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.

The poppy, *Papaver somniferum*, was processed into opium, a narcotic used widely throughout the Orient in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The drug was grown and manufactured in India, a subcontinent of princely states united under the banner of Great Britain in 1757. Opium was marketed, solely and exclusively, under the aegis of England's empire in India by the Honourable East India Company.

The camellia, *Camellia sinensis*, is also known as tea. The empire of China had a near complete monopoly on tea, as it was the only country to grow, pick, process, cook, and in all other ways manufacture, wholesale, and export "the liquid jade."

For nearly two hundred years the East India Company sold opium to China and bought tea with the proceeds. China, in turn, bought opium from British traders out of India and paid for the drug with the silver profits from tea.

The opium-for-tea exchange was not merely profitable to England but had become an indispensable element of the economy.
Nearly £1 in every £10 sterling collected by the government came from taxes on the import and sale of tea—about a pound per person per year. Tea taxes funded railways, roads, and civil service salaries, among the many other necessities of an emergent industrial nation. Opium was equally significant to the British economy, for it financed the management of India—the shining jewel in Queen Victoria's imperial crown. While it had always been hoped that India would become economically self-sustaining, by the mid-nineteenth century England was waging a series of expansionist wars on India's North-West Frontier that were swiftly draining whatever profits could be derived from the rich and vast subcontinent.

The triangular trade in botanical products was the engine that powered a world economy, and the wheels of empire turned on the growth, processing, and sale of plant life: poppies from India and camellias from China, with a cut from each for Great Britain.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the British-Chinese relationship was a tragically unhappy. The Exalted and Celestial Emperor in Peking had “officially” banned the sale of opium in China in 1729, but it continued to be smuggled in for generations afterward. (Notably, the sale of opium was also forbidden by Queen Victoria within the British Isles. She, however, was largely obeyed.) Opium sales increased quickly and steadily; there was a fivefold growth in volume in the years 1822–37 alone. Finally, in 1839, the leading Chinese court official in the trading port of Canton, rankled by the profligacy of the foreigners and the pestilence of opium addiction among his own people, held the entire foreign encampment hostage, ransoming the three hundred Britons for their opium, then worth £6 million (about $1.45 million in today's dollars). When the opium was surrendered and the hostages released, the mandarin ordered five hundred Chinese coolies to foul nearly three million pounds of the drug with salt and lime and then wash the mixture out into the Pearl River. In response, young Victoria sent Britain’s navy to war to keep the lucrative opium-for-tea arrangement alive.

In battle, Britain trounced China, whose rough wooden sailing junks were no match for Her Majesty’s steam-powered modern navy. As part of the peace treaty, England won concessions from the Chinese that after a century of diplomatic entreaty no one had thought possible: the island of Hong Kong plus the cession of five new treaty or trading ports on the mainland.

Few Westerners had penetrated the Chinese interior since the days of Marco Polo. For two hundred years prior to the First Opium War, British ships had been restricted to docking at the entrepôt of Canton, a southern trading city at the mouth of the Pearl River. Britons could not officially step foot outside their warehouses, and many had never even seen the city walls, 20 feet thick and 25 feet high and only 200 yards away from the foreigners’ district. Now, with their triumph in the war, the interior of China was opened to the British—just a crack—for business.

With five new cities in which to trade, British merchants began dreaming of the lush silks, delicate porcelains, and perfumed teas stockpiled in the Chinese interior, just waiting to be sold to the wider world. Merchants conceived of the possibility of dealing directly with Chinese manufacturers, rather than the cantankerous middlemen or Hongs who commanded the Canton warehouses. Bankers had visions of untold riches, of mineral wealth, and of crops, plants, and flowers—a giant country filled with unmonetized commodities.

The new order established by the First Opium War was an unstable one, however. Forced by British gunboats to sign the in-
tolerable treaties, China, the once proud and self-contained nation, had been thoroughly shamed. British politicians and traders worried that the humiliated Chinese emperor might upset the delicate balance established by the peace accords by legalizing opium production in China itself, thus breaking India's (and, in turn, Britain's) monopoly on the poppy.

An idea now took hold in the City of London: Tea could and must be secured for England. The Napoleonic Wars had long since ended by the time of the Opium Wars, but the brave men who had fought at Trafalgar and Waterloo still held enormous sway over foreign policy and opinion. Henry Hardinge, a great general who had helped defeat Napoleon beside Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington, warned of the risk posed by a defiant China when he was governor-general of India:

"It is in my opinion by no means improbable that in a few years the Government of Pekin, by legalising the cultivation of Opium in China, where the soil has been already proved equally well adapted with India to the growth of the plant, may deprive this Government of one of its present chief sources of revenue. Under this view I deem it most desirable to afford every encouragement to the cultivation of Tea in India; in my opinion the latter is likely in course of time to prove an equally prolific and more safe source of revenue to the state than that now derived from the monopoly on Opium."

If China legalized the opium poppy, it would leave a crucial gap in the economic triangle: England would no longer have the money to pay for her tea, her wars in India, or her public works projects at home. Chinese-grown opium would put an end to the shameful economic codependence between the two empires, the unhappy marriage sealed by the exchange of two flowers. It was a divorce that Britain could ill afford.

The Indian Himalaya mountain range resembled China's best tea-growing regions. The Himalayas were high in altitude, richly soiled, and clouded in mists that would both water tea plants and shade them from the scorching sun. Frequent frosts would help sweeten and flavor their liquor, making it more complicated, intense, delicious.

As botanical products swelled the balance sheets of the Oriental trade, they became so important to the world order that the men who studied them—men who were once popularly regarded as mere gardeners—began to be appreciated as the botanists they were. By the mid-nineteenth century, botanists were no longer viewed as humble men in hats and hobnailed boots, tending to their bulbs, flowers, and shrubs, but as swashbucklers and world-changers, whose collections of foreign plants had potential scientific, economic, and agricultural value in England and throughout the empire. New technology for transplanting live flora had also grown more sophisticated, allowing professional plant hunters to collect and transport ever more exotic specimens.

