

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.

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for How Britain Stole Tea from China. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-britain-stole-tea-from-china/>*

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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The strategic problem, How Britain Stole Tea from China. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-britain-stole-tea-from-china/>*

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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Robert Fortune's mission, How Britain Stole Tea from China. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-britain-stole-tea-from-china/>*

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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The transfer to India, How Britain Stole Tea from China. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-britain-stole-tea-from-china/*

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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for What it changed, How Britain Stole Tea from China. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-britain-stole-tea-from-china/*

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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Espionage, the facts, How Britain Stole Tea from China. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-britain-stole-tea-from-china/*

Romantic accounts call Fortune an adventurer; bluntly, this was state sponsored biopiracy and industrial theft. This wiki says so while still finding the story genuinely fascinating, the same neither cynical nor credulous standard used across 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

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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

Element	What happened
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

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for What was stolen, and what survived, How Britain Stole Tea from China. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-britain-stole-tea-from-china/>*

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 is as worth noting: 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.

Reference noted

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- [EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine \(2015\)](#)

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 delivery is on the house above £35.

FROM THE CURATOR *teas* · Match the tea to the moment. A 6am cup and a 4pm cup do not need to be the same brew.

More tea history reading

- [History of British tea](#)
- [The history of tea](#)
- [The Opium Wars and tea](#)
- [Tea history timeline](#)

Our shelf picks

Source: [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for How Britain Stole Tea from China. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-britain-stole-tea-from-china/*

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- [Black tea](#)
- [Oolong tea](#)
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- [Herbal tea](#)
- [Caffeine in tea](#)
- [How to make tea properly](#)
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