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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tea and Place: The Evolving Discussion about Terroir in Song China

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Abstract

This article employs terroir as an analytical framework to examine how a place-specific tea acquired its reputation and contributed to processes of cultural self-fashioning in Song China. Focusing on Fujian's Beiyuan 北苑 tea—exceptionally well documented in Song sources—it explores the close connections among tea, landscape appreciation, and place-making. Drawing on tea manuals and connoisseur writings, the article shows how literati linked tea quality to both natural conditions and cultural practices, using such associations to articulate refined taste and produce place-based knowledge. The case of Beiyuan tea reveals the emergence of a distinctly Chinese rhetoric of terroir, one that transformed environmental description into a rhetoric that mediated between local expertise and imperial order. Within this framework, place itself came to embody quality, integrating physical environment, cultural identity, and sensory experience.

Keywords: tea; place; terroir; Beiyuan; taste; local; imperial

The interplay of tea's production, distribution, and enjoyment is inherently tied to place. In Europe, tea packaging often bears geographic labels that indicate a designation of origin. Asian teas usually display specific production locales, such as black tea from Mount Wuyi 武夷 or Darjeeling in India. Sociologists and marketing scholars have researched such geographical indicators, showing that a product's region and place branding critically influence consumer purchasing choices, and labels of origin bolster a product's market reputation.[1] The historical aspect, while only briefly mentioned, is particularly important in

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[1]Simone Guercini and Silvia Ranfagni, "Integrating Country-of-origin Image and Brand Image in Corporate Rebranding: The Case of China," *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 31.5 (2013), 508–21; Lee Joliffe, "The Lure of Tea: History, Traditions and Attractions," *Food Tourism Around the World: Development, Management and Markets* (2004), 121–136; and Maria L. Loureiro and Wendy J. Umberger, "Assessing

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identifying tea.[2] This study explores the historical interplay between location and tea production, focusing on how place is used to label the production and consumption of tea.

Tea plantations are sensitive to the natural environment. Tea trees grow best in tropical and subtropical regions with plenty of rain—at least 60 inches a year —and dryness lasting no longer than three months. The ideal temperature is around 65–68°F, with a relative humidity of 70–90 percent.[3] Soil is also essential. Tea trees need acidic soil for optimal growth because acidity helps them absorb nutrients. The central root must obtain a solid grasp to a depth of up to six feet, so the soil must be loose and porous, with good drainage while retaining moisture. Therefore, tea experts have long acknowledged that good tea usually comes from mountains.[4]

Since the Song dynasty (960–1279), scholars have recorded how local environments shaped tea quality. This was largely due to regional specialization in the production and trade of tea.[5] The rich natural resources and hilly inland regions of South China also fostered the emergence of new technologies in tea cultivation. While some texts on tea production reflect literati ideals of taste, others—especially tea manuals—combine empirical notes on soil, climate, and technique with broader cultural meanings attached to place. These detailed examinations of tea production suggest that the history of taste is indispensable for piecing together the history of environment and knowledge.

This article examines Beiyuan 北苑 tea from Jian'an 建安 (in Jianzhou 建州 prefecture, Fujian province) during the Song dynasty as a case study of the intricate connections between tea culture, landscape appreciation, and place-making. Beiyuan tea serves as an ideal example for several reasons. First, it was the earliest and most thoroughly documented tea in Chinese history—at least eleven treatises from the Song period were devoted to its production and evaluation, an unprecedented level of attention for a single regional product. Second, Beiyuan tea was appreciated by both the imperial court and local literati, circulating simultaneously as a tributary offering and market commodity. Third, the Song period saw a critical transition in modes of knowledge-making: the shift toward increasing observation and documentation of local products. This trend was accompanied by a "localist turn" in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, which gave rise to numerous *pulu* 譜錄 writings, of which place-based tea treatises accounted for the majority.[6] In this intellectual climate, Beiyuan tea exemplified an emerging rhetoric of terroir. This was a framework in which natural endowment, human craft, and moral geography were woven together to define quality and authenticity.

Consumer Preferences for Country-of-Origin Labeling," *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics* 37.1 (2005), 49–63.

[2]James A. Benn, *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 3.

[3]Joseph Needham, Lu Gwei-djen, and Hsing-Tsung Huang, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 6:, *Biology and Biological Technology. Part 1, Botany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 435–36; and Kevin Gascoyne, François Marchand, Jasmin Desharnais, and Hugo Amèrici et al., eds., *Tea: History, Terroirs, Varieties* (Buffalo, New York: Firefly Books, 2014), 21–22.

[4]See Xu Cishu 許次紓 (1549–1604), *Cha shu* 茶疏, in Pei-kai Cheng 鄭培凱 and Zhu Zizhen 朱自振, eds., *Zhongguo lidai chashu huibian jiaozhuben* 中國歷代茶書匯編校注本 (hereafter *ZGLDCSHB*), 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan youxian gongsi, 2007), 2:268. See also Livio Zanini, "'The Brush-Rest and the Tea Stove': Xu Cishu's Biography," *Ming Qing yanjiu* 11 (2002), 123–52.

[5]Richard von Glahn, "The Tang–Song Transition in Chinese Economic History," in *The Cambridge Economic History of China*, edited by Debin Ma and Richard von Glahn, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1:243–56.

[6]Huijun Mai, "The Double Life of the Scallop: Anthropomorphic Biography, 'Pulu,' and the Northern Song Discourse on Things," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 49 (2020), 149–205.

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Most English-language scholarship on Chinese tea culture has focused on the political and economic control of the tea industry or its religious associations. But its significance in material and literary culture remains underexplored.[7] Chinese-language scholarship offers a fuller picture, encompassing reconstructions of how sensory appreciation and technical knowledge shaped Song-period tea culture.[8] Japanese scholars have examined Songdynasty tea as a major commodity in domestic and international trade.[9] Recently, literary historians have also discussed specific tea writings and poems as sources for understanding the production and connoisseurship of tea.[10] Fujian tea, in particular, has received more scholarly attention.[11] Scholarship on contemporary Fujian tea has concluded that the development of its fame and judgment is historically rooted.[12]

Building on this body of scholarship, this article approaches Beiyuan tea as both a focus of cultural practice and a textual construction. I employ terroir as an analytical framework to examine how a place-specific tea gained its reputation and contributed to processes of cultural self-fashioning. Originating in the French culinary tradition, the concept of terroir encompasses both the physical attributes of a region—such as soil and climate—and a historical understanding of place. Anthropologists and food scholars have shown that terroir is a form of ecological knowledge and a strategy of cultural distinction—a way of assigning value and authenticity to the material world.[13] Scholars of political economy and sociology likewise frame the evaluation of local products within systems that link economic production.[14] Much like French winegrowers, Chinese tea producers and

[7]Paul Jakov Smith, *Taxing Heaven's Storehouse: Horses, Bureaucrats, and the Destruction of the Sichuan Tea Industry, 1074–1224* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Benn, *Tea in China*.

