

Agricultural Trade Commodities - Rice

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“Domestication of rice ranks as one of the most important developments in history. Rice has fed more people over a longer period than has any other crop.” (Huggan, 1995, 262). Rice (*Oryza sativa*) is one of the most essential and versatile crops in the world. It serves as a dietary staple for billions of people around the world. The history of rice cultivation dates back thousands of years, and its trade has been instrumental in connecting distant regions of the world. This paper explores the historical development of rice cultivation, the establishment of trade routes, and the profound impact of rice trade on both China and the global community.

Rice cultivation has a long and storied history, with its origins traced to the Asian continent. Archaeological evidence suggests that rice was first cultivated in the Yangtze River valley in China as early as 8,000 BC and later in the Ganges River valley in the Indian subcontinent. These early domestication efforts gave rise to two major subspecies of rice: *indica* and *japonica*.

Current findings from genetics and archaeology are consistent with the domestication of *Oryza sativa japonica* in the Yangtze River valley of southern China...Rice was also cultivated in India as early as 5000 BP, but the domesticated *indica* subspecies currently appears to be a product of the introgression of favorable alleles from *japonica*. (Gross, 2014, 1).

These subspecies and their variations were suited to local climates and their cultivation led to the establishment of trade routes that enabled the exchange of goods and cultural practices. The Silk Road, a network of interconnected trade routes, played a significant role in the spread of rice. Chinese merchants traversed these routes, introducing rice to Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Similarly, the Indian Ocean trade routes facilitated the movement of rice to Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. (Spengler, 2021)

Rice is thought to have been introduced to Greece and the surrounding areas by members of Alexander the Great's army and from there worked its way to the southern portions of Europe and a few locations in North Africa. Egypt began growing rice in the Nile delta around the seventh century and it arrived in Spain via the Moors about three or four hundred years later. (Huggan, 1995, 263).

Rice eventually found its way to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade. African slaves brought with them the knowledge of rice cultivation, leading to the establishment of rice plantations in the American South. This not only shaped the culture of the region but also had significant economic implications, as rice became a valuable export crop for the American colonies and later the United States.

Nowhere in the Americas did rice play such an important economic role as in South Carolina. Rice and South Carolina share a history that led to the establishment of the crop early in its settlement and the colony's growing emphasis on rice as a plantation crop by the end of the seventeenth century. Within just twenty years of its founding, the crop was being cultivated for export. By the mid-eighteenth century the cultivation of rice extended along the Atlantic coast from North Carolina's Cape Fear River to the St. Johns River in Florida and inland for some thirty-five miles along tidal waterways. On the eve of the American Revolution, over the years 1768– 1772, rice exports from South Carolina exceeded sixty million pounds annually. Already rice had become the first cereal to be globally traded. (Carney, 2001, 78).

The trade and movement of humans has transported rice in all directions and today it is cultivated on every continent with the sole exception of Antarctica. The trade of rice has had a profound impact on not only China, but other countries and regions where it began being cultivated. It has been a major driver of economic growth and employment in countries where rice is a staple crop. It has also led to the development of infrastructure, such as irrigation systems and transportation networks, that benefit agricultural practices. The global impact of rice trade cannot be overstated. It has helped ensure food security for many nations and

facilitated international cooperation. Rice trade has influenced cultural exchange, diets, and culinary traditions worldwide. It is incredible that something as small as rice can have such a large impact on the world.

All trade, not just that of rice, highlights the intricate web of relationships among nations, emphasizing that our world is interdependent. It demonstrates how the exchange of goods, services, and ideas transcends borders, connecting diverse parts of the globe. In our age of airplanes and modern cargo ships, it is fascinating to think about how far rice and other goods traveled across the globe. It was not an easy feat to transport large volumes of any agricultural commodity throughout most of human history. Only in the last couple hundred years have we had the advancement of railroads and air travel. People had to work hard to transport these things. They would have been unable to communicate with their family and friends back home as they participated in these long voyages. Even with messengers, these interactions would have been few and far between. They also did not know when or if they'd be back because of the many obstacles and hazards they faced along the way. Think of the individual stops in foreign lands, the crossing of countless borders and sailing across various bodies of water that was needed to bring these things home. That makes the journey of these agricultural commodities that much more fascinating.

Through all of this, countries and people from all different backgrounds and regions were working together to make this a reality. As I study this topic, it also makes me think of the advent of radios, telephones, and the internet; technologies capable of allowing people from anywhere in the world to contact people thousands of miles away from them. Stock markets that allow people to trade on companies they have never even seen. Globalization is an

unstoppable force that humans have been a part of since the dawn of man. It is in our nature to go where we have not been, try things we have never tried, meet new people, and to participate in the interconnectedness that is the human experience.

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