

Ethnic Spirit Research along the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail in Ganzi Prefecture

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Abstract: The Ancient Tea Horse Road primarily centers around the Yunnan, and Sichuan triangle, consisting of the main routes known as the Dian-Zang Road and the Chuan-Zang Road, along with numerous supporting branches. It's an ancient pathway of communication between the Han Chinese and Minzu cultures that has spanned thousands of years. As one of the renowned historical trade routes in China's west, it has served as a corridor for interaction and integration among various ethnic groups in the southwestern region. In the Ganzi Prefecture, which lies along the Chuan-Zang section of the Ancient Tea Horse Road, the continuous blending of Han and Zang cultures is witnessed. The Chuan-Zang Tea Horse Road represents a pathway of unwavering national spirit, characterized by resilience, persistence, self-improvement, diligence, and bravery. It embodies the fusion of cultures and the path of fraternal unity among various ethnic groups. Promoting and inheriting the spirit of the Ancient Tea Horse Road is not only conducive to upholding traditional culture and fostering local economic development but, more importantly, to solidifying the awareness of the Chinese national community.

Keywords: Ganzi Prefecture; Tea Horse Ancient Road; Diligent and Brave; Continuous Self-Improvement; National Spirit

1. Introduction

The Tea-Horse Ancient Trail, primarily traversed by caravan, stands as a folk international trade route and serves as a corridor for economic and cultural exchanges among southwestern Chinese ethnic groups. Originating from the ancient tea-horse trade in the southwestern border regions, this trail

emerged during the Tang and Song dynasties, reaching its peak during the Ming and Qing dynasties. It tightly interconnects the "Great Triangle" region of Yunnan, Xizang, and Sichuan. Starting from Ya'an in Sichuan, this route traverses mountains and valleys, crosses tumultuous waters, passes through various places including Luding, Kangding, Garze, Litang, Batang, Chamdo, and Dege, eventually reaching Lhasa [1]. It extends its influence to neighboring countries like Bhutan, Nepal, and India. Known as the "Chuan-Zang Tea-Horse Ancient Trail," it is the oldest and most challenging historical route, boasting a tapestry of elements such as bandits, century-old shops, the "Ajia" teahouse, Kangding love songs, tea carriers, and caravans – all composing a symphony of ethnic spirit along this celestial road.

2. Formation and Development of the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail

The footprint of the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail stretches across the regions of Sichuan, Xizang, and Yunnan, traversing the diverse landscapes of the Nu River, Lancang River, and Jinsha River basins. This trail, characterized by the tea-horse trade and relying on caravans as its primary mode of transportation, constitutes an ancient commercial route [2]. The Tea-Horse Ancient Trail originated during the Tang Dynasty, flourished in the Song Dynasty, reached its pinnacle in the Ming Dynasty, and declined during the Qing Dynasty. The Kang-Zang region is situated at altitudes of three to four thousand meters in a cold highland area. Inhabitants require high-calorie foods like tsampa (roasted barley flour), dairy products, butter, beef, and mutton due to the harsh climate [3]. Tsampa generates internal heat, and excess fat is not easily metabolized in the human body. Since the highland areas lack vegetables, tea leaves serve as both a fat decomposer and a remedy for internal heat.

Consequently, Zang People developed the habit of consuming butter tea in their daily lives. However, as the Zang region does not produce tea, the introduction of tea consumption from the Tang Dynasty onwards immediately became an essential aspect of Zang life.

In the inland regions, a substantial number of high-quality mules and horses were needed for military purposes and warfare, resulting in a supply-demand imbalance. Meanwhile, Zang people possessed fine horses in the Kang-Zang region, which aligned with the needs of the inland regions. Zang horses became their preferred choice. This led to the emergence of the mutually beneficial tea-horse trade, where tea and horses were exchanged. Goods such as mules, furs, medicinal herbs from Xizang, as well as tea, cloth, salt, and everyday items from Sichuan, Yunnan, and the inland areas flowed back and forth amidst the high mountains and deep valleys of the Trans-Himalayan region. With the evolution of social and economic development, this trade prospered, giving rise to the enduring "Tea-Horse Ancient Trail," which continues to this day.

