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THE TEA AND HORSE TRADE WITH INNER ASIA
DURING THE MING*

Ming China was eager to be self-sufficient after a century of Mongol occupation. She was contemptuous of trade, considered mercantile relations as tribute missions, and at the same time, perhaps not even consciously, feared dependence on other states. Some modern scholars maintain that China *was* economically self-sufficient and that she used the barbarian demand for Chinese goods as a political device rather than for economic gain. T. F. Tsiang, whose views have been widely publicized by his student John Fairbank, points out "on China's part the permission to trade was intended to be a mark of imperial bounty and a means of keeping the barbarians in the proper state of submissiveness."¹ I will show how this view offers an inadequate explanation of China's desire, despite her scorn for commerce, to pursue the tea and horse trade.

The Chinese bred horses but they recognized that "the horses of distant lands, usually to the West or North, and even of their nomadic enemies near at hand, [were] quite frankly superior."² Being larger, faster, and hardier than Chinese horses, the foreign steeds were ideally suited for warfare. Even a cursory look at China's horse policy prior to the Ming indicates her eagerness for foreign horses. In the first dynasty, the Shang (1523 B.C.—1028 B.C.), the Kings apparently sent military expeditions to obtain horses from tribes on the periphery

* For a list of abbreviations, units of measurement and bibliography see p. 166.

¹ Quoted in John Fairbank and Ssu-yü Teng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* VI, (1941), p. 140.

² H. G. Creel, "The Role of the Horse in Chinese History," *American Historical Review*, LXX, 647—672, (1965), pp. 655—656.

of the Chinese heartland.³ Such expeditions must have been common, for horses seem to have been plentiful as evidenced by the skeletons found in Shang tombs. The appointment of *Ma*, military officials who cared for horses, and the widespread use of chariots also attests to the prevalence and importance of these animals. In the Chou (1027 B.C.—256 B.C.), the practice of burying sacrificial horses increased—as many as 114 horses were buried in the Hsin-ts'un site.⁴ Horses were also extremely valuable in warfare (i. e. cavalry), hunting, and transportation. During the chaotic last centuries of the Chou culminating in the founding of a centralized empire under the Ch'in (221 B.C.—207 B.C.), the worth of the horse in combat was amply demonstrated. Nor is it an accident that the new victorious dynasty derived from westernmost China and used West Asian horses extensively.

Han Wu-ti (140 B.C.—87 B.C.) was the most famous early Emperor to recognize the superiority of Central Asian horses and consciously set out to import or expropriate them. When the King of Ferghana refused to comply with Wu's request for horses, Wu sent a large and costly military expedition under Li Kuang-li to gain the "blood-sweating" horses that he coveted.⁵ The costliness of the enterprise deterred future Emperors from using this method to obtain horses.

The barbarian invasions following the fall of the Han (A.D. 220) and the T'ang (A.D. 907) dynasties demonstrated that China needed horses if she were to survive. The period of Mongol control (A.D. 1260—1368) was even more instructive, for the Chinese recognized that "the Mongols were able to establish their empire because of their abundance of horses . . . Having established the empire, they were unable, from the imperial centre in China, to acquire enough horses to back a regular and realistic horse policy which would have given them the necessary mobility always to act successfully against rebels and retain the unity of the empire."⁶

³ L. C. Goodrich, *A Short History of the Chinese People* (3rd. ed., New York, 1958), p. 16.

⁴ Cheng Te-k'un, *Archaeology in China* (Vol. II), (Cambridge, 1960), *Shang China*, p. 205; Cheng Te-k'un, *Archaeology in China* (Vol. III), (Cambridge, 1963), *Chou China*, p. 77.

⁵ Homer Dubs, *History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Vol. II), (Baltimore, 1944), p. 132.

⁶ S. Jagchid and C. R. Bawden, "Some Notes on the Horse Policy of the Yüan Dynasty," *Central Asiatic Journal*, X, (1965), p. 264.

When the first Ming Emperor took the throne, one of his vital tasks, therefore, was to insure a steady supply of war horses. Following a policy of self-sufficiency, he organized both the *Yüan-ma ssu* (Pasturage Office) and the *T'ai-p'u ssu*, with four branch offices, all under the aegis of the Ministry of War for the purpose of breeding horses. Though their functions were frequently similar, the *Yüan-ma ssu* was responsible for the pasture areas set aside by the government and for the rearing of horses, while the *T'ai-p'u ssu* conducted semi-annual inspection tours checking the size, weight, and physical condition (including the eyes, teeth, and color) of these horses and reporting negligent officials and breeders to the Ministry of War which either fined or arrested them.⁸

Despite these measures, China was unable to procure enough horses for her Empire.⁹ The intensive agriculture practiced by the Chinese left little land available for pasture. Even the meagre acreage allotted to the *Yüan-ma ssu* was constantly reduced to meet the demands of the farmers. In 1409, in the province of Shensi the *Yüan-ma ssu* had twenty-four pasture areas but by the end of the fifteenth century it maintained only six of these.¹⁰ In addition to the land shortage, few competent breeders were available and one Emperor was forced to assign criminals to the *Yüan-ma ssu*.¹¹ In 1504 Yang I-ch'ing, a leading advocate of reform in the horse administration of the Ming, wrote a memorial deploring the condition of the *Yüan-ma ssu* and requesting that its pasture land be expanded and that more and better trained personnel be assigned the important duty of breeding and tending horses.¹² His plans were not completely implemented, and so in the

⁷ Here I am using the terminology devised by Charles Hucker in his article "Governmental Organization of the Ming Dynasty," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, XXI, (1958), pp. 1—66.

⁸ *Ming shu* (hereafter *MShu*), 66, p. 1325; *Ming shih* (hereafter *MS*), 75, p. 801.

⁹ Creel, *op. cit.* p. 669. During the Sung, Wang An-shih attempted to procure horses by ordering every family in the North to raise one war horse for the government. See John Meskill (ed.), *Wang An-shih: Practical Reformer?*, (Boston, D. C. Heath and Co., 1963), pp. 87—88.

¹⁰ *Kansu t'ung-chih*, 19, p. 1918; *Shensi t'ung-chih* (hereafter *STC*), 42, pp. 16b—17a; *T'ai-tsung shih-lu*, 60, pp. 12b—13a.

¹¹ *STC* 42, pp. 17a—17b.

¹² *MS* 75, p. 801 (Yang's proposals will be discussed at some length later).

late sixteenth century we find the Jesuit Matthew Ricci commenting that:¹³

The Chinese know little about the taming or training of horses. Those which they make use of in daily life are all geldings and consequently quiet and good tempered. They have countless horses in the service of the army, but these are so degenerate and lacking in martial spirit that they are put to rout even by the neighing of the Tartars' steeds and so they are practically useless in battle.

Because China was unable to raise her own horses, the Emperors, especially Hung-wu and Yung-lo, sent embassies to the Central Asian states, one of whose objectives was to stimulate these states to offer horses as tribute.¹⁴ When foreign envoys presented horses, the Emperors rewarded them with valuable goods such as silk and silver.¹⁵ They were particularly generous to Arab ambassadors who might present them with the famed Arabian steeds. In 1518, for example, the Cheng-te Emperor bestowed upon the King of Mecca the four-clawed dragon robe, an item rarely given to and highly prized by foreigners.¹⁶ This policy was successful, for nearly every Central Asian tribute mission mentioned in the *Ming shih* and *Ming shih-lu* offered horses to the Emperor. Most of these states, however, donated tribute irregularly and the number of horses they presented was not fixed. As a result, they could not be relied upon to provide a continual flow of horses.¹⁷ In addition, the Chinese government incurred enormous expenses in

¹³ *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583—1610* (translated by Louis Gallagher), (New York, 1953), p. 13.

¹⁴ Ch'en Ch'eng, the author of the *Hsi-yü fan kuo chih*, "the most important source for the situation in Central Asia during the early Ming period" (Wolfgang Franke, *Preliminary Notes on the Important Chinese Literary Sources for the History of the Ming Dynasty, 1368—1644*, Chengtu Studia Serica Monograph, Series A, No. 2, 1948, p. 60), and Fu An, who was kept as a prisoner by Tamerlane, were prominent leaders in two of these embassies. See *MS 332*, p. 3829. I am currently at work on a complete translation of Ch'en's work.

¹⁵ *Ta Ming hui tien* (hereafter *TMHT*), 112, p. 1655.

