PEPPER TRADE IN EAST ASIA*

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Through the extension of cultural and economic contacts, the histories of the neighbouring countries of China have been linked with that of the Middle Kingdom and with each other, forming a unity in the East Asian world. Inter-Asian commerce was one of the principal factors in this formation. This paper traces shifts in the inter-Asian commercial intercourse through pepper trade in East Asia.

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Pepper is one of the world’s most common spices. From olden times it was a staple article of commerce between East Asia and South or Southeast Asia just as it was between Europe and India. In the first two centuries of the Christian era, because of the expansion of Chinese power, commercial relations between China and India, by way of Central Asia and also along the sea-route, became closer. Trade flourished, and the Chinese obtained precious stones, glass, horses, and some tropical luxury goods, such as ivory and tortoise shell, in return for exports of silk. At about this time, along with the increase in foreign trade, China became a missionary field for Buddhism. Many Buddhist missionaries who represented diverse backgrounds and varied forms of Buddhism began to enter China.

With these close commercial and cultural contacts, many new products, ideas and inventions were introduced into China. Indian medical knowledge was transmitted by Buddhist monks and many drugs obtained from tropical products were introduced. These, combined with the experimental work of the Taoists, greatly enriched Chinese medicine.

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Pepper was one of these new foreign products. It was introduced for medical use at first. In the dynastic history of the later Han dynasty, pepper is already enumerated among the articles brought from India. From this we may be fairly certain that Indian pepper was introduced to China along the overland and overseas route during the first two centuries A.D.

However, the term pepper, called *Hu-chiao* 胡椒 in Chinese, has the character *Hu* 胡, which generally refers to the Central Asiatic nomads, prefixed to *chiao* 椒, a Chinese designation for the pungent plant of the genus *Zanthoxylum*. This is evidence that at first pepper must have been imported into China mostly by way of the overland route rather than the sea route.

The age of confusion following the fall of the Han dynasty witnessed the partitioning of China and “barbarian” invasions of the empire. These events opened the road to foreign ideas, and between the third and sixth centuries, Buddhism was adopted by the majority of the Chinese people. At this time, the ceremonial burning of incense may have come in from the south. Owing to the increasing demand for incense and drugs, natural tropical products of Southeast Asia gradually became a major article of commerce in the trans-Asian sea trade. As overseas trade between the Roman Orient and India was closely linked with the trade from India to Southeast Asia and South China, commerce along the sea route gradually advanced. From the third or fourth century, Persian ships were regularly engaged in the carrying trade between the middle East, India and China. In the *Wei-shu* 魏書 and the *Sui-shu* 隋書, pepper occurs as a product of Persia. In those days Indian pepper was evidently brought in by Persian traders across the Indian sea and around the Malay Peninsula to China.

At this time, besides the activities of the Persian traders, those Indianized states of Southeast Asia that were prospering as ports of call and entrepot for the China trade, decided to pursue the benefits from this trade themselves, in competition with the Persians. They are known to have sent their own diplomatic and trade missions to China. According to the records of the Chinese chronicles from the latter half of the third century to the sixth century, there were more than one hundred occasions when envoys from Southeast Asia bore

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2. *Wei-shu* 魏書, (Po-na ed.), 102.15b; *Sui-shu* 隋書, (Po-na ed.), 83.15a.