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The Great Tea Road and the Belt and Road Initiative: Tracing Historical Roots and Assessing Contemporary Significance

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Abstract: In the context of globalization, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) functions as a key strategic platform for promoting economic integration, nurturing cultural exchange, and strengthening international collaborations. The Great Tea Road, positioned within this comprehensive framework, stands out as a trade route rich in both historical significance and cultural heritage, offering both historical continuity and contemporary relevance to the BRI. Engaging in a thorough multidisciplinary examination, this paper outlines the complex, mutually beneficial relationship between the Great Tea Road and the BRI from historical, cultural, and regional cooperation perspectives. The investigation illuminates a shared ethos that seeks to enhance global connectivity, cultivate peaceful relations, facilitate economic trade, and foster cultural dialogues. Through the lens of cultural heritage studies, the paper emphasizes the pivotal role the Great Tea Road plays in sustaining traditional Chinese culture and in promoting intercultural dialogue within the BRI ecosystem. In terms of regional partnerships, the paper argues that the Great Tea Road adds critical value to the effective implementation of the BRI, particularly by fostering community bonds and enhancing people-to-people interactions. Coinciding with the tenth anniversary of President Xi Jinping's initiative to rejuvenate the Silk Road and the Great Tea Road, set against the backdrop of the successful China-Central Asia Summit, this scholarly endeavor aims to reassert the enduring significance of the Great Tea Road. Consequently, it offers a substantive historical and

cultural foundation, imparting both theoretical understandings and practical insights, for the continuing development and enrichment of the BRI.

Keywords: Great Tea Road, Belt and Road Initiative, historical examination, cultural heritage, regional cooperation

1. Introduction

In the broader context of globalization, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has garnered extensive and far-reaching implications, aiming to address the current global imbalances in economic development as well as regional challenges. The BRI fosters economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and connectivity among participating nations, generating multidimensional significance not only economically, but also politically, culturally, and socially. In contributing to sustainable development, reducing developmental disparities, and collectively responding to global challenges, regional collaboration emerges as an essential approach. However, the implementation of the BRI is fraught with a myriad of complexities, including geopolitical risks and issues of cooperative coordination. Against this backdrop, the Great Tea Road, a historically significant route for trade and cultural communication, exhibits its unique value within the contemporary BRI context. This ancient trade route has not only facilitated the circulation of goods such as tea but also served as a platform for the exchange of culture, technology, and arts. Its rich historical and cultural layers not only enrich the diversity of the BRI but also underscore the long history of international collaboration and exchange, providing invaluable insights and experiences for contemporary international cooperation. As we mark the tenth anniversary of President Xi Jinping's proposal to develop the Silk Road and the Great Tea Road, as well as the successful convening of the China-Central Asia Summit in 2023, this paper aims to delve into the strategic position and role of the Great Tea Road within the BRI framework. Through bridging historical perspectives with

contemporary realities, the paper aspires to achieve the long-term strategic goals of the BRI. Such an inquiry will facilitate understanding and mitigating challenges faced in the implementation of the BRI, thereby offering further insights for future regional multilateral cooperation and global development.

2. Theoretical and Empirical Explorations in the Great Tea Road Studies

2.1 Key Theories Shaping the Great Tea Road Research

Scholarly research on the Great Tea Road, both domestically and internationally, can be primarily categorized into three main perspectives. The first focuses on the Great Tea Road as a commercial trade route, with an emphasis on its tangible cultural value (Li et al. 2016; Zhou and Tai 2019; Huang and Ping 2020; Ni and Cui 2021; Liu and Feng 2022; Chen 2022; An 2022; Liu 2022; Zhang 2022). Russian scholar Boris P. Torgasheff (1926) discussed the processes of tea planting, production, processing, and classification in the tea source areas of Fujian and the Two Lakes region (*lianghu diqu*)¹. He also reviewed the scenarios of tea exports, taxation, consumption, and the decline of the tea trade in the early 20th century. Contrary to the post-World War II globalization spearheaded by the United States, Liu (2019) posits that the Great Tea Road is a product of globalization dating back to the 16th century. He argues that the iconic events signaling the formation of global division of labor and markets are the discovery of the New World and Russia's crossing of the Ural Mountains and conquest of Siberia. The Great Tea Road encompasses a grand temporal and spatial scope, starting from the 1960s, and includes vast tea-producing areas in

¹ The term *lianghu diqu* typically refers to China's Hubei and Hunan provinces, distinguished by their major lakes, Dongting Lake and East Lake. Historically, these provinces, rich in water resources and fertile land, have been key economic and cultural centers situated in the middle to lower reaches of the Yangtze River.

China's Jiangnan region² as well as major tea-consuming areas in Mongolia, Russia, Europe, and Central Asia. Russian scholar Ivan Ksokolov (2016) proposed that tea is an essential commodity in the daily lives of Russians and that Chinese tea was mainly transported to Russia via the Great Tea Road.

