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Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry Part XVI: Early Attempts to Replicate China Tea



THE CULTURE AND PREPARATION OF TEA

China tea culture has evolved over a period of many centuries. When Chinese Buddhist monks first introduced tea to visiting monks from Japan, it was consumed in powdered form, whisked with hot water. This style of tea is still venerated in Japan as *Cha-no-yu*, the *Japanese Tea Ceremony*. Soon thereafter, the Mongols invaded China, and tea as an art form gave way to tea as an article of commerce.

By the nineteenth century, China tea had become an integral part of British life and an important component of the British economy. But friction with China mounted with each passing decade. Finding an alternative to China tea became “a national emergency.”

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Upton Tea Imports will be closed for our annual vacation from July 3 through July 11. Orders received by July 1 will be shipped by July 2. We will also be closed Fridays during the month of August and September 3 so that our staff can enjoy a little extra time off!

Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XV

By 1819 the British had been importing China teas for a century and a half. Japan was the only other commercial source of tea, but production for export was quite limited, and for decades the Dutch were the only Occidentals with access to Japan. Even Dutch access had been reduced to token levels by the end of the eighteenth century.

As the nineteenth century unfolded, two great monopolies controlled the rapidly growing British tea market: the import monopoly was enjoyed by the British East India Company (EIC), while production was tightly controlled by China. Both monopolies were jealously guarded.

China had developed a massive capacity for tea production, considerably in excess of domestic consumption. This phenomenon existed since their trade of China tea for Tibetan war horses in the twelfth century, as documented in *Part I* of our series. We recall that tea gradually replaced silver as the preferred bartering “currency” for war horses, greatly relaxing the strain on China’s limited silver reserves. So critical was the tea trade to the Chinese war effort that the selling of tea seeds and seedlings to Tibet, or any other foreign country, was strictly prohibited and the prescribed punishment for defiance of this policy was severe.

By the early 1800s, tea had become the leading source of revenue for the EIC, as illustrated in the table to the right. But unlike Tibet, Great Britain lacked a trading commodity that was of equal interest to China, except for silver. With silver reserves rapidly declining, Parliament and the Crown turned a blind eye to the illicit trade in EIC opium, as discussed in our last installment.

To many, opium was seen as a solution to the trade imbalance, but the illicit opium trade greatly exacerbated tensions between China and Great Britain. Well before the First Opium War ensued in September 1839, it

became apparent that the tea trade was at great risk. If the British were to have a secure source of tea, they would have to undertake the daunting task of producing it on their own soil.

The British knew nothing about tea horticulture, tea harvesting, or tea manufacture. Indigenous tea plants had been identified in Assam by Major Robert Bruce as early as 1823, but few believed these plants could produce tea of commercial quality. It would take over a decade for the British to understand enough about tea to realize that Assam tea plants might actually form the basis of their tea empire. In the meantime, an obsession with the procurement of China tea seeds and seedlings took front stage.

The logic behind disregarding the Assam plant was fairly simple. First of all, the botanical classification of *Camellia sinensis* was still a work in progress, and many doubted that tea of any useful sort could be made from the Assam varietal, even if it seemed similar to the China varietal. Moreover, without even knowing how to make tea, the whole debate over Assam tea was pointless. The scheme required the acquisition of China tea expertise, which was far more complicated than acquiring seeds and plants.

Great Britain was not the first to envision the production of tea outside of China.

**EIC Commodity Sales
for Trade Year 1809/10**

Commodity	Sales (£)
Teas	3,410,753
Bengal piece goods	333,768
Coast and Surat piece goods	769,870
Raw silk	555,531
Nankeens	133,472
Pepper	50,476
Saltpetre	223,794
Spices	153,824
Drugs, sugar, indigo etc.	357,787
Total	£5,989,275

H.V. Brown, *The Business of Empire*, Cambridge University Press, 2006

According to William Ukers (*All About Tea*), as early as the seventeenth century, Japanese tea seeds had been sown in Java:

The German naturalist and doctor of medicine, Andreas Cleyer [associated with the *Dutch East India Company* (VOC)], first thought of growing tea in Java. He had become rich in the smuggling trade and it occurred to him that tea bushes would add an ornamental touch to the gardens surrounding his palatial home on the Tiger canal at Batavia. In 1684 he brought tea seeds from Japan, from which he successfully grew several tea bushes; and although nothing ever became of his tea planting experiment, this gesture entitles him to the honor of being the first to grow tea in Java. Cleyer's garden steward, Georg Meister, subsequently transported tea plants to the Cape of Good Hope and to Holland.

The success of this original tea planting appears to have created a stir among the VOC Directors, known as the "Seven Lords", but no serious effort was made to actually produce tea on a large scale until the 1820s. While cultivation of the tea plant on Java soil had been mastered by the Dutch, the production of tea was still a mystery. Even among the Chinese population of Java, not a single soul seemed to know how to manufacture tea.

