

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

“To Control Tibet, First Pacify Kham”: Trade Routes and “Official Routes” (*Guandao*) in Easternmost Kham

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Abstract

This article focuses on the trade routes in the western Sichuan borderlands that facilitated contact and trade between Chinese counties and Eastern Tibet. In particular, the article offers a description of “official routes” (*guandao*)—which the Chinese emperor twice proclaimed to be the vital mode of access between China and Tibet—from Chengdu, Sichuan’s provincial capital, to Khampa areas, with Lhasa as the final destination. The exchange of goods in this region followed various routes during different periods. From the tenth to sixteenth centuries, transactions occurred primarily along the borders of Amdo (Tib. A mdo, Northeastern Tibet), but for political, economic, and practical reasons, such exchanges became more limited geographically and eventually focused along the Sichuan–Kham/Ngawa border. Many routes shifted to the towns of Kangding (Tib. Dartsedo) and Songpan (Tib. Zungchu), the main sites of distribution, where rich opportunities for trade and a strictly limiting transport geography made them important entrepôts that evolved into centers of prosperity. The geographic range of this article reaches to these two towns and leaves the investigation of the routes that led to western centers such as Derge, Batang, Chamdo, and Jyekundo for future research.

Keywords: Tibet, China, trade routes, official routes, *guandao*, tea, *chama gudao*, tea-horse trade, commodities, borderlands, Songpan, Kangding, Dartsedo, Kham, Ngawa, Sichuan, Luding, Dadu He, Kangxi, Manchu

Introduction

We know that the rise and interplay of trade and accompanying trading routes have been a driving force in history. In the eighteenth century, Adam Smith highlighted the disparate distribution of resources and trading propensities and stated the commonplace that we trade for what we want in order to get what we do not have. We must also acknowledge the value of exchange and of the entire trading enterprise, with the concomitant economic, social, and strategic factors that result from trading relationships.

In addressing the long history of trade and contact in the Sino-Tibetan border regions, this article looks at the importance of trade in the context of how and why known and documented routes came into being, and, more specifically, at practical developments in the

western Sichuan borderlands. At the center of this long-standing relationship was brick tea, a commodity grown, processed, packaged, and controlled solely by China and desired by Tibet.¹ For barter exchange, the Chinese sought to fulfill their requirement for strong horses of cavalry quality, which indigenous husbandry was unable to produce. They went to the borders of Tibet with tea to trade for good steppe horses. These borderlands witnessed the rise of this vital enterprise, which at first took place in the north, but later, as described here, turned directly westward from the tea-growing areas of Sichuan Province.

Tibetans first encountered Chinese tea more than a thousand years ago, most probably in the early eighth century,² and they took to the new beverage with progressive enthusiasm.³ Large volumes of tea came their way for the first time in the eleventh century, when China moved to establish the strategic tea–horse trade to secure Central Asian horses for military defense (Smith 1991, 23). This decisive period in the development of regular exchange has been documented by historian Paul Smith (1991), who also provides the rationale for trade routes and their adoption and construction.

The link between trade and the projection of power, a primary focus of this article, is revealed through the Chinese and Manchu imperial creation and naming of two “official routes” (*guandao*) in which tea played a major part. Different in time and place, but important for comparison, is historian Peter Perdue’s 2015 discussion of the *manja* (tea) trade, one of many border trades conducted around the frontiers of the Qing Empire during its period of expansion. Specifically, Perdue deals with the struggles over Central Asia between the Qing and the Zunghar Mongols. He points out that there were periods of truce in the mid-1700s, which allowed for trade relations. Such times centered on the *manja* tea trade; the Zunghars sought contact and influence in Lhasa, and the Qing in turn gathered information about the goals and intentions of the Mongols. This time of peace “provides an important example of the Qing usage of border trade for diplomatic and economic gain” (Perdue 2015, 2). Parallels can be drawn with the tea–horse exchange, as shown below.

From the symbiosis between China and Tibet and the evolution of trading routes came the special name *chama gudao*, or “tea–horse routes” (also “ancient tea–horse roads”). The term *chama gudao* has legitimacy within certain contexts of time and place, but these need to be based on actual economic encounters of these two commodities and not fabricated stories.⁴ This article clarifies the context and periods of the *chama gudao* in Sichuan. These “tea–horse routes”—correctly interpreted in a limited, regional way, as opposed to an unlikely macro or even international setting—referred to three main roads that led from China to three trading towns in the border zones of Kham and adjacent Ngawa. These were Zhongdian (Tib.

Rgyal thang) in the south, Kangding (Tib. Dar rtse mdo) in the center, and Songpan (Tib. Zung chu) in the north. Our concern here is with the last two sites, because the first—Zhongdian in Yunnan—has been of minor significance, and Sichuan commanded the lion’s share of trade with Tibet.

Although the early centuries of the tea–horse trade took place along the borders of Shaanxi and Gansu in China’s north, there were exceptions and interruptions. A famous case occurred when the Northern Song dynasty collapsed in 1127 under invasions by the Jurchens, denying Chinese access to the pasturelands that produced the “blood-sweating” Central Asian horses they needed. Because of this loss of territory and severing of trade routes, China’s merchants, both government and private, looked west from Sichuan to Kham for the fulfillment of the tea–horse arrangements (Rossabi 1970, 140–142). This new focus came about out of necessity, and the exchanges became more limited geographically during the late fourteenth century and then wholeheartedly at the start of the eighteenth century, when economic and geopolitical factors concentrated trade almost entirely along the border zones of Sichuan–Kham/Ngawa. Thus, Sichuan, the focus of this article, grew, prepared, and supplied the main commodity and initiated the routes for transporting it, thereby fulfilling the role of tea supplier to Tibet.

I will present the main Sichuan routes in the central zone first, in order to note the numerous types of routes. Twice in this border area the Chinese imperium established, maintained, and supervised *guandao*.

