

Role of Brick Tea Trade in the Formation of the Unitary Multi-Ethnic Country of China

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In the Chinese history, no commodity has had a greater impact upon both China and the world other than tea. In the formation of the unitary multi-ethnic country of China, the brick tea trade ran through every stage of the country's history since the Tang and Song Dynasties as a commercial activity through which the Central Plains dynasties exchanged tea from the Han regions for horses and other commodities from nomads in the northern grasslands and Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Throughout the brick tea trade that continued for one thousand years, all ethnic groups were involved, consciously or passively, in the production, processing, transport and marketing of the tea, and collaborated in all trading chains and links, thus creating the largest trading activity in the history of China or even the world and exerting a significant influence on the formation of the unitary multi-ethnic country of China as a result.

Keywords: brick tea, unitary multi-ethnic country, tea-horse trade, China

As is implied by the name, brick tea is tea sold specifically to those northern frontiers ethnic groups and differs from that sold in the interior regions of China in terms of raw materials, production process, package and transport mode. As a kind of black tea, it is mostly of old tea, usually made with 3-5 buds per leaf and mixed with stems of a tea tree. It is processed specially (e.g., via pile fermentation) and supplied specifically to northern ethnic minorities and Russians. Black tea is produced mainly in Sichuan (the south-route and west-route brick tea), Hunan (Anhua black tea), Hubei (old green tea), Yunnan (brick tea), Guangxi (Liupu tea), and Shaanxi (Fu tea) Provinces, etc. To be more specific, brick tea produced in Ya'an, Tianquan, Mingshan, Xingjing, Guanxian, Shifang, Chongqing, Pingwu, etc. in Sichuan Province, and that produced in Fohai, Yunnan are supplied to Tibet, Ganzi and Aba in western Sichuan, Qinghai, Gannan in Gansu, and other Tibetan-related areas, where it is used to make butter tea favored by the Tibetans. Black tea produced in Yiyang, Hunan, etc. is supplied to Xinjiang and the Mongolian grasslands, and green brick tea produced in Zhaoliqiao, Hubei to Inner and Outer Mongolia, Russia, etc. Due to climatic and geographic restrictions, tea cannot be produced in non-acid soil areas north of the Qinling Mountains and the Huai River, so frontier ethnic peoples have to obtain tea via trading with inland Chinese tea producing areas. Therefore, the developing history of brick tea is also a history of economic and cultural exchanges between tea farmers and the nomads.

Never has been a commodity in the history of China played such an important and lasting role in maintaining the relationship between the central government and frontier ethnic groups. Economically speaking, tea plays a crucial role in the complementary effect of the two lifestyles of farming and stockbreeding; politically, tea has been an important means by which the past central authorities could control and stabilize the frontiers; culturally, tea's far-reaching social and cultural influence lies in that it

could be incorporated into the daily life of frontier ethnic peoples, thus constituting an organic part of their cultures.

SPREADING OF TEA FROM INLAND CHINA TO THE NORTHERN GRASSLANDS AND QINGHAI-TIBET PLATEAU

No definite conclusion has been reached on when the tea drinking habit started in China. Tea residue is found in the rotten and carbonized grain relic unearthed from outer burial pit K15 of the mausoleum of Emperor Jing of the Western Han Dynasty at the east end of Xianyang, Shaanxi, as the earliest real tea remains discovered archaeologically to date. Archaeologists have assumed it to be the emperor's tea but can never get to know how it was drunk, whether it was used as food or a drug, and where it was from. It is certain that the tea drinking habit was not popular in the Han Dynasty. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Han people in southern China, including Sichuan, were drinking tea generally, all by extensive decoction, by which tea was mixed with congee, orange peel, ginger, etc. and boiled before being drunk. There is no literature on whether picked tealeaves were stir-fried or otherwise processed (Liu 2002:5-9). Existing archaeological materials have provided no conclusive clue on tealeaf processing. There are many disputes in the tea community about tea drinking before the Tang Dynasty due to the lack of historical materials or doubts in existing materials. It is certain that in the Tang Dynasty, tea drinking became an art, and tealeaf processing techniques were refined, as evidenced by *The Classic of Tea* written by Lu Yu, a Tang tea sage. As can be seen from the line "The trader leaves her for profit and went to Fuliang to buy tea two months ago" in *The Lute Verse* by Bai Juyi, tea was produced on a large scale and had already become a commodity in the Tang period and enjoyed by certain consumer groups. Since the emergence of tea tasting by fine decoction and slow sipping, shapes of tea gradually transformed from large leaves, pieces and cakes to fine powder and loose bars in the Song Dynasty, when tea drinking became a popular vogue in the Han society, and tea drinking was part of the daily life of both the upper class and common people, as can be proved by the famous Song minister Wang Anshi's writing, "Tea has become a necessity for almost everyone, just like other indispensable items, such as rice and salt." (Wang 2006:63)

