

The Historical Significance and Value of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road from the Perspective of Multi-ethnic Communication, Exchange, and Integration

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ABSTRACT

The Ancient Tea-Horse Road is a comprehensive channel network that has traveled through the Hengduan Mountains in southwestern China since the Tang and Song dynasties, with tea horse trade as its core, connecting Yunnan, Sichuan, Xizang, and radiating to South Asia and Southeast Asia. It goes beyond a single economic function and has become a practical example of multi-ethnic communication, exchange, and integration in history. This article is based on the theoretical perspective of "communication, exchange, and integration" to re-examine the historical significance and value of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road. Research has shown that at the economic level, the ancient road constructed a symbiotic regional economic system with "tea-horse exchange" as the core and diverse commodities as supplements, laying a solid foundation for material exchanges; At the cultural level, as a dynamic corridor for cultural dissemination and mutual learning, it has given birth to a tea horse cultural community that integrates language, religion, and art, completing deep level spiritual exchanges; At the social level, ancient roads have facilitated deep interweaving of blood, geography, and social connections through population migration, intermarriage between ethnic groups, the rise of towns, and innovation in social organizations, achieving social integration. In the end, the Ancient Tea-Horse Road, with its historical practice spanning thousands of years, proved its eternal value as a historical link between "national unity" and "Chinese national community consciousness". The summary of its historical experience not only deepens our understanding of the internal driving force behind the formation of the "diverse and integrated" pattern of the Chinese nation, but also provides rich historical insights for forging a sense of community among the Chinese nation in a broader region and at a deeper level in the new era.

Keywords: *Ancient Tea-Horse Road, Communication exchange and integration, Ethnic relations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Hengduan Mountains and the Three Rivers Confluence region of southwestern China, Mr. Fei Xiaotong delineated a crucial "Zang-Yi Ethnic Corridor".¹ This corridor, as a crucial area for the migration and movement of ancient ethnic groups, is key to understanding the formation of ethnic patterns in southwestern China. The Ancient

Tea-Horse Road was the most vibrant and far-reaching cultural artery along this corridor. It originated in the Tang and Song dynasties, flourished during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and persisted until the Republic of China era. Its core driving force stemmed from the economic trade represented by the "tea-horse exchange", which connected the agrarian civilization with the plateau nomadic civilization.

For a long time, academic research on the Ancient Tea-Horse Road has evolved from route verification and trade history documentation to an in-depth exploration of its comprehensive historical and cultural significance. Early research primarily focused on its transportation routes and commercial

1. The Zang-Yi Ethnic Corridor proposed by China's ethnology community generally covers a narrow strip extending from the southern part of Gansu and eastern Qinghai in the north, through western Sichuan, eastern Xizang, western Yunnan, as well as northern Myanmar and northeastern India in the south. Refer to Fei Xiaotong's "On the Identification of Ethnic Groups in China", published in "China Social Sciences, Issue 1, 1980.

functions. However, with new archaeological discoveries and deeper ethnological research, the profound significance of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road as a "cultural canal" that fostered deep interregional and interethnic interactions has become increasingly evident. It serves not only as an economic bridge between the two major ethnic groups, the Han and the Tibetan, but also as a vast arena that connects over twenty ethnicities along the route — such as the Yi, Naxi, Bai, Hui, and Lisu — fostering emotional resonance, cultural integration, and social interweaving through continuous interaction.

This paper integrates multidisciplinary evidence from historical texts, archaeological findings, ethnography, and linguistics to explore how the Ancient Tea-Horse Road specifically facilitated profound interactions among ethnic groups on material, cultural, and social levels? How has this interaction evolved from an economic behavior into a powerful force that shapes regional social structures and collective identities? A profound understanding of this historical process will help us gain insight into the intrinsic structure and vivid practices of the "unity in diversity" pattern of the Chinese nation as it took shape in the southwestern region. It will also draw valuable historical wisdom to strengthen the consciousness of the Chinese nation as a community in the present and future.