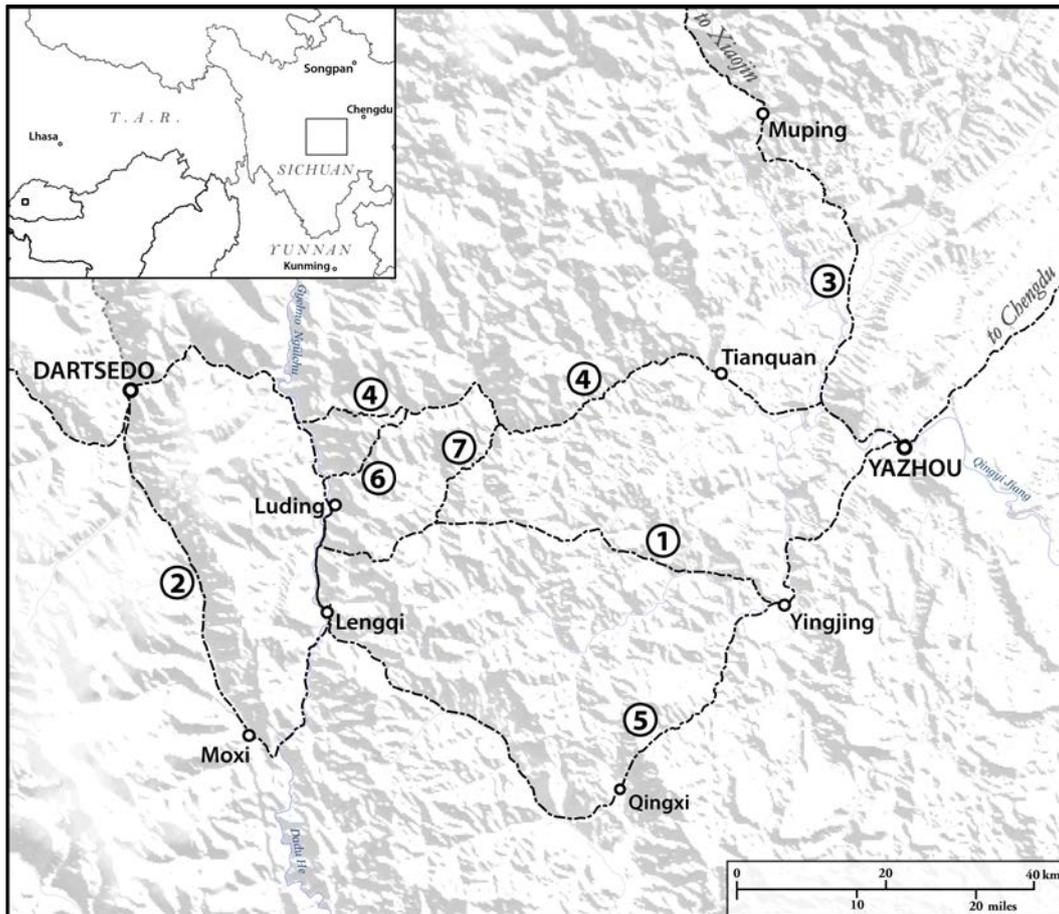
The Setting and Range of Sichuan Trade Routes

Historian Fernand Braudel wrote of the important role played by commodities and trade “at the lower levels, within the modest circle of the local, sometimes very localized economy” (1992, 135). This is an apt observation for the areas in question, in which Chinese and Tibetans engaged vibrantly over long periods, notwithstanding Braudel’s observation that “civilizations can’t climb hills,” and anthropologist James Scott’s statement that “the hills, however, are... a zone of cultural refusal” (2009, 20). Still, and significantly, Braudel asserts that different civilizations and regions have the ability to overcome barriers—actual and figurative—through trading activity, even when the regions are completely foreign to one another. He concludes that the larger economy created through contact “is a sum of individualized areas, economic and non-economic, which it brings together... and that it usually goes beyond the boundaries of division” (Braudel 1992, 24). Barriers come down and towns spring up wherever there are the crossroads of trade.

In Sichuan, the practical core of this trade—production in China and delivery of manufactured goods, especially tea bricks, into the hands of Tibetans—took place within a geographical ellipse of just 220 kilometers from east to west and 160 kilometers from north to south. This oval of activity, embodying the power inherent in the exchange of goods, witnessed the varied stages of trade, which manifested particular local adaptations to the special requirements of production, geography, and transport (see map 1).

Despite larger social, ethnic, and geopolitical concerns, anthropologist Tina Harris rightly points out that routes and trade relations are established locally through everyday life. Trade routes are consciously opened, made, and contested based on common practicalities, such as cost, efficiency, and opportunity. And trade has geographical dimensions as well, in which geography goes hand in hand with “actors who work within the limitations imposed by states” (Harris 2013, 111–112) and the available commodities. Harris emphasizes the strong sense of place and brings things down to earth by always stressing goods, merchants, objects, and markets, and the reasons why particular routes developed (Harris 2013). These considerations, though modern in her treatment, can be seen to play directly into the story of Sichuan’s trade and trade routes.

For the past thousand years, Tibet’s tea has come almost entirely from Sichuan Province, and specifically from the five “tea counties” of Ya’an, Mingshan, Qionglai, Tianquan, and Yingjing, where growing conditions proved ideal and the technology of brick tea manufacturing was perfected.⁵ From the factories in these counties came annually the millions of kilograms of compressed tea that satisfied Tibet’s monasteries, lamas, and wealthy families. From these points of departure, the tea made its way north to Amdo by wheelbarrow transport before being transferred to Tibetan animals. Later, in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), as we shall see, the commodity crossed westward over mountainous regions where Sichuan’s counties approached and abutted the historic dividing zone between China and Tibet. Then, by means of trails and roads, the tea penetrated into the easternmost parts of Kham and Ngawa as a means to distribute products and engage in other concerns, as varied as pilgrimage and geopolitics. This network of trade and contact, as it crossed over a barrier range and large river, became a major force in regional history and economics. From the Tibetan point of view, as pointed out by Buddhist scholar Matthew Kapstein, we know that trade has always been one of the three major traditional occupations of Tibet—pastoralism and farming being the other two—and thus we see the undeniable role of commodity economics (Kapstein 2006, 18).