No longer confined to China's southernmost coast, Britain now had greater access to the areas where tea was cultivated and processed. If the manufacture of tea in India was to be successful, Britain would need healthy specimens of the finest tea plants, seeds by the thousand, and the centuries-old knowledge of accomplished Chinese tea manufacturers. The task required a plant hunter, a gardener, a thief, a spy.

The man Britain needed was named Robert Fortune.
Min River, China, 1845

On an autumn afternoon in 1845, long before Robert Fortune made his name as one of the world’s great plant hunters, it seemed very likely that he would die in China. For two weeks he had been confined to a listless junk near the city of Fuzhou, at the mouth of the Min River. His ordinarily robust constitution was near collapse. With a raging fever, he took to his bunk in the cabin of a seagoing cargo boat, dizzy from the smell of bilgewater and rotting fish. The junk’s deck, laden with timber from the countryside, also held Fortune’s cargo, which included trunk-size glass boxes filled with flowers, shrubs, grasses, vegetables, fruits, and all manner of exotic plant life. These glazed cases, known as Wardian or Ward’s cases after their inventor, were on their way with Fortune to London—if he ever made it that far. With his long legs dangling off a bunk made for the shorter Chinese, Fortune, only thirty-three years old at the time, imagined himself dying in the boat’s hold, being swaddled in his grimy bedclothes, and then unceremoniously hurled overboard into a watery grave.

He was in the last days of a three-year expedition to China, conducted at the behest of the Royal Horticultural Society of London, to find and collect samples of the Orient’s botanical treasures. Fortune’s assignment included procuring “the peaches of Pekin, cultivated in the Emperor’s Garden and weighing 2 lbs.,” among other imagined delicacies. In addition to living flora, he would take home a pressed herbarium and intricate botanical drawings penned by the finest draftsmen in China. With every seed, plant, graft, and clone collected, Fortune was advancing Western knowledge of the East and of botany.

Each new plant he cataloged was significant not only for its novelty value but for its possible utility to the British Empire. The nineteenth-century world had been revolutionized by the mechanized manufacture of natural products into refined goods: Cotton became cloth on automated looms, iron ore was transformed into train tracks and steamships’ hulls, and clay became stoneware and porcelain. China was a frontier of agricultural riches and industrial possibilities.

But, lying feverish in his bunk, Fortune could not believe he or his plants would ever find their way safely back to the gardens of Britain. He was in the greatest danger he had ever known, notwithstanding the three years he had already spent living in China as a foreigner.

“It seemed hard for me to die . . . without a friend or countryman to close my eyes, or follow me to my last resting place; home, friends, and country, how doubly dear they did seem to me then!” he later wrote.

Fortune’s life was emblematic of that of many entrepreneurial Britons who were seizing the opportunities offered by the expansion of the empire. His roots were modest. His early education in rural horticulture took place at the elbow of his “hedger” father, a hired farmworker. He had no formal higher education beyond his parish schooling in the tiny town of Edrom, in the Scottish
Borders; his knowledge of natural history was not obtained at the universities of Oxford or Edinburgh, but from folk practice and professional apprenticeship. He gained a first-class certificate in horticulture, a trade qualification, but lacked the degree in medicine that was a common accompaniment to an interest in botany among those he aspired to join as a peer. For all that, Fortune was ambitious, and for many nineteenth-century Scots as well as English second sons of some talent and no sinecure, seeking one’s chances abroad was the only way to advance in the rigid Victorian social hierarchy. There were untold possibilities to make a decent living by exploiting the untapped resources of the empire.

With his lively mind, Fortune rose quickly through the ranks of horticulture, first in the Botanic Garden at Edinburgh and later at the Royal Horticultural Society’s gardens in Chiswick. Based on his skills at cultivating orchids and hothouse ornamentals—the rare, showy plants from the Orient—Fortune was the Society’s first choice to be dispatched to explore China at the close of the First Opium War. Founded in 1804 by John Wedgwood, Charles Darwin’s maternal uncle, the Society was the arbiter of all things green and growing in England. At its lively meetings botanists and zoologists presented papers and discussed the latest developments in their fields, which were multiplying rapidly with the increase in British global dominion. Its journals detailed the classification of the newest plants from the farthest reaches of Her Majesty’s empire. The Society’s botanists were busily engaged in the great project of naming and describing every species according to the methods by which they reproduced, a system recently introduced in Europe by the great Carl von Linné, known as Linnaeus.

Victorian England had a passion for natural exotica, for the insects, fossils, and plants that had been collected over the decades by its missionaries, officers, and merchants on the high seas. With the rural peasantry moving off the land and into the city as industrialization took hold and farmland was enclosed by the gentry, Britons began to yearn for nature in all its forms, and a new market evolved to supply British households with plants. Potted ferns of all varieties became a national obsession and soon were seen everywhere: on decorative porcelain, wallpaper, and textiles; in the conservatories of the rich; and on the windowsills of the poor. Easy to grow and propagate, and hardy enough to transplant, ferns had a wild, uncultivated look that reflected the national pastoralism.

In pursuit of a more exotic trophy, in 1856 the Sixth Duke of Devonshire paid a hundred guineas (about $12,000 today) for the first imported example of the Philippine orchid Phalaenopsis amabilis. The duke nearly squandered his fortune on his passion for flowers. Striking and delicate with its snow-white oblong petals and yellow lips, the amabilis orchid was beloved by Society members and hugely profitable to its discoverer.

