

The Tea Horse Road

Jeff Fuchs

Zhongdian (China) and Canada

Thick swooping mists, damp and all encompassing, threaded through bent shapes that were in fact trees. Craggy and awkward, these trees appeared stooped and aimless, meters high and slick with moisture [Fig. 1]. Nothing hinted at their identity or their crucial importance in the history of the very fabric of a dozen cultures. Pressed into southwestern Yunnan province I stood amidst a sanctuary of sorts, a point from which the very leaves of the mist-shrouded trees around me were carried to all compass points on the backs of mules in caravans that would travel thousands of kilometers. These ungracious bowed trees that created their own ancient forest were tea trees, which had for centuries been let to wander and expand in a never-ending series of curves. It was here upon Nano Mountain near Menghai

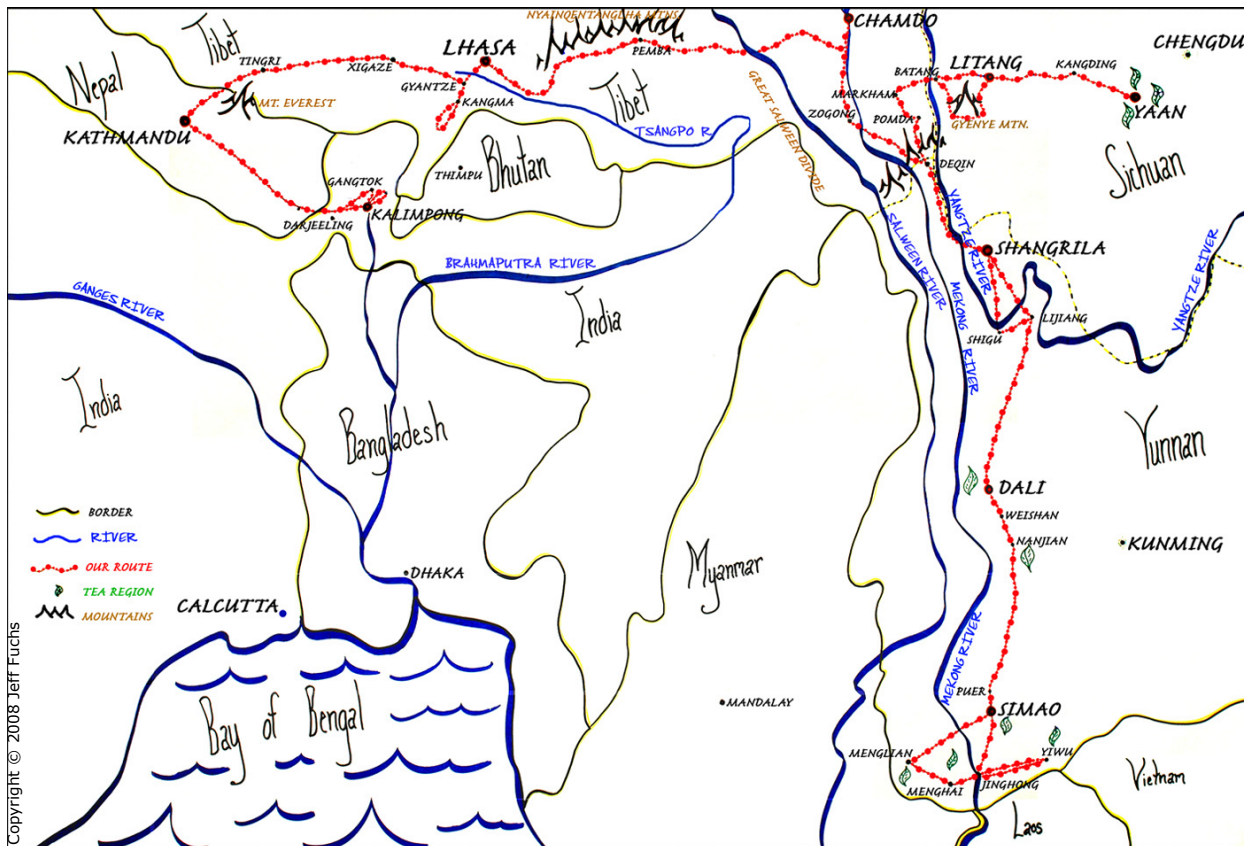
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Fig. 1. A harvester from the Lahu tribe in the tea sanctuary of Nano Shan just outside Menghai, Yunnan.