Those northern nomads began to drink tea quite late. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties, they still drank buttermilk mainly – a processed dairy product. According to the *Luoyang Jialan Records* written in the Northern Wei Dynasty, those who liked to drink tea were mostly Han people in the south, while non-Han people that dominated the Central Plains and Han people influenced by minority customs mostly drank buttermilk every day. After Wang Su, an official of the Southern Qi State, went to the Northern Wei State because of his failure in a political struggle, he changed his diet gradually from rice, fish soup and tea to mutton and buttermilk to cater to the Xianbei nobles. On a banquet, he said that tea was just a slave to buttermilk to play up to the Northern Wei Dynasty's first emperor Tuoba Hong. Supervising Secretary Liu Gao so admired Wang Su that he drank tea every day. The emperor's younger brother, Pengcheng King Yuan Xie, scoffed at this behavior, and satirized that he liked civilian things. Later, the Northern Wei people derogatorily called tea "the slave to buttermilk", so that officials were ashamed of drinking tea on royal and noble banquets (Fan 1978:147-148). Nevertheless, this indicates that in the northern dynasty, drinking tea and buttermilk coexisted. In the context of the reform by Wei Emperor Xiaowen, albeit the Han and Xianbei peoples differed in lifestyles, they were learning from and getting used to each other's culture and customs, with the fusion of farming and nomadic cultures becoming a trend and feature of that time, indicating that Southern Dynasty people who joined Northern Wei or were captured, undoubtedly influenced the culture and customs of the ruling ethnic group of the Xianbei.

In the Tang Dynasty, records on tea trade between northern ethnic minorities and the Central Plains emerged. The Uyghur Khanate that rose by the Orkhon River and ruled the Mongolian Grasslands in the mid-8th century was in peace with the Tang Empire, and twice dispatched troops to help the Tang suppress the An Lushan Rebellion. The Uyghur Khanate had frequent trade with the Tang Empire, mostly exchanging horses for silk and also for tea, as recorded in Lu Yu's *Biography in The New History of Tang*, "Uyghurs drove horses to exchange for tea." (Lu 1975: 5612) But, what was the purpose of this tea trade, as a switch trade with other ethnic groups or for self-drinking? This is not described in historical records. The Feng's

Records written by censor Feng Yan during Tang Emperor Dezong's reign says, "When Uyghurs came in the past, they drove horses and returned with tea. How strange it is!" (Zhao 2005: 52) Thus it can be seen that it was uncommon for northern ethnic groups to drink tea in the Tang period, and that was why even Feng Yan felt it peculiar that the Uyghurs came to interior China for tea.

It was not until the Song Dynasty that northern ethnic groups began to drink tea generally, and tea-horse trade became an important form of material exchange between farmers and nomads. Apart from the trade between the Song Empire and Tibet in the northwest, the Liao and Jin Empires also exchanged for tea with the Song Empire. The Song History-Records of Foods and Commodities writes that, before the Chanyuan Alliance Treaty was signed, there were several frontier markets along the Song-Liao border, including tea trade.

Although there was frontier trade during the first Liao emperor's reign, no government office was set up for this purpose. In 977, frontier markets were opened in Zhen, Yi, Xiong, Ba and Cang Prefectures to trade in aromas, ivories, rhinoceros' horns and tea. But in 987, such trade was banned.¹

That is to say, during the reign of Zhao Kuangyin, first emperor of the Song, there was neither official market nor trade authority between Song and Liao, and trade in this period was mostly nongovernmental. It was not until 977 that five frontier markets were officially set up between Song and Liao. However, before the Chanyuan Alliance Treaty was signed, due to successive wars and conflicts between the two countries these frontier markets were unstable. In 1005 in which the Chanyuan Alliance Treaty was signed, the Song Empire set up three fixed frontier markets in Xiong, Ba and Ansu Prefectures, with another set up later. During the reigns of Song Emperors Renzong and Yingzong, Liao complied with the treaty and trade was uninterrupted.²

Archaeological materials also provide us with extensive physical evidence and present a picture of then tea drinking in the Liao, Jin and Western Xia Empires. Many murals depicting tea drinking have been found in the tombs of Zhang Shiqing's family of the Liao Dynasty in Xiabali Village, Xuanhua District, Hebei Province,³ in which the tea brewers are dressed in Han and Khitan clothing, and the tea boilers, pots, cups, mills and other utensils, and the tea brewing process show that tea drinking was prevalent in the 16 prefectures in the southern Liao Empire. This correlates with the statement of Miao Sui of the Song Empire that "The Khitan people imitate the Han people in clothing and diet" (Chen 1989:65). It is noteworthy that the tea brewing method seen in Liao murals is the same as that of Song, namely stirring, other than mixing tea with fresh milk. Tea brewers are mostly dressed in Han clothing, and tea ware is mostly from Song official kilns (Liu 1996: 2), possibly because the Han people in the Liao and Jin Kingdoms mostly drank tea, and Liao Khitan royal members and nobles were imitating the Song way of tea drinking. Among the Liao Khitan people, tea drinkers were mostly scholar-officials, with common people rarely seen. The Chanyuan Alliance Treaty between Liao and Song signed in 1005 was an important bilateral treaty, specifying that the Song Empire should offer 50,000 kilograms of silver and 200,000 reels of silk to the Liao Empire every year, which should be delivered to Xiong Prefecture. These goods did not include tea, meaning probably that tea was unimportant for the Liao Empire. During Song Emperor Renzong's reign, the Western Xia Empire accepted an annual tribute of 130,000 reels of silk, 2,500 kilograms of silver and 10,000 kilograms of tea from the Song Empire after prolonged warfare. Tea was noteworthy as part of the tribute, proving that tea had become an important daily necessity in the Western Xia Empire. Since the empire occupied areas along the south side of the Great Wall, including the Hexi Corridor bordered by Tibet, it is unclear whether tea was consumed by the Western Xia Empire itself or resold to Tibetan tribes.