2. THE FOUNDATION OF INTERACTION: ECONOMIC RECIPROCITY AND THE INITIAL FORMATION OF REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

Deep interaction among ethnic groups begins with the exchange of material goods and the intertwining of interests. The Ancient Tea-Horse Road first established a regional economic system based on practical needs and complementary symbiosis. This system not only met the survival and development needs of various ethnic groups but also served as a foundational force, creating an indispensable environment for continuous and extensive interethnic interactions.

2.1 "Tea-Horse Exchange"

The formation and maintenance of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road were fundamentally driven by the economic complementarity between the nomadic civilization of the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau and the agricultural civilization of the Central Plains. For

the Central Plains dynasties, horses were strategic resources for maintaining national defense, ensuring transportation, and enhancing productivity. Since the Song Dynasty, due to the loss of traditional horse producing areas in the north, the dependence on good horses in Tibetan areas has become more urgent. The "History of Song: Military Records" records that "Sima Zhuanyang was stationed in Xihe and Qinfeng",² and later expanded to Sichuan-Xizang and Yunnan-Xizang regions. For nomadic people who mainly consume meat and milk, tea has gradually evolved from a luxury item to a daily necessity due to its unique effects of relieving greasiness, aiding digestion, and supplementing vitamins. Yan Cangshu, a native of the Southern Song Dynasty, said that "barbarians cannot live without tea for a day"³, which is not an empty statement. The supply and demand relationship of "tea as the first priority for what they lack" and "horse as the first demand for what I lack" constitutes the stable and sustainable core driving force of tea horse trade.

2.2 Diversified Trade Network

With the deepening and stability of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road trade, the range of exchanged goods far exceeds the two core categories of tea and horses, forming a rich and diverse network of goods flow. In addition to tea, which occupies an absolute dominant position, various living and production materials such as cloth, silk, porcelain, iron ware, salt, sugar, etc. are also exported from the mainland to Xizang and other ethnic areas in the southwest. The goods transported from Tibetan and southwestern regions to the mainland include precious medicinal herbs such as musk, cordyceps, and Fritillaria, livestock products such as fur and felt blankets, as well as minerals such as gold and silver. The circulation of this diverse commodity brings together ethnic groups with a wider range of livelihoods in a common economic cycle network, forming a regional economic symbiotic relationship of "interdependence and interdependence, where no one can do without each other". It promoted preliminary regional division of labor, enabling the integration of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Xizang regions into a closely connected and interdependent functional unit in terms of economic functions.

2. Tuotuo et al.: "History of the Song Dynasty", Zhonghua Book Company, 2011 edition, page 4950.

3. Continued Literature General Examination, Volume 22.

2.3 Horse Caravans, Towns and Institutional Innovation

The sustained and large-scale trade activities have given rise to a series of specialized socio-economic organizations and institutional innovations, among which the most core is the horse caravan. The horse caravans are not single ethnic organizations, and their members often include members from multiple ethnic groups such as Hui, Han, Naxi, Bai, and Zang. In order to cope with language, cultural barriers, and safety issues during the long and arduous journey, the horse caravans formed a strict organizational discipline and developed the "Naicang" system, which established fixed cooperative relationships with different ethnic villages along the way. It is also known as the "landlord partner" trade on the Yunnan-Xiazng Highway. This relationship is based on deep reciprocity and trust, and can even be passed down from generation to generation.⁴ At the same time, a number of key commercial towns emerged along the ancient road and flourished, such as Kangding on the Sichuan-Xizang Highway, Lijiang on the Yunnan-Xizang Highway, and Changdu at the hub. Kangding developed from a barren pasture before the Ming Dynasty to a commercial center known as the bustling city, where Han people were gathered and making trade. Its "Guozhuang" industry evolved from a warehouse to a comprehensive institution that integrates trade intermediaries, accommodation, translation, and other functions. At its peak, it had as many as 48 businesses.⁵ These towns, as "communication hubs", have historical value not only in witnessing economic prosperity, but also in breaking down geographical and cultural barriers between ethnic groups, becoming social spaces for long-term coexistence and frequent interaction among merchants, porters, and artisans of various ethnic groups.