Map 1. Major trade routes from Sichuan to Easternmost Tibet: 1. Han dynasty route, 56/57 C.E. (Yingjing County); 2. Yajiageng route, c. 500 C.E. (Dadu River, Moxi, Yajiageng Pass); 3. Ya'an to Xiaojin route (Baoshan, Xiaojin [*Btsan lha rdzong*]); 4. Yanzhou route: Ming dynasty official route, 1397 (Tianquan to Yanzhou [today's Lan'an], Dadu River); 5. Big route (*Dalu*): Qing dynasty official route, 1708 (Ya'an, Yingjing, Qingxi, Sanjiao, Feiyueling Pass, Hualinping, Luding); 6. Ma'an shan route, early 1700s; 7. Small route (*xiaolu*), 1939 (Ya'an, Tianquan, Erlang Shan, Luding; this is today's motor vehicle road from Ya'an to Luding and Kangding). *Source*: Created by Patrick Booz and Rémi Chaix, based on data from NASA's Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM).

The products of the Sichuan Basin, which fed the trade with Tibet, took many forms in the preparation and packaging of these riches for the journey to Kham. Different counties had different products based on their respective ecological, material, cultural, and technical endowments, which allowed them to provide goods and products that Tibetans and other ethnic groups in the border area wanted. These commodities fulfilled both local and long-distance demands. The main items included tea, silk brocade, and other textiles, but also dozens of other goods, such as *khata* (silk ceremonial scarves), high-quality ink, jewelry (*zhubao*), porcelain and china vessels, all types of cloth and dyes, paper products, shoes, tobacco, opium, foodstuffs and grains (particularly wheat and rice for wealthy Tibetans, and

also Chinese garrisons), items of daily use (padlocks, hardware, toiletries, needles, combs, mirrors, buttons, writing brushes), and later matches, wristwatches, pistols, rifles, and ammunition. Of special value were metal products: copper and iron goods (*tongtie*), tools, tin utensils, knives, iron plowshares, copper bottles (for heating wine), kettles, pots, bowls, tea caddies, and many other day-to-day metal items. The different border counties of Sichuan funneled such products to the appropriate, or accessible, roads for the journey to Eastern Tibet, primarily the two towns of Kangding and Songpan.⁶

The common understanding of a tea–horse trade had validity and usefulness at certain times. But in the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644), and especially during the Qing (1644–1911), the border trade, called *chama hushi* (Ch. tea–horse exchange), should more correctly be called *chatu jiaoliu* (Ch. tea–local products trade)—that is, the constellation of arrangements, interactions, and trading of tea for Tibetan goods. This often-overlooked transition to *chatu jiaoliu* had huge implications, for it meant that large volumes of desired, tradable Tibetan items, heretofore adjuncts to the horse trade, now began to find their full potential on the scale of value. Musk, medicinal herbs, gold bullion, deer antlers, pelts, skins, yak tails, wool, and many other products were gathered and processed throughout Kham, traded primarily for tea, and then transported east to China.

More than a dozen routes existed between China and Tibet in the Sichuan region; it is revealing to note these varied lines of communication through time and their special characteristics, which account for the diversity of roads. The destinations of goods and the distances involved prompted probes for trails of efficiency and least difficulty. Because of the mountainous terrain and vast landscapes, there have never been easy transecting routes in the geographic domain of the barrier range, but we see that both nature and man-made efforts combined to make routes workable. Against this background, we can begin to evaluate the cat’s cradle of trade routes by first looking at the land. The risks of adhering to a misleading environmental determinism are always present, yet one must understand the geography, orography, valleys, passes, hydrology, weather, geology, and routes in the mountains that can be negotiated by heavily laden humans.

The long interface and merging of Tibetan areas with non-Tibetan neighbors to the east extends from northern Burma nearly to Inner Mongolia. This complicated topography is the geographic platform for investigating trade and trade routes on the frontier, and the existence of long-standing plateau contact with China, for these regions of easternmost Tibet, “could and never can escape their locational proximity to China and can never be neglected in terms of potential economic integration” (van Spengen 2000, 35). Medical anthropologist

Mona Schrempf has researched the northern areas of this interface, specifically the trading center of Songpan. Lessons learned from her investigation show both differences and similarities to the Kangding routes, which carried a much larger volume of trade. Schrempf describes an ever-changing sociopolitical world in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands and engages with the area in a number of ways—geographical, multiethnic, and historical—through an interpretation of Hwa shang, a historical character famous for defending Chinese Chan Buddhism against an Indian monk who spoke on behalf of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism in a debate in Tibet in 793. Hwa shang represents Tibetan relations with Chinese authorities. In emphasizing the varied legitimizations of the long-standing political connections between China and Tibet, Schrempf also reveals the continuities in trade (Schrempf 2006, 7).⁷ This search for stability was at the center of the Ya’an–Kangding economic exchange as well (Schrempf 2006, 1–3, 20).

Historian Jack Patrick Hayes, also researching Songpan, emphasizes how the surrounding regions were linked both to one another and to the greater Chinese economy. Songpan was an early and vital entrance point for Chinese goods, administrators, and armies, as well as a site for commodity convergence. Here, the broader Tibetan and Chinese worlds met at a node of three major trade routes (Hayes 2010). Another treatment of the northern zone, by anthropologist and historian Marie-Paule Hille, cites the trade relations of the Xidaotang Sufis, whose religious, moral, and socioeconomic organization stood firmly as their source of success with Tibet and trade. Pragmatically, they used highland and lowland products, as with the Sichuan counties, and established long-standing relationships with individuals and monasteries, also like the main trading houses in Kangding. Their goal was to find and maintain permanent contacts, not short-term profit. This closely matches the underlying motivation and ethos of the Kangding trade (Hille 2015, 180–186).

