese had done in Macau. After reaching Xiamen on board a Chinese junk, the Spanish delegation spent over two months in China, visiting the cities of Quanzhou and Fuzhou, but did not succeed in their aim of establishing a base. After returning to Manila, de Rada wrote an account of his mission.²⁶ Describing Chinese ceremonies and etiquette, de Rada noted: “when paying a visit to someone, after everyone has exchanged bows and seated themselves, a servant brings a tray with a bowl of hot water for each guest. This water is boiled together with some slightly bitter herbs and a morsel of conserved fruit. The guests are given a bowl with a very small spoon; they eat the fruit and drink the hot water. Although we did not care much for that hot boiled water, we soon became accustomed to it and got to like it for this is always the first thing that is served on any visit.”²⁷ The custom of serving guests tea containing sweet conserve described by de Rada was much in vogue during the last century of the Ming dynasty although it was frowned upon by the connoisseurs of the period²⁸. Today, this custom only survives in a few places and is usually associated with special festivities. Much of the information collected by de Rada was included in *Historia de las cosas mas notables, ritos y costumbres, del gran Reyno dela China*, compiled by his Augustinian confrere Juan González de Mendoza (1545-1618) and published in Rome in 1585.

The description of tea-drinking in China in de Mendoza’s text, translated into English, French, and German, represents the first mention of this beverage in books printed in these languages: “they giue great intertainment vnto their guesstes, and make them straightwayes a beuer or collation with manie sortes of conserues and fruites, and good wine, and an other kinde of drinke, that is generally vsed thorough out the whole kingdome, and is made of diuerse physicall hearbes, good to comfort the heart, the which they warme when they drinke thereof. These ceremeonies they vse when that one neighbour visite an other.”²⁹ The sixth book of Maffei’s *Historiarum Indicarum*, which was entirely dedicated to China, contains a description of the cultures and other products of the country that also mentions the custom of tea drinking: “although they do not extract wine from the vines as we do, but have a custom of preserving the grapes as a kind of condiment for the winter, they yet press out of a certain herb, a liquor which is very healthy which is called Chia, and they drink it hot, as do the Japanese. And the use of this causes them not to know the meaning of phlegm, heaviness of the head, or running of the eyes, but they live a long and happy life, without pain or infirmity of any sort.”³⁰ His brief and rather vague description of Chinese tea suggests that Maffei, who never travelled to the East himself, did not have detailed first-hand sources on this argument. The same may be said of the description of tea contained in the text in *Delle cause della grandezza e magnificenza delle città* by the Piedmont essayist Giovanni Botero (1544-1617), published for the first time in Venice in the same year as Maffei’s book, and subsequently translated into Spanish (1593), Latin (1602), and English (1606): “they have also an herbe, out of which they presse a delicate iucye, which serves them for drincke instead of wyne. It also preserves their health, and frees them from all those evils, that the immoderate use of wyne doth bree unto us.”³¹



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1585, pp. 124-125; Italian version in GONZÁLEZ DE MENDOZA 1586, p. 136.

30. MEW-ASHTON 1892, p. 249; Italian version in MAFFEI 1589, c. 95v.

31. BOTERO 1606, p. 75. Italian version in BOTERO 1588, p. 61.

12. Tea preparation. Wang Wen (1497-1576), *Zhucha tu*, 1558 (Taipei, The Collection of National Palace Museum).



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When Maffei and Botero wrote their treatises, the members of the Society of Jesus had only recently crossed the borders of Macau into the Celestial Empire in order to begin their work of evangelization there. Matteo Ricci, (1552-1610), a Jesuit missionary from Macerata, entered China in 1584, founding the first Jesuit mission house in Zhaoqing, west of Guangzhou. In 1589 the residence was transferred to the nearby city of Shaozhou, and in the following years, missions were established in Nanchang, in Jiangxi Province, and in Nanjing. In 1601 Ricci reached the capital of Beijing, where he founded a fourth residence and remained at the service of the imperial court as a scholar until his death. In a number of the letters sent to inform his superiors and other members of the Society about the progress of the mission in China, Ricci mentions the consumption of tea during the course of visits to officials and other eminent

personages, but he does not go into detail.³² This suggests that he knew that his correspondents were aware of this custom and would not require any further explanations. In a letter sent from Nanchang in 1596, he referred to a *Descrizione della Cina* that he had sought to send to Europe on numerous occasions over the previous years, although no copy of this is known today.³³ It was only in 1608 that Ricci began work on his *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina*, his complete history of the Chinese mission, which was intended to make up for “all the failures to write in the past years”.³⁴ After reaching Europe, Ricci’s text was translated into Latin by Nicolas Trigault and first published in Augsburg in 1615 under Trigault’s name, meeting with immediate success. Tea is discussed in two places in the first of the five books making up this work: “I will mention two or three things previously unknown to us. One concerns a shrub that does not bear fruit whose leaves