where tea has grown rampant and unimpaired since ancient times in the swaths of tea fields around it, where tea has been collected, dried and packed to be sent into Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Burma. Here tea is nothing less than revered completely.

Fig. 2. The author's route along the Tea Horse Road from Yunnan to Tibet and beyond.



Tea's journeys south and west, though, were nothing compared to the epic distances and dangers of the journey north and west that tea would take into the daunting black spires and snow peaks of the Himalayas — to Lhasa and beyond, 4000 kilometers away [Fig. 2, previous page]. Tea would travel along a pathway 1300 years old, one which I myself would follow for over seven months: *Cha Ma Dao* (Tea Horse Road) to the Chinese, *Gyalam* (wide road) to the Tibetans. The Tea Horse Road was what one old trader would later describe as "the tea corridor into the mountains." To the West it had remained a mystery, nameless and "hidden," for most of its lifetime. Sometime in China's early T'ang Dynasty (618-907 CE) caravans and tributes of tea began their journeys into Tibet to sate an addiction, soothe monarchs and smooth over perceived insults. It is claimed that tea was introduced into Tibet as part of a dowry of the T'ang's Princess Wencheng on her betrothal to the formidable Songtsen Gambo (617-649). Others point out that Tibetans were already drinking a form of tea and had previous interaction with tea-producing minorities of Southern Yunnan. We know that in the mid-seventh century tea was packed on caravans in ever increasing amounts destined for the top of the world. The tea-laden caravans would continue their journeys for over a thousand years until their petering out in the mid-1950s. Across watersheds, and over 5000-meter, perpetually snow-clad mountain passes, tea would make its way upon the backs of the humble mules. From the damp and mystical valleys of tea, entire arteries of pathways and routes ferried the green leaves to distant landscapes.

As a trade and news pipeline, the Tea Horse Road's importance cannot be overstated. Accessing some of the most remote communities in all of Asia, it was at once a trade route, migration route and strategic military route that linked and provided. Salts, medicines, silver, pelts, jewels and all manner of other goods would in time find their way along the Tea Horse Road making it what some locals called a "conductor of economies."

Dakpa, an old Tibetan friend, and I had arrived in this thick, humid, green zone to seek out the origins of not only the Tea Horse Road but also the origins of tea itself. *Camellia Sinensis Assamica*, known unofficially as the

"big leaf tea" variety and found in a wild state in both Yunnan and Assam, India, has grown relatively undisturbed in these damp southern climes since before anyone can remember. The Dai, Hani, Naxi, Han, Yi, Tibetan and Bai tribes all contributed in some way to the production, transportation, and ultimate consumption of tea. Though their serving styles might differ, they were identical in their dependence on this crop that would dictate trade and social demands for centuries. Dakpa and I had in our time contributed to rampant consumption of tea, and I could find no more fitting partner in "tea travel" than him. Both of us admitted to having a more than a slight addiction to the leaf, but this was the furthest south either of us had traveled in Yunnan. Where Dakpa's Tibetan customs brought the addition of butter and salt into tea's world, the tribes of southern Yunnan added salt, pepper, herbs, spices and even chili peppers to their own modified versions, using tea to treat fevers, wounds, blisters and as a general coolant. Here in the south tea was worshipped with a casual fervency that approached a kind of animism. It was present in all life, and its very longevity was considered an indication of the continued bond between man and this most social of green plant matter.