The second research perspective focuses on the connection between the Great Tea Road and national development strategies to explore its contemporary significance. Li Boxi (2015), a professor and researcher at the Development Research Center of the State Council, posited that the Great Tea Road serves as an integral part of China's BRI, linking the BRI with two other key national strategies: the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Coordinated Development and the Yangtze River Economic Belt. This notion has garnered widespread support among domestic and foreign experts and scholars (Yang et al. 2015; Liu and Zhong 2016; Ni and Cui 2021). On the one hand, the notion that the Great Tea Road is an essential component of the BRI aligns with historical facts. Song Yaping (2015) elaborated on three well-known tea routes in Chinese history, highlighting how the historical Great Tea Road was closely related to the ancient Silk Road. Russian scholar Sergei Uyanayev (2016) asserted that the Great Tea Road has long been part of the ancient caravan routes on the Silk Road, through which silk and various other goods were transported from China to Europe. On the other hand, the re-emphasis on the Great Tea Road enriches the theoretical underpinnings of the BRI, constitutes an important part of its implementation, and helps to foster closer cultural ties among peoples (Huang 2016). Mongolian expert Shi Egekhe (2017) enthusiastically endorsed the alignment of the China-Mongolia-Russia Great Tea Road with the BRI, calling for maximizing mutually beneficial relations between nations. Liu

2 The term "Jiangnan" commonly referred to the regions south of the Yangtze River, including present-day Jiangsu Province, Zhejiang Province, and Shanghai, as well as parts of Anhui Province. Fujian Province and Guangdong Province are also included in some definitions. This area has historically been one of the important centers of Chinese culture, economy, and politics. With its abundant water resources, fertile farmland, and convenient transportation, it served as a crucial base for economic and cultural development in ancient China.

(2020) discussed how the Great Tea Road can effectively promote the coordinated development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt and the BRI, thereby facilitating Hubei's further opening-up and high-quality development in the New Era.

The third perspective focuses on the study of the humanistic spirit embodied in the Great Tea Road. Research in this area delves into the characteristics of tea merchants and the communication and development of tea culture, with particular emphasis on the ways for cultural exchange and integration among different countries, regions, and ethnicities along the route (Zhang 2014; Fan 2017; Huang and Gong 2022). These studies suggest that China, using tea as a medium, disseminated Eastern civilization to the Western world (Chen 2013; McFarlane 2016; Zhou and Tai 2019). Liu (2021) elaborated on the pioneering contributions of Shanxi merchants (*jinshang*) in Ming and Qing dynasties to the development of the Great Tea Road and the contemporary relevance of their entrepreneurial spirit. The study also explored the historical origins and practical connections between the Great Tea Road and the BRI. It underscored the indispensable historical value and contemporary significance of the Great Tea Road as a historical trade and cultural route, particularly in its contributions to the formation and development of the Shanxi business culture circle, the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, and its alignment and coordination with various national development strategies implemented by China in the New Era.

2.2 Empirical Milestones: From Fieldwork to World Heritage Candidacy

Since President Xi Jinping first introduced the concept of the “Great Tea Road” at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in March 2013, this topic has garnered widespread attention in both academic and cultural circles domestically and internationally. It has also ignited a new wave of enthusiasm for the research and application for World Heritage status for the Great Tea Road. On both official and grassroots levels, China,

Mongolia, and Russia have collectively identified the Great Tea Road as a candidate for World Heritage status, laying the groundwork for multi-layered, multi-disciplinary international cooperation.

In terms of the application process for World Heritage status for the Great Tea Road, a series of mature mechanisms have been established. Specifically, these include the initiation of a domestic alliance involving eight provinces, the strategic layout for a joint application for World Heritage status by China, Mongolia, and Russia, and the coordination of resources through the “Great Tea Road (China) Collaborative (wanli chadao xiezuoti),” collectively advancing the protection of cultural heritage and its internationalization process.

In preparation for the World Heritage application of the Great Tea Road, relevant offices collaborated with provincial and regional cultural heritage departments to complete a series of foundational work, including cultural resource surveys, basic value assessments, and heritage site evaluations. In 2018, this topic was officially incorporated into the “Special Program for the Protection and Exchange of Cultural Heritage along the Silk Road Economic Belt (Sichou Zhilu Jingjidai)³ and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (21 Shiji Haishang Sichou Zhilu) (2018-2035),” further affirming its significant status under the BRI.

In addition to the leadership roles played by official bodies and academic communities, there has been a high level of enthusiasm for participation from various sectors of society and the general public along the Great Tea Road. Cultural dissemination initiatives, such as the documentary *The Tea Road* produced by Mr. Guo Qiang’s company in Shanxi and the *Retracing the Tea Road* series activities organized by Wuhan media, not only offer new interpretations of the historical and cultural connotations of the Great Tea Road, but also fully demonstrate its applications and value in contemporary society and culture.

3 The Silk Road Economic Belt (Sichou Zhilu Jingjidai) is the geo-conceptual twin of the BRI, the other being the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (21 Shiji Haishang Sichou Zhilu).

