

Tea Brick Myths That I Have Been Told

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A letter written in 1774 that I have shamelessly borrowed:

The truth cannot lay on both sides. My endeavors, therefore, have been to pursue her under the guide of Experience, and a careful reference to facts; how far I have succeeded Time will certainly determine: This, however, I will venture to assert, that no man can have a sufficient foundation, on which to form a clear opinion on the subject, without going into some such researches as I have done.

If the investigation here made meets with your approbation, I shall think myself fully rewarded for my trouble.

I have the honour to subscribe myself, with great truth,

*Your Faithful,
Obedient, and
Humble Servant,¹*

*THE AUTHOR
[written by another; appreciated and borrowed by
Deborah J. Peterson]*

MYTH #1: Brick tea was here in colonial America.

The first recorded entry of brick tea shows it was imported to Fort Ross in northern California in 1818 for the Russian and Asian hunters working for the fort. They were familiar with brick tea, and it was imported for their use. ²

MYTH #2: The common soldiers were issued brick tea.

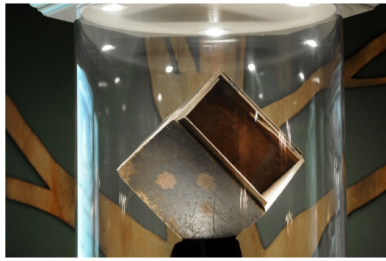
I consulted with some of the best recognized authorities on this subject, noted historians and authors: Todd Braisted, Don Hagist, and John U. Rees. There is no record in any quartermaster reports, letters, or journals mentioning brick tea being issued.

MYTH #3: Brick tea was dumped in the harbor during the December 16, 1773, Boston Tea Party.

According to historians at the Boston Tea Party Ships and Museum, the three ships that were raided that night contained 240 chests of Bohea, 15 of Congou, 10 of Souchong (all black teas), 60 of Singlo, and 15 of Hyson (both green teas) - all in loose-leaf form.

Accounts of the Boston tea rebellion included stories of tea leaves piled like haystacks alongside the ship in Griffin's Wharf while men used rakes to plow the leaves into the low tide of Boston Harbor. ³

Brick tea does not float: I tried it as an experiment in both salt and spring waters.



One of the tea chests broken into and thrown overboard was the Robinson half chest 13½” long x 11-7/8 ” wide x 11-¼” high; made of poplar wood about ½” thick. Property of the Boston Tea Party Ships Museum.



On view at the Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum is a bottle of loose, uncompressed tea that was from:

- a.) The family of Thaddeus Mason Harris, a Unitarian clergyman who hailed from Dorchester. As the story goes, Harris gathered the tea, which washed ashore from the Boston Tea Party, on the beaches of Dorchester Neck Flats, or
- b.) The second provenance says the tea was shaken out of a Boston Tea Party participant’s boot when he returned home from the protest.

MYTH #4: “The Cantonese preferred brick tea, according to Thomas Wu (tea dealer and tea historian), therefore we know it was both known and available to the tea buyers at Canton”¹

There is no information to support this statement.

Brick tea is the crudest form of the beverage. Tea is made from *Camellia sinensis*, a subtropical evergreen shrub. But while green tea is made from unoxidized buds and leaves, brick tea bound for Tibet, to this day, is made from the plant's large tough leaves, twigs, stems, along with the leaves and fruit of other plants and trees (alder for instance). It is the most bitter and least smooth of all teas. After several cycles of steaming and drying, the tea is mixed with gluey rice water, pressed into molds, and dried. Bricks of black tea weigh from one to six pounds and are still sold throughout modern Tibet.”^{5 6}

MYTH #5: Brick tea was a major export item.

Although the Chinese regard it as an inferior product, brick tea is greatly esteemed by the Tibetans for its powerful flavor.⁷

Brick tea is aged. Western Europe and the American colonies preferred fresh loose tea to the inferior brick tea.⁸

It was a major export item overland on the almost 1,400-mile Tea Horse Road into Mongolia, Tibet, and Siberia. There are no records of brick tea being sold out of Canton for shipment overseas to western Europe or the colonies. It would not have withstood the 18-month sea journey.^{9 10}

MYTH #6: Russians used so much brick tea that they invaded China and set up steam presses to mold the bricks.

There is no evidence that Russia invaded China to set up steam presses.

In 1911 Russia invaded China, but it had nothing to do with the demand for brick tea. The Chinese Revolution (1911-12) was a nationalist democratic revolt that overthrew the Manchu dynasty in 1912 and created a republic.¹¹

The steam press was invented in 1878, replacing the earlier Chinese method of a number of men tugging at a huge lever press or twisting the screw of a device much like a wine press.

