Buddhist Laymen and Tea during the Tang dynasty (618–907)

1. Tea and the Chan monk.

Southerners like to drink [tea], but at first few northerners drank it. In the Kaiyuan reign period (713–742) there was Master Demon-Queller (Xiangmo 降魔) of Lingyan monastery 灵岩寺 on Mount Tai 泰山 (in present-day Shandong). He strongly propagated the teaching of Chan. In the study of meditation he emphasized not sleeping, and also not eating in the evening. So he allowed all [his followers] to drink tea. People adopted it from them, and everywhere they boiled and drank [tea].

Fengshi wenjian ji 封氏聞見記 (Record of Things Seen and Heard by Mr. Feng) by Feng Yan 封演 (jinshi 進士 756).

2. Lu Yu 陸羽 (733–804), author of Chajing 茶經 (Classic of Tea).

Major sources:

- biography in the “recluses” section (yinyi zhuan 隱逸傳) of Xin Tang shu 新唐書 (New Book of the Tang), by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072), Song Qi 宋祁 (998-1061) et. al. 1043-1060.

- biography in Tang caizi zhuan 唐才子傳 (Biographies of Talented Men of the Tang dynasty) by Xin Wenfang 辛文房 (fl. 1300).

- self-penned “Instructor Lu’s Autobiography” (Lu wenxue zizhuan 陸文學自傳), completed 761.

- Plus various scattered anecdotes by contemporary literati.

A composite outline biography of Lu Yu

Birth and clan: unknown.

Upbringing: discovered by a river bank at the age of three by the meditation master Zhiji 智積 (otherwise unknown) of Longgai monastery 龙盖寺 in Jingling 竟陵.

Name: Lu Yu reports that he chose it by divination from Yijing 易經.

Career: Rejects monastery life on the grounds that it would be unfilial for him to cut off his family line and not have offspring.

Becomes an actor. Moves to Tiaoxi 苕溪 (Zhejiang) to write. Chajing composed circa 760.

Close associate of eminent monks such as the poet Jiaoran 皎然 (730–799), the calligrapher Huaisu 懐素 (737–799 or 725–785) and literati such as Yan Zhenqing 颜真卿 (709–785).
Contacts with eighth-century Chan figures: Jiaoran’s pupil, the poet-monk Lingche 靈澈 (author of preface to Baolin zhuan 寶林傳 [Chronicle of Baolin monastery]) and Fahai 法海 (author of preface to Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch 六祖檀經).

2a. Lu Yu in Buddhist historiography

Entry for the year 803 from Fozu lidai tongzai 佛祖歷代通載 (A comprehensive record of the history of the Buddhas and Patriarchs) by Nianchang 念常 (1282-1344):

隱士陸羽卒。羽字鴻漸。初為沙門得之水濱畜之。既長以易自筮得蹇之漸。曰鴻漸于陸。其羽可用以為儀。乃以陸為姓氏。名而字之。師教以旁行書。答曰。終鮮兄弟而絕後嗣。得為孝乎。逃去為優人。

天寶中。太守李齊物異之授以書。貌侻陋口吃而辨。上元中隱苕溪。與沙門道標皎然善。自號桑苧翁。闔門著書。召拜太子文學。不就。嗜茶著茶經三卷。言茶之原之法之具尤備。天下益知飲茶矣。時鬻茶者至陶羽形置突間祀之為茶神。

初開元中有逸人王休者。居太白山。每至冬取溪氷敲其精瑩者煮。茗共客飲之。時覺林寺僧志崇取茶三等。以驚雷笑自奉。以萱草帶供佛。以紫茸香待客。赴茶者至以油囊盛餘滴以歸。復有常伯熊者。因慮仝茶詩。深信飲茶之益。乃取羽之論。復廣著茶功。御史李季卿宣慰江南。知伯熊善煮茶召之。伯熊執器而前。季卿為再舉杯。時又有舉羽者召之。羽野服挈具而入。季卿不為禮。羽愧之更著毀茶論。其後尚茶成風。致回紇入朝驅馬市茶焉。

