

The "Ancient Tea and Horse Caravan Road," the "Silk Road" of Southwest China

Yang Fuquan

The "Tea and Horse Caravan Road" of Southwest China is less well known than the famous Silk Road. Its route crosses some very high and dangerous terrain. It begins from Sichuan and Yunnan provinces in Southwest China, runs along the eastern foothills of the Hengduan Mountains, a center of tea production in China, then crosses the Hengduan mountain range and deep canyons of several major rivers, the Yalong, the Jinsha (the upper reaches of Yangtze), the Lancang (Mekong), and the Nu (Salween), thus spanning the two highest plateaus of China (Qinghai-Tibet and Yunnan-Guizhou) before finally reaching India south of the Himalayas.

The name of the road (*Chamadao* in the Chinese records meaning "the tea and horse road") indicates its importance in the trade of tea and horses, but other products passed along it as well. Horse caravans carried tea, sugar and salt from Sichuan and Yunnan to Tibet and brought back colorful local mountain goods. The Chinese over the ages often bought warhorses from Tibetan and other ethnic groups of Southwest China, and these too came over this road. The road also served as a significant corridor for migration as well as a channel for cultural communication among the ethnic groups in western China; beyond this, it was a bridge for international cultural and economic exchange between China and India. Although silk was not included in the trade goods carried over it, at times it has been termed the "Southern Silk Road of China," due to its importance in both economic and cultural aspects of Chinese history.

The Hengduan mountain range and the Qinghai-Tibet plateaus through which the Tea and Horse Caravan Road passes is an area

with an abundant bio-diversity and complex topography. Generally speaking, the Tea and Horse Road follows two main routes (Fig. 1). One of them starts at the original place of the famous Pu'er tea production (present day Xishuangbanna and Sima prefectures of Yunnan province) and passes through Dali, Lijiang, Zhongdian (present Shangrila county), Deqin of Yunnan Province and Mangkang, Zuogong [Zogong], Bangda, Changdu, Luolongzong, Gongbujiangda and Lhasa in Tibet. From Lhasa it heads south through Jiangze [Gyantse], Pali, and Yadong in Tibet and on to Burma, Nepal and India. The other route starts at Ya'an, Sichuan province, which is the major site of Yacha tea production, and goes through Luding, Kangding, Batang, Changdu and Lhasa, and then to Nepal and India. According to the surveys, the tea and horse route from Sichuan to Lhasa is some 2350 kilometers long, with fifty-six

traveling stages. One has fifty-one river crossings, fifteen rope bridges and ten iron bridges (Fig. 2, p. 30) and traverses seventy-eight mountains over 3000 meters high. All of this makes the route one of the most difficult in the world. Moreover, the weather in this area of the world is extremely changeable. In a single day the traveler may experience heavy snow, hail, burning sun and heavy winds, with extreme variations in the temperatures. There are many branches joining these two major routes, combining to connect the economy, religions and cultures in the broad triangular area of Tibet, Yunnan and Sichuan.

The Tea and Horse Caravan Road as a corridor of ancient civilizations

This route would appear to have been in use long before it became an avenue for the tea and horse trade during the Tang and the Song dynasties, for it was a very important corridor connecting the ancient cultures of the areas of present Tibet, Yunnan and Sichuan. In such places as Ganzi and Aba districts of Sichuan and the Hengduan Mountains of Northwest Yunnan archaeologists have discovered many cist tombs

