**INTRODUCTION**

At the height of the British Empire, England controlled more of the planet than any other country. The Empire controlled a quarter of Earth’s surface about as much of its population. The tea plant from China became one of the most important commodities of British trade, and the need to acquire tea lead to the expansion of the Empire and to several wars. Tea has a shady history as it came to England by way of trade, smuggling, drug dealing, and thievery.

In the 17th century, England participated in world trade to bringing riches into the country, beginning the cycle of expanding the Empire as a means to increase trade and increasing trade to expand the Empire. Once Europe was introduced to tea, the East India companies of the major European nations brought tea to the upper classes of European society, but due to taxation it was a luxury far too expensive for the majority of England’s population.

In the 18th century, England united with Scotland and Wales to become Great Britain. The British Empire continued expanding, adding many territories in India. The mighty British East India Company began feeling a pinch in their profits as smugglers started bringing tea to the middle and lower classes of the population.

When the British Crown lowered the import tax on tea, smuggling stopped, but during the 19th century, relations with China were strained. China was the world’s sole source of tea, and Britain was spending enormous amounts of silver to purchase tea. Britain began trading Indian-grown opium to China for British silver, which they used to finance the purchase of more tea. The Chinese tried to stop the opium trade as millions of Chinese became addicted to opium, but the British fought, and won, two wars to continue trading in opium.

Britain could no longer rely on Chinese tea, which had become a very important commodity in England, so they began looking for suitable tea-growing land within their own borders. India had many geographical areas similar to the tea-growing regions in China, but Britain lacked the necessary knowledge to grow or manufacture tea. To solve this problem, and to keep the flow of tea entering the Empire, the British East India Company arranged for Chinese tea plants, seeds, and equipment to be stolen from China and delivered to India.

The national identity of the British people was rooted in drinking tea. Through trade, smuggling, drug dealing, and stealing, tea became an icon of British culture that remains to this day.

**THE EAST INDIAMEN AND TRADING TEA**

All tea comes from one plant, the *Camellia sinensis*. Originating in China, ancient writings first referenced the drink in 2737 B.C.E.The Chinese, self-sufficient and distrustful of foreigners, had little need to trade with the outside world. They kept their culture and resources to themselves for centuries, and this included the tea plant (Ukers, 1).

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish trade with China in 1537, in Macau, which is part of the Canton region. They traded for porcelain, which was extremely rare in Europe and highly prized, but they eventually discovered Chinese tea. Tea was grown in small amounts on small, family farms, but when combined and brought to Canton for trade, it totaled massive amounts for trade (MacFarlane, 105).

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, 1558-1603, the desire for world trade shaped the national purpose of England. Expanding their reach through trade, they could bring home riches and become a maritime power. The spirit of exploration became the excuse, plundering the means, and vast riches the reward (Dalziel, 15).

To further trade interests, however, Elizabeth had to expand her Empire. Having colonial holdings around the world gave England ports, land, and safe passage from which to trade. The English people supported colonization, believing it to be a source of wealth, prestige, and security. The colonies were also places to relocate a growing population, criminals, the poor, and those who opposed religious reform.

The Dutch led the English in trade for several decades, and tea drinking in The Hague, the seat of Dutch government, became exotic, expensive, and very fashionable. Tea first came to England from trading with the Dutch, and by the time English traders first appeared in China in 1637 (Ukers, 38), the English aristocracy knew enough about tea that it was obvious tea would make a lucrative commodity.

Oliver Cromwell’s death ended the English Interregnum, the period of Parliamentary rule between monarchs, and King Charles II was restored to the English throne in 1660 after spending the Interregnum in The Hague (Scott, 100). From his time in The Hague, Charles was very familiar with tea, but it is his wife, Queen Catherine of Braganza, that is credited with introducing tea to the English court and aristocracy. Catherine preferred tea to alcoholic beverages, claiming alcohol “habitually heated or stupefied their brains morning, noon, and night,” (Ukers, 43), but above all, Catherine was Portuguese, and Portugal had been buying tea from the Chinese for over 100 years.

Tea quickly became as fashionable with English nobility as it had with the Dutch, but that did not mean it *tasted good* in those very early years. It was often stale from months or years of travel and storage, brewed in bulk, and sealed in ale barrels until heated up again and served (Scott, 89).

Nevertheless, tea’s popularity grew, and the English began to see tea as commodity that would fund the military and expand the Empire. Thus began a cycle of trading for tea to expand the Empire and expanding the Empire to trade for more tea—accomplished, in part, by a private company that would be in business for nearly three centuries: the British East India Company.

**The British East India Company**

When Queen Elizabeth first chartered the British East India Company in 1600, it was under the official name of the United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies but was also referred to as “John Company” or the “Honourable Company.” Other countries had well-established East Indies companies of their own, including the Dutch and the French, but the British East India Company reigned superior over them all, becoming *the* East India Company (Rose, 23).