¹⁶ *MS 332*, p. 3833. For the uses of the dragon robe in diplomatic relations, see Schuyler Camman, "Presentation of Dragon Robes by the Ming and Ch'ing Court for Diplomatic Purposes," *Sinologica*, III, (1953), pp. 193—220.

¹⁷ John Fairbank and Ssu-yü Teng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System," *HJAS*, VI, 135—246, (1941), p. 157. For example, Hami, the Central Asian state most closely related to China, sent tribute only once every five years during the sixteenth century.

providing for the upkeep of tribute envoys and it was in the best interests of the Empire to find a cheaper way of obtaining horses.

Another occasional source of horses was booty captured in war. Several times, according to the *Ming shih*, Chinese forces confiscated domestic animals—as few as 630 horses at one time and as many as three hundred and forty thousand on another occasion.¹⁸ But again such bonanzas were infrequent. Often, in fact, the Chinese lost their own precious horses to the barbarians.

The major dependable source for horses was trade. Trade, which has been considered by modern scholars repugnant to Chinese officials, was necessary for the survival of the state. In the beginning of the dynasty, this trade was controlled by the government with minimal participation by merchants, but as the dynasty declined and its need for horses became desperate, it forsook its prejudice against commerce and allowed merchants to play a dominant role in the horse trade.

On the northeastern border of China, barbarian horses were traded for Chinese silver and silk and on the northwest an extensive tea-horse trade developed.¹⁹ The former has been studied by modern scholars, but the latter has, with few exceptions, received little attention.²⁰

A tea-horse trade had existed as early as the Sung (A. D. 960—1279). The *Ch'a-ma ssu* (Horse Trading Office) was created in the twelfth century to supervise this trade.²¹ It encouraged the barbarian merchants²² to exchange their horses for tea. Trade was conducted in the

¹⁸ *MS* 330, p. 3802; *MS* 330, p. 3800—01, 3807.

¹⁹ See the article by Hou Jen-chih, "Ming-tai Hsüan Ta Shan-hsi san-chen ma-shih k'ao", *Yen-ching hsüeh-pao* (1938), pp. 183—237; translated as "Frontier Horse Markets in the Ming Dynasty" in John DeFrancis and E-tu Zen Sun (eds.), *Chinese Social History*, (Washington, 1956), pp. 309—332. Other commodities, such as salt and porcelain, were also used in horse trading. For this, see Wang Shih-chen, *Yen-shan-t'ang pieh-chi* 89, p. 3923 and *TMHT* 153, p. 2139. Surprisingly enough, another important source of horses was Korea. See Henry Serruys, *Sino-Jürced Relations During the Yung-lo Period, 1403—1424*, (Wiesbaden, 1955), p. 32.

²⁰ A notable exception is Tani Mitsutaka's "Mindai chama bōeki no kenkyū" [A Study of Tea and Horse Trade in the Ming Dynasty], *Shirin* (1966), pp. 733—751; 861—879.

²¹ *Sung shih* 167, pp. 17b—18b.

²² I do not use the term "barbarian" to malign or deprecate the conglomerate of tribes and groups on China's borders, for many of them enjoyed a higher level of culture than the term "barbarian" usually implies. In this paper, the word is used in its original meaning. As H. D. F. Kitto explains, "The Greek word 'barbaros' does not mean 'barbarian' in the modern sense; it is not a term of

fifth month of the year at T'ao-chou, in the sixth at Ho-chou, and in the seventh at Hsi-ning.²³ The trading period was brief, so as to limit contact between the Chinese and the barbarians and to allow maximum control by the government. The system worked for a time but as the government declined and lost its monopoly on tea, private merchants exported huge amounts of it, reducing the barbarian demand for tea and the attraction of the tea-horse trade.

The Ming followed the example of the Sung in attempting to use the government tea monopoly not only as a way of obtaining horses, but also as a potent means of pacifying the unruly barbarians. The barbarians coveted tea for several reasons: it remained fresh longer than other beverages such as koumiss; it contained fewer impurities than water; and it was a mild stimulant, particularly after prolonged exposure to the cold. The *Ming shih* relates that without tea the barbarians would be "afflicted and thereby ill" and should they trespass upon the border lands of China, withholding tea would render them docile.²⁴ Theoretically, the tea-horse trade was encouraged in times of

loathing or contempt; it does not mean people who live in caves and eat their meat raw. It means simply people who make noises like 'bar bar' instead of talking Greek. If you did not speak Greek you were a 'barbarian' . . ." (*The Greeks*, [Penguin Book, 1951] p. 7). In this case, "barbarian" is a convenient term for the peoples on the northwestern border of China who commonly did not speak Chinese and whom the Chinese called by that name.

²³ Li Shih-heng, "Tsui-ch'u hua-fan ch'a-ma mou-i te ching-t'ung" (Earliest Tea-Horse Trade Between the Chinese and the Barbarians), *Kuo-li pei-ching ta-hsiieh she-hui k'o-hsiieh ch'i-kan* (1925), pp. 216—217. Robert Hartwell lists a number of Sung sources on the tea-horse trade in his *A Guide to Sources of Chinese Economic History, A. D. 618—1368*, (Chicago, 1964).

²⁴ *MS* 80, p. 843. For the use of tea among modern-day nomads, see George Cressey, *Land of the 500 Million*, (New York, 1955) p. 320. Tea as a stimulant and as of medicinal value is discussed in William Ukers, *All About Tea*, (New York, 1935) Vol. I, pp. 539, 556. The policy of attempting to pacify the barbarians by denying them cherished products prevailed into the nineteenth century. Lin Tse-hsü in his famous letter of 1839 to Queen Victoria asserts that "Of all that China exports to foreign countries, there is not a single thing which is not beneficial to people: they are of benefit when eaten, or of benefit when used, or of benefit when resold: all are beneficial. Is there a single article from China which has done any harm to foreign countries? Take tea and rhubarb, for example; the foreign countries cannot get along for a single day without them. If China cuts off these benefits with no sympathy for those who are to suffer, then what can the barbarians rely upon to keep themselves alive?" John Fairbank and Ssu-yü Teng, *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839—1923*, (Cambridge, 1954), p. 25.

peace but abandoned in times of war. In reality, the need for horses was so great that this threat was rarely carried out. If China was to secure an adequate supply of horses and remain strong, the tea trade had to be maintained. Tea and horses were so inextricably related that officials repeatedly requested that the tea laws and the horse administration be supervised by the same man.²⁵

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE *CH'A-MA SSU*

Government control of tea was, in Chinese eyes, the first step in the creation of a rational and effective horse policy. Hung-wu, in the fourth year of his reign, imposed a ten percent tax in kind on all tea. The remainder, with the exception of a small amount for the producer's personal consumption, was saved for government use. The Emperor also ordered his soldiers to cultivate tea on idle land. The soldiers divided up twenty percent of this tea and government officials received the rest.²⁶ As a result, the government, according to Hung-wu, would annually collect approximately one million *chin* from Szechwan and 26,862 *chin* from Han-chung fu in Shensi, two of the largest tea producing areas in early Ming.²⁷ A Tea Tax Office (*Ch'a-k'o ssu*) with branches primarily in Szechwan was created to levy and collect the fixed tea tax.²⁸ Though the tea producers secured such privileges as exemption from labor service, severe penalties were imposed on those producers who evaded the tax by selling tea illegally to merchants. These penalties ranged from twenty lashings for a first offence to confiscation of property and even death for repeated transgressions.²⁹ Ming officials frequently warned the merchants and producers that private trading in tea was as much a crime as violating the salt monopoly.³⁰

After the tea was collected and packed, soldiers transported it to the Horse Trading Office. Initially this was not difficult for branches

²⁵ *MS* 92, p. 971; *TMHT* 153, p. 2137.

²⁶ *MS* 80, p. 844; *TMHT* 37, p. 685; *T'ai-tsu shih-lu* 70, pp. 4a—4b.

²⁷ *TMHT* 37, p. 683.

²⁸ *MS* 80, p. 844.

²⁹ *TMHT*, 37, p. 684.

³⁰ *TMHT*, 37, p. 684; Li Chieh, *Ming shih*, p. 342.

of the *Ch'a-ma ssu* were located in both Shensi and Szechwan.³¹ Since most of the barbarian horse traders were close to Shensi, all but one of the Szechwan branches were closed before 1400. Most of the one million *chin* produced in Szechwan had to be transported to Shensi for trade.

The transport system created by Hung-wu was ill-advised and precarious. He ordered his army in Szechwan to send the tea to the Shensi border where the army of that province carried it to the *Ch'a-ma ssu*. By transporting the tea to the borders instead of having the barbarians bring their horses to Szechwan, the government avoided the tremendous expense of lodging and feeding the barbarian traders on their trip through China.³² Hung-wu failed to realize that if war broke out and the army could not be responsible for the tea, both the monopoly and the transportation system would be endangered.