[In this year], the recluse Lu Yu died. Yu’s style name was Hongjian 鴻漸. At the start of his life he was rescued from the banks of a river by a śramaṇa, and brought up by him. When he grew up he used the Change Classic (Yijing 易經) to divine about himself and he obtained [hexagram 53] “gradual advance.” This said, “The wild goose gradually advances to the heights (lu 陸). Its feathers (羽) may be used as ornaments.” Therefore he took Lu as his surname, [Yu] as his personal name, and [Hongjian as] his style name. His master taught him using horizontal script. [One day] he said [to his adoptive father], “In the end, I have no brothers, [and if I stay in the monastery with you] I will cut off any descendents. How would this be filial?” So he left and became an actor.

During the Tianbao 天寶 (742–56) reign period, the Governor (Taishou) Li Qiwu 李齊物 was impressed by him and gave him his own writings. In appearance, Lu was ugly and base, he was stammering in his speech, yet discerning in intellect. During the Shangyuan 上元 reign period (760–62) he went into reclusion in Tiaoxi 茗溪 (Zhejiang) and was good friends with the śramaṇas Daobiao 道標 (d.u.) and Jiaoran 皎然. He named himself the “Old Man of Mulberry and Hemp.” He closed his door and composed texts. He was summoned to be an instructor in the establishment of the Heir Apparent 子文學, but he did not accept. He was fond of tea and so composed the Classic of Tea in three fascicles. It spoke of the origins, methods and utensils of tea and was very
complete. It encouraged knowledge of drinking tea throughout the world. In time, those who dealt in tea took images of Lu Yu, set them up in their stalls and prayed to him as the God of Tea.

Earlier, during the Kaiyuan period, there was the hermit Wang Xiu 王休 who lived on Mount Taibai (Zhongnan shan 终南山). Every winter he would take water from the stream, whisk it until it was bright and boil it. He put tea buds in it and offered it to guests to drink.

At that time there was the monk Zhichong 志崇 of Juelin si 覺林寺 who selected three grades of tea. He said that one should use “thunderbolt smile” to offer oneself; “Day lily” to offer to the buddhas; and “violet downy and fragrant” to offer guests. Those knowledgeable about tea came to him and used oiled bags to carry home the left-over dregs.

Then there was Chang Boxiong 常伯熊, who on account of Lu Tong’s 虑仝 (790–835) tea poems sincerely believed in the benefits of drinking tea. So, he picked up Lu Yu’s discussion and extended it to compose the Cha gong 茶功. The Censor Li Jiqing 李季卿 was in charge of Jiangnan. He knew that Boxiong was good at boiling tea and summoned him. Boxiong took his teaware and appeared before him. Jiqing repeatedly raised a cup to him. Another time he also summoned Lu Yu. Yu, rustically clad, took his utensils and entered. Jiqing did not show him ceremony. Lu Yu was embarrassed and composed the “Discussion slandering tea.” Afterwards the custom of tea flourished, so much so that when Uighurs came to court, they traded horses for tea.

3. *Chajiu lun* 茶酒論 (A Discussion between Tea and Alcohol)

*Figure 1* Dunhuang manuscript, British Library, Stein Collection, Or.8210/S.406
Mr. Tea said to Mr. Alcohol, “I, Mingcao, am the heart of the ten thousand plants. I am either as white as jade or as yellow as gold. Famous monks, bhadantas [dade 大德, monks of great virtue], recluses and [those who dwell] in Buddhist monasteries all take me while making discourses, for I can clear away their dullness and weariness. Tea is offered to [the future buddha] Maitreya and dedicated to [the bodhisattva] Avalokiteśvara. Over the course of a thousand or even ten thousand kalpas the various buddhas are pleased with me. Alcohol can bring forth ruin and separation of family [and cause human beings] to do a lot of lascivious and depraved things.”