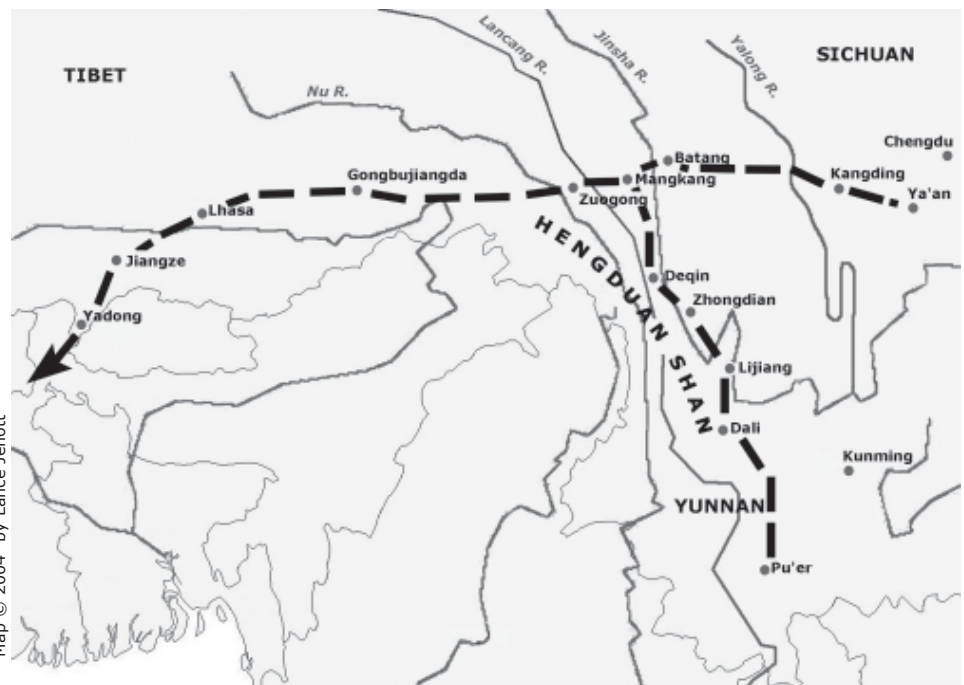


Fig. 1. Map illustrating the Tea and Horse Road



Source: H. R. Davies, *Yün-nan* (1909), facing p. 56.

Fig. 2. Iron chain bridge over the Nu (Salween)

which date from the Shang (ca. 1600-ca.1100 BCE) and the Zhou (ca. 1100-256 BCE) dynasties. These cist tombs are scattered broadly in the canyons and valleys of the upper reaches of the Min River as well as the Yalong and Jinsha Rivers. Most of these tombs are located in western Sichuan and western Yunnan, although a few have also been found in Tibet. Although there are slight differences between the cist tombs of the various sites, their main features and cultural characteristics are generally similar. The archeologists have established that the cist tombs discovered in Tibet are closely related with those of Sichuan and Yunnan in terms of their form and the grave goods. Notably those cist tombs found in Changdu and Linzhi, Tibet, definitely belong to the same cultural system as those in western Sichuan and western Yunnan (Luo Kaiyu 1992). The cist tombs in Tibet are for the most part found close to the roads which led directly from Yunnan and Sichuan. Thus it is clear that about 4000-5000 years ago, well before the Tea and Horse Road was opened, migration and communication among the various ethnic groups operated along this road.

A brief introduction to the history of the ancient Tea and Horse Caravan Road

One can trace the history of the Tea and Horse Road back to the period of the Tang dynasty (618-907) and Tibetan (Tubo) regime. Tea was introduced to the Tibetan area during

Ganlu zhi hai (The Sea of Amrita), mentions ranking tea by quality (Dacangzongba: 104-106). Li Zhao's *Guo shi bu* (Supplement to the National History), written under the Tang dynasty, relates that emperor Dezong sent his supervisory official (*jiangchayushi*) Chang Lu to visit Tibet, where the Tibetan king received him in a tent. Chang Lu offered boiled tea to the King, who asked what it was. Chang answered that this was called *cha* (tea) and was good for relieving thirst and nervousness. The king then responded that Tibet already had *cha* and instructed his servants show the tea to Chang Lu (Li Zhao: Vol. 2). This record corroborates that of the *Han Zang shi ji*.