3. The Historical Intersections and Shared Connotations of the Great Tea Road and the BRI

3.1 Intersecting with the Silk Road: Historical Context and Synergies

The Great Tea Road emerged in the 16th century as both a byproduct of burgeoning economic globalization and a catalyst for extensive ethnocultural integration. Spanning two critical historical epochs—the waning period of traditional Chinese society and the onset of modernity—it spatially links China’s agrarian civilization with Western industrial modernity. When considered from both historical and empirical vantage points, the Great Tea Road exhibits a substantial overlap with the Silk Road, thereby affirming its status as an indispensable element of the BRI.

3.1.1 Origins and Development of the Great Tea Road

The genesis of the Great Tea Road can be traced back to the ancient Chinese mercantile paradigm of the “Tea-Horse Barter System”, which enabled minority ethnic groups from the Northwestern frontiers to exchange horses and other livestock for daily necessities like tea and textiles produced in the Central Plains. During the Tang Dynasty, tea culture underwent a geographical expansion from south to north, albeit at a relatively modest scale in terms of the Tea-Horse exchange. By the Song Dynasty, the Tea-Horse trade had evolved into a systematized commercial enterprise, with copious quantities of southern tea being distributed to the Northwestern territories, frontiers, and various other foreign nations.

The dawn of the 17th century marked Russia’s entry into this milieu, inaugurating the internationalization of Chinese tea culture. In 1616, Russian envoy Vasily Tyumenets brought tea back to Russia as a diplomatic gift from the Khanate of Yarkand in Central Asia. In 1656, the arrival of the diplomatic delegation led by Fyodor Baykov in Beijing signified the commencement of direct tea exports from China to Russia. The signing of the *Treaty of*

Nerchinsk in 1689 further solidified the official status for Sino-Russian tea trade.

At the juncture of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Sino-Russian tea trade progressively coalesced into a commercial monopoly dominated by merchants from Shanxi, especially after the *Treaty of Kyakhta* in 1728. Tea commerce accounted for an astonishing 88% to 93% of the total volume of trade between China and Russia. Amidst the Taiping Rebellion, which erupted in the first year of Xianfeng's reign of the Qing Dynasty (1851), tea-producing regions in Fujian's Wuyi Mountains were adversely affected. Consequently, Shanxi merchants swiftly redirected their principal sources of tea supply to Anhua in Hunan and southeastern Hubei.

As the 20th century dawned, the Great Tea Road began its gradual decline, catalyzed by multiple factors, including the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway, the ascendancy of tea industries in India and Sri Lanka, and the import restrictions imposed by the Soviet regime. The advent of railway transportation drastically reduced the time required for tea transport, rendering the overland routes increasingly obsolescent. Concurrently, the development of British colonial tea plantations in India and Sri Lanka precipitated a tectonic shift in the global tea market's center of gravity. The imposition of import restrictions by the Soviet authorities, who categorized tea as a luxury commodity, led to a precipitous downturn in the hitherto flourishing Sino-Russian tea trade. By the 1980s, the provenance of tea imported into Russia had largely shifted to India and Sri Lanka, relegating China to a marginal role that constituted a mere 2% of Russia's tea import portfolio. After the Soviet Union's dissolution, Russia primarily sourced its black teas, floral teas, and fruit-infused teas from countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and Finland, signaling the definitive wane of the Great Tea Road.

3.1.2 The Great Tea Road as an Integral Component of the Silk Road

Chronologically speaking, the Great Tea Road and the Silk Road emerged in a symbiotic relationship, with the former historically subsumed under the larger umbrella of the latter. Remarkably, the Great Tea Road has continued to flourish and serve as an essential commercial artery between

nations for over two centuries, even as other Silk Road routes have waned.

In his 2015 report *Strategic Integration of the Great Tea Road into the Belt and Road Initiative*, Professor and Researcher Li Boxi at the Development Research Center of the State Council posited that the Great Tea Road is a significant component of the BRI and advocated for its official inclusion on the policy agenda. This proposition has garnered widespread endorsement from both domestic and international scholars and experts. On the one hand, Li's argument is grounded in historical veracity. Song Yaping, Director of the Hubei Provincial Academy of Social Sciences, meticulously documented in his 2015 monograph *The Eurasian Ancient Tea Road and Its Origins* that there are three significant tea routes in China's history, each having close connections with the Silk Road's formation and development. On the other hand, Russian scholar Sergey Uyanayev argued in his 2016 presentation *The Ancient Tea Road: An Organic Component of Eurasian Cooperation* at the Great Tea Road Mayoral Forum that the Great Tea Road has historically been part of the Silk Road and was utilized for the long-distance transport of silk and other myriad commodities to Europe. This nuanced analysis supports the scholarly proposition that the Great Tea Road should not only be understood as part of the broader history of the Silk Road but also merits recognition and inclusion within the strategic framework of the BRI.

