

# Development of Premium Teas in China

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses acreage, production, output value and exports of the Chinese tea industry from 1950–2011. The analysis shows that development of China tea industry has been closely related to the progress made in science and technology. The development of premium tea in China shows its significant role in constant enhancement of output value of Chinese tea industry as well as tea consumption in China. Here, ten famous premium teas have been listed as examples of China premium tea.

**Keywords:** Premium Tea; Anhui Province; Yellow Mountain Fur Peak

## Introduction

Over the past 60 years, the Chinese tea industry has been very successful in promoting development of tea production in China. Since the founding of New China, tea production has been developing rapidly. The total acreage of tea plantation increased from 169,400 ha in 1950 to 2,207,000 ha in 2011, 13 times higher. The total production grew from 62,000 tons in 1950 to 1,557,059 tons in 2011, 25 times higher. During the same years, exports also increased from 18,700 tons to 343,000 tons respectively, 18.3 times higher<sup>1</sup> (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Total acreage, production, output value and exports of Chinese tea production (1950–2011)<sup>1</sup>**

Year	Acreage (thousand ha)	Production (thousand tons)	Exporting Amounts (thousand tons)
1950	169.4	62.2	18.7
1960	372.0	135.8	42.6
1970	487.3	136.0	41.7
1980	1040.7	303.7	107.9
1990	1061.3	525.0	195.5
2000	1089.0	683.3	227.7
2005	1270.0	920.0	286.6
2010	2059.4	1465.7	323.0
2011	2207.0	1557.0	343.0

It can be seen from Table 1 that tea production shows a sustained increase during the period from 1950–2011, excluding the period from sixties to seventies in the last

century. Tea production increased more than 25 times during the period 1950–2011. However, the increasing rate has been different during various periods of time. For example, the annual increment was 5.93% during 1950–1970, and during 1971–2000 it was 13.4%, 1.25 times higher than that in the former twenty years. The total increase in production from 2000–2011 was 137.8%, and the annual increase was 12.5%.<sup>1</sup> The significantly higher increasing rate during the period 1971–2011 could be attributed to the increment of acreage of tea plantation, and also due to the constant development of innovations in the Chinese tea industry.<sup>2</sup> The question is, what are the most important fields that played significant roles in the development of China tea industry? To answer this question, we have chosen the following areas which showed a great impact on the development of China tea production. This includes the application of elite cultivars, adjustment on the structure of tea products, the development of deep manufacture of tea and the role of premium tea in Chinese tea industry.<sup>3</sup> Here, we describe the development of premium tea in China and its role in the development of the Chinese tea industry.

## Background of Premium Tea Development

Premium tea is the product manufactured from a single bud or one bud and one leaf shoot with high quality and aroma. This kind of tea has been developed since the beginning of the 1990s to replace low quality tea products. During the period before the 1990s, people in China were accustomed to consume tea manufactured from one bud and three leaf shoots used as the raw material. After the reforms and open policies initiated in China since the 1980s, the Chinese people became

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rich and could afford to consume higher quality tea. In response to this demand, premium tea was developed. Its production was first initiated in Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces and the eastern provinces of China. The production of premium tea has increased continuously during the past twenty years, i.e. 1990–2011. Table 2 shows the development of premium tea in China. It can be seen from Table 2, the output value of premium tea has been much higher than that of ordinary tea products. This strategy of increasing the production of premium tea was in direct response to counter the overstocking of low quality tea at the end of the 1980s in the last century. Premium tea was welcomed by customers because of its high quality and the Chinese people, who became rich after the reforms, could afford to buy it since the end of the eighties of the last century. They did not hesitate to pay more money to buy some higher quality tea in order to enjoy the pleasant taste and aroma of the tea product instead of buying low quality tea. This strategy reversed the declining trend of the Chinese tea industry towards the end of the eighties in the last century. In 2011, the production of premium tea accounted for 43.4% of the total tea production in China. The output value was still higher at 76.8% of the total Chinese tea production.

### Development of Premium Tea Production

In the Chinese tea industry, premium tea production has developed continuously since the 1990s. It can be seen from Table 2 that the production of premium tea has increased from 17,000 tons in 1990 to 676,000 tons in 2011, increasing 38.7 times during the 21 year period. During the initial period, the percentage of premium tea in the total Chinese tea production was only 3.1%, however, this percentage increased to 43.4% in 2011. Due to the higher price of premium tea, the percentage of

premium tea output value in the total tea output value also increased from 9.3% in 1990 to 76.9% in 2011. It means that premium tea which is only 43.4% of the total tea production, contributes 76.9% of the total output value of the Chinese tea production. The rapid development of premium tea production from 1990 to 2011 has helped in the sustainable development of Chinese tea production. The average annual increasing rate of output value of Chinese tea industry was as high as 138.48% during the period 1990–2010. According to estimates, in recent years, the average price of the premium tea and the ordinary tea in market was around 290 RMB/kg and 60 RMB/kg respectively.

