

# Popularization of Spice Culture and its influence in Tang Dynasty

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**Abstract.** In Ancient China, the usage of spices has a long history. Following the establishment of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty, spices were eventually introduced into Chinese culture through commercial exchanges. Before the Tang dynasty, the narrow access to spices and their small application scope confined them to the aristocratic class. As time went by, due to the national power of the Tang Dynasty, the empire conquered parts of the Western Regions and was recognized by the surrounding countries. Therefore, the Silk Road flourished, starting the process of the popularization of Spice Culture. Although most of the use was still limited to the nobility, and its definition is still a luxury, it is undeniable that in the Tang Dynasty, the development of Spice Culture promoted the improvement of trade institutions and laws, as well as the economic and cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries. At the same time, the Spice Culture also promoted the popularization, spreading, and localization of religions. The related technologies, in-depth research on medical treatment, cosmetics, and herbal medicine were also developed because of the popularization of spice. Social and mass attitudes towards spices and their application also changed. The influence and significance of spices could be seen in ancient Chinese feudal society.

**Keywords:** Spice Culture; the Silk Road; Tang Dynasty; Spices.

## 1. Introduction

In Ancient China, spices were mainly natural ingredients from plants, animals, and microorganisms [1]. Since the low productivity, spices for food were not used daily, while non-edible spices were those used for cosmetic, medical, and religious purposes as opposed to edible spices. It was not until the Tang Dynasty that the distinction between spices and herbs was gradually recorded. Those foreign spices entered China by maritime and land trade and gained popularity among all social classes because of their preciousness.

There are already records of the use of native Chinese spices during the Spring and Autumn, and Warring States period. However, the ancient Chinese began to use foreign spices until the Han dynasties. During the country's unification, after Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions and the opening of the Silk Road, many goods from the West were thus imported, including the "spices" rarely found in central plains regions. Therefore, the enthusiasm for using spices became popular in the upper class. With the recovery of the Nanyue Kingdom (Canton), the Han Empire acquired management rights for coastal ports and a channel for overseas trade. The advantages of maritime transport made it easier for spices to enter China directly from their origin. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, the development of the Silk Road and the introduction of Buddhism brought opportunities to develop spices. Because of the inconvenience of transportation, spices at that time were still recognized as rare belongings, limited to the use of the noble elite. Until the Wei, Jin, and North-South dynasties, with the flourishing of Buddhism, the Buddhist incense burning began to promote the consumer class and gradually moved down [2].

The Silk Road, named after the silk trade between China and the West, is a land route from Chang' or Luoyang, through Gansu and Xinjiang province, to Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe, and linked with the Mediterranean countries. At first, the Silk Road was an overland trade channel opened by Zhang Qian on his mission to the Western Regions during the Western Han Dynasty, starting from Chang'an and reaching as far as the Western Asian countries. By the Eastern Han Dynasty, Ban Chao had once again sent his envoys to the Western Regions to open the long-abandoned Silk Road,

extending the east end of the route to Luoyang, the capital of the Eastern Han Dynasty, and the west end to Rome.

This trade route was also known as the “Spice Road”. As Henery Pirenne mentioned in *The Economic and social history of medieval Europe*, “Spices were the first objects of this trade and never ceased to occupy the chief place in it down to the very end... Thus medieval trade began as a trade in luxury goods, that is to say, a trade bringing in big profits at a relatively small cost... [3]” The lightweight and consistent quality but can sell high prices of spices in the inaccessible Silk Road and merely relying on the Maritime Silk Road brought significant gains, which makes spices in trade or tribute account for a significant proportion. With the western regions’ recovery and the southern route’s opening, the Tang Dynasty trade played an essential role in ancient China. It took over the routes and resources left behind by the previous ones and opened new channels. Especially in the use of spices opened the transition of Spice Culture from the upper nobility to the ordinary people.

The study of the Silk Road and the spread of Spice Culture is essential for the cultural exchanges between East and West, especially with the restatement of the “Silk Road” concept in recent years, which makes the study of cultural exchanges in history significant. However, the study of trade goods on the Silk Road has focused chiefly on tea, silk, and porcelain. Little research has been done on spices, which were once an essential commodity along the Silk Road. There is little research on the systematic correlation with social development in the available data. Therefore, this paper aims to summarize that Spice Culture was the driving force and influence in the Tang Dynasty. Analyzing the Tang Dynasty’s Spice Culture can help us see Tang’s culture and society from the perspective of spices. It also helps us better understand early China’s economic exchanges with other nations, which has implications for cross-cultural and comparative studies of East and West.

