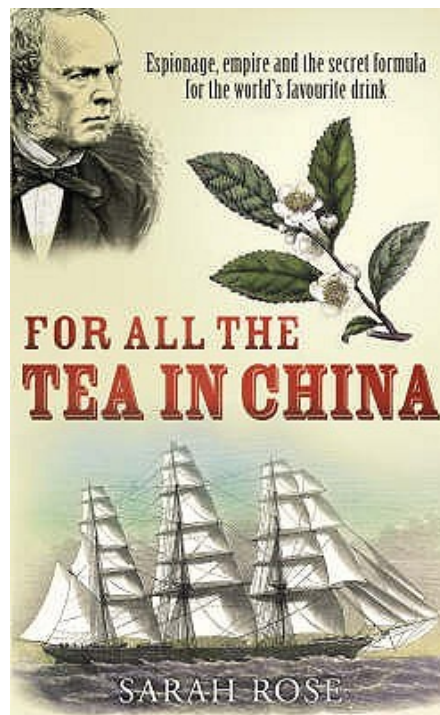




For All the Tea in China: Espionage, Empire and the Secret Formula for the World's Favourite Drink

Sarah Rose

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Robert Fortune was a Scottish gardener, botanist, plant hunter - and industrial spy. In 1848, the East India Company engaged him to make a clandestine trip into the interior of China - territory forbidden to foreigners - to steal the closely guarded secrets of tea. For centuries, China had been the world's sole tea manufacturer. Britain purchased this fuel for its Empire by trading opium to the Chinese - a poisonous relationship Britain fought two destructive wars to sustain. The East India Company had profited lavishly as the middleman, but now it was sinking, having lost its monopoly to trade tea. Its salvation, it thought, was to establish its own plantations in the Himalayas of British India. There were just two problems: India had no tea plants worth growing, and the company wouldn't have known what to do with them if it had. Hence Robert Fortune's daring trip. The Chinese interior was off-limits and virtually unknown to the West, but that's where the finest tea was grown - the richest oolongs, soochongs and pekoes. And the Emperor aimed to keep it that way.

For All the Tea in China: Espionage, Empire and the Secret Formula for the World's Favourite Drink Details

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From Reader Review For All the Tea in China: Espionage, Empire and the Secret Formula for the World's Favourite Drink for online ebook

Rachel says

Simplistic, disjointed, poorly edited (hello, typos, I didn't expect to see so many of you here today), and NO FOOTNOTES. How the hell do you write a nonfiction history book and have no information about where you got your information? Also, things that were clearly from one (ahem, RACIST) man's memoirs were stated as fact. What. The. Hell.

Example: One tale about Robert Fortune (the botanist/adventurer/world-traveler/spy that is essentially the main character of this story) has him on his boat with a Chinese crew when they are attacked by pirates. According to this "nonfiction" book, while the entire crew flees below as cannonballs are whizzing overhead (including one that juuuuuuuust misses Fortune, not that he even bats an eye), Fortune takes aim at the pirate ship with a shotgun in one hand and a pistol in the other, two-fisted shooting his way to victory and causing the pirate ship (that is stocked with cannons, remember) to turn tail and flee. At which point the Chinese crew emerges from below deck to prostrate themselves in front of Fortune, honoring him for his bravery. (Think, "WE'RE NOT WORTHY!" from Wayne's World.)

Now, a good historian retelling this from what I assume is Fortune's memoirs, because they appear to be the only primary source Rose has used here (although we'll never know because, again, no citations, no footnotes, no information....), would say that while this is the only firsthand account of this incident, we must take it with a HUGE grain of salt. After all, travel memoirs were mega-bestsellers in Victorian England and the spicier ones sold best. Also, readers should always be suspicious of tales in which the writer of the only known record comes off as the big hero--there might be a bit of embellishment. Also, there's the whole racist tone of the whole thing that makes it doubtful that any of the Chinese crew got interviewed about the incident.

All in all, although Sarah Rose can tell a good story, no doubt about it, this book is NOT worth reading. I'm kind of shocked that it has such good reviews.

Liz says

I loved this book.

On Amazon a few people have pointed out inaccuracies such as monetary conversions and mixing up 'English' and 'British'. Honestly, I didn't notice any of these and as I haven't got a memory for facts and figures it doesn't bother me much. What I did notice was a great story.

