

Heritage Perspective of the Great Tea Route in China

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Abstract: The research project examines the dispersion and classification of cultural heritage across nine Chinese provinces along the Great Tea Route. The scholars utilize keyword extraction techniques to categorize tangible cultural heritage into distinct groups, utilizing heritage data published on the Great Tea Route website. The results showcase many locations for preserving historical sites, their geographic significance, and the diversity and richness of heritage types. Furthermore, regional conservation priorities were identified during this analysis and were influenced by history and culture. The study is a valuable foundation for understanding how cultural heritage is distributed, contributing to future studies and preservation efforts.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Great Tea Route, China, Heritage management, Heritage revitalization

1. Introduction

The ancient trade route between China and Russia, known as the Great Tea Route, has been instrumental in transporting goods such as tea and has played a significant role in establishing deep cultural connections between the East and the West [1]. The multiple Chinese provinces it passes through have seen this historic route serve as keeping alive several forms of material and cultural heritage, including temples, tea plantations, and ancient villages. Recently, there has been growing importance accorded to the conservation and documentation of different cultures along this path due to their vulnerability to modern economic growth and urbanization.

The reintroduction of the Great Tea Route under China's modern Silk Road initiative demonstrates the continued relevance of this age-old passageway. It also highlights the governments' interest in reviving old trading routes to facilitate cultural exchange and economic cooperation [2]. However, the rapid development along these routes presents significant challenges to heritage preservation. Therefore, comprehensive recording, analysis, and knowledge about such heritage are essential.

This research project is focused on several key areas related to the conservation and documentation of historical highlights found along the length of the Great Tea Route. Firstly, a systematic identification and classification of all types of tangible heritage located within this particular historical corridor is required. This will assist in establishing priorities for conservation activities and facilitate an understanding of the cultural significance of each site. Furthermore, the accuracy and completeness of existing records present challenges due to significant variations in quality, quantity, and information content.

To overcome these obstacles, we have employed a quantitative approach based on official websites listing recognized cultural heritage sites along the Great Tea Route, from which the data was sourced. Subsequently, keyword extraction techniques were employed to categorize the sites into distinct types, ensuring a structured and measurable analysis. By employing this methodology, one can systematically map out the distribution features of tangible cultural heritage, thereby gaining a clear understanding of the areas requiring immediate attention about their protection along this historic route. This quantification provides a robust empirical foundation for future policy initiatives aimed at the management of preserved historical objects.

2. Overview of The Great Tea Route History and Present

The beginning of the Great Tea Route dates back to the 17th century when Russians started getting more interested in Chinese tea. The popularity of this beverage grew significantly during that time among the Russian aristocracy. It happened because they were convinced of its taste and some social and medical advantages it could bring. In Russia, tea has become one of the most important products, especially

during severe winter months, and it is known for its digestive problems and need for warmth [3]. More buyers needed more sellers; therefore, making such a trade path between the two countries would allow the delivery of lots of tea quickly and safely; hence, the Great Tea Route from China to Russia appeared.

2.1 Initial Formation of the Route

It all started with the emergence of the Great Tea Route in the Wuyi Mountains of Fujian Province. Until now, these mountains are still famous for their high-quality teas. The route passed through 9 Chinese provinces, from Jiangxi to Hunan and Shanxi, and then onto Russian territory through the Mongolian steppes. Being over 13,000 kilometers long, this pathway was vital for tea distribution as it connected many important trade centers into one network. They helped establish places where tea could be collected, processed, and then stored until needed for the Russian market [4]. Like the ancient Silk Road, this road promoted business activities and harbored cultural exchanges.

The Great Tea Route has been an important channel for economic and cultural cooperation between China and Russia for hundreds of years. Trade took place along this route and served as a platform where ideas were shared, enlightening each other about mutual understanding besides exchanging customs and technologies between nations. It created a real-life connection between the East and West regarding culture and trade exchange [5].