## 2. The Driving Forces for Development

### 2.1 Politics

Strong military and national power gave the Tang dynasty greater control over the countries of the Western Regions than in previous dynasties. With the establishment of military establishments in the Western Regions, the Silk Road was further opened, providing stability for trade development along the route.

In the early years of the Zhenguan period, Tang emperor Taizong successively conquered the East Göktürks and Tuyuhun kingdom and set up political institutions to manage the land on the Göktürks frontiers. The Tang dynasty took over the rule of the Göktürks tribes in the northwest. Emperor Taizong was hailed as the “Khan of Heaven” by all the tribes, thus opening the communication between the Tang dynasty and the western regions. In the 14th year of the Zhenguan Period (640 AD), in order to protect the trade routes in the Western Regions, Emperor Taizong sent troops to defeat Gaochang and Qiuzi, set up the Anxi Protectorate and led the Four Military Towns of Khotan, Gaochang, Yanqi and Qiuzi, which further opening the Silk Road [4].

Until 657, when the Western Regions were incorporated into the Tang dynasty, precious spices were often brought to the imperial court as tribute. Tributary was one of the main ways the imperial family acquired the most delicate, precious spices, as seen in the records of *the Old Book of Tang*, such as tulip, lobelia, agarwood, and musk, which were particularly common in the early Tang dynasty [5]. According to *Cefu Yuanguai*, in the seventh year of the Kaiyuan Period, Buxoro Kingdom paid a tribute of 30 catties of tulip and 100 catties of raw molasses [6], which shows that spices had become a definite diplomatic gift for the royal group and nobility.

In addition, warfare was the most direct and efficient means of acquiring spices. It is recorded that there was a war between the Tang and the Abbasside Caliphate. After the war was won, the Tang Empire received some of the precious spices from the Abbasside Caliphate as spoils of war [7], which shows that war was also a means for the emperors to obtain spices.

## 2.2 Economics

The expansion of the Silk Road ensured the availability of spices, and with the opening of the Maritime Silk Road emergence ports such as Guangzhou and Yangzhou ports, where ships could carry more weight and were more conveniently located to the origin of the spices. The availability of spices became more significant and more widespread in ancient China and more varied.

The Tang dynasty had a prosperous economy with economic policies that benefited ordinary citizens, and the population thus had more wealth and access to new goods from outside the realm. Apart from that, technological advances in agricultural techniques and tools led to more developed agriculture and new wealth accumulation for ordinary citizens [8]. In this era, low prices, stable economic circumstances, and the established tax system, which allocated small plots of farmland to farmers, gave ordinary citizens more wealth to access new goods.

In terms of transportation, the Grand Canal provided well-developed transport facilities and a traffic system covering the whole empire that could allow goods to be transported from southern ports to the capital quickly. As Edward Hetzel Schafer pointed out in *the golden peaches of Samarkand: a study of Tang exotics*, “Visit Ching or Hsiang in the South, go to Tai-yuan or Fan-yang in the North, or go to Szu-chuan or Liang-fu in the West and everywhere there were shops and emporiums for supplying merchant travelers though they should go as far as several thousand li, they need not carry even an inch-long blade. [8]” The rapid development of transportation has brought opportunities for economic prosperity.

## 2.3 Culture

The empire’s stability, the economy’s prosperity, and the convenient transportation have promoted cultural exchanges in different regions, whether religious or folk. Due to climate factors, Southwest China has a large number of local spice raw materials, and the Spice Culture of Southwest China has entered the Central Plains with commercial trade [9]. At the same time, the coastal areas, Southeast Asia, and Central Asian countries communicated frequently, and plenty of foreign cultures began to enter Tang Empire from the southeast coast.