I've read a lot of factual books and they seem to fall into two categories:

Those which present just the facts - there will be very little dialogue or embellishment

Those which craft a story from the facts - they read mostly like fiction but with occasional divergences into facts and figures where appropriate.

This is definitely the latter. This is a hugely informative, rollicking adventure about an incredible man, with lovely little excerpts from his published works on his travels, extra detail about other characters involved in the wider historical background, and mind-boggling explanations of the effect tea has had on the world. Rose really makes you care for Fortune, and almost even more so, for the fates of his delicate tea seedlings, she

exposes the incredible technology of the day and the vast influence of the East India Company in great detail and never for one moment becomes a boring slog.

Jennifer says

Some authors should not read their own books. Imagine an excitable fourth grader reading her own screenplay aloud, doing all the voices. We made it through one disk.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books
(hide spoiler)]

Michele says

Corporate theft and espionage ~ all for a good cuppa! Well, not just for a good cup of tea; more to keep and expand Britain's world supremacy in the nineteenth century. Sarah Rose's exploration into the transplanting of tea from China to India is filled with a wide variety of topics, as well as unforeseen outcomes. The book covers topics from botany and Wardian cases (early, very large terrariums that kept propagated tea plants alive during months at sea) to the geopolitics of the times (swapping opium for tea and the forced opening of China to more trade). She even argues that the East India Trading Company commits the one of the first thefts of protected trade secrets, and certainly one of the largest, by sending Robert Fortune to China in order to steal tea plants, manufacturing secrets and knowledge workers. Who would have thought that seeking out the perfect cup of tea for a nation wild about the drink could lead to so many outcomes, both positive and negative. A fascinating read on many levels.

Kirk Battle says

Part adventure story, part economics of trade, part social history, it does a really good job of covering all the angles of what's happening in the world. It helps that I'm a tea fanatic and only order the good stuff, so learning about the tea making process has been fun as the English steal it. You basically had these two countries selling each other drugs, the British dumping opium into China and then the Chinese selling tea to the English. It's neat that the main character is this botanist who is just crazy enough to run around China in an obscure disguise and risk getting killed. Lots of random trivia, like how the guy invented a way to ship plants across the ocean, bureaucratic hurdles, and the quirks of Chinese culture.

Probably the most admirable feat is how Sarah Rose acknowledges the social issues going on while managing to find the adventure angle in it. I don't imagine anyone is overly horrified by the idea of stealing trade secrets from the Chinese, but I didn't know about coolie slavery exchanges until reading this. Lots of stuff about what jerks the East India Company is.

Plus the guy who stole tea from China is named Robert Fortune. I can't think of a more badass name for a mercenary botanist.

Hannah says

Rating Clarification: 4.5 Stars

Engaging, highly readable and very informative. The perfect reading balance of entertainment and education. Provided just what I love about well-written non-fiction. 1/2 star deducted due to a very lackluster, tacked-on conclusion.

Recommended.

Caroline says

[For All the Tea in China : How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History] by Sarah Rose is a wonderful book tracing the origins of tea since the 1800s. The journey of green and black tea from the mountains of China to the slopes of the Himalayas to the common teapots in England is outlined in detail, thanks to the memoir and copious notes taken by Robert Fortune, the man responsible for not only bringing high quality teas to England but also for bringing back many flowering plants and hedgerows that are now found in many an English garden.

For such a slim volume, this book packs a great deal of fascinating information. There's the journeys of Robert Fortune itself and his adventures among the Chinese during the mid 1800s, how he disguised himself as a mandarin to avoid hostilities, his brush with pirates in the high seas, and his experiments which improved the success rate in transporting delicate plants and seeds from China to India and back to England. In addition to this, bearing in mind the focus of this book being tea, we are also treated to an insight into the secrets of tea growing and harvesting, which had remained closely guarded secrets by the Chinese, until they were uncovered by Robert Fortune and smuggled out of China. We're even given tips to the proper way to brew a good pot of tea.