The solution to this problem came soon after a brash young man by the name of Jacobus Isidorus Lonevijk Levien (J.I.L.L.) Jacobson arrived in Batavia on September 2, 1827. Ukers refers to Jacobson as the "real founder and father of tea culture in Java." For six consecutive years he made trips to China with the intent of bringing back tea plants, seeds, and tea knowledge. His sixth trip was an overwhelming success. According to Ukers:

In those days it was an exceedingly hazardous undertaking to invade an unfriendly country and attempt to carry off men and produce, yet Jacobson did both.... When the workmen [from his fifth trip] were murdered in a coolie row, Jacobson went on a sixth journey to China, 1832-33, and brought back no less than 7,000,000 seeds, fifteen workmen – tea planters, tea makers, and box makers – and a mass of materials and implements, which he had collected. It was during this last exhibition that he nearly lost his life; for the Chinese government had put a price on his head...

Following his adventures in China, Jacobson devoted the rest of his brief life to the development of the Java tea industry, where he published two of the "pioneer technical books on tea."

The very year that Jacobson completed his sixth expedition to China, Great Britain decided to become more serious about the production of their own tea in India. Friction with China was mounting, and Great Britain could no longer ignore the fact that their supply of tea could be cut off at any time. The British were facing "an urgent national need." On January 24, 1834 Governor-General William Cavendish-Bentinck formed the "historic" Tea Committee, chartered with formulating a strategy for the large-scale production of tea in India.

One of the Committee members, Mr. George James Gordon, was immediately dispatched to China to procure seeds, plants and workers, just as J.I.L.L. Jacobson had previously done for the Dutch in Java. Meanwhile, Major Bruce's brother, C. A. Bruce, was promoting the Assam plant as a viable and readily available alternative to China plants.

The debate over China versus Assam plants was long and heated. At one point Assam protagonists temporarily convinced the Committee that sourcing China plants was wasted effort and Mr. Gordon was recalled from China. Shortly after his return, Gordon was once again dispatched to China as doubts over Assam tea resurfaced.

Gordon succeeded in procuring China seed and seedlings. Most of these were planted in Assam, often within a few feet of the maligned indigenous plants. Most importantly, Gordon secured Chinese workers to oversee the tea operation, from planting to production. This was the most treacherous part of Gordon's mission, for himself as well as the Chinese workers, whose families faced flogging and even torture for their defection.

In 1837, Chinese workers managed to produce sample quantities of tea from indigenous Assam plants. The following year eight

chests of tea, produced from Assam plants, were shipped to London. The China plants were still too small for harvesting. These chests were auctioned separately, each being offered as a separate lot. One bidder, Captain Pidding, purchased every lot at successively higher prices in order to exclude competition and “corner the market” for the first British grown tea.

The quality of the early tea was lacking, and it was still not clear whether the Assam plant was truly the best choice for the British tea industry. Even a decade after the 1838 auction of Assam tea, there was a suspicion that deep within China grew special varieties that were essential for success. There were still more questions than there were answers.

To that end, legendary botanist Robert Fortune was dispatched to China in 1848 to further the search for China tea seeds, plants, manufacturing implements, and expertise. Much of Fortune’s contribution came from his visits to tea producing areas of China which had never been penetrated by foreigners. His observations on the manufacturing of both green and black teas from several varieties of China tea plants helped clarify the difference between tea plant varieties and the production of green and black teas.

China had been making tea for thousands of years. During that time they had learned to cultivate specific tea plants for specific teas. The British were operating blindly. In *Tea – Its History and Mystery* (1892), Joseph M. Walsh provides some insight into the conundrum that plagued the pioneers of tea:

The species of the genus *Thea* are few in number, some botanists being of the opinion that even these are of a single kind – *Camillia* – and is by them classed as *Thea-Camillia*. Others asserting that no relation whatever exists between these two plants, maintaining that the *Thea* and *Camillia* are widely different and are of a distinct species.... The latest works on botany, also, make *Thea* a distinct genus – *Thea Sinensis* – divided into two species – *Thea viridis* and *Thea bohea* – these botanical names having no specific relation to the varieties known to commerce as Green and Black teas.



Walsh further explains how the classification of the Assam tea plant was still disputed, with some botanists believing it to be a unique species, and others classifying it as a simple *Thea bohea* variety.

In the end, the botanical classification of the Assam tea plant mattered little to the practical task at hand. Any tea of reasonable quality that could replace imported China tea would simply have to do if China ports closed. On the other hand, as long as China continued to sell to the British, the quality and price of British tea would have to compete in the open market. This proved to be a nearly insurmountable challenge.



Our series on *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry* will continue in the next issue of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*.