In this part of Yunnan tea leaves were harvested by hand, dried, fermented and shaped into bricks and cakes. Often fitted into bamboo husks and variously wrapped in bamboo leaves or tree bark to keep dry, tea's plethora of sizes and travel-savvy shapes hint at its long history as a commodity that traveled widely [Fig. 3]. Caravans moving ornately formed tea cakes to the ancient capitals of the Chinese Dynasties



Fig. 3. Puer tea wrapped in traditional fashion in bamboo leaves to ensure its secure travel.

as annual tributes were considered “untouchable” even by bandits, as the repercussions would be murderous. Tea would travel beyond borders into lands that its harvesters would never see — India, nomadic tribal lands, and the vast steppes of Mongolia. Along the Tea Horse Road’s winding length tea was wealth and a form of currency. In time it would surpass porcelains and even silks in economic value. Its unique stature in Asian culture was assured due to its general availability to all castes. Tea had originally been referred to as *tu* (bitter herb); its Mandarin

the minutest of towns, number in the dozens and ensure Dakpa and I are never short on tea distractions. To be considered a “true” *Puer* requires that the tea be the *Camellia Sinensis Assamica* variety (big leafed), that it be grown and produced in Yunnan province, and that it be sun dried. Puer is itself the prime tea-market town of southern Yunnan where caravans would assemble to load their precious cargoes. The “tea-belt towns” of Yunnan included as well Menglian, Menghai and Simao, and their produce, shaped into cakes and often adorned with inscriptions, poems or ribbons, would make up the bulk of teas destined for the Himalayan regions and the market towns along the way.

Though at present, *Shou*, artificially fermented (black) *Puer* tea, is the most widely available, the *Sheng* unfermented (green) *Puer* was the tea that traveled. Here in Yunnan’s south it is still the most consumed. Dakpa and I barely cared about the variety, as our only need and hope was that our seemingly inexhaustible tea sources and teashops indeed would never end. Our own route gradually took us northwards along barely visible vestiges of slick

cobblestones that at times disappeared under the green torrents of sub-tropical jungle growth [Fig. 5]. It was along such disappearing paths that thousands of hooves of caravans bearing tea would have moved.



Fig. 4. Tea fields near Simao in southern Yunnan stretch for kilometers.

designation, *cha*, came only later in its life. So important and exotic was tea that the Mandarin name was exported along with the product and has been preserved down to the present — in India, *chaya/chay*, in Russia, *chai*; in Turkey, *chay*; in Japan, *cha*; in Tibet, *jia*.

For two and a half weeks Dakpa and I had wandered through this “heartland of tea” in a tea stupor of sorts [Fig. 4]. We spent as much time slurping back the heady tonic of musty teas containing polyphenols, amino acids and vitamins, as we did tracing the ancient Tea Horse trails that are being slowly being eaten up by the voracious forests or replaced by roads built according to the blueprint laid down by The Tea Horse Road.

Teas of this southwestern corner of Yunnan are designated *Puer*, sold in shops that, even in



Fig. 5. The cobbled path of the ancient Tea Horse Road, which is still used by locals.

Tea's journeys deep into the Himalayan kingdoms and on to India could take up to six months in bamboo holds, shuddering through heat waves, icy blizzards and flooded valleys. During these voyages tea often began to ferment, strengthening the flavours and prematurely ageing the leaves, so the tea that made it to distant market towns was often a potent dark variety, very different from that which began the journey. It was this tea that would become famous to nomads and traders alike as *Jia Kamo* (Tibetan: strong/bitter tea).

My own intended seven month passage along the entire Tea Horse Road would take me through a dozen cultures, twice as many regional dialects and into the lives of some of the last remaining *makutos* (Mandarin: muleteers and porters) and *lados* (Tibetan: muleteers). It would gradually take me from a land of green heat into a land of endless ridges of grey stone — the Himalayas. Spiced and pepper-laced teas would give way to potent butter and salt tea: all lands that lie along the Tea Horse Road are still inextricably linked to tea.

