



EMPEROR MING TAIZU & THE ABOLITION OF CAKED TEA

茶人: *Steven D. Owyong*

We are very honored this issue to have so many renowned tea scholars brushing scrolls of insight on the Ming Dynasty. Last, but certainly not least, Steven Owyong illuminates the royal decree in all of China's long history that had the greatest impact on tea lovers, then to now. After having read so many tea classics, this article explains why there is such a mixture of tea, teaware and brewing methods in the Ming Dynasty. This fascinating topic, revealed in such a well-researched and articulate form, is one for posterity!

In the autumn of 1391, the dragon throne issued a declaration abolishing the production of caked tea at the imperial estate in Fujian. As recorded in the *Veritable Records of Emperor Taizu of the Great Ming Dynasty*, the *Imperial Decree on the Jianning Annual Offering of Tribute Tea* was proclaimed on the sixteenth day of the ninth lunar month of the twenty-fourth year of the Hongwu era. The palace order began with the simple but severe command: "Obey."

The author of the decree was Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), who as founder and first emperor of the Ming dynasty acquired the posthumous temple name of Ming Taizu, Great Progenitor of the Ming. Emperor Taizu ruled imperial China from the year 1368 to 1398, a regnal period known as Hongwu, the Era of Great Martial Attainment, in honor of his fame as a warrior and military general. The state tea monopoly played an important role in the economic and legal reforms of Taizu's government and exemplified his efforts to restructure agriculture, trade and taxes while dealing with fraud and corruption. The effectiveness of the emperor's policies was re-

flected in his commands on tea and the extent to which he was obeyed. On occasion, transgressors included his followers and family, their crimes forcing him to choose between the rule of law and nepotism. The emperor's attitude towards tea was stirred by his peasant background and common touch but more often informed by his experience and talent as a civil and military administrator. In private, Taizu's personal taste for tea was possibly influenced by the religious observances of his family.

Born in 1328 among the impoverished Fengyang peasantry of Anhui, Zhu Yuanzhang lost his parents and siblings to hardship, famine and plague, saving himself by honoring his dead father's wish for him to join the local Buddhist monastery of Huangjue Temple where the boy lived as a novitiate. When the abbey's poverty forced him to leave, he wandered the countryside as a mendicant monk. Returning later to the friary, he learned to read and write until the monastery was destroyed by warfare in 1352. At age twenty-four, he enlisted with Guo Zixing (1312–1355), a Muslim general of insurgent forces rebelling against the Yuan Dynasty and the alien Mon-

gols. Zhu Yuanzhang rose swiftly in the military and in the eyes of Guo Zixing, who proposed the marriage of the young soldier to Lady Ma (1332–1382), Guo's adopted daughter. On the death of Guo Zixing in 1355 and the demise of the general's male heirs, Zhu Yuanzhang became commander in chief of the army and took as his concubine Guo Zixing's other daughter, known as Guo Huifei (active ca. 1355–1370s). The following year, Zhu Yuanzhang captured Nanjing, the major city from which he ruled, and campaigned for over a decade against other warlords for control of the south. Between 1361 and 1364, he took the title of Duke of Wu and then that of Prince of Wu, establishing his aristocratic if not imperial ambitions. In 1367, Suzhou fell under siege, followed by the fall of Fujian on January 21, 1368: within two days Zhu Yuanzhang declared himself emperor and ruler of the Ming Dynasty. The successive surrenders of Suzhou and Fujian brought under his control the empire's two most celebrated tea regions, but it took years for the emperor to issue the stunning decrees that changed the forms of tea as imperial tribute.