2.2 Reintroduction of the Great Tea Route

In 2013, the Chinese government reintroduced the New Silk Road initiative that incorporated the Great Tea Route into the development of the Belt and Road program. This was done not only to revitalize history but also as a way of blending economic cooperation with cultural exchanges within an internationalized world. It sought to bring closer countries along its path by using this ancient trade route as a basis for stronger relationships [6]. The project was designed to resurrect old commercial routes and make them serve today's economic and strategic needs while affirming China's commitment to global cooperation and the preservation of culture.

The value of the Great Tea Route went beyond being just another trade route; instead, it can be regarded as a cultural-historical treasure trove with immense implications for China's national identity and foreign policy interests. Through this system, China demonstrated no break between its past glory days and present economic prosperity, as reflected in contemporary geostrategic thinking, where such ancient routes are re-integrated into modern plans. In this way, Beijing has leveraged its expertise in history to enhance its soft power capabilities and expand its diplomatic reach across Asia and Europe.

2.3 International cooperation for heritage conservation

To ensure that cultural heritage preservation and tourism along the Great Tea Route are improved, China entered into strategic partnerships with Russia and Mongolia in 2016. The three nations' collaboration recognizes that they have a shared history and culture represented by this route; therefore, their efforts will be aimed at safeguarding and promoting such invaluable inheritance [7].

Moreover, this cooperation concentrates on conserving legacies and developing the industry of traveling along this path. The countries involved want to attract global visitors by advertising various places of historical importance in terms of culture along the way; thus, it would be marketed internationally as a series of cultural and historical attractions stretching across different territories [8]. Through these developments in tourism, incomes could be generated locally while fostering understanding among people from diverse backgrounds who may come into contact with one another during visits made by individuals or groups from abroad.

2.4 Identification of relevant heritage within China

The reintroduction of The Great Tea Route also involved attempts to conserve and raise awareness about the cultural heritage entailed in such a road. Therefore, among other things, different provincial cultural and tourism departments within China endeavored to recognize and preserve many sites that were considered historic along this path, which included tea gardens, villages, ancient roads, and markets. These undertakings aimed at protecting the great tea routes' cultural tradition while using them as tourist attractions that would benefit local communities economically [9]. Additionally, by emphasizing its historical and cultural importance, china hoped that this would foster a shared identity, leading to more

cultural exchange programs between nations.

3. Analysis of the Heritage of the Great Tea Route

3.1 Data sources

This study applies information on cultural heritage from the “Great Tea Route” website, a list of officially recognized tangible cultural heritage found in nine provinces and thirty cities in China. In the course of data collection, we not only translated primary sources but also organized a systematic approach to data gathering through tabulation, as shown in Table 1, which was aimed at ensuring accuracy and relevance. The present work painstakingly traces the geography and classification behind each class of heritage that serves as a basis for future elaboration studies or conservation actions.

Table 1: List of Cities and Tangible Heritage Sites Designated for the Great Tea Route.