Alone now (Dakpa later would rejoin me), I zigzagged through and over what was left of trade towns on the road north from Puer to Dali, passing the gentle crests of the Yuliang Mountains. Fields of rice, corn, tobacco and tea nestle into neat geometric patterns in the hillsides — entire agricultural economies in plain view. While the market towns built by the Yi and Lisu peoples once anchored the Tea Horse Road, now only the eldest of the elders remembered the chimes and bells of the coming caravans and wove both legend and fact into passionate tales. No discussion was complete without multiple glasses, bowls, cups or pots of tea being shared, slurped and talked about. Indeed, the Tea Horse Road was not simply a trade route but a route that educated and shared. As one observer has noted, "the traders came back with tales of people, towns, languages, and of tea's importance in even the most distant of lands."

Dali once was at the center of the formidable Nanzhao Kingdom which for a time in the ninth century extended its power north into Sichuan and controlled as well another important trade corridor that headed west into Burma and beyond. The Dali kingdom, which succeeded the Nanzhao, finally succumbed to the Mongol

armies of Qubilai Khan in the mid-13th century. The Central Asian features and headscarves worn tight which one sees today in Weishan, south of Dali, may be a legacy of those forces, in which whole divisions were Muslims. Their descendants made the area famous, for it was they who formed caravans that became noted for discipline and being "on time" with their crucial shipments.

The Wei and Yi inhabitants of Weishan became known for their roasted or smoked teas that give off powerful wafts of woody flavor and offer a relief from heat. In the Xiaguan/Dali area, the higher altitudes and longer fermentation times create stronger varieties which would never be unwelcome in the Himalayas. While much of the brick tea that ended up in the nomadic regions was a rough mélange of stems and other vegetation, the important thing was that there be flavor to wring out of the tea during cooking.

The trade routes controlled by the Nanzhou and Dali kingdoms had ancient roots, connecting Yunnan with the powerful Tibetan Tubo empires. Some of the paths led directly between Yunnan and Lhasa, crossing what is now the northern third of Myanmar. Just north of Dali, along the banks of the Yangtze near the town of Shigu, the Yunnan-to-Tibet Tea Horse Road divided into two separate routes, both heading north into Tibet and converging near the Yunnan-Tibetan border at Deqin. One path skimmed along the Yunnan-Burmese border past Judian and Weixi, and the other, further east, made its way through the famed market towns of Lijiang, Shaxi and Gyalthang (present day Zhongdian).

As I meandered further north from Dali through the Cangshan (Cang mountains) I was getting close to my adopted home of Zhongdian, also referred to recently as Shangrila. Leaving the heat of the lowlands behind, my senses and sanity fared better in the cooling winds that announced the proximity of the Great Himalayan Range. Along with the gusts came the unmistakable knowledge that I had moved into landscapes where winds, snow and the ancient Khampa (eastern Tibetan) tribes resided.

Northwest Yunnan has been both the unofficial and official gateway into and out of the Himalayas for travelers, traders and ancient armies alike. The Hengduan Mountains' slow rise introduces the easternmost extension of

the Himalayas, through which until the mid-20th century the only way to travel was by mule or on foot. As the people and land change so too did the Tea Horse Road. It was from Yunnan's northwest that caravans would embark upon their most fierce battles with the elements through punishing terrain.

In Zhongdian, joined again by Dakpa, I would put together a team of mountain-bred locals to negotiate the 1600-kilometer journey west to Lhasa. It was in this same region of northwestern Yunnan that the caravans that traveled the Tea Horse Road would "upgrade" as well, replacing mules that had made the journey from the deep south with ones acclimatized to mountain travel. This was and still is in many quarters the domain of the fearsome Khampas (eastern Tibetans; *Kham* — eastern Tibet, *pa* or *ba* — people), uniquely adapted for a life of travel and survival in some of the most daunting terrain on the globe. It was these people who, after traversing their own lands, couriered tea- and salt-laden caravans through blizzards and bandit-ridden country on to Lhasa and beyond. In Mandarin the term for a muleteer is *makuto*, but here in these lands the term in local Tibetan was *lado* (literally meaning "hands of stone"), which seemed to explain precisely the requisite qualities for anyone considering this vocation.

