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# On the Mutual Construction of Caravan Culture and Group Identity

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**Abstract:** Horse caravan is one of the most important part of the tea-horse trade in Southwest China. Due to the geographical conditions and the need to maintain their livelihood, natives spontaneously developed such a mode of transportation. This not only promoted the exchange of commodities in southwestern Yunnan and Tibet border areas, but also became one important channel for foreign trade and cultural exchanges with neighboring countries in Southeast Asia. The long-distance trek and the steep terrain with various emergencies determine that this form of transportation will not be an individual activity. The horse caravan group formed with the common business purpose extends the personal relationship from blood to geo-industry relationship. The social network of the industry has established an invisible dense network between individuals and groups. In the common taboo beliefs, lingoes and folk literature, have strengthened members' affiliation with the caravan group, which in turn constructs subjective force behind the successful operation of this industry.

**Keywords:** Horse Caravan; Regional Identity; Tea-Horse Trade; Group Identification

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## 1. Formation of the horse caravan

### 1.1 Impact of geographical conditions

The caravan culture originated from Southwest China. Before 1949, the horse caravan was the only mode of transportation in the Yunnan-Tibet area. It was formed due to the special geographical and economic conditions of Yunnan. Since the Song Dynasty, the tea-horse exchange market has become an important part of the commercial trade between Han and Tibet. Yunnan, as the starting point, is located in the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, and it is connected with the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in the northwest. In addition to the relatively complete topography the Yunnan Plateau has many other mountain basins. The Southeastern Yunnan Plateau shares a relative complete topography, whereas the rest of the Yunnan Plateau has many other mountain basin. The southwestern Yunnan Plateau, in particular, is cut into flat-topped mountains and narrow valleys by many rivers distributed in a folding fan shape.

The Gaoligong Mountain, the Biluo Snow Mountain (including Nu Mountain and Yunling), Diancang Mountain and the Mianmian Mountain are intermingled with the Nu River, the Lancang River, Jinsha River, etc. They run through the high mountains, forming a steep valley. The mountains on both sides of the valley are often several thousand meters above the river surface. They together form a "unilateral road" which is common in the Yunnan province, with steep cliffs on one side and deep canyons on the other, where the road is so narrow that people or horses can fall if they make the slightest mistake. This type of road is quite common in the Yunnan province. As a result, there have been attempts to drive cattle, dogs and donkeys as means of transportation in the past, but donkeys are not as fast or as strong as horses, and they are not efficient in long-distance travel. Although cows are strong enough, they are not as fast as horses either. Also they are not as flexible as horses, especially climbing mountains. Therefore, horses became the only transport force that could be driven in such harsh environmental conditions historically.

## **2. Demand of tea-horse mutual market**

Among the teas introduced to Tibet, the big leaf Pu 'er tea, a specialty of Yunnan province, is especially popular among the Tibetan people. This is attributed by its unique color and aroma. The butter tea made from the big leaf Pu 'er tea is also extremely fragrant. The high altitude and low oxygen saturation in the Tibetan areas also contribute to the distinctive dietary habits the local people developed. The functionality of tea to aid digestion, has made it a necessity in the lives of Tibetans who eat meat and drink milk on a daily basis. Since its introduction to the area, the big leaf Pu 'er tea prevailed among the princes, nobles and ordinary people. The supply chain of tea production and demand thus came into being. The capacity of tea consumption among the Kham-Tibet people can be regarded as the world's first. They have three meals a day with tea, so more than two-thirds of Yunnan's 100,000 packs crude teas are sold in the Kham-Tibet area. Therefore, the great demand of Tibetans for Yunnan tea gave rise to various business opportunities for tea transport traders. This in turn facilitated the formation of various horse caravans and symbolized the start of tea-horse exchange market that was going to be enduring for many years at the time. Admittedly many valuable goods were transported on the way back, These goods, including salt, herbs and gems, can be more profitable than tea at times. In the later stage of the tea-horse exchange, some traders were engaged in the transport of goods that were rare in the interior, such as woolen fabrics, animal skins, wool and other leather products. They also brought back coptis, fritillary, cordyceps, bear bile, deer antler, musk and other medicinal materials. The more desperate type of the traders even put their eyes on opium.

## **3. Common Way of Life and Belief taboo: The Cultural Carrier of Identity**

### **Construction**

Professional caravans often have a certain organizational form and a strict organizational structure: they have leadership, stewardship, a system of distributing materials, punishment methods for violating discipline, with their own jargon and beliefs. Generally, there are three organizational forms of horse caravans. One is family-style, which consists of family members to transport the horses and mules in their own hands. The second form is to gather horses together, usually come the acquaintances in nearby villages. Each family takes several horses to go together in a group, each taking care of their own horses and choosing an experienced person as the leader. But these caravans cannot be used for seasonal long-term transportation. The third kind is called the ganging. It is different from the general organization form and it does not have strict rules between each other. Instead, it is formed temporarily, only when people share the same road or business together. Among these types of caravans, family business-style caravans are the most common one. There are also more rules in such caravans as a result of long-term practice. As a commercial organization, caravan has naturally produced some unique language and discourse taboos in its own industry during its long walking career. For example, "cock sorghum wine" is the old custom of the Han people who drive horses. They must slaughter the red cockscombs before going out, which means that the trip will have chance to get more dividends. Besides, drinking chicken blood sorghum wine also means that the members are united. In this special communication practice, a unique phenomenon of folk language which is powerful in its own right has been formed. It is more deeply rooted than almost anything else in contemporary society, and nothing connects people emotionally to one another as effectively as language. It is a simultaneity that comes across a homogenous and empty time.