The East India Company operated as the de facto government outside of England. They were permitted to acquire territory, mint money, command an army, sign treaties, make war or peace as they saw fit, and to develop judicial and tax system. The East India Company operated as an extension of the Crown, were the single largest employer in Britain, hired as many soldiers as did the Crown, and became the world’s first and largest multinational company (Rose, 23).

Chinese products, such as porcelain, silk, and spices were new, unknown, and very welcome back home, but English woolen broadcloth was not useful in the semi-tropical region of Canton. It may have been welcome in the cold northern regions of China, but Canton was the only port open to foreign trade. The only commodity the Chinese wanted from the British was silver (Tea Muse, np).

Other East India companies, primarily the Dutch and the French, rivaled the British East India Company. They were eventually eliminated as competitors, but the British saw them as enough of a threat to prohibit them from importing tea to England in 1669 (Fromer, 204) The East India Company now had a monopoly on tea coming into England that would last until 1834. The monopoly on tea benefited both the Company and the Crown, which charged taxes on all tea brought into the country (Ukers, 43).

By 1815, Britain dominated much of the world with military and economic control and the Empire had few rivals (Dalziel, 41). This could not be done without a strong military to support and protect colonies and possessions, but maintaining and expanding an empire was costly (Dalziel, 60). By taxing tea as a luxury item, the revenue from tea would go a long way in paying for British military expenses.

The East India Company controlled and limited the supply of tea by fixing the prices artificially high to protect profits and to ensure demand (Tea Smuggling, np). This made tea prohibitively expensive for the middle and lower classes, increased its appeal with the upper class, and brought in more money for the Crown. Every time the British Empire went to war, the amount of taxes on tea would rise (Ukers, 124).

**The Tea Climate in England – 17th Century**

Like other items imported into England, tea brought the larger world of trade into the domestic sphere (Fromer, 27). The British aristocracy frowned on those engaging in “commerce,” but before the East India Company’s monopoly on tea imports, the first tea importers were gentlemen who obtained tea from Holland and sold it to the friends. As J.M. Scott says in *The Great Tea Venture,* “Tea was above being commercial – it was a status symbol,” and in the upper classes, this status symbol was highly sought after (90).

The British learned how to brew tea properly, which improving the taste considerably. Drinking tea also brought men and women together for longer periods of time and on more equal terms. Afternoon tea became a part of normal life for the upper classes, when ladies and gentlemen gathered for a small meal of sandwiches, pastries, and large quantities of the beverage. They would reacquaint with one another, share each other’s company and ideas, and the ceremony and preparation of an afternoon tea was made more attractive by the rarity and cost of the drink (Scott, 90).

London coffee houses were popular places for gentlemen to gather, socialize, and discuss matters of the day. Coffee houses served coffee, chocolate, sherbet, and tailored their shops to individual characters of the male, upper class: Whigs, Tories, poets, law, business, and the clergy. The Crown was already taxing other luxury items, like tobacco and alcohol, and the fare sold at coffee houses. When coffee houses changed into teahouses, the clientele remained, and the shop owners did not miss the opportunity to pass the additional tea tax on to the customer (Scott, 152).

**THE SMUGGLERS AND ILLEGAL TEA**

European countries traded with China using the Free Trade system, in which imports coming back to their country were not taxed. Tax-free tea from Holland, France, and later, Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, came to the continent in larger ships and had lower operating costs than the now-bloated East India Company (Mui, 47).

Tea from the East India Company was legal, but because of the company’s monopoly on tea and the high taxes, smugglers had every incentive to bring tea into the country illegally. This began at the start of the 18th century (Tea Smuggling, np). As the East India Company grew, they edged out competition from the East India companies of the Dutch, Swedish, French, and Danish. Those companies, in turn, survived by selling tea to English smugglers, who were eager to acquire tea they could sell to the lower classes (Ukers, 68).

“Free trading,” a term for smuggling that was a play in support of the Free Trade system in Europe, became a cottage industry. So many were involved in smuggling that, at times, it was hard to find enough men to work the farms. Smuggling, it seemed, was more lucrative (Wilson, 41).

East India Company controlled importing and distribution of legal tea through London, and the London wholesalers controlled legal routes of inland distribution; but it was the smugglers that brought tea to everywhere in between, the remote interior (Mui, 51). Tea was then available to all classes in England, and the people, in turn, supported smuggling, including respected members of society like shopkeepers and clergy. Even those not directly involve in smuggling supported it indirectly by helping conceal, distribute, and purchase untaxed tea (Pettigrew, 43). Smuggled tea eventually had a massive impact on East India Company sales and profits.

Pricing legal tea was a very complicated process, and it fluctuated based on widely changing conditions. Bohea, a black tea, was the most common tea to be smuggled into Britain. If and when smuggled tea encroached on the legal tea trade, it would be reflected in the price of legal Bohea. The extra price included extra taxes, which was paid for by the wholesaler and then passed on to the customer (Mui, 52).

Competition soon developed between legal tea and smuggled tea. The smugglers sold tea for prices much lower than the legal marker. More people could then afford tea, and it also extended the network of distribution into the countryside. Attempting to undercut the smugglers, London wholesalers considered selling tea for less than the tax-free European prices, but they were largely unsuccessful (Mui, 56), The only way to stop the smuggling of tea would be to make tea cheaper and available to everyone by lowering taxes.