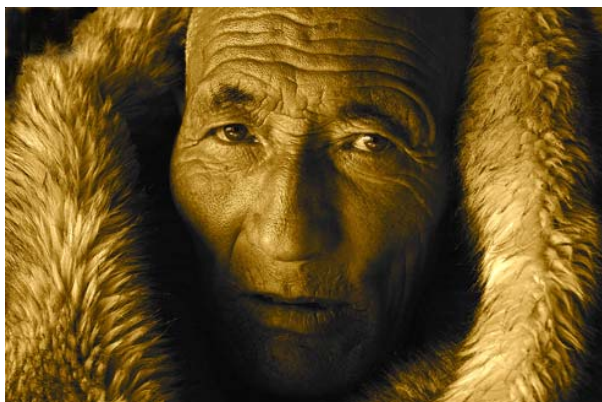


Fig. 6. An ancient Tibetan muleteer or lado ("hands of stone") sits in his furs.

Our expedition was deliberately geared to try and gain audience to a select few remaining muleteers who had survived [Fig. 6]. These

elders were still actively trading and traveling the Tea Horse Road into the mid-1950s. Unable to write, they preserved their knowledge in keeping with the rich Asian tradition of oral narratives. These fearless muleteers were often paid not in silver or money but in tea. Tea was



Fig. 7. The perilous meter-wide path in northwestern Yunnan.

a currency that knew no recession, and with tea one could easily trade for other goods. Leaders of the caravans in both spirit and fact were called *Tsompun*, and it was they who were ultimately responsible in ensuring that caravans reached their destinations intact.

My own team of six would head northwest from Zhongdian (Shangrila) past the silent magnificence of Meili Snow Mountain (Tibetan: *Kawa Karpo* – White Pillar) on the Yunnan-Tibetan border along the Mekong River, clipping the very northern border regions of Burma. Here trade routes merged with holy routes, as they wound their way through the grey ranges to sacred mountains, temples and towns.

In this area now known as Deqin, and known to the old Tibetans as *Jo*, hand carved tea bowls called *porre* would be packed up to join tea, salt, pelts and other trinkets for trade further west, as they were rare gifts in mountains where few luxuries were to be found. Towns still bearing the names of the trading times, Lado (muleteer) and Gyalam (wide road) sit little changed from centuries ago along the wedge-shaped ancient road. The salt wells of Tsakhalo function to this day in a dusty valley lined with trails that make their way to distant villages.

Passing caravans would stop here to pick up sacks of salt that would join their tea brethren to continue north and west into markets.

For a month, combatting frostbite, snow blindness and hunger, our team would plunge further northwest along remnants of tracks that at times seemed to vanish on the mountain slopes. Forbidding and grand swaths of rock gave way to more rock; that in turn gave way to strangely fertile valleys far below our mule team, as it negotiated paths which often measured a meter or less wide [Fig. 7, previous page]. In earlier times — and the threat seemed far from remote today — landslides, blizzards and disorientation had wiped out entire caravans, and bandits lurked in strategic points along the route.

Of vital importance both then and now was the presence and generosity of *netsangs* (host families) along the way [Figs. 8, 9]. Either within villages or within a single nomadic family, they provided supplies, grazing land and food to caravans in return for goods such as tea, salt or other hard-to-access goods. Though much had been forgotten, these families had inherited from their elders knowledge of the necessity to provide for caravans. It was often the generosity of these very caravans that enabled an isolated community to augment its own meager wealth. We depended on the local families for much of our food, which could be characterized as “the sum of all parts yak,” the milk, butter and dried meat all enabling us to



Fig. 8 (top). A netsang (Tibetan: “host”) hosts our team for an inevitable tea break near Dotok at an altitude of 4600 m in the Nyanqen Tanglha Mountains.

Fig. 9 (bottom). Our hosts pack our gear before sending us off.

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function day after day at the energy-sapping altitudes.

