Tea, Tourism and Modernization along the Tea-Horse Road

For centuries, tea has been one of China’s key trading ingredients. Tea has been a popular drink of choice throughout the world, but played a special role in Chinese and Tibetan history. The Tea-Horse Road was a major trading route, in which Chinese tea was exchanged for Tibetan horses for military purposes. Today the Tea-Horse Road is no longer the sole means of transporting and trading tea, nor is the need for horses great in China. China now has one of the world’s largest economies and is in the process of industrialization and becoming a modernized nation. With its growing industry, China’s relationship with tea, particularly along the Tea-Horse Road has changed. Tea has now become more than just a traditional drink and way of life; it has become an essential part of tourism and a trademark of the Tea-Horse Road. Although tea is still associated with some of the comforts of the old Chinese lifestyle, tea can be viewed as an example of a traditional entity which has undergone modernization. This modernization is made apparent through modern drinking habits and tea products, combined with the romanticism of pu’er tea through tourism. Tea in Yunnan illustrates how both the old and the new collide in China and how something traditional can change its face to suit modern needs.
The tea found along the Tea-Horse Road is particular to China’s Yunnan province. This tea, formally known as *Camellia Sinensis Assamica*, thrives in a prefecture in Yunnan called Pu’er. This is where it gains its common name, Pu’er tea.¹ Both Chinese and Tibetans have consumed Pu’er tea in a variety of ways for centuries. Pu’er tea was an ideal tea to carry along the Tea-Horse Road as it could be stored for many years and even improved with age. Because of the coarse terrain throughout the Tea-Horse Road, traders established many storage options. The tea was commonly compressed into circular moulds, often referred to as cakes or bricks, wrapped and tied into stacks of seven and placed in a banana trunk shell. For this reason it was often referred to as “qi zi bing” or seven piece cake.² What also made the tea unique to the Tea-Horse Road was that the tea was fermented throughout the journey from Yunnan to Tibet. Indeed, the

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same tea in one village would taste different in the next. By the time Chinese traders reached Tibet, the Pu’er tea had been fermented and had acquired a different taste.

![Photo2: Loose leaf Pu’er tea and teacake, Kunming Tea Market.](image)

The Chinese and Tibetans varied in their uses for the tea. In most of China, tea was prepared using unfermented Pu’er tea and using only hot water. Some tribes in Southern Yunnan added herbs, spices and even chili peppers to their tea and used the tea as a coolant to treat medical ailments such as fevers and wounds.³ In Tibet, the tea was made into more of a meal. The tea famously known as ‘yak butter tea’ combined fermented Pu’er tea, salt and yak butter to create a savory drink that was high in calories. The tea was often combined with barley flour to make tsampa, a traditional dough-like meal. Chinese and Tibetans also used tea as a form of currency. Chinese traders, villagers, Tibetans and nomads traded tea for not only horses, but for salt, food

³. Fukes, Jeff, “The Tea Horse Road.”
and other goods along the road. Through these social and cultural interactions along the Tea-Horse Road, Pu’er tea became strongly associated with Yunnan province, incorporating different minority groups and villages. Although the tea and usage of the tea varied in different villages, the Pu’er tea was transported and shared both geographically and socially. This allowed for tea to become an expression of unity within Yunnan, linking different cultures and traditions in the Provence. This idea has played an important role in today’s modern tea culture within Yunnan.

Photo 3: Yak butter tea combined with barley flour to make tsampa in a Tibetan home.

Tea in along the Tea-Horse Road is often associated with the old Chinese lifestyle, particularly in Yunnan. Throughout China, tea is still served at the beginning of a meal, although the type of tea differs with geography. In Yunnan both the unfermented green Pu’er tea and the fermented tea are generally served with a meal. However nearing closer to Tibet, buckwheat tea and also butter tea are generally served. Occasionally sweet tea is served in Tibetan restaurants. Tea is also a drink of choice when on the move. Glass water bottles containing either hot or cold water with loose tealeaves can also be found in many towns. This adaptation allows people to drink tea

when at work or travelling and illustrates how tea has adapted to the modern Chinese lifestyle. Tea also retains its heritage in teashops, where tea is stored in teacakes and bricks. The tea is also stored in baskets similar to those, which were used by caravans along the Tea-Horse road. Traditional teapots and methods of brewing tea and tea ceremony are also retained in these shops. The initial washing of the teapot and cups is essential to produce good tea. The steeping of the tea, which is short, then follows this and the tea gains more and flavor with each steeping. We were able to observe this in Kunming at the Tea Market. However, not all Chinese peasants would have had the luxury of a tea ceremony or would have drunk tea in this manner. In this sense, tea is still able to retain some of its traditional usage, however tourism aims to romanticize and capitalize the old drinking habits.