[8]Shen Dongmei 沈冬梅, *Cha yu Songdai shehui shenghuo* 茶與宋代社會生活 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2007); Liao Baoxiu 廖寶秀, *Songdai chicha fa yu chaqi zhi yanjiu* 宋代喫茶法與茶器之研究 (Taipei: Guoli gugong bowuyuan, 1999). *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:xiii–xviii.

[9]Mizuno Masaaki 水野正昭, "Sōdai ni okeru cha no seisan ni tsuite" 宋代における茶の生産について, *Tōyōshi kenkyū* 東洋史研究 42.3 (1983): 1–29.

[10]Nien Chen-Ho 粘振和, "Beisong zhongqi cha wenhua de yige qiemian: Lun Mei Yaochen chashi de shiliao jiazhi" 北宋中期茶文化的一個切面:論梅堯臣茶詩的史料價值, *Guoli Taizhong keji daxue tongshi jiaoyu xuebao* 國立台中科技大學通識教育學報 2 (2013), 51–74; and Ronald Egan, "The Interplay of Social and Literary History: Tea in the Poetry of the Middle Historical Period," in *Scribes of Gastronomy: Representations of Food and Drink in Imperial Chinese Literature*, edited by Isaac Yue and Siufu Tang (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 69–86.

[11]Kin Sum Li, "A Bowl of Good Tea in the Northern Song Dynasty: Using Modern Examples to Understand the *Daguan cha-lun* 大觀茶論," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 54.1 (2022), 3–41; and Mai, "The Double Life of the Scallop."

[12]Dan Choffnes, "Terroir, Tradition, and Place-Making in Tea Villages of Southeastern China," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 50.3 (2022), 178–85; Kunbing Xiao, "The Taste of Tea: Material, Embodied Knowledge and Environmental History in Northern Fujian, China," *Journal of Material Culture* 22.1 (2017), 3–18.

[13]Jacques Fanet, *Great Wine Terroirs*, trans. Florence Brutton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 10; Kolleen M. Guy, *When Champagne Became French: Wine and the Making of a National Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Amy B. Trubek, *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Amy Trubek, Kolleen M. Guy, and Sarah Bowen, "Terroir: A French Conversation with a Transnational Future," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 14.2 (2010), 139–48; Sarah Besky, "The Labor of Terroir and the Terroir of Labor: Geographical Indication and Darjeeling Tea Plantations," *Agriculture & Human Values* 31.1 (2014), 83–96.

[14]Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1856); Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

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connoisseurs developed their own "tastes for places." In modern tea studies, researchers have emphasized the sensory dimensions that anchor famous teas, such as Pu'er, in specific landscapes.[15]

The closest Chinese equivalent to terroir is *fengtu* 風土. First appearing in Handynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) writings, *fengtu* referred simultaneously to social customs and to the physical landscape that shaped them.[16] The term expressed a close and enduring connection between people and their environment. Although not all texts employ the term *fengtu* explicitly, many writings articulate a *fengtu*-like mode of reasoning using terms like *caomu* 草木 (vegetation) and *shuitu* 水土 (water and soil), both of which link material qualities to specific environments. The rise of terroir-like thinking in the Song dynasty can be seen as a reinterpretation of *fengtu* with new analytical precision. Song documents no longer merely described regional differences; they sought to explain how particular environments produced superior goods.

The case of Beiyuan tea in the Song dynasty exemplifies this emerging rhetoric of Chinese terroir. The process was shaped by both state control and literati culture, which turned geography into reputation and local cultivation into an aesthetic landscape. Through the practices of naming and ranking tea, Song scholars transformed *fengtu*—the moral and cultural idea of place—into a language of taste and refinement. In this new framework, place itself came to embody quality. The physical environment was linked with cultural identity and sensory experience. The following discussion situates Beiyuan tea within earlier traditions of place-specific tea, examines its institutional development during the Song, and then analyzes how terroir was constructed from the environment, craft, connoisseurship, and interactions between imperial order and scholars.

Tang–Song Records of Local Teas

The proliferation of tea cultivation during the Tang–Song dynasties was accompanied by an increase in records of tea originating from specific places. Lu Yu's 陸羽 (733–804) work on tea in the Tang dynasty (618–907) notes important sites of tea production, including an observation about Mount Guzhu 顧渚.[17] Wang Fu's 王敷 (c. 742–756) *Chajiu lun* 茶酒論 (Discussion between tea and wine) mapped the geography of famous teas during the mid-Tang period, including Fuliang 浮梁 in Jiangxi, Shezhou 歙州 in Anhui, Mengding 蒙頂 in Sichuan, and Yuhang 餘杭 near Hangzhou.[18] These places signaled prestige, quality, and local character, and suggested an early consciousness of spatial reputation. Many of these famous teas were also mentioned in Pei Wen's 裴汶 (born c. 805) *Cha shu* 茶述 (Tea narratives), listing ten place-specific teas in three grades.[19] This ranking practice reflects an emerging awareness of place-based distinction.

[15]Zhen Ma, "Sensorial Place-Making in Ethnic Minority Areas: The Consumption of Forest Puer Tea in Contemporary China," *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 19.4 (2018), 316–32; Selina Chan, "*Terroir* and Green Tea in China: The Case of Meijiawu Dragon Well (Longjing) Tea," in *Geographical Indications and International Agricultural Trade: The Challenge of Asia*, edited by Augustin-Jean et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 226–38.

[16]Ban Gu 班固, *Han Shu* 漢書, in Wenyuange *siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 electronic edition (hereafter *SKQS*), 64.5a; and Fan Ye 范曄, *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (*SKQS*), 31.13b.

[17]*ZGLDCSHB*, 1:46–47.

[18]*ZGLDCSHB*, 1:42.

[19]*ZGLDCSHB*, 1:49.

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The place-product recording practice was further developed during the Five Dynasties (907–979). Mao Wenxi's 毛文錫 (c. 889–904) *Cha pu* 茶谱 (Catalogue of tea), for instance, categorized over thirty types of tea according to their regional origins. His gazetteer-style narrative made tea a regionally registered product. In some regions, the location of tea production was as precise as a hill, revealing the effort to situate it within a specific environmental context.[20] Mao's record remains primarily descriptive, without deeper analysis of how environmental factors shape quality.

