

# Investigation and Analysis of the Development of Tea-Horse Trade between the Hans and Tibetans During the Period of Early Tang and Late Qing Dynasties

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**Abstract:** *Between the early Tang and late Qing dynasties, the central governments of feudal dynasties of China had conducted an overall central control over the tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans. The tea-horse trade played an active role in the exchanges and development of the politics, economics and cultures between the Hans and Tibetans, in which the tea-horse ancient road has still devoted its lingering force up to now to the economic life of people of all ethnic groups along the way. At the same time, the tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans has also laid a realistic foundation for the formation and national fusion of the multinational country of China, and for the building the concept of community of shared future of the Chinese nation.*

**Keywords:** *tea-horse trade; economic exchanges between the Hans and Tibetans; tea-horse ancient road*

## 1. Origin of the Tea-Horse Trade between the Hans and Tibetans

The Tibetan nationality of our country is mainly distributed in the Tibet Autonomous Region, Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province, Yushu, Hainan, Huangnan, Haibei and Guoluo Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures and Haixi Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu Province and Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province, etc. Tibetans inhabit the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau with an average altitude of more than 3,500 meters, and an average temperature of below 0 °C in many areas, 10 °C-18 °C lower than that in the east areas of the same latitude. In general, the Tibetan regions are featured by the relatively intense ultraviolet light, the large difference in temperature between day and night, the barren land, and the poor natural conditions, which bring great restriction to their agricultural production. The economic structure of the ancient Tibetan areas mainly relies on the animal husbandry. Therefore, the Tibetan diet is mostly beef and mutton, zanba and dairy products, which have a lot of fat and no vegetable, not conducive to digestion, so the dietary structure of the ancient Tibetans was primarily beef and mutton, and milk full of fat but short of microelement such as vitamins. In this regard, the effect of tea appears very significant. Modern science proves that tea contains many ingredients beneficial to human physiology. Tea polyphenol can break down fat and help digestion; caffeine can excite nerves, allay tiredness and calm emotions; vitamin can make up for the subvitaminosis that people who live in the plateau section easily suffer from due to the extreme shortage of vegetables and fruits. Moreover, tea can also lose weight, reduce serum triglyceride, fasting blood-glucose and blood uric acid, and relax the bowels. <sup>[1]</sup>Therefore, a moderate tea drinking not only keeps the balance of the normal water required by human physiology, but helps take in the biochemical substances in tea leaves, and digest, which will exert specific functions in regulating the physiological metabolism function of human bodies and preventing anoxia and hypotension. Therefore, a proverb is popular among the Tibetan people saying that “A day without tea makes one sluggish, and three days without tea make one sick” and “It is better to be starved of salt for one day, than to be starved of tea for one day” <sup>[2]</sup>.

Owing to the restrained physic-geographical environment, the Tibetan areas were unable to produce tea independently in history. However, tea was also their daily necessities and was in great demand. Meanwhile, in the Tang and Song dynasties, the central governments naturally were in great need for

army horses in Tibet to stabilize their national defenses and strengthen their military constructions. Therefore, under the historical conditions that both sides took what their needs, the tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans began from the Tang Dynasty, thrived in the Song Dynasty, flourished in the Ming Dynasty, declined in the late Qing Dynasty, and later was replaced by the frontier tea trade. The tea-horse trade crossed over thousand years, which rose and declined sometimes, but was never interrupted.

## **2. Policies of Central Governments on the Tea-Horse Trade from the Tang Dynasty to the Late Qing Dynasty**

In order to consolidate the rule over the northwest region, the ancient feudal dynasties of China implemented the Jimi policy (“Jimi” means the policy of winning people’s support to prevent them from being disloyal. The “Jimi rule” was adopted for frontier’s minorities by the rulers of all dynasties between the early Tang and late Qing dynasties) for the nomad in the northwest region by taking advantage of the monopoly right to the tea economy, which was a ruling policy for border areas integrating tea law, horse policy and frontier’s policy<sup>[3]</sup>. However, it is rare that the tea-horse trade activities promoted by the influence of the policy of “Harnessing the Borders with Tea” plays a great and far-reaching influence on the politics, economy and culture of that time in Chinese history.