Tribute in ancient China was the presentation of goods from the nobility to the sovereign, a system by which the specialties of a province were sent as taxes to the palace. Such levies were first suggested in the *Tribute of Yu* wherein the legendary Yu the Great described the geography of the empire, its mountains and rivers, and the local products that might be sent to the mythical Emperor Shun. As an herb, tea was initially a southern rarity used for its medicinal and culinary properties. Tea was recorded as tribute in the *Records of the Southern Realms beyond Mount Hua* and included in the diplomatic exchanges between the dynastic Zhou and the Ba and Shu of distant Sichuan. Modern archaeology has revealed that tea was received as tribute from at least the second century BCE at capitals in the north and south. In Hunan, excavations at Mawangdui near Changsha unearthed tea from the grave of Xizui (died ca. 168–164 BCE), otherwise known as Lady Dai, the consort of the Chu nobleman Marquis of Dai (died 186 BCE). Kept in a bamboo basket, the tea was labeled and registered in the tomb's funerary inventory. In the north near Xi'an, archaeologists uncovered at the tomb of Emperor Jingdi (188–141 BCE) a sacrificial pit that contained a compressed dark brown vegetal matrix, the remnants of a block of fine tea comprised of uniform leaf buds. From the Han through the Qing dynasties, tea was used as imperial tribute for over two thousand years, most famously during the Northern Song when emperors were presented with highly refined caked teas.

Caked tea was first described by the Tang scholar Lu Yu (733–804) in 780 when he completed the *Tea Sutra*: “By steaming the tea leaves, pounding them to a paste, shaping the paste into molds, drying the cakes, tying them together, and sealing them, tea is thus dried and preserved.” During the Song Dynasty, the processing of caked tea was even more sophisticated, requiring the picking and selection of the smallest buds, frequent washing of leaves, steaming and pressing to express water, juices, and oils, pounding and kneading into a pasty pulp, filling decorative molds, alternately heating and boiling the hardening cakes, drying over a low fire, curing lightly with smoke,

passing over boiling water, and fanning to the luster of dark lacquer. The process took over two weeks before the finished cakes were placed in pouches of yellow silk gauze, wrapped in bamboo leaves and cushioned within linings of more silk, and sealed in a red lacquered casket with a gilt lock. By custom, forty to one hundred measures of the tea were sent north by special courier to the emperor, the precious tribute arriving before the Festival of Purity and Light and the spring sacrifices to the imperial ancestors. When Emperor Taizu declared the abolition of caked tea, he ended a form of tea that had flourished for over six hundred years.

The first elimination of caked tea by Taizu actually occurred in 1375 when he nullified the Yuan imperial tea office at Guzhu and ordered the halt of its caked tea production. Mount Guzhu was a place on the southwestern shores of Lake Tai, near the town of Huzhou in northern Zhejiang. Tea had been produced there since before the third century, and the local leaf was known in history variously as Zisun or Russet Shoot, Yangxian, or Guzhu. In 770, Lu Yu recommended the tea as a superior leaf to the local prefect, and thereafter Guzhu caked tea was sent north as tribute to the capital.

Taizu waited seven years after his inauguration in 1368 to act at Guzhu. In lieu of caked tea, he directed the presentation of two *jin*, about two and a half pounds, of whole-leaf tea as annual tribute to the palace. Just why Taizu ended the production of caked tea at Guzhu was unknown, but tradition had it that he preferred his tea steeped from dried whole leaves. Boiling or steeping whole-leaf tea produced an infusion, a practical and efficient and rather soldierly technique that recalled the medicinal and culinary origins of tea as well as common custom. Steeping whole leaves required only water, fire, a pot and cups—a very direct way of drinking tea that removed the need for the elaborate paraphernalia requisite to the preparation of powdered caked tea: pounder, pestle and mortar, sieve, spoon, ewer, bowl and whisk. In time, Taizu's legendary fondness for Guzhu was connected to the emperor's peasant background and the virtuous frugality inherent in the simple steeping of leaf tea. Within Taizu's family, however, tea drinking may well have