Within China's borders, three main routes of the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail are distributed: the Qing-Zang Ancient Trail, Chuan-Zang Ancient Trail, and Yun-Zang Ancient Trail.

3. Ethnic Spirit on the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail

As a historical relic, the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail is not merely a trace of ancient commerce, nor is it a mere cultural symbol; it holds a profound humanistic significance, embodying the historical spirit of the Chinese nation [4]. Regardless of wind, frost, snow, rain, scorching heat, or bitter cold, the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail has preserved the indomitable silhouette of numerous caravan teams, enduring their arduous journey.

One could say that this trail is paved with the sweat and bitterness of its travelers. It represents a path etched with the spirit of perseverance, fortitude, resilience, diligence, courage, and unflagging determination. It is a route that bears witness to the unyielding determination, steadfastness, self-improvement, diligence, and bravery of the national spirit. Moreover, it is a path that reflects the fusion of various ethnic cultures and stands as a

testament to the unity, friendship, and solidarity among different ethnic groups.

3.1 Unity and Harmony Spirit on the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail

The Tea-Horse Ancient Trail, in its historical role, is more than just a trade route connecting the Zang region and the hinterland; it is also a significant path to ensure stability. It not only facilitated exchanges and integration among various ethnic groups but also played an irreplaceable role in maintaining governance and tranquility in Xizang. As depicted in the Zang heroic epic Gesar, the arrival of goods from Han territory into the Zang region symbolized the connection of hearts between the two populations [4]. This vividly expresses the Zang people's most straightforward and sincere understanding of the essence of the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail and the tea-horse trade.

Moreover, the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail served as a conduit for the spread of Zang Buddhism. It not only facilitated the exchange of Buddhist culture but also fostered unity and friendship among diverse ethnic groups. With the development of the tea-horse trade and the opening of the ancient trail, people from different ethnic backgrounds, including Han and Zang, frequently traversed its path. Especially since the Yuan Dynasty, Han residents continuously migrated into the Kangba region, bringing advanced production techniques. Collaborating with their Zang counterparts, they contributed to the economic development, market prosperity, ethnic unity, and social progress of the Kangba region.

For instance, cities like Luding on the banks of the Dadu River, which was initially a modest "Western Barbarian village," transformed into a bustling commercial hub with the construction of an iron bridge during the 15th year of the Kangxi reign. By the third year of the Xuantong reign (1911), over 30 traders had gathered there, making it a crucial point for goods transfer between the hinterland and Kangding [5]. Other cities, including Kangding, Garze, Batang, Shangri-La, and Chamdo, emerged as plateau towns alongside the "Tea-Horse Ancient Trail." Throughout history, successive central dynasties implemented a policy of regional autonomy using the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail, reinforcing the southwestern frontier and maintaining

national unity.

During the resistance against Japanese aggression, when resources were scarce in the rear areas, the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail assumed a pivotal role. Tens of thousands of mule and horse caravans, along with Zang yaks, formed a continuous stream, showcasing the trail's magnificence. This impressive feat greatly supported the anti-Japanese war effort and made an indelible contribution to the final victory in the war of national liberation.