This central route from Ya’an to Kangding crystallized in a small geographical area the main problems and solutions of the commodity trade. Kangding itself was strategically important because it lay at the convergence of major roads going to Sichuan, Yunnan, and Central Tibet, with numerous branch routes into Kham. The same can be said of Songpan to the north, though on a smaller scale, with trails primarily linked to Ngawa (Aba), Gyarong, Kokonor, broader Amdo, and finally reaching Jyekundo (Yushu), Nagchu, and Lhasa. In short, the unfolding of trade should be seen within the wider context of Chinese and Tibetan interaction and from a long-term geohistorical perspective. Geographer Wim van Spengen’s assertions of “the inseparability of geography and history” and the fact that “certain themes

and regions command a higher interest at certain times than others” have poignancy here (van Spengen 2000, 35).

The earliest historical record we have for a road from the Chinese counties to the Tibetan zone of Eastern Kham goes back to 56 C.E., when Han dynasty militarists constructed a route through today’s Yingjing County to the border range. This shows that sometimes the purpose of a road is primarily coercion and secondarily trade. The building of the road was done as a show of force, confirming anthropologist Thomas Barfield’s observation that routes have been used to intimidate or force alliances or to compel trade (1989, 249). The road, strictly controlled by soldiers and officials, and for sanctioned trade only, allowed access to the border zones and projected Chinese power. It fell into disuse after the collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 C.E. (Barfield 1989).⁸

A longer route, easier to follow, dates back some 1,500 years. It progressed south-southwest from the populated areas of Chengdu and Ya’an, along the river valley of the Dadu to Hanyuan, then west and north into easternmost Kham and along ancient trails to Kangding via Moxi and the Yajiageng Pass. This is a good example of a natural route, long though it was, that relied on a river valley for penetration and the lowest mountain pass to reach the desired destination. At times, one must also look at human geography and belief systems to further understand roadways, movement, and trade.

Familiarity with Tibet allows identification of pilgrimage routes, linked to religious and geomantic power places and sacred mountains. In the case of Kham and the Sino-Tibetan borders, main trails crossing the Ma’an Shan Pass and Feiyueling Pass fulfilled such a position in the minds of Tibetans for a thousand years because of holy Emei Mountain in Sichuan Province, *loco sacro* of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra (Tib. Kun-tu bzang-po, Ch. Pu Xian) (Hargett 2006). Commodity exchange and commerce at all levels also occurred on these pilgrim paths, where religion and trade intermingled. For Tibetans, the opening of such trading routes—indeed, the opening of all pathways—is both material and spiritual. Tibetologist Charles Ramble (1997) has commented on these dual themes and has also shown how, for Tibetans if not Chinese, the creation of new routes involved the taming of wilderness by actual and symbolic subjugation of its harmful and demonic forces.

Any survey of a regional trade map, or a walk across the land itself, reveals that—apart from the main points of departure and destination and related connecting lines of communication—there will invariably be gaps in the distribution of routes. Generally speaking, and except in truly remote areas where the frontier has its own frontier, people live in these interstices, and secondary towns and markets stand in seeming isolation. So there is a

calling for and reasons for secondary and tertiary routes that cover these gaps in the topographic map. Local people, local needs, and local transport come to the fore, and careful investigation can identify these lesser-known, but nevertheless locally vital, routes. The clearest example of such a road in Sichuan, dating back centuries, goes from Ya'an to Baoxing and on into the Khampa-Ngawa regions of Xiaojin, Jinchuan, and Danba. There are also many others.

New or expanded routes took hold when new types of transport imposed themselves, such as the transition from foot to horses and mules, or when the growth in trading volume demanded a larger or wider road, where horses could pass two abreast. A definitive example of this occurred in the eighteenth century, when an officially sanctioned road demanded enlargement (see below). The introduction of carts, and much later motor vehicles, also required expansion. Hand in hand with these factors is always the availability of local and imported labor to undertake the building of new roads or the widening of old roads. The social life of roads and trails is affected by many factors that alter their configuration and use. More direct, yet more difficult, shortcuts that aspired to shave off hours of transport time and sometimes saved one or two days of walking came into common use if genuinely efficacious and worth the extra expenditure of energy for time saved. The Xin Lu (New Road)—which traversed from Yingjing and crossed Hanyuan County in an arrow-like line to find a breach in the barrier range, finally reaching Lengqi was such a shortcut, dating to about 1890. The prominence of certain trade routes could fluctuate because of positional shifts in production, or even a change in consumer demand or other productive capacities. Good examples are the tea-producing counties of Mingshan and Qionglai (Qiongzhou), which, because of economic declines in the Ya'an-Kangding market in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, shifted their silk production and tea output to the northern trade route, which led from Duijiangyan to Songpan (see A. D. 1883).⁹

Historian John Flower expands the idea of a road's meaning and potential, and the innate correspondence between road building, power, and hybridity, which is defined as the "material and spiritual forces that form the essence of roads" (2004, 651). Echoing Braudel, he states that road building advances material civilization and, for good or ill, opens different societies to different potentialities, where integration and sometimes confrontation can take place at different levels. The following observation resonates from ancient times to the present: "Roads are symbolically charged, they both are and stand for economic development itself and are very concrete embodiments of hope" (Flower 2004, 651–652). They also can be the sharp point of expansion and dominance. Road building, commitment of resources, and

the permanent presence of loyal personnel give legitimacy to the builder and reinforce territorial claims or other aspirations of the instigator (see below).

Hazards and dangers of the road took many forms, from earthquakes and landslides to robbers and bandits. Traders and travelers avoided certain routes because of disease, or wars and violence. Eastern Tibet faced such conditions most glaringly during the eighteenth-century Jinchuan wars and the nineteenth-century uprising of Gönpo Namgyel.¹⁰ Smugglers' routes flourished during periods when tea was monopolized by the Sichuan government, such as during the Ming dynasty and under Zhao Erfeng in the late Qing (*Yingjing wenshi* 1989, 13). Such smuggling of tea and silk by independent merchants took place especially in the Tianquan-Luding area.

This brief survey of road types leads to the most significant of all, the “official routes” that commanded attention at important historical moments.

