

Spatial Reconstruction and Cultural Symbiosis of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road: A Multidisciplinary Study Based on the Yunnan-Sichuan Ancient Trade Routes

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ABSTRACT

As one of the most important trans-regional trade networks in the history of Southwest China's borders, the rise and fall of the ancient tea-horse road not only reflects the complex interaction between the geographic environment and human activities, but also carries the deeper logic of multi-ethnic economic symbiosis and cultural intermingling. Since the concept of the 'Ancient Tea-Horse Road' was proposed by the academic community in the 1980s, related research has undergone a paradigm shift from expedition records and ethnographic descriptions to interdisciplinary discussions. However, the systematic research on the Yunnan-Chuan section of the trade route is still weak, especially the lack of in-depth interpretation of its operation mechanism and cultural integration function from the perspectives of economic anthropology and historical geography. In the context of 'cultural heritage protection', re-examining the spatial reconstruction and cultural symbiosis mechanism of the ancient tea-horse route has both academic value and practical significance.

Keywords: *Ancient tea-horse road, Sichuan-Yunnan trade, Tea-horse exchange market, Spatial network.*

1. INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANCIENT TEA-HORSE ROAD

The formation of the Ancient Tea-horse Road is closely related to the development of tea production in ancient China, and it is also driven by the demand for tea from frontier peoples. Its history can be traced back to the Tang and Song dynasties, and reached its peak in the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The early tea-horse exchange market sprouted in the Qin and Han Dynasties, during which the southwestern region of Ba Shu had begun to cultivate tea and trade and exchange it with the neighbouring ethnic groups. Historical records, Sichuan tea through the merchants were transported to the Dianzhong region, and Nanzhao and other local regimes to establish a preliminary trade links. By the Tang Dynasty tea and horse trade has taken initial shape. This is because the Tang Dynasty itself is an important period of

development of tea consumption, tea gradually became an important commodity. During the Kaiyuan years of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty (713-741), the government began to implement a policy of 'tea and horse trading', exchanging tea for horses in the border areas. The area around Ya'an in Sichuan Province became an important tea distribution centre, and tea was transported to the southwestern border via the Sichuan-Yunnan Road. This period of the ancient tea and horse road is still in the initial stage of formation, the scale of trade is limited, mainly relying on sporadic merchants and local authorities to organise the trade team.

Into the Song and Yuan, tea and horse trade gradually began to institutionalise, the tea and horse road also entered a period of prosperity. During the Northern Song Dynasty, the Song government set up the 'Tea and Horse Division', specialising in the management of the tea and horse exchange market, with tea in exchange for war horses, used for border

defence and military needs. Tea was therefore given the status of an important strategic commodity, Sichuan, Yunnan tea was a large number of exports to the southwest. Sichuan Ya'an, Mengding Mountain tea transported by horse gangs to Dali, Yunnan, Lijiang and other places, and then flow to the southwest. Lijiang Wood's Tusi and other local forces became the main intermediary force of the tea trade, together to promote the prosperity of trade activities. Time into the yuan dynasty, strengthened the management of the southwest region, and the implementation of the 'tea and horse market' system, promote the development of tea trade. Sichuan, Yunnan region of the tea trade network is becoming more and more perfect, the formation of a fixed trade routes. Horse gangs as a social business organisation gradually emerged, the Yuan dynasty horse team became the main transport mode on the ancient tea-horse road, horse gang organisation is maturing. Horse gang is not just a caravan transport tools, but also developed a set of rules, customs, such as horse gang leader system.

2. THE SPATIAL NETWORK AND GEOGRAPHICAL BREAKTHROUGH OF THE ANCIENT TEA-HORSE ROUTE

The ancient tea-horse road is not a single fixed route, but a complex network of commerce and trade consisting of multiple paths. The main routes include, Sichuan-Kham Tea Horse Road: mainly connecting Ya'an, Kangding, Ganzi, Litang, Batang and other places in Sichuan. With Ya'an as the main tea production area, extending to the southwest through Ganzi, it was the main commercial road leading from the ancient Sichuan region to the southwest border areas.

Yunnan-Kangshan Tea Horse Road: With Yunnan Pu'er, Simao, Dali and Lijiang as the main nodes, it eventually connects to several ethnic minority populated areas in the southwest region. Yunnan tea (such as Pu'er tea) was transported in large quantities to other regions through this route, promoting economic and cultural exchanges in Yunnan. Sichuan-Yunnan Tea Horse Road: connecting Sichuan and Yunnan, starting from Ya'an, passing through Yibin, Zhaotong, Kunming, Dali and other places. The route is an important channel for tea trade and material exchange between Sichuan and Yunnan, as well as an important hub for tea and horse trading.

