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The Tea Trade Interview

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF FORTUNE

Not since the legendary 19th century Scottish adventurer Robert Fortune has a Westerner journeyed to China to buy tea directly. American David Lee Hoffman speaks about his travels for Silk Road Teas.

“There’s a serious problem in China. China has eight million tea farmers.”

“The solution is to start feeding the soil, it’s very simple.”

“If they have a better quality tea, they will get a much higher price for it, and if they can grow it organically, they get still an even greater price.”

EDITOR'S NOTE: To study tea cultivation and acquire tea in China's hinterlands without official blessings or even speaking the language is an exploit few have attempted since botanist Robert Fortune immediately after the Opium War. Following sometimes literally in those footsteps, my friend David Lee Hoffman is another intrepid visionary whose contributions will prove historically significant, and of benefit, to China and all tea lovers.

James Norwood Pratt

TT: How did you get your start in tea?

D: This goes back 25 years. I was living in Asia, and of course everyone drank tea. Traveling across Asia you have tea wherever you stop. I got my start in Morocco, in North Africa, where we drank mint tea, green tea, mostly Gunpowder, with mint and sugar. It’s a delicious drink, but it wasn’t tea, as far as what I know tea to be now. Then heading out through Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Afganistan, and you get into the black tea country, and I got my start drinking tea on a regular basis in India. But it was with the Tibetans that I got my real introduction to tea with character, tea that had personality that wasn’t masked by spices and milk. I noticed there was a great difference in the quality of tea I drank with nomads and with the Dalai Lama and his teachers. The tea I was served in that environment was quite a different quality than what I got with the common people.

I came back to this country and I tried to sustain my tea drinking habit and there was nothing out there. I went to Chinatown and systematically combed through every shop trying to find tea and occasionally would find some good teas but that was my start. In my quest for finding better teas I started going to China about five years ago and I brought back tea. I found there was great interest in the tea I was bringing back and the business grew.

TT: What did you learn on your first trip to buy tea?

D: On my very first trip I found some very wonderful teas but I couldn’t get them out of the country except through the post office which is ridiculous, because you have to jump through hurdles just to send 10 kilos of tea. You can’t run a business on such a small amount. I started learning about the politics in China. I got a good introduction to the bureaucratic difficulties, not in buying tea, but in getting it out of the country.

TT: Is it different province to province?

D: Yes! Each one has its own restrictions. The central government has established certain guidelines for controlling the export of tea, but in fact it’s really up to the local provinces to put these laws in effect. Often you encounter great obstacles in working through the system. As far as I know I’m the first foreigner ever to go to China and start buying tea directly from the farmer. This was unheard of--the locals don’t even do this. No one wants to deal with the farmers. That’s the reality. They don’t

want to go out and be in the dirt and the hard conditions and smell the sweat of the farmers. They'd rather go to the nice clean shop and have it delivered to them in neat packages, which is how they do it. The tea brokers buy from manufacturers or from the collectives.

TT: What role does China Native Produce and Animal By Products Corporation (the official government export agency) play in tea today?

D: At one time, all tea pretty much came through their hands, but I haven't really dealt with them that much. At one time you could actually find really high quality teas from them, but it only was by chance. They collect teas from many different farms, and if you got tea from a good farm, the tea was excellent, but there was no consistency in the quality, so it was strictly pot luck.

I've dealt with tea exporters. If you're shipping out a container of tea, you've got to go through the proper channels, and often it was very difficult because, one, I'm buying tea directly from the farmer, and two, I had to pay the proper taxes. Sometimes it amounted to about 30% of the price of the tea. I'm happy to pay the tax. I think that ultimately this can be of benefit to local governments which are in need of revenue as well as support the farmers, which really needs to be done in China.

TT: Are these private farmers, working on their own plot of land that they own or is it a collective farm?