On the other hand, the re-emphasis on the Great Tea Road enriches the theoretical substance of the BRI, serving as a critical aspect for actualizing its broader objectives and facilitating what can be termed a "Project of People-to-People Bond." Mongolian scholar Sheng Egshig concurred with this perspective in his 2015 article, *The Historical Choice and Current Trend of Aligning Mongolia's "Tea Route" with the Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union Policies*. Egshig elucidates that Mongolia is actively considering the creation of a Tea Road tourism brand to tap into the latent potential for tourism along the route. Meanwhile, Park Geon-il, a researcher at the Contemporary Mongolian Research Center of the Institute of Asia-Pacific and Global Strategy Studies under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, offered insights in 2016 from the vantage point of the

interconnectedness of various initiatives like the Silk Road Economic Belt, the Steppe Route, and the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor with the Great Tea Road. He elaborates on the historical opportunities and future prospects of Sino-Mongolian-Russian collaboration. This multi-dimensional scholarship substantiates the argument that the Great Tea Road not only complements the larger framework of the BRI, but also serves as a linchpin for regional development and multilateral partnerships. The scholarship suggests a broader cultural and economic synergy among the participating nations, endorsing the Great Tea Road's pivotal role in fostering international collaboration and mutual understanding.

3.2 Shared Aspirations and Implications for Global Initiatives

Since the recorded Chinese history, silk and tea have not only existed concurrently but also have been universally embraced by diverse communities—from the nomadic tribes of the northern steppes to the civilizations of the West. Within the framework of the BRI, the Great Tea Road and the Silk Road share a profound resonance in terms of their ideological and spiritual aims, meriting sustained scholarly investigation and policy development. Both the Silk Road and the Great Tea Road serve as emblematic conduits of cross-cultural dialogue and geopolitical integration. While the Silk Road has historically bridged Eastern and Western civilizations, the Great Tea Road has linked China and Russia, two pivotal Eurasian entities. Their shared significance lies in their capacity to facilitate not just material exchanges but also the transmission of cultural, intellectual, and spiritual assets, contributing to a comprehensive form of internationalism that the BRI seeks to invigorate. Geographically, the BRI envisions three primary routes that echo the missions of these ancient networks: a land route commencing in China and traversing through Central Asia and Russia to the Baltic Sea; a second that begins in China and passes through Central and Western Asia to reach the coasts of the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean; and the Maritime Silk Road that extends from China southwards through Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean regions. The alignment of these trade and cultural routes with the

broad objectives of the BRI is not coincidental. Rather, it embodies a shared set of values and objectives that are intrinsically interlinked, emphasizing the critical need for a reevaluation of both routes within the strategic and ideological frameworks of the BRI. This congruence of meanings and ambitions reinforces the Great Tea Road's relevance not only as a physical trade route but also as a vessel for the perpetuation of shared cultural and spiritual ideals.

The BRI spans three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa—connecting the burgeoning economic sphere of East Asia with the well-capitalized and expansive markets of Europe. The BRI envisions enormous potential for economic development in numerous countries along its routes. The Sino-Russian geopolitical stature and their bilateral relations have grown increasingly pivotal on the global stage over time. In this evolving context, the Great Tea Road should continue to be recognized as an integral component of the BRI, and this fundamental relationship should evolve into a consensual understanding among the Party, the state, and the nation. The BRI's objective to revive the Silk Road logically extends to encompass the Great Tea Road. *The Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* (hereafter referred to as *Vision and Actions*), which outlines the scope of the BRI, suggests that the BRI is grounded in but not confined to the ancient Silk Road. This document should be amended to include the recognition that the historical basis of the BRI is jointly constructed by the Great Tea Road in addition to other Silk Road routes.

From antiquity to the present, the Great Tea Road has been an essential segment of the Silk Road—a fact endorsed by authoritative United Nations bodies and increasingly acknowledged as an international consensus. Over its lengthy developmental trajectory, the Silk Road has gradually crystallized a set of guiding principles characterized as “peaceful cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit, Win-Win cooperation.” The BRI, in espousing these time-honored principles of the ancient Silk Road, aims to foster pragmatic cooperation among participating countries. Through economic integration, the BRI seeks to encourage cultural

inclusiveness, subsequently leading to the progressive attainment of political trust among nations. This aligns with the overarching goal of creating a community of shared interests, shared destiny, and shared responsibilities.

4. Trade and Culture: Navigating the Great Tea Road and the BRI

4.1 The Tea Trade as a Catalyst for China's Integration into the Global Trade Ecosystem

The Great Tea Road, which has spanned nearly three centuries, has unfolded in temporal synchrony with China's assimilation into the global system. In the annals of global exchange, the tea trade has emerged as a pivotal conduit for establishing expansive ties between China and the global community. Regarding the geographical proliferation of tea cultivation, the conspicuous upsurge in tea exports has catalyzed the expansion of growing regions from Wuyi Mountains to multiple core areas including Yangloudong, Xuefeng Mountains, and Wuling Mountains. As delineated by Chen (2018) in his comprehensive historical account *Chaye tongshi (General History of the Tea Industry)*, the cultivation area of tea in China reached an historical apex of 6 to 7 million mu⁴ towards the end of the Qing Dynasty.

