

Talking tea

A short introduction to tea terms in Japanese and English



Maren Fichter

Intern #156



My name is Maren, intern #156, from Germany by way of the US and the UK. My academic background is in linguistics, and I've always been very interested in why we use the words we use, and how we manipulate language to create new meanings. In context of tea, which has such a complex global history spanning thousands of years, including contact, conflict, and exchange between numerous cultures and languages, there's a lot that's of interest to me.

So in my time at Obubu, I wanted to explore some of the language around tea in both English and Japanese. What do words like matcha and sencha actually mean? Where did they come from? Why are some terms translated into English in the international tea market, and others kept in Japanese? Where do Obubu's tea names come from?

This document is meant to be a short guide for incoming interns or any other curious folks about some of the most common tea terms you'll come across, as well as some details about Obubu's tea naming practices. At Obubu, we aim to honour a lot of traditions in Japanese tea culture, while also establishing new precedents in other areas, and our tea naming practices reflect this. So in this guide I'm also aiming to share a bit about Obubu's approach in line with our principles of education, community, and quality.

Tea basics	3
Tea and cha	3
Varieties and cultivars	4
Oxidation and fermentation	5
Japanese tea terms	6
Common tea names	6
Notes and themes	9
Obubu's tea names	9
Sources	11
Thanks	12

Tea basics

Tea originated in China, and the character 茶 has been used since mid-Tang dynasty when it originated as a modification of 荼 tu, meaning 'bitter vegetable,' which referred to a variety of plants. At this point it began to be used specifically to refer to tea as a drink. At the time this took the form of pressed tea cakes ground into powder and boiled.

Tracing the exact history and etymology of this character is beyond the scope of this project, but various sources break it down in different ways - for example, as a combination of the radicals grass 艹, people 人, and tree 木. Other sources also indicate a relationship to the radical roof 宀.

Tea and cha

There a number of distinct dialects of Chinese, many of which have slightly different pronunciations of the character 茶. There are two which have made their way into most other world languages in some form or another - in the coastal regions of what's now Fujian it's *te*, while more inland it's *cha*.

As tea traveled from China to other parts of the world, its name came with it based on the trade routes it traveled by. So generally, *tea* and words like it indicate sea-based trade routes starting in modern Fujian (initially via Dutch and Portuguese traders, then English), while *cha* and related words indicate trade routes over land (like the Silk Road). The land-based trade routes date back at least 2,000 years, while the sea-based trade routes began in the 17th century.

Funnily enough, the Japanese お茶 comes from the pronunciation that's usually transmitted via the land route, even though tea necessarily came to Japan over sea. This is because tea came to Japan via Buddhist monks from central China, where *cha* is used, rather than through the coastal ports in Fujian using the *te* pronunciation.

