Exactly how far back in time the history of tea goes is unclear. There are reports that a Chinese emperor discovered it as early as 2737 B.C.E., when a camellia leaf fell into his cup of boiling water. But most scholars believe that tea cultivation began in China’s interior around 350 B.C.E. and spread slowly by way of travelers and traders.

One of the most popular teas in China is *pu’er* (pronounced POO-air), which takes its name from a county in the southern Yunnan Province and is cultivated in China, Laos, and Vietnam. Like fine wine, experts categorize *pu’er* by age and geographic origin; tea that is forty or fifty years old may sell for hundreds of dollars per pound.

Whether black, green, oolong, or *pu’er*; whether consumed with sugar, milk, lemon, or ice; whether prepared simply with hot water or in an elaborate ceremony, tea is truly the beverage of the Mekong River region.