| Provinces | Cities | Identified Tangible Heritages |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Fujian | Nanping | Village of Xiamei |
| | | Ancient Tea Garden of Wuyi |
| | | Ancient Tea Plantation of Wuyi |
| | | Ancient Horse Route of Mingan |
| | | Village of Chishi |
| Anhui | Huangshan | Ancient Route of Lingyang |
| Jiangxi | Shangrao | Village of Qimen |
| | | Ancient Route from the Qing Dynasty in Hekou Village |
| | | Ancient Route of Huirao, Zheling Section |
| | | Ancient Route of Huirao, Tangongling Section |
| | Jingdezhen | Longteng Village and Tea Garden |
| | | Ancient Route of Fujian-Ganxi |
| | | Ancient Village of Cangxi |
| | Jiujiang | Ancient Village of Yantai |
| | | Ancient Village of Panxi |
| | | Ancient Residence of Jiujiang |
| | | Ninghong Tea Garden |
| | | Xiushui Tea Garden |
| Hunan | Yiyang | Poyang Lake Temple |
| | | Village of Da'an |
| | | Da'an Tea Plantation |
| | | Yuanqi Bridge |
| | | Ancient Route of Yaozajian |
| | | Yongxi Bridge |
| | | Ancient Village of Tangjiaguan |
| | | Ancient Buildings of the Anhua Tea Factory |
| | | Santai Pagoda |
| | | Yuntai Mountain Tea Plantation |
| | | Village of Jinhui |
| | | Sixian Bridge |
| | | Village of Jiangnan |
| | | Ancient Route of Huangshaping |
| | | Huangshaping Tea Factory |
| | | Taoshu Mausoleum |
| | | Wenlan Pagoda |
| | Ancient Route of Ming and Qing Dynasties | |
| | Yueyang | Ruins of Daxitou |
| | | Yueyang Pagoda |
| | | Yuezhou Gate |
| | | Village of Nieshi |
| | | Linxiang Pagoda |
| | Changde | Ancient Village of Jubanshan |
| | | Ancient Tea Route of Shimen |
| | | Jieshan Temple |
| | Hubei | Wuhan |
| Former Russian Consulate | | |
| Former Russian police station | | |

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| | | Shunfeng Tea Factory |
| | | Xintai Building |
| | | Residence of Levanov |
| | | House of Bagong |
| | | Former Russian General Council |
| | | Orthodox Church |
| | | Former Dazhimen rail station |
| | Xianning | Ancient Route of Kuzhu Ridge |
| | | Ancient Village of Chibi |
| | Enshi | Stone Street of the Ming and Qing Dynasties |
| | | Ancient Tea Route of Hefeng |
| Yichang | Ancient Tea Route of Wufeng | |
| | Wufeng Tea Garden and Village of Wuhua | |
| Xiangyang | Wufeng Refined Tea Factory | |
| | Xiangfan city walls and quays | |
| Henan | Nanyang | Government Offices of Nanyang |
| | | Ancient Village of Xiangdian |
| | | Tianfei Temple of Nanyang |
| | | Bandaojin horse station |
| | Pingdingshan | Guild Hall of Shanxanxi |
| | Ruzhou | Ancient Village of Hanzha |
| Luoyang | Guanlin Temple | |
| | Guild Hall of Luze | |
| Jiaozuo | Guild Hall of Luoyang | |
| | Ancient Route of Taixing South Part | |
| Shanxi | Jincheng | Ancient Route of Taixing North Part |
| | | Guild Hall of Huaiqin |
| | | Fucheng Guandi Temple |
| | | Ancient Route of Baijing |
| | Changzhi | Ancient Route of Zhongcun |
| | | Ancient Village of Yincheng |
| | Jinzhong | Ancient Route of Qixian |
| | | Residence of the Cao Family |
| | | Residence of the Chang Family |
| | Lvliang | Site of Dadechuan Society |
| | | Residence of Niu Yunkuan |
| | Taiyuan | Grand Guandi Temple |
| | | Qianhexiang Tea House |
| | | Site of the Former Sanhedian Fort |
| | Xinzhou | Shiling Gate |
| | | Yanmen Pass |
| | Shuzhou | Residence of Cheng Huapeng |
| Shahu Gate | | |
| Datong | New Town of Guangwu | |
| | Site of the Former Deshengkou Fort | |
| | Datong Guandi Temple | |
| | Site of the Former Zhoushizhuang Fort | |
| Hebei | Zhangjiakou | Site of the Former Xinping Fort |
| | | Jiming Horse Station |
| | | Ancient Village of Xuanhua |
| | | Fort of Zhangjiakou |
| | | Former Site of the General Administration of Chahar |
| | | Dajing Gate |
| Inner Mongolia | Ulanqab | Ruins of the Military Platform |
| | | Village of Longsheng |
| | Hohhot | Hohhot Mosque |
| | | Dazhao Temple |
| | | Residence of Gurun Princess Kejing |
| | Xilingol League | Former Site of the Mongolian Merchants in Hohhot |
| | | Huizong Temple |
| Duo Lun Shanxi Guild Hall | | |
| Beizi Temple | | |
| | | Ruins of the Yilin Horse Station |