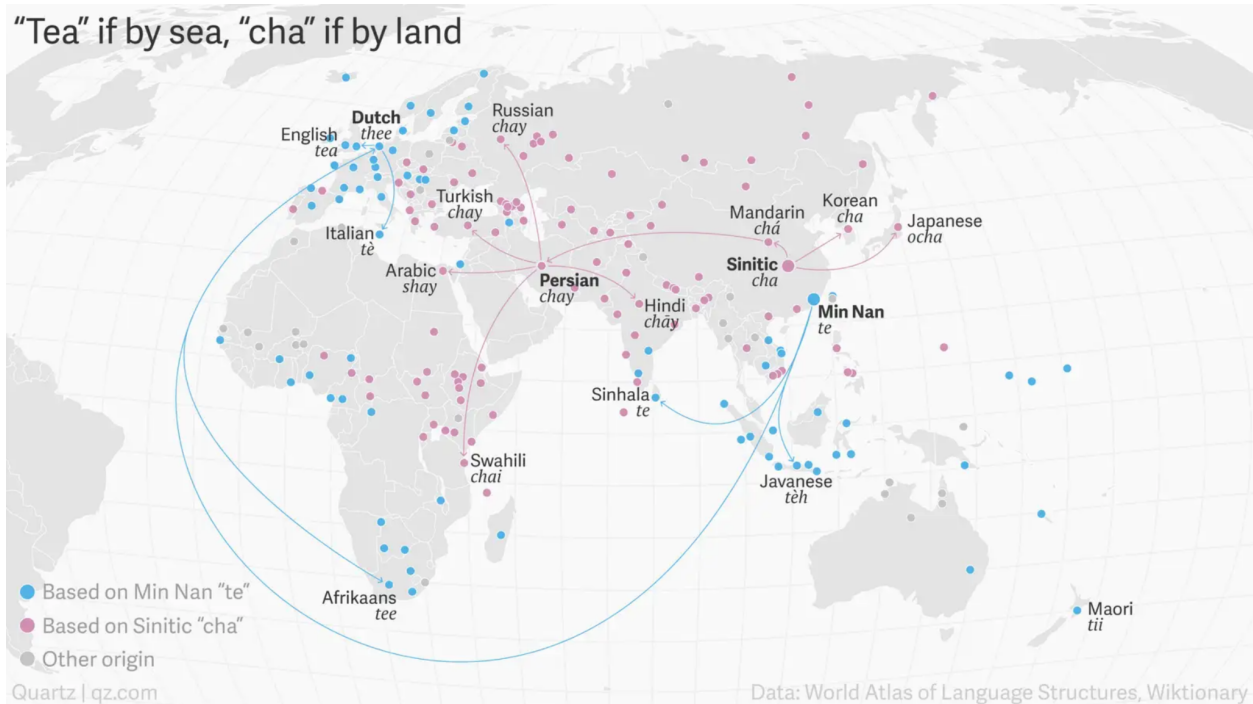


Image from <https://qz.com/1176962/map-how-the-word-tea-spread-over-land-and-sea-to-conquer-the-world>

Varieties and cultivars

Varieties are naturally occurring variations of the tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*. The main ones are *Camellia sinensis* var. *sinensis* and *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*, which differ mainly in terms of leaf size and distribution across the world. *Assamica* grows mainly in southwestern China and India, while *sinensis* can be found in the rest of China, Taiwan, and Japan.

Cultivars, on the other hand, are human-selected to maintain certain desirable variations (hence the name *cultivated variety*), and they are usually propagated by taking cuttings of mother plants. Usually cultivars are selected for flavour profile, pest or disease resistance, aroma characteristics, or the timeline they sprout on. Previous Obubu intern Katrina #138 has written a really helpful introduction to Japanese cultivars, particularly focusing on ones we have at Obubu, [which is available free online](#) for anyone who wants a deeper dive.

Oxidation and fermentation

Two commonly misunderstood terms in the tea world are oxidation and fermentation. There are a few reasons for this confusion, mostly around historical mistranslations of terms for processes that have only recently become well-understood enough to be scientifically distinguished.

Oxidation refers to the enzymatic process that causes tea leaves to turn brown after being harvested. It happens when polyphenol oxidase is exposed to oxygen in the atmosphere, and it's the same process that turns an apple brown when it's bitten or cut. This process starts happening the moment that tea leaves are harvested (and in some cases beforehand), and it can be stopped by heating the leaves to kill the enzymes responsible for it. Different levels of oxidation give us the common white-yellow-green-oolong-black-dark tea categories.

Fermentation, on the other hand, is a microbial process that requires a certain amount of humidity in order to take place. Usually only dark teas are fermented; sometimes microbial activity is induced through artificial means, like with the *wo dui* wet piling method used to make shou puer, and with other teas it's encouraged through long-term storage methods in which moisture and temperature are carefully controlled.

The Chinese term for oxidation, *fāxiào*, is often translated literally as fermentation. To maintain the distinction, Chinese uses *hòu fāxiào* for microbial fermentation, but this translates literally to post-fermentation. Both processes end up darkening the tea leaves and impacting their flavour, which might contribute to the conflation in terminology as well. But the key distinction between the two is that oxidation is the enzymatic process that happens to all tea leaves when they're harvested, while fermentation is a microbial process that only happens if moisture and temperature conditions are met.

