



The Dark and Devious History of Tea: The Beverage That Floated Empires

By Darius Okolla



No one knows when we, as the human race, decided that tea is worth drinking, though tea remains fabled as one of the world's oldest beverages. Its story of origin is scant - there is uncertain allusion to a strong beverage in a Chinese document from 59 B.C, and some architectural evidence pointing to a century earlier, traced to the Han Yangling Mausoleum in Xi'an in western China, which was built for the Jing Emperor Liu Qi, who died in 141 B.C.

But from its murky beginnings, this unassuming leafy bush would come to shape history as we know it. For millennia, tea has graced the tables of the mighty and the lowly, fuelling wars, building empires, and bonding societies in a relentless quest for that 'wondrous beverage' packed with caffeine and theanine.

There are four types of tea - black tea, green tea, white tea and oolong tea, originating from two varieties of the plant in the Camellia family: *Camellia sinensis*, a narrow-leaf variety originating in central China and Japan thriving in the cool, high mountain regions there, while the broad leaf variety, *Camellia assamica*, thrives best in the moist, tropical climates found in Northeast India and Yunnan provinces of China.

Turkey leads the global tea consumption at 6.96 million pounds with Ireland, United Kingdom and

Russia coming in at second, third and fourth place respectively. Morocco is the highest tea consumer in Africa with annual consumption of about 2.5 million pounds followed by Egypt at 2.3 million pounds. As of 2017 China made about \$1.45 billion dollars form tea exports while Kenya remains the largest global tea exporter, accounting for 25% of all tea exports worldwide.

Protected by the mountain mists, and given just enough humidity, the plant produces shiny, dark green leaves and small, tender, white blossoms. The final quality of tea depends on a lot of factors - the soil, climate, altitude, and expertise of the tea-pickers.

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Research shows that tea has not always been consumed as a beverage. It was used in burial rituals among Chinese royalty, as a mixture containing the buds, some roasted barley, salt, and or ginger. It would later adopt other uses including as dowry payment for aristocrats, around 640 A.D. A thousand years later in the 1600s the buds would land in the British Isles, sipping its way into daily culinary preferences as it provided relief and a 'high' for workers who often had to contend with the drudgery of manual labour. Tea would have remained just another drink in the periphery of the British civilization were it not for its accidental encounter with a powerful ally - sugar. Out of this marriage came global capitalism, royal tea culture, health fads and the darkest of all outcomes - slave plantations.

The tea craze reached British high society through Catherine of Braganza, a Portuguese aristocrat who married into the British monarchy, to Charles II. As an early celebrity endorser of tea, her wedding to Charles II helped the fad to take off among the British nobility, making it as native to British royalty as white weddings.

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Catherine of Braganza's enthusiasm for tea, as well as the expensive nature of the new invention, sugar, made tea a hallmark and fetish for the status-chasing elites.

From the 1600s the fortune of tea as a global beverage seemed relentless. Its cultural phenomenon as a mark of status meant lots of people developed new literature on this 'wondrous beverage', key among them an English writer named Thomas Tryon, who counted Benjamin Franklin as one of his fans.

Tryon was an advocate for tea in moderation, and not conspicuous consumption as was the case with the aristocrats of the day. Tryon developed self-help books around tea, for which his enthusiasm was tempered by his conflicted relationship with sugar. On one hand, he hated the slavery of the sugar plantations in the West Indies, while still savouring the magical effects of the substance in his tea. Tryon, well aware that the cruelty of slavery drained into the cups of British royalty as an enchanting

beverage, expressed a love-hate relationship with sugar and by extension tea.

Some of the same health and cultural claims about tea that people like Tryon were making, including mental clarity, esteem, and momentary high, and the perceived analgesics of sugar - were also being made about coffee. But coffee lost out in prestige because of its origins in the Arabian Peninsula, then a poor periphery of the British Empire and its imperial interests. With little capacity for industrial production, coffee was limited in reach and adoption.