Since China had been closed to Westerners for centuries, it remained largely a blank on plant-hunting maps, a place once marked “Here be dragons.” China considered itself the center of the world, but the Middle Kingdom was in fact almost entirely removed from the global stage, albeit Chinese civilization was more than five thousand years old. With little real knowledge of China, the West projected onto it a million fantasies of paradise, danger, and exoticism. All the yearning reflected in England’s desire for gardens was fulfilled and even magnified by its perception of China as the untouched Shangri-la of horticulture.
Had Europeans been permitted a closer look at China, they would have found a country riven by internal unrest and governed by hated foreigners. The Manchus had crossed the Great Wall from the north and for two hundred years had ruled the ethnic Han Chinese from the capital of Peking (now Beijing), demanding fealty and taxes. Secret societies abounded in the south, sworn to combat the alien emperors of the Manchurian Qing Dynasty. The countryside was full of thieves and highwaymen, and the seaways were plagued by pirates. Famines blighted the lives of the rural peasantry, as did corrupt officials, members of the Confucian-educated scholar class known as mandarins, while squalor overwhelmed the cities.

The British had some knowledge of China’s affairs through trading contact—the East India Company had been doing business in Canton for almost two centuries—but the interior of China was for the most part terra incognita. Two things England did know, however: There were bound to be marvelous plants in China, and the economic future of Great Britain might benefit greatly from them.

The emperor of China took pains to prevent interlopers from exploring his territory and capitalizing on its resources. In the wake of the First Opium War, the Treaty of Nanking had granted Britain rights to trade in Fuzhou and four other treaty ports, walled coastal cities previously forbidden to outsiders. But suspicion of the British and their intentions remained widespread, with white men officially prohibited from traveling beyond the newly constructed foreign concessions in the port cities. And if Chinese laws could not keep foreigners inside the city walls, the realities of life in China might: It presented a hostile environment to Britons unaccustomed to the humidity, insects, vermin, disease, and terrible sanitation of even the most civi-

lized outposts. No sane man would wish to live or die in China.

In the autumn of 1842, news of the peace between China and England reached the halls of the Royal Horticultural Society, which provided it an unprecedented opportunity to send an expedition into deepest China. The discovery and exploitation of botanical materials were now widely recognized as a British priority, and Robert Fortune was the first person given leave by the Foreign Office to travel to China at the end of hostilities.

Fortune was chosen for the China expedition despite lacking the usual gentleman’s background that would fit him for such a prestigious Society assignment. He was paid wages of only £100 a year (about £5,000 in today’s money, or $10,000), a paltry sum on which to raise a family and one that would not be increased during his entire three-year tenure. When he dared to try to negotiate for a better stipend, the Society sharply re- buked him, with a reminder that “the mere pecuniary returns of your mission ought to be but a secondary consideration” next to “the distinction and status which you could not have attained any other way.”

Given his social standing and lack of property, Fortune was not judged by the Society as being entitled to any of their requisites, including such niceties as a rifle, pistols, bullets, and gunpowder. His mission was to study and expropriate the rare plants of the Orient—a task that did not, they maintained, require weaponry. It was not for the plants, Fortune argued, but for his own safety that he needed this protection. While his fellow professional botanists were sympathetic, the fact remained that when gentlemen plant hunters needed guns, they had the independent means with which to purchase them.

The Society members eventually agreed that their investment
in the China expedition would be forfeited or at least greatly reduced if Fortune were killed before its completion. While they again refused to raise his salary, they did reluctantly provide him with some weapons.

As it turned out, their choice of Fortune to lead the expedition was a triumph. He faithfully reported back to them all the details of his botanical finds, shipping to England as many living examples of the new and wonderful plants of China as he could. He took cuttings, made grafts, kept careful notes, and wrote detailed letters for the botanists of the world, many of whom received the fruits of his discoveries as part of a program of global imperial plant exchange. By the end of his first trip to China, Fortune was considered a success within the circles of scientific exploration, the first of his shipments having been received, propagated, and duly celebrated.

It helped that he had a collector's eye for the rare and the beautiful, as well as for potential market value. He plumbed the reaches of China's natural wonders, keeping his eye trained on the flowers that, while perhaps not of immense significance to science, might nonetheless fetch a high price under the gavel. Over the course of three years Fortune discovered the winter-blooming jasmine; the bleeding heart, a floral image of brokenheartedness to play to Victorian romanticism; the Chinese fan palm, a gift of colonial exotica to Queen Victoria on her thirty-second birthday; the white wisteria; the corsage gardenia (Gardenia fortunei); and the lilac daphne (Daphne fortunei). Fortune found the fabled double yellow tea rose (commonly known as Fortune's Double Yellow or The Gold of Ophir) in a mandarin's garden, climbing walls to a height of 15 feet. One discovery in particular—the kumquat, Citrus fortunei, or commonly Fortunella, the miniature citrus fruit with edible skin—would make him immortal. Although Fortune did not own the property rights to any of his botanical finds, he would travel home with many other salable curiosities and trinkets, rare gems, pottery, and pieces of jade.

Beyond his scrupulously observed field notes, Fortune kept a diary of his exploits and of his encounters with the exotic people and customs of China. He wrote about his servants and interpreters, officials, merchants, herbalists, artists, fishermen, gardeners, monks, prostitutes, street peddlers, women, and children. Like other travelers of the Victorian era, upon his return in 1847 he published this document in the form of a travelogue. Three Years' Wanderings in the Northern Provinces of China is liberally sprinkled with the geographical and botanical descriptions one might find in any horticultural study, but it also contains its author's jaunty and unstinting reminiscences of meeting fellow British expatriates in the treaty ports, of the temples and priests, and of the dangers of bandits.