**Early Days of Smuggling**

There were two main methods of smuggling tea into England. The first method was to buy tea from other countries, and the second was to buy tea directly from East Indiamen. The East India Company allowed ship officers to leave a certain amount of space on the ship for their own “private trade.” They could make more money by selling their personal stash to smugglers, but they competed with their own employers (Mui, 45).

Smugglers could not rely on regular or consistent amounts of tea from the East Indiamen. It was usually cheaper than buying from the Dutch or the French, but the tea was only average in quality. The East Indiamen would anchor their ship outside of territorial waters before reaching the Thames to London, and smugglers would row out to them (Mui, 45). When the continental countries traded with China, they sailed back to their country on designated water routes established in the 1740s. To buy from these countries, smugglers learned these routes and would rendezvous with incoming ships to purchase tea (Mui, 50).

Some smugglers sailed directly to the continent, but tea smuggling mainly occurred along the southern coast of England, the Scottish borders, at the Isle of Man, the Isle of Wight, and around the Channel Islands (Pettigrew, 43). During the early days, smugglers’ boats were small and unarmed. To outsmart the excise officers, they had to rely on their ability to evade detection and operate in secrecy with the help of local citizens using light signals, coast watchers, and sheer trickery. Being further from the government in London, the profit on smuggled tea was higher in Scotland, but smugglers in England made more trips across channel to France and Holland. (Mui, 56).

Tea was packaged in oil-skinned pouches to keep the sea water out and then packed into cases that fit between timbers of boats and resembled flooring (Pettigrew, 43). When they got to the coast, if no immediate transport was available, smugglers would stash the tea under hedgerows, behind bushes, or in people’s barns and sheds.

Other illicit goods had long since been smuggled into the country using creative means. Gloves, lace, and jewelry filled fishermen’s boots; silk hid in ladies’ petticoats; amber and lace filled hollowed loaves of bread and tobacco in rolled sailcloth (Pettigrew, 42). Tea was much easier to smuggle than gin or brandy; it was light and easy to transport. It could be hidden inside a cape or greatcoat, held under hats, or even sewn into cotton pouches worn under clothing and hung from shoulders with suspenders.

**The “New mode” of Smuggling**

Noticeable changes in smuggling began taking place the northern part of Britain. As the government enacted stricter laws and more effective enforcement to stop smuggling, the smugglers became bolder and more creative. In “Smuggling and the British Tea Trade before 1784”, authors Lorna and Hoh-Cheung Mui write that this new mode of smuggling tea was highly organized and unparalleled any other smuggling in Britain’s history (56).

With this new mode, the smuggling trade became powerful and resourceful, using large, well-armed ships and large gangs of men. Smugglers used to sail from along the coast, from port to port, to offload tea, but the tea smuggling in the north became centered in Edinburgh and Aberdeen allowing mobilization of funds and illegal tea dealers (Mui, 60).

Eventually, merchants dealing in illegal tea began cooperating with each other in Scotland, forming large companies. Shopkeepers pooled together orders for tea, gave the orders to merchants, who went directly to the continent to fill the orders. They shared each other’s ports when needed, and enclosed large warehouses behind strong walls (Mui, 59).

Some lines between the legal and smuggled tea trades were distinct. The advantages of the legal tea trade were control of the major lines of distribution in Britain and the expert knowledge of buying and blending tea (Mui, 56). The advantages of the illegal tea trade were access to larger quantities of tea and the ability to distribute further inland to an untapped market. Adam Smith, the Scottish philosopher, warned, “Highly taxed articles, if in demand, find means of evading additional charges.” The demand for tea never let up, and as competition grew between legal trade and smugglers, the lines between legal and illegal tea began to blur (Mui, 56).

Dealers in illicit tea began taking advantage of legal systems of commerce, such as credit and insurance, and some legal dealers from London began traveling to the continent to buy tax-free tea. Smuggled tea began creeping into London, the center of legal tea trade, and still made a profit. Some brave smugglers would go as far as buying directly from East India Company auctions when the price was lower than they could get on the continent. Smuggling was becoming nearly legitimate.

By the time tea got to the teahouses and shops in Britain, legal and illegal tea channels often merged. Shopkeepers dealt with illegal traders in private while complaining about them in public. After 1745, legal market for tea began to shrink, which ultimately affected the East India Company’s profits, and the legal tea trade pressured British government to abolish smuggling (Mui, 70).

**Cultural acceptance of smuggling**

Countless people in the middle and lower classes bought smuggled tea (Wilson, 42). This included clergymen, who accepted smugglers and believed the ends justified the means and thought tea did not add to the social disturbances caused by alcoholic beverages. Sidney Smith, an English author and clergyman, was born at the height of smuggling days, said, “Thank God for tea! What would the world do without tea? How did it exist? I am glad I was not born before tea,” (Scott, 100).