The dynamics of tea trade not only facilitated the integration of tea-producing regions with the global trading system, but also catalyzed the emergence of multiple commercial towns along the Great Tea Road, thereby accelerating their assimilation into the international commercial milieu. More significantly, this form of external trade exerted transformative impacts on the lives and value systems of the inhabitants of tea-producing regions, rupturing millennia-long patterns of autarkic, subsistence economies. Concurrently, the

4 The term "mu" represents a traditional Chinese unit of land area, frequently employed in the contexts of agriculture and land measurement. In contemporary China, one "mu" has been standardized to equate to 666.67 square meters. This unit has a long history of application in China and continues to be widely utilized in the present day.

capital accumulation emanating from tea trade also served as a financial catalyst for the Europe's Industrial Revolution. Such mercantile activities not only heralded the introduction of European industrial civilization but also acted as an influential impetus for China's incipient engagement with modern capitalism. Particularly in the aftermath of the Opium Wars, salient shifts occurred in China's societal fabric, trading systems, and administrative modalities, further propelling the growth of the tea trade.

From a supply chain perspective, the Great Tea Road encompasses a multifaceted series of processes—production, processing, transportation, and sales—tailored to meet the heterogeneous demands of consumers from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds. For instance, black tea is primarily marketed to Russian and European consumers, whereas dark tea is mainly sold to regions in Mongolia, Siberian Russia, and Central Asia. Such product diversification not only invigorates the economies of tea-producing areas but also has pronounced socio-economic repercussions for the towns situated along the trade route.

In terms of its spatial network, this trading route successfully interconnects tea-producing area, transshipment towns, and terminal consumer markets, thus establishing a comprehensive nexus. This intricate system has engendered a multi-stakeholder community, encompassing tea farmers, local and foreign merchants, governmental administrators, and consumers, predicated on Tea Interest Community. This communal alignment achieves not only mutual economic benefits but also facilitates multifaceted exchanges and reciprocal learning across cultural and social dimensions.

4.2 The Glocalization of Chinese Tea Culture

In one sense, the global communication of tea culture represents a process of glocalization of Chinese tea culture, a process that is spatially manifested in its east-to-west diffusion. The glocalization of Chinese tea culture has been significantly facilitated by the currents of economic globalization. As tea becomes increasingly accepted, familiarized, and cherished globally, it manifests in various dimensions of localized globality. Historical evidence

substantiates that the initial translation and introduction of Chinese tea was to Korea, followed by other nations and regions such as Japan, Indonesia, Soviet Union, India, Sri Lanka, and Western Europe, each adapting the Chinese practices of tea consumption, cultivation, and processing techniques. Within this schema, Japan, capitalizing on its archipelagic geography, assumes a critical role as a maritime transshipment hub, significantly aiding the westward diffusion and interpretation of tea culture. The paradigms of harmony, peace, and cooperation encapsulate the apogee of virtues aspired to within Chinese tea culture, and they also form the tangible objectives pursued by the Great Tea Road. The phrase “beneficence to all under heaven” captures both the initial intent behind the establishment of this trade route and the consequential effects that ensued post-establishment. Thus, the Great Tea Road acts as both a material and symbolic conduit for disseminating Chinese tea culture, thereby fostering a global-local nexus characterized by reciprocal economic, social, and cultural engagement.

Firstly, the Great Tea Road serves as a catalytic agent within the tea industry’s ecological system, exerting an undeniable influence on the cultivation, processing, and trade of tea along its route. Particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries, when Chinese tea technology was progressively maturing, the presence of the Great Tea Road facilitated not only the standardization and scientific advancement of tea-making techniques but also the development of ancillary infrastructure and logistics systems. Additionally, diversified medicinal and health benefits from tea have seen its application transcend from strictly therapeutic usages to encompass a broader consumer landscape, thereby manifesting its profound scientific and cultural dimensions.

Secondly, the Great Tea Road is not merely a conduit for the flow of commodities; it functions as an infrastructural framework for cultural dissemination and exchange. Various commercial, religious, and social venues along the route have acted as pivotal platforms for the communication of tea culture and its subsequent literary, artistic, and ceremonial extensions. This process not only enriches the cultural tapestry of the regions along the route, but also provides a powerful impetus for the global exchange and understanding of tea culture, thus securing its significant place within the

international discursive framework concerning tea.

Lastly, the Great Tea Road, throughout its evolution and prosperity, has incubated a plethora of material civilizations, including tea farms (*chayuan*), villages (*cunhuo*), districts (*jiequ*), and commemorative architectural structures. These manifest a cross-regional, intercultural commercial ethos, exemplified by the Jin (Shanxi) merchants. This commercial ethos draws its sustenance from a multicultural milieu—incorporating the stability, caution, and integrity of Central Plains culture, as well as the courage, innovation, and openness of various ethnic minorities—thus contributing a rich repository of spiritual resources for modern commercial culture. This holistic blend of cultural ethos and material legacy furnishes a robust foundation for the Great Tea Road’s candidacy for World Cultural Heritage status, while also infusing enduring vitality into its future integration with cultural tourism and socio-economic development.