Fortune's trip began in Hong Kong, Britain's newest colonial possession, during the typhoon season of 1843. He declared the island to be "in lamentable condition," suffering from the bad air, or mal aria, which laid waste its European inhabitants. "Viewed as a place of trade, I fear Hong Kong will be a failure," he wrote none too prophetically. Sailing up the coast toward the northernmost trading port at Shanghai, Fortune was nearly shipwrecked in a typhoon. "Some idea may be formed of the storm when I mention that a large fish weighing at least 30 pounds was thrown out of the sea onto the skylight upon the poop, the frame of which was dashed to pieces and the fish fell through and landed upon the cabin table." While plant hunting on mainland hillsides, Fortune was pickpocketed, chased, and beaten by thieves, who threw a brick at his head. "I was stunned for a few seconds and leaned against a wall to breathe and recover myself... The rascals again surrounded me and relieved me of several articles," he wrote.
Fortune also visited opium-trading dens and held forth on the perils of addiction. "I have often seen the drug used and I can assert in the great majority of cases it is not immoderately indulged in. At the same time, I am well aware that, like the use of ardent spirits in our own country, it is frequently carried to a most lamentable excess."

He was particularly eager to obtain plant material from the gardens of mandarins, which often held some of the best specimens available. In order to access the gardens of Suzhou, a forbidden city, he donned a disguise. "I was, of course, travelling in the Chinese costume; my head was shaved, I had a splendid wig and tail, of which some Chinaman in former days must have been extremely vain; and upon the whole I believe I made a very fair Chinaman." The masquerade fooled the gatekeepers, and Fortune observed, "How surprised they would have been had it been whispered that an Englishman was standing amongst them."

*Three Years* also charted Fortune's evolution as a man gradually coming to terms with what he viewed as an enigmatic society. At first he approached China with all the arrogance of a colonialist, dismissing it as a country full of "wretched Chinese hovels, cotton fields, and tombs." Like many foreigners, he saw himself as a missionary for the Western way of life, mocking any Chinese notions of superiority. European expatriates should, he believed, serve as examples to the Chinese, since any "peeps at our comforts and refinements may have a tendency to raise the 'barbarian race' a step or two higher in the eyes of the 'enlightened' Chinese." Yet after three years his opinion had been tempered, for he could not have successfully completed his mission without coming into close contact with everyday Chinese, and in so doing the country inevitably began to assume a human face for him.

The barriers to penetrating China were enormous and ranged from the linguistic and the social to the strictly official. In light of his outsider status Fortune was almost entirely dependent on Chinese peasants, boatmen, coolies, guides, and porters. He found many who were willing to help him sidestep national and cultural boundaries—for a price. The contact he had with ordinary Chinese people, which few Westerners had previously experienced, led him to hope for unity and reconciliation between the two nations. "Nothing," he wrote, "can give the Chinese a higher idea of our civilisation and attainments than our love for flowers, or tend more to create a feeling between us and them."

*Three Years* was both a critical and a popular triumph. A reviewer for *The Times* of London, the paper of record, wrote as follows:

When readers have recovered from the intoxication produced by the exciting drink of Uncle Tom's Cabin, we seriously recommend them . . . to "try Fortune's mild Bohea." There is no adulteration in the article. It is pure—almost to a fault, and has to be taken, as the Chinese themselves drink tea, without the admixture of milk and sugar, for luscious ornament and superfluous additions our singleminded author has none. Concerning the flavour there can be no mistake. One trial will prove the excellence of the commodity, and he that sips once will be soothed and sip again.

The book was avidly consumed by an audience of armchair botanists and starry-eyed colonialists, but also by those who simply enjoyed a gripping tale. Fortune rendered his experiences in the traditional form of the Victorian bildungsroman: Living by his wits and full of improvisation, the young man from the prov-
inces made his name in the unlikeliest of ways and was celebrated upon his return to London.

But if one vignette in particular stood out and established Fortune in the popular imagination as a hero, it was the tale that began with him in his fevered state, lying in a cabin belowdecks on the treacherous Min River.

Fortune’s flat-bottomed ship made a turn north from the rocky mouth of the river out into the South China Sea. The small wooden craft sailed on an early morning wind, her rattan sail full, patched together like a quilt and pouching out between bamboo stays.

The cabin door burst open, and the breathless captain and pilot began to shout in Fukiense, the dialect of the coast.

“Pirates!” they warned. Haidao!

On deck it was a scene of chaos, as the captain had begun ripping up floorboards in order to stash his valuables while crew members likewise sought places to hide the few pieces of copper money they had managed to set aside in a life of hard sea labor. Fortune took out his telescope and could see five ships on the horizon, unmarked, flying no imperial flags. They could only be pirate ships.

As the first enemy craft bore down on them, its crew, some fifty or so strong, gathered along the gangway and began “hoot- ing and yelling like demons.”

“ Their fearful yells seem to be ringing in my ears even now, after this lapse of time, and when I am on the other side of the globe,” Fortune later wrote.

Turning back to the crew of his own ship, he noticed they had been subtly transformed. The men had made themselves look like beggars, as if they had been at sea for forty years or more; they were now wearing only the suggestion of clothes—torn rags and

shreds of rice sacks. With enemies about to board, there was nothing to be gained by appearing prosperous.

Piracy was the scourge of China. Trade with the West brought in untold foreign wealth, leaving the coasts a battleground between the mandarins, who sought to impose official control over shipping, and a mutinous water world of thieves. If life in a pirate gang was a frenzy of sodomy, gang rape, torture, and cannibalism, it was also a way to make a living outside the rigid structure of Qing society. There was little profit in taking a boat as small as Fortune’s, as it would yield only a few captives to sell as slaves and a negligible vessel to commandeering or sink—but there was also very little risk. The pirate ship could easily outgun, outmaneuver, and generally outclass Fortune’s cumbersome cargo junk.