Tea was so popular in the lower classes that people turned a blind eye to the actions of smugglers and helped them avoid the law. As illegal tea trade became larger, more refined and organized, smugglers required more support from citizens willing to risk the law, which now included stricter enforcement and more excise officers (Mui, 60). However, as as tea smuggling became more serious, smugglers became more dangerous. They were often hardened criminals, violent and intimidating, so it is likely many people were not given a choice.

One thing the people of all classes did *not* approve of was the adulteration of tea. The Chinese add dyes to green tea, such as copper carbonate and lead chromate—both poisonous—making the color of tea more pleasing to the British consumer. When the British learned about the Chinese coloring tea, public preference shifted from green tea to black tea—a preference that lasts to this day—but the Chinese were not the only ones to adulterate British tea (Ukers, 10).

British smugglers, merchants of illegal tea, and even some merchants dealing in the legal trade, adulterated their own tea by bulking it up with various plant materials to increase their profits (Fromer, 318). They added twigs, dried leaves from other plants, sheep dung, and sometimes floor sweepings (Wilson, 43). It seems whatever happened to be lying around could end up in tea. Reusing leaves was another form of adulteration. Some housemaids working for the upper class carefully dried tealeaves used from their employers’ cups, repackaged them to look like new, and then skimmed fresh leaves to sell or keep for their own use.

“Smouch” was sold as tea, but had not a single leaf from the *Camellia sinensis* plant (Fromer, 43). Today, smouch is sold throughout the world as “tisanes” or “herbal tea” and manufactured by most tea makers. The difference being tisanes today are appropriately labeled, and customers know what they are buying.

Adulteration of tea was profitable and hard to stop. Laws against adulterating tea were first passed in 1725, but they were difficult to enforce. London tea dealers and distributers began mixing and blending tea leaves to create uniform, consistent taste; this is standard in most food industries, and is still done today, but it is not the same as adulterating tea (Ukers, 121).

Smuggling flourished through the 3rd quarter of the 18th century, and by 1780s, an estimated 4-7 million pounds of tea came into England annually—a much higher amount than legal tea. There was a simple formula to stop smuggling: lower the taxes on tea, sell cheaper tea to all classes, sell more tea, and increased profits for the East India Company and the Crown (Tea Smuggling, np).

Prime Minister, William Pitt, reduced tea tax with the Commutation Act of 1784, cutting taxes from 119% to 12.5%. Tea smuggling declined almost immediately, information about prior, illegal activities was ignored, and many people in the illicit trade became legal tea dealers (Mui, 70).

When the rivalry between legal and illegal tea favored the smugglers, the East India Company found themselves with a surplus of tea on their hands. They would dump the surplus on the American market. It’s worth noting that the people of England had little to do with Boston Tea Party of 1773 and American War of Independence (or Revolutionary War) 1775-83. The East India Company tried to create a tea monopoly in the American colonies, as they had in England, but they were unsuccessful. In consequence, as William Ukers writes in *All About Tea*, “England lost an empire to oblige the East India Company,” (Ukers, 79).

**The Tea Climate in England – 18th Century**

Importing foreign luxury goods in the 18th century was associated with wealth and prestige in the upper classes, (Fromer, 62), but for the middle and lower classes, using smuggled goods had a certain excitement and romantic quality. It was also a way to show off contraband, like silks, lace, perfume, tea, and alcohol, which they could not otherwise afford (Wilson, 41).

After two centuries of importing porcelain from the Chinese, the British began manufacturing their own tea ware: teacups, teapots, saucers, bowls, and tea trays. Companies such as Wedgewood, Chelsea, Worcester, and Bow created beautiful work that is treasured today. J.M. Scott sees a contradiction in this, noting being “beautiful, delicate tea ware was develop while smugglers and revenue officers were knocking each other about so roughly” (Scott, 157).

In the early days of smuggling, shopkeepers had little knowledge of tea, but as people eventually became more educated about tea, their standards were raised, and the British people became very discerning customers (Mui, 51). If people wanted better quality and taste, they would have to purchase legal tea from the East India Company, which was usually pure and unadulterated (Wilson, 42). But as time went on, East India Company tea became average in quality and tea imported into Sweden and Denmark was the finest (Mui, 47), and tea from the French and Dutch tea was the middle grade.

Sweden and Denmark began importing Congou, a variety of black tea that the East India Company imported little of. Smugglers made big profit on Congou and often acquired types the East India Company did not. This gave the English people variety, and the lower classes occasionally drank better quality teas than the upper classes (Mui, 47).

**THE DRUG DEALERS AND SELLING OPIUM FOR TEA**

The East India Company could only purchase tea from China with silver, and this worked until the 1770s when silver became scarce during the American Revolution. When Britain was cut off from the supply of Mexican silver they previously accessed, they needed a new supply of silver or a new currency to purchase tea. Opium became this new currency (MacFarlane, 109).

Opium would come to change many things in the economic, political, and social arenas of the British and Chinese Empires. “There was a time when maps of the world were drawn in the name of plants, when two empires, Britain and China went to war over two flowers: the poppy and the camellia,” (Rose, 1).