Japanese tea terms

Common tea names

Matcha 抹茶	mat 'rubbed' + cha 'tea' The name matcha refers to powdered tea. There are no restrictions on using the name 'matcha' (as there are with things like puer or champagne). Even the different grades of matcha, like 'ceremonial' vs 'premium' vs 'cooking' grades, don't have usage regulations, so it's important when buying matcha to understand the practices of the producer or vendor you're purchasing from. Ceremonial should always be from a spring harvest.
Tencha 碾茶	ten 'mortar, grind' + cha 'tea' Tencha is the raw material that matcha is made from - steamed, cut, and dried leaf which has had stems and veins removed. The name refers to the grinding process during which tencha is made into matcha.
Sencha 煎茶	sen 'boil' + cha 'tea' Tea came to Japan in its powdered form, and it wasn't until the 18th century that infused whole-leaf tea became popular. Calling it sencha differentiated it from matcha, the then-standard whisked tea.
Kabuse	kabuse 'covered' This comes from kabuseru 'to cover', and it refers to the process of covering tea plants to decrease the amount of sunlight the tea leaves receive, which gives the finished tea a more umami flavour. Kabuse sencha is usually shaded for 2-3 weeks, and matcha is usually shaded for 3-4 weeks.
Gyokuro 玉露	'jade dew' This name refers to the delicacy of the liquor colour, suggesting that it looks like a dewdrop resembling a gleaming jewel. Gyokuro is the highest grade of Japanese green tea and needs to be shaded with shelf-style shading for 3 weeks.

<p>Kukicha 茎茶</p>	<p>kuki ‘twig, stem’ + cha ‘tea’</p> <p>This tea name refers to the part of the tea leaves it’s made from. When producing tencha, the precursor to matcha, stems and veins are removed from the tea leaves, and these are repurposed into kukicha. Because kukicha contains only stem and vein material, and not leaf material, it has far less caffeine than other teas, and generally has a sweeter, milder flavour profile. Because kukicha is a byproduct of other tea processing methods, it can come in a lot of forms - shaded, unshaded, roasted, unroasted, etc.</p>
<p>Karigane</p>	<p>‘call of the wild goose’ kari ‘wild goose’ + gane ‘sound, noise’</p> <p>Karigane usually refers to kukicha, usually using stalk material, made from gyokuro or other high-grade sencha. This more poetic name evokes the look of a wild goose sitting on tree branches floating in the water. This term is mostly used in the Kyoto region; you’ll find a few others referring to similar material (like shiraore in Kyushu).</p>
<p>Hojicha 焙じ茶</p>	<p>houji ‘roasted’ + cha ‘tea’</p> <p>Houjiru means ‘to roast’, so hojicha refers to tea that has been roasted. Usually bancha is used for this. Hojicha has very little caffeine because caffeine breaks down at the higher temperatures used during the roasting process, and the larger leaf material of bancha naturally contains less caffeine than smaller leaves and buds.</p> <p>It can be romanised as either houjicha or hojicha; at Obubu we tend to use hojicha, for SEO consistency on the website and marketing materials.</p>
<p>Wakoucha 和紅茶</p>	<p>wa ‘Japanese’ + kou ‘red’ + cha ‘tea’</p> <p>Wakoucha refers to Japanese black tea. <i>Wa</i> is the oldest recorded name referring to Japan in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese texts, and the character has been in use since the 8th century. <i>Kou</i> refers to a deep red/crimson colour. Like the Chinese <i>hong cha</i>, which uses the same characters, this refers to the colour of the brewed liquor, rather than the colour of the dry leaf (which is where western translations get the name ‘black tea’).</p>
<p>Aracha 荒茶</p>	<p>ara ‘coarse, crude, rough’ + cha ‘tea’</p> <p>Most of Obubu’s teas are aracha. This term refers to tea that’s gone through the initial processing steps of steaming, rolling, and drying. It’s also known as farmer’s tea, because it’s the tea we’re directly making on the tea farm. At</p>