The Tibetan people had been in close communication with the Tang and the various ethnic groups of southwest China for a long time; so it is very likely that the tea of Sichuan and Yunnan had already reached Tibet. As early as the seventh century Tubo (Tibetan) military power had conquered the ethnic tribes scattered in the present areas of Lijiang and Dali, Yunnan, and had established a military administration in northwest Yunnan. The military route used by the Tibetans to reach Yunnan was closely related to the contemporary tea and horse route. Yunnan is the one of the places where tea plants are native. Since 1949 scientists have found many wild and cultivated tea trees that are more than a thousand years old in the Nannuo mountains and Bada Mountains of Menghai County as well as Yiwu Mountains and Xiangming

the Tang dynasty. According to the Tibetan book "Historic Collection of the Han and Tibet" (*Han Zang shi ji*) "In the reign of the Tibetan King Chidusongzan [Khri 'Dus sron] (676-704), the Tibetan aristocracy started to drink tea and use the tea-bowl, and tea was classified into different categories." Moreover, the book,

Mountains of Mengla County, Xishuangbanna. The local people call these ancient tea trees the "Tea Tree Kings." In the *Man shu* (the book about the native tribes of southwest China, written by Fan Chuo during the Tang), there is a description of the tea trees grown in southern Yunnan. It also states that the local tribal people of Nanzhao Kingdom (7th-9th centuries CE) had the custom of drinking the local tea (Fan Chuo 1961, 1992). The Tibetan military government had a very close relationship with the Nanzhao kingdom, and it is possible that Yunnan tea was introduced into Tibet during that time.

The development of large-scale commerce in tea and horses between the Chinese dynasties and Tibet and the development of the caravan road for the tea and horse trade probably dates to the Song dynasty (960-1279). During that period, the demand for tea would have gradually increased as tea became an important drink in the daily life of the Tibetans. The Song court then started to be involved in the shipping of tea to Tibet. The Song required a large number of warhorses from Tibet to defend against the invading northern nomadic Liao, Jin and Xixia. The court established the *Chamasi* [Ch'a-ma ssu], Tea and Horse Office, in charge of the tea and horse trade in the seventh year of Xining (1074) and also set up many markets for selling tea and buying horses in Northwest China.¹ Every year the government transported huge amounts of tea, obtained mainly from Yunnan and Sichuan, to exchange for warhorses with the Tibetan tribes. According to one study, more than 20,000 warhorses per year were exchanged for tea during the Northern Song (960-1127) dynasty. Of the total annual output of tea in Sichuan, 30,000,000 Jin or 15,000,000 kilograms, at least half was sold to Tibet (Jia Daquan 1993: 4).

The Yüan dynasty (1271-1368) also paid great attention to the trade of tea to Tibet and established the *Xifanchatijusi*, meaning the bureau in charge of tea trade to Tibet. At first, tea was sold through the government bureau, but later it gradually was handled by individual

traders. The most prosperous period for the tea and horse trade between Yunnan, Sichuan and Tibet was under the Ming dynasty (1369-1644). The Ming court established the office of *Chakesi* [Ch'a-k'o ssu], the bureau in charge of tea and horse trade. The quality of the horses offered to the court by the Tibetans as "tribute" determined the quality of the tea. Given the importance of tea in the daily life of the Tibetans, the Ming court was able to use the tea trade as a means of maintaining some political control over the Tibetan leaders and lamas.

During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the tea trade between Yunnan, Sichuan and Tibet continued to develop. Although the court stopped buying horses from the Tibetan area in 1735, it eased the restrictions on the tea trade, and huge amounts of tea were exported there. In 1661, the fifth Dalai Lama asked the Qing court to set up a large market for the tea and horse trade in Beisheng (present Yongsheng, Yunnan), and his request was approved by the central court. From that time there was a rapid increase in the amount of Yunnan tea transported to Tibet along the Tea and Horse Road. In just one year, 1661, 30,000 *dan* or 1,500,000 kg of Yunnan tea were sent to Tibet. Tea also served as an important gift from the Qing court to the Tibetan elite: for example, the court allocated 5000 *jin* (2500 kg) to the Dalai Lama and 2500 *jin* to the Panchan Lama each year. During the Republic Period (1911-1949), though the Chinese government did not play an important role in the tea trade, it continued to prosper in the hands of private traders who still traveled along the ancient Tea and Horse Road.