Meanwhile tea, tied to the far more developed Far East commercial treadmills had an easier time rising to meet demand in the West. England engaged in trade with China, through the East India Company, and the Dutch East India Company, exporting spices, silks and other goods like opium in exchange for tea. The multiplicity of good fortunes; a huge demand back home, naval trade, existence of the huge trading firms British East India Company and Dutch East India Company, spurred the first impulses of modern capitalism.

Soon the Chinese rejected opiates owing to their addictive effects and the British realized that if they were going to keep pace with the tea craze back at home and not have to deal with the Chinese, they had to own tea plantations themselves.

Tea was such a lucrative trade, that, by the mid-19th century, the firm, through a Scottish botanist went on to steal tea seedlings and the secrets of tea production from China and used that to establish a tea empire in conquered India.

The British understood that getting their hands on the plant, and learning how to grow it, was not just good business, it was a cultural prestige, commercial coup and a strong geopolitical move.

Historian Sara Rose in her book *For All the Tea In China: How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History* describes how Scottish botanist had written about the marvels of tea in his travel journals during a trip to China in 1845. His writings caught the attention of Victorian high society, who then tasked him to make a return visit and sneak out tea seedlings out of China and to learn the mechanics of tea production, which would then be planted in British-controlled India.

Fortune did not know it, but this would mark the beginning of the end of Chinese domination and a rise of imperial Britain, both countries' fates tied to a bunch of leaves dipped in hot water mixed with spoonfuls of sugar. As Sarah elaborates, (the aptly-named) Fortune never saw himself as part of a global conspiracy, but just as a humble botanist, even though he was about to commit what she calls "*the greatest single act of corporate espionage in history.*"

The impact of the espionage was incalculable; within decades, India surpassed China as the world's largest tea producer, China sunk never to recover until the 1970s, Britain rose and the global commerce moved to the West for the next 180 years.

A new tea empire arose during that time, and true to Tryon's fears and disgust, a new kind of capitalism developed. It would be spurred on by bureaucratic, infrastructural, commercial and military capabilities, supporting slavery, colonialism and land expropriation aided by plunder through British institutions.

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That legacy implicit in our tea making cultures is still with us today. The great inequalities, between class divides and between nation-states that characterize the modern world can be traced to this global commerce’s long and violent operations.

The tea empire in India evolved over centuries as a critical cog and a microcosm of the larger problematic capitalism with its oppressive social and political structures in places such as West Indies the Ottoman Empire and mid-1800s western India.

The centrality of slavery in the massive production of Tea Empire in India, the rise of 18th centuries tea merchants in South Asia and their centrality in the slave trade irked Tryon and his ilk. In tea, Tryon saw the dehumanizing excesses of global economies as well as the racist debauchery of the Euro-American enterprise in subjugating distant lands to feed the royal fetish for tea under the banner of violence and racism.

The British Empire’s ability to modernize and industrialize rested on the power and reach of the two companies, their control of distant lands, naval superiority, and enslaved labour in India. Slavery, therefore, has always been an integral part of the sugar and tea economy; a core part of the Western world, and it took a violent struggle, most successfully in the 1790s in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) to break its yoke.

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Tea and sugar proved to be convenient alternatives to alcohol, a good addition to British culinary options, and good source of cheap calories for the masses. As the Industrial Revolution got underway, where the factory replaced the plough beginning in the mid-1700s, tea sweetened the transition away from hard farm labour giving the factory workers regular hits of caffeine.

The mercurial duo of tea and sugar made not just cultural sense as a classy drink but also spelt a boon for British government coffers. As the wheels of industrialization grew louder and churned faster, tea accounted for every tenth pound into the royal coffers, while sugar imports could sufficiently fund the then global British navy. Sugar made tea popular while tea made sugar valuable to the empire.

The tea-and-sugar revenues filled the British royal navy coffers enabling them to conquer distant lands around the globe in the 1800s at a terrible human cost, especially in Africa and the West Indies.