A significant increase in tea cultivation occurred during the Song. By the close of the Shaoxing era (1131–1162), sixty prefectures and 242 counties were tea producers. James Benn highlighted that Song-era tea cakes often bore poetic monikers and the names of their places of manufacture, which designated them as regional delights for sophisticated enthusiasts.[21] Tea emerged as a way to taste distant locales without leaving one's home. Discussions of soil and suitable environments continued into Song-dynasty writings on tea. Ye Qingchen's 葉清臣 (1000–1049) *Shu zhucha quan pin* 述煮茶泉品 (On the classification of springs for boiling tea), for instance, started with a list of famous teas between the mountains of Wu 吳 and Chu 楚.[22] He further concluded that the environment, the making method, and the water used all contributed to the uniqueness of these teas. Compared to previous lists of local teas, this work included more reasoning about why certain teas from certain places were better than others.

Works about tea in the Song dynasty developed within a broader cultural trend that tied celebrated products to their places of origin. As Huijun Mai noted, the "culture of famous things" flourished alongside the growth of the Song commercial economy.[23] Lists of "the top things under heaven" (*tianxia diyi* 天下第一) circulated widely, praising place-based excellence—from the ink of Huizhou to the silk of Suzhou, and, notably, the tea of Fujian.

Beiyuan Tea: History and Treatises

In the mid-Tang dynasty, Lu Yu listed Jianzhou tea in his discussion of tea production, commenting that tea from Fujian has excellent flavor.[24] However, Jianzhou tea was not widely acknowledged until the Five Dynasties. Zhang Tinghui's 張廷暉 (903–980) family owned a tea plantation in Jian'an; the circumference was about thirty *li* 里 (approximately ten miles). In 933, Zhang offered this tea plantation to Wang Yanjun 王延鈞 (?–935), ruler of the Min 閩 kingdom, in exchange for an official position.[25] This tea plantation was thus labeled as a royal roasting site in 977.

Later, people explained the rising fame of Jianzhou tea during the Song: "The emergence of all things follows its own proper season."[26] Pei-Kai Cheng has suggested that this rising fame of Jian'an tea was driven by external factors, particularly a climate transition from warm to cold. The average temperatures in the Song dynasty were 4–5

[20]*ZGLDCSHB*, 1:55.
[21]Benn, *Tea in China*, 120.
[22]*ZGLDCSHB*, 1:70–71.
[23]Mai, "The Double Life of the Scallop," 151–53.
[24]Lu Yu, *Cha jing* 茶經, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:18.
[25]Hao Yulin 郝玉麟 and Xie Daocheng 謝道承, *Fujian tongzhi* 福建通志 (*SKQS*), 63.25b. For more of the history of Beiyuan, see Benn, *Tea in China*, 119–20.
[26]Xiong Fan 熊蕃, *Xuanhe Beiyuan gongcha lu* 宣和北苑貢茶錄 (*SKQS*), 1a.

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degrees Fahrenheit lower than those in the Tang.[27] The colder temperature made tea in the Jiangnan region difficult to grow on time. But tea from Jian'an, according to Song Zi'an 宋子安 (c. eleventh century), was "earlier than other counties … the climate is often warm so that tea buds can sprout ten days before Jingzhe [around mid-March]."[28] This early sprouting ensured its arrival at the capital before the Qingming festival.

The right timing of Beiyuan tea was frequently emphasized in contemporary writings. According to *Daguan cha lun* 大觀茶論 (Treatise on tea from the Daguan reign), compiled under the supervision of Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1082–1135, reigned 1100–1126): "As for [Beiyuan] tea, it gets the best of the Ou and Min regions' beauty and gathers the spirit of the mountains and rivers. … This is not something that can be attained and valued in a time of chaos."[29] This observation situates Beiyuan's distinction not only in its geography but also in its temporality—its quality depended on the harmony between natural cycles and political order. A similar awareness of timing appears in poems. Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) boasted, "Jian'an is thirty-five hundred miles away; / the capital tastes the new tea in the third lunar month." With this comment, he celebrated the precise alignment of tea growing and imperial consumption.[30] The distance between Jian'an and the capital was an essential component of the allure of Beiyuan tea—the shared attention of the imperial court and scholars to situate Beiyuan tea within a time–place framework.

The development of Beiyuan tea was inseparable from imperial support. At the beginning of the Song, Beiyuan manufactured their famous Dragon and Phoenix teacakes (*longfeng chatuan* 龍鳳茶團), especially under Ding Wei's 丁謂 (966–1037) supervision as Fujian Transport Commissioner (zhuanyunshi 轉運使) from 998 to 1003. To maintain the high quality of imperial tea, the court relocated residents from surrounding counties and moved Jian'an tea farmers to these places. Tea farmers were exempted from taxes so they could focus on tea growing. A monumental development occurred in the Qingli reign (1041–1048), when Cai Xiang 蔡襄 (1012–1067) became the Transport Commissioner in Fujian. He reformed and re-invented the Small Dragon teacake (*xiao long tuan* 小龍團). Made with fresh tea buds as a raw ingredient, these new teacakes were of excellent quality and became highly sought after.[31] Emperor Renzong 仁宗 (1010–1063, r. 1022–1063) conferred the imperial title of "top-grade dragon tea" (*shangpin longcha* 上品龍茶) upon it.[32]

The imperial patronage of Beiyuan tea led to extensive connoisseurship writing.[33] In total, eleven works on Beiyuan tea were composed between the late eleventh and twelfth centuries: Ding Wei's *Beiyuan cha lu* 北苑茶錄 (Beiyuan tea record), Zhou Jiang's 周絳 (c. 1004) *Bu cha jing* 補茶經 (Supplement to the classic of tea), Liu Yi's 劉異 (unknown

[27]Pei-kai Cheng, "Chayin youdao de lishi jincheng" 茶飲有道的歷史進程, *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 故宮博物院院刊, 257 (2023), 4–15; and *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:xiii.

[28]*ZGLDCSHB*, 1:86.

[29]Huizong 徽宗, *Daguan cha lun* 大觀茶論, from Lu Tingcan 陸廷燦, *Xu cha jing* 續茶經, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:101.

[30]Ouyang Xiu, *Wenzhong ji* 文忠集, in Zhu Zizhen 朱自振 and Chen Zugui 陳祖槼, *Zhongguo chaye lishi ziliao xuanji* 中國茶葉歷史資料選輯 (hereafter *ZGCYLSZLXJ*) (Beijing: Nongye chubanshe, 1981), 235.

[31]*Xuanhe Beiyuan gongcha lu*, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:114–15.

[32]*ZGLDCSHB*, 1:116.

[33]Egan, "Interplay of Social and Literary History," 69–86, 78–79.