Lest you think this is nothing but a horticultural lesson, Ms Rose, includes relevant historical notes on the Taiping Revolution, the Opium Wars, the beginnings of the Indian movement towards independence, Britain's economic and industrial growth and the smuggling of Chinese coolies out of China to other parts of the world. She explains not only what these events are, but what caused them and why they were important events.

Robert Fortune's notes on the Chinese secrets of tea-growing and harvesting, in addition to his hiring and transporting Chinese tea experts to India, can be considered industrial espionage, for surely if he had been discovered by the Chinese government, he would have been arrested and possibly executed.

Fascinating read.

Ran says

This book details Robert Fortune's industrial espionage of the tea plant and production process. Traveling

deep within China in the 1840s, Scottish botanist Fortune extracted not only the plant (seeds and yearlings) on behalf of the British East India Company for production in India, but also gathered the expertise of several tea workers to supervise production of the commodity abroad. Author Sarah Rose attributes much to Fortune, including the "discovery" of many exotic plants in China, use of the Linnaeus taxonomy, and improving the health of British tea drinkers by exposing the use of poisons to color green tea. She states, "His work made it possible for entire agricultural economies to find new markets in new homes." (244) While I find some of the work hyperbolic, Rose's approach to the topic is from the popular history perspective and reads easily.

Clare O'Beara says

I've really enjoyed reading this book every evening. Robert Fortune, head of the Physic Garden in Chelsea, London, was sent out to China to search for and steal the secrets and seeds of tea.

The Scot led a charmed life for at this time, 1840s, China was largely closed to foreign travellers and resented having lost a war to better military technology and being forced to trade on British terms. The author makes no bones about explaining what the East India Tea Company - the world's first global company - was up to. Opium poppies were brought from Afghanistan to India, grown there, the opium from them sold to China, in order to gain silver from China, as the only thing the Chinese would accept in trade for tea was silver.

As Fortune travelled he saw the huge nation ravaged by one in six people being addicted to opium. Farmers lived in poverty and worked hard daily with little hope of advancement except through scholarly studies in the coastal cities. No wonder everyone he hired wanted to scrape off a percentage for themselves. Once he obtained tea plants, cuttings and seeds, he had to ship them, hoping the glass Ward cases would work. Ward cases were also used to steal rubber and chinchona bark from South America. Then Fortune had to find out the trade secrets of making black tea and green tea.

The central theme of the book is the wonderful and finicky tea plants and their cultivation, harvesting and the preparation of tea.

We also learn about the tea clippers bringing crops of tea to Britain faster, so as to keep it on sale when fresh, until their replacement by steamships which could travel through Suez; and the porcelain packaging and ballasting the cargoes. The Indian Mutiny and weaponry are extra detail.

Enjoy with a cup of your favourite brew. I would love to see this book filmed, for the fantastic scenery as much as anything.

I borrowed the book from the RDS Library. This is an unbiased review.

Shahine Ardeshir says

What interested me in picking this book up, and what kept me reading all the way through was the story: How the British stole tea-making from China, and started growing it in India. The biggest heist in the history of the world! As an Indian, I took the fact that we grow copious amounts of world class tea here for granted. I didn't realize that this was all a function of our colonial past, and so I wanted to know more. It formed part

of my ever-growing interest in the true impact of colonisation on the world.

Granted, this is not the most serious of history books I've read - but that's partly why I enjoyed it so much. It was a light, colourful story of a Scottish botanist, who literally goes on an adventure to delve into China, and come away with everything needed to grow tea in India, from physical seeds and saplings, to detailed notes on how to harvest the crop.

(Also, if you're Indian, don't expect to hear much about us, beyond the obvious fact that we were a British colony at the time. The book's lens is clearly and squarely on China, with minor episodes in the UK.)

A fun, entertaining read, that moved at a quick clip, I'd highly recommend this for an afternoon or two at home, curled up in bed with (dare I say it?) a cup of tea!

Jodi says

In preparation for my trip to China a year and a half ago I read everything about China I could get my hands on. I still love to read books about China because it is such an interesting culture.....this book didn't disappoint. I struggled with 3 or 4 stars though because sometimes I had to go back and reread because it seemed to jump from one idea to the next with little transition. However, the story of Robert Fortune infiltrating a country that was pretty much closed to the outside world and managing to steal hundreds of thousands of tea plants and seeds fascinating. Fortune's espionage was good for England because they were able to drink quality tea for a lower price but bad for China because they lost their greatest national treasure that the outside world clamored for in great numbers! Today there are foreign policies to protect countries from being taken advantage of in this way!!!

