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TOM STANDAGE

Author of *The Victorian Internet* and *The Turk*

9
Empires of Tea

Better to be deprived of food for three days than of tea for one.
—*Chinese proverb*

Thank God for tea! What would the world do without tea? How did it exist?—*Sydney Smith, British writer (1771-1845)*

-The Drink That Conquered the World

WITH FAR-FLUNG TERRITORIES stretched around the world, the British Empire was famously described in 1773 by Sir George Macartney, an imperial administrator, as "this vast empire on which the sun never sets." At its height, it encompassed a fifth of the world's surface and a quarter of its population. Despite the loss of its North American colonies following American independence, Britain expanded its sphere of influence dramatically from the mid-eighteenth century, establishing control of India and Canada, setting up new colonies in Australia and New Zealand, and displacing the Dutch to dominate European sea trade with the East. Intertwined with Britain's emergence as the first global superpower was its pioneering adoption of a new system of manufacturing. Workers were brought together in large factories where tireless labor-saving machines driven by steam engines amplified human skill and effort—a cluster of innovations collectively known today as the Industrial Revolution.

Linking these imperial and industrial expansions was a new drink—new to Europeans, at least—that became associated with the English and remains so to this day. Tea provided the basis for the widening of European trade with the East. Profits from its trade helped to fund the advance into India of the British East India Company, the commercial organization that became Britain's de facto colonial government in the East. Having started as a luxury drink, tea trickled down to become the beverage of the working man, the fuel for the workers who operated the new machine-powered factories. If the sun never set on the British

Empire, it was perpetually teatime, somewhere at least.

With its associated drinking rituals of genteel afternoon tea and the worker's tea break, tea perfectly matched Britain's self-image as a civilizing, industrious power. How odd, then, that this quintessentially English drink initially had to be imported at great cost and effort from China, that vast and mysterious dominion on the other side of the world, and that the cultivation and processing of tea were utter mysteries to its European drinkers. As far as they were concerned, the chests of tea leaves simply materialized on the dock in Canton; tea might as well have come from Mars. Even so, tea somehow became a central part of British culture. The drink that already lubricated China's immense empire could then conquer vast new territories: Having won over the British, tea spread throughout the world and became the most widely consumed beverage on Earth after water. The story of tea is the story of imperialism, industrialization, and world domination, one cup at a time.

The Rise of Tea Culture

According to Chinese tradition, the first cup of tea was brewed by the emperor Shen Nung, whose reign is traditionally dated to 2737-2697 BCE. He was the second of China's legendary emperors and was credited with the inventions of agriculture and the plow, along with the discovery of medicinal herbs. (Similarly, his predecessor, the first emperor, is said to have discovered fire, cooking, and music.) Legend has it that Shen Nung was boiling some water to drink, using some branches from a wild tea bush to fuel his fire, when a gust of wind carried some of the plant's leaves into his pot. He found the resulting infusion a delicate and refreshing drink. He later wrote a medical treatise, the *Pen ts'ao,* on the medicinal uses of various herbs, in which he supposedly noted that an infusion of tea leaves "quenches the thirst, lessens the desire for sleep, and gladdens and cheers the heart." Yet tea is not, in fact, such an ancient Chinese beverage; the story of Shen Nung is a far later invention. The earliest edition of the *Pen ts'ao,* dated to the Neo-Han dynasty (25-221 CE), makes no mention of tea. The reference to tea was added in the seventh century.

Tea is an infusion of the dried leaves, buds, and flowers of an evergreen bush, *Camellia sinensis,* which seems to have evolved in the jungles of the eastern Himalayas on what is now the India China border. In prehistoric times, people noticed the invigorating effect of chewing its leaves, and the healing effect of

rubbing them on wounds, practices that survived for thousands of years. Tea was also consumed in a medicinal gruel in southwest China, the chopped leaves being mixed with shallot, ginger, and other ingredients; tribal peoples in what is now northern Thailand steamed or boiled the leaves and formed them into balls, then ate them with salt, oil, garlic, fat, and dried fish. So tea was a medicine and a foodstuff before it was a drink.