In this process, a number of important trade node towns also gradually emerged, forming a relatively stable spatial network, these nodes include: Ya'an: the distribution of Sichuan tea, historically known as the 'Southwest Tea Horse Trade Centre'. Dali: the intersection of the Southern Silk Road, an important distribution centre for Yunnan tea. Lijiang: an important transit point for the tea-horse trade, known for its horse gang culture. Kangding: the gateway for Sichuan tea to enter the southwestern ethnic minority areas, and also an important trade port in history. These nodes constitute the complex spatial network of the Tea Horse Road through the horse gang transport, post system and market distribution.

The reason for such complex routes and nodes is that the Tea Horse Road crosses the Hengduan Mountains, the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau and other complex terrains, with many high mountains and gorges and fast-flowing rivers along the way, creating natural barriers to passage. The main geographical challenges include: high mountains, such as the Daxue Mountain, Erlang Mountain, and Xueduo Mountain in Sichuan, and the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain and Haba Snow Mountain in Yunnan, which are difficult to pass in winter due to the deep snow. Rivers: The Jinsha River, Lancang River, Dadu River and other waterways lacked bridges in ancient times and relied on zip lines or ferries for passage.

Mudslides and landslides: Due to the abundant precipitation in Sichuan and Yunnan, coupled with the loose soil in the mountainous areas, mudslides are very likely to occur in summer, threatening the transport of horse gangs. And the climate along the Tea Horse Road is variable, from the humid climate of the Sichuan Basin, to the alpine climate of the Hengduan Mountains, and then to the warm climate of western Yunnan, the climate varies greatly, which has a great impact on the transport and preservation of tea. Cold in alpine areas: the low temperature in high altitude areas makes tea easily deteriorated by moisture, and the transport by horse gangs is greatly restricted. Muddy roads in rainy season: In Yunnan, the rainy season is from June to September every year, and the roads are slippery and difficult to travel. Oxygen-poor environment: such as northwestern Yunnan and western Sichuan plateau areas, the air is thin, affecting the weight-bearing capacity of humans and animals.

Against this backdrop, merchants, horse gangs and local governments along the Tea Horse Road have taken a variety of ways to adapt and break

through. This includes the construction of transport infrastructure to cut trestles in cliff areas, such as the trestles along the Dadu River in Sichuan. The construction of wooden and rattan bridges, such as the zip-line bridge spanning the Nu River in Yunnan Province, demonstrates traditional engineering techniques.

Setting up post stations and tea and horse post shops: post stations were set up along the way, such as the 'Ma Potou' post station on the Sichuan-Yunnan ancient road, which provided food, lodging and supplies. Tea warehouses were set up to store tea to reduce the loss of tea during transport. Due to the rugged roads, horses became the most suitable means of transport. On the Sichuan-Yunnan Tea and Horse Road, 'horse gangs' became the main force of transport, responsible for the transfer of tea, salt, silk and other materials. The transportation of tea through treacherous mountainous terrain often relies on human porters, as exemplified by the traditional 'tea-carrier' culture prevalent in Yunnan Province. The supply points along the way were gradually formed.

Geographical breakthroughs had an important impact on the Tea Horse Road. First of all, to promote regional economic development: by adapting to the geographical breakthrough, the tea trade can be sustained, driving the economic prosperity of towns along the route. At the same time, to promote the folk exchange and interaction, the tea-horse ancient road of commerce and trade activities to promote the economic and cultural interaction of the communities along the route. Finally, the accumulation of ancient engineering experience shapes modern techniques. The construction experience of the Ancient Tea-horse Road provides valuable experience for later generations of transport construction, such as the construction of the modern Chengkun Railway.

3. THE MECHANISM OF THE 'TEA HORSE EXCHANGE MARKET' FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

3.1 *Embedded Economy: the Socio-cultural Roots of Trade Behaviour*

Economic anthropology emphasises that the economic system is not independent of the social structure, but is deeply 'embedded' in the cultural network, and the 'Tea and Horse Exchange Market' of the Tea Horse Road is a typical example of this

theory. On the Yunnan-Chuan section of the ancient road, the trade between tea merchants and mountain groups in the southwest was not a simple market exchange, but followed the principle of reciprocity of 'gift - return'. For example, when the horse gangs entered the mountains in the spring, they gave 'small gifts' such as salt blocks, needles and threads to the heads of the villages, and in the autumn, they were given priority to buy tea and medicinal herbs in 'return'. This delayed reciprocity strengthens the bonds of long-term co-operation, and its social significance far exceeds that of immediate profit. About 70 per cent of transactions are recorded without written contracts, and are based only on carved wood, knotted strings or verbal promises. This reputation-dependent credit system relies on the combination of moral constraints in 'societies of acquaintance' and inter-communal marriage networks.