Aside from the one million *chin* of tea used by the government, the rest was sold to tea merchants for distribution within China. Merchants paid two hundred cash (*ch'ien*) to the government and in return received a license (*yin*) entitling them to one hundred *chin* of tea. They could also, with a special license (*yu-t'ieh*), purchase a smaller unit of tea (*chi-ling*).³³ A Tea Control Station (*P'i-ch'a so*), referred to as a surveillance agency by Charles Hucker, recorded the names, family relationships, and the number of *yin* allotted to merchants.³⁴ The merchants then took the licenses to the tea plantations and received the specified amount of tea. They were accorded a set time limit, usually a year, within which they had to sell their tea and return their licenses to the Tea Control Station for cancellation.³⁵ Merchants who delayed the return of their licenses were liable to have their tea confiscated by officials.

³¹ A good account of the original branches of the *Ch'a-ma ssu* in Szechwan, Yunnan, and Kueichow is found in Tani, *Op. cit.*, pp. 84—87. The Yung-ning *Ch'a-ma ssu* was the only branch in Szechwan.

³² See E. Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources*, (London, 1888), Vol. II, p. 266 for examples of government expenditure on foreign traders.

³³ *TMHT* 37, p. 684; *MS* 80, p. 843.

³⁴ *TMHT* 37, p. 684; *T'ai-tsung shih-lu* 55, p. 7b.

³⁵ *TMHT* 153, p. 2138. Compare with the Yüan monopoly system. See Herbert Franz Schurmann, *Economic Structure of the Yüan Dynasty*, (Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. 193—202.

Still more severe punishments were reserved for merchants who exported tea illegally to the barbarians. Capital punishment was prescribed for those who smuggled tea outside the borders of China. In Hung-wu's time, no mercy was shown towards smugglers. Hung-wu had Ou-yang Lun, a relative by marriage, executed for this offense.³⁶ Border officials who abetted the smugglers in any way were also punished though usually not so severely.

In effect, the *Ch'a-ma ssu* in Shensi was the only organization legally empowered to carry on the tea-horse trade. Four major branches were founded to fulfill this task. The most important, Ho-chou, was established as early as 1374, T'ao-chou sometime prior to 1383, Hsi-ning (transferred from Ch'in-chou) in 1397, and Kan-chou in 1413.³⁷ Branches of the *Ch'a-ma ssu* were also found in Min-chou and Chuang-lang though between them these handled less than one thousand horses a year.³⁸ Many texts do not even mention the latter because of their relative insignificance.

Each branch office of the *Ch'a-ma ssu* traded with the barbarians in its own area. Hsi-ning trading primarily with the Uighur tribes of Ch'ü-hsien, An-ting, A-tuan, and Han-tung in the Ch'ing-hai (Lake Kokonor) region; Ho-chou and T'ao-chou trading with tribes organized into the Hsi-fan and Pi-li military districts.^{38a} None of these groups could compete in wealth, land, and power with the Oirat Mongols who were their neighbors to the northeast and the growing Moslem state of Turfan to the northwest. Sporadic raids by these two powers, as we shall see, led to the retreat and dispersal of the barbarians and to the disruption of the tea-horse trade.

³⁶ Li Kuang-pi, "Ming-tai hsi-ch'a i-ma k'ao" [Examination of tea-horse trade between Ming and the West], *Chung-yang Ya-hsiü-ya* (1943), pp. 48—49.

³⁷ *T'ai-tsu shih-lu* 93, p. 6b; 155, p. 4b; 252, p. 3b; *T'ai-tsung shih-lu* 88, p. 6b. We do not know when the T'ao-chou branch was founded. It must have existed prior to 1383, for in that year it was merged with the Ho-chou branch. It resumed its independent existence in 1411. Ho-chou is Kansu's Tao-ho hsien; T'ao-chou is Kansu's Lin-t'an hsien; Hsi-ning is Ching-hai's Hsi-ning hsien; Kan-chou is Kansu's Chang-i hsien; Min-chou is Kansu's Min-hsien; Chuang-lang is Kansu's P'ing-fan hsien; Identifications are based on *Chung-kuo ku-chin ti-ming ta tz'u-tien*.

³⁸ For an enlightening discussion of all the branches of the *Ch'a-ma ssu*, see Tani, *Op. cit.*, pp. 88—89.

^{38a} The Kan-chou *Ch'a-ma ssu* was active only sporadically in the tea-horse trade. It was founded in 1413, but was abolished in 1442 and was not reestablished until 1563.

The *Ch'a-ma ssu* was staffed by a Surveillance Commissioner (*Ta-shih*, of 9a rank) and a Surveillance Vice Commissioner (*Fu-shih*, of 9b rank) and the local branches also were assigned a Commander (*Ssu-ling*) and an Assistant Commander (*Ssu-ch'eng*).³⁹ I have found no sources describing the division of power among these various officials. I have also been unable to uncover the names of any officials of the *Ch'a-ma ssu*, but since they belonged to the lowest, the ninth, rank of the civil bureaucracy, this is not unusual. Their position at the bottom of the civil hierarchy, however, gives rise to speculation about their effectiveness and honesty. It is at least possible, if not probable, that these ill-paid and low ranking officials might for a fee have been willing to overlook the activity of smugglers. Hung-wu and his successors were obviously worried about this development. Periodically Hung-wu and Yung-lo issued gloomy edicts promising severe punishments for such illegal activities.⁴⁰ Later, as these pronouncements failed to deter corrupt officials, Emperors sent Messengers (*Hsing-jen*) and Censors (*Yü-shih*) to patrol the borders and to report on officials who condoned and participated in acts of smuggling.⁴¹

Why the Chinese Emperors chose low ranking and underpaid officials to work in the *Ch'a-ma ssu* is difficult to understand. It was perhaps the same attitude that motivated them to appoint eunuchs as directors of the Maritime Trade Superintendencies (*Shih-po t'i-chü ssu*) in southeastern China, an attitude springing from an antipathy towards commerce and a belief that high officials should not demean themselves in the market place. As I have already stated, though the Chinese recognized the need for trade they were continually scornful of it.

There is no doubt that the government favored and initiated the tea-horse trade. In 1375, Hung-wu sent the eunuch Chao Ch'eng with silk, tea, and other valuable products attractive to the barbarians to Ho-chou to trade for horses.⁴² In 1392, a second eunuch reached Ho-chou with 300,000 *chin* of tea and traded with other barbarians for over 10,000 horses, which were immediately turned over to border officials for defense purposes.⁴³ Apparently, the barbarians enjoyed a

³⁹ *MS* 75, p. 802.

⁴⁰ *STC* 42, p. 15b; *TMHT* 37, p. 689.

⁴¹ *TMHT* 37, p. 691.

⁴² *MS* 330, p. 3796; *T'ai-tsu shih-lu* 100, p. 1b.

⁴³ Wang, *Op. cit.*, 89, p. 3932; *MS* 330, pp. 3796—3797.

good cup of tea, and trade was conducted. Only after some effort were the Chinese able to induce the barbarians to engage in trade.

Nevertheless, trade, once initiated, was conducted on Chinese terms. In 1397, Hung-wu sent Li Ching to give the top half of 41 gold tablets (*chin-p'ai hsin-fu*) to the barbarians and the bottom to the various branches of the *Ch'a-ma ssu*—21 to Ho-chou, 16 to Hsi-ning, and 4 to T'ao-chou.⁴⁴ Every three years a Court official called on the barbarians, comparing their tablets with those stored in the *Ch'a-ma ssu*. If the barbarian tablets were genuine, he proceeded to trade Chinese tea for horses.⁴⁵ Theoretically these restrictions would reduce the likelihood of smuggling both by barbarians and Chinese and would maximize government control of trade.

The prices of the horses and the number to be traded were also determined by the Chinese. In 1389, Hung-wu ordered the *Ch'a-ma ssu* to pay one hundred and twenty *chin* for superior horses, seventy *chin* for average horses, and fifty *chin* for inferior horses.⁴⁶ Earlier, prices for horses had fluctuated from forty to eighteen hundred *chin* per horse, depending on the demand.⁴⁷ By keeping prices stable, the government would be assured a regular supply of horses. It could maintain these prices only by curbing the private export of tea. If the barbarians had access to smuggled tea, their demand for it would be reduced, the price of tea would go down and the horse-tea price ratio would be upset.

