



The Rise of Tea Culture in China: The Invention of the Individual (Asia/Pacific/Perspectives)

By Bret Hirsch

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This distinctive and enlightening book explores the invention and development of tea drinking in China, using tea culture to explore the profound question of how Chinese have traditionally expressed individuality. Western stereotypes portray a culture that values conformity and denigrates the individual, but Bret Hirsch convincingly explodes this facile myth. He argues that although Chinese embrace a communitarian ethos and assume that the individual can only thrive within a healthy community, they have also long respected people with unique traits and superior achievements. Hirsch traces how emperors, scholars, poets, and merchants all used tea connoisseurship to publicly demonstrate superior discernment, gaining admiration by displaying individuality. Acknowledging central differences with Western norms, Hirsch shows how personal distinction nevertheless constitutes an important aspect of Chinese society. By linking tea to individualism, his deeply researched book makes an original and influential contribution to the history of Chinese culture.

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The Rise of Tea Culture in China: The Invention of the Individual (Asia/Pacific/Perspectives)

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Editorial Review

Review

From a distinct perspective, this relatively slim yet fluently written book opens up a new dimension about the tea culture in China. After a brief discussion of the ancient form of tea, the author switches his attention to the period of the Tang and Song dynasties, when the making and drinking of the beverage once again experienced a marked change. But his real interest lies elsewhere. Hinsch is intent on describing how tea drinking at that time played a role in fostering a new culture from the Tang to the Song. Drawing on existent scholarship, the author maintains that China's political culture experienced a transformation marked by the rise of individualism (however one chooses to define the term in a Chinese context). He illustrates how this cultural transformation was reflected in tea drinking customs and habits, especially among the literati class. In particular, he points out that from the Tang to the Song, while tea became increasingly accessible to people of all walks of life, it attained a particularly rich sociocultural and religious meaning for the literati class. Very worthwhile reading. Summing Up: Highly recommended. All levels/libraries. (*CHOICE*)

Bret Hinsch's delightfully written book is a very welcome addition to the literature on tea. Using largely Chinese sources, Dr. Hinsch finds that tea was associated with individuality and connoisseurship in imperial China. He focuses on the Tang and Song dynasties, when tea became popular and became a topic for conversation, meditation, and luxury. This is a highly original book with new and exciting ideas about the history of tea in China. (Eugene Anderson, University of California at Riverside)

In this captivating volume, Bret Hinsch demonstrates as never before how an unpretentious infusion of the dried leaves of a bitter plant from the southern hinterland became the iconic beverage of high culture in central China. Beyond that, he shows how the art of tea drinking during the transition from medieval to early modern China was intimately involved in the development of individualism and self-expression, such that the 'new man' of this period had a very different outlook on personhood from individuals of classical times. This is a learned study of the role of tea in Chinese society, one that ranges from literature and aesthetics to gender and morality, covering a host of topics in a most engaging fashion. (Victor H. Mair, University of Pennsylvania)

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About the Author

Bret Hinsch is professor in the Department of History at Fo Guang University, Yilan, Taiwan. He is the author of *Masculinities in Chinese History*, *Women in Early Imperial China*, and *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*.

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