3.2 Geographical distribution analysis

According to the information illustrated in Figure 1, in a full-scale survey of the spread of concrete legacy in China’s provinces, Hunan emerges as a leading province with twenty-five registered heritages, affirming that this region possesses substantial historical and cultural assets and that local governments remain proactive in maintaining these assets. On the other hand, Shanxi has 23 registered heritage sites, showing its deep historical background and the preservation of its ancient architectural resources. Moreover, Hubei and Jiangxi have 18 and 12, respectively, showing along Yangtze’s middle-lower reaches a dense presence of cultural heritage. Such differences in distribution may reflect differing economic conditions, patterns of history, and policy support in these areas.



Figure 1: Geographical distribution of cultural heritage.

Notably, the small number of recorded heritages in provinces such as Fujian or Hebei does not imply any lower value attached to them or any regional richness, for instance. The quantification of heritage sites depends upon factors such as local government conservation programs, financial investment levels, and criteria for registration into our heritage list. Therefore, it becomes crucial to study disparities between cultural preservation efforts across various regions from the macroscopic perspective.

3.3 Categorization and grouping analysis

Table 2: Classification of heritage and corresponding quantities.

| Abbreviations | Type of heritages | Quantities |
|---------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| OV | Old Villages | 22 |
| AR | Ancient Route | 19 |
| TE | Temples | 10 |
| MB | Modern Buildings | 8 |
| RH | Residential Houses | 8 |
| TP | Tea Plantations and Gardens | 6 |
| GU | Guildhalls | 6 |
| RU | Ruins | 5 |
| GP | Gates and Passes | 5 |
| AF | Ancient Forts | 5 |
| PA | Pagodas | 4 |
| TF | Tea Factories | 4 |
| BR | Bridges | 3 |
| HS | Horse Stations | 3 |
| MA | Mausoleum | 1 |
| CW | City Wall | 1 |
| MO | Mosque | 1 |

Examining the keywords in the names and descriptions of heritage sites, we sorted out heritage in this study. Keyword extraction (or text categorization) is one of the principal ways to make sense of unstructured text when extracting keywords from texts. For example, by identifying sets of terms associated with various forms of heritage, like ancient villages, historical roads, tea plantations, and temples, one can establish different kinds of heritage types. The main advantage of this technique is that it is more straightforward and efficient, making initial sorting out using large data very fast. However, the method has its drawbacks, particularly the subjectivity in selecting and defining keywords, which can affect the accuracy and consistency of the results.

The quantitative results of this classification are summarized at the macro level, as shown in Table 2, to illustrate the distribution of different types of heritage. The major source areas in certain types of old villages and ancient routes account for a higher number, reflecting that they have more historical and cultural values than the others with some protection efforts. On the contrary, such categories as bridges and horse stations have fewer entries, possibly indicating lower attention towards them during conservation and recognition processes. These are /important figures for understanding the present state of preservation and cultural values associated with different kinds of heritages.

However, these quantitative distributions must be used with caution. They may be influenced by regional cultural policy fluctuation, which will then map into what is considered significant or most pressing for preservation. This analysis highlights the need for a nuanced look at cultural heritage categorization and the factors that influence its conservation, thereby highlighting the difficulty in managing and preserving cultural heritage in an ever-changing, diverse context.

