# The Thirst for Tea: An Examination of Tea Smuggling in England During the Long Eighteenth Century

**Abstract:**

This paper seeks to examine several facets of the phenomenon of tea smuggling during the "long" eighteenth century. In order to understand why tea smuggling occurred at this time, one must consider the laws which necessitated smuggling, as well as the economic environment of Britain throughout the century. In addressing the extensive popularity of ritualized tea drinking, one can comprehend why tea, specifically–admittedly among a myriad of other valuable commodities–was selected to be smuggled. The material nature of the tea ritual, in addition to the smuggling process, is crucial to understanding the significance of tea itself and associated illicit activities. By investigating these elements concurrently, one may begin to understand why tea was smuggled during the eighteenth century, and how the British government consequently worked to end smuggling altogether.

The thirst for tea transcended all social classes across the English empire throughout the "long" eighteenth century.[1] At the beginning of its rise to economic dominance, tea was considered a luxury commodity, enjoyed only by the upper echelons of society, who acclimatized themselves to its new, bitter taste. However, shortly after its introduction to the noble class and, by extension, court culture, the practice of tea consumption trickled down into the middle class, rapidly leaking into the poorest sectors of English society.[2] From its elite beginnings, tea developed into an inherently British commodity, an essential to daily life for all social classes. It rose to popularity in Britain and the Dutch Republic initially, long before individuals of any class on the European continent picked up a tea cup.[3] Tea trading occurred during the seventeenth century, but the beverage gained substantial adoration during the eighteenth. Consequently, demand increased, but the British East India Company, who retained a monopoly on all goods imported from Asia, was unable to adequately supply the British Isles with ample amounts of tea.[4] In order to satisfy the mass desire for the leaf, many Englishmen of varying social standings turned to smuggled tea, either the consumption thereof, or smuggling itself. Smuggling was not a new concept, particularly following the increase in activity due to the Navigation Acts of 1651 and 1660, however the smuggling of tea in particular became a part of everyday life for many by the turn of eighteenth century. Additionally, as the popularity of tea grew, so did consumption taxes, which led to taxation practices which, by contemporary standards, appear outrageous. Thus, this paper proposes an examination of tea smuggling shaped

[1] The eighteenth century is traditionally titled as the "long" eighteenth century due to British historical scope, which often measures the century from the Glorious Revolution in 1688 to the conclusion of the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.
[2] Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 230.
[3] Understandably so, Britain and the Dutch Republic were the first to accommodate tea into daily life due to their command of trade within Asia, in particular China which supplied the sacred leaf. On this issue, see Chris Nierstrasz, *Rivalry for Trade in Tea and Textiles: The English and Dutch East India Companies (1700-1800)* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 94.
[4] Ibid., 93.

both by the conception of tea as a fashionable commodity and the influence of intolerable taxation of tea on illicit economic activities.

To begin, one must first examine why tea was an object of choice for taxation by the British state, and hence increased smuggling in the name of avoiding these taxes. Tea first came to Britain with the wave of "exotic" novelties imported from Asia in the seventeenth century and as such, was popularized by a widespread curiosity about the unknown.[5] Curiosity about eastern "exoticism" began within the noble classes, who could afford luxurious and frivolous Asian commodities. However, tea did not stay confined to the court and manor houses; during the eighteenth century, the popularity of tea drinking exploded across all levels of society. Economist and historian, Maxine Berg states that, "oriental commodities were profoundly attractive; once the possibilities of their possession moved beyond princes and aristocrats, there seemed to be no stopping the expansion of trade."[6] Tea became fashionable not only for its association with Asia, but also for its supposed health benefits. Tea was considered a stimulant, but unlike other simulants on the market, such as brandy or ale, tea had no inebriating effects.[7] This allowed every individual to consume the beverage at any time of day with no ill effects. Thus, tea became a habitual drink which permeated daily life.[8] Tea was not the only popular stimulating drink, as coffee had also become increasingly prominent in the eighteenth century. Yet, coffee drinking did not offer the same level of sociability and respectability that tea did.[9]

[5] Markman Ellis, Richard Coulton, and Matthew Mauger, *Empire of Tea: The Asian Leaf that Conquered the World* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2015), 31.
[6] Berg, 49.
[7] Ellis, 35.
[8] Berg, 57.
[9] For more on the differences between coffee and tea within the eighteenth century, as well as a discussion of consumerism as it relates to social classes, see Anne McCants, "Poor Consumers as Global Consumers: the diffusion of tea and coffee drinking in the eighteenth century," *Economic History Review* 61, no. 1 (2008): 172-200.