D: All this changes. In fact, every trip I go back it's a different situation. When I first started, they were all pretty much state farms and the only private farms were the individual family farmers who grew enough for themselves and a few friends. In the last few years, all this has changed. Now, it's permitted for the farmers to sell their tea privately, they deregulated the restrictions that the farmer had to sell to the tea cooperative, which was fine while it lasted, because it gave the farmers an opportunity to sell their teas regardless. They could harvest their tea, there was a set price, they took it down to the collection agency, and they were paid by weight. In fact this was one of my best sources for seeking out tea because I was able to taste the teas from separate farms before they got mixed into the big batch. So if you could find out where the collectives were, you were able to taste the teas when they came in. It worked out pretty well—the farmers were always happy to sell me tea directly because they would get paid more for their tea, which I'm happy to do.

The problem is that many of the state collectives are having a difficult time right now, financially. There's a serious problem in China. China has eight million tea farmers. Eight million tea farmers! The amount of tea farmers that have access to selling their tea for export probably amounts to less than five hundred, if that. The rest of the farmers have to have some way to sell their tea in China. The market is very depressed right now in China; there's actually a surplus of tea. I've seen warehouses filled floor to ceiling. A lot of it ends up being processed into green tea extract, for polyphenals, for health benefits. It's a medical product. And yet, there's such a demand in the world market for quality tea right now.

Even if the farmer has a quality product, there's no outlet for them to sell it to, there are no organized markets in China to sell tea, with the exception of one that opened last year which I attended, the inaugural of the open ming-cha, famous tea, marketplace. It was very interesting, it was very busy, it was in Zhejiang Province up near [Shaoshing] in the north. I suppose it was successful from the standpoint of getting lots of publicity, but the farmers weren't represented, except from the local area where the market was held. I saw very few teas coming in from the other parts of China. And the quality of the tea coming was pretty standard, there was nothing exceptional and the prices I paid were very high compared to what's available in China. In short, it wasn't possible to conduct any business at that market although the concept itself is an excellent one, and I think if China organized tea markets, where the farmer could take his tea to market and sell directly to the public, this would provide a great benefit to the tea farmer, not to mention people looking for quality tea. As yet there are no organized markets for tea; there are markets for rice, vegetables, electronics, anything else you want, but tea is still a very strictly controlled commodity in China and it's killing the tea farmer. I saw so many farms this year where the farmer could not afford to pick tea; they're just leaving it on the bush and there are farmers going to the towns, abandoning their fields, going to the cities shining shoes on the streets, and getting paid more to shine shoes than they did to farm tea.

TT: Is that a function of the general move in China to the so-called capitalist road where the cities are a magnet for the dream of becoming rich?

D: Yes, there's tremendous wealth in China now and it's growing exponentially. It's amazing how fast the economy is booming in China but it's concentrated right in the great cities along the coast. Inland, it's much slower. I've thrown my lot in with the farmer. I've always avoided politics, my passion is tea and that's what I want to continue doing, but the reality is now I can no longer remain detached from the political arena of tea farming. The tea farmer has a very difficult time right now in China and I'm backing the farmer because in fact it's the small farmer where you can find the really exceptional teas. Not to say you can't find them elsewhere, but I haven't been able to. Every great tasting tea I've ever found has been from small farms where they still care about the product they're growing.

Forty years ago the government initiated a policy to increase tea production, to catch up with India and again become a major producer of tea in the world market. The way of doing this was through the scientific application of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides, which in theory I suppose sounds very good, but in practice the simple farmer knew nothing about using pesticides and fertilizers and they made a lot of mistakes. A lot of tea got sprayed with pesticides and residues remained on the plants. They're working on this problem and they certainly made a noble effort to solve the problem with the large commercial farms that are dealing with exports, so I don't think one needs to be so concerned with pesticide residues on teas, but still it is a major problem in China. At first when they started this policy, it was great, the farmers increased their production by 20%, there was lot less labor involved with the application of fertilizer, they didn't have to carry hundreds of pounds of messy manures and animal waste up to the tea farms, and they loved it. Production went up, profits went up, everything seemed fine, and was for a few years and then things started changing.