Tea drinking was also popular in the Jin Empire, mostly among the Han people. In 1206, the Department of State Affairs reported to the emperor, "Tea is not a daily necessity, but is popular among civilians, especially farmers, and there are many tea houses on street."⁴ "Being popular" indicates that the tea drinking habit was generally seen among all classes of the empire, but mostly among the farming Han people. Jurchen officials ruling the empire thought, "Tea originates from the Song Empire, and is not a daily necessity."⁵ It can be seen that the Jurchen people then did not regard tea as a daily necessity, but a luxury.

Moreover, to cut treasury expenditures and avoid supporting the enemy, the Jin Empire banned tea trade with the Song several times, as *Jin History—Emperor Zhangzong's Primary Chronicle* states, “A tea ban was preliminarily proclaimed in November 1206.” It was even stipulated that officials of rank 7 or above were qualified to drink tea, and tea was banned as a commodity or gift.⁶ Jurchen civilians did not have the tea drinking habit and would only drink it during festivals and weddings due to high tea prices. Hong Hao, Minister of Rites of the Southern Song Dynasty, visited the Jin Empire as an envoy in 1129 and was detained in the Cold Mountain in the hinterland of the Liao Empire for over ten years, hence his familiarity with the Jurchen customs. Songmo Records by him after returning home record a tea drinking scene of Jurchen people on a wedding, “After the wedding, the rich guys began to brew tea, and retained several honored guests to drink it, or decocted fresh milk or butter with crude tea.” (Hong 2019:124) This may be regarded as an earliest record on milk tea or butter tea in Chinese literatures.

In the Yuan Dynasty, the Mongols who ruled the Central Plains lived together with the Han people, and there was a trend of fusion between farming and nomadic cultures. The Mongols created drinks suited to their taste by mixing tea with dairy products. The Yuan people had many ways of tea decoction and drinking, such as wolfberry tea, Yumo tea, Jinzi tea, green tea, fried tea, blue paste tea, Sichuan tea, Xifan tea, rattan tea, child tea and pastry tea (Hu 1986: 58), in which Xifan tea, blue paste tea, fried tea and pastry tea were made by mixing with butter or frying, common ways of tea drinking of northern ethnic groups, which were not only popular among the Mongols, but also accepted by the Han people then and reflected in some Yuan verses. Li Shouqing's *Salvation of Liu Cui* by Monk Yueming states, “Tea waiter, serve pastry tea.” (Li 1996:688) Ma Zhiyuan's *Lyu Dongming Drunk at the Yueyang Tower Three Times* states, “(Guo Yun) What tea do you want? (Zheng Mo) I want pastry tea.” (Ma : 4141) It can be seen that butter tea was an important type of tea in the Yuan Dynasty. Why did the Han people in the Yuan Dynasty accept butter tea? The most reasonable explanation may be that they were catering to the Mongol rulers, but this indirectly promoted cultural exchanges and fusion between the Mongols and Han people. Since the Ming Dynasty, there has been no record on butter tea drinking among the Han people south of the Great Wall. However, it is certain that tea began to be popularized among the Mongols and other nomadic ethnic groups after the Yuan Dynasty.

The academic community have different views on when tea entered Tibet, and when it became popular and a daily necessity for the Tibetans. Based on existing literatures, the Tibetans in the Tubo Dynasty ate fried noodles with barley (tsampa) and drank buttermilk mainly. There is no historical record on tea drinking in Tubo,⁷ and no tea-horse trade between Tang and Tubo is recorded. In the Northern Song Dynasty, since the Song Empire was in war with the Liao, Jin and Western Xia Empires in the north, many horses were needed for military purposes, and thus tea-horse trade started with Tibet on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau with which it had less conflicts. The main venues of tea-horse trade in this period were Qinfeng and Xihe Prefectures in the northwestern border between Song and Tibet,⁸ other than the tea producing area of Ya Prefecture in Sichuan. Tea exported to Tibet was “old tea” with a long growth period, other than “tender tea” consumed by the Chinese (Huang 2001:1654). It is certain that the Tibetans on the east edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau began to drink tea in a prevalent manner, but it is unknown from Tibetan and Han literatures whether people within the Tibet Autonomous Region today began to accept tea in the Song and Yuan Dynasties. In the Yuan times, the term “Xifan tea” emerged.⁹ Volume 2 of *Assorted Decoctions of Principles of Correct Diet* written by Mongolian medical expert Husihui in the mid Yuan Dynasty records the origin and brewing method of Xifan tea in detail: “It is produced natively, bitter in taste and decocted with butter.” (Hu 1986: 58) In the Yuan Dynasty, Xifan was a Tibetan area bordered by Shaanxi, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan Provinces, and Yazhou, the origin of Xifan tea, was in this area, where the Yuan government established a Xifan Tea Administrative Office,¹⁰ so it is reasonable that *Principles of Correct Diet* states that Xifan tea is “produced natively”. The decoction of tea with butter is already the preparation method of butter tea. In the early Ming Dynasty, official Xie Jin described the tea brewing method of the Xifan people in more detail: “When the Tibetans eat too much meat, they would gather in a yurt and brewed tea with butter as a supplement, which is a longstanding custom.” (Xie 1962: 86) Mixing boiled tea with butter is already the same as the current preparation method of butter tea and had continued for a long time before the early Ming Dynasty, indicating that butter tea was very popular among the Xifan people in the