Sociability was an important factor in the rise of tea drinking. Tea drinking became a form of ritualized sociability, with the tea table as the symbol of respectability.[10] This social phenomenon developed across classes, as tea drinking provided an opportunity for public and private gathering. Ideas could be debated, or politics discussed, in a respectable atmosphere, which required little physicality. Genteel women played a vital role in the sociability of tea consumption, as they had complete knowledge of tea equipage and preparation in their roles as hostesses.[11] Consequently, tea became associated with femininity, despite men also being avid tea drinkers.[12] Tea-related socializing could be done in the home, for those who had the luxury of time, or in a tea house or café. Tea drinking came with a complicated set of rituals, executed not only for the benefit of one's health, but one's social status.

Tea's equipage– dishes, teapots, and other paraphernalia– would contribute significantly to tea's sociability, as well as further its popularity. Tea consumption brought with it a dynamic range of equipage, which had not been of serious economic import prior to the popularity of tea. Several elements were required in order to conduct the process of tea drinking including: teapots, tea cups with saucers, jugs for milk and sugar, teaspoons, and so on. Chinese porcelain became increasingly popular during the eighteenth century, as it paired well with a Chinese beverage. The progressive popularization of tea equipage was linked with an upsurge in tea consumption, as the two commodities naturally developed together.[13] Furthermore, many individuals could not afford a full set of tea equipage; those in the countryside tended to possess significantly less tea paraphernalia than individuals who performed sociable activities, such as nobility or those who

[10] Ibid., 231-32.
[11] Jon Stobart, *Sugar and Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England 1650-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 243.
[12] Ibid., 249.
[13] Ibid., 243.

Figure 1. Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Still Life: Tea Set*, 1781-83, oil on canvas mounted on board, 37.8 x 51.6 cm (14 7/8 x 20 5/6 in.), The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/735/jean-etienne-liotard-still-life-tea-set-swiss-about-1781-1783/.

populated urban centres. Economic and cultural historian, Jon Stobart, argues that, "People could signal their wealth, distinction, and dignity by consuming high-grade or luxury goods."[14] This signalling did not extend only to the quality of tea one consumed, but also the ostentatiousness of their tea equipage. To illustrate the value placed on tea equipage itself, I include Jean-Étienne Liotard's painting *Still Life: Tea Set* painted between 1781-1783, which exemplifies an upper middle-class tea set with fine Chinese porcelain, set on a rather dismal tea tray (above).

Considering tea's significance as an indication of class and wealth, it is interesting to note that, "tea consumption by the poor was sufficiently widespread to produce a series of critiques from moralizing social commentators."[15] Due to the fact that tea began its life in Britain as a luxury item intended for the wealthy, its expansion to the lower classes was discouraged. The

[14] Ibid., 219.
[15] Ibid., 216.

crusade against poorer classes consuming tea was taken up by several middle-class men, including Jonus Henway, a moral reformer who "blamed tea drinking for the misplaced priorities of the labouring poor on their tea equipage."[16] It was believed that tea consumption, similar to many other fashionable activities and commodities, should be restricted to those who could afford the time to be social, and were deserving of respect; this is due to the rigid and ingrained class structure of English society. Similarly, Thomas Turner, a middle-class shopkeeper who sold teas–and was well regarded within his community–discussed the consumption of tea by the lower class in his diary. On July 15th, 1758 he wrote, "the exorbitant practice of tea-drinking have in such a manner corrupted the morals of people of almost all ranks,"[17] and on September 26th, 1763 that "custom has brought tea and spirituous liquors so much in fashion that I dare to be bold to say they often, too often, prove our ruin."[18] The association of tea consumption with the corruption of morals occurs only in discourse specifically regarding the poor. They, in the opinions of richer men, should not have had the means, nor the time to engage in tea consumption, and were thus criticized for their audacity when they did. Objections against lower-class tea consumption did not prevent tea drinking and associated rituals of sociability from occurring; however, the lower classes' frequency of consumption was considerably lower, due to their economic resources.