Now major problems are confronting tea farming in China and other countries where they relied heavily on chemical fertilizers. Because what happens over time is the soil becomes depleted of nutrients which the chemical fertilizers don't replace: the trace elements and more important, the humus content, the mass in the soil that provides the structure, the bulk that retains the water, that allows aeration for the roots to grow, that allows for the microbial and natural biological life to exist in the soil. This is vital for tea production, this is vital for any plant, but if you're cooking with food you put spices and other things in it and you can mask the deadness of the food. You can't do this with tea—if tea is dead, it's dead, and so much of our commercial tea now is dead. The fact is because so much of the land has been depleted of nutrients, and because of the constant traffic of the tea pickers, the soil has become compacted, the roots don't grow, the sprays with which they apply the chemical fertilizers with have a very shallow penetration in the soil because when you get a heavy rain it runs off rather than soaks in the soil and washes a lot of the chemicals into the water supply rather than going down into the roots.

TT: What's the solution?

D: The solution is to start feeding the soil, it's very simple. It's something they did for thousands of years. You can apply modern techniques to the old way of doing things, and this is the main work I'm doing in China. What I'm doing now is basically working with farmers to establish organic farming techniques which is so important to the sustenance of tea farming in China, because if nothing is done right now, not only are the eight million tea farmers going to suffer, but so are the passionate tea drinkers around the world who want a quality product but won't be able to find it. You cannot get great tea from dead soil, there's no way around that. So much of the tea coming out of China now that is judged to be high quality tea is based totally on the appearance of the tea leaf. I see this all the time. They're more concerned with the appearance of the leaf—it looks good, it's whole, got good color, it's picked at the right time, it's a famous tea—these are the factors that establish the price of tea in China.

The farmer can't afford to collect the manure and the leaves and the rapeseed extract. Even though they know it makes better tea. Everyone knows it makes better tea if you use natural fertilizer. When they scent, they grow these flowers in these pots in Fujian used for scenting tea. They're beautiful flowers, and they grow them in these big pots. And in the springtime they pull them outside, in the wintertime they bring them inside. They must weigh 200 lbs. a tree, they're big trees. Anyway, they

will not use chemicals, they will only use organic [materials]. Because they know, if you want a good-scented flower, you've got to feed the soil. And the farmers know this with tea. The problem is, if you're going to grow commercially, there's no way to collect all the food you need for the soil.

I've got the support of the Tea Research Institute, the Department of Agriculture. They all know they have major problems, they're documented, and they know the problems, and even the erosion problem, has to do with feeding the soil. If you can build up the soil, if you can aerate the soil, the water flows into the soil and absorbs it; the soil, it's like a sponge, it retains water. If you don't have humus in the soil it leaches out.

What we're doing is creating a system. This has been my work for 20 years: how to turn garbage into fertilizer. Earthworms will do it 24 hours a day without asking for anything in return except being fed. Worm casts happen to be nature's finest fertilizer ever, because they're totally water soluble. And it's got so much good stuff in there. Well, it turns out that these worms we're raising here in California are acid-tolerant. And the tea plants need an acid condition. So the worms provide aeration for the soil, they provide fertilizer.

You take the waste, any kind of organic waste—worms will eat anything. All you have to do is compost it, and break down the cell structure. And the microorganisms will take care of the rest. Well, the worms will do it most efficiently. If you don't have a resource of organic material, then you simply compost it down below and carry up the concentrate. In other words, just the worm casts. You want to create a situation where you're composting directly in the soil. All you do is feed the soil. Just as nature has done for years. The leaves fall off the trees, fall on the ground, and create an environment, a microcosm of life and digestion. It's biodigestion. That's what composting is. Each element in the chain feeding off one another. You have thermophilic decomposition in a compost pile, but that's a different process. You use a different set of bacteria to break [it] down. What I'm promoting is use of biodigestive worms and organisms.

T: Now when you bring this program to a farmer, are you also saying, "If you do this I will buy your tea?"

D: Oh yes. "At twice the price that you can sell it for regularly." You have to provide an incentive for the farmer. And I tell them, "I'll take a percentage of the tea that I've got from you now, I'll take a percentage of that money, and give it back to you to invest in the soil."

T: You're actually subsidizing, you're advancing him cash, so he can afford to do this?