As tea became part of the British national identity, opium penetrated China. The poppy plant, *Papavar somniferum*, from which opium is made, was unknown in China until the 1600s. Dutch traders introduced China to Middle Eastern opium and the Native American calumet, also called the peace pipe (Trading Opium for Tea, np).

The Chinese government officially discouraged opium smoking, but this was ignored by Britain’s need for tea and a large Chinese population addicted to opium (Fromer, 37). Britain sold Indian-grown opium to China in exchange for silver, and then used that same silver to buy tea from China. This triangular trade, opium, silver, and tea, “powered a world economy” for nearly 200 years (Rose, 2).

**The Opium-Silver-Tea Triangle**

Britain became addicted to tea, China became addicted to opium, and the East India Company benefited financially from both by facilitating the opium-silver-tea triangle (Trading Opium for Tea, np). The Company organized and financed poppy growing, and the cultivation and distribution of opium in India, and then sold it to British privateers, or “country firms,” who took the opium to China. These country firms made a profit, but the East India Company would only allow them to sell opium to China in exchange for British silver. This gave Britain the financial means to pay for tea, but, of equal importance, this system also rotated British silver back into the British economy, allowed them to control the outflow of silver, and provided the necessary funds for governing India (Ukers, 80).

The British controlled most of India by 1818 by bringing smaller Indian territories under their control with persuading and force (Hodge, 345). India’s resources of opium, and later, of Indian-grown tea, and the human labor required to grow both, made India the most valuable colony of the British Empire.

The Dutch and Americans joined the British by trading Turkish-grown opium with China, and opium imports into China increased 1000 times by 1830 (MacFarlane, 109). In 1831, in an effort to curtail the drug, the Chinese government imposed severe restrictions on the East India Company, but the Company kept their hands clean by having the country firms bring opium into China on their behalf and by keeping it to islands just outside Canton (Opium Wars, np).

For years, the British and Chinese participated jointly in a dramatic façade to continue smuggling opium into China. The British ships were allowed to offload opium outside Canton and start to depart. The Chinese would appear to give chase, and once out of sight of the mainland, they would let loose a “furious bombardment of fiery discharges,” straight into the water, and report back that they sunk another “barbarian smuggler.” (Trading Opium for Tea, np).

Britain had failed to legalize the opium trade with China through diplomatic efforts, so they bribed Chinese customs officers including them on profits of smuggled opium, and the only thing the Chinese accomplished was that the Emperor no longer received an import duty on opium (Trading Opium for Tea, np).

Even though the East India Company grew poppy in India, they opposed poppy industry in the British-controlled Assam region. Many of the Assamese were already addicted to opium, which made them poor workers for cultivating *tea* (Fromer, 322), so the Company controlled the problem my controlling the cultivation.

Opium was generally accepted in Britain at the time, and it was openly available for self-medicating in the form of laudanum. They did not have a problem with opium, so the British people believed that the Chinese did not either (Opium Wars, np). Drinking tea at anti-slavery and anti-alcohol meetings, the social changes in the west were financed with a drug addiction halfway around the world (Scott, 58).

The website for the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding writes that the “British waging war for the sake of selling a poisonous drug constitutes the most shameful leaf of human history.” However, it could also be argued that they waged war for the sake of the other leaf, the non-poisonous *tea* leaf, or “liquid jade.” The website also states that leaders in concealed the dangers of opium from the British public, while British traders handed out free samples of the drug to induce addiction (Opium Wars, np).

This codependent system of opium ad tea became unbalanced, and the amount of opium smuggled into China began to outpace the amount of tea leaving the country (Scott, 62). Something had to give.

**The Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860)**

As more of the British economy and lifestyle began to depend on the tea trade, the British began to feel vulnerable to a foreign, largely uncooperative, country for one of their main commodities. This “vulnerability” was emphasized in England to justify to the people that legitimate commercial and military aggression was necessary against China (Fromer, 358). These are themes and propagandistic techniques that would be repeated later, throughout the world, during the World Wars.

The situation came to a head in 1839 when the Chinese emperor ordered thousands of pounds of opium to be confiscated from a British ship and publicly destroyed. Queen Victoria’s advisors at the time were men who fought in the Napoleonic Wars and had a great deal of influence over foreign policy and public opinion (Rose, 4). They responded by sending an army, and the first Opium War began (Pettigrew, 88).

In the first Opium War, 1839-42, the Chinese military were no match for the British. China’s desire to suppress Indian-grown opium trade failed, and British acquired the control Hong Kong and five new ports from which to trade. These concessions were extremely heavy-handed and humiliated the Chinese, but thus were the place of tea in the British Empire. Without the continue sale of opium in China, they could not purchase tea, but the war caused rising anti-foreign sentiment in China (Dalziel, 70).

Tension and resentment led to the second Opium War, or the “Arrow War,” 1856-1860. The Chinese captured a British boat named The Arrow, and accusing the British of smuggling, which they likely were, but it was still against Chinese law. Again the British responded with war and again the Chinese were overwhelmed by superior technology.