With a firm understanding of the rise of tea consumption and its associations with the material world, as well as its social nuances, we can progress to smuggling. Smuggling was not a concept created in an economic vacuum borne for the sole purpose of supplying Englishmen with a respectable beverage. Smuggling became of particular consequence in England following

[16] Berg, 231.
[17] Thomas Turner, *The Diary of Thomas Turner 1754*-1765, ed. David Vaisey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 159.
[18] Ibid., 280.

the Navigation Acts of 1651 and 1660. The Navigation Act of 1651 was implemented under Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate in order to establish a secured protectionist English economy in the face of Dutch economic threat. With the Act, Cromwell attempted to exclude the Dutch from English shipping, altogether– although it proved impossible to enforce, as England was preoccupied by the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652-54) and the Anglo-Spanish War (1654-60). [19] However, a revised version of the Act was instituted under Charles II following the Restoration in 1660. This Navigation Act stipulated that "all goods taken to, and from, the colonies should be carried in English or colonial ships; masters and three-quarters of the crew were to be English or colonial subjects."[20] Moreover, a list of "enumerated" colonially-produced commodities were to be exported exclusively to England, including: "cotton, dye-woods, ginger, indigo, sugar, and tobacco."[21] The mercantilist policy of the new act was praised by contemporaries for fiscally strengthening the burgeoning empire, but like its predecessor, it was incredibly difficult to enforce. [22] Another decade of war stretched England's resources, as the Second and Third Anglo-Dutch Wars broke out (1665-67, 1672-74, respectively); consequently, a third Navigation Act was implemented in 1673, concentrating on regulating economic activity on the Atlantic. [23] However, as England expanded her imperial foothold across the globe, enforcement of protectionist policies became increasingly problematic. As a result, channels for illicit commerce developed around the world, in response to the demands of English markets.[24] Smuggling, therefore, flourished even prior to the demand for tea.

[19] Nuala Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies: London and the Atlantic Economy 1660*-1700 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 36.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 37.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 47
[24] Ibid., 39.

The Navigation Acts– and further protectionist policies such as monopoly legislation– were intended to eliminate competition within English markets. The consequences of these policies were twofold: rising commodity prices fuelled by monopoly-holding companies (particularly the East India Company), and the creation of opportunities for aggressive taxation. The East India Company held a charter for all goods imported east of the Cape of Good Hope. [25] They maintained control over Indian Ocean trade for England, while other English companies faced turbulence in the face of ever-changing monopoly policies. [26] Monopoly trade created difficulties for English merchants, who struggled to pay exorbitant prices for tea at East India Company auctions. The challenge faced by English merchants is astutely summarized by Dutch historian Chris Nierstrasz who states that "the Navigation Acts ousted unwanted competition, thus merchants were forced to find a different solution: smuggling."[27]

Due to their monopoly, the East India Company worked to maintain a chokehold on the importation of legally acquired eastern goods. Significantly, the EIC had the responsibility of meeting economic demand for *all* "exotic" eastern commodities, but, alone were incapable of meeting the increasing demands of consumers. Georgian markets exploded, as exposure to and availability of previously unknown commodities became common. Economic historian, Joan Thirsk, affirms this notion: "the country bumpkin was no longer satisfied with the goods he could buy at the nearest market town." [28] As a result, the East India Company were obligated to increase shipments to England. They were, however, unsuccessful in this regard, which left the opportunity for entrepreneurial individuals–with little consideration of the law–to step into tea