Yuan Dynasty. During Ming Emperor Jiajing's reign, tea was processed into shapes of bricks. "Individual tea traders would process new tea into bricks and go to foreign tribes for trade."¹¹ Brick tea can maximize the volume of tea and is convenient for long-distance transport and storage. Literatures record that the tea drinking was popular in Tibet in the early Qing Dynasty. Kalon Tshering Dbangrgyal Dokar of the Tibet local government during Qing Emperor Qianlong's reign mentioned tea donation to lamas in Lhasa and Shigatse at least six times in the Biography of Kalon (Dokar 1986).

Most foreign scholars think that tea was introduced into Tibet after the 10th century. Portuguese Jesuits Antonio de Andrade and Manuel Marques were the first westerners entering Tibet. In 1623, they arrived at Tsaparang, the capital of the Guge Kingdom in western Tibet. Andrade mentioned in his report in 1624 that coarse silk, porcelains and tea imported from China were delivered to Guge via Tibet. The first westerner mentioning brick tea was William Moorcoft, who described in detail tea bags compacted into blocks in Leh, Ladakh in 1819: "These tea bags are from Lhasa and Yarkand, wrapped with cowhide, and covered with yellow paper bearing Chinese characters." (Bertsch 2009) In sum, in the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, with the popularization of the tea drinking on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, tea gradually become a daily necessity for the Tibetans.

The process of tea spreading from the mainland and Han areas to northern minority areas has great significance in the development of the Chinese nation and is a two-way process. In this process, northern ethnic groups did not accept tea simply and passively, but combined tea with dairy products cleverly based on their own ethnic characteristics and dietary habits and developed tea drinking methods and customs with their own ethnic features.

IMPORTANCE OF TEA FOR THE TIBETANS

For northern and northwestern nomads, eating meat and drinking tea added with dairy elements is a necessary supplement to body nutrition. Butter tea and milk tea are served not only as drinks, but also as food. Since ancient times, cattle and sheep have been the most common domestic animals in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, where there are extensive pastures, and most people deal with stockbreeding and grazing. Farming areas are located in river valleys mainly, but crop output is low due to restraints in irrigation and limited sunshine; therefore, people cannot maintain a basic subsistence by farming alone, and vacant land unsuitable for crop growing is often used for herding. There is no purely agricultural area like those in the Central Plains of China, and agricultural areas take on a half-farming and half-stockbreeding feature. Therefore, dairy products are the most easily available food in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Milk is a high-calorie drink rich in proteins and dietary calcium essential to the human body. Although people can also obtain dietary calcium from dark green vegetables, the demand of the human body cannot be met by eating lots of vegetables only. Due to the harsh natural environment and high altitude thereof, a limited number of crops, especially vegetables, can be cultivated. The vegetables eaten daily by Tibetans traditionally living in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau are mainly rutabaga, pea, etc., and they are short of dark green vegetables and dietary calcium in milk is the most convenient nutrition source. In addition, as food with high calories and rich proteins, dairy products can help people there resist the cold weather more effectively. For some people, since the body lacks lactase that decomposes lactose in milk, drinking fresh milk directly would lead to bellyache and diarrhea. Medical research shows that when one is ablated in the infancy, lactase that decomposes human and animal milks in the body will appear, giving rise to lactose intolerance. Since lactose cannot be absorbed by the human body directly, repulsion will occur after one drinks' animal milk, resulting in bellyache and diarrhea (MacFarlane 2016:53). This is more prevalent in Asia, as almost 100% of Asians have symptoms of lactose maldigestion to varying degrees and repulse milk (Harris 2001: 141-145; Pan 2018:7). There is no record of direct drinking of fresh milk by the Tibetans before the democratic reform in the literatures available at present. This was confirmed by a survey of nomadic Tibetan areas in Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan and Xikang in northwestern China by Yu Xiangwen in the 1940s. "They (herdsmen) never drink plain boiled water or pure milk and must drink tea or milk tea." (Yu 1947: 70) The combination of fresh milk or butter and tea is more acceptable to the body, cleverly overcoming the lactose intolerance problem of the Asians, and creates a unique tea drinking method for the Tibetans. A person in

the Qing Dynasty recorded a preparation method of butter tea as follows: “Boil tea away tens of times in a pot, remove the residue, add a little butter and salt, and put the mixture with a wooden barrel for eating.” (Li 1990: 705) That is, tea is boiled away, added with salt, poured into a wooden barrel containing butter, and fully stirred with a wooden stick so that tea and butter are fully mixed into a cream for drinking. This preparation method of butter tea has been followed till today. Nowadays, most Tibetans use electric stirring in place of butter drums to make butter tea, but on the same principle.