4.3 Strategic Objectives and Future Trajectories of the BRI

In September and October of 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping, during his visits to four Central Asian countries and Indonesia, proposed the conceptual frameworks for the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. In December 2014, China’s Central Economic Work Conference integrated this strategic vision into its annual work agenda, thereby canonizing the Belt and Road Initiative as a guiding principle in China’s domestic and foreign policies. In March 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce jointly issued the *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, marking the transition of the BRI from conceptualization to implementation. As a globally-influential developmental strategy emanating from China but radiating across Eurasia, the BRI assumes a tripartite mandate: it endeavors to explore new paradigm of economic growth, achieve a re-balancing of globalization, and inaugurate novel frameworks for regional collaboration. Undergirded by these objectives, the BRI seeks to leverage emerging

historical opportunities to cultivate peace, cooperation, and mutual benefit on a global scale. The BRI serves as an exemplar of Sino-centric geopolitics and geo-economics, aiming to manifest a new *modus operandi* for international development and cooperation. It endeavors not only to redefine the material and logistical dimensions of cross-border connectivity but also to reimagine the immaterial and ideological landscapes that guide international relations and economic diplomacy. In doing so, the BRI aspires to establish a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable paradigm of global development, thereby representing China's strategic ambition in reshaping both regional and global economic landscape.

The BRI comprises two main routes: the terrestrial Silk Road Economic Belt and the maritime 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. It is perceived as a strategic vehicle through which China aims to expand its global influence, particularly in economic and trade sectors. Moreover, the BRI is viewed as China's concerted effort to address its domestic issues of "overcapacity." Concomitant with the fundamental interests of the international community, it epitomizes shared human aspirations and ideals. The initiative serves as an active exploration of new models for international cooperation and global governance, and it is poised to contribute positively to the ongoing endeavors for world peace and development.

Since its proposal, the BRI has seen the implementation or planning of a multitude of projects, encompassing railway systems, highways, ports, and energy infrastructure across various countries and regions. China has formalized cooperation agreements with several participating nations, extending substantial financial backing. Notable examples include the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines, infrastructure development in Africa, China-Europe freight trains, Middle Eastern energy and infrastructure, and Southeast Asian infrastructure initiatives. The BRI is a long-term, complex endeavor, the success of which hinges on a range of variables including the political and economic stability of the participating nations as well as the broader global economic context. Nevertheless, it has undeniably become a pivotal power in shaping the global economic geography and geopolitical landscape.

The tea trade has facilitated multifaceted interactions between China and the global community, yielding intricate impacts and implications across economic, social, and cultural dimensions. The ascendancy and historical metamorphoses of the Great Tea Road represent a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing social, economic, and cultural facets. This route catalyzed not only trade and cultural interactions between China and northern nomadic tribes and Russia, but also engendered an industry tightly bound to tea production, circulation, and consumption. Serving as a conduit for tea as a central commodity, the route knitted together diverse geographical, cultural, and economic stakeholders into an integrated axis of social functions.

Historically and factually, the Great Tea Road overlaps significantly with the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor. The BRI, functioning as a dual-core strategy for both economic trade and cultural development, offers an opportunity for the revitalization of China's cultural industry and the steady enhancement of its soft power. In contrast to the violent and exploitative routes forged by Europeans, the ancient Silk Road witnessed harmonious amalgamations of major civilizations along its course, facilitating the westward transmission of the Four Great Inventions of Ancient China and the eastward migration of the three major religions. Locally produced goods such as silk, spices, porcelain, jade, grains, and fruits traversed along the Silk Road to the opposite end of the world. The ancient Silk Road's spirit of openness, freedom, and harmony significantly propelled and sustained the economic development, cultural exchanges, and artistic prosperity of the Eurasian continent. It generated cultural and artistic zeniths unprecedented in human history, embodying the adage that "Amity between people holds the key to sound relations between states." Today's BRI perpetuates the spirit of the ancient Silk Road. While establishing an elaborate new economic corridor, it also strings together multiple new cultural pathways that amalgamate language, thought, belief, art, and education across various fields, laying the groundwork for greater public affinity. The core tenets of peace, cooperation, openness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit persist, driving collective development and shared prosperity. The BRI aims to construct a shared community characterized by political trust, economic

integration, and cultural inclusivity, resonating as the dominant theme in this new epoch of the Silk Road.

5. Building Bridges: Economic and Regional Integration via the Great Tea Road

5.1 Legacy and Modern Relevance: The Great Tea Road in Historical Trade

The Great Tea Road served as a vital artery for ancient trade, exerting several multifaceted impacts. First, as an ancient trading route, it greatly facilitated the circulation and exchange of goods. Teas, one of the primary commodities in this trade, were extensively disseminated across various regions via this route. The tea trade catalyzed commercial activities, invigorated markets, and consequently acted as a propellant for economic development in different areas. Second, the Great Tea Road connected disparate cities and regions, thereby creating an expansive commercial network. This network enabled the distribution of goods from one region to another, promoting inter-regional trade. The emergence of this trading network also fortified the connections between various regions, driving the continuity of trade activities. Third, the rise of long-distance commerce and the establishment of the Great Tea Road contributed to the evolution of currency systems and transaction methods. Traders required an effective payment system for completing inter-regional transactions, thereby fostering the utilization and innovation of currency and trade mechanisms. This advancement in currency and transaction methodologies offered more convenient and efficient means for economic trade. Simultaneously, trading activities along the Great Tea Road were not solely confined to commodity exchange but also entailed the interchange of culture and technology. Interactions between merchants and travelers facilitated the dissemination of culture, technology, and knowledge across different regions. This not only enriched the cultural milieu but also spurred advances in technology and

craftsmanship. Cities and regions connected by the route benefited from this commercial and cultural synergy, attracting traders, travelers, and investment, thereby stimulating economic growth in these urban and regional centers.