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dates) *Beiyuan shiyi* 北苑拾遺 (Miscellanies of Beiyuan), Lü Huiqing's 呂惠卿 (1032–1111) *Jian'an cha ji* 建安茶記 (Record of Jian'an tea), the anonymous *Beiyuan jian cha fa* 北苑鑒茶法 (Method of examining Beiyuan tea), Zhang Bingwen's 章炳文 (unknown dates) *Heyuan cha lu* 壑源茶錄 (Record of Heyuan tea), Cai Xiang's *Cha lu* 茶錄 (Record of tea), Song Zi'an in *Dongxi shi cha lu* 東溪試茶錄 (Record of trying tea at East Creek), Huang Ru's 黃儒 (c. 1073) *Pin cha yaolu* 品茶要錄 (Essential record of tea tasting), Xiong Fan's 熊蕃 (c. 1121–1125) *Xuanhe Beiyuan gongcha lu* 宣和北苑貢茶錄 (Record of tributary tea from Beiyuan during the Xuanha era), and Zhao Ruli's 趙汝礪 (c. 1186) *Beiyuan bielu* 北苑別錄 (Separate record of Beiyuan).[34]

Many of these records were categorized under *pulu* at the time, which was a venue for local officials to participate in the empire-wide tea discourse in the twelfth century.[35] Some authors, including Ding Wei and Cai Xiang, were local officials in Fujian, while others were local scholars, like Song Zi'an. These writings were partly intended to document things for the emperor, and they also helped establish a local identity via material knowledge.

Records from before the mid-Northern Song are fragmentary: Ding Wei's *Beiyuan cha lu* discussed only the basics of picking and processing, while Liu Yi's *Beiyuan shiyi* recorded utensils for tea preparation. One of the most important and well-discussed books is Cai Xiang's *Cha lu*, compiled around 1051. In the memorial that serves as the preface to his book, Cai made it clear that the text was intended for Emperor Renzong: "After retiring from court, I considered that even for something as trivial as herbs and plants, once they are recognized by Your Majesty and put in an appropriate place, their use can be thoroughly exploited."[36] This statement articulated a politics of place that tied imperial recognition to environmental fitness. Here, place is not merely physical terrain but a legitimizing framework. When a product is situated "appropriately"—geographically, institutionally, and symbolically—its potential can be "thoroughly exploited." This narrative transformed Jian'an tea from a regional specialty into an imperial brand. What mattered to Cai was not only how tea was grown, but how it was tasted and ranked.

Following Cai's work, later narratives became more detailed in their description of the specific characteristics of Beiyuan tea. Around 1064, Song Zi'an meticulously recorded various tea roasteries, demonstrating an early awareness of regional differentiation. A few years later, another local resident, Huang Ru, noted specific manufacturing practices and identified flaws resulting from poor treatment. More books were written by officials. *Daguan cha lun* established criteria for harvesting and processing Beiyuan tea. The Fujianese official Xiong Fan, in his book published around 1125, repeatedly advertised the imperial prestige of local tea as a tributary good with illustrations of teacake molds. By the late twelfth century, the local official Zhao Ruli further discussed pressing and grinding techniques.

These treatises partially emerged from the state's effort to integrate the newly expanded and claimed southern regions into the imperial order. Collectively, they transformed Beiyuan from a site of imperial production into a geography of taste, wherein environment, craft, and bureaucracy converged to define quality. In doing so, they created a turning point in the codification of place-based knowledge and laid the intellectual foundation for the rhetoric of tea terroir.

[34]The first five titles are no longer extant.

[35]*ZGLDCSHB*, 1:177.

[36]*ZGLDCSHB*, 1:76. The translation is from Mai, "The Double Life of the Scallop," 166–67.

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Constructing Terroir: Nature, Technique, and Authenticity

Almost all tea writings started with a depiction of the natural environment. One of the most scientific explanations of the environment was offered by Song Zi'an:

> Today, the Beiyuan roasting grounds have a distinctive atmosphere. In early spring, mornings are often clear, while rain falls regularly at other times. When the weather clears, mist and dew gather densely, dim and steaming. Even at midday, the air remains cool, a condition especially suited to tea. Tea thrives in the shade of high mountains and delights in early sunlight. From Phoenix Hill in Beiyuan straight through to the Bitter Bamboo Garden, … this entire area lies at high elevation, where sunlight arrives early, … Jian'an tea ranks foremost under heaven: it is a plant that condenses the utmost numinous essence of mountains and rivers, a tea in which the first harmonious *qi* of heaven and earth is fully concentrated.

> 今北苑焙, 風氣亦殊, 先春朝霽常雨, 霽則霧露昏蒸, 晝午猶寒, 故茶宜之。茶宜高山之陰, 而喜日陽之早。自北苑鳳山直苦竹園頭, … … 皆高遠先陽處, … … 建安茶品, 甲於天下, 凝山川至靈之卉, 天地始和之氣, 儘此茶矣。[37]

This discussion reveals several natural conditions that benefited tea plantations: frequent rain and mist, adequate sunshine and lower temperatures, and elevation. Such a detailed environmental portrait constructs terroir as a product of topography and temperature, but also of *qi*—the balanced vitality that joins heaven, earth, and human cultivation. The emphasis on mist, dew, and early light creates a sensory landscape wherein atmospheric conditions become signs of purity.

In addition to observations of environmental conditions, contemporary writings also detailed the ecological features of Beiyuan tea trees, noting that they were taller than other trees.[38] Local people diligently cultivated and improved the tea trees. In the sixth lunar month of each year, people would loosen the tree roots to cultivate the soil. Tea farmers removed weeds and unnecessary branches to guide the "*qi* of growth" (*shengzhang zhi qi* 生長之氣) and allow rain and dew to flow down. This method is called "open field" (*kaishe* 開畬).[39] Only Paulownia trees would be left unremoved—their leaves drop during the fall, thus sunlight for tea trees will not be blocked. Such detailed technical knowledge was essential to the construction of place-specific tea.

Song Zi'an's work also identified thirty-two tea-producing sites, detailing their places of origin as well as their relative proximity and distance from one another. While numerous roasteries in Jianzhou were associated with distinct environmental characteristics, these thirty-two officially recognized roasteries carried imperial prestige and were valued for their scarcity. The particular growing ranges of different varieties were important for the rise of terroir. This documentation provided one of the earliest systematic attempts to map terroir through connoisseurship. Each variety was associated with a narrowly defined site of cultivation—specific slopes, streams, and elevations within the Beiyuan region. Subtle variations in soil composition, humidity, and sunlight were

[37]Song Zi'an, *Dongxi shi cha lu*, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:83.
[38]Zhuang Chuo 莊綽 (1078–?), *Jilei bian* 雞肋編, in *ZGCYLSZLXJ*, 252.
[39]Zhao Ruli, *Beiyuan bielu*, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:141.