Tea contains caffeine, which is slightly addictive. However, tea is not a drug and is not harmful to the human body. Compared to plain water, tea drink is enjoyable and tasty. Tea can turn tasteless plain water into an attractive drink, and has such effects as reducing lipids, resolving greasiness and refreshing the body system. Tea contains vitamins, magnesium, potassium, etc. essential to the human body, which can make up the deficiency of intake from green vegetables.

In addition, as we know, human and animal feces, and other harmful substances inevitably pollute water, and when humans drink polluted water, pathogenic bacteria in water would enter the body, resulting in an outbreak and propagation of diseases. Tea can be drunk only after decoction with boiling water, and boiled tea water is relatively sterile. Consequently, the popularization of tea drinking in Tibet reduces the probability of getting ill and the propagation of diseases among the local people, and thus extends their life span considerably. Although no relevant historical material is available to confirm this, it is an undisputed fact from a scientific perspective. The Tibetans also know that drinking cold water directly is adverse to physical health. When Indian spy Chandra Dass entering Tibet for surveying and mapping in 1882 stayed in Gyantse and Shigatse, the cook of Seng Chen Living Buddha IV of the Zhongzi Monastery told him, “Drinking cold water is harmful, and the Tibetans rarely do it.” When he fell ill at the Samding Monastery in Nagarze, a local Tibetan doctor told him not to drink cold water and said that even a healthy man would get sick after drinking it (Das 2006: 92).

After tea became popular on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, it has played an irreplaceably important role in the lives of the Tibetans. Due to the special dietary habits of the Tibetans, i.e., “eating more tsampa, beef, mutton, milk, milk residue, butter, etc., which are strong in nature, all people regard tea as a vital item.” (Chen 1970: 52) “The Tibetans like drinking tea, because smelly and greasy food that blocks the stomach and intestines must be rinsed with tea.” (Xu 2010: 6251) In addition, brick tea is suitable for decoction, highly suited to the unique dietary and cooking methods of the Tibetans living on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. The climate and environment of the plateau tends to be dry and cold most of the time, with sunshine in summer and spring only, and, to protect against the cold, people like hot food and tea. Butter tea, the favorite food of the Tibetans, is made from tea with butter. Since butter would condensate when becoming cold, butter tea should be drunk while hot. Tsampa is the most popular food of the Tibetans, and it is ideal to eat tsampa together with hot tea or butter tea. In addition, Tibet is short of timber and coal, and cow manure seen everywhere becomes the most common fuel there. Cow manure has a weak flame when burned and is suitable for stewing food and decocting tea. Decocting tea with low heat not only fully releases the fragrance of black tea and make tea water stronger, but also is an enjoyment for tea drinkers. Even in the wild, one can set up a simple stove with three stones at a place away from the wind, put on it a ceramic, copper or iron pot containing tea, ignite cow manure for slow brewing, and mix boiled tea water with tsampa. This can dispel the cold, relieve fatigue and sate one’s appetite. This is an important reason why tea was loved by the Tibetans and became popular on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau quickly.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BRICK TEA TRADE

All past Chinese dynasties were clearly aware of the importance of tea for the Tibetans. Cheng Zhishao, an official of the Northern Song Dynasty, once told Song Emperor Huizong: “The Tibetans usually eat meat and drink butter tea, so tea is precious for them.”¹² *Ming History—Records of Foods and Commodities* also states, “Minority residents are addicted to tea, and would fall ill if they cannot get tea.” It is because tea is essential to the daily life of such ethnic peoples as Tibetans and Mongolians that it was regarded by the central governments of the past dynasties as a tool to control ethnic minorities and was “offered based on their obedience.”¹³ The frontier ethnic minorities that “could not live without tea” were controlled by

adjusting the amount of tea supply, and the tea's role in this aspect was deemed to surpass the function of "tens of thousands of soldiers".¹⁴ Zhu Yuanzhang, the first Ming emperor once stressed the importance of tea in maintaining the relationship between the central government and frontier ethnic peoples, "I use tea not for profits, but just to control the barbarians."¹⁵ Thus, tea not only has an economic commodity value, but is also endowed with political significance. For the past central governments, brick tea's political role was much greater than its commodity value to some extent and served to maintain connections between the central governments and northern ethnic peoples.

