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THE ORIGIN OF TEA: HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY AND ROUTES OF DISPERSAL

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Abstract: This article examines the origins of the tea plant, its natural distribution, the early processes of domestication, and the historical routes through which tea spread across different regions of the world. It discusses the botanical and geographical characteristics of areas associated with tea in southwestern China, northern Myanmar, and northeastern India, the development of tea consumption in ancient China, and the role of tea in regional and international trade. Particular attention is paid to the different branches of the Silk Road, trade routes across the Tibetan Plateau, maritime commerce, and the development of tea trading networks in Central Asia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The study draws on archaeobotanical evidence, molecular genetic research, and historical sources. The dissemination of tea is interpreted as a long-term process shaped by natural geographical conditions, commercial infrastructure, and cultural interaction. By applying historical geographical and cartographic approaches, the article explores the relationships between tea-growing regions, centres of consumption, and major trade routes. It also highlights the importance of distinguishing the natural distribution of the tea plant from its domestication and the subsequent expansion of tea-drinking practices.

Keywords: tea, historical geography, Camellia sinensis, China, Yunnan, Assam, Silk Road, Tibetan Plateau, Central Asia, caravan trade, cultural exchange, historical cartography.

Introduction

Tea is a plant-based product that has held economic, social, and cultural significance throughout human history. Today, it is not only a daily staple in many countries but also a cultural phenomenon intertwined with hospitality, social interaction, and traditional rituals. However, the historical importance of tea extends beyond its consumption. The processes of its cultivation, processing, transportation, and sale have influenced the development of economic ties between different regions, the formation of trade hubs, and the exchange of cultural experiences.

Studying the history of tea is particularly important for historical geography and cartography, as the distribution of this product is closely linked to natural botanical ranges, human settlements, mountain passes, river valleys, caravan routes, ports, and commercial centers. The distances and natural barriers between tea-producing regions and the areas where it is consumed have shaped transport routes, the price of the product, and the activities of trade intermediaries.

The question of the origins of tea lies at the intersection of botany and history. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the natural origin of the tea plant is associated with southwestern China, northern Myanmar, and the northeastern regions of India. However, the exact location where it first grew and where it was first domesticated by humans remains a subject that has not been fully resolved [1].

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The relevance of this topic lies in the need to study the history of tea not merely as the trade of a single commodity, but as a historical process that reflects the interplay between geographical environments, economic relations, and cultural exchange. Analyzing the development of the tea trade—particularly in the context of Central Asia—offers a broader understanding of the region's connections with East Asia, India, Iran, and Russia.

The objective of this research is to analyze the origin and historical dispersal of the tea plant in relation to geographical regions, trade routes, and the economic and cultural ties between various peoples.

Research objectives:

- to examine scholarly perspectives on the natural distribution and domestication of the tea plant;
- to explore the emergence of tea consumption in ancient China and its historical evolution; • to determine the significance of land and maritime trade routes in the spread of tea;
- to analyze the tea trade in Central Asia during the 18th and 19th centuries, along with its geographical characteristics;
- to explain the primary routes of tea distribution based on the capabilities of historical cartography.

Research methods. The article employs historical-comparative, historical-geographical, chronological, and systemic analysis methods. Furthermore, findings from archaeobotanical discoveries and molecular-genetic research are examined in comparison with historical sources.

Main Body

1. Origin and Natural Geography of the Tea Plant

In scientific literature, the tea plant is referred to as *Camellia sinensis* (L.) Kuntze. It is an evergreen plant belonging to the Theaceae family, and its natural distribution is associated with specific regions in East and Southeast Asia. Sufficient moisture, adequate rainfall, suitable temperatures, and appropriate soil conditions are essential for the growth of the tea plant. Foothill regions and humid subtropical zones have provided favorable conditions for both its natural populations and cultivated plantations.

When examining the origins of tea, it is necessary to distinguish between three concepts: the plant's natural range, its domestication, and the historical spread of tea as a beverage. The "natural range" refers to the geographical areas where the plant exists without human intervention. "Domestication" is the process by which humans select, propagate, and cultivate the plant to meet their economic or practical needs. The "spread of tea as a beverage" refers to the transmission of consumption habits to other peoples and regions. There is insufficient evidence to assume that these processes occurred during the same time period or within a single geographical area.