Exactly how and when it spread into China is unclear, but it seems to have been helped along by Buddhist monks, adherents of the religion founded in India in the sixth century BCE by Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha. Both Buddhist and Taoist monks found that drinking tea was an invaluable aid to meditation, since it enhanced concentration and banished fatigue—qualities that are now known to be due to the presence of caffeine. Lao-tzu, the founder of Taoism who lived in the sixth century BCE, believed that tea was an essential ingredient in the elixir of life.

The earliest unambiguous Chinese reference to tea is from the first century BCE, some twenty-six centuries after Shen Nung's supposed discovery. Having started out as an obscure medicinal and religious beverage, tea first seems to have become a domestic drink in China around this time; a contemporary book, *Working Rules of Servants,* describes the proper ways to buy and serve it. Tea had become so popular by the fourth century CE that it became necessary to begin the deliberate cultivation of tea, rather than simply harvesting the leaves from wild bushes. Tea spread throughout China and became the national beverage during the Tang dynasty
(618-907 CE), a period that is regarded as a golden age in Chinese history.

During this time, China was the largest, wealthiest, and most populous empire in the world. Its overall population tripled between 630 and 755 to exceed fifty million, and its capital, Changan (modern Xi'an), was the greatest metropolis on Earth, home to around two million people. The city was a cultural magnet at a time when China was particularly open to outside influences. Trade thrived along the trade routes of the Silk Road and by sea with India, Japan, and Korea. Clothing, hairstyles, and the sport of polo were imported from Turkey and Persia, new foodstuffs from India, and musical instruments and dances from central Asia, along with wine in goatskin bags. China exported silk, tea, paper, and ceramics in return. Amid this diverse, dynamic, and cosmopolitan atmosphere, Chinese sculpture, painting, and poetry flourished. The prosperity of the period and the surge in population were helped along by the widespread adoption of the custom of drinking tea. Its powerful antiseptic properties meant it was safer to drink than previous beverages such as rice or millet beer, even if the water was not properly boiled during preparation. Modern research has found that the phenolics (tannic acid) in tea can kill the bacteria that cause cholera, typhoid, and dysentery. Tea could be prepared quickly and easily from dried leaves and did not spoil like beer. It was, in effect, an efficient and convenient water-purification technology that dramatically reduced the prevalence of waterborne diseases, reducing infant mortality and increasing longevity.

Tea also had a more visible economic impact. As the size and value of the Chinese trade in tea grew during the seventh century, the tea merchants of Fujian, who were required to handle large sums of money, pioneered the use of a new invention: paper money. Tea itself, in the form of bricks, also came into use as a currency. It was ideally suited to the purpose, providing a light and compact store of value that could also be consumed if necessary. Paper money had the drawback that its value diminished the farther it was taken from the imperial center, whereas tea actually increased in value in remote areas. Brick tea remained in use as a currency in some parts of central Asia into modern times.

Tea's popularity during the Tang dynasty was reflected by the imposition of the first tax on tea in 780, and by the success of a book published the same year: The Classic of Tea, written by Lu Yu, a celebrated Taoist poet. Written at the behest of the merchants who sold tea, it describes the cultivation, preparation, and serving of tea in great detail. Lu Yu wrote many more books about tea, no aspect of which escaped his gaze. He described the merits of the various kinds of leaves, the best sort of water to use in its preparation (ideally, from slow-flowing mountain streams; well water only if no other is available), and even enumerated the stages in the process of boiling water: "When the water is boiling, it must look like fishes' eyes and give off but the hint of a sound. When at the edges it clatters like a bubbling spring and looks like pearls innumerable strung together, it has reached the second stage. When it leaps like breakers majestic and resounds like a swelling wave, it is at its peak. Any more and the water will be boiled out and should not be used." Lu Yu's palate was so sensitive that he was said to be able to identify the source of water from its taste alone, and even to determine the part of the river from which it had been drawn. More than anyone else, Lu Yu transformed tea from a mere thirst-quenching drink to a