For the purpose of controlling those peoples with tea and making huge profits at the same time, the past Chinese feudal dynasties practiced a monopoly on tea-horse trade, formulated relevant regulations, and kept improving them. Among them was the tea-horse law or tea monopoly system. The former originated in the Song Dynasty and ended in the Qing period and played a crucial role in maintaining connections between the central government and frontier minority areas. Before the Song Dynasty, since northern nomads did not have the tea drinking habit, there was no restriction on tea export. In the Tang Dynasty, although the demand for war horses was high, there is almost no record on tea-horse trade in literatures, and only two records of tea purchase by the Uyghur Khanate can be found. The main form of trade between the Tang Empire, and the Turks, Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in the north was exchanging gold and silk for war horses. As noted in *New History of Tang—Military Records*, "Afterwards, the Turks came for friendship, and Tang Emperor Xuanzong treated them kindly. About one year later, the Shuofang Army began to exchange gold and silk for war horses in West Shouxiang City." The *Old History of Tang* also states, "After 760, the Uyghur Khanate often dispatched envoys for horse-silk trade, sometimes involving tens of thousands of horses, where one horse could be exchanged for 40 reels of silk."¹⁶ In addition, there is no clear record in historical materials on tea-horse trade between the Tang Empire and Tubo in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and nomads in the Mongolian Grasslands.

Since Song Emperor Shenzong's reign, the tea-horse law was managed systematically, and tea-horse trade was monopolized by the government through the Tea and Horse Office. However, with increasing trade volume, the government was unable to control all aspects of trade and began to issue tea trade permits. Tea traders, having received permits, would send tea to the Tea and Horse Office, and tea was purchased by the office to exchange for horses, starting the public-private partnership of brick tea trade. Later, since tea trade permits issued officially were far from enough to meet the demand of the frontier ethnic minorities for tea, tea smuggling prevailed, and there were countless regulations on banning tea smuggling in the Song and Yuan Dynasties. Since the Song Empire was in standoffs with the Liao, Jin and Western Xia Empires, tea horses were mostly from Tubo in the northwest. The Song Empire set up tea-horse markets in Qin and Xi Prefectures to exchange tea from Sichuan for Tubo war horses.

In the Yuan Dynasty, all areas around the Great Wall were within the territory of the Yuan Empire, and the Mongolian rulers were not short of horses, so tea-horse trade did not continue for nearly one century, when tea traders sold brick tea to frontier areas freely after paying taxes. It was in this period that the Mongols generally accepted tea and combined it with dairy products favored by nomads to make butter tea and milk tea. Thus, a unique tea culture was developed, and has continued to date. After the Yuan period, the Mongols retreated to the Mongolian grasslands north of the Great Wall, but maintained a great military strength that threatened the Ming Empire. To prevent the Mongols from allying with western ethnic minorities to oppose the Ming Empire, the Ming government split them up and controlled them with tea and established a most sophisticated tea-horse trade system in order to get tea horses. The Ming government also expanded the scope of the public-private partnership and allowed tea traders to exchange part of tea for minority goods.

In the Qing Dynasty, tea horses were no longer the first choice in tea trade, and tea-horse trade began to decline and was gradually replaced by exchanging tea for Mongolian and Tibetan specialties. In the early Qing Dynasty, there was a great demand for tea horses due to frequent wars (each Manchu soldier was provided with 3 tea horses) (Zhang 1996: 25-28), and therefore tea-horse trade of the Ming Dynasty was maintained. Afterwards, with the unification of the country, especially after the Mongolian tribes were brought into direct jurisdiction, there was no longer a shortage of tea horses, and Mongolian horses more suitable for battles became the first choice of the Qing army, "Horses from western ethnic minorities were

no longer valued, and the former tea-horse trade system was abolished.”¹⁷ In addition, the Mongolians played a very important role in unifying the country and maintaining the regime as an important supporting power of the Qing Empire. To win over them, the Qing Empire no longer imposed restrictions on their tea import volume. However, a strict tea trade permit system was still imposed on Tibet of which it had a loose control. “There were two purposes, namely, to control them”¹⁸ and “build military reserves.”¹⁹ After the abolishment of tea-horse trade, specialties like musk, wool, leathers, alluvial gold, sodium borate and medicinal materials replaced horses, and became key Tibetan items in exchange for inland tea, fabrics, silk, metallic items, general merchandise, and other goods (Chen 1986: 211).

In the Qing Dynasty, frontier minority areas that did not submit themselves to the central government were also coerced by controlling tea sold to Tibet. In the last years of Qing Emperor Kangxi’s reign, the Mongolian Junggar tribe occupied Tibet, and some chieftains and monasteries in Xikang and Tibet surrendered to Junggar. In Year 58 of Kangxi’s reign (1719), some officials said, “In Tachienlu (today’s Kangding City), an official was assigned for amnesty, and a census record of minority households was prepared for tea rationing. Tea trade was allowed or prohibited based on obedience.”²⁰ The tea ban by the Qing government triggered a panic in Tibet, and many Tibetans submitted themselves to the Qing government successively. Austrian diplomat Arthur von Rosthorn pointed out the especially important role of tea trade as a means of the Qing government to control Tibet in his book published in the late 19th century. He thought that after the Qing government monopolized tea, opening a tea market for trading with the Tibetans became a franchise, which was suspended once or twice due to the disobedience of the Tibetans. The Qing government maintained an undersupply of tea for Tibet to maintain its authority and influence in Tibet (Rosthorn 1895: 39-40).