been encouraged by his two wives, Lady Ma and Guo Huifei, both of whom were raised Muslim and taught to eschew alcohol. As noted in the *History of the Ming*, Lady Ma personally prepared Taizu's meals and in all likelihood followed *halal*, the dietary laws of Islam. Among Chinese rulers, Taizu was notable for his support of the Muslim community, the emperor canonizing seven Muslim generals as princes, constructing mosques throughout the south, and writing the *One Hundred Word Eulogy* in praise of the Prophet Mohammad and Islam. According to the lost work *Secret History of Chinese Muslims* by Ma Wensheng (1426–1510), Taizu's commanders were all followers of the Prophet, and Taizu governed his Muslim generals by imposing on them Islamic proscriptions and harsh penalties, especially against alcohol—even personally executing the drunkard son of his closest military aide.

After Guzhu, it was a further sixteen years before Taizu acted in 1391 on the tribute of caked tea from Jianning, Fujian. Fujian was a mountainous province far to the south where the cliffs, rocky soil and good drainage enhanced the quality of its tea. The herb had been grown in Jianning since the Tang Dynasty, but it was in the tenth century that Fujian tea gained aristocratic cachet. In 933, during the Five Dynasties period, the farmer Zhang Tinghui (tenth century) presented his extensive tea gardens at Phoenix Mountain to the King of Min, who then designated the gift as a royal estate and kept Zhang as its overseer. Located along the northern tributaries of the Min River, the tea gardens were known as North Park or Beiyuan. Beiyuan and its tea mills became the primary sources of imperial tribute tea during the Northern Song Dynasty when North Park tea was such the epitome of excellence that certain caked teas became synonymous with the specific reigns of rulers. Indeed, in the history of tea, the possession of North Park and its precious tribute conferred legitimacy to any claim of sovereignty, dynasty, and power over the empire.

Fujian tea was especially appreciated by Emperor Huizong (1082–1135), an aesthete of the highest order who promoted the caked teas of Beiyuan at court. Early in his reign,

Huizong wrote his *Treatise on Tea from the Reign of Great Vision* (1107) in which he buoyantly described the caked tea of Fujian as a reflection of the harmonious condition of the State:

大觀茶論

“As for tea, it possesses the elegance of Ou and Min, endowed with the essence of their hills and streams. Tea dispels and cleanses obstructions and leads to clarity and balance... Since the beginning of the present dynasty, the annual tribute from Jianxi has consisted of dragon rounds and phoenix cakes: the most famous and best tea under Heaven, the products of Heyuan, ever flourishing. Now, we have undertaken the hundred neglected tasks and all within the empire is serene, tranquil, and absent of strife, all achieved favorably without effort. Scholars and commoners alike are immersed in our beneficence and imbued with our transformative virtue, such that all may partake in the noble elegance of drinking tea. Thus in recent years, the merit of picking and selecting tea, the skill of processing it, the excellence of grading it, and the wonder of preparing and serving tea, all have attained the utmost degree of perfection... As for the rise and fall of things, each has its time... But in an era complimented by peace and unchanging normalcy, when all is calm and prosperous, when daily necessities are finally satisfied and when even essentials are just carelessly strewn about, then all scholars under Heaven incline to purity and follow leisurely pursuits, everyone in the quest for tea: seeking its literary gems and pretty sounding bits of golden verse, sipping from its flowers and sucking on its blossoms, weighing the value of its literature, debating the distinctions in its appraisal and judgment. In such a time, even minor scholars unabashedly cherish tea; such may be called the flourishing of sensibility and esteem... I happened to have a day of leisure to dwell upon the subtleties and wonders of tea. For those of later generations who may not know the benefits and demerits of tea, I have at the end of this preface set out twenty articles to be known as the Treatise on Tea.”