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said to yield differences in color, fragrance, and texture. Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) even compared these tea variations to different personalities.[40]

In addition to environmental differences, the roasting process also influenced the tea flavor. Local artisans adjusted the temperature and timing based on the leaves' intrinsic moisture and density. Such adaptive techniques were essential in preserving the "true flavor" of the place. The tea-making techniques were recorded by Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002–1060), "Warmth comes early in the southern streams, / tea buds sprout in early spring. / Picked into green bamboo baskets, / steamed at the house among white clouds."[41] The "white clouds" refer to the mountain area where the tea roasteries were located, and the steaming technique using a bamboo basket was considered key to the unique taste.

Among all the teas, Heyuan 壑源 ranked first, followed by Shaxi 沙溪. When sending tea to his friend, Su Shi wrote, "Shaxi and Beiyuan are difficult to distinguish, / Watermarks forming a single line—competing over which tea reveals them first."[42] Heyuan tea was produced in far lesser quantities, so many tea traders marked Shaxi tea as Heyuan to double their price. Such an evaluation illustrated an awareness of regional variations, establishing a hierarchy grounded in the sensory distinctions produced by terroir.

Because of the ranking among different Beiyuan teas, counterfeits and discussions about authenticity followed. Huang Ru's writing included a specific category called "counterfeits" (*ruza* 入雜). Producing these was a fairly common practice that involved mixing lesser-quality tea leaves with good ones.[43] Tea sellers commonly mixed non-local teas with Heyuan tea or with other herbs, such as persimmon leaves. Counterfeiting was a direct result of the growing recognition of terroir; tea from certain locations sold much better and commanded higher prices.

The discourses on authenticity in Song tea culture were inseparable from the emerging rhetoric of terroir. To claim a tea as Heyuan or Shaxi tea was not merely to identify its place of origin, but to affirm a combination of environmental conditions and craftsmanship. Authenticity, in this sense, functioned as a moral geography: genuine tea embodied the right soil, water, and roasting, while counterfeit imitations threatened to dissolve the aesthetic order that terroir sustained. Song texts frequently condemned teas falsely labeled, revealing a growing anxiety about the commodification of place-names.

Refining Terroir: Innovation and Value in Teacake Production

The evaluation of place-specific tea extended to the making and appreciation of various teacakes. The Song dynasty witnessed a profound transformation in both the technology and aesthetics of tea preparation. Departing from the Tang method of boiling both water and tea, Song manufacturers perfected compressed tea cakes (*tuancha* 團茶) that had already been pre-roasted during production. During Emperor Taizong's reign (976–997), to distinguish tribute tea from common consumption, the court introduced specialized molds bearing dragon and phoenix motifs, thus creating the Dragon and Phoenix

[40]Su Shi, *Dongpo quanji* 東坡全集 (*SKQS*), 5.21b; and Egan, "Interplay of Social and Literary History," 79–81.

[41]Mei Yaochen, *Wanling xiansheng ji* 宛陵先生集, *Sibu congkan chubian* 四部叢刊初編 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1967), 114.

[42]*Dongpo quanji*, 7.10b.

[43]*Pin cha yaolu*, 2b–3b, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:90.

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teacakes. The tribute cakes were meticulously pressed from steamed and roasted leaves, with the imagery transforming local craftsmanship into imperial symbolism.

The tributary status translated into prestige and price. The commercial value and scarcity of a Beiyuan teacake can be discerned from Ouyang Xiu's writing:[44]

> Among all grades of tea, none is more precious than the Dragon and Phoenix cakes. Known as "small cakes," they consist of twenty-eight pieces and together weigh one *jin*, valued at two *liang* of gold. Yet while gold may be obtained, such tea cannot. In the past, when the emperor observed the purification fast at the Southern Suburb altar, a single cake was jointly bestowed upon the two central offices [the Secretariat-Chancellery and the Bureau of Military Affairs], and the four of us divided it among ourselves. Palace attendants often engraved the cakes with golden floral designs, a testament to their extraordinary value.
>
> 茶之品莫貴於龍鳳, 謂之小團, 凡二十八片, 重一斤, 其價值金二兩。然金可有, 而茶不可得, 嚐南郊緻齋, 兩府共賜一餅, 四人分之。宮人往往鏤金花其上, 蓋貴重如此。[45]

The expense of tea was also testified in poetry. Mei Yaochen wrote, "Would people know about such rare treasures, / even a small corner of [teacake] is worth a hundred *jin* of gold."[46] Mei's other poems also note that the value of Beiyuan tea was comparable to gold.[47]

By the mid-Song period, the teacake was not merely something to make a beverage from but was regarded as an art form in itself. Consumption and connoisseurship further motivated tea refinements, "[Teacake production] grew ever more novel, driven by the tastes of the time."[48] Xiong Fan's book included images of different teacake molds and auspicious names for newly invented teacake engravings. The carved imagery of auspicious creatures served as an imperial seal of authenticity, but it also made visible the interplay of place, craft, and meaning. Moreover, many of the names highlighted their imperial auspiciousness, such as "Dragon and Phoenix of Refined Splendor" (*longfeng yinghua* 龍鳳英華), "Precious Jade Suitable for the Year" (*yinian baoyu* 宜年寶玉), and "Jade Clear Celebrating Clouds" (*yuqing qingyun* 玉清慶雲).[49]

The hyper-aesthetic refinement of Song teacakes—whether expressed through auspicious names or miniature sculptural forms—was inseparable from the imperial palate that shaped demand. Imperial taste not only determined which teas were favored but also drove officials and relatives to seek out the most exclusive varieties. Their eagerness is vividly reflected in Empress Dowager Xuanren's 宣仁 (1032–1093) complaint: "Jianzhou is hereby ordered not to produce Dense Cloud Dragon tea in the future, as I have been excessively troubled by it. Everyone asks for Dense Cloud Dragon, and no one wants other compressed tea."[50] This product, according to Cai Tao 蔡絛 (1096–1162), had "intricate cloud patterns —more exquisite even than the small dragon cakes."[51] This hyper-refinement of form and

[44] *Jilei bian*, in *ZGCYLSZLXJ*, 252.
[45] *Wenzhong ji* (*SKQS*), 127.5a.
[46] *Wanling xiansheng ji*, 7.62.
[47] *Wanling xiansheng ji*, 9.81, 22.190.
[48] Huang Ru, *Pin cha yaolu*, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:89.
[49] *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:119–25.
[50] Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–1590), *Fen'gan yuhua* 分甘余話 (*SKQS*), 1.12b–13a.
[51] Cai Tao, *Tie weishan congtan* 鐵圍山叢談 (*SKQS*), 6.15b.

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texture made it not merely a beverage but a material icon of imperial taste. Scarcity only heightened its allure, and the Empress Dowager's complaint functioned paradoxically as a form of advertising, amplifying the tea's cultural prestige.

