The Tea Trade: The Story Told Straight

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The tea trade, in summary:** Tea became a global commodity through a story that is both fascinating and dark: Chinese monopoly, a silver drain solved with opium and war, the theft of Chinese plants, and colonial plantations in India, Ceylon and beyond. The modern trade is the direct descendant.

The tea trade usually gets told as a charming tale of clippers and china cups; told straight, tea's rise as a global commodity involves monopoly, silver, addiction, war, smuggling and colonial plantation labour, and it is as dark as it is fascinating. A guide that keeps the romance and drops the discomfort is not history; it is marketing.

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

How tea left China

For nearly two millennia tea was effectively a Chinese product: China grew, processed and guarded it, and the rest of the world bought it on Chinese terms. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) made the first commercial shipments to Europe around 1610, and British East India Company ships joined the China trade from 1664. In Britain tea moved within decades from an aristocratic curiosity, popularised at court by Catherine of Braganza, the Portuguese wife of Charles II, from 1662, to a national habit reaching the working class by 1800. This was never simply trade between equals; it was a powerful European chartered-company system extracting a product from a country that, for a long time, held all the cards, and the friction of that imbalance drives most of what follows.

The silver problem and the opium response

This is the uncomfortable core that polite histories skip. Britain wanted ever more Chinese tea but had little China wanted in return, and the Chinese economy ran on silver, so Britain paid in silver, draining its reserves year after year. The "solution" the East India Company engineered from the 1770s was to smuggle Indian-grown opium into China to reverse the flow, knowingly fostering mass addiction to fund the tea habit. When China tried to ban the import, Britain fought the First Opium War (1839-1842) and the Second (1856-1860) to force the trade open. The sentence most tea histories will not write: the British cup of tea was, for a crucial period, financially underwritten by a deliberate drug trade and the wars that protected it.

Breaking the monopoly: theft and plantations

To escape dependence on China, Britain pursued two routes. First, plantations: wild tea found in Assam in 1823 gave the Company a basis for an Indian industry, and by the 1850s vast plantations had been established in Assam, Darjeeling and the Nilgiris, frequently on harsh, coercive labour terms. Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) lost its coffee industry to a fungus in the 1860s and turned the cleared estates over to tea, a major exporter by the 1880s. Second, industrial espionage: in 1848 the Scottish plant-hunter Robert Fortune, disguised as a Chinese merchant, smuggled out tea plants, seeds and processing knowledge that helped the Indian industry start. The cheap, abundant Empire tea that made the drink universal in Britain was inseparable from colonial land control and plantation labour, and saying so is accuracy, not editorialising.

The modern globalised trade

The twentieth century scaled the trade up and spread it further. British colonial introduction of tea to Kenya in the early 1900s built an industry that is now the world's third largest producer, most of it bound for the British market; Dutch colonial expansion left a substantial Indonesian industry; and Argentina and Malawi became smaller but significant producers. From the 1970s, specialist retailers in Britain, Europe and North America revived interest in single-origin and craft teas, putting fine Chinese, Japanese and Indian leaf back alongside the mass-market blends.

What the history is not

Candour cuts both ways. Acknowledging the dark structure does not require pretending no one ever enjoyed tea innocently, or that every trader was a villain, or that tea-growing regions today are defined only by that past. The trade was extractive and the Opium Wars were colonial aggression rather than mere "trade disputes", and the clipper-ship romance is only part of the picture, but many tea-producing countries are now independent industries with their own pride and craft, and the drink itself is blameless. A fair history gives credit for the skill, the technology and the cultural exchange, and names the harm just as plainly.

Why this history still matters

It matters because the modern world of tea, who grows it, who profits, why it is so cheap, why "ethical" and "Fairtrade" labels exist at all, is the direct descendant of this trade. Contemporary supply chains still reflect colonial-era structures, plantation labour systems and the gap between low producer prices and high retail margins; certifications such as Fairtrade exist partly to address that legacy; and the fact that you can buy Kenyan teabags in a British supermarket is the direct result of colonial investment a century ago. The reward of knowing the trade's past is drinking the present cup with your eyes open, which is the consistent standard of this whole wiki.

The tea trade, by period

Period	What happened
Before 1600	Tea is an internal Chinese commodity, traded along the Silk Road and Chinese coastal cities
1610	The Dutch East India Company makes the first commercial shipment of tea to Europe

Period	What happened
1650s to 1660s	Tea spreads in Britain via coffee houses; Catherine of Braganza popularises it at court from 1662
1700 to 1830	British East India Company monopoly on tea imports; smuggling supplies about half the market
1773	Boston Tea Party: colonists dump 342 chests of Company tea over British taxation
1839 to 1860	The Opium Wars: Britain forces China to open ports after the opium-for-tea scheme
1840s to 1900	Britain plants tea in India and Ceylon; by 1900 Indian tea supplies most of Britain
1900 to present	Modern globalised trade: Kenya, Indonesia, Argentina; a specialty revival from the late 20th century

The cup in front of you is the end result of four centuries of commerce, conflict, colonisation and craft. To taste the major chapters, the teas with the deepest lineage are Keemun (classic Chinese black exported along the historic routes), Assam (the workhorse of British India), Darjeeling (the colonial premium estates) and Ceylon (the Sri Lankan plantation industry). The companion Opium Wars, tea in India and tea smuggling pages tell the chapters in full, and you can explore the living end of that history in the full tea shop.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

FROM THE CURATOR

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