During World War II, especially in 1942 when the coastal cities of China and Burma were occupied by the Japanese army, blocking any remaining highways for international trade, the Tea and Horse Caravan Road became a significant transportation link supplying inland China from India.²

According to one source, more than 25,000 horses and mules were used (Fig. 3) and more than 1200 trading firms were to be found along the road. The Russian-born Peter Goullart, a descendant of merchants who had been involved in the inner Asian trade with China, arrived in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, in 1939. He spent two years there and then moved to Lijiang (Likiang), one of the important stopping points on the Tea and Horse Caravan Road. In his evocative book about his Lijiang years, *Forgotten Kingdom*, he provides abundant detail about the wartime trade with Tibet over that historic road:

Everything was indented [*sic*], contracted or bought outright that could be conveniently carried by yak or mule. Sewing machines, textiles, cases of the best cigarettes, both British and American, whiskies and gins of famous brands, dyes and chemicals, kerosene oil in tins, toilet and canned goods and a thousand and one varieties of small articles started flowing in an unending stream by trail and truck to Kaimpong, to be hastily repacked and dispatched by caravan to Lhasa. There the flood of merchandise was crammed into the halls and courtyards of the palaces and lamaseries and turned over to an army of sorters and professional packers. The least fragile goods were set

aside for the northern route to Tachienlu [Dhartsedo/Kangding], to be transported by yaks; other articles were packed for delivery at Likiang, especially the liquors and cigarettes which were worth their weight in gold in Kunming, crowded with thirsty American and British troops...

It was estimated that some 8,000 mules and horses, and probably 20,000 yaks, were used during Operation Caravan, when all other routes into China had been blocked during the war. Almost every week long caravans arrived in Likiang. So good and profitable was the business that even the rainy seasons failed to stop some adventurous merchants. This was a considerable risk and, in their avarice, they took it. The rainy season is much dreaded in Tibet and on the border, and all caravan and pilgrim traffic usually stops for the duration. The trails become muddy and swampy, rivers and streams swell to incredible proportions, mountains are wrapped in mists and avalanches and landslides become the rule rather than the exception. Many a traveller has been buried forever under tons of rocks or swept to his death by a raging torrent [Goullart 1955: 87-88].

With the defeat of Japan, the bottom instantly dropped out of the Tibet trade, and the merchants who had yet undelivered stocks were devastated. The overland route never recovered.

The Tea and Horse Caravan Road today

While modernization undermined this historic route's commercial significance, the Tea and Horse Caravan Road is now attracting attention due to the growth of tourism in southwest China. One reason is the



Fig. 3. A Yunnan pack mule and load.

Source: H.R. Davies, *Yün-nan* (1909), facing p. 2.

ethnic and cultural diversity of the region. There is a local saying, "The languages beyond five square *li* [2.5 kilometers] are different from each other, and the customs beyond ten square *li* are different from each other." There are more than twenty different ethnic groups to be found along the route. Some famous old towns and villages which once were key stations and markets of the Tea and Horse Caravan Road have been listed among the most important international sites for historic preservation. For example, the Lijiang, where the Naxi people form the majority of inhabitants, was been designated as a world cultural heritage site by UNESCO in 1997. In 2002, Sidengjie village, Shaxi Township in Yunnan, was listed as a "protected world architectural heritage site" by the World Architecture Foundation.

Moreover, the Tea and Horse Caravan Road continues to be a sacred road for many people. The different religions along the road include, for example, the white, yellow and red sects of Tibetan Buddhism; the Bon religion of pre-Buddhism in Tibet; the Dongba religion of the Naxi people which combines Bon, Buddhism and its own animism; Han Buddhism and Taoism, as well as the Hinayana belief of the Dai people, and the Benzhu (local gods and goddess) worship of the Bai people. Along the caravan road, there are many sacred mountains belonging to the different ethnic groups. For example, Kawagebo Snow Mountain [Meiliexuashan] (6740 m), near Yubeng in northern Yunnan, is one of the most famous sacred mountains of the Tibetan people. Every year many pilgrims from Sichuan, Yunnan, Tibet, Qinghai, and Gansu come there to worship and circumambulate the mountain with their tents, sheep and horses to ask for blessings from the mountain god. Pilgrims still travel annually to Lhasa to pay their respect to the deities of Buddhism, often still "measuring the road" by prostrating their bodies along its length. The road these pilgrims follow is the Tea and Horse Caravan Road. In the past, young monks often shared the road with the caravans when traveling to Lhasa to carry on

their studies and to advance their careers.