3.4 Distribution of heritage types Analysis

Table 3: Geographical distribution of the different types of heritage.

| Provinces | Types of heritages | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|--------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | OV | AR | TE | MB | RH | TP | GU | RU | GP | AF | PA | TF | BR | HS | MA | CW | MO |
| Fujian | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Anhui | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Jiangxi | 5 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Hunan | 6 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Hubei | 2 | 4 | 0 | 8 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Henan | 2 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Shanxi | 2 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Hebei | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Inner Mongolia | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

While investigating cultural heritage distribution among nine provinces of China, we learned that various regions have different types of heritage, which are dominant among them, as indicated in Table 3. These disparities indicate the individuality of each province's culture and show how these areas have grown with different historical focuses. For instance, Hubei Province, particularly Wuhan, has many modern architectural heritages concentrated in one place. This may be attributed to great historical events during the modern era coupled with a fast urbanization process. In contrast, Hunan Province preserves ancient roads and villages, thus underscoring a strong commitment towards history and culture conservation and respect for traditional ways of life.

Jiangxi is characterized by large numbers of old villages as well as tea-related cultural sites like plantations and gardens, which reflect its long-standing agrarianism and historical connection with tea. More so than any other single aspect, this link to tea culture represents what is unique about Jiangxi's cultural heritage. On the other hand, Shanxi boasts a wide range of heritage types, some being ancient fortresses while others include roads, among many more. These features can indicate Shanxi's significance over time, both militarily and culturally within China itself. Thereby, not only do they represent geographical and historical importance but also highlight defense and transport functions throughout history.

The research facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the diverse forms of cultural heritage in each province under examination. This is also a starting point for other studies, like one where we would find out what conservation efforts are currently being made or how to save certain types of history later on. Such findings are important because, without them, there can be no management strategy; they help communities delve into their pasts more deeply than ever before by providing directions that shape

decisions about what things need saving now and why those choices matter most based upon this evidence from our investigation into areas such as public involvement with historic sites.

4. Study of Different Heritages

4.1 Old villages

The traditional villages along the Great Tea Route are typical settlements with deep cultural roots in tea planting and trade. These towns were also major habitats for tea growing and crude processing. The villages also acted as tea distribution points, on top of being trading centers, which further incorporated them into the social and economic fabric of the Great Tea Route. Such multiple agricultural uses indicate diverse historical landscapes of agriculture along with other types on a trade route, representing phases from Agricultural land use to commercial exchange over time.

4.2 Ancient route

Originally made by Jin merchants to transport goods within China, these ancient routes developed into key channels for north-south tea trade with Russia during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Beyond their initial commercial function, these roads became hubs of economic exchange, transportation, foreign contacts, and cultural integration. These pathways are more than just physical lines; they are cultural relics reflecting the historical interplay between business activities and social behaviors. Thus, they support cultural interaction through the tea business along this part of the Great Tea Route, especially where different communities met.

4.3 Temple

The temples marking out locations along the Great Tea Route should not be seen only from a religious perspective but also as cultural symbols embodying regional practices and beliefs that had spiritual meaning to nearby people. Most of these temples are Buddhist, but some include sites associated with worshipping local gods like Guan Yu, suggesting that even sharing culture has happened through trade on this important route. These buildings were erected during the Ming-Qing period and are characterized by various architectural styles. They served as rest stops for travelers, allowing them to replenish their mental energy after lengthy journeys. Additionally, they facilitated intangible cultural exchange activities among those seeking spiritual fulfillment along the Great Tea Route.

4.4 Modern buildings

Built mostly in Wuhan, these modern structures represent an architectural fusion between East and West and serve various purposes related to business activities associated with this industry. Constructed under a former Russian Concession, these buildings played many roles, such as where financial transactions took place or even living quarters for diplomats, among other functions. They can be seen not only in the buildings left behind but also in stories showing how Russians interacted culturally with locals during their stay there, hence the socio-economic changes within the Wuhan municipality boundary due to the tea trade.

4.5 Residential houses

Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, among China's most influential business classes was the Jin merchants. The residential houses of these individuals reflect their architectural and economic impact. These homes are not just places to live; they are also pieces of culture that provide insight into the lifestyle, economic power, and cultural traditions of the people who were engaged in running the Great Tea Route. Keeping them intact helps us understand how important merchants were in regional commerce through different parts of China, Mongolia, and Russia's cultural exchanges.