This time, the Chinese paid the British large amounts of silver for reparations, began allowing foreigners to travel in China’s interior, legalized opium trade, opened 10 new ports, and allowed missionaries to promote the Christian faith (Hodge, 147). As harsh as these concessions were, Britain could have conquered China but chose not to. They wanted the current Qing Dynasty to remain in power, but as a weakened negotiating party, and they wanted China to accept free trade and diplomatic relations in the style developed by European nations (Hodge, 217).

To put the opium sales into perspective, in 1820, an average of 10,000 cases of opium entered China annually; by 1870, opium imports averaged 100,000 cases annually. Opium sales peaked by 1879 and did not wind down until the First World War (Hyam, 28).

Although the British finally got China to legalize the opium trade, they did not want China to legalize the *cultivation* of poppy within their Chinese borders. If China began growing poppy and producing their own opium, Britain could not longer pay for tea with Indian-grown poppy (Rose, 4). As relations with China were crumbling, the British realized they needed to find alternate sources of tea, and that meant growing it somewhere within the border of the British Empire.

**The Tea Climate in England – Early 19th Century**

The British opinion on selling drugs to China did not change after the Opium Wars. The East India Company closed its doors in 1858, and the private firms that transported opium on the Company’s behalf took over the growing and processing of opium within India. One such firm was Jardine & Matheson. James Matheson, founder, reportedly said, “Selling opium was the moral equivalent of selling brandy.” It may be understandable that little distinction was made between the two in England, when one considers it is likely there were many more British alcoholics than there were British opium addicts (Hyam, 28).

Drinking tea was associated with the respectable, civilized, and mild England, and this was set against the association of opium, and China, as barbaric and strong. This cultural delineation was used to justify the continuation of the opium-tea-silver triangle for as long as they could (Fromer, 44). Surprisingly, both tea and opium were identified with the *consumer* and not the *producer*. Opium was made by the British, but smoked by the Chinese; tea was made by the Chinese, but drank by British. This identification with both products was convenient only for the British (Fromer, 320).

Through marketing and advertising, the tea British industry tea helped create Britain’s national identity. The tea drinking public envisioned themselves as contributing to the growth of British naval, economic, and colonial power every time they purchased tea (Fromer, 29). New national themes in favor of expanding the British Empire began to take root among the people: competition among industrialized nations, national greatness, new international markets, and the revival of Christian missionary work in the British colonies (Hodge, 216).

In the early 19th century, tea drinking began to affect the inner workings of British daily life (Fromer, 59). “There are several things that Englishmen like to do without their women-folk (yet without any lack of love for them), but drinking tea is not one of those things – quite the reverse.” (Scott, 152). Men took tea in the teahouses and at home. In the 1850s, women began having tea in each other’s home, in public tea gardens, and by the 1880s shops began to serve afternoon, and women begin to frequent teahouses without a male chaperon.

The end of smuggling in the late 18th century did not stop the adulteration of tea, but it did start a strong national interest the field of botany (Tea Smuggling, np). The interest in botany led to one important discovery that was crucial for Britain in growing their own tea: one plant, the *Camellia sinensis*, makes all tea, and from this one tea plant, all four kinds of tea can be made: white, green, oolong, and black.

The differences between these major types of tea are determined only by manufacturing, such as steaming the leaves to make green tea and fermenting the leaves to produce black. The term “fermenting,” which is a chemical change, speaks to Western inexperience and ignorance of tea production, and their centuries of experience in making wine and beer. However, no chemical change actually takes place in manufacturing tea. A more suitable term would be “oxidizing” as the differences in manufacturing the four types of tea have to do with heat and exposure to air (Scott, 172).

**THE THIEVES AND STEALING TEA**

About the beginning of the 19th century, the British began to view their success as an international power as a mark of *divine* power. Because they were able to implement and enforce their systems of government and law in their colonies around the world, the British developed a view of racial superiority, which would eventually disturb relations between Britain and their colonies, especially in India (Dalziel, 41).

One advantage the Chinese had over the British was centuries of experience with tea. Chinese tea was grown and produced thousands of miles from the consumer in strict secrecy. Britain had no control over production, no way to improve or monitor quality, no way to apply systematic knowledge of scientific management to increase yield or protecting tea from pests (MacFarlane, 108). Britain’s consumption and demand of tea required large plantations or estates. They could satisfy this high demand if they could apply principles of the industrial revolution to tea growing, such as economies of scale and scientific production, but they could never achieve this while relying solely on Chinese-grown tea (MacFarlane, 105).

18th and 19th century Britain did, however, support worldwide scientific exploration and the quest for botanical knowledge, both of which influenced imperial expansion (Dalziel, 100). If the boundaries of the British Empire could be shifted to include territories where tea could be produced and manufactured, this would create a safe, British source of the national beverage that they could refine and control from the seed to the cup (Fromer, 28).

International plant hunters searched and collected different types of seeds and plants. They were adventurers that often traveled independent of governments and botanical gardens. Plant exploration and exploitation led to assessment of plants for their use in cultivation and colonial development, and they played a big part of the economic development of growing empires, including the British Empire (Dalziel, 100).