“擅甌閩之秀氣，鐘山川之靈稟，祛襟滌滯，致清導和...本朝之興，歲修建溪之貢，尤團鳳餅，名冠天下，而壑源之品，亦自此而盛。延及於今，百廢俱興，海內晏然，垂拱密勿，幸致無為。縉紳之士，韋布之流，沐浴膏澤，熏陶德化，盛以雅尚相推，從事茗飲，故近歲以來，採擇之精，制作之工，品第之勝，烹點之妙，莫不盛造其極。且物之興廢；固自有時...世既累洽，人恬物熙。則常須而日用者，固久厭飫狼籍，而天下之士，勵志清白，兢為閒暇修索之玩，莫不碎玉鏘金，啜英咀華。較筐篋之精，爭鑿裁之別，雖下士於此時，不以蓄茶為羞，可謂盛世之情尚也...偶因暇日，研究精微，所得之妙，後人有不自知為利害者，敘本末列於二十篇，號曰茶論。”

With youthful optimism, Emperor Huizong extolled the virtues of his reign, describing the peace, prosperity, and concord of the empire as manifest in the simple but noble act of drinking tea. For centuries thereafter, the caked teas of North Park remained, in the eyes of emperors, among the most important tribute sent to the imperial capital.

Nearly five hundred years later, Emperor Taizu expressed a less sanguine view of tea when he issued his resounding decree of 1391 to the administrators at North Park:

大明太祖高皇帝實錄 洪武二十四年九月庚子 詔建寧歲貢上供茶

“聽。茶戶採進有司勿與。天下產茶去處歲貢皆有定額，而建寧茶品為上。其所進者必碾而揉之，壓以銀板，大小龍團上以重勞民力。罷造龍團。惟採茶芽以進。其品有四曰探春，屯春，次春，紫筍。置茶戶五百，免其徭役，俾專事採植。既而有司恐其後時常遣人督之。茶戶畏其逼迫，往往納賂。上聞之。故有是命。”

“The officials of the tea households are ordered to cease harvesting and presenting caked tea. Of all the empire’s tea producers of annual tribute on fixed quotas, the tea of Jianning is supreme. To produce tribute tea, leaves must be crushed and kneaded into pulp and pressed into silver molds to make large and small dragon rounds, a method that greatly strains the resources of the people. Abolish the production of dragon rounds. Pick only tea buds to present as tribute. There are four kinds: Seeking Springtime, Gathering Springtime, Staying Spring and Russet Shoots. We established five hundred tea households, exempted them from corvée labor, and allowed them to specialize in planting and harvesting tea. Afterwards, there were officials who feared these later reforms and sent overseers to abuse the householders, who dreaded their tyranny. Everywhere bribes were taken. This was reported to the imperial court; thus, We issue this command.”



茶 These are some replica dragon and phoenix cakes from Zhejiang. They are made from Zisun (Purple Bamboo Shoot Tea). They are organic. However, though the producer claimed they are made just as the cakes of the Tang, Song and early Ming would have been made, cakes from those different dynasties were no doubt different and people nowadays do not have the skills needed to make authentic cakes. They smell delicious, though. We are happily trying them out, boiled and whisked!

洪武

茶 A portrait of an elderly Ming Taizu. The Hongwu emperor lived a long life of seventy years, and seems kindly in this depiction.



In his decree, Taizu was absolute regarding his ban on caked tea, repeating emphatically to stop and eliminate the making of dragon rounds. He regarded the labor-intensive process as a burden to the householders even as he praised them highly for the quality of their tea. Taizu also revealed his grave concern for the farmers whose welfare he pursued through his early reforms, changes that organized them into a stable agricultural corps and excused them and their families from forced labor, permitting all to focus exclusively on cultivating tea. Moreover, by designating just four bud teas, which were far easier to produce than caked teas, the emperor vastly lightened their workload. Then, Taizu finally addressed the true reasons for his decree: the maltreatment of the farmers by government officials who further exploited the peasants by demanding bribes from them.