### **2.1 Tea-horse trade in the Tang Dynasty**

In the Tang Dynasty, the tea production of our country had achieved great development. In the fifteenth year of Zhenguan (AD 641) and the fourth year of Jinglong (AD 710), the two princesses of the Tang Dynasty, Princess Wencheng and Princess Jincheng, were married to two Tibetan kings, Srongtsen Gampo and Kridê Zukzain, respectively. They brought the advanced economy, science and culture of the mainland to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Based on the Imperial matrimony, the mainland and the Tibetan region began their frequent economic exchanges. The commodity exchanges of selling horses and purchasing tea also appeared in the process of the economic exchanges of the Tibetan people in the Tibetan region with the Han people, which set a new precedent for the tea-horse trade. According to *The Record of What Mr. Feng Sees and Hears*, when the Huihu people paid tribute to Tang, they drove the famous horses and returned with tea<sup>[4]</sup>. However, restricted by the economic development at that time, the practice of selling horses and buying tea was simply one of various commodity exchanges conducted by tributary governors by making use of their special political status, and did not exert an important role in the economic exchanges between the Hans and Tibetans. The tea-horse trade was still in its infancy, and had not formed a special system.

### **2.2 Tea-horse trade in the Song Dynasty**

In the Song Dynasty, tea drinking was popular among both the noble and the ordinary, which even extended to the point where “One cannot live without tea a single day”<sup>[5]</sup>. The tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans made a lot of progress, and officially developed into an important national economic policy to be more institutionalized. It formed under the following conditions. First, the Tibetan region was in greater demand for tea objectively. Second, the tea production in the Han region at this time improved greatly. The total tea production increased twice or three times that of the Tang Dynasty, which laid a reliable material foundation for the smooth implementation of the tea-horse trade. Third, because the Song Dynasty, founded in the Central Plains, fought with Liao (BC907-BC1125) and Western Xia (BC1038-BC1227) in successive years, and needed a large number of war horses to replenish their national defense, they attached great importance to horse policies. Although the Song Dynasty set up a wide variety of horse trade farms in Hedong, Shaanxi and other places in early years, Qidan (BC907-BC1125) and Western Xia as the places of horse production could not easily import their war horses to the Song Dynasty out of defending their own benefits. The Song Dynasty had to import war horses from the minorities in the Tibetan region to guarantee their source of war horses, which provided conditions for the tea-horse trade. Finally, the Song Dynasty encountered economic hardship, and the price of horses was expensive, so it could not afford to buy horses with its silk or copper cashes. Therefore, it was the best choice for the central finance of the Song Dynasty to exchange horses with tea.

In the Song Dynasty, the tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans, which was monopolized and directly managed by the feudal official, had a Tea Trade and Tax Department on the Chengdufu Road and a Horse Trade Department in Tsinchow, Shaanxi to act as its organizations initially.

Afterwards, the two departments were merged and renamed as the Official-run Tea for Horse of Dudatiju. According to literature, since the Song Dynasty promoted the tea-horse trade among the minorities in the Xiqin region and Tibetan region, it had transported 40,000 packs of tea (One pack is equal to 100 jin of tea) to the Xihe region from Sichuan each year. The tea produced in Sichuan could be only used to purchase other military materials after guaranteeing the need for exchanging horses. In order to solicit the Tibetan and other nationalities to exchange its horses, the Song Government offered a variety of benefits and convenience for fan-tribes selling horses, which regulated that the price of the tea for exchanging horses should be lower than that of the tea used for common sales, and the price of horses was higher than that of tea. All fan-tribes enjoyed extremely generous economic benefits in the tea-horse trade with the Song Dynasty. This policy of “reducing the price to buy more horses” played the role that “horses always came in large numbers”.

The Song Government took all sorts of measures to ensure its monopoly on the tea-horse trade, whose ultimate purpose was to ensure the needs of the the Song Dynasty for war horses in the political and military fields. Its economic interests were subject to its political and military interests. The system of the tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans emerged in the Song Dynasty had a positive effect on solving the war horse source of the Song Dynasty, maintaining the unity of the nationalities between the Hans and Tibetans, and promoting the economic exchanges, and the social and economic development of the Han and Tibetan nationalities, which served as an important tie of the friendship and unity between the Han and Tibetan people.

### ***2.3 Tea-horse trade in the Yuan Dynasty***

The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the Mongolia grassland and the Central Plains were all incorporated into the territory of the Yuan Dynasty after it unified China. The Mongol army horses were self-sufficient with abundant horse sources, and moreover, the Yuan Dynasty administered the minorities in the border areas in a more strict manner than ever before, hence the Jimi policy lost its significance. However, the Yuan Dynasty still appreciated its sales of tea to the Tibetan region, which once set up the “Tibetan Tea Monopoly Managing Department” to uniformly purchase tea, and expressly stipulated that “the crime of selling tea privately was the identical with that of selling salt”. Due to the too high official price, the policy was hard to sustain. The Yuan Government had to abandon the business and allow merchants to buy and sell by themselves, and paid taxes by itself. The tea-horse trade was able to continue through folk channels.