Goullart's conclusion about the significance of the road (from his post-war perspective) is worth quoting, since it might be generalized to the earlier periods of this historic route:

Few people have realized how vast and unprecedented this sudden expansion of caravan traffic between India and China was, or how important. It was a unique and spectacular phenomenon. No complete story has yet been written about it, but it will always live in my memory as one of the great adventures of mankind. Moreover, it demonstrated to the world very convincingly that, should all modern means of communication and transportation be destroyed by some atomic cataclysm, the humble horse, man's oldest friend, is ever ready to forge again a link between scattered peoples and nations [Goullart 1955: 88].

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Notes [added by editor]

1. Morris Rossabi dates the establishment of this office to the twelfth century, citing as his source the *Sung shih*, 167, pp. 17b-18b (Rossabi 1970: 140). The current article and that of Rossabi complement one another, since Rossabi's main focus is the horse and tea trade along the "Northern Silk Route." He says nothing about the trade with Tibet, just as Yang Fuquan says nothing about the trade with partners other than Tibet. Rossabi provides substantial detail about the mechanisms for controlling the trade and the changes over time in government policies.

2. I have added here some material from Goullart beyond what was originally selected by Yang Fuquan. It is worth noting as well that the overland trade was but a part of the effort to supply the forces fighting the Japanese. Americans best remember the air routes over "the Hump" of the mountains of the eastern Himalaya, an anecdotal account of which may be found in

Bliss K. Thorne, *The Hump: The Great Military Airlift of World War II* (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1965).

Chinese characters

<i>Chakesi</i>	茶课司
<i>Chamadao</i>	茶马道
<i>Chamasi</i>	茶马司
<i>Hang Zang shi ji</i>	汉藏史集
<i>Man shu</i>	蛮书
<i>Xifanchatijusi</i>	西番茶提举司



Antipina Archive: KA 3900

Fig. 1. Family portrait. Klavdiia Antipina is standing in the white dress to the left of center. Morshansk c. 1910-11.

Klavdiia Antipina — a Tribute to the Ethnographer of the Kyrgyz

John L. Sommer
Fremont, California

Born into nobility near Moscow, Russia, Klavdiia Ivanovna Antipina died at the age of 92 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. In those decades, she had seen the beginning and the end of the Soviet Union. Initially she had shared the exhilaration of the Marxist

and the Leninist doctrines of Communism with fellow students in the finest and most selective of Soviet universities, Moscow State University. A happy marriage and promising career in the 1930s were soon destroyed by Stalinist repressions. Her husband was arrested and disappeared; she and her young son were exiled to Central Asia. "The stone must lie where it has fallen" is a Kyrgyz saying, an explanation for the acceptance of fate. Klavdiia Ivanovna lived in Kyrgyzstan for the remainder of her life, becoming a much-respected ethnographer of The Kyrgyz.

Klavdiia Ivanovna Antipina was born 5 May 1904, the fourth child in a large family which lived in Morshansk near Moscow (Fig. 1). Her grandfather had been a "person of the church." Her father, who preceded every meal with a prayer, carried a title of nobility which he lost at the time of the communist revolution. The family lived in a two-story house with a piano on the second floor. We may conclude that the family was prosperous, aristocratic, religious, and disciplined. Klavdiia Ivanovna

was a "blue blood," a member of the gentry.

In 1922, at age eighteen (Fig. 2) she moved to Moscow where she entered a Forestry Institute and became fascinated with dendrology. Her interests widened and she was accepted by Moscow State University, where she studied ethnography and became, along with several of her classmates, a respected scholar. She married a fellow student, Mikhail ("Misha") Rabinovich, who edited the University's student newspaper (Fig. 3). They lived full and happy lives. She



Antipina Archive: KA 2950

Fig. 2. Klavdiia Antipina at about the time of her move to Moscow. c. 1922.



Antipina Archive: KA 3901

Fig. 3. Klavdiia Antipina and "Misha." Moscow, c. 1930.