3. BRIDGE OF COMMUNICATION: CULTURAL DISSEMINATION AND THE FORMATION OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

The Ancient Tea-Horse Road, while fulfilling its economic artery function, is also an

exceptionally active "dynamic corridor" for cultural dissemination and mutual learning. In the continuous flow of materials and personnel for hundreds of years, it has greatly promoted the deep exchange of spiritual and cultural aspects among various ethnic groups along the way, and its value is reflected in the harmonious coexistence of cultural diversity and the continuous generation of value concepts.

3.1 Language Blending

Language is the most fundamental and profound carrier of cultural exchange. The frequent trade and social contact on the ancient road inevitably gave rise to language exchange and integration. In order to communicate effectively, members of the caravan, vendors, and residents along the route actively learn and borrow each other's language elements, gradually forming a mixed communication pattern of "using Chinese and Tibetan as the main languages and integrating multi-ethnic vocabulary", and even forming a certain "common language" within specific regions and industries. Linguistic research has provided solid evidence for this. Chen Baoya et al. discovered a northern tea horse ancient road with the pronunciation of "chai" as its spatial distribution feature through phonological geography methods, proving that the vocabulary and pronunciation of the core cultural concept of "tea" spread along the ancient road.⁶ Further research has revealed the close evolutionary relationship between a group of related words such as "tea", "horse", "wine", and "salt" in languages such as Chinese, Tibetan, Bai, and Yi within the Chinese-Zang language family, forming a linguistic integration and communication. The deep value of borrowing, translating, and blending this language lies not only in the simplification of communication tools, but also in the intuitive manifestation of the mutual infiltration and acceptance of cultural cognitive systems.

3.2 Artistic Integration

In the field of art, this fusion is even more colorful. The residential buildings of the Naxi ethnic group, while maintaining their basic layout, creatively absorb decorative arts such as wood carving and painting from the Han and Bai ethnic

4. Tao Zixiang, The Ancient Tea-Horse Road: A Historic Practice of Forging the Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation, Guangxi Ethnic Studies, 2024 Issue 5, p124.

5. Refer to Geller's "Preliminary Exploration of the Historical Role and Practical Significance of the 'Tea-Horse Ancient Road'" in Chinese Tibetology, Issue 3, 2002, p.62.

6. Chen Baoya, The Linear Communication Model of Lingua Franca on the Ancient Tea-Carrying Horse Road: A Case Study of Shanxi Dialect Pronounced in the Way of Lingua Franca, Journal of Guizhou Minzu University: Philosophy and Social Science, 2020(3).

groups, forming a unique architectural style. The "Chasing Horses Tune" that has been passed down along the ancient road, although the lyrics and singing styles vary among different ethnic groups, has formed a mountain song form with similar tones and emotional connections around the common life experience of "Chasing Horses", becoming a musical symbol that crosses ethnic groups on the Tea Horse Ancient Road. The Jianchuan Grottoes in Yunnan and the murals in the Diqing area all show traces of the fusion of various artistic styles such as Han, Tibetan, and Bai.