D: Yes. I want to provide an incentive. We have to—not just me—everyone has to support the farmer.

TT: Who initiated the project you're doing with the Tea Research Institute?

D: I did. At that point there were no organic teas coming out of China. I visited several farms where they claimed it was organic, they had the certificates, I visited the farms and saw evidence to the contrary. My biggest concern now with the future of China tea is with the misrepresentation of the word organic. It has great marketing potential and that's what they're picking up on, the marketing potential, not the actual sustainable practice of organic farming, which is so much more important than just being able to sell a product. I'm working on this project to be able to qualify tea that is certified organic. What does this mean? It's simply a piece of paper that says this tea is organic. It doesn't mean anything unless you can qualify the statement. In other words, show how the farmer is feeding the soil, show what they're doing for insect control, etc. There's a half dozen international certification organizations, but this in itself isn't sufficient. What they use in China, teas are given the "Green Award," and that's as close as they get to in China. I've tried to track down trails of teas which they're calling organic now and you run into big obstacles. One, the suppliers don't want to disclose their sources which is a big problem in itself—how do you know when a tea's organic, how do you know when it's grown without pesticides and herbicides? The only way you can really know is have someone go back to that farm and monitor their farming techniques, then you know. Unfortunately, organics has become a marketing concept rather than an actual practice of farming. And that's what we've got to get back to. We've got to get back to the farmer, back to the land, back to the soil.

TT: Have you seen any indications of other importing countries, such as Taiwan, Japan, Germany, coming to China and trying to gain access to garden growing in China?

D: Oh, very much so. Everyone is going over there because I think they see the potential in the cheap labor. Certainly China has thousands of years of tea growing history and they're great masters at it. There's no way to get around that, they are the leading world masters of tea farming. I know of at least eight Japanese farms in China, and there are quite a few Taiwanese investing in China now. There's a lot more interest in China from foreign countries.

TT: With this new prosperity in China, is that leading Chinese consumption to increase?

D: There is a new class of people in China that has a lot of money now, and they want to buy the good things they haven't had before, and that includes good tea of course. They're paying lots of money for tea and two things are happening: they're buying a lot of mediocre tea in great packaging, and two, they're also buying good tea and consuming it domestically so it decreases the amount of tea of that quality for export.

TT: What are you doing to secure for export the quality that you require?

D: This last trip was very interesting. I found one of the best green teas that I ever found in China, from the farmer, and the price to the farmer was less than a dollar a pound. Unbelievable, and it was such good tea. I brought this tea to my exporter and we had a big tea tasting there and there were a lot of tea tasters and I slipped my tea into this lot. The tea tasters there singled this out as being a fine tasting tea and it proved to be quite an embarrassment to the exporter who was trying to sell me their teas at 50 times the price. So you don't need to spend a lot of money for great tea, but what you do need to do is go back to the source, back to the farmer and support the farmer to allow him to grow the tea in the way he knows best which is by feeding the soil with good organic fertilizer. This is crucial to getting fine tasting tea with good aroma.

Another thing that has happened in China that most people aren't aware of in the West--they think tea is tea. Well tea is grown from many different varieties of the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*) and what happened is that forty years ago, the government, through the Tea Research Institute in Hangzhou which is the main national tea research institute, they started working on strains of tea plants, varieties, that were high production, drought resistant, insect resistant, etc., all the qualities other than taste and aroma. So what they did was put the emphasis on strains like (fu yen) and (ou hao), the varieties that had qualities for high production and good profit but not necessarily good taste and aroma. So what has happened now is that you very seldom find the older varieties of tea plant in commercial production, very rare. But in fact, the best tasting teas are not from these new varieties, but from the older varieties. This is a big problem now because most of the commercial gardens are not planted with these varieties. Farmers don't want to plant these because they're too slow growing and they sell tea by weight.

One of the projects I'm doing with the Tea Research Institute is singling out exceptional teas, and visiting the land, and doing the soil analysis to determine the organic content as well as the mineral content. Minerals are very important in soils.