His crew now began hauling up baskets of stones from the hold, emptying the rocks across the span of the deck. In peacetime these stones functioned as ballast; in war they were the most rudimentary of weapons. However, as Fortune noted, “All the pirate junks carried guns, and consequently a whole deck load of stones could be of very little use.”

“Bring the junk around,” one of the crew demanded.

“Run us back to the cliffs and hide among them,” another argued.

“Fight!” cried one. Da!

“Flee!” yelled another. Zou!

The fate of a Westerner taken by pirates was often a bloody one: The brigands would possibly hold Fortune for ransom and torture him. Under duress he would be forced to write letters to the British missions, begging for impossible sums to be paid to secure his release. One English captive held in such circumstances wrote, “I saw one man nailed through his feet with large
nails, then beaten with four rattans twisted together, till he vomited blood; and after remaining some time in this state, he was taken ashore and cut into pieces.” Another “was fixed upright, his bowels cut open and his heart taken out, which they afterwards soaked in spirits and ate.”

Pirates did not shrink from such cruelty, given that their own death sentences were virtually assured. The state’s punishment for piracy was nailing the perpetrators to a cross, slicing them with a sharp knife, and cutting them into 120, 72, 36, or 24 pieces. Of the lightest sentence, 24 cuts, one observer wrote:

The first and second cuts remove the eyebrows; the third and fourth, the shoulders; the fifth and sixth, the breasts, the seventh and eighth, the parts between each hand and elbow; the ninth and tenth, the parts between each elbow and shoulder; the eleventh and twelfth, the flesh of each thigh; the thirteenth and fourteenth, the calf of each leg; the fifteenth pierces the heart; the sixteenth severs the head from the body; the seventeenth and eighteenth cut off the hands; the nineteenth and twentieth, the arms; the twenty-first and twenty-second, the feet; the twenty-third and twenty-fourth, the legs.

Fortune knew that he would be the choicest of the pirates’ prizes, so he mustered his depleted strength, rallied from his fever, and imposed what order he could on the pandemonium on deck. Raising his pistol, he took aim at the head of his own helmsman.

“My gun is nearer to you than those of the pirates,” he threat-ened, “and if you move from the helm, depend upon it, I will shoot you.”

As he delivered his warning, the enemy ship fired a broadside cannon. The crew—every man but Fortune’s terrified pilot—fled belowdecks. The cannonball whizzed over Fortune’s head, its flight taking it directly between the sails.

The pirate ship was at least half again the size of Fortune’s, but as her guns were fixed along her gangways (the passageways along either side of the ship), the craft was forced to adjust her head-on course and turn at a sharp angle in order to fire. While the cannon volley continued, Fortune settled on his plan: He would not retaliate from a distance but would allow the pirates to believe his ship could be boarded easily. Bringing them into close range would give the advantage to Fortune’s precision weaponry over the pirates’ heavy and clumsy cannons and locally made muskets or matchlocks (the Chinese did not have rifles or pistols), which were as likely to blow up in the hands of a marksman as fire a shot.

The pirates bore down on them, guns ablaze. When they were 20 yards off, Fortune took his chance. Crawling along the deck toward the high quarterdeck at the stern, he rose abruptly and let loose with both barrels of his rifle.

In an instant the shocked crew of the attacking ship disappeared behind its bulwarks. Fortune’s shot was true, leaving one of the pirates injured and probably dead. The pirate craft was suddenly a ghost vessel: No one was steering her; her sails luffed helplessly.

Fortune’s craft, on the other hand, had its pilot and a full sail.

Pirates traveled in packs, however, and shortly afterward a
second ship began to gain on them, and three more were sighted in the distance.

Fortune then hit upon an idea prompted by his rag-bedecked crewmen and his own experiences visiting the mandarin gardens of Suzhou in disguise: cultural cross-dressing in borrowed clothes. He still had several changes of Western clothing stored in his cabin below. What if he dressed up the crew as Occidentals? "It now struck me that perhaps I might be able to deceive the pirates with regard to our strength," he wrote. The Chinese were essentially blind at sea: While all British ships carried telescopes and some even binoculars, few Chinese vessels had them. If the pirates believed there was a full European contingent and arsenal aboard, they might be less enthusiastic about running down the junk.

Fortune dressed the "least Chinese-looking Chinamen" from the crew in his remaining Western finery. In frock coats, trousers, and heeled shoes, the men began to look like Victorian travelers. He instructed them to take up sticks that might look like rifles at long range, and several brandished the short levers used for hoisting the sails.

However convincingly the crew may have appeared British, with pirates at close range they remained petrified. When a cannon volley began, every man fled under the decks, leaving Fortune alone.

The second pirate ship began to fire: more shrapnel, more terror, more cries. But before the brigands had time to reload, Fortune was on his feet.

He let loose the contents of his rifle—two shots, fore and aft—and then fired his revolvers, killing the helmsman and again leaving the vessel to heel under the wind.
East India House, City of London, January 12, 1848

East India House occupied a prestigious site on Leadenhall Street in the center of the City of London. The building's grand façade had Ionic columns supporting a triangular tympanum decorated with emblems of global commerce: At the corners, a figure representing Europe was seated on a horse, and the figure of Asia sat astride a camel; between Europe and Asia rode King George in flowing Roman dress. The mad king, who famously lost the reins of thirteen profitable colonies in the Americas, brandished a sword in defense of international trade. Although the architectural pediment faced north, every man who walked beneath it into the bustling East India Company offices below faced due east, toward the Orient, the center of profit for the venerable company.