symbol of culture and sophistication. Tea tasting and appreciation, particularly the ability to recognize different types, became highly regarded. Making tea became an honor reserved for the head of the household; an inability to make tea well, in an elegant manner, was considered a disgrace. Drinking parties and banquets centered on tea became popular at the court, where the emperor drank special teas made with water transported from particular springs. This led to the tradition of presenting special "tribute teas" to the emperor every year.

Tea production in China. Processing leaves into tea was a complicated process, all of which was done by hand.

Tea's popularity continued in the prosperous Sung dynasty (960-1279), but it fell from official favor as China came under the rule of the Mongols during the thirteenth century. The Mongols were originally a nomadic, pastoral people who tended herds of horses, camels, and sheep on the open steppes. Under Genghis Khan and his sons, they established the largest connected land empire in history, encompassing much of the Eurasian landmass, from Hungary in the west to Korea in the east, and as far south as Vietnam. Fittingly for a nation of skilled horsemen, the traditional Mongol drink was koumiss, made by churning and then fermenting mare's milk in a leather bag, to transform the lactose sugars in the milk into alcohol. This explains why the Venetian traveler Marco Polo, who spent many years at the Chinese court during this period, made no mention of tea other than to note the tradition of the tea tribute to the emperor (though he did remark that koumiss was "like white wine and very good to drink"). China's new rulers showed no interest in the local drink and maintained their own cultural traditions. Kublai Khan, ruler of the eastern portion of the Mongol Empire, had grass from the steppes grown in the courtyards of his Chinese palace and drank koumiss specially prepared from the milk of white mares.

To emphasize the extent and diversity of the Mongol Empire, Kublai's brother Mangu Khan installed a silver drinking fountain at the Mongol capital of Karakorum. Its four spouts dispensed rice beer from China, grape wine from Persia, mead from northern Eurasia, and koumiss from Mongolia. Tea was nowhere to be seen. But the sprawling empire symbolized by this fountain proved unsustainable and collapsed during the fourteenth century. A renewed enthusiasm for drinking tea was then one way in which Chinese culture reasserted itself following the expulsion of the Mongols and the establishment of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The preparation and consumption of tea began to become increasingly elaborate; the meticulous attention to detail advocated by Lu Yu was revived and extended. Harking back to its religious roots, tea came to be seen as a form of spiritual as well as bodily refreshment.

The idea of the tea ceremony was, however, taken to its greatest heights in Japan. Tea had been drunk in Japan as early as the sixth century, but in 1191 the latest Chinese knowledge about the growing, picking, preparation, and drinking of tea was brought into the country by a Buddhist monk named Eisai, who wrote a book extolling tea's health benefits. When Japan's military ruler, or shogun, Minamoto Sanetomo, fell ill, Eisai cured him with the help of some homegrown tea. The shogun became a strong advocate of the new drink, and its popularity spread from his court to the country as a whole. By the fourteenth century, tea had become widespread at every level in Japanese society. The climate was well suited for the cultivation of tea; even the smallest households could maintain a couple of bushes, picking a leaf or two when needed.

The full Japanese tea ceremony is an immensely intricate, almost mystical ritual that can take more than an hour. Merely to describe the steps of grinding the tea, boiling the water, mixing and stirring the tea is to overlook the significance of the particular form of the utensils, and the order and the nature of their use. The water must be transferred from a specific kind of jar to the kettle using a delicate bamboo dipper; a special spoon is used to measure out the tea; there must be a special stirrer, a square silk'cloth to wipe the jar and spoon, a rest for the kettle lid, and so on. All of these items are to be brought in by the host in the correct sequence and placed on the correct mats. Ideally, the host is even to gather the firewood himself, and the whole ceremony should take place in a teahouse situated in an appropriately laid-out garden.