“Have you ever noted,” said Mr. Tea to Mr. Alcohol, “that young men of fourteen or fifteen years of age will never come near the grog shops? Have you ever noted that the Shengsheng bird lost its life on account of alcohol? You have said that drinking tea develops sickness while drinking wine cultivates wisdom. But, I have only heard it said that there are those who become mad with alcohol and suffer from diseases caused by drinking! I have never heard of people being mad with, or for, tea!

Because of alcohol, King Ajataśatru killed his parents; because of alcohol, Liu Ling became drunk for three years. After one has drunk [alcohol] one will frown with the eyebrows, stare, fight in anger and strike with one’s fists. In the written accusation, it is only stated that [the accused] is “drunk and disorderly,” but there is no such thing as one who exchanges words with others on account of being mad with tea. [After a drunken man has been arrested, he] can only plead with the gaoler. The Judge will ask [him] to pay some fines. The big cangue will be put round his neck and the wooden rafters placed on his back. Then he will burn incense, vowing to give up wine. He will repeat the name of Buddha and beg Heaven for mercy. For all the rest of his life, he will drink no more alcohol in the very hope that he will be out of the great difficulty!”

4. Tang poetry

Jiaoran 皎然

九日與陸處士羽飲茶  
Drinking Tea with the Recluse Lu Yü on Double Ninth

九日山僧院，
On the day of Double Ninth, in a mountain monastery,

東籬菊也黃。
By the Eastern fence, chrysanthemums bloom yellow.

俗人多泛酒，
Common folk float them in their wine,

誰解助茶香。
But who can explain how they would improve the flavour of tea?
Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831)

茶，
香葉，嫩芽，
慕詩客，愛僧家。
碾雕白玉，羅織紅紗。
銚煎黃蕊色，碗轉曲塵花。
夜後邀陪明月，晨前命對朝霞。
洗盡古今人不倦，將至醉後豈堪誇。

Tea
fragrant leaves, tender buds.
The desire of poetic guests, the love of the Saṃgha.
Cut and ground white jade, red silk woven on a loom.
Boiled in a pan—the colour of yellow pistils, swirled around in a bowl—blossoms of yeast mould.
At the end of the night it invites you to accompany the bright moon, before dawn it makes you face the morning mist.
Washing it down, people of the past and present never tire. Who can make such a claim after getting drunk?

Wei Yingwu 韋應物 (737—92)

潔性不可汙，
為飲滌塵煩。
此物信靈味，
本自出山原。

The pure nature ought not to be defiled,
By drinking [tea] one sweeps away the defilements.
This thing has a truly numinous taste,
Its fundamental self arises from the mountain springs.

[from “Xiyuan zhong chasheng” 喜園中茶生]

茶果邀真侶，
觴酌洽同心。

With tea and fruit one invites true friends,
With cups of wine one meets those of the same mind.

[from “Jianji guan xi jian pubu xia zuo” 簡寂觀西澗瀑布下作]

Li Hua 李華 (d. ca. 769)

澤藥滋畦茂，
氣染茶甌馨。

The glossy herbs grow luxuriantly in the fields.
Their qi soaks into the tea cups and emits a pleasant fragrance.

飲液盡眉壽，
餐和皆體平。

Drinking this sap makes you live a long time,
Consuming it harmonizes the body.

[from “Yunmuquan si” 雲母泉寺]
5. Material evidence.

Figure 2 Yan Liben, 閻立本 d. 673 (attr.) Xiao Yi Acquiring the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” by Deception

Tea-set from the Tang imperial workshop, recovered from the crypt of Famen si, Fufeng county, Shaanxi

Figure 3 Jar from Famen si 法門寺, silver with gilding, ninth century
Figure 4, Jar with musicians and entertainers, silver with gilding, Famen si

Figure 5, silver-gilt tea-cake grinder with wheel, inscription dated 869, Famen si
Figure 6, tea-sieve, silver-gilt, Famen si