Amid the hubbub of the trading house, whose day-to-day activities included the recopying of letters, the distribution of favors, perquisites, and privileges in assemblies that lasted from dawn to dusk, and the serving of breakfast, a wooden chest arrived from India. It was carried through paneled hallways sumptuously adorned with portraits, statues, and memorabilia and beyond a vast library and a museum filled with models, coins, medals, fossils, stuffed birds, sculptures, and reliefs. Shouldered by porters from the dockyards, the chest passed before a clockwork tiger, which, when wound up, would "eat" a wooden British soldier—once the property of an Indian sultan before his defeat at the hands of the company.

Large but light, the chest was delivered to a young clerk, who pried off its tin-lined lid, releasing a fragrant herbal aroma. From the contents of the chest he began to prepare several small packages. With a scale before him and brass weights lined up by size, he measured out uniform quantities from the box, carefully depositing each into a wax-dipped cloth bag. He was ready to parcels of loose tea to be delivered to the best tea distributors in London.

The task of tea allocation was not among the clerk's typical duties, which were those of any secretary: writing out triplicates of every document, letter, and bill of lading that reached the offices of the company from the Orient. To a man making a decent wage of £300 a year for work that was neither taxing nor glamorous, this task of doling out some packets of tea would nevertheless be among the most significant actions he would perform in his lifelong career. It was no exaggeration to say that his employer's survival hinged on whether the tea he was dispatching made a favorable impression on its distinguished recipients.

Officially titled the United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies, although sometimes referred to as John Company or the Honourable Company, the clerk's employer was a global corporation that had weathered nearly three hundred glorious and mostly profitable years in trade with the East. In that time it colonized much of the world and in the process became its first and largest multinational company. For very
good reason it was called the “Grandest Society of Merchants in the Universe.”

When Queen Elizabeth granted her royal charter to the East India Company in 1600, she gave it all trading rights in the East Indies, a mandate as broad and valuable as any public concern has held. For the first hundred years of its existence it largely bought spices and fabrics in the Orient and sold them in London. To fund the expeditions eastward, the company sold shares, and stockholders received a dividend on profits. The operation was enormously successful for England, and the company prospered.

As profits and opportunities grew, however, trade with the East became more and more complicated. John Company became the de facto government of many of the lands in which it did business: It could acquire territory, mint money, command armies, sign treaties, make war and peace, and develop its own judicial and taxation systems. It became a peer to empires and states and, as such, an entirely new entity in the global economy.

The East India Company gave birth to the fortunes of the Pitt family, the military reputation of the Duke of Wellington, and the empire of Hastings. One company governor, Elihu Yale, funded a college of some apparent renown. The clublike offices on Leadenhall Street employed such fine minds as John Stuart Mill and Charles Lamb. With a staff of nearly 350 in the London office, it was the single largest private employer in Britain. The company hired as many soldiers as did the Crown and thus doubled the number of available jobs in the military, while increasing civil service positions by 50 percent. The company extended a gentlemanly capitalism to England’s otherwise propertyless leisure class, largely from southern England and public school edu-
cated. “Some of the best working blood of England is in India,” commented one company man.

Managed in London by its Court of Directors, the East India Company was organized very much along the same lines as modern corporations. Businesses previously had been owned by the same people who managed them. But the shareholders of East India Company had no say in its day-to-day operations. A professional managerial class arose in England, and becoming a member of it became synonymous with middle-class success. The company’s international ambitions were so extensive and its structure so complex that it developed elaborate international banking and inventory systems to track goods, services, and debts across oceans. Managers were empowered to make high-volume transactions in several markets simultaneously, using whatever technology and information was available—from the letter to the telegraph to the hunch.

Like today’s international businesses, the company would do anything to get ahead of the game, and it was generally believed that tea was the commodity that would keep the company preeminent. Tea was first introduced into England in the 1660s as part of the dowry of Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza when she married Charles II. Tea proved to be an ideal cargo for the East Indiaman merchant boats in that it was light, easily packed, and could withstand the vagaries of many months spent in an ocean crossing. An exotic luxury, tea rapidly became a favorite way among the upper classes to signify civility and taste in the chilly, wet climate of Britain. From there it rapidly percolated downward through society so that by the mid-eighteenth century tea had become the most popular drink throughout Britain, outselling even beer.

Previously just another trading commodity for the Honour-
able Company, tea had now become a staple of British life. To be English was to drink tea: Wives put tea on the breakfast table, and the bankers of the empire understood that it was tea that made the Far East trade go round. It was a significant profit center for the government, a multibillion-pound industry, accounting for as much as 10 percent of the total British economy as measured by tax revenues to the exchequer. And the East India Company had its stamp on every single case shipped into England.

The dominance of the company was threatened, however, when in the early nineteenth century Parliament made a series of moves to withdraw its license to trade with Asia. Initially the company’s royal charter had given it a total monopoly on trade with the Orient at a time when no one really understood the implications of such a grant. Monopolies, by definition, squelch competition and innovation. Not only did rival firms object to the high barriers to trading in foreign ports, but a growing populism in England extended to the business practices of the empire. As the men of Britain became increasingly enfranchised politically, why couldn’t every British trading firm have the same rights to trade in the Far East? In 1813, Westminster withdrew the company’s monopoly on trade in India; it was left to rule the subcontinent as the de facto government but was ordered to allow other corporations to do business in Indian ports with Indian-made goods. Despite this check on company power, it collected tax revenues in India equal to half of the total tax revenues of Britain and remained financially healthy. It also retained its most valuable trade monopoly in China.

China had once been a source of pure profit to the company. The company had the run of Cathay, and every chest of tea, silk, or porcelain out of Canton traveled on East Indiaman ships so that money practically minted itself. The margins on tea were particularly high, and its value by the turn of the nineteenth century equaled that of all other Chinese goods combined. But free trade advocates, including Adam Smith, continued to rail against the company’s dominance in the China trade. An 1834 act of Parliament finally stripped John Company of its long-sanctioned monopoly over China. Free trade sentiment and mercantilist tendencies stirring in England ensured that there was fierce jostling for a share in the lucrative tea business. New, smaller trading firms were soon docking in Canton, offloading opium, onloading tea for England, and, with their faster ships, sailing between continents in record time. The triple-masted East Indiaman looked old, bloated, and slow in comparison, much like the East India Company itself. It seemed as if the company’s days of unrivaled supremacy in the East were numbered.