3.2 Diligence and Courage Spirit on the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail

Ren Naiqiang, a renowned Zang scholar, stated in his work *Outline of the History and Geography of Kangba: The Kangba Plateau* stands in the heart of central Asia, like a grindstone embedded in the ground, surrounded by sheer cliffs. Especially in the areas connecting with the Sichuan Basin and the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, the terrain is rugged, with precipitous slopes and turbulent rivers. It is a region of cliffs and chasms, a place where even birds find it hard to navigate [6]. Indeed, the ancient trail's challenges were as daunting as ascending into the heavens. As documented by Lin Tian in *Records of Zang Journeys*: "The journey from Ya'an to Lhasa spans over two thousand kilometers of highland ancient trails, crossing the entire Hengduan Mountains and many sparsely populated regions. Countless obstacles, over the course of many years, have made travel on the Kangba Trail as difficult as 'journeying to the Western Heaven' [3]." From the above, it is evident that the areas traversed by the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail were treacherous, making transportation incredibly challenging in a history of underdeveloped infrastructure. Tea leaves, under such adverse conditions, were primarily transported by human porters known as "Tea Carriers" or "Beibei Zi," a unique form of manual transportation. They endured hardships beyond measure to deliver tea to various parts of the Zang region. The tea carriers, ranging from impoverished farmers to the elderly at 60 and children as young as 13, comprised a crucial aspect of the Han-Zang tea-horse trade. Carrying tea was an incredibly grueling task. On the road, tea carriers sustained themselves with saltwater and flatbread, using corn leaves and dried rice straw as makeshift bedding at night. Due to the

arduous journey and its length, the carriers often carried an "L"-shaped iron crutch specifically designed for carrying tea, which they used to rest on stones along the way.

Over time, these stones were transformed into numerous pits and hollows by the repeated impacts of the crutches. Each pit, varying in size and depth, represents the indelible imprint of the ancestors who toiled diligently, working tirelessly from the skies of history. They communicate the struggles of the past, bearing witness to extraordinary vitality and courage, and displaying the remarkable pioneering spirit they employed for survival and development.

Many people and horses tragically perished while crossing rivers. Horse drivers often teetered on the brink of life and death, and in each horse driver's memory, there are stories that evoke sadness and tears. Every horse driver must be willing to take risks and confront various challenges. In times of encountering bandits, robbers, and crises, they must remain fearless and composed [7].

They are both merchants and explorers, pioneering a path through treacherous terrain and steep mountains using the most primitive methods. With their perseverance, courage, and wisdom, they hewed out this extraordinary "Heavenly Road" with their hardworking hands. Along this ancient path, people walked for survival, and their journey embodied the enduring spirit of the Chinese nation [4]. This spirit has weathered countless storms of history and remains unyielding, standing tall among the world's nations. The Tea-Horse Ancient Trail has become a repository of the Chinese national spirit and demeanor, a historical legend that narrates the ancient nation's past while symbolizing its brilliant future.

3.3 Perseverance Spirit of the Tea-Horse Ancient Trail

In Zang region, many Zang people have led a nomadic life of freedom for years. To obtain daily necessities, men tirelessly traverse mountains and valleys, following caravans of horses and mules. The women who stay at home are responsible for upholding the household, eliminating any concerns for the men who are away. Their strength in life is unattainable by ordinary people. They are compelled to learn self-reliance and exhibit

resilience year after year. Zang women demonstrate the same self-sufficiency and determination as men. While men are away for months or even years to earn a living, these women become the pillars of their households, the hopes of their children. They must shoulder all the burdens of the family. Hardship has ingrained itself into the essence of Zang women. They experience a kind of profound and tangible hardship in their lives. Faced with setbacks, these women do not become discouraged or disheartened. They never bow to fate, demonstrating an unyielding spirit that deeply moves us. They silently endure suffering, bravely resisting and transcending it. Carrying the weight of life's burdens, they persist through arduous journeys. Amidst the enveloping hardships, they stand firm and rise against adversities, soaring with unwavering determination, demonstrating a spirit of self-improvement. As they carry on their backs the heavy load of life, they persist through hardship. In the midst of the encirclement of suffering, they stand strong, and in the face of a life of hardship, they rise and soar, displaying a spirit of continuous self-improvement.