If successful, the government annually expected to use approximately one million *chin* of tea in exchange for fourteen thousand horses. According to the *Ta Ming hui tien*, Ho-chou received 7,705 horses, T'ao-chou 3,050, and Hsi-ning 3,050, a total of 13,805.⁴⁸ Most of the horses were sent to frontier garrisons: the mares were transported to the pasture areas of the *Yüan-ma ssu* for breeding; and the few remaining good horses were donated to the Emperor.

⁴⁴ Tani, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁴⁵ *MS* 80, p. 844. For a similar system that was used with the Southeast Asian states, see Wang Huai-chung (trans), Uchida Naosaku, "Ming-tai te ch'ao-kung mao-i chih-tu" [The System of Court Tribute and Trade in the Ming Period], *Shih-huo* (December 10, 1935), p. 32. Original Japanese article is in *Shina Kenkyū* (1935), pp. 91—101.

⁴⁶ *MS* 92, p. 971; *STC* 42, p. 16a.

⁴⁷ Li Chieh, *op. cit.*, pp. 342—343; Wang, *op. cit.*, 89, p. 3925.

⁴⁸ *TMHT* 37, p. 688; Yang I-ch'ing gives 14,051 as the annual number of horses involved in the trade.

This elaborate system of trade required a major effort from the Chinese government. Government soldiers cultivated idle land, packed tea, and transported it from the Szechwan to the Shensi border. Government storehouses preserved the tea for as long as three years while waiting for trade. Four agencies, the Horse Trading Office, the Tea Tax Office, the Tea Control Station, and later the Tea Censorate, were created to facilitate government control of the trade. The Government was eager to pursue this venture. When war and famine caused soldiers to be diverted from the tea trade, the government, unabashed, called upon the merchants to substitute for the soldiers as tea agents.

The system was effective during the early Ming and by the middle of Hung-wu's reign, it was stabilized and operating to the satisfaction of both the government and the barbarians. Trade expanded with each passing year. In 1378 the Chinese received 469 horses from Han-tung; by 1384 they received 560; by 1390 the number increased to 7060; and by 1392 over 10,000 horses were acquired by the Chinese.⁴⁹ Hung-wu was apparently able to impose the severe restrictions needed for an effective tea-horse trade.

Yung-lo initially demonstrated greater interest in winning the hearts of the northwestern barbarians so "that all countries, even the most distant, should acknowledge his supremacy" than in following the harsh policies of his father.⁵⁰ He relaxed the prohibitions on private tea and caused the *Ch'a-ma ssu* to pay more for horses. Early in his reign, one branch office paid eighty thousand *chin* of tea for seventy horses, an average of over one thousand *chin* per horse, far beyond the maximum of one hundred and twenty *chin* established by Hung-wu.⁵¹ Border officials also took advantage of Yung-lo's laxity and traded with the barbarians, occasionally using coarse, adulterated tea.⁵² China could not continue in this way for long because Chinese tea was being consumed with little gain. Yung-lo apparently understood this when he was about to embark on his Mongol campaigns. His five large scale military expeditions against the Mongols created

⁴⁹ *STC* 42, pp. 15b—16a; Wang, *op. cit.*, 89, p. 3932.

⁵⁰ Bretschneider, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 247; *MS* 332, p. 3830.

⁵¹ *MS* 80, p. 844.

⁵² *T'ai-tsung shih-lu* 39, pp. 7b—8a.

a need for war horses, most of which could be supplied only by the tea-horse trade.⁵³

In 1408, Yung-lo acted to revive the tea-horse trade. He reimposed prohibitions on tea smuggling and reinforced them with the threat of a death sentence for violators.⁵⁴ In 1415 he set up further restrictions by sending four Messengers a month from the third to the ninth month of the year to curb the illegal outflow of tea. In 1421, curiously enough, the gold tablet system was temporarily suspended and was only reinstated in 1435.⁵⁵ It is difficult to determine how this interruption affected the trade, but probably the reduction of government control that this act represented reflected a decline in the number of horses acquired by the Chinese. After Yung-lo's death, the Chinese were less expansionist, the Empire was relatively peaceful, and the need for war-horses was consequently diminished. Furthermore, Yung-lo's strenuous efforts, especially from 1415 on, had led to a significant increase in the number of horses.⁵⁶ Only when this number began to

⁵³ For a brief account of these expeditions, see Wolfgang Franke, "Chinesische Feldzüge durch die Mongolei im frühen 15. Jahrhundert," *Sinologica*, III, (1951—1953), pp. 81—88.

⁵⁴ *TMHT* 37, p. 689.

⁵⁵ *T'ai-tsung shih-lu* 120, pp. 3a—3b; *MS* 80, pp. 844—845; *TMHT* 37, p. 688. According to *TMHT*, Yung-lo stopped the tally system in 1416; this seems highly unlikely in view of his efforts in the previous year to bolster the restrictions on tea smuggling. Tani argues that a more logical time for the stopping would be after the burning of the Imperial Palace in 1421. For this, see Tani, *op. cit.*, pp. 94—98.

⁵⁶ The *Shih-lu* gives under the twelfth month of the year statistics, ranging from total population (used by O. B. Van der Sprenkel in his "Population Statistics of Ming China," *BSOAS*. XV, (1953), pp. 289—326) to salt tax, meant to convey the economic performance of the Empire. Though, in particular instances, these figures, because of copyists' errors and perhaps deliberate falsification, cannot be relied upon, general trends may be perceived. For this, see Van der Sprenkel's introductory remarks in the above article. In this case, the general trend in Yung-lo's reign from 1415 on is a tremendous increase in the number of horses. In 1415, the number is 310,617; by 1417, 514,439; and by 1422, it rose to 1,199,315. The figures for the tea tax during the Ming are also extremely suggestive. A steady decline is apparent after Yung-lo's reign—in 1413, a high point is reached with the collection of 1,997,808 *chin* of tea; by 1426, a comparatively meager 630,852 *chin* is collected; and by 1488, the figure is only 89,000 *chin*. A slight rise to 113,311 *chin* occurs under Cheng-te (1506—1521) as a result of Yang I-ch'ing's reforms (see pp. 155—159) but the tax never exceeds that after Cheng-te's reign.

decline in 1435 did the Hsüan-te Emperor (1426—1435) return to the gold tablet system and seek to set rigid government controls to rehabilitate the tea-horse trade. He and his successor triumphed—but not for long.

THE DECLINE OF THE TEA-HORSE TRADE

The invasions of Esen (Yeh-hsien), the Oirat chief, in 1449 dealt a damaging blow to the tea-horse trade. For nearly a decade Esen had engaged in a horse trade of his own with China. In 1448 the Chinese eunuch Wang Chen tried to underpay Esen for his horses, infuriating the Oirat chief who vowed revenge.⁵⁷ Shortly thereafter, claiming that his envoys had not been properly received by China, he embarked upon a series of raids on China which culminated in the capture of the Chinese Emperor.⁵⁸ His early raids were primarily directed against the northwestern border. He captured and devastated Kanchou and Ninghsia and forced many of the barbarians involved in the horse trade to seek refuge in China while others drifted to remote areas of Inner Asia.

As a result, the gold tablets, the sole binding element in the tea-horse trade, were scattered and for the most part destroyed. About fifty years later, Yang I-ch'ing was amazed to find a barbarian chief who had in his possession a tablet and was aware of its function.⁵⁹ Although a few of these tablets were preserved, they were rarely used in trade again. Without them, the government was severely limited in determining the groups that could trade with the Chinese, in fixing the price of tea and horses, and in preventing unscrupulous officials and merchants from trading with the barbarians.

Esen's invasions not only destroyed the gold tablet system, but also disrupted the official transportation of tea. The army which was

⁵⁷ *MS* 81, p. 857.

⁵⁸ For a good account of this episode, see Wolfgang Franke, "Yü Ch'ien, Staatsmann und Kriegsminister 1398—1457," *Monumenta Serica*, XI, (1946), pp. 94—100. It should be noted that Esen's dispute with Wang Chen was only the last in a series of unpleasant incidents that began with the Oirat chief's conquest of Hami in the early 1440's and that marred the relationship of Oirats and Chinese.

⁵⁹ Yang I-ch'ing, *Kuan-chung tsou-i*, pp. 4a—4b.

needed to repel Esen's forces could not be spared to carry tea. Even before these invasions the army had difficulty in fulfilling its obligations, and the Cheng-t'ung Emperor reluctantly ordered that the amount of tea collected and transported by the army from Szechwan and Shensi be reduced to half the fixed quota—less than one half a million *chin*.⁶⁰ The rest of the tea tax was converted into paper money and silver. Paradoxically Esen's invasions accentuated the need for horses while simultaneously preventing their acquisition by the Chinese. The army was unable to fight and transport tea for the tea-horse trade at the same time.