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the central government also took conciliation measures while controlling tea. For example, the Ming government was tolerant to tea smuggling by Tibetan lamas and traders who paid tributes to the court albeit there was a ban on the smuggling practice. In addition, tea market profits were shared with the Tibetan local government, officials and monasteries to befriend them. In the early Qing Dynasty, since Year 3 of Qing Emperor Yongzheng’s reign (1725), the Emperor issued a decree, prohibiting the Dalai Lama to levy taxes on tea traders in the Xikang region, and exempting the Dalai Lama’s trade caravans from taxes. The Qing government also annually gave 2,500 kilograms of tea to the Dalai Lama and 1,250 kilograms to the Panchen Lama along with 10 kilograms of silver from the tea tax levied in Tachienlu as a reward.²¹ This measure not only weakened the Dalai Lama’s influence and realized the central government’s direct administration of the Xikang region, but also conciliated the Tibetan rulers. During Qianlong’s reign, the Qing government gave 250 kilograms of silver to the Dalai Lama from the tea tax of Tachienlu annually as a reward, taken there by a Tibet trade caravan from Tachienlu along with tea.²² Tibet had over 1,000 monasteries of varying sizes, and major ones with great financial strength were mostly involved in tea trade. Since there was no bazaar in many places of Tibet, monasteries became places for the wholesale and retail of tea. Since civilians and retailers were subject to lamas, the latter took advantage of this to further enhance their political and economic control. Tea trade was an important income source for monasteries and resulted in their reliance on the Qing government.

PARTICIPATION IN AND DEVELOPMENT OF BRICK TEA TRADE BY ALL ETHNIC GROUPS IN CHINA

The Complementary Role of Brick Tea in Farming-Stockbreeding Exchange

China is a united multi-ethnic country, and all of its ethnic groups have contributed to developing this territory of 9.6 million square kilometers. Naturally, those ethnic groups with their characteristic lifestyles and diversified ecological environments are constituents of this multi-cultural country. Since ancient times, all the peoples on this land have developed their distinctive ways of living and modes of production, represented by the farming practice south of the Great Wall and nomadic livelihood in the north, with the two different but complementary economic and cultural types becoming an intrinsic foundation of the country. Historically, the farming and nomadic economies were interdependent and complementary, but the latter was more singular and vulnerable, hence it had more heavy reliance.

In farming-nomadic exchanges, tea had played a critical role. Since the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the northern nomads cultivated the tea drinking habit, and thus tea became a rigid need among the civilians thereof. While tea flowed northward and westward from the inland China, horses, wool, leathers, medicinal materials, musk, alluvial gold and other specialties from the northern grasslands and the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau were transported inwards continuously. Such exchanges and connections between the two influenced all parts of the life and production of all peoples and integrated them into an interdependent and complementary natural economic entity, whose evolution became the economic foundation and conducive condition for a united multi-ethnic country.

Division of Labor and Cooperation Among Ethnic Groups in the Brick Tea Trade Chain

Brick Tea trade involved and was created jointly by all ethnic groups of China. Orderly labor division and collaboration among all ethnic groups could be seen in production, processing, transport, sale and consumption. The production and circulation of brick tea not only created jobs for hundreds of thousands of people, but was also associated with numerous organizations and families, such as tea farmers, tea traders, tea houses, porters, mule and horse lessors, and tea processing and packaging workers. Some of them worked on a full-time basis, and some only in slack seasons to earn extra income.

The huge business network created by brick tea trade connected frontier areas with the Chinese inland, and China with Russia, South Asian countries and the broader world. This network had a management system and traffic routes that were relatively independent, and tea agents and middlemen in it played a crucial role. Han, Hui, Salar and other people doing business in Tibet and related areas generally established geography-based industry organizations and groups composed mainly of fellow townsmen for the purpose of commercial competition and mutual aid, such as tea houses or trading firms. Xikang and Tibetan tea traders generally included members from monasteries, chieftains and civilians. Tibetan traders also created a huge tea trade network from retail to wholesale.

Tea Trade Routes Built by All Ethnic Groups

Brick Tea transport was long-distance trade, from Ya'an on the west edge of the Sichuan Basin, western Yunnan, Yiyang in Hunan and Zhaoliqiao in Hubei to Tibet and the Mongolian Grasslands. Tea traders had to go through countless rugged roads, turbulent rivers, treacherous lake shoals, snow mountains and meadows, and might encounter bandits and robbers at any time. Tea was carried by men and horses stop by stop to the Mongolian Grasslands and the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

In the late Qing and Republican China period, the brick tea quota from Ya'an to Tibet was over 110,000 dan (1 dan = 50 kilograms) per annum, requiring about 100,000 men-times of porters, who walked through rugged mountain paths between Ya'an and Kangding back and forth all the year round. After tea was transported from Ya'an and other places to Kangding, it was resold to traders (mostly Tibetan) taking round trips between Xikang and Tibet. Such tea bound for Tibet had to be repacked, i.e., removing bamboo splits from tea strips, wrapping them with cowhide, and carrying them on yaks and mules suited to the highland conditions. Cowhide sewing was usually done by Tibetan workers, and tea was carried to Tibet by Tibetan herdsmen. A round trip between Kangding and Lhasa would take about one year.

