

How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History

Who was Robert Fortune?

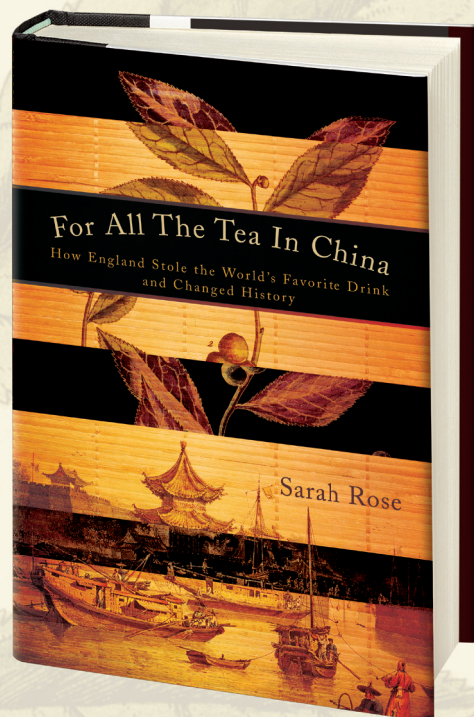
- Robert Fortune has been called the Indiana Jones of tea. He fought pirates, traveled undercover in Chinese clothing, and was attacked by bandits and opium addicts. “His picture belongs next to portraits of Churchill and the Queen,” said one reviewer in England.
- Fortune stole an entire industry from one country, China, and transplanted it to another, India—the most successful act of corporate espionage ever.
- Fortune was a contemporary of Charles Darwin and Joseph Hooker, naturalists and plant hunters who also changed the world.
- Fortune’s experiments with the Wardian Case paved the way for the transport of Chinchona trees to India (for malaria-fighting quinine) and the creation of a rubber industry throughout the Pacific.
- Fortune is the father of the kumquat (*Citrus fortunei* or *fortunella*) and also discovered the winter blooming jasmine, the bleeding heart, the white wisteria, and the corsage gardenia, all common in modern gardens.

What about tea?

- Tea is the most popular drink on earth next to water. Until Robert Fortune’s trips in the mid-19th century, no one in the Western world knew how it was manufactured.
- Robert Fortune proved that Green tea and Black tea came from the same plants. Until his notes were published, it was believed they were entirely different species.

What does the story teach us about today?

- The East India Company was the world’s first multinational corporation and teetered on the brink of dissolution—rather like American automakers. In desperate times, the corporation resorted to desperate measures: espionage.
- The Chinese were adulterating green tea for the British market with poisonous dyes—blue cyanide and yellow gypsum—a story that echoes today’s melamine/milk scandal.
- While Chinese intellectual property theft makes headlines now, the British Empire enacted the largest theft of trade secrets in history when it stole tea seeds, plants, and recipes from Imperial China.



March 2010

978-0-670-02152-9

\$25.95 (\$32.50 CAN)

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