Because the government no longer demanded a million *chin* of tea from Szechwan, tea merchants obtained a greater share. Some sold tea legally for internal consumption while others saw a great opportunity for quick profit in satisfying the barbarians' desire for tea. Tea smuggling flourished, and the government, busily engaged in protecting itself from the Oirats, was unable to control it. Consequently, the tea-growers in Szechwan had no choice but to collaborate with the merchants. If they refused to cooperate, their tea would not be distributed and would spoil.

Finally Esen's invasions created another problem that indirectly affected the tea-horse trade. There had been periodic famines in Shensi but Esen's assaults on China and the influx of Chinese soldiers in the area markedly increased the need for grain.⁶¹ The government transported grain to relieve Shensi, an effort which, as I shall show, disrupted the tea-horse trade.

Ch'eng-hua's reign (1465—1487) witnessed the first attempts to deal with these problems, although many of these efforts were, undoubtedly, makeshift. For example, following a precedent set in early Ming times, the Chinese used commodities other than tea to trade for horses. From 1467 to 1470 Ch'eng-hua converted the tea tax to silver to buy horses. Possibly the barbarians desired tea more than silver or perhaps the Emperor realized that had this policy continued for long, it would have led to a disastrous outflow of China's silver. In any case, after 1470, Ch'eng-hua discontinued the practice.⁶² In 1479, during the fifteenth year of his reign, Ch'eng-hua in desperation ordered the Censors, who originally investigated but now administered many

⁶⁰ *STC* 42, p. 18a.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18b.

⁶² *TMHT* 37, pp. 685—686; Tani, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

functions of the *Ch'a-ma ssu*, to trade for horses irrespective of regulations.⁶³ He urged the Censors to summon the barbarians for the tea-horse exchange and encouraged them to trade at their convenience and with no price limitations. Perhaps he realized that this would not necessarily assure a steady supply of horses and was also only a temporary measure.

In seeking more permanent solutions, Ch'eng-hua adopted the policies of his predecessors and prohibited the exportation of private tea. He attempted to reimpose controls that the government had abandoned after Esen's invasions. He ordered all who smuggled over 500 *chin* of tea to be drafted into the army.⁶⁴ He also refused to allow tribute-bearing Moslems and Buddhist priests to buy tea before returning to their native lands, a practice many Emperors had already and would later condone.⁶⁵ In 1467, he tried to intimidate negligent and corrupt officials and merchants by appointing Censors to patrol the borders and punish tea smugglers. All of those involved in this private trading including the barbarians were outraged and demanded that the Emperor appoint the relatively permissive Messengers rather than the strict Censors to perform this function. The barbarians refused to supply horses unless their demands were met. A compromise was finally effected permitting the appointment of Tea Censors who performed annual border inspections.⁶⁶ However, since they were not permanently assigned to the border, they could not successfully eliminate the smuggling.

Ch'eng-hua was more successful in increasing the tea production of Han-chung fu in Shensi. He realized that the army could not be used to convey tea from Szechwan to Shensi and decided to eliminate the transportation problem by expanding tea production in Shensi itself. He ordered idle land to be reclaimed and placed under cultivation and refugees from border areas were settled in Shensi as tea growers.⁶⁷

⁶³ *TMHT* 153, p. 2137.

⁶⁴ *TMHT* 37, p. 689.

⁶⁵ He may have been thinking here of the role played by Buddhist priests in Japanese trade with early Ming. For this, see Wang Yi-t'ung, *Official Relations Between China and Japan, 1368—1549*, (Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 3.

⁶⁶ *MS* 80, p. 845.

⁶⁷ *TMHT* 19, p. 353. In his article "Fiscal Administration During the Ming Administration," in Charles Hucker (ed.), *Chinese Government in Ming Times* (Columbia University Press, 1969), Ray Huang discusses the difficulties encountered by the government in revising the tax structure—see pages 77, 87—88.

Within thirty years, tea production had risen to one million *chin* per year or as much as had been produced in Szechwan. One suspects that Ch'eng-hua had anticipated that much of this increase would wind up in the hands of the government as tax, but surprisingly, no effort was made during his reign to increase the tea tax of Shensi. Tea continued to be taxed at the same rate of 26,000 *chin* rather than 1,000,000 *chin*.

Finally, Ch'eng-hua chose the Tea Exchange (*K'ai-chung*) system to deal with the famine problem in Shensi. Using salt instead of tea, this system had been initiated in 1370 to supply soldiers on the Shansi border.⁶⁸ Merchants transported grain to the army stationed in Shansi and in return received certificates (*yin*) entitling them to government salt. According to the *Ming shih*, "in this way the expenses of transportation will be economized and the supply of grain at the frontier will be sufficient."⁶⁹ Ch'eng-hua applied the same principles in Shensi. He ordered merchants to send grain to the famine stricken province and to the soldiers on the border, compensating them with tea from the Ch'a-ma ssu. Later the Hung-chih Emperor varied the procedure by selling tea to the merchants for silver which was then used to buy grain.⁷⁰

None of Ch'eng-hua's efforts—the elimination of restrictions on the horse trade, the use of Censors to curb smuggling, the increased production of tea in Han-chung fu, or the *K'ai-chung* system—ultimately stabilized the tea-horse trade during his reign. After Ch'eng-hua's death, when the Hung-chih Emperor took the throne, the private tea trade flourished. Taking advantage of the disintegration of the gold tablet system, Chinese border officials and merchants eagerly smuggled tea to the barbarians. Censors made annual inspection tours but these were too cursory to be effective. Only a paltry number of horses was obtained by the government and even these were inferior, since the merchants and officials took the prize mounts.

The rise of Turfan in Central Asia exacerbated these problems. Turfan, which had been a relatively small and peaceful—if not docile—

⁶⁸ See Wang Ch'ung-wu, "Ming-tai te shang-t'un chih-tu" in *Yü-kung* (August 6, 1936), pp. 1—15, translated as "The Ming System of Merchant Colonization" in John DeFrancis and E-tu Zen Sun (eds.), *Chinese Social History*, pp. 299—308.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 300; *MS* 80, p. 838. Also, see Ho Ping-ti, "The Salt Merchants of Yang-chou," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, XVII, 130—168, (1954), pp. 135—136.

⁷⁰ *TMHT* 37, p. 686.

state in the early fifteenth century, had absorbed Lukchak (Liu-ch'eng) and Karakhoja (Huo-chou) in the mid-fifteenth century and demanded that China recognize her as a great Moslem power in Central Asia. In 1469, its Sultan Ali requested that the Chinese Emperor grant him the four clawed dragon robe, but the Board of Rites, regarding Ali as arrogant, refused his demand. In 1473, Ali invaded and captured Hami, an area which was an extremely important thoroughfare in the caravan trade between China and Central Asia, and which the Chinese considered strategic to the defense of their northwestern lands. Ch'eng-hua sent a mission led by Li Wen^{70a} and Liu Wen to oust Ali from Hami, but the expedition was unsuccessful. After Ali's death in 1482, Han-shen, the exiled leader of Hami, led an army of 1300 men, recaptured Hami, and was recognized by the Chinese as its rightful king. Turfan refused to relent, and in 1488, the first year of Hung-chih's reign, Ahmed, Ali's son,⁷¹ treacherously killed Han-shen and reoccupied Hami.⁷²

Henceforth Turfan cast a shadow on Hung-chih's reign (1488—1505). The Chinese, hoping to pressure Turfan into submission without resorting to military force, cut off trade and tribute missions. But China had to remain on her guard and in fact, on several occasions, clashed with Turfan's troops. Once again China needed war horses for her cavalry to meet the threat of force. One of Hung-chih's advisers, Li Tung-yang,^{72a} urged a restoration of the gold tablet system to procure the beasts. Li pointed out that the elimination of the system in 1449 led to an increase in private tea in which the officials and merchants had profited. According to Li, they used coarse tea and cheated the barbarians who became disenchanted and sent inferior horses to China. Only with the return to the gold tablet system would China control

^{70a} 89-Index, II, p. 231a.