[25] H. V Bowen, John McAleer, and Robert J. Blyth, *Monsoon Traders: The Maritime World of the East India Company* (London: Scala Publisher Ltd., 2011), 14.
[26] Ibid., 101.
[27] Nierstrasz, 93.
[28] Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 16.

markets. *A Proposal to Prevent the Smuggling of Tea*, published in 1745, demonstrates the Company's inadequacy:

> The home consumption of tea, since 1721, greatly increased in these Kingdoms; insomuch that it is upon good grounds believed that the annual consumption thereof is near *three millions* of pounds of weight; two millions of which is at present openly, and in denance of the laws and the civil government, smuggled and run in.[29]

This proposal suggests that the majority of tea – as much as two-thirds – was brought into England by illicit means due to expansive tea consumption, and therefore, despite the EIC's monopoly, they were unable to satisfy England's requirement for tea. The East India Company's inability to import sufficient tea can be explained by several factors. Firstly, they were confined to a single port, Canton, which was highly regulated by Chinese authorities, and trade was controlled by Hong merchants.[30] The process of trading at Canton was both labour-intensive and time-sensitive; Chinese trading policy created a number of measures in order to stagnate trading, such as docking EIC ships at nearby Whampoa, instead of directly at Canton, and not allowing Company merchants inland, consequently making it difficult for the EIC to carry out their business efficiently.[31] Additionally, the EIC "organized its commercial business according to a fixed routine based upon decisions made at the same time every year."[32] This restricted the Company substantially in terms of economic flexibility, as they could not cater to fluctuations in the English market. Therefore, the EIC's monopoly did not hinder smuggling, but in fact fuelled it by the elimination of economic competition and their lack of supply in contrast to ever-rising demand.

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[29] *A Proposal to Prevent the Smuggling of Tea* (London: 1745), 1, http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/8QoBp.
[30] Bowen, *Monsoon Traders*, 102.
[31] Ibid.
[32] H. V Bowen, "Sinews of Trade and Empire: The Supply of Commodity Exports to the East India Company during the Late Eighteenth Century," *The Economic History Review* 55, no. 3 (2002): 474.

Throughout the eighteenth century, taxes on tea were continually and steadily increased. Within the exhaustive work of Markman Ellis et al., *Empire of Tea: The Asian Leaf that Conquered the World*, the authors claim that, "by seeking to raise a large revenue on the domestic consumption of tea, eighteenth century administrations had created a fertile ground for the establishment of an unofficial market operating below the systems of state surveillance."[33] The monopoly retained by the East India Company created a convenient avenue by which government officials could excise tea, as the commodity could not, in theory, be sold without undergoing legitimate bureaucratic procedures. Tea was taxed at EIC auctions at an average rate of four shillings per pound. To contextualize this, the United Kingdom National Archive currency converter for purchasing power estimates four shillings in 1750, to be worth approximately £23.33 in 2017, and that four shillings was equivalent to two days of wages for a skilled tradesman.[34] Even this approximate conversion permits a contemporary conception of the significance of a four shilling tax. Four shillings would have seemed like pocket change for the parliamentarians making revenue decisions, but an investment for those most impacted by the laws, especially for shopkeepers who bought tea en masse. Unfortunately, "the average provincial shopkeeper had little general knowledge of the tea trade and lacked the financial resources and business contacts to expand his trade."[35] Hence, a turn to smuggling was the more affordable option for many. Smuggled tea was significantly cheaper than tea offered by the EIC at legal auction, as is exemplified by the table below.[36] Thus, governmental attempts to tax tea were, in fact, detrimental to maintaining the legality of the tea trade within England.

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[33] Ellis, 168.
[34] "Currency Converter: 1270-2017," The National Archives, accessed December 5, 2018, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/.
[35] Hoh-Cheung Mui and Lorna Mui, "Smuggling and the British Tea Trade before 1784," *The American Historical Review* 74, no. 1 (1968): 51.
[36] Ibid., 65.