There was more than one transport route from the origins of Tibetan tea, namely Ya'an on the west edge of the Sichuan Basin and western Yunnan, to Tibet, and a huge transport network existed with a road system composed mainly of the three major routes of Sichuan-Tibet, Yunnan-Tibet and Qinghai-Tibet (Gansu-Qinghai), and also of numerous branch and auxiliary lines, spanning Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai and Tibet, and extending to South Asia, West Asia, Central Asia and Southeast Asia. The Ancient Tea-horse Road familiar to almost everyone today had two main routes, one from Ya'an, Sichuan to Tibet Lhasa via Luding, Kangding, Batang and Changdu, with a full length of over 3,000 kilometers, and the other from the origins of Pu'er tea in Yunnan (Xishuangbanna, Simao, etc.) to Banda, Zayu or Lhorong, Gongbogyamda and Lhasa in Tibet via Dali, Lijiang, Zhongdian and Deqing, with a full length of over 3,800 kilometers.

There were numerous branch lines along the above main routes, such as those from Ya'an to Songpan and Gannan, from Dege in Sichuan to Yushu, Xining and Lintan in Qinghai, and from Changdu to northern Tibet via Wuqi and Dingqing. This highly developed tea trade network connected Sichuan, Yunnan and

Tibet closely, and formed the highest, steepest and longest ancient tea-horse road in the world. In addition, there was another tea road from Yunnan to Tibet via Southeast Asia and South Asia, beginning with tea origins in Yunnan (Xishuangbanna, etc.), running through Myanmar, Kolkata (by sea), Darjeeling or Kalimpong (by train), and the south piedmont of the Himalayas, and ending in Tibet, which constituted the main passages for Yunnan tea sold to Tibet in the Qing and Republican China period.

CONCLUSION

Throughout Chinese history, no commodity has influenced both China and the world like tea. Since the Tang and Song Dynasties, brick tea trade has served as an important means and bond connecting the Central Plains governments to the northern and northwestern ethnic peoples and played a not-to-be neglected role in the formation and development of the unitary multi-ethnic country of China.

The first Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang made an incisive comment on the role of Brick Tea: “Tea is something most readily available yet playing the greatest role.”²³ This means that though easily grown, and of high output and low value, tea, especially brick tea, played the greatest role in controlling the frontier ethnic minorities (Wang 2009: 53). Economically, brick tea contributed a lot to the exchanges between farming and stockbreeding, and was used to exchange for horses, medicinal materials, wool, leathers, sodium borate, etc., which were scarce in inland China. In the meantime, tea tax also became an important source of state and local revenue. Politically, brick tea served to control ethnic minorities by the central governments of the past dynasties. In addition, brick tea also served as a medium and bond between farming and nomadic cultures indirectly. For example, the Tibetans living on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau had four main foodstuffs in their diet, namely tsampa, meat, tea and butter, in which only tea had to be imported from the mainland, and its cultivation and processing were completely manipulated by the distant mainland. Accordingly, the central governments could control the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau by monopolizing tea and regulating its exports. It can be said that no other commodity had such an effect in the history of China.

In the formation of the united multi-ethnic country of China, brick tea trade ran through its every stage since the Tang and Song Dynasties as a commercial activity for the Han to exchange for horses and other commodities from the nomads in the northern grasslands and Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. During brick tea trade that continued for one thousand years, all ethnic peoples were involved consciously or passively in its production, processing, transport and marketing and collaborated in all chains and links, creating the largest trading activity in the history of China and even the world.

The foundation for maintaining a community is provided by symbols, faiths and values shared by all members, composed of common memories, experiences and stories. The shift from self-existence to self-consciousness of the Chinese nation has been a long historical process. To understand this, we should not only rely on historical facts recorded in literatures, but also look for the answer from daily life. Except for the recorded major historical events, the relationships between the mainland and frontier areas, and between the Han and surrounding ethnic groups, are to a greater extent reflected in the exchange of materials that are inconspicuous but omnipresent and closely associated with daily life, such as tea. For thousands of years, brick tea trade has never been interrupted in whatever dynasty or situation. In pre-modern history characterized by inconvenient traffic and information blocking, material exchange was significant. Through tea production, circulation and consumption, people of different cultures, regions and lifestyles had been connected, and those who never met and might never meet each other in their lifetimes were woven into the tea network and constituted a community of interests. Compared with the oppositions and conflicts between ethnic groups and regimes in history, tea brought nice memories of harmony, peace and friendship, and was an embodiment of mutual benefit, interdependence and solidarity, the outcome of resource sharing and collaboration among all ethnic groups, and a pursuit for nice life; hence it has been the most meaningful memory carrier and shared symbol.

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