In the words of Japan's greatest tea-master, Rikyu, who lived in the seventeenth century, "If the tea and eating utensils are of bad taste, and if the natural layout and planning of the trees and rocks in the tea-garden are unpleasing, then it is as well to go straight back home." Although incredibly formal, some of Rikyu's rules, such as the decree that the conversation was not to turn to worldly matters, are not so different from the unwritten rules that govern a ceremonious European dinner party. The Japanese tea ceremony was the very pinnacle of tea culture, the result of taking a drink from southern Asia, imbuing it with a diverse range of cultural and religious influences, and filtering it through hundreds of years of accumulated customs and rituals.

Tea Reaches Europe

In the early sixteenth century, when the first Europeans reached China by sea, the Chinese justifiably regarded their country as the greatest on Earth. It was the world's largest and most populous nation, with a civilization far older and more enduring than any in Europe. The Celestial Empire, as it was known, was assumed by its inhabitants to be located at the center of the universe. Nobody could compete with its cultural and intellectual achievements; outsiders were dismissed as barbarians or "foreign devils" who might understandably wish to imitate China but whose corrupting influence was best kept at arm's length. Nor was any European technology of the time unknown to the Chinese, who were ahead of Europe in almost every field; the magnetic compass, gunpowder, and printed books on board European ships were all Chinese innovations. The Portuguese explorers who had sailed from their trading post at Malacca on the Malay Peninsula in search of the legendary riches of the East were met with condescension. China was self-sufficient and lacked nothing.

The Portuguese agreed to pay tribute to the emperor in return for the right to trade, and they maintained sporadic commercial contact with China for several years. European manufactured goods were of no interest to the Chinese, though they were happy to sell silk and porcelain in return for gold and silver. Eventually, in 1557, the Chinese authorities allowed the Portuguese to establish a trading post on the tiny peninsula of Macao in the Canton estuary, through which all goods were to be shipped. This allowed the Chinese to levy duties and minimized contact with the foreigners; other Europeans were excluded from direct Chinese trade altogether. When the Dutch arrived in the East Indies toward the end of the sixteenth century, they had to buy Chinese goods through intermediaries in other countries in the region.

Tea is first mentioned in European reports from the region in the 1550s. But shipping it to Europe did not occur to the earliest traders. Small quantities may have been brought to Lisbon privately by Portuguese sailors, but it was not until 1610 that a Dutch ship brought the first small commercial consignment of tea to Europe, where it was regarded as a novelty. From the Netherlands, tea reached France in the 1630s and England in the 1650s. This first tea was green tea, the kind that had always been consumed by the Chinese. Black tea, which is made by allowing the newly picked green leaves to oxidize by leaving them overnight, only appeared during the Ming dynasty; its origins are a mystery. It came to be regarded by the Chinese as suitable only for consumption by foreigners and eventually dominated exports to Europe. Clueless as they were to the origins of tea, Europeans wrongly assumed green and black tea were two entirely different botanical species.

Although it was available in Europe a few years earlier than coffee, tea had far less impact during the seventeenth century, largely because it was so much more expensive. It began as a luxury and medicinal drink in the Netherlands, where arguments raged over its health benefits from the 1630s.

An early opponent of tea (and of coffee and chocolate, the other two newfangled hot drinks) was Simon Pauli, a German doctor and physician to the king of Denmark. He published a tract in 1635 in which he conceded that tea had some medical benefits, but that they were far outweighed by its drawbacks. Transporting the tea from China, he claimed, made it poisonous, so that "it hastens the death of those that drink it, especially if they have passed the age of forty years." Pauli boasted that he had used "the utmost of my Endeavors to destroy the raging epidemical Madness of importing Tea into Europe from China."