The development of Buddhism in the Central Plains also led to the use of spices. Especially in the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, Buddhism rose, temples increased, and Buddhism began to enter the lives of civilians gradually. In the Tang Dynasty, because Xuan Zang took Buddhist scriptures and brought back spices from India, Buddhism and spices became more prosperous. The application and importance of Buddhism-related activities, rituals, and spices have become prominent, accompanying a thick religious connotation. With the spread of Buddhism, Spice Culture has also entered public life. Secondly, the rise of Buddhist culture and the exchange of Western culture promoted the construction of Buddhist grottoes in areas along the Silk Road, such as Mogao Grottoes and Yungang Grottoes. Buddhism also influenced the mural elements in the Buddhist grottoes, and there are often scenes such as incense and incense burning [10].

## 2.4 Society

The strong economic power of the Tang empire provided people with the most basic physiological and safety needs. After these needs were met, the Tang people began to pursue higher needs. Maslow divided human needs into five levels: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Only after one level of needs was satisfied was the next level pursued [2].

The more distant an object was from its place of origin, the more attractive it became [2]. The rare spice became the representative of luxury goods. With the increasing pursuit of self-dignity of the Tang people, it became a symbol of identity. On this basis, the social ethos also changed from frugality in the early Tang Dynasty to pursuing fashion and luxury with improved quality of life. People were competing to use luxury commodities [5,12]. The pursuit of exotic objects permeated all levels of Tang society and all aspects of daily life and people were competing to use luxury commodities [8].

## 2.5 Technology

During the Tang dynasty, spices were widely used in food, medicine, and other fields after centuries of research and use, and many spice writings have appeared since spices were introduced in Han Dynasty.

In the Han Dynasty, “fumigation cages” could be directly put in clothes to smoke incense, and “quilt incense burners” could be covered in quilts [12]. There were also a variety of incense appliances, such as incense spoons, incense plates, and incense buckets, which showed the ancients’ wisdom and ingenuity and a high level of craftsmanship. Thus, there is also evidence of the use of spices by the people of the Tang dynasty. With the stability of transportation and the political situation of the Central Plains Dynasty, more and more foreigners entered the Tang Empire with technology and their Spice Culture.

## 3. The Influences of Spice Culture

Spice Culture is a series of methods, habits, and systems gradually formed by the Chinese nation around the production, processing, deployment, and utilization of various spices, which can reflect the national spirit, national tradition, national aesthetics, and values, and is a part of the secular culture of the Han nation [13].

### 3.1 Politics

Spices in the upper class gradually changed from luxury goods to political symbols. As the representative of tributes and diplomatic gifts, precious spices will be collected by the royal family. Ordinary officials can only obtain rewards from the emperors in the imperial examinations, awards, festivals, and other royal events. Similarly, spices from tribute will also be used as gifts to other countries. Especially in Japan, the Tang Dynasty’s many gifts to Japan contained the spices they needed most [11].

Spices, as a bulk commodity in the foreign trade of the Tang Dynasty, also brought a series of problems with the prosperity of the commodity economy, such as tax evasion and lawbreaking. These problems aroused the government’s attention to the supervision of transactions with foreign businessmen and promoted improving the foreign-related laws and management system. The government has established several institutions, like the Office of Foreign (Honglu Temple), to manage the foreign population and transactions better. Secondly, the high taxes on spices brought much extra income to the government.

The sufficient income made more funds flow into military and town organizations in the Western Regions [14]. Taxation in the Western Regions not only reduced the financial burden of the empire but also provided sufficient military funds for the region, which is conducive to regional stability. The stable political situation will also positively affect the spice trade to and from the Western Regions [9]. It cannot be ignored that the enhancement of military strength in the western region is also conducive to the empire’s control over the western region. The empire’s suzerainty over the western region depends on its solid military strength, which makes the Silk Road smoother. However, a large amount of capital inflow means that regional governors have more economic freedom and military power, which poses a significant threat to centralization.

### 3.2 Economics

The expansion of trade along the Silk Road led to the further development of the commercial economy of the Tang Dynasty, and the prosperity of the commodity economy resulted in the rapid rise of some coastal cities, such as Guangzhou, Yangzhou, Wenzhou, and Hangzhou, and some northwest border city, Dunhuang, Guizhou, Shazhou.

In Tang Dynasty, different countries had different taxation calculation methods, while different goods were taxed at different rates. To facilitate the calculation of taxes, a 10% tax was set for spices such as cloves and agarwood [14]. In the meantime, the government also ordered the protection of

foreigners. It strictly forbade private tax rate increases, which also helped to retain foreigners, expand the Chinese market, and increase government revenues.