Nonetheless, the physical demands of traipsing day in and day out above 4000 meters eventually brought down Dakpa with dehydration. To continue in the unyielding mountains was too risky, and he wisely elected to stop in one town, rest, and then turn back. Our core team of six was reduced to four.

The most brutal travel along the entire route now unfolded against the backdrop of the Great Salween Divide [Fig. 10]. It separates the highest major river flows on the globe, the Yarlung Tsangpo (which becomes the Brahmaputra), and the glacier-fed Salween which flows from the Qinghai Mountains to the north into the Bay of Bengal. The Nup, Shar, and Tro passes, never predictable, were often snow covered year round. The Salween Divide



Fig. 10. The avalanche-prone peaks near the entrance to the Nyanqen Tanglha Mountains in the Salween Divide.



Fig. 11. Crossing a mountain stream.

Fig. 12. Setting up camp at a site used by nomads near the settlement of Tzachuka.



also marked the boundary between the lands of the Khampa Drokpa (Eastern Tibetan nomads) and the reclusive Abohors tribes, smaller in stature and less forceful (or willing) in dealings with the outside world — a people content to remain hidden. In their lands, banditry had been rife in the heyday of the trade, and the most famous muleteers often earned their reputations and fealty based upon their skills not just as conductors but also as feared guardians of their goods.

Here in eastern Tibet our team once again had a choice of alternate routes, as the Tea Horse Road divided into three branches, northern, southern, and the one we chose in the middle. Ours was the one least affected by outsiders, the sole route unobstructed by roadways and little frequented by travelers. Permanently snow-capped peaks, gorges carved by swollen rivers, and scars of massive landslides created an isolated splendor of landscapes.

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Traveling within the blue shadows of the Nyanqen Tanglha Mountains our team of four and two horsemen followed snaking rivers [Fig. 11]. Along them towns consisting of no more than a half dozen homes or nomadic dwellings were the only evidence of a human presence beyond the odd domesticated yak or cow grazing on impossible cliffs.

In the days of heavy caravan travel, distances were broken up into segments determined by landmarks or locations suitable for camps, with little interest in "how many kilometers" were traveled [Fig. 12]. Should two caravans meet upon a narrow strip of path, smaller caravans would defer to the larger, and in such a manner skirmishes were kept to a minimum. Bells, chimes and charms adorned the lead mules warning of their coming. The caravans of eastern Tibetan Khampas often numbered hundreds of mules traveling in kilometers-long processions to the main market centers, unloading, and trading for new products to bring back to sell for a profit [Figs. 13, 14 (following page)].

For 1300 years little changed. The traders and migrating communities along the trail brought to isolated communities knowledge of far off cultures and languages and access to goods that seemed barely real. Corals from the Bay of Bengal and turquoise from the Middle East made their way along pathways that fed into the Tea Horse Road from further west. During our expedition, many nomads showed off colorful earrings that could not have come from any other source but the Tea Horse Road merchants.

Fig. 13. Our mule caravan ascending the Sho La, the first of the major passes on the way to Lhasa. Many mules are muzzled to prevent them from eating vegetation that contains hallucinogenic properties.



Fig. 14. Ascending through freshly fallen snow on a day that began in humid forests and continued to a pass in blizzard conditions at close to 5000 m.

As we journeyed through immense landscapes, where nothing was heard but the ever-present wind, days and weeks disappeared [Fig. 15]. Often our team was without mules, forcing us to consolidate equipment and supplies and leaving no alternative to carrying 30 kg rucksacks upon our backs. Locals, as they have for all time, refused in many cases to risk their animals in deep snow, and in other areas all four legged help was high in the mountains with entire communities that were foraging for the caterpillar fungus (*yartsa gunbu*). Valued as a medicine in Asia, where, transmitted through intermediaries, it might sell in Chinese shops for huge sums, the fungus could be collected only during a precious two-month period in spring. Nothing was as economically valued (not even tea).