Taking the opposite view was Nikolas Dirx, a Dutch doctor who championed tea and regarded it as a panacea. "Nothing is comparable to this plant," he declared in 1641. "Those that use it are for that reason, alone, exempt from all maladies and reach an extreme old age." An even more enthusiastic advocate of tea was another Dutch doctor, Cornelius Bontekoe, who wrote a book recommending the consumption of several cups of tea each day. "We recommend tea to the entire nation, and to all peoples!" he declared. "We urge every man, every woman, to drink it every day; if possible, every hour; beginning with ten cups a day and subsequently increasing the dosage—as much as the stomach can take." People who were ill, he suggested, should consume as many as fifty cups a day; he proposed two hundred as an upper limit. Bontekoe was honored by the Dutch East India Company for his help in boosting tea sales; indeed, the company may have put him up to writing his book in the first place. It is notable that he disapproved of the practice of adding sugar to tea, which had by this time started to become popular. (Some medical authorities of the time regarded sugar as harmful.)

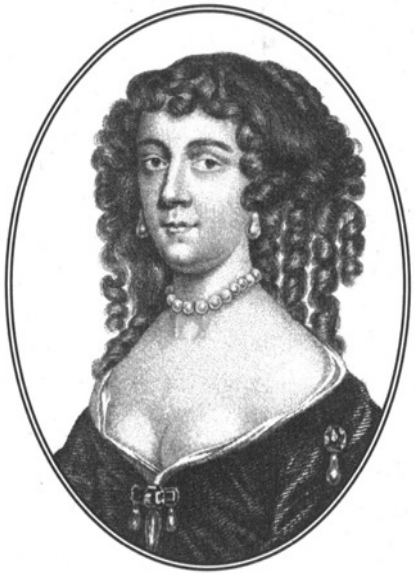
Another European addition to tea was milk. As early as 1660 an English advertisement for tea declared that among its many supposed medical benefits, "it (being prepared and drank with Milk and Water) strengtheneth the inward parts, and prevents consumption, and powerfully assuageth the pains of the Bowels or griping of the Guts or Looseness." In France, where tea enjoyed a brief spell of popularity among the aristocracy between 1650 and 1700, people also began to drank tea with milk, both for the flavor and to reduce its temperature. Cooling tea using milk protected both the drinker and the fine porcelain cup in which the tea was served. But tea was soon eclipsed in France by coffee and chocolate. Ultimately it was Britain, rather than France or the Netherlands, that emerged as the most tea-loving European nation, with momentous historical consequences.

Britain's Peculiar Enthusiasm for Tea

It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that almost nobody in Britain drank tea at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and nearly everybody did by the end of it. Official imports grew from around six tons in 1699 to eleven thousand tons a century later, and the price of a pound of tea at the end of the century was one-twentieth of the price at the beginning. Furthermore, those figures do not include smuggled tea, which probably doubled the volume of imports for much of the century until the duty levied on tea was sharply reduced in 1784. Another confounding factor was the widespread practice of adulteration, the stretching of tea by mixing it with ash and willow leaves, sawdust, flowers, and more dubious substances—even sheep's dung, according to one account—often colored and disguised using chemical dyes. Tea was adulterated in one way or another at almost every stage along the chain from leaf to cup, so that the amount consumed was far greater than the amount imported. Black tea began to become more popular, partly because it was more durable than green tea on long voyages, but also as a side effect of this adulteration. Many of the chemicals used to make fake green tea were poisonous, whereas black tea was safer, even when adulterated. As black tea started to displace the smoother, less bitter green tea, the addition of sugar and milk helped to make it more palatable.

Whatever the true extent of smuggling and adulteration, it is clear that by the end of the eighteenth century there was easily enough tea coming into Britain for everyone in the country to drink one or two cups a day, no matter what their station in life. As early as 1757 one observer noted that "there is a certain lane near Richmond, where beggars are often seen, in the summer season, drinking their tea. You may see laborers who are mending the roads drinking their tea; it is even drank in cinder-carts; and what is not less absurd, sold out in cups to haymakers." What explains the speed and enthusiasm with which the British took to tea? The answer consists of several interlocking parts.