The Official Routes (*Guandao*)

Routes that received official recognition, government funding for building and maintenance, or special status for officials, armies, and postal systems endured with higher quality and regularity, so long as the funding and recognition held. Well-known examples in Europe include the various categories of Roman roads and, in Eastern Europe, the official route to the West opened by Peter the Great of Russia in the late seventeenth century. In China, the sanctioned “official routes” (*guandao*) were based on geopolitical concerns and trade or military opportunism. These routes came into existence, or were affirmed, by official decree from the emperor himself. This happened twice in direct connection with trade routes in western Sichuan that led to Tibet. The motives and impetus for creating the two Sichuan *guandao*, though not identical and separated by three hundred years, were nevertheless linked by three overarching themes: Chinese desire for trade expansion; such trade combined with territorial encroachment; and use of both of the former motivations to exert greater control over Tibetans and Tibetan commercial and military activities in the border zones.

We know that the all-important brick tea, created by the Chinese, was a commodity of destination—an object intended by its producers solely for export and exchange; the Chinese never boiled or drank it, and in fact belittled this form of tea. For the Tibetans, the highly desired brick tea was entirely an inward-directed trade (Booz 2011, 27–30). As far back as the eleventh century, Yazhou (Ya’an) and the surrounding tea counties became the primary suppliers of tea to Tibet. Most was transported by wheelbarrow to Shaanxi and Gansu in the north, but a considerable amount, perhaps 15 percent of the total volume at that time and up

until the seventeenth century, went to local Tibetans—that is, to Khampas. Tradition required that these men travel the long distances eastward from Kham, cross the Dadu River, traverse the barrier range, and finally arrive at Yazhou to conduct the tea–horse business. It was here that Chinese officials scrutinized Tibetan horses for purchase and negotiated a price with the Tibetan traders. So, for centuries, Tibetans with their pack animals were compelled to travel this arduous, time-consuming route into Chinese territory in order to secure tea (Sheng 1994, 72). Such a long-standing and strictly enforced agreement made sense for the Chinese, because it neutralized the Tibetans deep inside Chinese territory and allowed factories and officials to closely observe and tightly control the tea transactions. In addition, with Tibetans arriving at its doorstep, the government escaped the responsibility of transporting the huge loads, as was necessitated by tea shipments to the north. But for the Tibetans, such arrangements were cumbersome and odious.

A series of events in the late fourteenth century deal with a trade route—the first *guandao* to come into existence—that stands as a prime example for understanding the unique history of an individual road. This route’s history coherently shows the geography, practicalities, rationale, and justification for the expansion of trade, and presages events that came to the fore much later in the creation of Sichuan’s second *guandao*. This first “official road” on the Kham border resulted from the unsatisfactory conditions described above, and we can see that it succeeded in its goals.

The advantages of geographic proximity and a narrowing locus of trade—avoiding the long, difficult shipments of tea and other goods to Gansu and Shaanxi in the northwest—combined with the realization that horses (albeit of a lower quality) could be acquired, made real the prospects for Kham to become a ready and practical trading partner. These aspirations took form by shifting the trade marts directly westward into Tibetan territory. But how was such an arrangement to be put into place with the Tibetans, who were seen as unruly and dangerous by the Chinese? The strategic barrier range passes of Ma’an Shan and Feiyueling (2,830 meters) stood as military outposts for the control of tea; no tea was allowed to be carried beyond the passes into Kham, thus forcing Tibetans to continue to enter China to get their tea (Yang 2006, 126).

Officials and traders between Tibet and Sichuan considered the Dadu River to be the functional border between the two regions; Chinese people rarely, if ever, crossed into the “barbarian lands” (Ch. *fandi*) on the west bank, but Tibetans had to travel east across the river to conduct business (He 1991, 9). This tiresome method of getting tea in Yazhou frustrated not only the Tibetans, but alert Chinese officials and merchants saw it as a hindrance to the

overall value and purpose of the tea–horse trade. But, first things first. In 1387, a local Sichuan official named Gao Weishan reported to the emperor six advantages to establishing a new trading route to a new trading center farther to the west. This marked the potential role of Yanzhou (today’s Lan’an, not to be confused with Yazhou), whose position on the western face of the barrier range made it a radical and attractive alternative. Gao’s intention in writing was to highlight the practicalities of the new route, and his first point, perhaps to curry favor with the emperor, dealt with security (i.e., keeping the Tibetans under control). After that he got down to the nuts and bolts of what the new enterprising vision would entail:

1. If we set up a market in Yanzhou, then the barbarians (Ch. *fanmin*) will depend on us, and thus not be out of control. 2. We should ask the people of Diaomen’s *liufan zhaotaosi* [“military organization of the six barbarian offices; tribal areas”] to make pressed black tea [Ch. *wucha*] only, and transport it to Yanzhou to exchange for horses. [The advantage would be to have all tea made into bricks for the Tibetans; the transport distance was short.] 3. Compared to exchanging horses in Yazhou, this site in Yanzhou will be much more profitable. 4. Dajianlu [Dartsedo] will be close to this horse trading site [*yimaqu*]; if we do so, the *fanmin* must all come to us. 5. If we set up a place to exchange horses in Yanzhou, then there must be lots of *fanmin* who will come here to buy tea, and we can double the tax, or raise it several times more, and they will bring more products. 6. We can fix the road from Diaomen to Yanzhou for the traffic. (Quoted in Zeng and Yang 1989, 18)¹¹

Two years later, officials repeated the main points of this plan to move the tea trade west:

Every year barbarian merchants [Ch. *fanshang*] from Changhexi¹² exchange horses for tea at the Yazhou *chamasi* [tea–horse office]. We give them so much [tea] mainly because the road that those barbarian merchants travel is very far. This is both too far for the barbarian merchants to travel, and gives them too much tea. We should decrease the price of the horses and move the *chamasi* to Yanzhou, and also transport the tea. (Quoted in Li and Liu 1989, 54)

The emperor granted permission, which precipitated the practical development of Yanzhou. The town became a major transshipment center for goods and the proposed benefits were indeed realized. It had a garrison, many tea warehouses, and a market where people conducted the tea–horse trade (*Luding xianxhi* 1999, 611). Yanzhou, being closer to Kangding, shifted the Chinese sphere of influence over the passes into Tibetan territory,¹³ and was good for business because it made travel and trade easier for the enthusiastic Tibetan buyers. It also brought an expanding Chinese population over the barrier range into Kham, steadily assimilating locals and creating the first steps toward annexation of Tibetan territory.