The other thing is they've developed strains, different varieties, that are salt tolerant. With all those chemical fertilizers, you have a salt build-up in the soil. And this is the one thing you have to leach out. So you end up using 10 times the amount of water that you would for organic fertilizer. One, because there's no humus in the soil to retain the water. And two, you have to leach out the salts. So this is the same situation in tea farming.

We're planting old varieties now, the farms I'm working with, we're going back to some of the better strains of tea plants. The old tea tasters will tell you this. I befriended one. He says the same thing "the teas were better tasting forty years ago".

TT: Are the tea institutes growing the older varieties and providing these as a nursery to the farmers?

D: No.

TT: So how would the farmer get the older variety?

D: They have them on their farms. There are 260 varieties growing, but it's also a problem there. They're only maintaining them, it's like a museum. Some of the best tea I tasted in China was from wild tea plants and this is one of the things I've been promoting is going back to the wild strains.

There are wild tea plants growing in China. You can't run a business on these few plants but it's great information for the palate, because when you drink that tea it's very different from any of the commercial teas.

TT: Can you clone them or...

D: Absolutely. You take cuttings, collect seeds, mostly cuttings. That's the best way to propagate these. And this is one of the projects I have with the Tea Research Institute is to take cuttings from these and then plant them, then do a comparison of the different varieties and compare the taste and aroma of these.

TT: Are you finding a receptive response there to your view?

D: Yes, they're recognizing the problem now in China, both on the farmer level and the government level. It's not an easy situation to resolve because the farmers have no room for experimentation now, it's at the survival level. All they want to do is sell their tea and get paid. What I am proposing is that if they have a better quality tea, they will get a much higher price for it, and if they can grow it organically, they get still an even greater price for their tea. This is what we need to do, we need to give support to the local farmer, show them that there is appreciation for higher quality tea, which they know how to grow.

TT: Do you think there'll be support for China tea in the U.S., which has, really only since World War II, become attached to India and Ceylon blacks?

D: Absolutely. Which is good, because I think it will raise the quality of India and Ceylon teas. They've all got to realize the name of the game now is not how cheap you can make it, how mass produced and quantity, but the quality. Let's get back to organics, let's get back to feeding the soil, and giving that soil all the nutrition that that tea plant needs to grow into a healthy plant. We've got to do it, there's no way around that.

What we need to do is to educate people how to drink tea, how to taste tea. And how to prepare tea. And my approach is to remove the intimidation of having it be complicated or difficult. Because it's not. It's simply a leaf off a plant. Nothing more, nothing less. It's only the sophistication of how they roll that leaf, how they pick it, how they prepare it, and how they feed the soil -- or not feed the soil -- that determines the differences between these teas. And, you know, this is nonsense, saying, 'this tea here, you have to prepare it at 164 degrees, and steep it for exactly two and a half minutes.' You know, no one does it that way. It's one thing if you're doing a comparative analysis of tea, and you have 20 teas lined up. [Then] you want to be sure the taste difference is from the tea and not from the technique. Then you have to be analytical about it, you have to be very precise; I make sure that each tea is prepared exactly the same way. But that's not drinking tea for the pleasure of it. That's not how you enjoy tea. There's no right or wrong way to make tea. You can do it anyway you like. So what I try to get people to do is, do whatever it is you're doing, but taste it along the way. And if you find it's not strong enough, let it steep longer. Still not strong enough, put more tea in it. But don't judge the tea because you had a bad experience the first time. And as you develop a palate for tea, you'll learn what you like and what you don't like.

TT: Do you want to make a prediction for China tea?

D: China tea is going up. I am working hard to promote it. It still has some of the best teas in the world. The future of China tea is anyone's guess. There's going to be a lot of popularity in the product and there's going to be a lot of jockeying for position of control in China.

TT: What's the most satisfying aspect for you being an American trader in China tea?

D: I love tea, I love finding great tea. It's so wonderful to drink really good tea. It's one of those cheap thrills in life. You can have a wonderful cup of tea, it costs you pennies for the cup, it's very satisfying, it's good for your health, you can drink it all day long with no ill effects. Why not indulge in one of life's oldest, simplest pleasures?

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