After the loss of its last trade monopoly, China became mostly a headache for the company, due to a series of lingering unsolved problems. The empire of Great Britain owed its entire acquaintance with tea, not to mention its continuing supply of it, to the empire of China. The Chinese picked tea, roasted it, blended it, and then sold it to England at a lucrative markup. China was in complete control of the drink that had dominated British taste for two centuries. Dependence on another country for a vital product was a blow to imperial Britain’s sense of self-sufficiency. It was especially galling to be so reliant on a nation that was so often churlish and disobliging, and that would raise prices on inferior goods whenever it pleased.

To East India House, it had long seemed preposterous that any country, let alone one of “backwards Orientals,” could so thoroughly ignore trade initiatives from a nation whose mighty navy, at the time, dominated the world. Yet isolationist China
had managed successfully to keep Great Britain at arm's length, even though Britain purchased one out of every five chests of tea it manufactured. Despite a century of diplomatic approaches, the Chinese had yielded absolutely no secrets about the manufacture of tea. How it was grown, by whom, and in what conditions remained a mystery to the West. Even the very names for tea were enigmatic: Lark's Tongue, Dragon's Well, Jade Girl Peak, Looking Glass Rock, Water Tortoise Stones, Rock of Three Monks. Were these green teas or blacks? How could one label them for the market with such descriptions? How could the company be sure the teas would taste the same from year to year? Its Court of Directors had long since grown tired of dealing with grasping middlemen and did not want to share any part of their profits with the infuriating Chinese.

Tea was the symbol of the one major country on earth that still resisted Britain's empire.

If the tea trade had been the greatest boon for the East India Company in its prime, by the mid-nineteenth century the company was reeling; its tea trade was in decline while simultaneously its last, best hope for survival. In India the company presided over a series of human catastrophes: a famine that killed more than ten million and heavy death tolls from warfare between states, corruption, expansionism, drug dealing, and ethnic cleansing. Governing a subcontinent was also an expensive business. To safeguard its territory the company mounted military campaigns in Afghanistan and the Punjab, with scant resources to pay for them. New colonies were supposed to create new markets for British-manufactured goods, but there was little demand from Asian peasantry for British woolens.

The company clerk kept his hand steady as he measured out the chest of Indian tea in the dark-paneled confines of East India House. This was Himalayan tea, which was never before seen in England. It had been sent from Calcutta on the orders of Viscount Hardinge himself as part of a plan to save the company.

Hardinge had battled Napoleon at the sides of both Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington. He missed Waterloo by a mere two days after losing his hand at the Battle of Ligny. The viscount was such a favorite of Wellington's that he was nevertheless presented with the gift of Napoleon's sword. Hardinge went from the military to a life in politics, serving as a member of Parliament and later at cabinet level as Secretary for War, in both Whig and Conservative administrations. At the tiller he was an able hand—even if he only had one—and the Honourable Company counted itself lucky to have such a trusted soldier helming India as governor-general from 1844 to 1848. When he suggested that this Indian tea ought to be sent to London's tasters and blenders, the finest practitioners in the entire world, the Court of Directors of the East India Company hastily and heartily agreed.

Himalayan tea was not the first tea produced on Indian soil. The company had been growing tea there for at least ten years, propagated out of native Indian tea plants in Assam Province. Indian tea was initially discovered in Assam by company medical corps surgeons as early as 1815 but was not formally acknowledged as such until 1831. Indian tea grew well in its sea-level home soil near Burma, where the natives chewed rather than drank it. In the following years the company invested millions in the experimental cultivation of native tea, to see if it could be grown in Indian gardens for the domestic market. To an extent the plan worked. The company discovered it could produce a leaf that
looked like the tea leaves of China; it could also train natives to pick and prepare tea. But the company could never make Assam tea taste good—or at least not as good as China tea, the finest in the world and the only one that mattered to a thirsty English market.

Assam tea had a strong bite to it and a hot, sooty taste. Even today Assam is seldom graded fine at auction and is appreciated only by those who desire a strong nose and a certain maltiness to their brew. It also doesn't grow particularly well, yielding a poor return per acre. Now as then, Assam tea is largely used in blends when the prevailing notes of dainty florals require a slight heft. Within a few years of commencing their tea experiment, the company realized that Assam would never fetch the high prices of its rival and would certainly never overtake China tea in the world marketplace, and so it begrudgingly divested itself of its tea assets there.

Himalayan tea was the company's next big hope, enthused Hardinge in a letter to the Court of Directors dated September 20, 1847.

I consider it highly probable that in the course of a few years, the cultivation of [Himalayan] tea is likely to prove a highly valuable source of revenue for the state. No apparent difficulties exist to the spread of Tea cultivation in the Hills to an almost unlimited extent and I have every confidence that at no remote period Tea will be produced in sufficient amount not only to meet the probably large demand in India but also in quantity and sufficient fineness in quality to enable it to compete with the Tea of China in European markets and to render England in some degree independent of a foreign Country for its supplies of this necessary of life.