⁷¹ *MS* 329, p. 3790. Mohammedan sources make no mention of Ali and cite a certain Yunus Khan as Ahmed's father. See Ney Elias (ed.), E. Denison Ross (trans.), *The Tarikh-i-Rashidi of Mirza Muhammad Haidar, Dughlat*, (London, 1895; reprint: Source Books and Studies on Inner Asia, New York, Praeger, 1970), p. 51.

⁷² *MShu* 167, pp. 3294—3296; *MS* 329, p. 3791. Two important contemporary accounts of the struggles between Turfan and China have been preserved. One, the *Hsing-fu Ha-mi chih*, was written by the War Minister Ma Wen-sheng and the other, the *P'ing-fan shih-mo*, by the military man Hsü Chin. I am working on an extensive study of this period based on these two sources.

^{72a} 89-Index II, p. 226c.

her officials and merchants, regain the trust of the barbarians, and revive the tea-horse trade.⁷³

In 1490, the Censor Li Luan advanced a proposal that was adopted by Hung-chih. He urged that the government compromise with the merchants, permitting them to transport tea to the Shensi *Ch'a-ma ssu*. The merchants would receive 60% of the tea for their own private trade and the government would obtain 400,000 *chin* (40% of the 1,000,000 *chin* transported) which would be exchanged for 4,000 horses.⁷⁴ Li and Hung-chih failed to anticipate problems in implementing these policies. They assumed that merchants would not take advantage of the compromise. The merchants, contrary to Li's expectations, kept the superior tea and presented to the *Ch'a-ma ssu* that of the lowest quality. Thus in trade the government had to be satisfied with inferior steeds.

Li and Hung-chih also could not have foreseen the onset of devastating famines in Shensi, the first of which struck in 1494. Hung-chih was compelled to use the *K'ai-chung* system to relieve Shensi. He released 2,000,000 *chin* of tea, which had been accumulated over a number of years from many regions of China, to merchants who transported grain to the border.⁷⁵ In the very next year, he temporarily suspended the horse trade and released four million more *chin* to private entrepreneurs.⁷⁶ In 1501 he ordered officials to sell four to five million *chin* to merchants in exchange for silver, which was used to buy grain in Shensi. Hung-chih realized that the outflow of tea was subverting the tea-horse trade, and in 1502 he decreed that the exchange of tea for grain was prohibited.⁷⁷

The prohibitions on the *K'ai-chung* system still left many problems unresolved. Hung-chih was unable to find an effective method of transporting high quality tea to the borders. He relied upon the merchants to convey any tea that he was fortunate enough to get and the merchants were making good use of their leverage to insure great profits for themselves. Hung-chih was unable to curb the merchants who met the barbarian demand for tea and so he could not tempt the barbarians with official tea.

⁷³ *MS* 92, p. 971.

⁷⁴ *MS* 80, p. 845.

⁷⁵ *TMHT* 37, p. 686.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 686.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 686.

ATTEMPTS AT REFORM

Yang I-ch'ing was the first official to devise a comprehensive reform program of the Ming horse administration. Yang was born in Yünnan in 1454 but as a child moved to Pa-ling in Hunan where his father retired from official life. He was a precocious child and, having qualified as a Bachelor (*hsiu-ts'ai*) at a young age, attracted the attention of the Ch'eng-hua Emperor who assigned a tutor to instruct him. At fourteen he passed the provincial examinations (*hsiang-shih*) and at eighteen he became a *chin-shih*. His father's death and the mourning period that followed temporarily impeded his spectacular progress but he regained his momentum shortly. He was appointed an Assistant Surveillance Commissioner (*an-ch'a ch'ien-shih*) in Shansi and then advanced to the Surveillance Vice Commissioner (*an-ch'a fu-shih*) in Shensi. He stayed in Shensi for eight years and, being inquisitive in nature, investigated Shensi's border problems, specifically the horse administration. His knowledge was not put to use immediately as he was transferred to a post in Nanking. But in 1502 the War Minister Liu Ta-hsia recommended that Yang be appointed Left Vice Censor-in-chief (*tso fu-tu yü-shih*) in Shensi with the power to direct the horse administration.⁷⁸

With his eight years' tenure in Shensi and his study of horses during that time, Yang was well qualified to reform and perhaps invigorate the horse administration. Yang saw the necessity for more pasture land if China were to succeed in breeding her own horses and wrote memorials to the Emperor urging such an increase. He also requested an increase in the number of herdsmen in Shensi, pointing out that in early Ming there had been 1220 herdsmen but the number had gradually been reduced to 745. Better trained personnel in the *Yüan-ma ssu*, according to Yang, would permit China to breed more of her own horses and lessen her dependence on the barbarians. Finally, Yang demanded that new pasture lands be created and that nearby exposed towns (*ch'eng*) and forts (*pao*) be built for protection against hostile barbarians.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ *MS* 198, p. 2303; Li Kuang-pi, *op. cit.*, p. 50. See Herbert Giles, *A Chinese Biographical Dictionary*, (London, 1898), pp. 905—906, and *Tōyō rekishi daijiten* (vol. 9), p. 97 for brief biographies of Yang. Also, the *89-Index* III, p. 153b has more sources on Yang. Yang deserves a full-scale biography.

⁷⁹ Li Kuang-pi, *op. cit.*, pp. 50—51.

Yang's most important work on the tea-horse trade was a memorial of over 6,000 characters written in 1505.⁸⁰ In it he presented a brief history of the trade, analyzed its current problems, and furnished a program designed to remedy its weaknesses. Yang's immense personal knowledge was evident throughout the memorial; he constantly referred to his own experiences with border officials and barbarians. He had seen everything with his own eyes and was not the amateur who dabbles in many fields that one frequently encounters in Chinese history. Because he knew the situation, he realized that the merchants had to be granted an important role in the tea-horse trade. Though he still inveighed against commerce and private traffic in tea, he ultimately offered a plan that was dependent on the merchants for its success.

Yang began his memorial by briefly explaining the relations between China and the barbarians. He pointed out that the Chinese gained the barbarians' confidence by supplying them with tea. As a result the barbarians were willing to act as a buffer against hostile peoples in Central Asia. If the barbarians dared to rebel, according to Yang, their tea supply would be cut off and they would become ill and die. With this threat, China regulated the barbarians. However, since the gold tablet system had been abolished, private trading had made tea available to the barbarians and the Chinese government had been unable to obtain horses from them.

Sated with tea, the barbarians lost their inhibitions towards China, robbing and plundering the border areas. To pacify the barbarians Yang suggested strong punishment for one or two of the tribes to set an example for the others. Even such forceful action would not in itself be sufficient to reestablish proper relations with the barbarians. China, asserted Yang, needed to reinstitute the gold tablet system and to make clear the prohibitions on private tea.⁸¹ Yang required officials to scrutinize merchant licenses and to confiscate forgeries. Furthermore he wanted to increase the number of Censors patrolling the border to eradicate the "evil grass"—Yang's description for the corrupt officials—which stifled the tea-horse trade. Under Yang's plan, stiffer punishments had to be meted out to smugglers and private trading in tea had to be treated as a serious crime. Yang emphasized that the

⁸⁰ Included in a collection of his memorials entitled *Kuan-chung tsou-i*. This collection provides excellent opportunities for further research on the horse administration in the Ming.

⁸¹ Yang I-ch'ing *Kuan-chung tsou-i*, 3, pp. 5a—6a.

early Ming Emperors who cherished life and were not fond of killing considered tea smuggling a capital crime, so that even those who smuggled as little as four or five *chin* were frightened. Later Emperors, on the other hand, had been more lenient and as a result those smuggling fifty or even five hundred *chin* were not afraid. Consequently, Yang advocated harsher punishments.

Yang also outlined the trading conditions on the border. Every three years trade would be conducted between the *Ch'a-ma ssu* and the barbarians who possessed gold tablets. In the second year the Emperor would send a proclamation in the barbarian language to the border tribes urging them to bring their best horses for trade. If the barbarians came, officials would reward them generously with tea and would encourage them to return. If the barbarians refused to come after three pleadings, the Chinese would attack one or two of the recalcitrant tribes and in this way compel acquiescence.