Botanical gardens sprang up around the world, extending the national identity of the imperial country to the colony, while also showcasing native plants from that colony. In the 1780s, Britain planted tea plants from Chinese seeds, for ornamental purposes. They allowed the plants to grow into trees, not realizing the tea plant would produce tea-quality leaves if the plant was kept the size of a small shrub (Ukers, 134).

The British knew tea must be moved to British-controlled land, but they also knew the tea must be grown properly and efficiently, at a new site using few laborers and modern machinery, yielding large amounts while keeping production costs down and quality up (MacFarlane, 105).

**An Incentive to Steal Tea from China**

The Chinese intentionally fooled Britain by adulterating tea to “please the eye of the unsuspecting consumer” (Fromer, 35), but they also sabotaged seeds purchased by westerners. They did not package them in soil, allowing them to spoil, (Ukers, 114) they boiled seeds to prevent them from germinating, and resorted to what Ukers calls “all kinds of strange tricks to defeat the propagation of the China tea plant outside of China,” including selling moldy, diseased, and dead seeds (Ukers, 141).

After more than a century of diplomatic trade with China, Britain was no closer to knowing the secrets of growing, picking, roasting blending, or manufacturing tea (Rose, 28), and what little the Company learned from Chinese growers had broken down, and new methods were not found to maintain or increase yield (Ukers, 150). Instead of discouraging the British from growing their own tea, it gave the British an incentive to steal tea seeds from China.

The East India Company controlled vast areas of territory in India, had a powerful army at its disposal, and ambitious officials. This was a combination that bred corruption, mismanagement and fraud, and when combined with profit losses from tea smuggling, the Company was eventually in a dire financial situation (Dalziel, 40). When the Crown allowed private merchants to sell Indian goods around the world in 1813, the Company lost their monopoly on Indian goods. However, and were left to govern and retain the valuable trade monopoly in China and fended off competition for additional 20 years until that too ended in 1833 (Pettigrew, 88).

While traipsing around India in 1823, British explorer, Charles Bruce, discovered indigenous tea plants in Assam (Ukers, 79). To find wild tea in India just when China monopoly dissolved was considered divine intervention and was a rather ethnocentric point of view, suggesting that India, in some way, was always meant to be British (Fromer, 51).

Julie Fromer argues that discovering native tea on British soil helped remove lingering anxieties of basing a national identity on product that is imported from a foreign source (Fromer, 52). Discovering a native tea plant also had the potential of providing the British Crown income and ensured British taste for tea could be satisfied domestically.

Tea grown on British soil became urgent national need, but the East India Company did all it could to discourage tea cultivation in India (Ukers, 137). The Company was fearful the effect would have on the only remaining monopoly it had, the China tea trade. They ignored Indian-grown tea sources of tea, and, for years, they delayed tea cultivation in India in order to remain the sole source of tea consumed in Britain (Fromer, 47).

India is a large country with vastly diverse ecological systems, and the question of where to grow tea remained. The Indian Himalayas were much like Chinese Himalaya, with high altitude, rich soil, clouded in cool mists that provide water and shade (Rose, 31) But the native tea found in Assam was grown in a hot terrain.

Governor General Lord Bentinck established the first tea committee in 1834. The Tea Committee was to find the knowledge, skill, and seeds required to grow tea in India because “some better guarantee should be provided for the supply of the tea than that already furnished by the toleration of the Chinese,” (Ukers, 137). The Tea Committee also sent a company secretary to purchase seeds and knowledge from China. Not surprisingly, the Chinese seeds did not thrive in India and were likely sabotaged; yet the English at home became enthusiastic about growing their own tea.

The East India Company was now forced to assist in the searching for new territory to grow tea (Pettigrew, 88). The Company no loner had the clout with the Crown, or the trust of the English people, to refuse.

**Stealing Tea from China**

The East India Company planned to steal tea plants and seeds in, what Rose says, was “nothing short of the industrial espionage… the greatest theft of trade secrets in the history of mankind,” (Rose, 34). But the British were not the first to try this. The Dutch first smuggled information, tea plants, seeds, and finally Chinese workman out of China and into Java and Sumatra from 1827 to 1833 (Scott, 71). Britain watched the Dutch and learned from their failure to produce good crops. Like the British, the early efforts of the Dutch-grown tea was due to ignorance on growing methods ecological conditions necessary for growing tea (Ukers, 109).

Transplanted tea bushes from China did not thrive when moved to India, it was thought they could not grow in India at all, which pleased the Chinese, and to an extent, the East India Company. But healthy Chinese tea *seeds* could grow in India (Ukers, 109). East India Company was aware by now that getting seeds out of China would be diplomatically impossible, and that seeds purchased from the Chinese were usually sabotaged—they would have to steal seeds. “They needed a plant hunter, a gardener, a thief, a spy, and his name was Robert Fortune,” (Rose, 5).