Dusty beige ruins of small towns marked the black-ridged landscapes; villages that had existed in a "provider" role for the Tea Horse Road. As trade along the ancient corridor ebbed, so too did the need for the supplies, and with time the last humans moved on to larger towns or eased back into a life of nomadic subsistence.

In preparations for an ascent of one last major pass before Lhasa (Tro La – Crying Pillar Pass, 4916 m), we bedded down in the long forgotten



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nomadic ruins of Gole using yak dung for fuel. Strewn around the old encampment, poking out of the ground in odd shaped lumps, were the discarded horseshoes of previous travelers, giving an impression that the ancient past wasn't so ancient. The sound of distant humming engines filled the air as a rag-tag group of nomads on motorbikes stopped in to demand we pay for the dung that was fueling our fire. In these wind-savaged lands near 5000 meters, all supplies – whether food, medicine or even yak dung – were rare and critical. They moved on after we explained our purpose and made an offering of tea. It was in such a manner that "borders" were enforced in these desolate lands, where few lines or markings denoted property. A peak or stream might serve as the only indication of property rights which even now are observed.



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The various trade routes, snaking in from all directions, met at Lhasa (Tibetan: Holy Land). The unquestioned spiritual center for Tibetans, it was also the great trade center. The northern routes connected it with centers of nomadic power. A natural extension of the Tea Horse Road continued south into India, through the wool strongholds of Loka, pressing

Fig. 15. Nomad tents and yaks dwarfed by the immense landscape in eastern Tibet.

through the market hub of Gyanze, southwest to the border town of Yadong on the Indian border, and on to the trading towns of Kalimpong and Gangtok in West Bengal and Sikkim respectively. On the way into Lhasa, many caravans would stop at monasteries, bringing with them donations and even novice monks arriving to study. Market districts like old Bharkor would have been lined with goods from dozens of lands, and it was here that the caravans of Tea Horse Road would ultimately arrive. Horse markets, often located on the outskirts of town, bubbled over with activity. During the Song Dynasty (960-1127) rugged little warhorses from Naqu become the prime export heading east along a branch of the Tea Horse Road back into Sichuan. The tea and equine exchange reached a massive scale, increasingly regulated by government and controlled by a few important clans of merchants. While stalls selling bricks and woven bamboo containers of tea still can be found in Lhasa, confirming tea's ability to endure, horses are rarely found anywhere today but in distant towns.

It had taken the four remaining members of our team almost sixty days to reach Lhasa from Zhongdian, about the same time it took the old caravans. Unlike them though, we did not face a quick turn-around to retrace our steps after a few days of manic trading. With skin peeling and our bodies worn down by the elements into thin husks, we now could indulge in yet another type of tea in desperate quantities, this one almost violently sweet. The *Jia Kamo* (bitter tea) had given way to *Jia Ngamo* (sweet tea), and butter infusion had given way to a sugar infusion.

While tea has survived intact and essential, activities along the Tea Horse Road have long been given over to motor vehicles that now surge through the mountains in a fraction of the time that it took the mule caravans. Many called the Tea Horse Road, the "Eternal Road," never believing that a time would come when the bustle of trade and travel would end. One elder tradesman called the Tea Horse Road "the great chain through the mountains," a chain which had linked peoples, products and cultures for over a thousand years and whose importance lives on.

About the author

Having lived for most of the past decade in Asia, **Jeff Fuchs** has devoted himself to documenting indigenous cultures, oral histories and fast disappearing Asian traditions. His photos and stories have appeared in many newspapers and magazines, and his photos have been exhibited on three continents. To view more of his elegant photography, visit <www.jefffuchs.com>. His work has inspired programs on Chinese and Canadian television. His recently released book, *The Ancient Tea Horse Road* (Penguin-Viking Publishers, 2008), details his eight-month groundbreaking journey chronicling one of the world's great trade routes. Fuchs is the first westerner to have completed both strands of the route stretching almost five thousand kilometers through the Himalayas and a dozen cultures. He divides time between his adopted home in the eastern Himalayas and Canada and may be contacted at <vandor81@hotmail.com>.