Another prominent example of how imperial taste elevated a local taste was white tea (*baicha* 白茶). White tea was first known among local people: "White-leaf tea is highly prized among the people … Its buds and leaves are thin as paper, and in popular practice it is regarded as an auspicious gift of tea, selecting the finest for tea competitions."[52] This tea refers to "albino" leaf mutations, emerging from unpredictable natural and climatic conditions and thus gaining a reputation for rarity.

Later, this tea was highly valued by Emperor Huizong for its uniqueness and elegant color, and was consequently elevated to an elite taste.[53] Mei Yaochen, for instance, praised white tea by evoking its local production area: "White tea emerges from the upper stream, / Red banana trees stretch along the seashore."[54] The "upper stream" refers to Dongxi 東溪, a key tea-producing site. Its white-hued tea buds were highly esteemed for both their color purity and the refinement of processing that enhanced this appearance.

The value of white tea led to the invention of "Dragon Cake Surpassing Snow" (*longtuan shengxue* 龍團勝雪) in 1120, which epitomized the Song court's pursuit of sensory refinement. The innovator, Transport Commissioner Zheng Kejian 鄭可簡 (c. 1120), crafted this extraordinary tribute tea using only "silver-thread water buds" (*yinsi shuiya* 銀絲水芽). By selecting the tenderest buds and steeping them in spring water, tea producers made a tea whose whiteness and clarity inspired its name, "surpassing snow." The price—forty thousand cash per *jin*—signaled its transformation into an imperial luxury. Even the packaging underscored its elite status. The tea was recorded as wrapped in bamboo leaves, placed first in a yellow container, then enclosed in a decorated box, and finally secured within a bamboo case fastened with a silver lock. This elaborate presentation made the tea ceremonially precious.[55]

Such material extravagance did more than display imperial privilege; it shaped emerging norms of tea appreciation. The fascination with "Dragon Cake Surpassing Snow" and other refined teacakes shows that, by the late Northern Song, appreciating tea had become an aesthetic and sensory practice. The ranking of buds, along with the scrutiny of color and texture, reflected an ethic of refinement grounded in subtle variations of the natural environment.

Sensing Terroir: Taste and the Making of Tea

Tea appreciation in the Song was not simply an aesthetic exercise but a mode of knowing place. Through sensory engagement—tasting, smelling, and observing—connoisseurs translated environmental specificity into experiential understanding. Song scholars loved to discuss how to identify the subtle tastes of different tea leaves, and the ability to discern differences among teas was valued. Cai Xiang was said to be exceptionally knowledgeable about tea. Once, Buddhist monks made teacakes named "Rockface White" (*shiyan bai* 石岩白) and discreetly sent them to the capital. Over a year later, Cai was asked to taste tea. As he held the bowl, without tasting it, he remarked on the striking resemblance to

[52] *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:86.
[53] *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:105
[54] *Wanling xiansheng ji*, 55.450.
[55] *Beiyuan bielu*, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:140.

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"Rockface White."[56] This anecdote affirms a terroir-based way of thinking—recognizing that different environments give subtle distinctions in taste—and celebrates the connoisseur's ability to discern those nuances.

Cai's tea-tasting ability came from his detailed analysis of Beiyuan tea's varieties. He elevated the ability to taste tea to the level of perceiving the truth about things and people, which he called "perceiving beyond the surface" (*cha zhi yu nei* 察之於內).[57] His discernment of subtle differences in tea offered a revealing example of Song literati connoisseurship grounded in terroir. He was well aware of the features caused by the landscape and the crafting technique. The purity of the tea mirrored upright character, and the difficulty of its cultivation symbolized the cultivation of virtue itself. Through such associations, Cai formalized the rhetoric of terroir.

The association between tea tasting and moral cultivation among scholar-officials also appears in Su Shi's "Biography of Ye Jia" ("Ye Jia zhuan" 葉嘉傳). In this piece, Wuyi tea is personified as a virtuous man who willingly sacrifices himself in service to the emperor.[58] By taking tea as a moral agent who exemplified merit in government, Su transformed a material commodity into a living embodiment of place and virtue. The vitality of the landscape thus mirrored human character. In the conclusion, Su underscored that the finest flavor comes from the Min region, and within Min, the tea from Heyuan ranks highest. This hierarchy of taste parallels the geographical hierarchy of production, suggesting that discerning tea and judging virtue followed the same logic—linking together terroir, character, and moral order.

Furthermore, the act of whisking tea revealed the art of touch and technique. When consumed, the teacakes were ground into fine powder, whisked with boiling water, and served directly, a process known as "whisking tea" (*dian cha* 點茶). This development not only simplified brewing but also enhanced visual and sensory refinement. Cai Xiang also detailed the process of making tea and tea wares, demonstrating meticulous attention to the making technique and material preparation.[59]

Whisking tea was valued as a local practice in Jian'an. In one of Mei Yaochen's poems to Ouyang Xiu, he posed a contrast between Jian'an tea making and the northern way of tea making: "Don't tell such things to vulgar northerners; / They only mix their tea with white clay and sesame oil."[60] Mei's contrast between the refined Jian'an tea and the crude northern practice of mixing "white clay and sesame" in tea-making highlighted how tea preparation was inseparable from local preferences. The northern practice of mixing tea was considered inferior to Jian'an tea. Mei frequently described the sensory beauty of making Beiyuan tea: "The water gently simmers, the froth is light, never dispersing; / The mouth is sweet, the spirit bright, and the flavor long-lasting."[61] The visual and tactile success of whisking tea depended on the material properties of the Beiyuan cakes—their ground texture, roasting balance, and water compatibility. Therefore, whisking tea transformed terroir into a performative art, a process that embodied knowledge of how to release the essence of place through technique.

[56]Peng Bing 彭秉, *Moke huizhu* 墨客揮麈, in *ZGCYLSZLXJ*, 234.
[57]*Cha lu*, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:77.
[58]*Dongpo quanji*, 39.21a–25a.
[59]*Cha lu*, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:77–78.
[60]*Wanling xiansheng ji*, 7.90.
[61]*Wanling xiansheng ji*, 51.424–5.

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Appreciation of Beiyuan tea extends to the choice of spring water to accompany it. Attention to water quality and its place-based features emerged long before the Song.[62] Zhang Youxin's 張又新 (c. 813) *Jian chashui ji* 煎茶水記 (Record of boiling tea waters) offered one of the first attempts to classify and rank water sources across the empire. Zhang believed that taste was inseparable from "the congruence of local water and terrain" (*shuitu zhiyi* 水土之宜).[63] By the Song dynasty, Gulian 谷簾 water from Mount Lu 廬山, which Zhang Youxin ranked as the best, was especially emphasized alongside Jian'an tea.

