

THE WATER-MELON

49. This Cucurbitacea (*Citrullus vulgaris* or *Cucurbita citrullus*) is known to the Chinese under the name *si kwa* 西瓜 ("melon of the west"). The plant now covers a zone from anterior Asia, the Caucasus region, Persia to Turkistan and China, also southern Russia and the regions of the lower Danube. There is no evidence to lead one to suppose that the cultivation was very ancient in Iran, India, Central Asia, or China; and this harmonizes with the botanical observation that the species has not been found wild in Asia.¹

A. ENGLER² traces the home of the water-melon to South Africa, whence he holds it spread to Egypt and the Orient in most ancient times, and was diffused over southern Europe and Asia in the pre-Christian era. This theory is based on the observation that the water-melon grows spontaneously in South Africa, but it is not explained by what agencies it was disseminated from there to ancient Egypt. Nevertheless the available historical evidence in Asia seems to me to speak in favor of the theory that the fruit is not an Asiatic cultivation; and, since there is no reason to credit it to Europe, it may well be traceable to an African origin.

The water-melon is not mentioned by any work of the T'ang dynasty; notably it is absent from the *T'ai p'in hwan yü ki*. The earliest allusion to it is found in the diary of Hu Kiao 胡峤, entitled *Hien lu ki* 陷虜記, which is inserted in chapter 73 of the History of the Five Dynasties (*Wu tai shi*), written by N'ou-yan Siu 歐陽修 (A.D. 1017-72) and translated by E. CHAVANNES.³ Hu Kiao travelled in the country of the Kitan from A.D. 947 to 953, and narrates that there for the first time he ate water-melons (*si kwa*).⁴ He goes on to say, "It is told that the Kitan, after the annihilation of the Uigur, obtained this cultivation. They cultivated the plant by covering the seeds with cattle-manure and placing mats over the beds. The fruit is as large as that of the

¹ A. DE CANDOLLE, *Origin of Cultivated Plants*, p. 263.

² In Hehn, *Kulturpflanzen*, p. 323.

³ *Voyageurs chinois chez les Khitan* (*Journal asiatique*, 1897, I, pp. 390-442).

⁴ Chavannes' translation "melons" (p. 400) is inadequate; the water-melon is styled in French *pastèque* or *melon d'eau*. Hu Kiao, of course, was acquainted with melons in general, but what he did not previously know is this particular species. During Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, "on mangeait des lentilles, des pigeons, et un melon d'eau exquis, connu dans les pays méridionaux sous le nom de *pastèque*. Les soldats l'appelaient *sainte pastèque*" (THIERS, *Histoire de la révolution française*).