### ***2.4 Tea-horse trade in the Ming Dynasty***

After the Ming dynasty unified China, the remaining forces of the Yuan Dynasty had been entrenched in Mobei, and the whole country in the battlefield environment had been in great demand for war horses. Therefore, “the country took horse policies seriously and strictly enforced the tea law”, specified that “tea and horse were essential political affairs of the nation”, and meanwhile, “united the Tibetan people to compete with the invaders”, thus forming a more complete tea law and an enormous bureaucracy than those of the Song Dynasty. The difference between Ming dynasty and Song Dynasty also lied in that the relationship between the Tibetan region and the central dynasty had changed from a loose owner-member relationship to a direct subordination. Moreover, the change in political relations would inevitably affect that in economic relations, and the trade contacts between inland and border areas experienced fundamental change in their policy, system and mode. In the Ming Dynasty, the patterns of the tea-horse trade contained the Chaifa horse system, tributary trade, private tea trade and so on.

Although the Chaifa horse system retained the economic relationship of exchanging horses with tea, the relationship had already been not that of equal and free commodity exchange. Politically, it was the “Chaifa” of the emperor to his subjects, and was mandatory. Economically, it was used by the state to mobilize subjects’ horses, and to determine the requisition quantity and repayment price, with the property of replacing taxes with horses. The tea-horse trade in the Chaifa horse system reflected both the economic intercourse between the central government and the Tibetan region, and the ruling relationship between the central government and the Tibetan region. It marked the central government’s immediate and stabilized rule over the Tibetan region, and embodied the right to rule of the central dynasty.

The tributary trade aimed to broadly unite the high rank of Tibetan monks and laymen to reinforce the nation’s rule over the Tibetan region. Tea became the main article for the Ming Dynasty to hamper

and cultivate the leaders of the monks and laymen in the Tibetan region, and pay tribute to them. Compared with the Tang and Song dynasties, the Ming Dynasty had more advanced tea-horse trade of contributing horses and awarding tea. Acquiring tea was one of the crucial goals of the tributary of the leaders of the monks and laymen in the Tibetan region in the Ming Dynasty. The existing Tibetan documents still recorded that "Paying tribute today is only to ask for tea." The Tibetan envoy who presented tribute not only acquired a good deal of tea in this way, but privately purchased tea along the way when returning to the Tibetan region, and openly applied for buying tea and awarding tea to return to the Tibetan region by making use of the special identity of their envoy. "On the way, tea was mainly transported by boat and vehicles and manpower over years in an endless stream"<sup>[6]</sup>, from which it could be seen that how prosperous the import of tea to Tibet was at that time.

In terms of the private tea trade, as the central dynasty and the Tibetan region strengthened their political and economic exchanges with each other, the private tea-horse trade was increasingly thriving. During the years of Jiajing (AD1522-AD1566), the borderland trade and the hinterland trade were formed in Li, Ya and Songpan areas, that is, the sales area system of "two borderlands and one hinterland". The borderland trade was launched in the Tibetan region, and the hinterland trade in the mainland. Tea merchants came to Li and Ya to sell tea, and engaged in diversified transactions with tea and horses as the dominants. The Tibetan merchants from Duogan and Wusizang also arrived at Li, Ya and Diaomen City to exchange tea and cloth with various local products, generating a prosperous trade market. <sup>[7]</sup>The tea-horse trade run by the state, the tea-horse trade of contributing horses and awarding tea, and the private tea-horse trade were complementary to one another, opening the golden age of the tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans in the Ming Dynasty.