I enjoyed reading more about the proper rituals involved in serving tea - In China I was shown how the first cup of tea is always dumped out in order to wash out all the tannins and impurities. The lady teaching me said the first cup is only for nosy neighbors or people you don't like. In the book, it was stated that the first cup is for your enemies because tea business is so dirty with tea leaves drying in the sun among insects, and dirt. The book mentioned that tea was produce in need of washing - never thought of it that way before! I also enjoyed learning how tea was picked (only the top-most tender leaves), dried in the sun, pressed, then baked until it is five times smaller than when it started. Also, I always wondered what the difference was between green tea and black tea - now I know. They are from the same plant, but black tea is allowed to ferment longer. Interesting!!! I also found it interesting that at one point the Chinese were putting dyes in the tea for the Western market because they thought it would look better to the Western eye. Sadly, the dye they used was poison - iron ferrocyanide (cyanide) for a blue color and yellow powder that was gypsum/calcium sulfate! Yikes! When I bought tea out in San Francisco the man showed me blue tea and mentioned that it was from the region not for the blue hands people had when making it. I didn't understand but now I do - he wanted to make sure I knew the blue tea I bought was not colored with cyanide! Eeek!

I will drink my next cup of tea with so much more respect.....but should I enjoy a nice cup of British Earl Gray, Darjeeling, or some of my Chinese blends.....hmmmmmmmm.....what a dilemma!

Heidi says

This book has it all - well written, great history, botany, linking historical periods with nutrition, travel, shipping of plants... I knew of Fortune's Double Yellow rose, but had no idea of Robert Fortune's other

botanical exploits in China. If you like plants, history and tea, this is the book for you. I can't wait for Sarah Rose's next book.

I listened to the audio book. It was read by the author. Took a bit to get used to the voice, but totally fine once I adjusted.

Abigail Bok says

For All the Tea in China is an adventure story in the guise of a history book, and is a delight to read. It follows the work of botanist Robert Fortune, who in the 1840s was tasked by the British East India Company to travel illegally into the Chinese hinterland and steal high-quality tea plants and seeds, as well as the secrets to processing both green and black tea. The Company wished to undercut the Chinese tea trade and establish tea plantations in India, where they would be under the Company's control. At this time, China closely guarded the secrets of tea cultivation and processing, and did not allow foreigners to set foot on Chinese soil except for a few licensed trading ports. The Company saw Indian production of tea as a way to control every stage of the trade and avoid the limitations and inconveniences of trading with China.

Our dauntless hero disguises himself as a mandarin from a province nobody has ever visited and boldly goes where no Westerner had ever gone. He encounters pirates, opium addicts, banditti and Buddhist monks. The rip-roaring fun of his adventures and humor of clashing cultural assumptions is tempered with awareness of the damage done and tragedies caused by Western invader/explorers in their encounters with the other cultures of the world. Fortune is a classic of the European explorer type, bold, wily, adaptable, and locked in his own cultural assumptions; I kept hearing the Randy Newman song "The Great Nations of Europe (in the Fifteenth Century)" when reading about him.

Beyond the picaresque story line, the book is full of interesting information and offers a broader perspective on the effect of the nineteenth-century tea trade on a global scale, and I savored every page. The ending felt a bit rushed—or perhaps I simply didn't want it to end. The last chapter rushes us through a summary of what came after Fortune's travels that was so packed with interesting factoids that I was left a little dizzied; but it made sense that those sequelae should be only summarized, as they weren't the core of the story. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in history of the British Empire, trade, botanical exploration, nineteenth-century China or India, or travel adventure.

Abigail Hartman says

I don't read much modern history, so Rose's account of Robert Fortune and his transmission (read: theft) of tea from China to India was new and intriguing for this tea-drinker. The trouble was that I didn't find the book particularly well written. Sentences were choppy, often broken up when they could have stayed in a single paragraph or stuck together when they should have been separate (or just didn't flow at all). The literary quality was distracting, and despite the dramatic set-up, the book didn't deliver enough drama or suspense to dull me to those annoyances. Indeed, I expected a lot more, well, danger than Fortune encountered -- or that he seemed to encounter. Obviously a historian can't create drama where there isn't any, but I do wish authors wouldn't set up expectations that they then cannot fulfill.