Range of Prices of Smuggled and Legal Tea, February 1779 (in pence)[75]

| | Smuggled | Legal |
|---|---|---|
| Bohea | 24–33 | 47–51 |
| Congou | 40–54 | 56–96 |
| Souchong | 42–66 | 72–144 |
| Common Green or Singlo | 42–66 | 68–120 |
| Hyson | 66–108 | 126–240 |

The individuals immersed in this illicit economy were diverse. There were of course East India Company employees engaged in illegal activity, as they had prime opportunity to make side deals or stow away containers of tea for domestic resale. However, private traders also engaged in smuggling from the Chinese port of Canton. Some of these individuals were "licensed 'free merchants'" who would work on behalf of the EIC, offering the Company an alternative approach to dealing with controlling and aggressive Hong merchants.[37] As well, there were other entrepreneurial individuals who operated under "privilege trade" through a license with the EIC.[38] These traders differed from free merchants and EIC employees, their licences granting them ample opportunity for illicit trade, and they managed to illegally transport a considerable quantity of goods back to England on their own ships.[39] "Privileged" traders were the primary suppliers of smuggled tea, along with interlopers and clandestine traders who would "often conduct high-volume illicit trade between Britain and India via mainland Europe."[40] A wide range of individuals participated in smuggling commodities from China to England, and many focused their efforts on tea.

[37] Bowen, *Monsoon Traders,* 106.
[38] Ibid., 107.
[39] Ibid., 108.
[40] Ibid.

Agents of tea smuggling from other European nations and their respective trading companies should be addressed. Coastal nations benefitted from lucrative opportunities for illicit activities in Britain by nature of their location. Economic historians, Ho-Cheung Mui and Lorna Mui state that, "for smuggling into Britain, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, neither of which fell under British regulation, served as strategic entrepôts for tea coming from various European countries."[41] As well, European nations were faced with less regulatory scrutiny–that is to say, their imports went untaxed. [42] Nations participating in tea smuggling were also England's greatest imperial competitors: the Dutch Republic and France, as well as Sweden and Denmark. The Dutch tea trade had grown alongside England's, and they were thus heavily involved in trade within Canton of their own right. France, Sweden, and Denmark began trading directly with China in the 1730s, and presumably developed similar groupings of trade individuals with ample means to smuggle.[43] Additionally, during an investigation into the East India Company's monopoly in 1813, the following exchange occurred between the House of Lord's Council and an EIC employee, Daniel Beale Esquire:

> Council: Do you conceive that the duties imposed by the British government on teas must generally act as an encouragement to the illicit importation of the article from China to this country?
>
> Daniel Beale Esq: No doubt, a duty of 95 per cent. is now imposed upon the sale price at the East-India Company's sales, and must be a great encouragement…The French, Danes, and Swedes imported large quantities of teas from Canton, many of which were understood to be for the purpose of smuggling; and I should suppose Dunkirk would, as before, become a depot for teas.[44]

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[41] Hoh-Cheung Mui, "Smuggling and the British Tea Trade," 50.
[42] Ibid., 47
[43] Ibid., 48.
[44] "Composite volume of minutes of evidence on the East India Company's affairs: 'Minutes of Evidence take before the Right Honourable House of Lords' and 'Minutes of Evidence taken before the Honourable House of Commons," East India Company, accessed November 28, 2018, http://www.eastindiacompany.amdigital.co.uk.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/Documents/SearchDetails/BL_IOR_A_2_15.

It appears to be almost common knowledge that other European nations influenced English markets via the smuggling of tea. Therefore, it was not only individuals who saw an opportunity for success in the face of England's monopolistic and tax laden tea market, but entire countries as well.