Thus, by the late fourteenth century, the site superseded the long-standing Yazhou arrangement, making Yanzhou the official tea–horse market of exchange (Ch. *chama hushi*)

(*Yingjing Wenshi* 1989, 1–2). The route from Diaomen (Tianquan) carried tea from the Chinese factories over the Yanzhou Pass and into Kham. The central government declared this to be the only permissible way to travel westward, and thus it became the main route to Tibet from Sichuan, proceeding directly west across the Dadu River to Kangding and onward to Litang, Batang, Chamdo, and finally Lhasa (Wu 1995, 28). In 1397, an imperial proclamation designated this as one of only two Chinese official roads to Tibet (Li and Liu 1989, 55–56). The other was from China’s northwestern Shaanxi Province.

This earlier of the two official initiatives to establish a road west from Sichuan to Kham was based on close, direct contact with Tibetans under controlled conditions and circumstances as they pertained to the tea–horse exchange. In the Ming dynasty, the emphasis was on the trade mart; for the second *guandao*, during the Qing, it was trade after the fact of military conquest. But in both cases the emperor considered the official designation along this sector of the Sino-Tibetan border to be vital. There was a saying—“To control Tibet, first pacify Kham” (*zhi zang bi xian an kang*)—and this became an expression of China’s imperial intention and might (Li 2004).

The background of the Qing-dynasty *guandao* is important because it lays out the reasons for direct Manchu invasion of Eastern Kham. The Manchus considered everything east of Dartsedo (Kangding), but practically east of the Dadu River, to be part of the “inner territory of the empire” (Ch. *neidi*) (Ahmad 1970, 81). This question of boundaries is vital, and Jack Hayes notes that both economic and political boundaries were fuzzy, prompting the Qing to clear up this unsettled state. And Perdue adds: “The story of the eighteenth-century Qing empire is of an effort to seal off this ambiguous, threatening frontier experience once and for all by incorporating it within the fixed boundaries of a distinctly defined space, and by drawing lines that clearly demarcated separate cultures” (2005, 41, 42).

The Manchu presence in Eastern Kham from 1699 or 1700 onward irrevocably altered many aspects of border life, including the brick tea trade to Tibet, further concentrating it along this central border route that linked Ya’an to Kangding (Dartsedo). The Tibetans, however, felt strongly about their claims, as expressed by Shakabpa. “Dartsedo has been a part of Tibet since ancient times.... This region has been left as a territory where laws were only loosely enforced, without collecting taxes, and left broadly within Tibetan territory” (Shakabpa 2010, 1:91). He goes on to blame others for the conflict over control. “Nevertheless, because of the activities of certain Chinese and Tibetan leaders, they argued that Dartsedo was Chinese territory, and furthermore some Chinese claimed that even Minyak [Tib. *Mi nyag*] belonged to China” (Xiageba 1976, 265, 266). Shakabpa’s summing

up of the situation shows the ambiguous status of the area, with its potential for conflict (Ahmad 1970, 310, 322). Shortly thereafter, crisis did come, and this shows in stark relief the importance of routes, and above all the power of a bridge.

The actual presence of the Qing in the border area before 1700 included only minor outposts; they had no presence in Kangding, though designs of China and Tibet were converging on the town. The Qing believed that having a direct hand in the area would bring Eastern Kham increasingly under their control, with the larger goal of neutralizing the Tibetans and promoting territorial expansion. Road building was a central element of this plan, with the goal of uninterrupted access from Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan, all the way to Kangding.

The Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1722) stated: “Tibetans love the small profit very much. When collecting tax, do not impose tax on them, just on merchants of our country.... [We] pay no attention to profit; if the tax is heavy, the Tibetans will not come” (*Kangding xianzhi* 1995, 163). This was part of an overall policy to win over the Tibetans, with concessions for trade, but with Qing dominance—and, specifically, Qing oversight and administration of the trading routes—as the goal. In 1699, the Sichuan governor (Ch. *xunfu*) Bei Henuo, reported to Kangxi on matters in the Kangding area, indicating a healthy environment for trade (“Xikang jingji de zhongxin” 1994).

Until that time, Chinese rarely ventured beyond the Dadu River to Kangding. The discussion above of Yanzhou as the first *guandao* affirms this—there was no flourishing of commerce farther to the west, beyond the Dadu; no bridge spanned the river at that time. Yet tea was highly desired by the monasteries and monks of Kangding, who would be happy to do business. Once again, as in the late fourteenth century, Chinese merchants saw the advantage of moving the markets westward. Petitioning the emperor for the right to establish Kangding, 50 kilometers west of Yanzhou, as the main trade mart was an obvious next step.

In 1693, Sangye Gyatso, the Tibetan regent representing the sixth Dalai Lama (b. 1683), wrote to Kangxi seeking explicit approval to open the road and “to set up a market” (Ch. *jiaoshi zhishi*) at Dartsedo (Yang 2006, 126–127). Manchu interest in the area, piqued by security and trade concerns, led to increasing involvement (Ahmad 1970, 63, 322).¹⁴ As Dai Yingcong emphasizes, the years 1696–1697 were pivotal in Qing frontier strategy: “The magnitude of the Tibet question was tremendously elevated” (2010, 8).