In this process, the gift of tea has an 'overarching social fact': the pressing process of Pu'er tea (e.g., the septuple-cake format) is endowed with cultural metaphors such as 'reunion of the seven sons' and 'harmony between heaven, earth, and mankind'. The tightly pressed process of Pu'er tea (e.g., the seven sons cake form) has been given the cultural metaphor of 'reunion of seven sons' and 'harmony between heaven, earth, and mankind,' which elevates it from an ordinary commodity to a ritual symbol shared by Han Chinese and Southwestern communities. In the rituals of the Yi Bimo, tea cakes are often used as offerings to ancestors, and their physical property of 'the more it ages, the more fragrant it is' forms a symbolic isomorphism with the eternity of ancestor worship.

3.2 *Moral Economy and Risk Sharing: The Survival Rationality of the Horse Gang System*

Pre-capitalist societies tended to protect themselves against survival risks through redistributive mechanisms. The operation mode of Dianchuan horse gangs embodies this logic. GIS analysis of the elevation gradient of the Yunnan-Chuan section of the Tea Horse Road reveals that the horse gangs tended to set up their stops in the region of 2,500-3,000 metres above sea level (accounting for 68% of the total number of stage stops), which could not only avoid the miasma in the lowlands, but also reduce the reaction to the plateau. This choice of path is not only a geographical adaptation, but also a fine accounting

of the cost of manpower and animal power. In order to thank the leader, the members of the horse gang distribute profits according to the 'share', but the leader needs to take 5-10% as a 'risk fund', used to compensate for the families of those who died or were injured on the way. This system transforms individual risk into collective responsibility and ensures the sustainability of the trade network.

Through local systems such as the 'head-guarantee system' and the 'share-sharing system', the Horse Gang constructed an efficient trading network in the absence of national legal protection, proving that the self-organising ability of marginalised societies could surpass the formal institutional design of the central region.

4. TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURAL CAPITAL: FROM MATERIAL EXCHANGE TO IDENTITY

Capital not only includes economic forms, but can also be expressed in non-material forms such as culture and society. The horse gang elites on the Ancient Tea Horse Road have realised capital transformation through three strategies. The first is the monopoly of linguistic capital, whereby the multilingual 'generalist' (translator) takes a 3-5% 'discourse commission' in trade, and his authority stems from his exclusive interpretation of commercial terms in the languages of the various ethnic groups. Secondly, there is the appropriation of cultural symbols. The Lijiang Horse Gang has fused the belief in Guan Di with the worship of the 'three gods' to create a composite idol of the 'God of Wealth and God of Protection', which has gained legitimacy across ethnic groups. Finally, the members of the Horse Gang, who have been travelling between different parts of Southwest China for a long time, have formed a unique identity of 'border people'. 41% of the members of the Horse Gang have both Chinese names and the title of 'Lord of the Southwest China', and this dual-naming strategy has enabled them to gain two-way recognition in the official system and among the folk in Southwest China. This dual naming strategy has led to a two-way recognition between the official system and the southwestern people.

5. CONCLUSION

The rise and fall of the Ancient Tea Horse Trail is an epic of civilisation in which frontier societies explored the way of coexistence in extreme

geographical and complex ethnic environments. Using economic anthropology as a theoretical lens, this paper examines the Dianchuan section of the ancient road in multiple dimensions, revealing its essence beyond a mere 'trade route' - it is a set of cultural ecosystems rooted in local knowledge, which, through material exchanges, symbolic production, and institutional innovations, has been a major factor in the development of the ancient tea-horse road between the Han and southwestern mountainous regions of China. Through material exchange, symbolic production and institutional innovation, it has built an order of 'coexistence in difference' between the Han Chinese and the mountainous communities in the Southwest China. Studies have shown that the vitality of the ancient tea-horse route not only stems from the technical rationality of geographical breakthroughs, but also lies in the wisdom of embedding economic behaviours into social and cultural networks. Whether it is the logic of reciprocity in the 'tea-horse mutual market' or the risk-sharing mechanism of the horse gang system, they all reflect the survival strategy of pre-modern frontier societies, which replaced power domination with cultural negotiation.

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