Photo 4: Tea being served traditionally, Kunming Tea Market.
Pu’er tea is now being marketed through association with the Tea-Horse Road and also as an attraction of the road itself. The “Go West Project,” aimed at stimulating the economy and development of China’s west, has placed emphasis not only on tourism in Yunnan but also in furthering the development of agricultural industry and encouraging the development of biological resources such as tea, sugar cane and tobacco. This has greatly affected tea development and production in Yunnan province. Indeed, the prefecture, which developed the Pu’er tea, changed its name from Simao back to Pu’er in 2007 in order to capitalize on the tea trade. This development can also be seen in towns along the Tea-Horse Road, where monuments are being erected and towns redeveloped predominately for domestic tourism. This is evident in towns such as Dali and Lijiang, which are large cities with the capacity to support large amounts of tourism. In the ‘old towns’ of these respective cities, many teashops sell Pu’er tea and other related merchandise. Large franchised chains, such as “Taetea” can also be found in each of these major tourist areas. These franchises can have multiple teashops in one city and provide customers with tea, glassware, teapots and also tea ceremony tables. The development of these chains not only illustrates how tea in Yunnan has benefitted from the “Go West” initiative in terms of development, but also how tea is becoming a key factor in the Yunnan tourism industry.

The development within Yunnan called for a modernization of tea and tea drinking habits in both young and old tea drinkers. Tea and the drinking of tea in China are now competing with globalization and the introduction of new beverages, such as coffee and soft drinks. To appeal to the younger generation of tea drinkers, milk-tea was brought over from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Hong Kong milk-tea is sweet and creamy and uses condensed milk. A popular Taiwanese drink is also popular, known in the West as “bubble tea.” It is often served cold and contains small tapioca balls. 7 These teas are sold in small shop fronts in large cities and are also available in bottled form. The sweet tea is also popular in Tibet, where it is sometimes mixed with yak butter tea to create a rich and sweet butter tea. To compete with this market, Pu’er teashops use a combination of tourism and marketing authenticity. This tourism targets mostly older, wealthy, domestic tourists from large cities. The styles of packaging, such as teacakes

are used as an attraction and expensive and rare teas are placed on display. Tourism from the Tea-Horse Road contributes to tea sales from the influx of people to the area, while specialty teashops advertise high quality and authentic Pu'er tea from Yunnan province. It is clear that tea has been modernized to suit both the younger generation in the form of new drinks and older generations through tourism to compete in the modern world.

Pu'er tea has come a long way from the ancient travels of the Tea-Horse Road. Traditional drinking practices and traditions, such as the rich yak butter tea in Tibet still retain their original qualities, however tourism and globalization has altered the tea market in Yunnan. Tea has become an important aspect of tourism for the Tea-Horse Road and a valuable source of income for Yunnan province. As a result tea has become more commercialized in these tourist centers. Also, modern drinking trends have altered the way Chinese drink tea, as sweet flavored milk-teas are gaining popularity with the younger generation and adaptations are being made to suit modern lifestyles.
The tea that was traded along the Tea-Horse Road, such as Pu’er tea, can still be found and traditional methods of packing tea have been retained. However, it can be seen that tea drinking in China has evolved since the time of the Tea-Horse Road and is an example of traditional Chinese good which has modernized to fit the needs of the modern Chinese lifestyle.

Photo 7: Tea being served as part of a meal in Kunming, Yunnan.
Chao, Julie. “Taiwan tapioca tea on tap: Suck up latest rage through fat straw and chew rubbery pearls.” San Francisco Chronicle http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/e/a/1999/12/12/NEWS3323.dtl#ixzz1yUY5CgVv (June 21 2012).