Jargon is ubiquitous in all walks of life. Its function is to help caravan members to realize or construct, to reinforce group segregation, and to confuse the layman. This is a kind of intermediary that only they can understand each other. People in the horse caravan feel that there are hundreds of people who are "homogeneous" with them in such a special language system. In such invisible circumstance, the past and present of the group are connected through the repeated narration of these jargon, imagining that each member will have his own sense of belonging to the group when using such a discourse system at the same time and space.

Horse Caravan transport conditions are dangerous. People and mules often live circumstances, coupled with changeable climate conditions. They always encounter all kinds of accidents, and the road is so dangerous and difficult to predict. Therefore, people seek for superficial powers to protect themselves from disasters. Besides, the horse drivers in Yunnan come

from various ethnic groups of Han, Yi, Tibet and Naxi, with different religious beliefs. Influenced by the devout religious atmosphere of Tibetans along the way, they are blended into the unique belief taboo system of the members of the caravan members. Although they are not strictly Buddhists, they usually have varying degrees of faith, which is ingrained in the Chinese belief system. Regardless of their religious belief, people will always have a pious mentality. Under such circumstances, this kind of spiritual sustenance will indeed have a psychological stabilizing effect on people. In addition, caravan people generally believe in primitive religions. Under the influence of animism, horse drivers believe that there are mountain gods and water gods in the nature, and there are spirits behind forests and vegetation. In order not to enrage these gods and provoking unreasonable disasters, the members of the horse caravan have created various taboos. The horse-riders will bring sacrifices to the gods of nature before leaving. During the itinerary, the caravan still has a set of unwritten taboos, all horse drivers must abide by without exception. Whether they violate the rules intentionally or not, they will be punished for offending the gods if they break the rules. Since everyone in the same group are considered as a community of destiny, the whole group will suffer from disaster when one person breaks the rules. Thus, such belief taboos are not personal concepts, but shared by the entire caravan. No one is an independent individual on the journey because they have to depend on the symbiotic coexistence of the team. The belief mechanism of the industry constrains members to their respective groups, which itself is the presentation of living historical memory and culture. It is the major element that supports the existence of the horse caravan. Through such a unique culture, members constitute like believers. Imagine the community and realize the difference between "us" and "others". In the process of observing customary behaviors, the repetition of inter-generational behaviors constantly strengthens the collective identity consciousness of members. Only when members break away from the caravan can they no longer abide by the common belief taboo.

#### **4. Music and Literature -- Cultural symbols of identity**

Singing a ditty is one of the few forms of entertainment used by horse drivers. It is the power of ballads to relieve boredom while walking. In ancient times, labor was the basis for the survival of primitive people. In the process of labor, in order to coordinate movements, improve labor efficiency, relieve fatigue and communicate feelings, people combined labor calls or languages containing certain meanings in accordance with a certain beat to form ballads. Among the ballads sung by the horsemen, there are many themes that reflect the life and the feelings of them. This is because they have traveled through many foreign countries together, communicated with people of different nationalities, and that created the ideological and cultural collisions. Horse Driving Tune is the most representative long narrative song among the horse drivers. Horse drivers from different ethnic groups then recompose and sing it according to their own views, local customs, widely spread stories and the psychological state of their nation. The colloquial characteristics make this kind of ballads easy to understand, while the thoughts and concepts these ballads convey are also very easy to grasp. In fact, ballads are the true expression of a group's characteristics. This kind of music cannot be disseminated by individuals; rather it is the product of the collective as a result of group's common cognition of moral concepts, life patterns, religious beliefs, and institutional culture. In the collective singing, the common group identity and unique rituals evoke sense of belonging. The singing action itself also reflects its distinctive identity attributes—this is a ballad belonging to “us”.

The initiative and spontaneity of the members are the inherent elements for the inheritance of various horse-driving tunes, including the power of identification. The interactive music itself is a living cultural symbol that inspires the common culture and experience in the hearts of the process of acquiring emotional belonging, they will perceive and strengthen the identity of one's own group identity. In addition, the recognition from others has strengthened the identity of the horse drivers with their inherent culture. In the many years of driving horses, horse-driving people have also summed up many proverbs and allegorical sayings according to their unique life experience. Due to the harsh conditions and poor medical treatment, the most daunting thing for horse chasers is diseases (either of the horse chasers themselves or of the mules). The intelligent drivers condensed these unique experiences into proverbs to inform the younger generation, such as ‘Beasts without masters must suffer’. Whether they are storytelling, proverbs, or allegorical sayings, their creation and dissemination bodies constitute what Anderson considered "empty homogeneous time". In such a time pattern, ‘you’ and ‘I’ have the same right to speak and listen, which is a kind of practice full of faith feeling. Besides, individuals collectively constitute "we" outside

of the text. In the same minor story, the act we told gave us a common tradition, that enabling us to hear about each other in a form that only we are familiar with. The performance of the narrative behavior of folk literature is always inseparable from the emotional experience of interpersonal relationship. In other words, the subjective narrative behavior of folk literature not only arouses members objectified emotions, but also makes this kind of objectification emotion get purification, allowing us to approach the emotional experience of the original interpersonal relationship. In these repetitions, the riders increasingly feel the power of being part of a group, which is the bondage of karmic bonds inherited from their ancestors.

## Conclusion

The generational shift during the long business journey did not weaken the sense of belonging to the group, for it was a life experience unique to each member of the team. Many members may never meet again after the team disbanded. However, when the memory is recalled, their identities are still 'members of the same caravan'. Under the influence of the common belief taboo and the various folk literature symbols created by them, the group identity is mutually constructed by their common culture and the way of life. As a member of the caravan, the horse chaser has a strong organizational cohesion and a sense of group identity. During their transportation career, they have always followed various organizational rules and traditions. Moreover, the legendary experience of the horse caravan has created a unique business travel culture, which worth further exploration.

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