All of these proposals were conventional—Yang envisioned a return to the system that existed under the first Emperors, a system supervised and controlled by the Chinese government. The only problem lay in transporting tea to the Shensi border and here Yang was compelled to seek an accommodation with the merchants. The merchants seemed to be the only group capable of undertaking this task and Yang reluctantly turned to them. He ordered rich tea merchants in Shensi to buy five hundred thousand to six hundred thousand *chin* of tea annually though no single merchant could obtain more than ten thousand *chin*. The merchants would carry the tea to the Shensi branches of the *Ch'a-ma ssu* which would sell one third of it locally for silver. Fifty *liang* of silver would be used to pay the merchants for every thousand *chin* of tea, 25 *liang* for the tea and 25 *liang* for packing and transportation. The remaining two thirds or approximately four hundred thousand *chin* of tea would then be available for the horse trade.⁸²

Yang wished to emphasize that his proposals differed from the *K'ai-chung* system. He pointed out that, although both authorized merchants to transport tea to the border, the government, under his plan, was the only agent empowered to sell tea to the barbarians. All private trading was forbidden. Moreover, the government received two-thirds of the tea under Yang's system while it obtained only two-fifths from the *K'ai-chung* system.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 19a—20b.

Apparently, Chinese merchants balked at this proposal and in 1506, the very next year, Yang was again forced to accommodate them. The merchants could make greater profits from private selling of tea through the *K'ai-chung* system than in receiving a fixed amount of silver from the government. Naturally they objected to government control of tea sales which Yang proposed. Within a year the government relented and revised Yang's plan to gain the support and cooperation of the merchants. The new regulations that were introduced in the first year of Cheng-te's reign provided that merchants would transport tea to the Shensi border and in return would receive fifty percent of the tea for private sale.⁸³ This compromise failed to remedy the weaknesses of Li Luan's proposal of 1490 which also allowed merchants to transport and sell private tea and which, as we have seen, merchants used to their own advantage. Again, in order to obtain sorely needed horses, the government was willing to go to extreme lengths in compromising with the tea merchants. Because of the government's action Yang's program came to nothing. Nor was Yang's other important proposal wholeheartedly implemented. He noted that Ch'eng-hua's efforts had led to a sharp increase in the tea production of Han-chung fu in Shensi. Yet the area's tax on tea had not been adjusted and remained the same as under Hung-wu, a low 26,862 *chin*. Yang asked that the tax be raised and the Hung-chih Emperor responded by doubling Han-chung fu's contribution to the government, making it 51,251 *chin*.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, since tea production in Han-chung fu had increased to well over a million *chin*, this was only a token rise in the tax and allowed much untaxed tea to flow into private hands.

Though Yang's reforms initially affected the tea-horse trade, their influence was felt only briefly. In the first four years of his program, China managed to collect 19,077 horses, less than 5,000 horses a year and certainly paltry compared to the 14,000 annually that were received a hundred years earlier.⁸⁵ After that, the official tea-horse trade declined, as merchant traffic in tea expanded. Because Yang had been forced to compromise by allowing merchants to transport tea and retain half of

⁸³ *MS* 80, p. 845.

⁸⁴ Yang, *op. cit.*, pp. 14b—17b. The Chia-ching *Han-chung fu-chih* 3, pp. 7b—8a gives the following breakdown for the new tax: Hsi-hsiang hsien—29,680 *chin*; Tzu-yang hsien—12,959 *chin*; Chin-chou—4,446 *chin*; Shih-ch'uan hsien—1,765 *chin*; Han-yin hsien—1,401 *chin*.

⁸⁵ *Wu-tsung shih-lu* 25, pp. 9b—10a.

it, the government was presented with low quality tea by unscrupulous merchants and had difficulty in obtaining superior horses from the barbarians.

By the middle of Cheng-te's reign, therefore, it was evident that Yang's reforms, the last serious effort to deal with the problems of the tea-horse trade, had been sabotaged by the government's reluctance to antagonize the merchants or perhaps its inability to compel them to accept Yang's program.^{85a}

During Cheng-te's reign (1506—1521), the tea-horse trade and the administration of the northwestern border grew less and less effective. Cheng-te favored the Buddhists and granted foreign Buddhist priests the right to export tea.⁸⁶ This increased the private traffic in tea and decreased the barbarian demand for official Chinese tea. Starting in 1509, trade was made even more difficult when the Mongol chief I-pu-la attacked the tribes on the northwestern border.⁸⁷ I-pu-la's invasions, like those of Esen sixty years earlier, dealt a blow to the barbarians involved in the tea-horse trade. In 1512, An-ting and Ch'ü-hsien, both areas supplying large numbers of horses, were overwhelmed by I-pu-la's forces and were cut off from China. Much of the Ch'ing-hai (Kokonor) area met the same fate⁸⁸. In the next year Hami, the entrepot of Central Asian trade with China, surrendered to Turfan's Moslem chief Mansur after fifty years of intermittent warfare.⁸⁹ The success of I-pu-la and Mansur was disastrous to the tea-horse trade, for many of the northwestern barbarians were scattered and were unable to re-establish their communities. Many of them virtually disappeared from the Ming chronicles. From the early sixteenth century on China also shifted her attention from the Northwest to the Northeast. The military threat posed by the "Northern bandits," primarily Mongols, seemed more potent than that from the Central Asian states or the barbarian tribes. Turfan was satisfied with its conquest of Hami and only occasionally attacked the northwestern boundary, while the

^{85a} Part of the problem may have been the division within the government itself. In 1507, a struggle between the influential eunuch Liu Chin and Yang ended with Yang's imprisonment. For this, see *MS* 198, pp. 2304—2305.

⁸⁶ *MS* 80, p. 845.

⁸⁷ For I-pu-la, see Sei Wada, "A Study of Dayan," *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, XIX, 1—42, (1960), pp. 27—29.

⁸⁸ *MS* 330, pp. 3800—3801.

⁸⁹ *MS* 329, pp. 3792—3793; Bretschneider, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 197—198.

bandits in the northeast continued to raid the border. To meet this threat, the Chinese depended on horses provided by friendly northeastern barbarians rather than by the northwestern tea-horse trade since transporting horses from Shensi to the northeast would have been both time-consuming and expensive.

Desperate efforts were made during the reign of Chia-ching (1522—1567) to reestablish the tea-horse trade. The Censor Liu Lun^{89a} proposed a complete prohibition of private tea and a reinstatement of the gold tablet system, a motion that was defeated by the Ministry of War which claimed that the gold tablets could be forged by the barbarians and would go undetected by the few officials on the border. This failure, the Ministry argued, would further tarnish China's image.⁹⁰ In 1551 the Emperor ordered the creation of a *k'an-ho* or tally system which was similar to the gold tablet system and which had been used effectively by the Chinese in their relations with Japan and Southeast Asia, but the plan was quickly abandoned since the government was apparently unable to muster the forces necessary to enforce it.⁹¹ In 1552 the Emperor again tried to curb private tea by confiscating stores of tea about to be smuggled out of the country by foreign Buddhist priests.⁹²

While the Chia-ching Emperor attempted to establish government control over the tea-horse trade, he was at the same time compelled to compromise with the merchants and to defy his own regulations in other ways. Famines on the Shensi border led him to revive the *K'ai-chung* system that had been abolished by Hung-chih. He tried to limit the amount of tea released to merchants to 300,000 to 400,000 *chin* but by 1547 the figure had climbed to one million *chin*.⁹³ Again in 1564 the Emperor ordered officials to restrict the quantity of tea to 500,000 or 600,000 *chin*, but the merchants could still engage in private trade in spite of these regulations.⁹⁴ Merchants also benefited from another of Chia-ching's orders. In 1536 the Censor Liu Liang-hsiang^{94a} told the Emperor that the three year time limit between trading periods was

^{89a} 89-Index, III, p. 234b.

⁹⁰ *MS* 80, p. 846.

⁹¹ *TMHT* 153, p. 2137; *MS* 92, p. 971.

⁹² *TMHT* 37, p. 691.

⁹³ *TMHT* 37, p. 687.

⁹⁴ *TMHT* 153, p. 2137.

^{94a} 89-Index, III, p. 238c.

too long causing much of the tea to be spoiled. Chia-ching, following Liu's advice, ordered tea officials to sell tea at any convenient time to anyone and to avoid storing it in the *Ch'a-ma ssu* for more than two years.⁹⁵ This relaxation of regulations was a disappointment—the tea-horse trade was not greatly stimulated nor were the merchants deterred from smuggling. As late as 1561, Chia-ching was still calling on officials to prohibit merchants from privately selling tea for horses.⁹⁶

The Chinese government faced the same problems throughout the sixteenth century. The barbarians had scattered as a result of the attacks of I-pu-la and Mansur; the government was unable to impose its will on the merchants and gain a complete monopoly over the tea-horse trade; and Chinese officials were preoccupied with the northeastern border. These problems seemed insurmountable, though a few feeble and ultimately unsuccessful attempts were made to reimpose government authority over the tea-horse trade. In 1569, officials, by imperial order, converted the tea tax of Szechwan into silver which was used to buy horses.⁹⁷ In 1571, the Emperor demanded that harsh measures be taken against merchants who kept their tea licenses and illegally used them more than once.⁹⁸ By 1585, the Wan-li Emperor (1573—1619) recognized the futility of these efforts at total control and again compromised with the merchants. He allowed them to sell seventy percent of the tea they transported to the border if they gave the government the remaining thirty percent, the lowest figure the government had ever demanded.