In 1861, the port of Hankow was opened to foreign traders, and the Russians built the first of their brick tea factories there. They pressed tea bricks after the Chinese fashion by men tugging at a huge lever press or twisting the screw of a device much like a wine press. Later, steam was introduced, and in 1878 the hydraulic press came into use.¹²

MYTH #7: brick tea was a luxury and gourmet item

Brick tea looked much like construction bricks, was made of the lowest grade tea leaves, and was not very pretty to look at.¹³



Brick tea is made of the lowest grade tea leaves in a variety of shapes.



The brick tea that the sutlers offer for sale looks nothing like what brick tea would have looked like in the 17th and 18th centuries, even if it were in colonial America. **WHICH IT WAS NOT!** What the sutlers are displaying is a dark brown rectangular flat tea tablet compressed with relief designs of five Nationalist stars (after 1911), with a celebratory architectural archway with another star in it, flanked by vegetation, with the Chinese Text below:

“Zhogguo Cha ye gongso [Chine Tea Cempany] / Zhao Liqiao zhuan cha chang zhizao [Made by Zhao Liqiao Tea Brick Factory],” Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, Powerhouse Collection,

Ultimo, AU, and the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch, New Zealand, Brick tea, Early 20th Century" Accession number 2008.32.19 ¹⁴

MYTH #8: Loose leaf tea tended to mold while being shipped on ships, so brick tea replaced it.

There is no evidence to support brick tea being shipped on ships, or molding. Tea chests during the 18th century were made of sturdy wooden construction, lined with thin lead sheeting and packaged tightly to preserve the loose-leaf tea.



Tea chests being filled. Notice the lead lining peeking out from the top. ¹⁵

China's compressed teas traveled along the almost 1400 mile Silk Road wrapped in bamboo, dried grasses or banana leaves. ¹⁶ The new fashion for loose-leaf tea that emerged during the Ming period (AD 1368-1644) meant that new packaging methods were required. More expensive, delicate teas were packed into decorative lacquer chests. These chests protected the tea from the 18 month journey across the high seas to Europe. ¹⁷



Brick tea wrapped in bamboo



Tea Horse Road carriers laden with brick tea.

China's compressed teas traveled well wrapped in bamboo, dried grasses or banana leaves. ¹⁸



Canton, China ¹⁹

¹ J. Nourse, *Observations on East India Shipping; Being a Comparative View between the Freight of 1773 and those of the Seven Preceding Years*, (London, 1774).

² Basil Dmytryshyn, *Colonial Russian America, Kyril T. Klehnikov's Reports, 1817-1832*, 1976, Oregon Historical Society

³ Boston Tea Party Ship Museum, <https://www.bostonteatartyship.com/partners/a-box-worth-keeping> and <https://www.bostonteatartyship.com/the-aftermath>

⁴ Muzzleloader, July/August 1997, *The Tea and Coffee Trade*, by Lee Hardluck Humphrey, p. 54.

⁵ Mark Jenkins, *Tea Horse Road*, p.106, National Geographic, May 2010

⁶ Andre Migot, *Tibetian Marches*. translated by Peter Flemming. E.P. Dutton. & Co., Inc., U.S.A., pp. 59-60.

⁷ Teapedia, The Tea Encyclopedia

⁸ Andre Migot, *Tibetian Marches*. translated by Peter Flemming. E.P. Dutton. & Co., Inc., U.S.A., pp. 59-60.

⁹ No evidence of brick tea going to western Europe

¹⁰ Mr. Humphrey's reply to this is, "That is the only part [of the article] that I have no documentation on."

¹¹ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Chinese-Revolution-1911-1912>

¹² <https://www.britannica.com/event/Chinese-Revolution-1911-1912>

¹³ Mark Jenkins, *Tea Horse Road*, National Geographic, May 2010, p. 102.

¹⁴ *Tea brick made by the Zhao Liqiao Tea Brick Factory* 2022, Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, accessed 5 October 2022, <https://ma.as/363008>

¹⁵ Detail of 1780s Chinese painting from set of tea production images. Martyn Gregory Gallery, London, Thanks to Christopher Sherwood Davis for sharing. https://www.martyngregory.com/files/ugd/7df51f_5032337d18d5420bb47e968288bf306f.pdf

¹⁶ Jane Pettigrew & Bruce Richardson, *The New Tea Companion, A guide to Teas Throughout the World*. London: The National Trust, 2005, p. 60.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 60.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 60.

¹⁹ Ground Plan of Canton, China (engraving) (b/w photo) by Nieuhoff, Johannes (17th century); Private Collection