	<p>this point, the tea is already drinkable and delicious - but due to the processing steps it's gone through, it's still a mix of leaf, twig, and stem material, with different sizes, shapes, and colours, so it doesn't yet have the uniform glossy dark green needle shape that Japanese green teas are famous for.</p> <p>This is why aracha is then usually sent off for secondary processing, which includes sorting, cutting, firing, and blending. Bigger companies often blend tea from different areas or seasons to maintain a uniform taste. At Obubu, we love the natural and authentic flavour of aracha, so we don't sort or blend most of our teas. The exceptions are teas like matcha, tencha, and kukicha, which consist of only leaf or stem material.</p>
<p>Shincha 新茶</p>	<p>shin 'new' + cha 'tea'</p> <p>Shincha usually refers to the first harvest of the year. The concentration of amino acids and polyphenols (and therefore flavour components) is the highest in the spring buds and leaves because the tea plants have been resting over winter, meaning that the first tea of the year will generally produce the finest, most intense flavours.</p> <p>Shincha is meant to be drunk fresh rather than aged, and it's the most highly awaited green tea of the year (with a matching price tag). Considering that we sell aracha direct to customers at Obubu, we don't focus so much on shincha, which does usually go through secondary sorting and blending.</p>
<p>Bancha 番茶</p>	<p>ban 'number in a series' + cha 'tea'</p> <p>Bancha refers to the coarser, larger leaves harvested after the spring harvest. The term is often combined with further information, such as which harvest it's produced from.</p> <p>Ichibancha refers to the first harvest tea, nibancha refers to the second, sanbancha refers to the third, and so on. Ichibancha and shincha do sometimes get used interchangeably, as they both refer to first harvest spring tea. But the distinction generally tends to hinge on the fact that ichibancha refers just to the order of the harvest, whereas shincha refers specifically to the high-quality tea that's meant to be drunk fresh.</p> <p>Bancha also sometimes references the local area where it's produced, as some regions have unique processing styles (like kyobancha 京番茶, bancha produced in the Kyoto region which is steamed longer than usual and roasted).</p>

Notes and themes

We can see a few themes emerging from these generic tea names. Standard tea names commonly include details about the processing method (eg. matcha, hojicha), cultivation method (eg. kabuse sencha), cultivar (eg. Okumidori matcha), and location (for single-origin teas, local styles like kyobancha, or blends from specific areas).

Higher-grade and rare teas tend to have more poetic names, which often describe what the tea leaves or liquor look like. With these rarer teas, there's perhaps less of a need to identify them based on their distinguishing features, and more poetic names evoke their comparatively rarer nature.

Obubu's tea names

At Obubu, we use the generic tea names for most of our teas, with some additions to differentiate our products. For example, we produce a number of different senchas, so we need to distinguish between these. Our main sencha productions are named for their season and cultivation method ([Sencha of the Spring Sun](#) and [Sencha of the Summer Sun](#)).

For more recent additions to our product catalogue, each name aims to evoke a connection to the natural world while conveying something of the tea itself, whether that's flavour profile, liquor colour, aroma, or a reference to the cultivar the tea is produced from. This is particularly the case when we want to highlight teas we produce from cultivars we use less - for example, [Sencha of the Gushing Brook](#) is produced from the Saemidori cultivar, and the name references the clear green liquor colour this cultivar is famous for.

We also differentiate our matcha products by naming them after their cultivars, and we reserve the term 'ceremonial' for spring matcha. Other grades are distinguished by shading and season.

Our kukichas are all named after birds, again referencing the natural world and evoking a similar effect as the term karigane. These bird names are inspired by the look of kukicha, tea which comprises stem and twig material, resembling a bird's nest. [Suzume](#), roasted summer kukicha, is named for the sparrow whose nest most directly resembles this tea's roasted twig material. [Tsugumi](#), roasted summer kukicha made from shaded material, is named for the dark brown colouring the leaf shares with the thrush. [Mejiro](#), our shaded spring kukicha, is named for the warbling white-eye, whose vibrant green plumage matches the tea liquor. Finally, [tsubame](#), our shaded summer kukicha, is named after the barn swallow, whose arrival coincides with the harvest season of the material this kukicha is made from.