Tea got its start when it became fashionable at the English court following the marriage in 1662 of Charles II to Catherine of Braganza, daughter of King John IV of Portugal. Her enormous dowry included the Portuguese trading posts of Tangier and Bombay, the right to trade with Portuguese possessions overseas, a fortune in gold, and a chest of tea. Catherine was a devoted tea drinker and brought the custom with her. Sipping tea in small cups—"not bigger than thimbles," according to one contemporary account—caught on almost immediately among the aristocracy. The year after Catherine's marriage to the king, the poet Edmund Waller wrote her a birthday poem, "On Tea," in which he highlighted her two gifts to the nation: tea and easier access to the East Indies.



Catherine of Braganza, the wife of Charles II, introduced tea to the English court.

The best of Queens, and best of herbs, we owe
To that bold nation, which the way did show
To the fair region where the sun doth rise,
Whose rich productions we so justly prize.
The Muse's friend, tea does our fancy aid,
Repress those vapors which the head invade,
And keep the palace of the soul serene,
Pit on her birthday to salute the Queen.

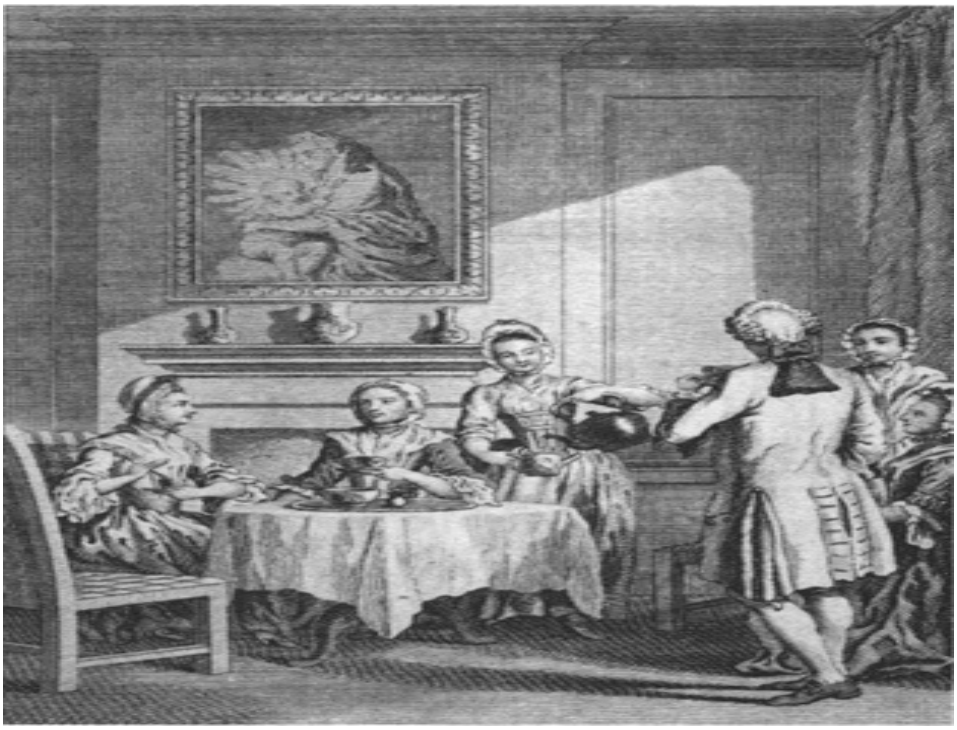
After the initial impetus provided by the tea-drinking queen, the second factorin the rise of tea was the role of the British East India Company, which had been granted a monopoly on imports to England from the East Indies. Though it initially lacked direct access to China, the company's records show that it began to bring in small quantities of "good thea" from the Netherlands during the 1660s as gifts for the king, to ensure that he would "not find himself totally neglected by the Company." This and other gifts won Charles's favor, and he gradually granted sweeping powers to the company, including the rights to acquire territory, issue currency, maintain an army, form alliances, declare war and make peace, and dispense justice. Over the course of the next century, what had started out as a simple trading company ended up as the manifestation of British power in the East, wielding more power than any other commercial organization in history. As the Scottish economist and writer William Playfair observed in 1799, "From a limited body of merchants, the India Company have become the Arbiters of the East." This was due in large part to the way the company fostered, expanded, and profited from the trade in tea.