In 1699, events spilled over into large-scale violence. The Battle of Dartsedo ended the short war (1699–1701), which placed the Qing in a position of undisputed strength in the border localities. Tang Xishun quickly took military control and stabilized trade (Yang 2006,

126).¹⁵ This is remembered as the moment when strong Chinese involvement in Kangding began; apart from military and political control, it prepared the way for roadways and expansion of the tea trade on a major scale (“Xikang jingji de zhongxin” 1994, 420). In 1702, the Qing court formally called Kangding (Dartsedo) “the trade market between Tibetan and Han” (*zanghan shangmao shichang*), and the emperor dispatched officials there to oversee the tea trade.¹⁶ The Qing seized the moment to embark on projects to secure their position and guarantee better conditions for both military control and trade expansion.

First, they built a broad, 60-kilometer road through Zanli, Pengba, Lengzhuguan, Wasigou, and up the side valley leading to Kangding (“Xikang jingji de zhongxin” 1994, 419). Second, Sichuan officials began planning and building the first bridge over the Dadu River. This bridge, known to Chinese as Luding Qiao and to Tibetans as Chagzamka,¹⁷ proved symbolically and practically to be the culmination and ultimate consolidation of Qing power. Transport, trade, communication, and military mobility into Kham were now theirs.

After the bridge’s completion and the rationalization of the routes from Chengdu to Yazhou (Ya’an), which linked all transport to the new roads west of the river, Kangxi used the occasion to proclaim the Manchu successes; to comment on history, transport, geography, and bridge construction; and to praise the road-and-bridge engineers. The emperor boasted that “thousands of *li* of territory have now become part of my map,” all made possible by the roads and bridge, which combined to gain the status of *guandao*, the official route to Tibet:

Therefore, the road to Dajianlu [Dartsedo, Kangding] goes through. If one went to Dajianlu, it was necessary to cross the Lushui [Dadu River], but there was no bridge to go across.... With the completed bridge, all communications—orders and post mail, vehicles [*che*] of the military, the civilians and the merchants—all can go smoothly and quickly, instead of being worried sick by obstacles along the way. I feel deeply satisfied about the picture [*tu*] of the bridge. Thus I honor it with the name Lu Ding [“Lu River is pacified”]. (Gao 1990, 521)

The consequences of the successful spanning of the Dadu River in 1706 cannot be overemphasized. Before this major act, the Dadu existed as the de facto delimiting border between China and Tibet. Luding Bridge now became the link in an uninterrupted road, wide enough for horses and armies, connecting central Sichuan and the tea counties to Kangding in Kham.¹⁸ This well-maintained route across the bridge allowed the volume of all trade, and tea especially, to grow greatly.¹⁹

Regular delivery of food, particularly rice, supported the Chinese garrisons and growing administration (“Xikang jingji de zhongxin” 1994, 420).²⁰ Events such as the

dispatch of a Qing army to Central Tibet in 1719 to expel the Dzungar Mongolians,²¹ and the placement and support of *ambans* (Manchu high officials) in Lhasa, beginning in 1727, were greatly helped by the bridge and Kangding's function as a springboard to the west.²²

It should not be assumed that the Qing initiated or created this trade route to Kangding. Indeed, contact and trade had been under way for centuries, despite the difficulties of traversing the Dadu River using primitive ferries and cable crossings (Ch. *liusuo*). The trails themselves were rough and rugged. A report to Emperor Kangxi reflects on the pre-Qing situation:

Because of the revolts in the late Ming, the merchants wanted to avoid these wars. So they risked using the cable crossings to get across the Dadu River, and they took tea and other products with them to Dajianlu [Kangding]. At precisely this same time, some Tibetan lamas arrived in Dajianlu. They began to do business and the population increased, so later the administrative position and title of *yingguan* was set up to control the trade. (“Xikang jingji de zhongxin” 1994, 419)

This reference is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, by describing the state of affairs, it shows that interchange did take place, though the Chinese only rarely ventured beyond the Dadu River to Kangding. Direct trade was limited. Second, the risks of travel and transport are made apparent by the use of dangerous cable crossings; no bridge spanned the Dadu at this time. Social chaos and desperation motivated merchants to make the attempt. Third, they took tea, as the main item of trade, directly to the Tibetans—a most welcome occurrence for the latter party as this eliminated the need to travel far eastward to collect the tea.

After the opening of the Luding Bridge in 1706, the Qing capitalized on all of these elements: route consolidation and the needs for road building, expansion of trade (especially tea), imposition of tax checkpoints, and rationalization of transport that addressed the needs of the military and the shipment of commodities. Such improvements highlight the motivations for economic, military, and political expansion. Along the main trail passed not only tea traders but also a range of men and occupations. These Chinese pioneers into the border zone and beyond represent, especially after the year 1706, the start of significant Han presence in areas west of the barrier range. By 1731, administrators, combined with some five hundred soldiers and two hundred clerks, brought the number of Qing employees living in Kangding to eight or nine hundred people (Wu 1990, 31). Trade, penetration, and control thrived under the new stability of the official road.

Conclusion

This article focuses the types and diversity of trade routes in western Sichuan, up and down the barrier range between China and Kham/Ngawa, with special attention paid to the official routes twice established by imperial China during the Ming and Qing dynasties. It also discusses the reasons why such a variety of routes existed, the commodities transported, and the larger impulses that played a part in Sino-Tibetan relations. Importantly, the article charts the change from tea-horse barter exchanges to a more varied tea-local products economy, as the market town of Kangding developed robustly in the eighteenth century and provided an outlet for Khampa's abundant resources, particularly medicines, wool, gold, musk, and finished products. And in these exchanges, intimately tied by trade and commodities and sharing of the same roads and networks of contact, frequently little or no detailed comprehension existed of the role or activities of the other side. How much, and in what ways, did the Chinese and Tibetans actually understand each other?

Engagement with the existing literature shows examples of parallel development or similar solutions under different circumstances, as varied sites and times actually shine light on the main China-Tibet exchanges, from Ya'an to Kangding, and how this became the most successful route for nearly two hundred years (1730–1930). Yet during this long period a dual set of circumstances intermingled: local adaptations and solutions to the special requirements of regional goods and routes, and, at the same time, the vagaries of larger sociopolitical concerns originating on both sides of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. The two sides knew of the intimate relationship between roads and power. For the Qing Empire, this dyad, combined with bridge building, ultimately resulted in a good, functioning road from Chengdu to Kangding.