The Yunnan and Sichuan regions of China are considered significant areas linked to the historical origins of tea. The Assam Valley in India and its adjacent regions are of great significance for studying the natural and genetic diversity of tea. Northern Myanmar is also considered within the context of the natural-geographical connection between these areas [1; 2].

In a molecular-genetic study published in 2016, M. K. Meegahakumbura and his colleagues examined the genetic differences among various tea groups, including the Chinese type, the Assam type found in China, and the Indian Assam type. Based on their findings, the authors suggested that the domestication of tea may have involved at least three independent processes [2]. A subsequent study also analyzed genetic data and the phylogenetic relationships among the plants [3].

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These results indicate that it is complex to attribute the origin of tea to a single country or locality. Furthermore, while genetic studies provide insights into the relationships between plants and potential centers of domestication, they cannot, on their own, fully explain the identity of the earliest consumers of tea, the trade routes involved, or the development of cultural traditions. Addressing these aspects requires an integrated approach, combining botany, archaeology, and written historical sources. 2. The Emergence of Tea Consumption in Ancient China

Written records and archaeological evidence indicate that tea held a significant place in the history of ancient China. However, it would be inaccurate to interpret the legends surrounding the discovery of tea—found within Chinese tradition—as actual historical events. While such narratives illustrate the role of tea in cultural memory, independent evidence is required to reliably determine the date of its initial consumption.

In studying the history of tea consumption in ancient China, archaeobotanical and biomolecular analyses are as important as written sources. In a 2016 study published in the journal *Scientific Reports*, Houyuan Lu and his colleagues analyzed microscopic markers and biomolecular components found in ancient plant remains. The study examined materials recovered from a Han Dynasty-era tomb near the city of Xi'an, as well as from the Ngari region in western Tibet [4].

Based on this evidence, the authors argue that tea was already being consumed during the Western Han Dynasty and may have spread westward across the Tibetan Plateau by the 2nd–3rd centuries AD [4]. This conclusion indicates that it is inaccurate to date the history of the tea trade only from the later Middle Ages. At the same time, these findings do not imply that all historical trade routes were fully established during that specific period. Rather, they should be viewed as archaeological evidence confirming the presence of tea in certain regions.

As tea became a consumer product in China, its social and economic significance grew. From its initial forms of consumption, tea eventually permeated the lives of various social strata. During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), the expansion of tea culture and the development of written traditions concerning tea solidified its position within Chinese society. Over time, the consumption of tea evolved beyond a mere daily necessity, becoming an integral part of hospitality, social interaction, and cultural experience.

Thus, ancient China served as a key historical hub—not only for the cultivation and consumption of tea but also for its dissemination to other regions. However, it is more appropriate to interpret this process not as a continuous, unidirectional spread, but rather as a complex, multi-branched system of connections that took shape over various periods.

Conclusion

The origin and historical dispersal of tea constitute a complex historical process shaped by the interplay of natural geographical conditions, human economic activity, trade relations, and cultural exchanges. Existing botanical and molecular-genetic research indicates that the natural distribution range of tea is linked to southwestern China, northern Myanmar, and the northeastern regions of India. At the same time, there are scientific perspectives suggesting that its domestication may have occurred through independent processes across several different regions.

Written and archaeological evidence from ancient China confirms that the consumption of tea has a long history. Research conducted by Lu and his colleagues provides significant evidence that tea was consumed as early as the 2nd–1st centuries BCE and may have spread via the Tibetan Plateau by the

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2nd–3rd centuries CE [4]. However, this evidence does not imply that all trade routes and consumption regions emerged simultaneously.

The Great Silk Road and its associated trade networks played a crucial role in the spread of tea to various geographical regions. Alongside overland routes, maritime trade also contributed to the popularization of tea on an international scale. In the 18th and 19th centuries, cities in Central Asia, trade intermediaries, and international economic relations served as key factors in the development of the tea trade.

“Figure 1: Origins and dispersal routes of tea (historical-geographical map)”

Research findings indicate that studying the history of tea requires an integrated analysis of botanical, archaeological, written historical, and cartographic data. Specifically, in the context of Central Asia, mapping trade routes, examining historical documents, and quantifying data related to the tea trade represent promising avenues for future research.

In a broader sense, the history of tea is not merely the history of a plant or a beverage; it is a history of economic ties between peoples, the exploration and development of geographical space, and the dissemination of cultural practices. Investigating this subject through the lens of historical geography and cartography enables a deeper understanding of the long-standing processes of trade and cultural exchange across Eurasia.

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