### ***2.5 Tea-horse trade in the Qing Dynasty***

In the early Qing Dynasty, the regime was still unstable, so it carried on the tea-horse trade of the Ming Dynasty. In the Kangxi and Yongzheng periods, the Qing Dynasty had sufficient sources of horses. In the meantime, with the economic development in the border areas, the Tibetan people needed more kinds of inland commodities, and the purely tea-horse trade failed to satisfy their requirements. The tea-horse trade system declared to step down from the stage of history, and was replaced by the frontier tea trade system that shared the same meaning with the tea-horse trade, but that had a wider trade area and a greatly changed basic form. The frontier tea trade system concentrated on changing official management into commercial management. The mainland still adopted tea as its main trading commodity. In addition, there was a sharp increase in the proportion of other means of life and production entering the market that was related to the life of the Tibetan people. The commodities for exchange were no longer confined to horses, but mainly local products such as leather, gold, medicine and so on. The private tea trade grew active and free. However, in the late Qing Dynasty, as the British "invaded Tibet with tea" to colonize Tibet, a large amount of Indian tea was dumped in Tibet, and the southern route tea took a serious hit, whose output and sales volume fell dramatically.

The flourishing tea-horse trade propelled the economic progress of the minority areas along the line, and also realized the governance of border areas with tea. It was a special political product in Chinese history, which fulfilled the control and rule of the Central Plains dynasty over the minorities in border areas<sup>[8]</sup>. The tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans acted as an active role in the establishment and consolidation of the multinational country of our country and made important contributions to it, and provided a profound historical foundation for constructing the concept of community of shared future of the Chinese nation.

### **3. Transportation of tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans — the tea-horse ancient road**

During the early Tang to late Qing dynasties, the transportation had also developed in the process of economic intercourse, together with the tea-horse trade. In history, the contacts of economic and trade between the Hans and Tibetans were primarily the exchanges of tea and horses, hence the main route that the trade passed was also known as the tea-horse ancient road. The tea-horse ancient road was a huge interconnected road network with Sichuan-Tibet road, Yunnan-Tibet road and Qinghai-Tibetan road as its three main lines while numerous branches and auxiliary lines supplementary.

### **3.1 Qinghai-Tibetan road**

The Qinghai-Tibetan road, also called the Tang-Tibet ancient road, was a tea-horse trade in the Tang and Song dynasties. Appearing in the Tang Dynasty, it was the earliest one of three ancient roads to gain development. In the early period, the Qinghai-Tibetan road was that of political intercourse, and turned into the main channel of the tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans in the later period. It started from Chang'an in the east, passed Duzhou (Ledu County, Qinghai), Ducheng (Xining), Moliyi (Gonghe County, Qinghai), Naluyi, Xianghai, and got to Zhonglongyi. It crossed the Teng Bridge over the Maoni River (Tongtian River), and Tanggula Mountains in the west, and arrived in Lhasa via Naqu, with the length of about 3,120 km. <sup>[9]</sup> It was also been considered that this road began with Xi'an, and reached Lhasa through Baoji, Tianshui, Wenxian, Songpan, Jinchuan, Danba, Ganning, Ganzi, Dengke, Yushu, Nagqu in the west.

### **3.2 Sichuan-Tibet road**

The Sichuan-Tibet road was an ancient road with the maximum transportation volume, the greatest influence, the largest popularity and the most prominent historical function. The Ming and Qing dynasties were the periods of great prosperity of the Sichuan-Tibet road. The Sichuan-Tibet road mainly started from the tea producing area in today's Ya'an, Sichuan, and first entered Kangding. Starting from Kangding, the road was divided into the southern and northern branches: The southern line began from Kangding, and passed Yajiang, Litang, Batang, Mangkang and Zuogong, to Chamdo (now the southern line of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway), and Lhasa in the south, then to Nepal, India, or westward to Kashmir via Ngari; the northern line started from Kangding, and passed Daofu, Luhuo, Ganzi, Dege and Jiangda in the north, and arrived in Qamdo (now the northern line of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway), and then went from Qamdo to the U-Tsang area.

### **3.3 Yunnan-Tibet road**

Since the Tang Dynasty, the tea-horse ancient road on the Yunnan-Tibet road had been a vital communication line with the nature of people to people exchange, which relied on horse caravan to transport tea, leather, grain and other goods among Yunnan, Sichuan and Tibet. It was the traffic artery of the "Great Triangle" region including Yunnan, Tibet and Sichuan. The Yunnan-Tibet road started from the origin of Pu'er tea in Yunnan (now Xishuangbanna, Puer and other places), passed Dali, Lijiang, Zhongdian and Deqin, and reached Tibet's Bangda, Chayu or Qamdo, Luolong, Gongbo'gyamda, Lhasa, and then went from Jiangzi and Yadong to Myanmar, Nepal and India, respectively, with a total length of the domestic route of over 3,800 km. It played multiple roles in the course of historical development, and was described by people as "the ancient road of civilization and culture transmission, commodity exchange channel, China and foreign exchange channel, ethnic migration corridor, and the way of eastward spread of Buddhism" <sup>[10]</sup>.