Also, I know it's popular history, but the lack of footnotes makes me sad.

Kathy says

This book should be riveting, but I found it less than interesting. I think this is so because I listened to it on audio and was unengaged by the reader. The book is read by the author, who is a fine writer, but a terrible reader: to the point of being outright distracting. Her voice is little-girlish, and she lacks flow when reading. I think I will go back and actually read this, because there is a good story in here. Perhaps it won't seem as choppy when I read the text. I strongly caution anyone who might listen via Audible or CD's to reconsider the audio format for "For All the Tea in China."

Raghu says

Whenever one thinks of the East India company, one thinks of its gradual evolution from a small trading post in a corner of India to eventually occupying the country and ruling it in the interests of Britain. But, little does one reflect on what the Company did in China, which had far-reaching consequences for itself and the world. Prior to the 19th century, China held the secrets of how to cultivate Tea, harvest and manufacture it on mass scale for the markets around the world. The British were hooked on this drink. They were importing ever increasing amounts of tea from China by the beginning of the 19th century. This cost the empire ever more silver and bullion by way of payments. Financially, it became imperative for Britain to manufacture tea themselves in their colonies. In fact, tea was also made in Assam in India but the quality was poor and could not compete with what China offered.

The solution England found was in Botany. In the opening years of the industrial era, botanic research was a counterpart to today's industrial research Laboratories. Britain employed Botanical imperialism as a way of making colonies pay their way. Plant hunters became the R&D men of the empire. The East India company decided that they must send one of their botanists to venture deep into China, in the forbidden tea-growing areas and steal not only the plants but also the know-how of cultivating and manufacturing it. British botanists had already done similar errands in China before. In fact, China is the source of many of the plants that adorn the British landscapes today, like the yellow forsythias, the rhododendrons, azaleas and camellias and many others. This book is the intriguing tale of how England accomplished this espionage operation in China where Green tea and Black tea were grown. It is the tale of how they stole the know-how and the seeds to make the Himalayas in India the center of tea production and capture the markets from China.

Robert Fortune, a botanist from Scotland, was chosen by the East India Company for this job. He was a good choice because Fortune had already spent three years in China, collecting many of its botanical treasures like the winter jasmine, the Fortunella and the white wisteria and shipping them to Britain. Stealing tea from China was a dangerous and criminal endeavour but Fortune was excited by the idea and agreed to do it. He set out to venture into the tea-growing regions in the interior of China, to the provinces of Zhejiang and Ahui where Green Tea was grown and then on to the remote mountains of Wuyi Shan in search of Black tea. He disguised himself as a Mandarin, with a pigtail and shaven head. He employed an entourage of Chinese workers, guides and coolies, some of whom were loyal and some others somewhat disloyal. The journey was nothing if not adventurous, as Fortune had to constantly make sure that he was not found out as a foreigner in these forbidden areas. Pirates and dacoits harassed them on their way but Fortune ended up successful. Not only did he evade detection, he also successfully managed to steal seeds, plants and the knowledge and bring them to his masters in India. All this was done not without a little help from the Chinese themselves in return for some silver. Colonialism was always aided by compradors in selling their own nation's wealth and subjugating their own people. This is what happened in India as well. The Chinese rulers eventually found out that their tea secrets have been stolen but they realized it too late to do anything about it. Britain captured the tea markets with their premium quality teas grown in Darjeeling in India. The author declares: "Robert

Fortune's theft helped spread tea to a wider world at lower prices. He democratized a luxury, and the world has been enjoying it ever since."

The book is more than just about Tea alone. Partly, it details Chinese culture and tradition as well. There are interesting paragraphs on the concepts of Mianxi and Guanxi, two inescapable facts of life in China. Guanxi is about the individual existing in a network of influence, a matrix of duties and social connections. Mianxi is about Face, the loss and gain of it. It is a Confucian concept, where one gains face and an increase in social status when social obligations were met. In reverse, one loses face if he fails those whom he is socially connected or obligated to. The Confucian tradition also believed in a kind of caste hierarchy. Occupations were seen in a hierarchy, with the highest belonging to scholars and poets, who preserved beauty and celebrated order; peasants came next, the cogs in the national machine. Merchants were ranked at the bottom of the collective heap, earning a living off the hard labor of others.

