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## Encyclopedia of Chinese Language and Linguistics

### Tea

(1,491 words)

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The story of tea begins where the far southwest of what is now China's Yúnnán province meets what is now northeastern Burma and Thailand, somewhere between the Mekong, Irawaddy, and Salween rivers. The tea plant *camellia sinensis* is native to a wide area that includes this region, and it was probably somewhere near here that it was first domesticated. A number of linguistic groups arrived in this region very early, first speakers of Mon-Khmer (the proto-language ancestral to Cambodian, Vietnamese, and other languages of southeast Asia; [Austroasiatic Languages](#)), and then speakers of [Tibeto-Burman](#) (the family that includes Burmese) and [Tai-Kadai](#) (the ancestor of Thai and other languages). Tea plays many important roles in this region; as a beverage, a salad, and as a ritual item.

An early Mon-Khmer language, or some stage of proto-Mon-Khmer used a proto-word *\*la* to mean 'tea' or 'leaf' (Mair and Hoh 2009, Appendix C; Shorto 2006). As speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages moved into the area, they borrowed *\*la*, and its descendent is the origin of modern Burmese *la* 'tea/leaf'. Early Chinese speakers likely borrowed the word *\*la* as they immigrated south into Yúnnán (other words for tea were also borrowed from local languages; see Lǐ 2005 on early Chinese words for tea borrowed from Tai-Kadai, likely originating from

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the same Mon-Khmer etymon). Over time *\*la* acquired a retroflex articulation or medial, becoming *\*lra* (Sagart 1999:188–189; Mair and Hoh 2009). By some time around 500 CE, the Middle Chinese form became *\*dra*.

For the next thousand years, tea culture and the word for tea developed in China. Tea slowly spread to neighboring countries, as the early Chinese powdered tea traditions ritualized in the *matcha* of the Japanese tea ceremony and yak-butter tea became a staple in Tibet. As the Chinese language diversified, words for tea began to diversify as well, and the *\*dra* affricated and aspirated in Mandarin and Cantonese, becoming *chá* in Mandarin, *caa4* in Cantonese, and de-retroflexed in Southern Mǐn (Mǐnnánhuà 閩南話), the dialect of Fújiàn and Táiwiān, becoming *te<sup>5</sup>*.

## 2. TEA SPREADS AROUND THE WORLD

Roughly around the turn of the 17th century, tea started to spread around the world, and languages around the world borrowed the word from Chinese, in two distinct forms. Some languages have a word starting with a stop "t" like English *tea* (and German *Tee* and Spanish *te*), while others have a word starting with an affricate "ch" like *cha* in Japanese and Portuguese, or *chai* in Russian, Mongolian, and Hindi.

Why these languages with these two forms? Figure 1 shows a map extracted from Dahl (2013), the entry on tea in the World Atlas of Language Structure (Dryer and Haspelmath 2013) with all the forms whose pronunciation begins with "ch" in light gray and the forms with pronunciation starting with "t" in dark gray.