The Himalayas possessed the same growing conditions as China's best tea regions. They were subtropical, on roughly the same latitude as Cairo, but high and cool, so the tea would be slow-growing and retain its pungency. There was also unlimited space on Himalayan hillsides for tea production—the natives seemed neither to want nor to make use of the mountains, for food or profit. Under Hardinge's orders, the company made elaborate plans for experimental plantations of a minimum of five hundred acres each, which would allow for economies of scale, capital investment, and the European efficiency that Chinese tea production lacked. British laws and British investors would oversee the sale and merchandising of Himalayan tea; there would be no middlemen, no double-dealing, no Chinese-style obfuscation. Labor in India was at least as cheap as in China, both countries having a surplus of manpower. The quality would eventually improve, and the prices would drop so that leaves that were picked for a penny could be sold for £3 in London. Growing tea would be like printing money.

As the clerk closed the bags of tea, he sealed them with the wax stamp of the East India Company. Each was sent to one of the esteemed tea brokers of London, the blenders, tasters, and traders whose noses and palates determined the price of a commodity and the fate of nations: Messrs. R. Gibbs & Co., Peek Brothers & Co., Miller & Lowcock, and the revered House of Twinings.

The Court of Directors was "requesting to be favoured with their respective opinion of the quality and value of some specimens of tea grown and manufactured in the District of Kumaon,
together with any practical suggestions for its improvement which may occur to them."

At last messengers arrived to pick up the deliveries.
The Court of Directors waited patiently for a response.
When the reports came, they were good—extremely good.
Twinings, Gibbs, Peek, and Miller & Lowcock wrote that the
Himalayan tea was as fine in quality as the finest of the China
teas. The leaves were perfection: beautiful to look at, picked at the
right time, light on the tongue, delicate in the cup, and brewed
up a rich liquor with a golden hue. The tea would compete admirably at auction; they would stake their reputation on it.

There were caveats, however. As the experts noted, the Himalayan tea was “lacking in fragrance,” that is, it did not have the
floral nose of the finest China teas. Some of this was a matter of
stock. While the Himalayan teas in the sample had been raised
from Chinese seed, it was not the finest seed from the best regions, but ordinary varieties smuggled out of Canton in the south
of China, the only place that Englishmen were then allowed. Tea
from Canton was known to be of extremely low quality compared to that of other Chinese tea regions.

Beyond the quality of the tea stock itself, none of the Himalayan tea’s other noted faults was inherent; instead, some of the
inspectors’ complaints were attributable to poor processing and manu-
ufacture. If the Himalayan tea lacked the perfumed notes of
China teas, it was because the latter were packed between other
materials, such as jasmine, bergamot, lemon, or verbena, to scent the brew. In addition, the Leadenhall Street tea had been poorly
prepared for shipment in boxes that were not airtight. The sea air
had doubtless tainted the sample, deadening its flavor.

The company’s prototype tea may not have had the ultimate
refinement, but if the methods and practices of the world’s finest

Chinese tea manufacturers could be imported to the plantations in India and if true native Chinese experts could train the
Himalayan growers in the processes of tea manufacture, then the deficiencies of Himalayan tea could be profitably redressed.

In 1846 (the season in which Hardinge’s tea was grown) the
company’s experimental tea gardens in the Himalayas totaled little more than six hundred acres, but the court had plans for rapid
expansion. The government of India had over one hundred thousand acres ready for cultivation. From such acreage the company
could expect to bring in a profit of almost 4 million rupees a year ($100 million today). But to achieve that level of return in only six
years—the time it takes a tea plant to mature to picking stage—it would need hundreds of thousands of Chinese seeds from the
finest of China’s green and black tea regions immediately.

For the Himalayan tea experiment, the company shopping list
was short but precise: It sought China’s materials, her best seeds, and
China’s tea knowledge, in the form of Chinese tea makers
and tea manufacturing implements.

The company was well aware that getting tea out of China
would be a difficult undertaking and impossible to achieve through normal diplomatic channels. As Her Majesty’s consul in
Shanghai, Rutherford Alcock, warned Viscount Hardinge, “It will suggest itself no doubt to your Excellency that the Chinese are
likely to regard any demand on my part for tea seeds or plants
with great jealousy, and that the attempts in conjunction with ef-
forts to obtain seeds, to induce Chinese skilled in the cultivation
and manufacture of tea to leave their country and proceed to
India for the purpose of instructing people, must inevitably fail.”
In other words, if the East India Company wanted tea for India,
it would have to steal it.

Tea met all the definitions of intellectual property: It was a
product of high commercial value; it was manufactured using a formula and process unique to China, which China protected fiercely; and it gave China a vast advantage over its competitors.

The notion of intellectual property and trade secrets had been articulated only a few years earlier when a Massachusetts judge ruled in an 1845 patent case that "only in this way can we protect intellectual property, the labors of the mind, productions and interests as much a man's own ... as the wheat he cultivates or the flocks he rears." In the dawn of 1848, the East India Company was planning a project that was nothing short of industrial espionage. If the company's scheme was successful, the largest multinational corporation in the world, the East India Company, would enact the greatest theft of trade secrets in the history of mankind.

Chelsea Physic Garden, May 7, 1848

On a spring day in 1848, Robert Fortune strolled through the Chelsea Physic Garden, a verdant patch of land by the Thames, admiring some of his own handiwork. The earth was just warming to life: Tulips were out in full flower, and lily of the valley dipped gracefully toward the ground. The bulb beds planted in the chilly previous autumn were coming into bloom, as was a tree peony, one of his most treasured discoveries in the Far East.

Three years earlier, upon his triumphant return from China, Fortune had been appointed curator of the Chelsea Physic Garden—something of a vindication of the Royal Horticultural Society's assessment of the value of the mission to his future career.

Now thirty-five, he had seen his life change very much for the better. Three Years' Wanderings in the Northern Provinces of China had been published a year earlier to rave reviews. He and his family currently enjoyed an enviable position that had a degree of social prominence and comfort to which he could not otherwise have aspired. His position at the Physic Garden paid £100 per annum (roughly $10,000 in today's dollars), no more than he had