I usually drink only coffee in the morning, but today I sat down with a cup of Howqua, a Chinese tea with British engagements. I am not turning, as the British did, from coffee to tea, but Victor H. Mair and Erling Hoh’s *The True History of Tea* makes a compelling argument for doing so. The idea of a “true” history of tea presents a challenge for the scholar. How can a single volume, however elegantly written and illustrated, include all that is true in the history of one of the most powerful beverages on the planet? Although it doesn’t include everything, the book does provide a superior infusion of stories.

From its botanical origins in Southeast Asia, tea, *Camellia sinensis*, is literally and figuratively a singular drink. The story of tea includes the fact that it is a singular botanical plant: all teas are one. The teas we drink are diverse because of the geographies, histories, and cultural stories behind them. The story of tea is also the story of power, as colonialism made tea the epitomizing drink of the British, and the force of religion made it the approved drink of Islam. The power of culture made tea a necessity of life in China: by the ninth century it was encoded in the list of daily needs: firewood, rice, salt, oil, soy sauce, and tea—a pretty good list for survival today, too.

The social uses of tea are many, varied by place, time, and gender. Tea was a stimulant at male gatherings in Europe and the Middle East. Meanwhile, coffee characterized male social settings in England by the 1640s, and to some this signaled revolution or ribaldry. The civilizing force of tea and ladies created quite a different setting as grandes dames poured tea at the weekly salons in their homes.

The book’s sidebars are vivid. We learn that China may have conquered Tibet by making Tibetans into tea addicts, drawing them into the horses-for-tea trade and into dependency on the Chinese. Here, too, are fascinating stories of mare’s-milk-drinking nomadic Mongols, who saw tea as effeminate and too civilized by half. We learn about the elegant shape of the clipper ships in the tea trade; the spread of magical tea potions by Daoist sages who noted “they can cure the hundred diseases…but they will not make people not die” (p.35); the condiments with which tea was spiced in China in the Tang dynasty: ginger, tangerine peel, peppermint, and scallion. For those of us who love such detail the book is full of curiosity-satisfiers, with stories about the evolution of tea utensils and bowls, ceremonies and rituals.

While China and, to some degree, Japan form the center of this historical treatise, attention is also paid to the Middle East, Russia, Europe, and the United States. London was Europe’s coffee-drinking capital in the early 1700s (when it boasted two thousand coffee houses), but the city converted to tea when that became the prime colonial crop. The Boston Tea Party in 1773 dumped ninety thousand pounds of tea in the harbor, but we note that Paul Revere, who opposed the importation of British tea, made elegant silver teapots. There is a very slender chapter on teas of India and Ceylon, and a brief coda on global taste movements in tea today. That there is very little on Korean tea seems a serious oversight, but with the detail we have—such as how to tell an undercover Russian spy by how he drinks his tea (he will wink involuntarily because he will have drunk countless glasses of tea with an eye-threatening spoon still perched inside)—who could fault any omissions?

There are some small errors and typographical mishaps. For example, I found Japanese words misspelled and cultural concepts such as wabi misused. All in all, though, this book’s use of the word “true” in the title, challenging as it might be to scholars, rings with authority. My only caveat: if you pick up this book looking for a recipe for the perfect cup of tea you will be disappointed. I searched everywhere, and while I think I could whip up a cup of Tibetan yak butter tea, I had to read the box of tea in my cupboard to brew my morning cuppa.

—Corky White, Boston University

**Bookends**

*It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time: My Adventures in Life and Food*  
Moira Hodgson  
New York: Nan A. Talese, 2009  
336 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

If exposure informs judgment, Moira Hodgson was born to be a critic, a position she held at the *New York Observer*. As a child in the fifties, shuttled among Egypt, Sweden, Vietnam, and Germany by her English foreign-service parents, her eager mouth took in such delicacies as ful medames, gooseberry aquavit, boiled pig’s heart, Bird’s custard powder, and “Blown Poularde ’Rose of May.’” *It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time* describes in dry, wry prose this peripatetic childhood, her bohemian twenties in New York City, and a series of mobile, glamorous years...