The corruption surrounding tea during the Ming was once described by the official Cao Hu (1478–1517) in a memorial sent to the throne. In the early sixteenth century, Cao Hu served in Guangxi prefecture, present North-eastern Jiangxi, where he resisted the profiteering of the Grand Defender, the eunuch official sent from the palace to oversee the annual collection of tribute teas from the region. On noting discrepancies in the recording of tribute bud teas, Cao Hu wondered if

the palace actually received the tribute: whereas the amount of tea collected exceeded one thousand *jin*, the tea submitted totaled no more than twenty. In his *Memorial Requesting the Reform of Tribute Tea*, Cao Hu defined in detail the many problems of the imperial tribute system and its levies of tea:

One: The picking and processing of tribute tea happens just at the spring tilling season. Among the peasants, the men must abandon the plow and the women must abandon weaving, leaving them without food or clothing for the entire year.

Two: In early spring, barley and wheat are not ripe. The peasants starve, stomachs in torment. To pick and process tea, their suffering and bitterness are unbearable.

Three: The officials collecting the tea are extremely quibbling; only one in ten passes inspection. The peasants are forced to bear usurious rates, and those who are better off buy good tea to fulfill their quotas.

Four: Without means of meeting the quotas, peasants seeking exemption bribe the officials.

Five: The officials take advantage of the tea trade, coercing and extorting. The entire peasantry is impoverished and production is squandered.

As shown by Cao Hu's memorial-written well over a hundred years after the death of Emperor Taizu—the conditions and corruption affecting tea endured. Imagine the ghost of Taizu evaluating Cao's plea for reform and learning that his decrees of 1375 and 1391 went ignored and his improvements to farm life unfulfilled; moreover, he would have been apoplectic to know that eunuchs—the castrated servants he once decreed be strictly confined to the inner palace—not only moved and exercised extensive powers abroad but also exploited the peasants and engaged in fraud against the very state he founded.

Near the end of his reign, the problems of tea overtook Taizu and dealt him a personal blow, an unexpected treason that affected directly the imperial family and the fate of his daughter. Of the sixteen princesses sired by Taizu, he was closest to the younger of two daughters he fathered with his first wife and empress Lady Ma. Princess Anqing (born ca. 1366), was married in 1381 to Ouyang Lun (died 1397), the wayward son of a scholar. In 1397, Ouyang Lun was sent as an imperial envoy to Sichuan and Shaanxi, a march region strategically linked to the vital tea and horse trade.

Historically, China was dependent on the nomadic cultures of the Asian Steppe for equine mounts, trading iron, cloth and tea for horses,

acquired for civil and military use. In the Ming, a standing herd of an estimated eight hundred thousand head was available with nearly four hundred thousand arrayed in defense at the border. Close to the frontier, Sichuan was the greatest and preferred source of tea; Tibetan herdsmen had been habituated to the herb for centuries and were especially fond of the Sichuan leaf. However, southern Shaanxi and the Hanzhong region also produced tea, and according to the *History of the Ming Dynasty*, a mere three million *jin* of tea from Shaanxi and Hanzhong bought thirty thousand horses. Highly regulated as a monopoly by the Ming government, the exchange of tea for horses was not only important to the security of the state but also a large target for corruption, attracting criminals and the attention of the throne.

In the spring of 1397, Taizu sent a number of envoys, including the high official Jing Qing (died 1402) and the Assistant Censor in Chief Deng Wenkeng (1360–1427), to investigate the smuggling of tea on the Sichuan and Shaanxi border. Shortly thereafter, the imperial son-in-law Ouyang Lun arrived, ostensibly to begin his own inquiries on behalf of the emperor but actually to engage in the highly lucrative but illegal trafficking of tea. Entrusted to do one thing, Ouyang Lun betrayed Taizu to do exactly the opposite. Ouyang employed henchmen led by one Zhou Bao (died 1397) to buy and transport tea, commandeering scores of carts from local officials for the purpose. Intimidated by Ouyang's connections to the imperial family, none dared oppose him until the convoy reached an inspection point at a river crossing where Zhou Bao struck an officer who filed a complaint. On learning of the incident and the identities of those involved, the imperial censor Deng Wenkeng impeached Ouyang Lun in a report that reached the emperor. Taizu was furious. And despite his affection for his daughter, Taizu ordered Ouyang Lun punished by death. Though unrecorded further by history, Princess Anqing was tainted by the scandal and likely never married again.