The pairing of Gulian water and Jian'an tea was especially emphasized in Su Shi's writings. In 1073, Su Shi received a gift of "one vessel of Gulian water and two dragon teacakes." In response, he composed a poem praising them as the "three perfections" (*san jue* 三絕) of tea, water, and poetry. "This water, this tea, both are first under Heaven; / Together, they make three perfections for one who truly discerns."[64] In particular, tea from Zengkeng 曾坑 went along perfectly with water from Gulian. An anecdote about Su Shi recorded: "After enjoying fine food, one should brew fragrant tea with Gulian water, using competition tea from Zengkeng."[65] Zengkeng was one of the Beiyuan tea plantations in Jian'an, and "competition tea" (*doupin* 鬥品) was its highest grade.[66]

The belief that certain waters could complete a tea reflects a sophisticated terroir sensibility. Quality emerged not from a single element but from the interplay of landscape, material, and skill. Pairing Gulian water with Beiyuan tea signaled an awareness of how environments complemented one another. Song connoisseurs thus moved beyond praising isolated springs or leaves to articulating correspondences between place-specific waters and teas.

Localizing Terroir: Local Pride and the Making of Place

By the twelfth century, Jian'an tea had come to symbolize the cultural refinement and natural abundance of Fujian. Literati exchanged regional teas as tokens of friendship, turning consumption into an act of social connection. Reflecting on Fujian in his later years, the former Fujian official Lu You 陸遊 (1125–1210) reminisced about lychees and summertime tea.[67] Lu You's social network intersected with his taste in tea. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) once sent Lu a special tea from Mount Wuyi. Lu commented on the origin of that tea: "Snow-white purity at Yu Ridge, as ground from the red-veined tea mill; / Milk-white foam rises on Min streams in the green-hued brew."[68] Such comparisons show how distinctions of place—mountain, stream, color—were considered as signs of authenticity.

The circulation and gifting of Jian'an tea among Southern Song literati demonstrated how terroir became embedded in social and intellectual life. Lu You's poetic engagement with Fujian tea not only revealed his connoisseurship but also functioned as an act of

[62]For more discussion on water appreciation, see Wai-yee Li, *The Promise and Peril of Things: Literature and Material Culture in Late Imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 85, 90–92.

[63]*ZGLDCSHB*, 1:76.

[64]*Dongpo quanji*, 29.25b.

[65]Zhu Bian 朱弁 (1085–1144), *Quyou jiuwen* 曲洧旧闻 (*SKQS*), 5.6b–7a; and Su Shi 蘇軾, *Dongpo zhilin* 東坡志林 (*SKQS*), 8.7a.

[66]*Dongxi shi cha lu*, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:84–85. Also see Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105), *Shangu ji* 山谷集 (*SKQS*), 4.1a–b.

[67]Lu You 陸遊, *Jiannan shigao* 劍南詩稿 (*SKQS*), 11.1b.

[68]*Jiannan shigao*, 45.9b–10a.

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literati self-fashioning. When Lu described the nuanced differences between teas from different locations, he was not simply cataloguing sensory impressions but rather making an intellectual observation about regional terroir. The geographical and material knowledge was transformed into Lu You's cultural capital. To know tea was to know place, and to articulate that knowledge through verse was to situate oneself within the geography of cultured taste.

As the prestige of regional teas grew, Song literati increasingly documented local tea-ceremony practices, especially the public tea competition (*doucha* 鬥茶). In Jian'an, each spring when the new tea was harvested, large-scale competitions were hosted along the Jian River or beneath Phoenix Hill to select the finest teas for imperial tribute. Local roasters and tea farmers presented their products for comparison, and the competitions often lasted several days. This public selection process, originally meant to ensure quality for Beiyuan's tribute tea, soon became a celebrated local festival. In these competitions, the social prestige of tea became inseparable from the environment in which it was produced. For example, Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052) wrote, "By the streams [of Jian] the rarest teas were the best under the Heaven; / Wuyi immortals have cultivated them since ancient times." The location of the Jian stream and nearby Mount Wuyi were used here to validate the tea's preciousness.[69] The poem ended with a comparison with other local products to elevate the good taste of Jian'an tea: "The price of Chang'an wine decreased by ten million, / and the medicine market of Chengdu lost its glory." Through this rhetorical contrast, the poet suggests that the excellence of Jian'an tea is so overwhelming that it diminishes the sensory attractiveness and commercial value of other renowned local commodities. The poet thus situated Jian'an tea within a broader landscape of place-based competition, reflecting a flourishing discourse on local goods.

Lu You's participation in tea competitions exemplified how literati engagement transformed a regional custom into a stage for cultural meaning. In 1179, while serving as tea commissioner in Fujian, Lu oversaw the preparation of tribute teas and attended the tea competition. He wrote poems to celebrate the refinement of Jianxi (Jian Stream) tea. "The official tea of Jianxi is peerless under heaven; / Its fragrance and flavor reach perfection only with light snow."[70] The first line situates the local product within a geography of taste, while the second moves into the realm of refined literati appreciation. For Lu You, the competition was not merely bureaucratic oversight but an aesthetic encounter with locality. His references to snow framed the tea-enjoying experience as a convergence of time and environment.

The flourishing of tea competitions in northern Fujian also stimulated the production of tea ware, further enriching the region's terroir. The Jian kilns in Jianyang 建陽 were close by. Familiar with the demands of whisked tea, local potters gradually designed black-glazed bowls for better tea preparation and display. As Cai Xiang noted, "Tea bowls: because tea is white in color, black bowls are most suitable. Those made in Jian'an are dark blue-black, with streaks like rabbit's fur. Their clay bodies are slightly thick; once heated, they retain warmth for a long time and are slow to cool—making them the most desirable for use."[71] The deep black glaze contrasted with the pale froth of whisked tea, while the thin rim and thick base retained heat. By aligning tea ware aesthetics with regional craft, the kiln producers turned local clay, glaze, and firing technique into part of Jian'an tea's

[69]Cai Zhengsun 蔡正孫 (1239–?), *Shilin guangji* 詩林廣記 (*SKQS*), 8.10a–b.
[70]*Jiannan shigao*, 11.1b.
[71]*Cha lu*, in *ZGLDCSHB*, 1:78.

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sensory geography. The bowl made the tea's qualities visible and durable. Therefore, tea terroir was expressed not only through taste but through the material objects.