Before concentrating on the resolution of tea smuggling, it is important to note the material culture which was utilized in the conduction of illicit schemes. Tea could be transported in a number of containers, the most popular and efficient being objects such as the tea chest displayed in Figure 2. In Canton, Hong merchants stored tea in tea chests – notice the Chinese characters inscribed on the outside of the chest – before they sold it either to EIC merchants or private traders for transport back to England.[45] Tea chests maintained a tight seal, allowing the tea to survive tumultuous sea travel and still arrive fresh. As well, smugglers crossing within the Indian Ocean would have utilized the snake boat pictured in Figure 3. This was a common smuggling vessel used on the Pearl River Delta around Canton and would have snuck tea from inland out to awaiting vessels in nearby docks. [46] There were hidden compartments in the bow and stern in which one could store tea chests without raising suspicion. Both tea chests and snake boats were instrumental in the legal tea trade and its criminal underbelly.

[45] Bowen, *Monsoon Traders*, 108.
[46] Ibid.

Figure 2: 'Tea Chest,' Miscellaneous Antiquities, Royal Museums Greenwich, AAB0462, http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/6509.html

Figure 3: Snake Boat,' Ship Models, Royal Museums Greenwich, AAE0143, http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/7007.html.

Curtailing smuggling was a difficult task, as enforcement was sparse and entrepreneurial individuals tended to be persistent in their illegality. For the majority of the eighteenth century, simple repression was the official policy for handling smuggling.[47] Needless to say, this was an ineffective pursuit, as port cities contained complex commercial networks and the Atlantic Ocean was impossible to patrol. As a result of Pitt's leadership, the Commutation Act of 1784 was passed and implemented, which drastically reduced tax on tea, effectively cutting the legs out from under smugglers and re-establishing the East India Company's authority. Following the Commutation Act, the EIC began expanding their control over tea, particularly within the Indian Ocean, and were able to gather, and then maintain, enough tea in reserve in order to meet the fluctuating English market.[48] Smuggling was not eradicated with this legislation but was greatly reduced. The "Commutation Act of 1784 mark[ed] a turning point in the history of the British tea trade."[49]

Taxation was the direct cause of tea smuggling within England. East India Company and tea scholar Chris Nierstrasz asserts that the tax on tea, as well as tea smuggling, was a result of the popularity of the beverage, and its prominence in English society.[50] I would contend that smuggling and tea's popularity were in a symbiotic relationship, each growing in response to the other. The demand for tea required supply, which was primarily produced by smugglers; as tea became more available through smuggling, the popularity of tea consumption rose in tandem. However, in order to maintain the popularity of tea while also breaking the neck of smuggling, England had to eliminate taxation on tea, or at least significantly reduce the duties imposed.[51]

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[47] Nierstrasz, 93.
[48] Hoh-Cheung Mui and Lorna Mui, "The Commutation Act and the Tea Trade in Britain 1784-1793," *The Economic History Review* 16, no. 2 (1963): 235-236.
[49] Ibid., 234.
[50] Nierstrasz, 97.
[51] Sylvanus Urban, "Method to Prevent Smuggling of Tea," *Gentleman's Magazine* 13, (1743): 31.

Only then could the government have eliminated the symbiotic relationship between tea consumption and smuggling, and instead replace it with an equally beneficial–and most importantly, legal–relationship with the East India Company.

Tea was a fashionable commodity which rose to predominance during the long eighteenth century, as Georgian markets expanded considerably due to exposure to foreign goods. Smuggling became a lucrative venture following the Navigation Acts of 1651 and 1660, and proved an optimal solution in the face of relentless governmental taxation. The expansion of tea consumption from the rich to the poor, increased its popularity and therefore demand. This required the monopoly-holding East India Company to increase their supply of tea to England. However, due to Chinese trade policy and insufficient annual planning, the EIC was unable to fulfill this demand. As such, the smuggling of tea rose to dominate English tea markets, consequently satisfying the English need for a respectable beverage while also avoiding abhorrent taxation rates. A wide range of individuals participated in smuggling, from EIC company-men to private traders which allowed tea to freely flow into England at an increased rate. Smuggling of tea was only significantly reduced with the Commutation Act of 1784, which moderated the tax on tea. As a result, the "national catastrophe" of the smuggled "scandal broth" was quelled, in favour of legal methods of import.[52]

[52] Ibid., 163.

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