In America, of all the British sensibilities that the Americans adopted, tea drinking seems to be one of those that simply dissolved into the Atlantic Ocean, with minimal traces of tea culture making it on the journey west. The Charleston Tea Plantation in Wadmalaw Island just southwest of bustling Charleston, South Carolina, is the only lush, green landscape that holds on to legacy of tea in the whole of continental America.

The sprawling 127 acres of gleaming rows of green leaves unfolds in Waccamaw, one of the Sea

Islands that dot the shoreline. The plantation is owned by the Bigelow Tea Co., in partnership with third-generation tea taster William Barclay Hall. It is what remains of the legacy of the Boston Tea Party or what was simply known as “the Destruction of the Tea in Boston till 1830s.”

That incident over 240 years ago on the evening of Dec. 16, 1773, involved the Sons of Liberty in Boston, disguised as Mohawks, stealing aboard three British merchant ships and tipping over more than 340 chests of quality East India Co. tea into the sea. This destruction of tea leaves as a protest against England’s unjust taxation policy sparked the Revolutionary War between Great Britain and its Thirteen Colonies culminating in the independence as the United States of America.

On the other side of the world in the choppy seas of the Indian Ocean lies the archipelago of Sri Lanka. This tea paradise’s long relationship with beverage goes back to 1890 when Sir Thomas Lipton arrived on the island of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, seeking to acquire real estate. 128 years later, the tea industry employs 1 million of the 22 million citizens.

A little further northwest of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) lies Myanmar (Burma), with its evolving generational politics of tea culture. Burma, as it is more popularly known internationally, is grappling with its tea-taking culture truncated across generational lines. Currently only middle-aged men keep the consumption of steaming *laphet yay*- Burmese tea alive. *Laphet yay* is the signature Burmese tea; black tea, evaporated milk and sweetened condensed milk. From Puta in the northerly region to Naypritaw in the central regions and in Yangon, tea consumption is more than regular past time; it’s a cultural moment for Burmese citizens. Word has it that the pro-democracy 8888 political uprising against the 1988 military rule might have started in a tea shop somewhere in the capital, Yangon.

The Indian subcontinent, one of the cradles of ancient tea, is home to Darjeeling, a boutique tea, referred to as the ‘Champagne Of Teas’. According to Jeff Koehler, author of *Darjeeling - The Colorful History and Precarious Fate of the World’s Greatest Tea*, Darjeeling remains India’s internationally renowned tea thanks to its auction sales even though it makes up a mere 1% of the 2 billion pounds of tea that Indians consume annually. India produces just 8 million pounds of Darjeeling tea out of 87 tea estates in the Himalayas.

However, it is further south of the Equator in Kenya that the true nation-state building power of tea lies. Measuring just about 582,000 square kilometres, Kenya has about 198,000 hectares of tea plantations churning about 480,000 tonnes of tea annually. Introduced in the country in 1903 by GWL Caine the crop would be commercialized 21 years later by Malcolm Fyers Bell. Currently, Kenya has surpassed India and even China- the ancient homeland of tea - in tea production. Small-scale production is managed through 66 factories handling about 500,000 small-scale farmers on 100,000 hectares of tea. Most of it is auctioned in the city port of Mombasa and exported abroad for blending with other lower quality tea varieties.

Now as the fortunes of the Asian giant rise once again, China is becoming a fierce and aggressive player in the tea sector, yet it still has to compete with Kenya and India who are former British colonies.

So was Fortune history’s beguiling economic spy, or a mere botanist who brought tea and its technologies west?

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former British colonies.

Fortune never saw himself as a spy or a great player in global geopolitical games. It is as though his greatness (or villainy) lies accidentally in him being a China and plant expert right at the point where the leaves that shaped the world lay halfway around the world from his Scottish neighbourhood. He was not a hero in his own eyes.

Nevertheless, by his small act, never has the fate of history been so drastically dependent on a bunch of leaves since Eve in the Garden of Eden, as when Fortune smuggled that humble seedling.

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