How Britain Stole Tea from China

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **How Britain stole tea from China, in summary:** Britain depended on Chinese tea and had only silver to pay. How Robert Fortune's industrial espionage smuggled the plant and broke China's monopoly.

One of the largest acts of corporate espionage in history was committed for tea, and it changed the world's supply forever. The man's biography is at Robert Fortune; this page is the event and its consequences, within the history cluster.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in March 2026.

The strategic problem

After the Opium Wars, Britain still depended on China for the tea itself and for the closely guarded knowledge of how to grow and process it. Breaking that monopoly was a strategic priority for the East India Company, which needed tea it controlled, grown on its own colonial land.

Robert Fortune's mission

In the 1840s and 1850s the Scottish botanist Robert Fortune was sent into the closed interior of China, at times disguised in Chinese dress, to acquire tea plants, seeds and, crucially, the manufacturing know how. He used the then new Wardian case, a sealed glass terrarium, to transport thousands of living plants across the world, solving the problem that had defeated earlier attempts.

The transfer to India

Fortune's smuggled plants and recruited Chinese tea workers were taken to British India, seeding the Himalayan and Assam tea industries with Chinese plants and Chinese expertise. It was, in modern terms, the theft of an entire industry's intellectual property at national scale, and it worked.

What it changed

Within decades India out produced China for the British market, China's monopoly was broken, and the global tea map was permanently redrawn, the plantation story in tea and the British Empire and the modern character of those regions in the Ceylon and Assam pages. Almost every everyday teabag today descends from this act.

Espionage, the facts

Romantic accounts call Fortune an adventurer; bluntly, this was state sponsored biopiracy and industrial theft. This wiki says as much while still finding the story fascinating, applying the same neither cynical nor credulous standard used on the people pages and the people behind tea.

The legacy in your mug

If you drink Indian or Ceylon tea, and almost everyone in Britain does, you are drinking the direct result of this espionage. It is the sharpest single illustration of the cluster's thesis: the history is not background to the cup, it is the cup, and brands like Dilmah exist commercially in its long shadow.

The theft, at a glance

Element	What happened
The problem	Britain depended on China for tea and had nothing China wanted but silver
The mission	The East India Company sent botanist Robert Fortune into China in disguise
The method	Industrial espionage: smuggled plants, seeds and processing know-how, plus trained workers
The transfer	The knowledge and stock seeded plantations in India, chiefly Assam and Darjeeling
The consequence	China's monopoly broken; cheap imperial tea permanently

What was stolen, and what survived

It is worth being precise, because "stole tea" undersells it. Fortune did not just smuggle a few plants; he extracted an integrated technology, viable stock and seeds, the processing craft of how to wither, roll, oxidise and fire the leaf, and the skilled Chinese workers who knew how to do it. China's monopoly was never really about the plant alone but about that accumulated craft, which is why this counts as industrial espionage rather than botany. What it did not change matters just as much: it broke the commercial monopoly and moved the cheap, mass, blended trade into the empire, but it did not erase Chinese tea culture, the connoisseurship and regional styles that still lead the world for many fine teas. Drinking a Chinese green today is drinking the tradition that survived; drinking an Assam is drinking the industry that was moved.

Practical shopping line for this topic: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Have a wander through the tea range; UK addresses get free delivery on orders above £35.

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teas · Match the tea to the moment. A cup at 6am and a cup at 4pm do not have to come from

the same pot.

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