4. The Significance of Ethnic Spirit of the Tea Horse Ancient Road

The historical value embedded within the Tea Horse Ancient Road transcends mere tea trade culture and the manifestation of cultural exchange among diverse ethnic groups such as the Han, Zang, and Yi peoples. What it reveals to us goes beyond these aspects, emphasizing the ethnic spirit carried by this ancient route, a spirit that holds exceptional value in today's material-driven society.

4.1 Beneficial for Han-Zang Ethnic Unity and Stability

One of the core elements of our country's ethnic spirit is unity and harmony, a spirit that the emergence and development of the Tea Horse Ancient Road embody. The Tea Horse Ancient Road stands as a witness to the deep-rooted friendship between the Han and Zang ethnicities, as well as other ethnic groups. While the trade exchange of tea for horses from the past may no longer exist, the diversified and enriched forms of trade connections continue to hold a significant place in the lives of Zang, Han, and various

other ethnic groups. The communication arteries established on the foundation of the Tea Horse Ancient Road, such as the Qing-Zang Road, Chuan-Zang Road, and Sichuan-Yunnan Road, have made immense contributions to connecting the hinterland with the Zang region. Even the ancient road branches that persist in remote areas, yet to be replaced by modern road networks, continue to fulfill their historical mission by bringing the benefits of modern development and social progress to local Zang. Moreover, these routes convey the genuine goodwill and assistance of the Han people. The existence of the Tea Horse Ancient Road has fostered a profound connection between Zang Buddhism and tea. Linking multiple regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, some of these areas have limited transportation access, making it challenging for outsiders to understand the Zang region. The lesser-known traditional cultures along the Tea Horse Ancient Road can lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions about the Zang region. Therefore, exploring the spirit of the Tea Horse Ancient Road enables these regions' ethnic cultures to be better known to a broader audience, promoting communication and interaction between the Han and Zang cultures. This effort also contributes to enhancing their confidence in their own ethnic cultures and their enthusiasm for preserving traditional cultural heritage. This has profound significance for the unity and stability of Han-Zang relations and the protection of cultural diversity in ethnic regions.

4.2 Facilitating the Inheritance of the Tea Horse Ancient Road Spirit

Throughout history, Chinese sages have advocated and practiced an unwavering, self-strengthening, self-reliant, and frugal spirit. Over the course of countless years, the Chinese nation has experienced hardships, but it has also risen from decline to prosperity multiple times, standing proudly among the world's nations. What is the foundation of this achievement? It is the spirit of hard work and relentless self-improvement. Along the path of the Tea Horse Ancient Road, we witness the indomitable, self-reliant, diligent, and courageous spirit of the people in the Zang region. They navigate through the deep mountains and valleys where no roads exist, carving out a path of life with their own lives

and blood, and opening the gateway to communication with the outside world. This demonstrates that the hardworking, diligent, and brave spirit of the Chinese nation has deep historical roots.

In today's world, where material conditions have significantly improved, this spirit might have diminished in some individuals, and a tendency towards extravagance and luxury has emerged. Therefore, advocating the spirit of hard work and perseverance has significant contemporary relevance.

4.3 Promoting Local Economic and Social Development

The promotion of the Tea Horse Ancient Road spirit not only holds spiritual significance but also provides sustainable tourism resources for the local areas, attracting investments and creating job opportunities. This, in turn, drives the overall economic and social development of these regions. Yunnan Province, home to segments of the Tea Horse Ancient Road like Xishuangbanna and Shangri-La, serves as a prominent example. In recent years, tourism development in these areas has played a significant role in boosting local industries and the overall regional economy.

The regions traversed by the Tea Horse Ancient Road are inhabited by various ethnic groups, each with its own unique cultural forms. The architectural styles of residences, clothing and attire, customs, languages, and even religious symbols found in every nook and corner vary widely. This rich cultural diversity has earned the road the moniker "Different Sounds within Five Miles, Different Customs within Ten Miles [8]." This multifaceted cultural characteristic makes the Tea Horse Ancient Road a vibrant corridor of ethnic cultures. By incorporating the Tea Horse Ancient Road spirit through diverse approaches, local economic and social development can be more effectively stimulated.

