

China's Ancient Tea Horse Route

Speaker: Stephen Codrington



Stephen's address on 27th July took us to a remote and seldom-visited corner of South-west China, near the northern tip of Burma (Myanmar) on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. Focussing on the theme of China's ancient tea-horse route, the illustrated talk pinpointed the area of China's northern Yunnan province between Zhongdian and Lijiang.

The address began with a historical overview of China's Tea-Horse Route. Although not as well known as China's famous Silk Road, the Tea-Horse Route was an important route for trade as well as exchanges of culture, religion and human migration. The track began in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) when tea was moved northwards from southern Yunnan and Sichuan provinces into Tibet, carried on horseback. Reciprocal trade developed during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) when horses were imported by China's rulers from Tibet for military purposes. During the Song Dynasty, the trade amounted to 20,000 warhorses per year in exchange for about 9,000,000 kilograms of tea.

Being situated at the eastern end of the Himalayas, the Tea-Horse Route traversed a very difficult physical environment with narrow tracks, high mountain ranges, deep gorges, fast-flowing rivers, heavy snow, cold temperatures and strong winds. Nonetheless, trade flourished until a decline began when China's Qing Dynasty rulers stopped buying horses for military purposes in 1735, although the tea trade continued until the late 1960s when the Tibetan highways were constructed. The route is still used for local trade, pilgrimage and tourism.

The talk focussed on five areas. The first area was the mountainous border area of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces where the twin villages of Benzilan and Waka are found. These villages, which are situated in a narrow valley surrounded by high mountains, are strongly Tibetan, the direct result of the migration of people, religion and culture along the Tea-Horse Route. We saw that these villages have a fascinating mix of Tibetan and Han Chinese cultures, the latter being introduced quite strongly through the village primary schools.

The second focus area was the town of Zhongdian (recently re-named Xiang Ge Li La, or Shangri-la). The old town of Zhongdian is a maze of narrow laneways and wooden shingle roofed houses that surround a central hill on which the Guishan Monastery stands proudly overlooking the town. Just a few kilometres to the north of Zhongdian is the huge Songzanlin Monastery, which is an exquisite and elaborate Buddhist monastery that looks as though it is been transplanted from Tibet itself. Largely destroyed during the turbulent Cultural Revolution, it is now a beautifully restored ensemble of Tibetan architecture.

The third focus area was the tiny village of Ma Chan. One of China's 'secret' and secluded leprosy villages, Ma Chan has a population of about 60 people, mainly Zhang nationality. The Chinese government policy from the 1950s onwards was to isolate lepers in closed colonies such as Ma Chan, and once relocated, the residents had no access to medical care, schooling or outside help. They and their families had no rights to leave the lepers' villages, although some help from foreign charities became possible from the late 1990s. The last new case of leprosy arrived in Ma Chan in 2000 and all residents have now been cured, although they still suffer from effects of the disease such as disfigurement, missing fingers, amputated legs, and of course, discrimination. The village is extremely isolated as local people are terrified to go anywhere near the village.

This was a fascinating insight into a hidden side of contemporary China, made possible because Stephen has taken several groups of students from his school to the village over the years to do community service. The students built the village's first toilet block, including an irrigation system from a local spring to provide a self-flushing mechanism, and they recently renovated many of the houses, scraping away the charcoal layers that had been caked onto the walls and then repainting them. There was applause when Stephen mentioned that after his most recent trip, several articles on the plight of lepers in Ma Chan had been published in Hong Kong's "South China Morning Post" by a reporter who accompanied the group, and shortly after that, the Chinese government began sending a truckload of free food every week to the village, and a government doctor began making weekly calls to the village.

The fourth focus area was Tiger Leaping Gorge. This beautiful deep gorge, bounded on each side by snow-capped mountains and cut by the rushing

Yangtze River, is perhaps the best place to see what the Tea-Horse Route looked like in its heyday. The unfenced narrow tracks still twist around the steep mountainsides, with small teams of horses making their way along the tracks amidst herds of mountain goats through tiny villages comprising wooden courtyard homes of the local Naxi people, some of whom have opened up their homes as accommodation for trekkers. Farming comprises cultivation of corn, chillies and vegetables, often on steep terraced hillsides.

The fifth and final focus area was the large town on Lijiang. Lijiang was the traditional cross-roads of the Tea-Horse Route, and the centre of the town - Sifang ("Four Winds") Square - remains a meeting place and active market area. Lijiang has been declared a world heritage area and it was easy to see why when we saw the images of the town's narrow cobble-stoned streets, lined by open-fronted wooden shop-houses with old, tiled, curved roofs and a network of streams carrying the melting snow from nearby mountains through the town. The canals feature a very sensible 'three pond' system for water use in many places in the town whereby the most upstream pond is used to draw drinking water, the next (middle) pond is used for washing vegetables and the third (most downstream) pond is used for washing clothes.

Lijiang is another area populated primarily by people of the Naxi nationality, and we were provided with an insight into their pictographic writing, culture and religion. Less appealing in the eyes of some were the markets in Lijiang where dog meat is obviously an important part of the local diet. A highlight of our look at Lijiang's old town was the Mu Clan Palace, a smaller variant of Beijing's Forbidden City that was used by the local ruling family for several hundred years.

Although many people in the audience had visited China, the remote area covered by Stephen's talk had not been visited by anyone in the audience. Stephen's talk thus provided a refreshing contrast to the picture of China that is often presented in the media or experienced even by seasoned travellers.