3.3 *The Interweaving of Living Customs and the Condensation of Value Consensus*

Centered around tea as the core commodity, a distinctive yet diverse tea-drinking culture has emerged, transcending ethnic boundaries. Although the ingredients, preparation methods, and drinking customs vary—such as Tibetan butter tea, Naxi "Dragon Tiger Duel," and Bai Three-Course Tea—each uses tea as a medium to convey hospitality, social etiquette, and life philosophy. The convergence and interweaving of this lifestyle with daily customs subtly bridge the psychological distance and emotional connections among members of different ethnic groups. More profoundly, through prolonged and frequent commercial exchanges and social interactions, the ethnic groups along the routes gradually refined and adhered to a shared set of commercial ethics and philosophies of conduct. The strict internal regulations of the caravan and the stable "naiqiang" relationship between merchants and "host families" are all built upon this unwritten shared set of values. These value consensus serve as the intangible bonds that sustain the vast and intricate socio-economic system of the ancient trails, enabling its smooth operation. Their historical significance lies in demonstrating that ethnic groups with diverse cultural backgrounds can, through prolonged peaceful exchanges, develop a normative culture that transcends their narrow ethnic boundaries and is widely recognized and followed by broader regional communities. This lays a solid psychological foundation for a higher-level collective identity.

4. THE ACHIEVEMENT OF INTEGRATION: THE EMERGENCE AND COHESION OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND COMMUNAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The profound interaction between economy and culture will ultimately lead to substantive integration at the societal structure level and deepening of ethnic relations. This represents the highest level of historical significance and value of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road, signifying that the achievements of interaction and exchange have become an integral part of the social fabric itself.

4.1 *Ethnic Intermingling and Bloodline Fusion*

The smooth passage of ancient roads and the prosperity of trade led to continuous, bidirectional or multidirectional population migrations and the reshaping of ethnic distribution patterns. On one hand, merchants, craftsmen, soldiers, and settlers from Han, Hui, and other ethnic groups in mainland China migrated in large numbers to the Zang-Yi Corridor region for trade, frontier defense, and land reclamation, eventually settling there. On the other hand, merchant caravans and immigrants from ethnic groups such as the Tibetans and the Naxi also migrated to the eastern and southern regions. The result of this migration is the formation of a "large-scale mixed settlement and small-scale clustered settlement" interwoven distribution pattern. Long-term and close intermingled coexistence inevitably leads to extensive interethnic marriage. This bloodline fusion based on marriage created a profound ethnic integration where "you are in me, and I am in you," laying the most robust biological and sociological foundation for an identity that transcends a single ethnic group—a more inclusive regional and even national identity.

4.2 *Identity Embedding and Identity Flow*

In the multicultural interweaving field of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road, individual social identities are often not singular and fixed, but present fluidity and complexity. The most typical example is the "Zang guests" of the Naxi ethnic group. They are not only merchants engaged in long-distance trade, but many are also devout followers of Zang Buddhism, frequently traveling between Lijiang and Lhasa, playing multiple roles such as merchants, pilgrims, and cultural ambassadors. Their cultural identity is often a

mixture of Naxi culture, Zang Buddhist culture, and even Han culture, and their identity can be flexibly transformed or possess multiple attributes in different contexts. Similarly, among the Zang population in western Sichuan and other areas, there are also many phenomena of using Chinese surnames, speaking bilingualism, and following some Chinese customs, reflecting the mutual infiltration of identity and culture. The profound enlightening value of this phenomenon lies in its revelation that in the context of deep communication, the identity of individuals and groups is not a fixed iron sheet, but rather situational and constructible. They can fully build a multi-level and composite identity towards a larger regional community, a shared "Tea-Horse Culture", and even the central dynasty while maintaining a deep emotional attachment to their own ethnic culture.

4.3 From the Spirit of the Ancient Road to the Consciousness of the Chinese National Community

The continuous operation of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road spanning thousands of years is itself a grand narrative of unity, cooperation, mutual benefit, openness and inclusiveness formed by people of all ethnic groups in the process of overcoming natural obstacles and pursuing a better life together. This "ancient road spirit" accumulated in historical practice is the deepest soil for national unity.

The central dynasties throughout history also deeply recognized the political and strategic value of the "Ancient Tea-Horse Road" and regarded it as the way to "govern Xizang for its peace". Through a series of measures such as setting up post stations, managing mutual markets, and granting titles, the central government has strengthened its political ties with the southwest region, making the ancient road a "smooth path for government orders".