4.6 Tea plantations and gardens

The ancient tea plantations and gardens found are crucial for studying agronomy knowledge base upon which tea cultivation rested back in the days. These places reveal how people traditionally plant tea and what kind of natural conditions were favorable for producing top-quality leaves. They act like living

museums because they show ecological methods employed in growing this type of vegetation over hundreds of years, thus shaping its production across different parts of a region. Preserving these landscapes is essential for educational and cultural continuity in tea cultivation heritage.

4.7 Guildhalls

Merchant assemblies saw guildhalls as symbols of commerce and cultural exchange. They were more than just places to meet: they were trade institutions, brokering deals for tea through negotiation and marketing. Commercial dynamics in the tea industry can only be understood if we preserve the establishments that represent it and the socio-cultural exchanges that shaped this area's economic history.

4.8 Gates and Passes

Gates and passes are physical structures along trading roads where goods meet people from different regions sharing their cultures. These objects often served defensive purposes against rival groups seeking control over lucrative trade routes and administrative needs like collecting taxes from merchants using those same paths again. As military architecture intersects with commercial necessity, gates mark boundaries while facilitating trade through taxation points. Geopolitical dynamics are represented by gates used during various times but guarded different areas each time because they played significant roles in protecting tea supply chains.

4.9 Ancient Forts

These forts guard against enemies who might try raiding caravans loaded with valuable goods that pass through dangerous territories, representing turbulent histories associated with them along great roads. The fortifications acted not only as centers where soldiers could rest before continuing their journey but also served administrative functions, controlling safety measures while regulating movements connected to trading in tea leaves. They were built strategically overseeing or guarding caravansaries.

4.10 Pagodas

Most pagodas had originally been built for religious reasons. However, many large outdoor temples, among other things, serve a secondary purpose, being only tall enough structures that are easily visible over long distances, making them helpful navigation aids. However, their religious work became interwoven with social life and economics along such routes, both among different communities residing there permanently, passing through occasionally, thus turning into cultural landmarks along the tea roadways. People need to understand how much religion influences social relationships along this trade route.

4.11 Horse Stations

Horse stations were integral to a vast logistics network in the Great Tea Routes, where goods and information had to be moved fast across widely separated regions. They were resting places for travelers, especially merchants, ensuring commerce continuity. They were positioned at regular intervals, showing organized infrastructure support. These stations provide insights into the operational mechanics behind historic trade routes and everyday life along these pathways.

5. Conclusions

This research gives important clues about the Great Tea Route's cultural heritage distribution and classification. It pointed out that reviewing systematically all kinds of heritages in nine provinces along with their relevant contexts shows how different priorities work for different places in terms of protecting local identities through conservation policies. The priority of ancient villages and roads reflects their significant values as cultural assets and historical sites. Similarly, this study has revealed what makes some parts more diverse than others along the route.

However, this research has limitations. For one thing, relying solely on official lists may fail to cover a complete range of cultural heritages within each province since they tend to be incomplete or biased towards certain types, such as monuments or archaeological sites. Secondly, although extensive geographically speaking, it was still limited, and only officially recognized areas were considered,

thereby excluding those unregistered new findings or other non-officially identified spots that might have been equally valuable.

In order to progress, it is essential to address these gaps by implementing more expansive methodologies during the collection and analysis of information pertinent to resolving such issues. Using qualitative methods like doing ethnographic studies and interviewing various experts, including community elders or local historians, can provide us with deeper insights into the value system placed upon different places by communities living around them concerning their history. Besides, socio-economic factors' influence over preservation efforts should also form part of future research while appraising current policy implementations vis-a-vis safeguarding authenticity along this historic pathway for the tea trade worldwide. This methodological expansion would make studies more inclusive and, therefore, stronger because it allows us to see things from multiple perspectives, thus leading to a better interpretation of what we find out.

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