The abolition of caked tea by Taizu signified many things. Culturally and politically, the imperial dragon and phoenix rounds of Mount Guzhu and

North Park were the last jewels in the imperial crown, and their possession by Taizu was assured by his victories at Suzhou and Fujian. Initially aimed at purging the historic but oppressive Mongol institutions haunting Huzhou and Jianning, Taizu's decrees of 1375 and 1391 also meant to establish his own benevolent reforms on tea in the face of the endemic corruption infecting the industry. The ban belatedly acknowledged that whole-leaf had long been the universal form of tea prepared and served throughout much of the empire and beyond. By the early fourteenth century, numerous commentaries described caked tea and even its powdered form as *passé* and *retardataire*, its use confined to the deep south in Guangdong and Fujian and its dwindling practice as an art continued only among the conservative elite.

Taizu's own son, the tea adept Zhu Quan (1378–1448) eventually admitted in his *Tea Manual* of 1440 that tea “need not be made into paste for cakes” even as he wistfully described all the old accouterments he used in preparing whisked powdered tea. Indeed, the disappearance of caked tea forced the development of alternative arts of tea, skillful techniques and proper utensils newly devised for the steeping of the leaf.

But the greater import of Emperor Taizu's historic decrees may well lie in the often forgotten fact that fine tea, caked or otherwise, was and remains an extremely labor intensive and highly regulated endeavor, a challenging pursuit worthy of the regard and concern expressed so long ago by the Tang poet Lu Tong (775–835) in the *Song of Tea*:

*“Where are the Immortal Isles of Mount Penglai?
I, Master Jade Stream, wish instead to ride this pure wind back
to the tea mountain where other immortals gather to oversee the land,
protecting the pure, high places from wind and rain.
Yet, how can I bear knowing the bitter fate of the myriad peasants toiling
beneath the tumbled tea cliffs!
I have but to ask Grand Master Meng about them;
whether they can ever regain some peace.”*

走筆謝孟諫議寄新茶 — 廬全 —

日高丈五睡正濃，軍將打門驚周公。口云諫議送書信，白絹斜封三道印。開緘宛見諫議面，手閱月團三百片。聞道新年入山裏，蟄蟲驚動春風起。天子須嘗陽羨茶，百草不敢先開花。仁風暗結珠琲瑤，先春抽出黃金芽。摘鮮焙芳旋封裹，至精至好且不奢。至尊之餘合王公，何事便到山人家。柴門反關無俗客，紗帽籠頭自煎吃。碧雲引風吹不斷，白花浮光凝碗面。一碗喉吻潤，兩碗破孤悶。三碗搜枯腸，唯有文字五千卷。四碗發輕汗，平生不平事，盡向毛孔散。五碗肌骨清，六碗通仙靈。七碗吃不得也，唯覺兩腋習習清風生。蓬萊山，在何處。玉川子，乘此清風欲歸去。山上群仙司下土，地位清高隔風雨。安得知百萬億蒼生命，墮在巔崖受辛苦。便為諫議問蒼生，到頭還得蘇息否。

明孝陵



茶 This is the impressive Mausoleum of the Hongwu emperor (明孝陵) in Nanjing. It lies at the southern foot of Purple Mountain. Construction began during the emperor's lifetime, in 1381, and was completed in 1405, during his son's reign. They say that thirteen separate funeral processions left the capital so that grave robbers wouldn't know where the emperor was really buried. Is he actually entombed here? There is a very impressive old stele inside commemorating the emperor, the "Shengong Shengde Stele" (神功圣德碑), literally, "The Stele of Godly Merit and Sainly Virtue," and many officials since have also added memorials as well.