32. RICCI 2001, pp. 132, 133, 139, 199, 238.

33. RICCI 2001, p. 326.

34. RICCI 2001, p. 525.



are used to make *Cia*, which is highly regarded in those regions and in the surrounding areas. This custom cannot be particularly old because there is no mention of it in antique books. This type of shrub may even grow in our woods. They pick the leaves in spring then place them in the shade to dry. The leaves are used in a decoction with water that is very popular because of its delicious taste and because it improves mood and digestion; it is drunk rather hot and throughout the day. For these reasons, it is drunk not only at meals but whenever guests come to the house, the first thing they are offered is a cup of *Cia* to drink. If their visit is protracted, they will be offered further cups, even three or four times. There are many grades, each one of a finer quality; some are worth one scudo, others two or three. Tea is more expensive in Japan, with the best quality costing ten to twelve scudi. It is also prepared in a different manner to China; in fact, in Japan they powder the leaves then put

one or two small spoons of this powder into every cup, drinking the powder with the water. In China they place half an ounce of these leaves into a jar of hot water then strain off the water to drink, leaving the leaves in the jar.³⁵

“As soon as everyone is seated, a servant wearing long robes comes to the table bearing a tray holding a number of cups of that decoction of *Cia* that I described in the second chapter. Everyone seated, from the first to the last who will be the master of the house, will take one of these cups. The cup also contains some dried fruit or sweet conserve along with a small silver spoon or other elegant implement that can be used to eat this fruit. If guests remain seated for a long time, they will be served tea twice or thrice, each time with a different dried fruit or conserve in the cup.”³⁶

Ricci’s description of Chinese tea reveals his personal experience of tea drinking – which coincides with the description given by Martin de Rada – as well as his knowledge of the reports

35. Ricci 2000, p. 18.

36. Ricci 2000, p. 60.

about tea sent by missionaries in Japan. His description of the leaves being dried in the shade shows that he probably never had occasion to observe tea processing first-hand on a tea plantation or did not pay much attention to it. In the following decades, other Jesuits sent even more detailed descriptions of tea production and consumption to Europe. From the 1610s onwards, tea made its first appearance on the European market, where it was imported by the ships of the Dutch East India Company.³⁷ Following its arrival in Europe, tea stopped being the curious beverage from distant shores mentioned in the accounts of travellers and missionaries, soon winning over the palates of new enthusiastic tea lovers.

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The Tea Gardens of Dazhangshan

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30th edition

edited by
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Maurizio Paolillo

Fondazione Benetton
Studi Ricerche

Treviso 2019

The Tea Gardens of Dazhangshan

*International Carlo Scarpa Prize
for Gardens 2019*

published by Fondazione Benetton
Studi Ricerche, with Antiga Edizioni,
edited by Patrizia Boschiero, Luigi Latini,
Maurizio Paolillo

On the occasion of the 30th International
Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens,
dedicated to the *Tea Gardens of Dazhangshan*,
this dossier is being issued simultaneously
in Italian and English editions.

Editorial production:

Patrizia Boschiero (coordination),
Chiara Condò and Nicoletta Tesser
(editing and layout). Proofreading
of English texts by Oona Smyth.

Translations from Italian to English:

Oona Smyth (Motivation of the Prize, pp. x-y;
essays by Maurizio Paolillo, pp. x-y and x-z;
Livio Zanini, pp. x-y; Giuseppe Barbera,
pp. x-y; Anna-Paola Pola, pp. x-y;
Massimo Rossi, pp. x-y).

Translations from Italian to Chinese:

Antonio Leggieri (Motivation of the Prize,
pp. x-y).

Translations from Chinese to English:

Paul Golf with Alison McFarland,
Thomas Staniforth, Qin Tian, Saul Thompson,
Shen Yu (essays by Hong Peng, pp. x-y;
Chen Xing, pp. x-y; Yu Yue, pp. x-y).

Translations from French to English:

Traduttori Associati (essay by Hervé Brunon
and Maxime Decaudin, pp. x-y).

The translations published in the Italian
edition of this book are by Antonio Leggieri,
Chiara Piaggio, Oona Smyth, Carla Toffolo.

Irene Beringher, Francesca Ghersetti
and Massimo Rossi (documentation centre
of Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche)
also worked with the editors, authors and
the publications office on research into and
acquisition of bibliographic, cartographic,
iconographic and documentary materials.

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