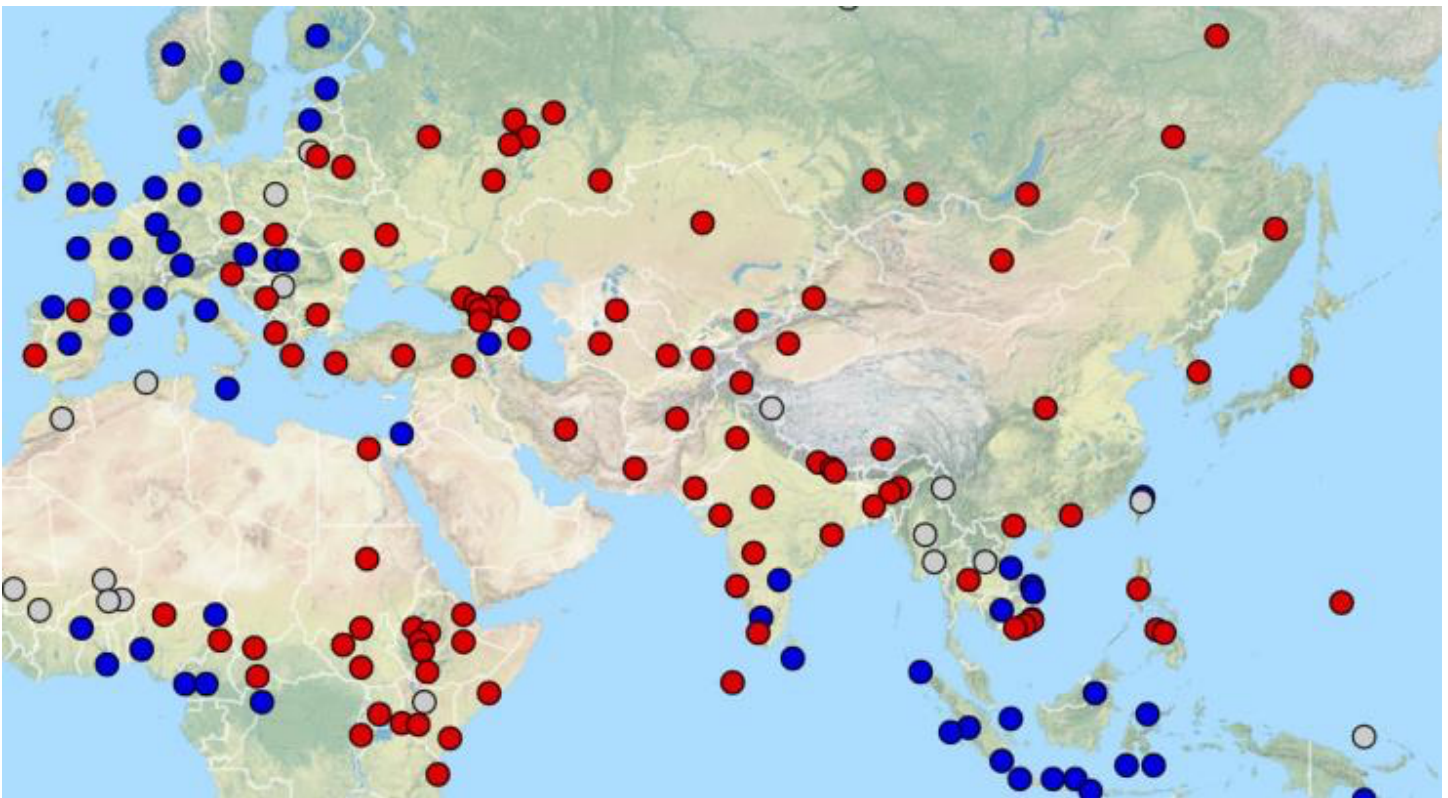


Figure 1. Pronunciation of "tea" around the world

### 3. FORMS BEGINNING WITH CH-

The light grey dots mark languages with words with initial "ch" or similar derivations that came originally from Mandarin or Cantonese *cha*. These include countries neighboring China like Korea, Tibet, and Vietnam, as well as non-neighboring Portugal, who all got tea directly from China, as well as forms like *chai* with a final *-i*.

In North American English the word *chai* tends to refer to masala chai – tea spiced with cardamom, cinnamon, and ginger, generally with milk. In many languages, however, it's the basic word for "tea". This includes central Asian and Middle Eastern languages like Arabic, Azerbaijani, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Mongolian, Pashto, Persian, Tajik, Tatar, Turkish, and Turkmen; European languages like Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Chechen, Georgian, Macedonian, Slovene, Russian, and Ukrainian; and South Asian languages like Hindi, Urdu, and Nepali. Geographically, the word *chai* covers what Mair and Hoh (2009:263) call "a wide band that runs across the center of Eurasia, from the eastern steppe to eastern Europe and Southwest Asia". This band across the center of Eurasia traces the route of Ghenghis Khan, who in the 13th century led a united army of Mongol tribes that conquered China and most of central Asia, and subjugated large parts of the Middle East and Eastern Europe. It was the Mongolian empire that strengthened and extended the Silk Road, the first global network of commerce

that link Europe and Asia, and which were the caravan routes by which China traded tea with its neighbors. The Mongol Empire and the various Persian/Turkic empires correspond neatly to the range of the word *chai* (Avery 2003).

Persian is likely the source of the final *-i* in *chai* (Anderson 2003; Mair and Hoh 2009); Persian nouns ending in long *â* have alternative forms ending in *-i*. Both before and after the Mongol empire, West, Central, and South Asia have been dominated by a variety of empires (the Ghaznavids, Timurids, Ottomans, and Mughals) that merged Turkic and Persian elements and used Persian as a lingua franca; indeed Persian languages like Tajiki and Dari are still spoken in Central Asia. The very first written mention of tea in Europe in 1559 is as *Chiai*, with an *-i*, by the Venetian travel writer Ramusio describing the Persian traveler Chaggi Memet (Yuan 1981).