The trade profits of the southern region were crucial to the national tax revenue after the Mid-Tang Dynasty [14]. It was recorded in *the Old Book of Tang* that if the insurgents occupied Guangzhou, the national treasury would be exhausted, leading to the country's demise [5]. Although some exaggeration existed, it is enough to reflect the importance of Guangzhou's foreign trade tax to the government.

### 3.3 Culture

From nobles to civilians, from luxury to simplicity, spices have gradually become a part of people's livelihood when applied to food, social culture, medical care and other fields. Since then, secular life and foreign incense are inseparable [15].

#### 3.3.1 Cultural communications

Through trade, Spice Cultures from the West were introduced to the Tang dynasty and then combined with the local incense culture to spread to East Asian countries or the West. For example, Buddhism from India and the Buddhist tradition of spice use were localized and integrated in China and then re-introduced to East Asian countries. The influence of the fragrance culture from China was far-reaching, including in neighboring countries such as Silla and Japan. The Tang emperor gave Japan a piece of agarwood, considered a national treasure kept in the Shosoin in Japan. The use and culture of spices were spread to Japan through the envoys of the Tang Dynasty. While Japan accepted the Spice Culture, it also developed its national characteristics and continues to this day [11].

#### 3.3.2 Social ethos

As early mentioned, the use of spices was highly prized by the upper classes of the Tang empire, and this led to a widespread craze for luxury goods, spices, and exotic cultures, with spice products not only being a symbol of quality of life, but also a tool for comparison and showing off wealth.

Spices played a vital role in court rituals. Apart from traditional funeral rituals, and the Emperor Xuanzong of Tang onwards, using spices to incense in the imperial court became a ritual in the law [4]. After that, officials will also be influenced by the royal family and even compete to follow the trend and construct buildings with precious spices such as using aloes as construction materials to achieve the effect of showing off [4]. The scholar-bureaucrats also actively applied spices to the stationaries, such as making ink with spices, which gave birth to the famous "pine-soot ink" [5].

The opening of the Maritime Silk Road greatly emphasized the trade in spices and incense. Especially the Maritime Silk Road because of the transport of more trafficking in precious spices. In the Tang Dynasty, exotic spices were once equivalent to gold [1], and the high price prompted people who loved spices to engage in commerce actively. In the early Tang Dynasty, aristocratic bureaucrats often engaged in business. After the mid-Tang Dynasty, this phenomenon became more common [4]. At the same time, there was also a particular demand for spices from religious groups, and in the *Extensive records of the Taiping era*, there was a record of monks from the West often involved in commerce [7]. Moreover, there some records of peasants abandoning agriculture to engage in commerce in historical documets. These phenomena are contrary to the hierarchy thought in ancient Chinese of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants.

In the Tang Dynasty, the spread and integration of religions were the most active, with plenty of religions active in the society. The large-scale use of spices has promoted the spread of religion. Whether it is Buddhism, Taoism, or Manichaeism, these religious activities will use numerous spices. The consumption of spices is inseparable from religious activities. The extensive use of spices has also become the driving force of religious transmission. *Extensive records of the Taiping era* recorded that different spices were used on different occasions of Taoism, and incense symbolized immortals [7]. Likewise, different perfumes in Buddhism are also used in different aspects. Spices' richness and in-depth research constantly promoted the improvement of religious etiquette and regulations [11].

### 3.3.3 The food and beverage culture

Due to the development of foreign trade, more and more foreign merchants settled in the territory of the Tang empire, so western culture became popular in terms of living, clothing, food, music, dance, and painting [14], not only for the upper class but also for the ordinary people. With the spice trade spreading rapidly throughout the empire, the western culture of spices became even more popular among the lower classes. According to *the Old Book of Tang*, a significant change in the diet of the Tang people since was that “The noble’s food is all from the western regions” [5]. As *Essential Techniques for People’s Welfare* also mentioned the use of pepper and other exotic spices in the preparation of “The skill of making mutton by the Hu people”. Another chapter of this book also recorded the making of wine, both of which use pepper and piper longum as ingredients [16], showing that spices from the West had already become part of the lives of ordinary people.

In terms of drinking alcohol, there are also wines introduced from the Western Regions that are popular in Chang’an, such as the tulip wine mentioned in Li Bai’s poems and the Sanlejiang wine that is popular in the northern regions, which is made with three kinds of spices, namely Alila, balia, and amolain from India [17].