Tea was served at meetings of the company's directors in London from the mid-1660s, and it was imported on a private basis by the captains and other officers of the company's ships, who were granted an allowance of space on each ship for "private trade." Tea was an ideal commodity for such purposes, given its scarcity and high value; the profit on a ton of tea could be worth several years' wages, and an allowance of ten tons was not unusual for a ship's captain. The private trade in tea probably helped to stimulate early demand, but it was banned in 1686 for fear it would undermine the company's small but growing official trade.

The company's first tea imports from the East Indies (from Bantam, in what is now Indonesia) arrived in 1669, and tea slowly became more widely available. It was initially a minor commodity as the company concentrated first on importing pepper, and then cheap textiles, from Asia. But opposition from Britain's domestic textile producers encouraged the company to place more emphasis on tea; there was no problem with offending domestic producers, since there were none. Tea's retail cost varied dramatically due to the sporadic nature of the supply, but the price per pound of the most expensive teas, which started at around six to ten pounds in 1660, had fallen to around four pounds by 1700. The price per pound of lesser teas was one pound. But a poor family at the time might have had an annual income of twenty pounds, so tea was still far too expensive to become universal. It remained a luxury item until the end of the seventeenth century, overshadowed by coffee, which cost much less; a cup of tea cost about five times as much as a cup of coffee.

Only when the company established trading posts in China in the early eighteenth century, and began direct imports of tea, did volumes increase and prices fall, making tea available to a far wider public. By 1718 tea was displacing silk as the mainstay of imports from China; by 1721 imports had reached five thousand tons a year. In 1744 one writer observed that "opening a Trade with the East-Indies . . . brought the Price of Tea . . . so low that the meanest labouring Man could compass the Purchase of it." At its height, tea represented more than 60 percent of the company's total trade, and the duty on tea accounted for around 10 percent of British government revenue. As a result, control of the tea trade granted the company an enormous degree of political influence and enabled it to have laws passed in its favor. Imports of tea from other European countries were banned; the duty on tea was reduced to increase sales and expand the market; adulteration of tea was punishable by huge fines. Smuggling and adulteration remained rife, but that just showed how much pent-up demand there was for tea. Finally, all that stood between Britain and total dominance of the East Indies trade were the Dutch. A series of wars ended in 1784 with a Dutch defeat, and the rival Dutch East India Company was dissolved in 1795, granting its British counterpart almost total control of the global tea trade.

Catherine of Braganza made it fashionable, and the East India Company made it available; but tea also became sociable, with the invention of new ways to consume it, both in private and in public. In 1717 Thomas Twining, the proprietor of a London coffeehouse, opened a shop next door specifically to sell tea, and to women in particular. Women were unable to buy tea over the counter in coffeehouses, which were men-only establishments. Nor did they wish to send their servants out to buy expensive tea with other household items, since that would mean entrusting them with large sums of money. (Tea's expense was reflected in the use of tea caddies—special boxes with lockable lids in which tea was stored, and to which only the lady of the house had access.) At Twining's shop, however, women could buy this fashionable new drink by the cup for immediate consumption, and as dried leaves for preparation at home. "Great ladies flocked to Twining's house in Devereaux Court in order to sip the enlivening beverage in small cups for which they paid their shillings," noted a contemporary observer. They could also have special blends of tea made up for them by Twining to match their tastes. Knowledge of tea and its ceremonial consumption in genteel surroundings at home became a means of demonstrating one's sophistication. Elaborate tea parties emerged as the British equivalent of the Chinese and Japanese tea ceremonies; tea was served in porcelain cups, imported in vast quantities as ballast in the same ships that brought the tea from China. Authors offered advice on how to prepare tea, the order in which guests of different rank should be served, what food to serve, and how guests ought to express thanks to the host. Tea was not just a drink; it eventually became an entirely new afternoon meal.