Tea production also intersected closely with scenic appreciation. Benefiting from the fame of the local tea, Beiyuan received various renovations, as inscribed on stone in 1048:

> East of Jianzhou lies Phoenix Hill, a site particularly well-suited to cultivating tea. … Under its jurisdiction are twelve roasting workshops. [Within the compound] are administrative offices, pavilions, and kiosks. At the center stood the Imperial Tea Hall; behind it was a spring of sweet water, covered and named the "Imperial Spring." In front, two springs were channeled forth, called the "Dragon and Phoenix Pool."
>
> 建州東, 鳳凰山, 厥植宜茶。 … … 屬之十二焙。有署暨亭榭。中曰禦茶堂, 後坎泉, 甘, 宇之曰:禦泉。前引二泉, 曰:龍鳳池。

This description transforms a productive landscape into a scenic geography, and the careful naming of halls, springs, and pools converted the site into an imperial space. Spatial order, hydrology, and architecture combine to evoke a harmony between nature and governance. Such naming and recording were acts of place-making—local officials inscribed political and aesthetic meaning onto the landscape. In this sense, tea cultivation did not merely respond to terroir; it created it.[72] By framing Phoenix Hill as an ideal site with mountain shade, sweet springs, and imperial presence, the Song government constructed a landscape where cultivation, taste, and authority converged.

Negotiating Terroir: State, Scholars, and the Politics of Place

The prestige of Beiyuan tea was neither purely a top-down imperial construction nor a spontaneous local phenomenon; rather, it emerged through a dynamic negotiation between the court's demand for distinction and the literati's pursuit of refined taste. The imperial tribute system institutionalized the hierarchy of teas—certain teas enjoyed greater fame due to imperial preference, such as Dragon tea cake and white tea. But at the same time, the symbolic weight of this hierarchy depended on the writings of the literati. Different cataloguing works on Beiyuan tea translated bureaucratic management and technical expertise into aesthetic language. Scholars' poems also revealed how deeply tea was connected within the literati circle.

Cai Xiang played an important role in the development of Beiyuan tea's fame, as he stood at the intersection of literati connoisseurship and imperial branding. Cai Xiang's regional focus—his comments on local techniques, water, and taste—marked the emergence of a new mode of localized expertise. Anecdotes about his discerning ability shaped him as a scholar with good taste. Cai Xiang also turned regional difference into imperial prestige, showing how localized environmental qualities could be codified into a national taste. These two intertwined concerns mark the maturation of terroir rhetoric in the Song

[72]Lu Dengxuan 陸登選 and Cui Xian 崔銑, *Jian'an xianzhi* 建安縣志 [1713], Harvard-Yenching Library Chinese Local Gazetteers Project (Electronic reproduction. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Library Preservation, 2015), 1.18b; Gong Zhi 鞏志, "Jianxi guancha tianxia jue: Lu You yu Jiancha 建溪官茶天下絕 : 陸遊與建茶," *Nongye kaogu* 農業考古 4 (1998), 295–96.

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—the transformation from descriptive geography to a sophisticated system linking place, production, and authority.

Literati poets further reinforced the two-way construction of tea's terroir by weaving Beiyuan tea into social and poetic exchanges. To gift or praise Jian'an tea was to signal refined discernment and participation in a network of elegant culture. At the same time, these writers localized imperial taste by grounding their depictions of tea in the textures of everyday life. Mei Yaochen's celebration of whisked tea and Lu You's record of local tea competitions anchored Beiyuan tea in social practice. Su Shi and others also broadened Beiyuan tea's significance by pairing it with spring water and comparing it to other celebrated regional products. They positioned Beiyuan tea within a national framework of famous local goods.

In this way, Beiyuan tea became a site of negotiated taste. Imperial branding supplied symbolic capital, while literati writings conferred cultural legitimacy through place-based knowledge and embodied experience. The resulting discourse on terroir—rooted in both locality and prestige—formed a political framework that bound region to state. Mobility was central to this process. Officials on assignment promoted regional teas beyond their home districts, and scholars circulated both tea and its meanings through correspondence, gifts, and poetry. Expanding travel networks during the Song did more than facilitate trade; they deepened the sensory and intellectual experience of terroir, creating a mobile landscape in which people, objects, and ideas continually reshaped the identity of tea.

Conclusion: A Chinese Rhetoric of Terroir

The Song dynasty marked the formative moment when terroir in China evolved from a descriptive sense of environment into a rhetoric that mediated between local expertise and imperial order. Through tea writing, connoisseurship, and bureaucratic codification, terroir transformed geography into political and cultural value. This emerging discourse became central to new forms of place-based knowledge. Writers emphasized the environmental conditions shaping cultivation, the localized techniques that distinguished regional teas, and the expressions of pride tied to geographic origin. Scholars cataloged ideal tea-drinking sites and linked specific locales with distinctive tastes, using tea appreciation as a way to think and feel through place. Within this expanding conversation, authenticity became a primary concern. As celebrated teas circulated more widely, imitation grew—fueled by commercialization and demand—prompting even more effort to define what made a tea genuine. In this way, the very challenges posed by counterfeit teas and the expansion of the commercial market helped solidify and popularize the rhetoric of terroir, whose underlying logic endured long after the Song. Taste was never merely sensory, but a means of ordering place and knowledge.

Compared with earlier uses of *fengtu*, the Song-era rhetoric of terroir was more analytical and explicit. Instead of simply noting regional characteristics, writers sought to explain how and why particular environments produced superior goods. While *fengtu* conveyed a broad sense of local conditions, the emerging notion of terroir emphasized the specific ways in which a place shaped the flavor, quality, and reputation of its tea. Through detailed discussions of cultivation and tasting, Song literati transformed *fengtu* from a general idea of environmental difference into a more articulated epistemology of place.

This articulation of terroir, however, was distinctively Chinese. French terroir developed from the bottom up, rooted in local commerce and later codified by law. But the

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Chinese version took shape within a broader intellectual world. Song literati, working within an imperial system of tribute, defined how environment and taste together shaped a tea's identity. Rather than elevating locality in opposition to centralized authority, Chinese terroir emerged from negotiations between imperial order and local practices, mediated through literati discourses.

This framework of terroir continued to mature in the Ming and Qing periods, as practices of branding, scenic appreciation, and popular participation broadened the cultural significance of place-specific teas. By the late Ming, dozens of celebrated regional varieties reflected an intensifying culture of locality and place-based naming.[73] While Mount Wuyi's tea replaced the fame of Beiyuan tea in the Ming and afterward, the discussion of terroir continued in commercial production and folk song.[74] Beginning with Beiyuan tea and extending across centuries, the history of Chinese tea demonstrates that terroir was never a fixed attribute of the landscape. Rather, it was a cultural construction —shaped by state recognition, literary imagination, and sensory practices—that enabled local products to bear meanings far beyond their geographic origin. In tracing this development, we see how tea became a medium through which people understood and narrated the surrounding environment.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

[73]Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛 (1567–1624), *Wu za zu* 五雜俎, in *ZGCYLSZLXJ*, 323.

[74]Zha Shenxing 查慎行 (1650–1727), *Jingye tang shiji* 敬業堂詩集, 44.14b, in Chen Binfan 陳彬藩, ed., *Zhongguo cha wenhua jingdian* 中國茶文化經典 (Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 1999), 351.

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