### Famous Premium Teas in China

Since the 1990s, around 1,000 types of premium teas have been developed in China. However, due to limited space here, we discuss only ten famous premium teas as under<sup>4</sup>:

#### Longjing tea

This is also known as Dragon Well tea. It is a variety of roasted green tea from Zhejiang Province in China, where it has been renowned for its high quality, and has earned the China Ten Famous Tea title. Longjing tea is divided into three sub-varieties: Xi hu Longjing, Qian Tang Longjing and Yue Zhou Longjing. Among them, Xi hu Longjing is the most famous and is grown in the Zhejiang Province near the famous West lake. It is grown in its designated area of 168 square kilometers. Higher quality Xi Hu Longjing teas have a very tight, flat shape and light green color (See Plate I, Fig.1). When steeped, the tea produces a yellow-green color, a gentle, pure aroma, and a rich flavor.

Table 2. Premium tea production and its contribution to the total tea production

Year	Production (× 1000 t)		Premium tea as % of total tea production	Output value of premium tea (billion)	Premium tea as % of total tea output value
	Premium tea	Total tea production			
1990	17	525.0	3.1	0.43	9.3
1995	69	589.7	11.7	2.30	39.7
2000	144	683.3	21.3	5.50	64.0
2005	275	934.8	29.4	14.6	75.0
2010	607	1465.7	41.4	45.5	75.0
2011	676	1557.0	43.4	56.0	76.9

**Huangshan Mao Feng tea**

This is one of the most famous teas in China and is produced in Anhui Province near the Huangshan (Yellow) Mountain. Huangshan Mao Feng Tea's English translation is "Yellow Mountain Fur Peak" due to the small white hairs which cover the leaves and also because of the shape of the processed leaves which resemble the peak of a mountain. The best teas are picked in early spring. The plucking standard of Huangshan Mao Feng is that only new tea buds and the leaf next to the bud are plucked. The leaves of Maofeng tea have a light yellow color. Its liquid is a tint of apricot yellow. The tea fragrance and aroma are long lasting and the leaves can be brewed five or six times. (See Plate I, Fig. 2).

**Bi Luo Chun tea**

This is a famous green tea originally grown in the Dong Ting mountains, Jiangsu Province. It is renowned for its delicate appearance in a tight spiral form, having white hairs, floral aroma and fruit taste. It is so delicate and tender that one kilogram of Dong Ting Bi Luo Chun tea has 14,000 to 15,000 tea shoots. Bi Luo Chun from Dong Shan (East Mountain) is considered to be the best. It is divided into five grades in decreasing order of quality: Supreme, Supreme I, Grade I, Grade I, Grade I (See Plate I, Fig. 3).

**Liu An Gua Pian tea**

This is a Chinese famous green tea from Liu An County in Anhui Province. Its name is derived from the shape of the processed tea leaves, which are flat and oval and resemble a melon seed. Unlike most green teas, which utilize new buds to manufacture tea, Liu An Gua Pian uses the second leaf on the branch. The slender stem of shoots is removed and the leaves are pan fired and shaped to stop oxidizing enzymes and are then dried (See Plate I, Fig 4).

**Tai Ping Hou Kui tea**

This is a historically famous green tea from Huang Shan City in Anhui province (Tai Ping County), developed in the year 1900. The high quality teas must consist of twigs whereby each twig has one bud embraced by two leaves, and is naturally stretched. The leaf is fleshy, thick, straight, flat and is pale green in color, even, bright and lustrous. When brewed, the liquor is bright, clear and transparent, with a very light yellowish green color. The tea gives a long-lasting flavor with an orchid scent and a fresh green note, refreshing, smooth, mellow and with a sweet after taste (See Plate I, Fig. 5).

**An Ji Bai Cha**

This is a new Chinese famous green tea originally produced in An Ji county of Zhejiang Province since 1981. Anji Bai cha is sometimes called a "white tea" because of its production process. However, it is a green tea, not a white tea. The term white refers to the whitish color of the fresh leaves. It is a temperature-sensitive mutant. Investigation indicated that the gene which controlled the synthesis of chlorophyll was inhibited under 25°C. So, only the vein of tender leaves showed green in colour while the remainder parts of the leaves were white in colour. However, the tender leaves turned into green colour, when the temperature was higher than 25°C. It is very much liked by consumers because of its extremely high theanine content and has a very short picking season. It contains at least 6–8% of amino acids, of which at least 2.5% is theanine, roughly 3–4 times the levels found in other Chinese green teas. The picking season is very short, around 30 days in the early spring season, as once the temperature increases the leaves start to turn green. The made tea has a pale yellowish-green color. The taste is refreshingly delicate and soothing with a slight hint of orchid sweetness in its aroma (See Plate I, Fig. 6).