Robert Fortune was a Scottish botanist, hired by the East India Company in 1848. In order to move around the country and steal Chinese tea seeds and plants, he disguising himself as Chinese and explained his strange looks and accent by claiming he was from a distant province. Remarkably, this worked. China was a large country whose people moved around very little. Fortune procured tens of thousands of tea seeds, hundreds of tea plants, and a dozen Chinese tea workers, and the necessary equipment and knowledge to cultivate tea in India (Rose, 191).

The British in India did not wait idly by for Fortune to solve their problem. Before he was even hired by the East India Company, the tea committee and the Company experimented with the native tea plant found in Assam, transplanting it throughout India. They discovered two things: many areas in India were not suitable for growing tea, and the tea plant needs to grow for several years before it produces mature leave that can be harvested.

The first batches of Indian-grown tealeaves during this trial-and-error process were poor quality (Rose, 31). The quality improved with subsequent trials, and first decent batch of tea was shipped to London in 1846. This batch of Indian-grown tea with its strong bite and hot, sooty taste, received lukewarm reviews, but London merchants and blenders recognized that more experience in cultivation and manufacture of Indian tea would improve the quality and fill Britain’s national need (Ukers, 146).

The 1840s began the end of British dependence on Chinese tea in England, and native Indian tea began to replace Chinese tea in 1860s (Ukers, 151). Once the British realized tea growers did not need to be Chinese to successfully grow and manufacture tea, and that they did not necessarily need Chinese tea seeds to produce good tea, private tea plantations and companies sprang up throughout India (Scott, 83).

Native Indian tea, and British expansion into the regions of India where it best grew, was “national right and responsibility” of the paternalistic, British government (Fromer, 51). Indian-grown tea turned out to be the most lucrative source of wealth and government revenue in the British Empire, and the industry employed more than a quarter of a million people. It took the British decades to learn how to cultivate native Indian tea to its fullest potential, but once they did, growing tea in India allowed the Britain to maintain control of the entire process of tea manufacturing, and to retain all of its profits (Ukers, 133).

**The Tea Climate in England – Late 19th Century**

Indian-grown tea began thriving on British plantations throughout India, Assam, Burma and Ceylon. Despite the increased tea supply, the East India Company kept tea prices high and controlled its supply until they went out of business in 1874. England became the biggest consumers of tea, outside of China, and they began seeing bold and imaginative advertising for tea, which influenced advertising and propaganda methods for decades to come (Pettigrew, 89).

To appreciate the amounts of tea grown in India, in 1866, Britain imported 97 million pounds of tea from China and 4 million pounds from India. By 1896, Britain imported 24 million pounds of tea from China, 122 million pounds from India, and 80 million pounds from Ceylon. Green tea from China was still appreciated in England, but by the end of the 19th century, Britain was a nation almost exclusively of black tea drinkers (Pettigrew, 89).

The British people were enjoying the fruits of their labors in the industrial revolution, and with the lower taxes, it was now commonplace for the lower classes to drink legal tea. The “English worker without tea is like an engine without oil, which does not necessarily work if you do not give it some, but certainly does not if you don’t,” (Scott, 152).

The East India Company controlled two-thirds of India, which became extremely controversial with English public by the mid-1800s. The British Parliament limited the Company’s financial and administrative autonomy until the Indian Mutiny of 1857, after which the British government terminated the Company. In 1858, India came under the control of the British Crown (Hodge, 204) and the era of the “Raj” began. Raj is Hindu word for “rule,” and the Crown ruled India until 1947 (Hodge, 587).

A cup of tea was now a daily occurrence throughout all regions of England. The cup of tea could then be seen as the embodiment of the British Empire itself. The porcelain cup came through British-controlled Hong Kong, the tea from British-controlled India. Sugar is grown in British West Indies colonies, and milk comes from domestic, English dairy farms.

**CONCLUSION**

Britain’s history with tea dates began in 1610. As the Empire became enamored with tea, acquiring tea became a national obsession. In the 17th century, the British East India Company imported tea, along with silk, spices, and other luxury goods, from the mysterious Orient.

After enjoying a trade monopoly on tea, the East India Company’s biggest competition was with domestic smugglers. Smuggled tea brought the liquid jade to the masses, which could not afford the highly taxed item. By the end of the 17th century, smuggled tea may have put the East India Company out of business had the British Crown not stepped in, reducing the tax on tea and eliminating smuggling nearly overnight.

Britain had become economically dependent on China, as it was the only source of tea. Instead of continuing to spend increasing amounts of silver on tea in the 18th century, the British began cultivating the poppy plant in India and sold opium to China, using the proceeds of opium to pay for more tea, a process which would not be stopped even after two Opium Wars.

In the 19th century, Britain realized it needed a new source of tea, and the Empire began a quest to find suitable land for growing it in India. After little success of growing tea on their own, Britain stole thousands of tea plants and tea seeds from China and planted them in India, the British-controlled, Indian-grown tea industry flourished.

Britain achieved in a few decades what the Chinese had protected for more than 15 centuries, the domestication of the *Camellia sinensis* and the domination of the world’s tea industry. Sometimes a luxury, sometimes a necessity, tea has earned a permanent place of prominence in the British culture and lifestyle.

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