Even more revealing of the government's futile efforts to control tea of a high quality was the debate over the inferior Hunan tea. In the sixteenth century tea production in Hunan grew more rapidly than in Szechwan and Shensi. Noting its abundance and lower cost, merchants and a few officials began exporting it to the barbarians. In 1595, the Censor Li Nan^{98a} demanded prohibitions on Hunan tea, asserting that it was bitter, injurious to the health, and in many cases could not be classified as tea at all—it was in his words "false tea." The government, desperate for any exportable tea, rejected Li Nan's demands and instead adopted the proposal of the Censor Hsü Ch'iao. Hsü admitted

⁹⁵ *TMHT* 37, p. 690.

⁹⁶ *TMHT* 153, p. 2137.

⁹⁷ *Huang-ch'ao ma-cheng chi* 12, p. 12a.

⁹⁸ *MS* 80, p. 846.

^{98a} *89-Index* II, p. 246c;

that Hunan tea was bitter but argued that if it was mixed with koumiss it did not lead to sickness. He also agreed that much so-called Hunan tea was "false tea" but pointed out that the tea authorities could uncover any such deceit.⁹⁹ Unfortunately, Hsü did not specify any government agency for this task, an act which made his proposal valueless. The government, in its anxiety to obtain tea at any cost, ignored both the weakness of Hsü's plan and the inferior quality of Hunan tea. Even this final effort to increase exportable tea proved futile, for, as the *Ming shih* points out, by the end of the Ming "the tea laws, the horse administration, and the border defenses were all ruined."¹⁰⁰

The Ch'ing also established a *Ch'a-ma ssu* and the first Ch'ing Emperor founded branches in the same six areas of Shensi as under the Ming.¹⁰¹ Yet the Ch'ing *Ch'a-ma ssu* never traded for as many horses as its Ming counterpart. By the eighteenth century, the Ch'ing had conquered most of modern-day Sinkiang and Mongolia where it had access to fine horses. The Ch'ing Court also discovered that Western Europeans and Russians coveted tea and that China could realize greater profits from a tea trade with these powers than with the barbarians on the northwestern border. As a result, a flourishing tea trade arose from which China received silver for its tea.¹⁰²

CONCLUSION

The Ming Court, though publicly scornful of commerce, initiated and nurtured the tea-horse trade with the barbarians through a series of official embassies in the Hung-wu period. China desperately needed horses and could not afford to remain aloof from commerce nor could she wait for the barbarians to pledge obeisance to the Emperor, as the official tribute system and traditional foreign relations demanded. As

⁹⁹ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 847. One last effort was made to revive the tea-horse trade when the eunuch Li Mou-ch'i was appointed to supervise the *Ch'a-ma ssu* in Shensi. Li's attempts seem to have been unsuccessful. See Lung Wen-pin, *Ming hui yao* 39, p. 701.

¹⁰¹ *Ch'ing shih kao* 147, pp. 3a—3b.

¹⁰² For a brief account of the decline of the tea-horse trade in Ch'ing, see Kano Naosada, "Chama bōeki no shūmatsu," [On the Dwindling of the Tea and Horse Trade], *Tōyōshi Kenkyū* (1963), pp. 73—95. See also the fine B. A. essay at Harvard College entitled *Tea System of the Ch'ing Dynasty* by B. H. Whibeck written in 1965.

Professor Fletcher writes in his recent study of Chinese relations with Central Asia.¹⁰³

“The early Ming court took Chinese commerce to the foreigners . . . The court not only winked at counterfeit “tribute” embassies and dealt with rulers who, with the court’s full knowledge, did not recognize the emperor’s authority; the court itself even took the initiative and promoted commerce.”

Thus the assertion by Ming officials still adhered to by some modern scholars that the tea-horse trade was solely a handy and inexpensive way of pacifying the barbarians is highly suspect. According to this theory, Chinese officials could control recalcitrant tribes by withholding tea. In fact, however, the Chinese rarely kept tea from the barbarians because they needed horses and were reluctant to antagonize barbarian horse traders. The only suspensions of trade occurred when the Chinese government itself was unable to transport tea to the border as, for example, after its resounding defeat by the Oirat chief Esen.

After Esen’s raids and the sixteenth-century invasions of I-pu-la and Mansur, the Emperors and officials abandoned the government monopoly of tea and compromised with the Chinese merchants, a class they viewed with contempt. They allowed merchants to transport and sell tea privately on the border, initially imposing a sizable tax in kind. However, as the government’s power waned and its demands became more modest, officials reduced the tea tax and merchants were unimpeded in trade until the warehouses of the *Ch’a-ma ssu* were empty and the pasture lands and stables of China were without the prized barbarian steeds.*

¹⁰³ Joseph Fletcher, “China and Central Asia,” in John King Fairbank, (editor), *Chinese World Order, Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, (Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 216—17.

* After completing this paper, I came across the *Minshi shokkashi yakuchū* (2 vols.), edited by Wada Sei, a valuable Japanese translation of the *Ming shih shih-huo-chih* with some interesting notes concerning the *MS* section on the tea tax.

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The Tea and Horse Trade with Inner Asia during the Ming

List of Chinese Characters

(I am grateful to Miss Loretta Pan, Senior Lecturer in Chinese, Columbia University for writing the Chinese characters)

A-hei-ma	阿黑麻	fu-shih	副使
A-li	阿力	Ha-mi	哈密
A-tuan	阿端	Han-chung fu	漢中府
an-ch'a ch'ien-shih	按察僉事	Han-shen	罕慎
An-ting	安定	Han-tung	罕東
ch'a-k'o ssu	茶課司	Ho-chou	河州
ch'a-ma ssu	茶馬司	Hsi-fan	西番
Chao Ch'eng	趙成	Hsi-ning	西寧
ch'eng	城	Hsin-ts'un	辛村
chi-ling	畸零	hsing-jen	行人
ch'ien	錢	Hsü Ch'iao	徐僑
chin	斤	Huo-chou	火州
Ch'in-chou	秦州	I-pu-la	亦不剌
chin-p'ai hsin-fu	金牌信符	k'ai-chung	開中
Ch'ing-hai	青海	k'an-ho	勘合
Ch'ü-hsien	曲先	Li Ching	李景
Chuang-lang	莊浪	Li Kuang-li	李廣利

Li Luan	李鸞	p'i-ch'a so	批茶所
Li Mou-ch'i	李茂奇	Pi-li	必理
Li Nan	李楠	shih-po t'i-chü ssu	市舶提舉司
Li Tung-yang	李東陽	ssu-ch'eng	司丞
Li Wen	李文	ssu-leng	司令
liang	兩	ta-shih	大使
Liu-ch'eng	柳城	t'ai-p'u ssu	太僕寺
Liu Chin	劉瑾	T'ao-chou	洮州
Liu Liang-hsiang	劉良鄉	tso-fu tu yü-shih	左副都御使
Liu Lun	劉崙	T'u-lu-fan	土魯番
Liu Ta-hsia	劉大夏	Wang Chen	王振
Liu Wen	劉文	Yang I-ch'ing	楊一清
ma	馬	Yeh-hsien	也先
Man-su-erh	滿速兒	yin	引
Min-chou	岷州	yü-shih	御使
Ou-yang Lun	歐陽倫	yu-t'ieh	由帖
Pa-ling	巴陵	yuan-ma ssu	苑馬寺
pao	堡		

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>MS</i>	<i>Ming shih</i>
<i>MShu</i>	<i>Ming shu</i>
<i>STC</i>	<i>Shensi t'ung-chih</i>
<i>TMHT</i>	<i>Ta Ming hui tien</i>
<i>89-Index</i>	<i>Combined Indices to Eighty-Nine Collections of Ming Dynasty Biographies</i> (Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series No. 24)

UNITS OF MEASUREMENT¹

<i>chin</i>	A catty. Approximately 586.82 grams (or a little over a pound).
<i>liang</i>	Approximately 37.30 grams or 1 1/3 ounces. One <i>liang</i> of silver equals 1000 copper coins.

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¹ Based on Wang Yi-t'ung *Official Relations Between China and Japan, 1368—1549*, p. 117.

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