**Keemun Gongfu black tea**

This is one of the world famous black teas produced in Qimen County in Anhui province. It is produced with careful skill ("gongfu") to form thin, tight strips without breaking the leaves. The tea is black in color, even, bright and lustrous. When brewed, the liquor is clear and bright, with a red color. It is fruity and sweet which creates its very distinctive and balanced taste. It also displays a hint of orchid fragrance and the so-called China tea sweetness. (See Plate I, Fig. 7).

**Jinjunmei black tea**

This is a new Chinese famous black tea produced in Wuyi Mountain, Fujian province. It was developed in 2005 according to the traditional process of Lapsang Souchong black tea, which is characterized by a distinctive smoky flavor. It is made of tea bud tips from a rare and primitive species of wild tea which grow in the National Natural Conservation Area of Wuyi Mountain, at an altitude of 1500 to 1800 meters. A skilled plucker can only pick about 2000 tea bud tips per day and needs tens of thousands of pieces of tea bud tips to produce 500 grams of Jinjunmei. It is black and yellow with a golden hair. When brewed, the liquor is clear and bright,

with golden color. It gives mixed aromas of fruit, flower, honey, and potato. It is a top-quality black tea (See Plate I, Fig. 8).

### Tieguanyin tea

This is a premium variety of Chinese Oolong tea originally produced in Anxi county of Fujian province. The processing of Tieguanyin tea is very complex and requires expertise. It is divided into two types by the roasting level. Lightly baked Tieguanyin and thoroughly baked Tieguanyin. Lightly baked Tieguanyin has a light green jade color. The tea liquid is golden yellow. It produces a strong flowery aroma and taste. It is more similar to green tea than Oolong. Thoroughly baked Tieguanyin is the original style. It has a more complex taste with a roasted nutty character; the tea liquid is reddish-brown (See Plate II, Fig. 9).

### Bai Hao Yinzhen tea

This is also known as Silver Needle. It is a white tea produced in Fujian Province. Amongst white teas, this is the most expensive variety and the most prized, as in this only the top buds (leaf shoots) are used to produce the tea. Genuine Silver Needles are made from cultivars of the Da Bai (Large White) tea. It is important to point out that there are other products that look similar to downy leaf shoots but most of those are green teas. They taste differently and have a different biochemical potency

from the genuine white tea Silver Needle. When brewed, the tea gives a slightly pale yellow color with evidence of floating white hairs that reflect light. The flavor and fragrance is delicate, light, fresh and sweet (See Plate II, Fig. 10).

### Conclusion

Tea is one of the oldest and most globally relevant beverages and is an important necessity of daily living for most humans. Tea is also a healthy beverage. The active components in tea have many health-promoting functions. The tea industry is a growing industry with a bright future and has witnessed sustained development during the past 60 years in China. This is mainly due to the fact that science and technology have played an important role in contributing to its development. The improvement in tea products, according to the social demand, have also played a significant role in the development of the tea industry in China. Practice has proved that the development of premium tea in the Chinese tea industry significantly increased the tea production and the output value of Chinese tea industry in the period 1990–2011. However, the tea industry must adapt to the changing world and adopt new areas of science and technology to further its development. We will accept the challenge so that the tea industry has a more prosperous future in China.

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## Plate I: Development of Premium Teas in China



Fig. 1: Longjing tea



Fig. 2: Huangshan Mao Feng tea

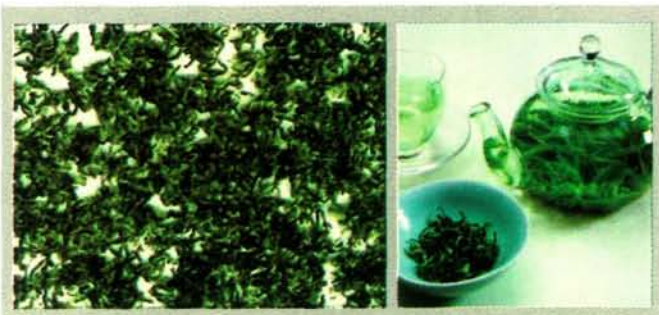


Fig. 3: Bi Luo Chun tea



Fig. 4: Liu An Gua Pian tea



Fig. 5: Tai Ping Hou Kui tea



Fig. 6: An Ji Bai Cha



Fig. 7: Keemun Gongfu black tea



Fig. 8: Jinjunmei black tea



## Plate II: Development of Premium Teas in China



(1) Lightly baked Tieguanyin

(2) Thoroughly baked Tieguanyin

Fig. 9: Tieguanyin tea



Fig. 10: Bai Hao Yinzhen tea