An English tea party around 1750. The ceremonial consumption of tea in genteel surroundings became an emblem of sophistication.

Another innovation in the serving of tea was the emergence of the tea gardens of London. The first to open, in 1732, was Vauxhall Gardens, a park with lit walkways, bandstands, performers of all kinds, and stalls selling food and drink, primarily bread and butter to be washed down with tea. Other tea gar dens soon followed. Their appeal was that they provided an elegant, respectable public venue, and a good place to meet members of the opposite sex. Young men at one tea garden, the White Conduit House, would "accidentally" tread on the trains of young women's gowns and offer a dish of tea in recompense; at another tea garden, the Parthenon, women would make the first move, asking their chosen young man to treat them to a dish of tea, according to a contemporary account in the *Gentleman's Magazine.* Tea gardens were particularly popular with women, who had always been excluded from coffeehouses, which were in decline by this time. The more respectable coffeehouses had begun to transform themselves into private gentleman's clubs and commercial institutions; that left only the less respectable ones, which relied on sales of alcohol and were increasingly difficult to distinguish from taverns. As the writer Daniel Defoe remarked, such establishments "are but ale houses, only they think that the name coffee-house gives a better air."

For the poor, tea gradually became an affordable luxury and then a necessity; tricks such as stretching a small quantity of tea with the addition of more water, or reusing tea leaves, finally brought the drink within everyone's reach, in some form at least. Special tea allowances were added to household servants' wages from the mid-eighteenth century; an Italian visitor to England in 1755 remarked that "even the common maid servants must have their tea twice a day." Despite having come from the other side of the world, tea eventually became cheaper than any drink except water. "We are so situated in our commercial and financial system, that tea brought from the eastern extremity of the world, and sugar brought from the West Indies . . . compose a drink cheaper than beer," noted one early nineteenth-century Scottish observer. And when consumed along with cold food, tea provided the illusion of a hot meal. Some people decried the adoption of tea by the poor and argued that rather than aping the habits of the rich, they should spend their money on more nutritious food instead. One lawmaker even suggested that tea should be made illegal for anyone with an annual income less than fifty pounds. But the truth, as one eighteenth-century writer pointed out, was that "were they now to be deprived of this, they would immediately be reduced to bread and water. Tea-drinking is not the cause, but the consequences of the distresses of the poor." The drink of queens had also become the drink of last resort.

From the top of British society to the bottom, everyone was drinking tea. Fashion, commerce, and social changes all played their part in the embrace of tea by the English, a phenomenon that was noted by foreigners even before the end of the eighteenth century. In 1784 a French visitor remarked that "throughout the whole of England the drinking of tea is general. . . . The humblest peasant has his tea twice a day just like the rich man; the total consumption is immense."

A Swedish visitor noted that "next to water, tea is the Englishman's proper element. All classes consume it, and if one is out on the London streets early in the morning, one may see in many places small tables set up under the open sky, round which coal-carters and workmen empty their cups of delicious beverage." Tea had reached around the world from the world's oldest empire and planted itself at the heart of the newest. As they drank their cups of tea at home, the British were reminded of the extent and might of their empire overseas. The rise of tea was entangled with the growth of Britain as a world power and set the stage for further expansion of its commercial and imperial might.