5. CONTEMPORARY INSPIRATION: INHERITANCE, TRANSFORMATION, AND INNOVATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF ANCIENT ROAD VALUES IN THE NEW ERA

Although the history of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road has gradually faded away, as a rich historical and cultural heritage, its wisdom and experience in promoting ethnic exchanges, communication, and

integration have not become outdated. In the great process of forging a sense of community for the Chinese nation in the new era, it is of great practical significance to deeply explore and creatively transform its core values.

5.1 The Revelation of Material Value: Solidifying the Modern Foundation of Communication and Integration Through High-quality Development

The vitality of ancient roads primarily stems from their effective satisfaction of the basic survival and development needs of various ethnic groups along the route. This enlightens people that the economic foundation has always been the fundamental driving force for maintaining ethnic unity and promoting ethnic exchanges. Today, it is necessary to steadfastly promote high-quality development in ethnic regions, by strengthening infrastructure construction, developing characteristic advantageous industries, integrating into the national unified market, promoting rural revitalization, and other means, to build a more closely integrated, interdependent, and win-win modern regional economic system.

5.2 The Inspiration of Folk Value: Stimulating Social Vitality and Nourishing the Deep Soil of Spontaneous Communication

The development, maintenance, and prosperity of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road are full of strong "folk" colors, and are the spontaneous creation and wisdom crystallization of people of all ethnic groups pursuing a better life. This reminds us that ethnic work in the new era must fully respect and give full play to the main role of the people. The government should play a more important role as a guide, service provider, and guarantor, focusing on creating an inclusive and open social environment, encouraging and supporting spontaneous cultural exchanges, commercial cooperation, tourism exchanges, community gatherings, and other activities at the grassroots level, allowing people of all ethnic groups to naturally come into contact, understand, accept, and appreciate each other in their daily lives, and allowing the seeds of national unity to take root, sprout, blossom, and bear fruit in the fertile soil of civil society.

5.3 The Inspiration of Compatibility Value: Adhering to Openness and Inclusiveness, and Building a Chinese Culture Shared by All Ethnic Groups

The value of "compatibility" demonstrated by the Ancient Tea-Horse Road, which is a harmonious scene of equal dialogue, mutual learning, and shared beauty among different cultures, is one of its most charming features. This requires us to scientifically protect the excellent traditional culture of all ethnic groups, promote their creative transformation and innovative development; At the same time, it is necessary to pay more attention to the mutual learning and integration of various ethnic cultures, extract, display and disseminate cultural symbols and spiritual signs that reflect the common emotions, values and memories of the Chinese nation, vigorously promote the national common language and script, and continuously enhance the high recognition of Chinese culture among all ethnic groups, and build a shared spiritual home for the Chinese nation.

6. CONCLUSION

From the grand theoretical perspective of "multi-ethnic communication, exchange, and integration", a systematic examination of the historical significance and value of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road has been deeply demonstrated. It tightly binds ethnic groups with different ecosystems and cultures into regional economic communities through "tea horse trade" and diversified trade; Subsequently, through the integration of language, religious coexistence, artistic fusion, and value consensus, a shared spiritual home of "Tea-Horse Culture" was constructed; Ultimately, through population migration, inter-ethnic intermarriage, identity embedding, and social network construction, a deep embedding of "you in me, I in you" has been achieved at the levels of blood, geography, and identity.

Today, people look back at this ancient road not only to reminisce about the past, but also to learn from the present. The symbiotic wisdom based on complementarity, creative vitality derived from the people, harmonious concepts achieved through inclusiveness, and a holistic perspective that is good at linkage contained in it have eternal enlightening value for us to solve new problems in ethnic work in the new era, and to forge a sense of

common identity for the Chinese nation in a broader region and at a deeper level. It is people's cultural responsibility and historical mission to deeply explore, systematically study, and creatively transform this precious historical and cultural heritage, so that it can serve the present and contribute to the future.

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