## **4. Historical Significance of the Tea-Horse Trade between the Hans and Tibetans**

With the rapid development of social economy and transport logistics, especially after foundation of New China, the original tea-horse trade system had disappeared, and naturally, the tea-horse trade also lost its former status and function. However, its rich historical connotation and value can not be underestimated, which are still worth our in-depth exploration and research.

### **4.1 Enhancing the solidarity and fusion of the Han and Tibetan nationalities**

China is a unified multinational country, whose formation has undergone a long historical process. The tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans has made contributions to the national unity, and the establishment and consolidation of a multinational country. It needs not only a common political basis, but a common economic basis, mutual cultural identity and so on in the process of development. In the long course of history, with the rise of the tea-horse trade, people of all nationalities have achieved the mutual effect and blend of the Han culture and the Tibetan culture, the Islamic culture, the grassland culture, the Yi culture, Naxi culture and other cultures in the long-range contacts and exchanges. In Kangding, Ganzi, Batang, Qamdo and other places, we saw both splendid Tibetan Buddhism temples, and guandi temple, land ancestral temple and others that reflected the architectures fused with Han cultures, together with mosques presenting the Islamic culture, etc. Along the tea-horse

ancient road, people of different nationalities mutually absorbed and melted their own diet, customs, festivals and others, and there were still a large number of national marriage families, providing the basis for national fusion and the common prosperity and development of all ethnic groups. It can be seen that as a vital bond, the tea-horse trade has played a tremendous role in the historical process of increasing the integration of Han, Tibetan and other nationalities in southwest and northwest China.

#### ***4.2 Promoting the development of economic community between the Hans and Tibetans***

The tea-horse trade crossed the Tibetan areas such as Yunnan, Sichuan, Tibet, Qinghai, Gansu and other places, which had made unforgettable contributions to the local economic development. The tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans promoted the Han and Tibetan nationalities to be an integral entirety economically to achieve their mutual support and common development, and improved the life of people of all nationalities. The tea-horse trade was an important pillar for the economic life of the Tibetan and other nationalities living on the animal husbandry. Horses had its selling line, which could stimulate the progress of the animal husbandry; tea had sources, which could ensure the health of the nationalities who eta meet and drank milk. The trade mainly based on the exchange of tea and horses brought leather making, gold washing, vegetables growing, architectures, gold and silver processing and other techniques, and technicians to minority areas in large quantities, which accelerated the flourishing development of related industries.

#### ***4.3 Accelerating the development of transportation in China and Tibet***

The advancement of the tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans established multiple economic traffic arteries for other ethnic groups living in geographical conditions with high altitude and out-dated traffic conditions, that is, the tea-horse ancient road, which included three main stems and numerous branches and auxiliary lines. The ancient road still exists, while losing its previous prosperity. However, it has made a significant contribution to the economic development of China and Tibet as well as minority areas along the ancient road. At the same time, the tea-horse trade also developed a special means of transportation and transportation team —— horse caravans. The horse caravans have already been replaced by the modern convenient transportation, and no longer exist. However, in the past thousands of years, they showed remarkable courage, tensile willpower, brave spirit and excellent wisdom when embracing the road with the highest terrain, the most dangerous mountain roads and the furthest distance, and weathered rain and snow, and wild beasts and poisonous insects and other abnormally hazardous and harsh environments. They were less lazy and more diligent, which was a crucial factor for guaranteeing the fluent implementation of the tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans, and playing the role of the tea-horse ancient road.

Since the Tang Dynasty, the tea-horse trade had gone through over a thousand years of development and changes. No other events like it had so large scale, scope and influence in the history of ethnic relations. It was a historical witness of the friendly exchanges between the Tibetan and Han people, and also a very important economic activity between the Han and Tibetan people in history. At present, despite the tea-horse trade system has disappeared, it has played some active part in facilitating national unity, national unity, and economic exchanges and social development of each nation. The tea-horse ancient road has still devoted its lingering force to the economic life of people of all ethnic groups along the way up to now. The horse caravan spirit motivate people to work hard, be diligent, and be brave to take risks and innovations for our future generations. The world is experiencing profound shifts unseen in a century, and a reasonable excavation of the historical value and significance of the tea-horse trade between the Hans and Tibetans has practical and positive meanings for building the concept of community of shared future of the Chinese nation.

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