The reasons for creating or expanding the *guandao* embodied China's desire for increased trade, and with this trade the potential for economic, military, political, and territorial expansion. The ultimate goal was penetration into the Tibetan border areas and beyond, exemplified by the phrase "To control Tibet, first pacify Kham." But for all involved in trade—including Khampa traders and trading houses, monastery merchants, Chinese producers and wholesalers, Muslim long-distance caravans, and smaller middlemen of all stripes—prudence was beneficial, and the *summum bonum* was to keep the tea moving and the trade routes open. In this search for stability and the long-term goal of securing permanent and reliable trading partners, we see how the many different routes, through time, permitted interaction between Tibetans and Chinese.

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Notes

- 1 Proverbially considered one of the “four pillars of life”—*tsampa* (barley flour), meat, butter, and tea—tea was the only traditional staple of Tibet that needed to be imported.
- 2 The fifteenth-century *Chronicle of China and Tibet* (Dpal ’byor bzang po [15th c.] 1979) includes two chapters on tea.
- 3 Tea went from a luxury to a necessity and became the indispensable drink of everyday life for reasons of hydration, nutrition, digestion, social interaction, hospitality, and religious functions.
- 4 There are many spurious publications, particularly in Yunnan Province, dealing with the so-called “tea–horse routes.” The reasons for this are usually commercial, including provincial justifications for the expansion of the tourism industry.
- 5 Tea from Yunnan and southern Shaanxi played only a minor role compared to that from Sichuan.
- 6 In all, some 120 trade items passed back and forth, making Dartsedo and Songpan essential “break of bulk” centers for the dispersal of goods into the Tibetan interior and—heading eastward—for Tibetan goods to reach China.
- 7 The local Shar ba (Tibetan inhabitants of the greater Songpan area) traded with Chinese merchants from Songpan and certain Tibetan nomad groups, mainly exchanging Chinese tea for horses, wool, and other animal products from the Tibetan highlands.
- 8 The route was largely created along steep riverbanks, and thus needed to be constructed with horizontal plank technology in many places. This road proved to be a Han engineering show of force to warn and awe the tribes of the borderland. Trade remained a minor element along this heavily garrisoned road.
- 9 Due to its position as the northernmost of Sichuan’s five tea-producing counties, Qionglai successfully split its affiliation by producing tea for both the southern market, via Dartsedo, and the northern market, via Songpan. When Qionglai realized it could no longer function and compete in the Kham business, it produced and transported tea only for the northwest markets of Amdo, Gansu, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang.
- 10 See, especially, Tsomu (2014), as well as the article by Tenzin Jinba in this issue of *Cross-Currents*, about the Jinchuan wars that took place in the Gyalrong region.
- 11 See also *Kangding xianzhi* (1995, 175).
- 12 This was the area west of the Dadu River, which included Dartsedo.
- 13 Sichuan Province’s direct movement westward reshaped economic and power relations.
- 14 In 1696, the Sichuan governor, Yu Yangchi, went on a mission to the border area and to meet Tibetan officials. He reported: “From Ming times, to now, it has been the territory which the tribal chieftains of the inner territory have controlled. It is appropriate [therefore] to enter it in the [Chinese] Register of Population [Ch. *bantu*]. But the Tibetans rely on the tea-trade for their living, and have lived there for many years. (They should be allowed to remain)... On receipt of this Memorial, the Board of Dependencies proposed that the Emperor permit the tea-trade as usual” (Ahmad 1970, 227). Three years later, in 1696, a seemingly passive administrative event—the

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- entering of Dartsedo in the *Population Register* (Ch. *bantu*)—implied annexation, which the emperor sanctioned.
- 15 See also Zeng Wenqiong and Yang Jiaming (1989, 17), citing *Kangding xian tuzhi* [Local gazetteer of Kangding] (1992).
- 16 Being so soon after the war, the Qing also clearly cared about political developments in the area.
- 17 To this day, many Tibetans believe mistakenly that Luding Bridge was constructed by Thangtong Gyalpo (Tib. Thang stong rgyal po), the famous fifteenth-century iron bridge builder. *Chagzamka* (Tib. Lcags zam kha) means simply “iron bridge.”
- 18 After the bridge’s construction, Dartsedo changed from a place with few permanent buildings to a proper town.
- 19 The tea trade volume reached 12.3 million *jin* (16 million pounds) during Emperor Yongzheng’s reign, a figure unsurpassed even in the late Qing and Republican periods (Liu 1989, 125–140).
- 20 The Qing in 1717 “established post stations and *liangtai* [grain officers] in Dartsedo, Nyachukha, Lithang and Bathang” (see Tsomu 2014, 84n180). In 1719, the Manchu advanced by the southern route to Lhasa by way of Dartsedo, Litang, Batang, and Chamdo. For support, they set up further grain offices and eighty-seven military post stations (Ch. *tangzhan*).
- 21 “In 1719, when a Qing general was sent to secure the lines of communication in Kham for a Qing expedition to Central Tibet, the Qing managed to place other parts of Kham under Qing control for the first time. In 1725, the areas to the west of the Yangtse-Mekong divide in Kham were placed under the Lhasa government, while east of the divide was governed by the indigenous rulers” (Tsomu 2014, 76). “In the third year of Yongzheng (1725), large areas of Kham were placed under the control of the governor-general of Sichuan Province” (Tsomu 2014, 34, 35, citing Gu et al, *Qing shilu zangzu shiliao* [1982, 311–312]).
- 22 According to Lin Hsiao-ting, “Generally speaking, from 1720 until the late eighteenth century, the Qing gradually increased its authority in Tibet, intervening in the case of third-party invasions of Tibet (1720 and 1792) and internal disorders (1728 and 1750). Each intervention resulted in an increase in Qing administrative control over Tibetan affairs” (Lin 2006, 8).
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