5. Effective Approaches to Promote the Tea Horse Ancient Road Spirit

The Tea Horse Ancient Road is a cultural landscape where human spirit harmoniously blends with natural environment. The terrain and topography of the areas the road traverses are complex and varied. It represents human resilience and resourcefulness in the face of

challenging natural environments, where people overcame obstacles with their wisdom and courage, turning barriers into pathways. It embodies the human spirit of diligence, bravery, pioneering, and unwavering determination. This spirit is accentuated by the juxtaposition of the road against the spectacular and rugged landscapes surrounding it, making the Tea Horse Ancient Road even more inspiring.

Firstly, Strengthen the Protection of the Cultural Landscape of the Tea Horse Ancient Road: The UNESCO World Heritage Committee recognized cultural landscapes as a distinct category in heritage conservation, emphasizing the importance of the co-creation of culture by humans and nature. Many recently added World Heritage sites belong to the cultural landscape category, which underscores the global recognition of their significance. The protection of natural scenery along the Tea Horse Ancient Road, such as the picturesque landscapes of Fengqing Tea Mountain, the ancient path, the convergence of three rivers, the evening glow on the ancient road, the grasslands of Shangri-La, and the riverside views, should be a priority [9]. The distinctive and intricate geographical and biological environments provide a grand natural backdrop, while activities like tea cultivation, salt production, and pottery making, along with various types of dwellings, religious architecture, and military facilities, contribute vibrant cultural hues. This showcases how humans have intervened minimally in nature to create spaces for survival and development, serving as a beneficial lesson for modern society.

Secondly, Enhance Ethnic Cultural Exchange: Zang culture is often seen as enigmatic and relatively unknown, particularly its comprehensive nature that encompasses religious and ethnic fusion. The Tea Horse Ancient Road serves as a vital mechanism for the exchange of Zang and Han cultures. By starting from shared experiences, such as the significance of tea in Zang daily life and the collective endurance of the hardships during the wartime, suitable communication channels can be established to foster mutual understanding and deepen relationships.

Thirdly, Utilize the Road's Rich Historical and Cultural Information: The Tea Horse Ancient Road, as a large-scale trade and transportation

system shaped by specific natural and societal environments, is rich in both natural and cultural information. Its unique character is epitomized by the tea culture it carries. It played an indispensable role in the spread of Asian civilizations, connecting regions like Yunnan, Xizang, Sichuan, Southeast Asia, and the Indian cultural sphere. By collaborating with universities and research institutions, the historical and cultural values of the Tea Horse Ancient Road can be further explored and elevated.

Lastly, Develop Unique Tourism: There's a high level of interest and participation in cultural dissemination activities among the general public. The current state of tourism products, however, often lacks the integration of cultural depth and market orientation, preventing cultural products from realizing their full value within the development process of our era. By unearthing the cultural resources and distinctive values of the Tea Horse Ancient Road, it's possible to accurately convey various aspects of cultural, folk, and regional heritage, achieving a harmonious unity between nature and culture. This will attract more people to understand, appreciate, and fall in love with the Tea Horse Ancient Road.

Conclusion

The Ancient Tea Horse Road has withstood the test of time, witnessing the changing landscapes, people, and events over thousands of years. Amidst these changes, what remains eternal is the precious legacy it imparts to us—the ethnic spirit carried by the Tea Horse Road: unity, diligence, courage, and unwavering resilience—truly embodying the essence of the Chinese nation. Today, the Tea Horse Road transcends being a mere historical route or tourist attraction; it signifies much more. It fosters closer ties and friendships between the Han and Zang ethnic groups, exemplifying their mutual cooperation, unity, and shared pursuit of progress. By safeguarding, studying, preserving, and promoting the ethnic spirit embedded in the Tea Horse Road, we not only carry forward history but also fulfill the contemporary societal needs.

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