The function of the Great Tea Road as a connective infrastructure serves as an instructive precedent for the BRI. By constructing transnational infrastructure and enhancing connectivity, the BRI facilitates trade, investment, and personnel mobility, thereby strengthening economic ties among countries along its routes and further expanding opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation. Historically, tea, as a primary trade commodity, was transported globally via the Great Tea Road. Within the context of the BRI, similar circulations of trade and commodities have been promoted to varying degrees. Such economic linkages contribute to the development of countries along these routes, broadening market scales and fostering industrial advancements. Moreover, the Great Tea Road lays the groundwork for cultural assimilation and technological collaboration within the framework of BRI. It serves as a model for how economic and infrastructural development can be harmoniously coupled with the intermingling of cultures and technologies, thereby creating a more holistic approach to global cooperation.

5.2 Enhancing Regional Connectivity: The Great Tea Road Within the BRI

The Great Tea Road comprises two distinct sections: domestic and international. The domestic section vertically traverses China from south to north, incorporating provinces and cities such as Fujian, Jiangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Hunan, Hubei, Anhui, Henan, Shanxi, Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, and Inner Mongolia. This domestic configuration serves to bolster economic ties between the northern and southern regions of China, thereby positioning these provinces and municipalities to effectively contribute to the BRI. Conversely, the international section extends westward from China through Mongolia and Russia, eventually reaching various parts of Europe. It passes through cities such as Ulaanbaatar, Chakhtu, Tula, Bisk, Omsk, Tyumen, Kazan, Moscow, and Saint Petersburg, ultimately providing a conduit to

Western Europe. This bifurcated structure of the Great Tea Road amplifies its role as a model for enhancing regional connectivity within the framework of the BRI, demonstrating the potential for symbiotic relations between domestic and international trade routes.

The Great Tea Road contributes to an elevated framework of openness within China's BRI by expanding the development space and integrating multiple cities into its fold. The Great Tea Road (China) Cooperative has identified several cities such as Wuyishan, Wuhan, Chibi, Pu'er, Anhua, Xiangyang, Shadian, Changzhi, Jinzhong, Shuozhou, Yuci, Tianjin, Beijing, Zhangjiakou, Hohhot, and Erenhot. Other cities, including Qianshan, Yichang, and Lu'an, have expressed interest in joining and are under consideration for integration as the network continues to expand. Within this system, various nodal cities act as connecting links: Wuyishan at the southern end of the Great Tea Road bridges the maritime and overland Silk Roads; Wuhan serves as a trading hub connecting the overland and maritime Silk Roads through the Yangtze River; Beijing acts as a cultural exchange node, linking the key BRI routes of China-Central Asia-Russia-Europe (Baltic Sea); Erenhot is a border trade window connecting the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, and so forth. In the broader scheme of the BRI, the Great Tea Road aligns closely with the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, one of the six major economic corridors prioritized for construction. Developing the entire Great Tea Road into a corridor for China, Mongolia, and Russia would create a vertical axis of openness running through China from north to south. The National Development and Reform Commission⁵ has proposed two routes within the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor: one extending from the north region of China to Mongolia and Russia, and the other running from the northeast region of China to

5 The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) is the main agency responsible for economic planning and development in the People's Republic of China. Operating under the State Council, it plays a significant role in formulating policies related to economic and social development, approving major construction projects, and regulating key economic operations. Established in 1952 as the State Planning Commission, it underwent several name changes before adopting its current title in 2003. The NDRC continues to be a pivotal institution in shaping China's economic landscape.

Manzhouli in China and Russia. These routes represent but a fraction of the Great Tea Road and can be considered initial steps in the overall planning and construction of the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor. Both Russia and Mongolia place high importance on the Great Tea Road, reflecting the ongoing elevation of strategic partnerships between China and these nations.

6. Symbiotic Growth: Mutual Advancements of the Great Tea Road and the BRI

6.1 Strategic Alignments: Integrating the Great Tea Road into the BRI

The Great Tea Road, a historical commercial route that traverses China from south to north, holds not only rich cultural significance but also occupies a crucial position in contemporary strategic planning. This route, which runs through regions such as Inner Mongolia, Hankou (Wuhan), and the Southwest and Southeast of China, is closely aligned with three major national strategies: the BRI, the Yangtze River Economic Belt, and the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Coordinated Development Strategy. The incorporation of the Great Tea Road into these strategies enables a more organic and synergistic integration of their respective advantages, facilitating blended growth. The Great Tea Road extends northward to Mongolia, westward to Russia, and southward to the Indochina Peninsula and Southeast Asia, offering new developmental opportunities for the regions along its route. Particularly, its role is indispensable in broadening the scope of the BRI and the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor. Therefore, the integration of this historical trade route into the BRI bears significant implications for national strategy.