Reading the book, I could not but think about all the talk of industrial espionage by China today. There is the allegation that the Chinese steal intellectual property and do not play by the rules of the game. This book is a timely reminder on the predatory practices of the world's first multi-national, the British East India company. The East India company's depredations in India are well-documented. But, the story of how the Company stole the secrets of cultivating and manufacturing tea from a secretive China shows how the British botanist used every ruse in the book in this effort. Their conduct was no different from what the Chinese are accused of today. Capitalism has its own insatiable impetus to seek more resources, more labor and more markets in order that it can expand. This is what propelled British capitalism to subjugate India and go after its wealth. It is this same urge that wanted to steal tea plants and its manufacturing secrets from China so that they can capture the world market for British made Indian tea. Now, in the 21st century, it is this same expansionist urge that makes China aggressively seek industrial secrets from the West by any means.

Though this is a well-written book which sustains interest all the way, there are a couple of glaring inaccuracies in the book. The Prologue claims that opium financed the management of India and that England believed that India would eventually become self-sustaining. Many recent books have shown that India was not only self-sustaining but actually financed Britain's rise from the 18th to the 20th centuries. India not only funded the East India company's disastrous war in Afghanistan in 1839 -1842 but later on, both the World wars as well in terms of men and material. In the first page of the book, the author refers to India, as a subcontinent of princely states united under the banner of Great Britain in 1757. The Union of India was actually accomplished by independent India nearly two hundred years later. Elsewhere in the book, Buddhism is described as expounding a philosophy that all beings pass through a series of lives, paying for the sins of one life with a good deed in the next. Religions originating from the Indian soil do not believe in sin or original sin in the Judeo-Christian sense. The idea of Karma follows rather from the cycle of cause and effect.

Finally, the author posits a grandiose theory that 'there was a time when maps of the world were redrawn in the name of plants, when two empires, Britain and China, went to war over two flowers: the poppy and the camellia'. Even if one thinks it may be a bit of a hyperbole, the idea is well argued in the narrative. Anyone interested in Tea or the East India Company or history in general, would enjoy reading this book.

Autoclette says

How such an interesting subject, full of vivid possibilities, could be rendered in such a droll way is beyond me.

Peter says

This is a book of many parts. Part history, it recounts the Imperialistic reach of the British quest for tea; part biography, it tells the story of Robert Fortune, the man who brought the tea of China to the cups of the British household and in the process perhaps perpetrated the greatest theft of property in history. The book is also a lush travelogue of the Far East with stories of beautiful mountains, pirates, Fortune assuming disguises to fool the Chinese, and the habits of Chinese households and places he visits.

While not a serious academic analysis of any one area, and the author admits such, it is a wonderful book to reveal and recount how the tea you are drinking came to be.

A book and a cup of tea. A perfect combination.

George says

Sarah Rose focuses on an important, but somewhat obscure subplot of the history of the British imperialism in Asia -- Scottish botanist Robert Fortune's employment by the East India Company to steal tea plants, as well as the relevant technologies and expertise, from the Chinese. His work will allow India to start producing well-regarded tea of its own, taking some of the power away from the Chinese and helping tea to grow in popularity by opening up the market and reducing prices. It's an important, interesting story, but it's apparent that Rose is limited by a relative lack of primary sources. As she discloses at the end of the book, Fortune's wife burned many of his papers, so she bases the book on Fortune's published memoirs and correspondence saved by some of his contemporaries. As a result, the book is frustratingly thin in some places and begins to skip around as it progresses. Rose tries to cover for this by presenting interesting facts and perspectives on related topics -- the firearms development that brought down the East India company, how the porcelain trade was helped by the tea trade, why the cholera epidemics might have been worse were it not for tea. If you can get past this disjointedness, there's a lot of great information here, the kind that you'll catch yourself thinking about as you sit down to drink your next cup of tea. Still, most people will finish the book wanting to know more.