### 3.4 Technology

As the study of spices progressed, their properties were explored and used in architecture, vessels, and artifacts. For example, according to *Extensive records of the Taiping era*, Yuan Zai used agarwood as the beam in his residence and painted the walls with rue because he valued its fresh fragrance and non-perishable characteristics [7]. Under the influence of the Spice Culture, the properties, uses, and effects of spices were studied by different consumer groups, and many new formulations and trends emerged. From the Tang Dynasty onwards, the technology of beauty products developed considerably with the introduction of spices. From the Qin and Han dynasties to the Wei and Jin dynasties, women used cosmetics made of lead and cinnabar, which achieved positive makeup results but were still harmful to the body. During the Tang Dynasty, people began to study the use of herbs and spices in combination [1].

Buddhist medicine also shows indigenous development as spices and Buddhism spread into secular life. For example, sandalwood is often used as a compress in Tibetan Buddhist medicine because of its anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties. Agarwood, clove, and sandalwood can be used as a remedy to quench thirst [10]. As spices became more widespread, so did the technology of spice-related crafts. Before the Tang dynasty, incense burners were mainly three or five feet. However, the six feet in curve incense burner painted on the north wall of Cave 445 in the Mogao Grottoes creative in Tang shows that the form of incense burners techniques was also developing [10]. Another unearthed cultural relic from the Tang Dynasty, the silver fragrance purse with grape, flower, and bird patterns, which is the collection now in the Shaanxi History Museum, was viewed as a testimony of the outstanding craftsmanship and spirituality of that era. Designed and manufactured using physics principles to ensure that it does not tilt and fall out even when shaken, the hollowing is ornamental and facilitates fragrance diffusion. It could be hung not only on clothes but also on furniture and in carriages. Thus, those kinds of art crafts not only could help Tang people to meet their basic needs for use but also had a high demand for spiritual satisfaction. So the use of spices had become part of people’s lives and was able to drive technological development can be seen.

## 4. Conclusion

Spices and Spice Culture played a significant role in every life. The developed economic trade of the Tang dynasty, the multicultural environment, and the evolution of spices all brought opportunities for the popularization of Spice Culture. Cultural exchange was also fundamental in the Medieval Period when foreign trade was booming in the Western Middle Ages [3]. At the same time, the pursuit of spices as a luxury product would also drive social development. The market demand drove the trade and a higher level of spiritual pursuits. The culture of spices made the political system and

institutions of the time increasingly sophisticated, reflecting the developed commodity economy and social economy, as well as the political status of China as a powerful empire of the time. Meanwhile, spices became a particular culture reflected in all aspects of life, including religion, food, technology, and medicine, and initiated the process of its popularization.

On the other hand, Spice is by no means a purely beautiful thing, its enchanting aroma is mixed with evil and greed, and that is what makes it so attractive [18]. The pursuit of spices gave rise to a culture of extravagance in society, leading to a social phenomenon of over-reliance on commerce, an emphasis on exoticism and indulgence in religion, even a negative trend towards escapism and wastefulness in later. So the flaws of this culture while recognising the positive effects of spices on society should be considered.

In the Tang Dynasty, spices gradually became favored among the general population. The emperor inherited the ideas and technologies of its predecessors, as well as incorporating the best of foreign cultures and reworking them in its own way. It contributed to the development of the culture of later generations [19]. After the Song Dynasty, spices entered a period of prosperity due to the flourishing of the Maritime Silk Road. By the Ming Dynasty, these expensive exotic spices, such as pepper, chili, saffron, and benzoin, could have been grown and cultivated in China [2]. They became essential spices and herbs for the typical household. In particular, the pepper, which entered China earlier, has been widely used in cooking, medicine, and painting [17]. The usage of spices in medicine was extensively documented in Li Shizhen's *Compendium of Materia Medica*, a famous medical monograph in China. In the late Ming dynasty, a masterpiece called *Xiangsheng* was known as an encyclopedia of spices.

As a medium for the worldwide commodity movement, spices inadvertently acted as a link between China and the world. The flow of spices has gradually changed from the political will of the feudal emperors to market orientation. The use of spices in the feudal dynasties and the gradual popularization of the market, to a certain extent, also reflected the development of the commodity economy in China and the localization process of cultural exchanges between China and the West.

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