The Great Tea Road serves not only a pivotal role in economic and trade activities but also enriches the cultural dimension of China's BRI. As an integral component of Chinese culture, tea culture has extensive global

influence. Through the Great Tea Road, BRI partner nations can deepen their understanding of and engagement with Chinese culture, thereby enhancing cultural cohesion and a sense of shared destiny. Additionally, this historical trade route holds particular strategic significance for China's central provinces. As China's economy transitions to a New Normal, the increasing necessity for these provinces to open-up is evident. The Great Tea Road offers an effective platform for these regions to align with the BRI, further fostering sustainable economic development nationally. In terms of international cooperation, the Great Tea Road presents a robust foundation for partnership, especially in the context of Sino-Russian and Sino-Mongolian relations. This route not only embodies profound historical and cultural legacies but is also consistent with the strategic interests and trade needs of all parties involved. Building upon the mutual interests of China, Mongolia, and Russia, the Great Tea Road contributes to the construction of a more tightly integrated community of shared destiny, reinforcing cultural identification and economic collaboration across various ethnicities and regions.

6.2 Mutual Catalysts: How the BRI Propels the Great Tea Road

6.2.1 Ascension of the Great Tea Road to a National Strategic Imperative

The development trajectory of the Great Tea Road is set to ascend to the level of national strategic importance, thereby entering the purview of the central government and securing the attention of central leadership. The incorporation of the Great Tea Road into the broader framework of the BRI is expected to precipitate the formulation of specialized planning protocols, encompassing a multitude of developmental facets along its trajectory. Upon their inclusion in the central government's implementation agenda for the BRI, these regional development projects are likely to gain access to a plethora of resources, including but not limited to, central government funding, policy frameworks, and fiscal incentives. Moreover, these projects may become eligible candidates for financial mechanisms such as those offered by the

Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund.

6.2.2 State-Sanctioned Investment Initiatives for Advancing the Great Tea Road

The developmental strategy for the Great Tea Road has garnered high-level attention from the central government, and it is poised to be integrated within the framework of the BRI, thereby elevating it to a national strategic planning level. On the one hand, specialized planning could cover a broad array of developmental areas along the route, including but not limited to infrastructure development, industrial cooperation, and cultural exchange. On the other hand, the implementation of this strategy will secure comprehensive support, which could encompass financial backing, policy frameworks, and tax incentives, potentially including financial resources from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund.

As a part of the national strategy, the Great Tea Road is not only expected to be incorporated into key infrastructure projects under the BRI but also poised to serve as an integral component of international economic collaborative development. The involved sectors would span industrial investment, resource development, economic and trade cooperation, financial exchange, regional cultural dialogue, and environmental conservation. Moreover, owing to the need for extensive policy coordination among participating countries in the BRI, the Great Tea Road could potentially serve as a pilot zone for policy experimentation, thereby cultivating a competitive edge in institutional and policy innovation.

With the gradual integration of the Great Tea Road into more elevated platforms of openness, this BRI is anticipated to further stimulate the development of city clusters along the route and multilateral cooperation mechanisms. For instance, by organizing various international forums and conferences, such as the Great Tea Road International Summit or the China-Mongolia-Russia Mayoral Summit, cooperation in logistics, agricultural and mineral trade, and infrastructure can be fostered among countries and cities along the route. Concurrently, the development of the Great Tea Road is likely to create diverse opportunities for the comprehensive growth of industries like

tea production, thereby expanding the spatial dimensions of resource allocation and enhancing strategic levels. Overall, the Great Tea Road holds the potential to evolve into a multifaceted, efficient, open, and globally competitive developmental platform in the foreseeable future.

7. Conclusion

In the context of globalization, China's Belt and Road Initiative is not merely an economic construct but serves as a multidimensional and multi-level global strategic platform. Within this paradigm, the Great Tea Road, with its rich historical depth and cultural significance, imbues the BRI with unique value at a strategic level. Notably, the Great Tea Road has not only been an integral part of the ancient Silk Road since time immemorial but has also sustained its independent existence for over 200 years even after other Silk Road routes declined. This fact substantiates its unique value in both strategic and cultural dimensions. At this historic point, marked by the tenth anniversary of President Xi Jinping's proposition of the Silk Road and the Great Tea Road development initiatives, as well as the successful convening of the China-Central Asia Summit, re-evaluating and promoting the value of the Great Tea Road becomes especially salient. This will not only help restore and elevate the historical and cultural standing of the Great Tea Road but also furnish robust theoretical and practical guidance to the BRI. We firmly believe that integrating the Great Tea Road more organically into the strategic framework of the BRI will not only facilitate broader, higher-level, and deeper openness, exchange, and integration but also pen a new chapter for regional collaboration, such as the tripartite development of the Great Tea Road by China, Mongolia, and Russia. This, in turn, will further propel the more comprehensive and sustained implementation and development of the BRI.

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