Using Japanese tea names like sencha, genmaicha, kukicha, and such in the international market, rather than translating these names, serves a few purposes for us. It's a way to highlight Obubu's authentic identity as a tea farm first and foremost, with deep connections to Japan's tea culture and history. It's also an opportunity to practice our value of education with customers across the world - even when tea names might be unfamiliar to customers, our product pages, blog posts, social media, and other content provide a wealth of information about the meanings of the terms we use.

Some of our tea names, like [Sencha of the Autumn Moon](#) and [Hachiju Hachiya Sencha](#), also refer to important times of year or festivals in Japan. Given that Obubu's values include community and education, these tea names aim to reinforce the connection between festivals, changing seasons, and tea culture.

We don't use the label 'organic' for any of our teas, though we do have a ['natural' tea line](#). Organic certification requires a high cost (in money, time, and paperwork) that's not feasible for a small organisation like Obubu, and not all organic certifications are recognised worldwide. So we've opted to forgo this certification, and instead produce a 'natural' line of teas instead.

These are grown and harvested without the addition of pesticides or fertilisers; the only thing we add to our natural tea fields are tea trimmings and leftover tea dust from our sencha productions. With this approach, we're hoping to pioneer a more sustainable approach to natural farming, both in terms of environmental impact as well as feasibility for small organisations.

Sources

Much of the information in this guide has come from conversations with Obubu staff and Obubu materials like tour presentations, online content, and the intern drive.

Online sources include the following:

<https://fareastteacompany.com/blogs/fareastteaclub/manufacturing-process-of-oxidized-tea>

<https://www.shizuokatea.com/blog/what-is-karigane-cha/>

<https://jisho.org/>

<https://gjtea.org/japanese-black-tea-wakoucha/>

<https://gjtea.org/info/japanese-tea-information/japanese-tea-kinds/>

<https://obubutea.com/tea-names-part-1/>

<https://obubutea.com/tea-names-part-2/>

<https://obubutea.com/tea-names-part-3/>

<https://www.shizuokatea.com/blog/the-differences-between-kukicha-kariganecha-and-shiraore/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Etymology_of_tea

<https://qz.com/1176962/map-how-the-word-tea-spread-over-land-and-sea-to-conquer-the-world>

<https://yunomi.life/blogs/tea-info/language-lesson-ocha-means-tea-in-japanese-but>

<https://www.japanesegreenteain.com/blogs/green-tea-and-health/everything-you-need-to-know-about-different-types-of-japanese-green-tea>

<https://teaepicure.com/tea-varieties-cultivars/>

<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E8%8C%B6>

<https://chitracollection.com/tea-in-early-china-and-japan/>

<https://www.teafromtaiwan.com/blog/Oxidation.html>

<https://www.teaformeplease.com/the-great-tea-debate-oxidation-vs/>

<https://redblossomtea.com/blogs/red-blossom-blog/red-tea-black-tea-dark-tea-oxidation-and-fermentation>

Thanks

My biggest thanks to the Obubu family for the opportunity to live in Wazuka and play with tea for three months, and for giving me the time and freedom to follow some other interests as well.

Thanks so much to all Obubu staff for many helpful conversations around this project and tea words in general, and special thanks to George and Kayo-san for their in-depth help and answers to my more specific questions. Big thanks to Jean for help with project scoping. Thanks also to Obubu's vast library of materials to draw from for this project, including previous interns' projects, tea tour materials, blog posts on the website, and more.

And finally, thanks and all the love to my fellow interns and everyone who's encouraged me to keep rambling about tea, words, and this brilliant niche intersection of two of my biggest nerd-brain topics. Love you all so much xx