#### 4. FORMS BEGINNING WITH T-

The second group of languages describes tea with a word pronounced something like "tey" – the way the English word *tea* used to be pronounced. This group includes western European languages like French *thé*, Spanish *te*, Italian *tè*, and Dutch, German, Danish, Swedish, Welsh, Irish, and Hungarian. And, mysteriously, the very much non-European languages Indonesian and Malay.

The source of these "t" words is *te<sup>5</sup>*, the word for tea in Southern Mǐn, a Chinese topolect of 46 million speakers, spoken in Fújiàn and Guǎngdōng provinces and in Táiwān. Southern Mǐn-speaking Chinese settled throughout Southeast Asia – explaining the word *teh* in Indonesian and Malay – and traded tea to the Dutch in the early 1600s in Dutch colonies like Batavia (modern Jakarta) and also in Xiàmén 廈門, the port city in Fújiàn where trade took place between China and Europe. We do not know if the Dutch got the word "tea" from Xiàmén directly, from those ethnic Chinese communities on Java, or both.

In any case the Dutch brought tea by ship to Europe and the word also spread from Dutch to French, English, and other Western European languages (Yuan 1981). By the middle of the 17th century, the word, pronounced "tey", arrived in England just in time to catch the very tail end of the Great Vowel Shift, in which all English [e:] vowels turned to [i:], and so within 50 years as the vowel shift completed, the word settled on its modern pronunciation [t<sup>h</sup>i] (Anderson 2003; Avery 2003). Tea began as an exotic luxury for the rich but in England it soon became more popular than beer.

#### 5. SUMMARY

The map below extracted from Dahl (2013) shows the *chai/tea isogloss* dividing Europe, with languages in the west using words like "tea" and languages in the east using words like "chai".

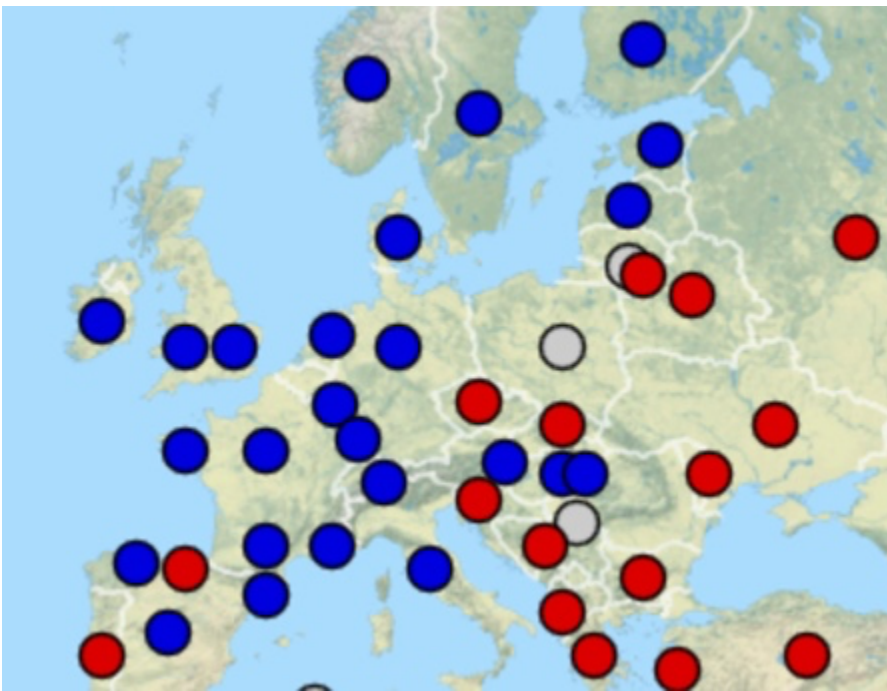


Figure 2. *Chai/tea* isogloss dividing Europe

In summary, "tea" comes from the seafaring Fujianese and spread west by sea while "chai" comes from the landlocked west and north of China and spread west by land across Central Asia, to South Asia, and Eastern Europe.

How languages of the world pronounce the common word for the leaves of *camellia sinensis* thus depends mainly (pace a few interesting exceptions like Portuguese) on whether its earlier speakers traded with China by land or by sea – *chai* if by land, *tea* if by sea. And the common descent of *tea*, *cha*, *chai*, and *la* from one protoword *\*la* reminds us of the even more ancient borrowings of tea. Tea offers us a history of international relations in every cup.

Dan JURAFSKY

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