CHINA’S ROUTE HERITAGE
MOBILITY NARRATIVES, MODERNITY AND THE ANCIENT TEA HORSE ROAD

Gary Sigley
China’s Route Heritage

*China’s Route Heritage* examines the creation, development, and proliferation of the route heritage discourse of the Ancient Tea Horse Road (*Chamagudao*), in the People’s Republic of China.

Examining the formation of the tea-horse road as a concept, its development as a platform for cultural branding, and its most recent interactions with the policy of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the revival of the discourse on the Silk Roads, the book demonstrates that the tea-horse road is an important part of the discourse on Chinese modernity. Describing the route heritage of the tea-horse road as a ‘mobility narrative’, whereby an ancient route is used to form a narrative of ethnic unity and cooperation, the book demonstrates that the study of such heritage offers unique insights into issues that are of concern to the wider field of critical heritage studies. Sigley also shows how the study of alternative route heritage enables us to gain a broader sense of route heritage discourse and its implications for the discussion of historical, present, and future forms of mobility and connectivity within China and beyond its borders.

*China’s Route Heritage* should be of interest to researchers and postgraduate students who are engaged in the study of heritage, China, the Silk Roads and the BRI, politics, international relations, and tourism.

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There is a burgeoning interest among academics, practitioners and policy-makers in the relationships between ‘culture’ and ‘development’. This embraces the now well-recognized need to adopt culturally sensitive approaches in development practice, the necessity of understanding the cultural dimensions of development, and more specifically the role of culture for development. Culture, in all its dimensions, is a fundamental component of sustainable development, and throughout the world we are seeing an increasing number of governmental and non-governmental agencies turning to culture as a vehicle for economic growth, for promoting social cohesion, stability and human wellbeing, and for tackling environmental issues. At the same time, there has been remarkably little critical debate around this relationship, and even less concerned with the interventions of cultural institutions or creative industries in development agendas. The objective of the Routledge Studies in Culture and Development series is to fill this lacuna and provide a forum for reaching across academic, practitioner and policy-maker audiences.

The series editors welcome submissions for single- and multiple-authored books and edited collections concerning issues such as the contribution of museums, heritage and cultural tourism to sustainable development; the politics of cultural diplomacy; cultural pluralism and human rights; traditional systems of environmental management; cultural industries and traditional livelihoods; and culturally appropriate forms of conflict resolution and post-conflict recovery.

Staging Indigenous Heritage
Instrumentalisation, Brokerage, and Representation in Malaysia
Yunci Cai

China’s Route Heritage
Mobility Narratives, Modernity and the Ancient Tea Horse Road
Gary Sigley

China’s Route Heritage
Mobility Narratives, Modernity and the Ancient Tea Horse Road

Gary Sigley
For Alek
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<tr>
<td>AHD</td>
<td>Authorised Heritage Discourse</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIIB</td>
<td>Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<td>BRI</td>
<td>Belt and Road Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAFTA</td>
<td>China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td>Communist Party of China</td>
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<td>CNKI</td>
<td>China National Knowledge Infrastructure</td>
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<td>CNTA</td>
<td>China National Tourism Administration</td>
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<td>GFC</td>
<td>Global Financial Crisis</td>
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<tr>
<td>GMS</td>
<td>Greater Mekong Subregion</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICOMOS</td>
<td>International Council on Monuments and Sites</td>
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<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCHA</td>
<td>National Culture Heritage Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>NPC</td>
<td>National People’s Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<td>SACH</td>
<td>State Administration of Cultural Heritage</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEZ(s)</td>
<td>Special Economic Zone(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAR</td>
<td>Tibetan Administrative Region</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Culture Organization</td>
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<td>UNWTO</td>
<td>United Nations World Tourism Organization</td>
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<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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Prologue
Connectivity and China’s borderlands: all roads lead to Beijing

_Qianmen_ and point zero for China’s national highway network

_Qianmen_, literally ‘the front gate’, is the main entrance to the old walled city of Beijing (Qianmen is colloquial for the official name of Zhengyangmen). It was through this gate that the Emperor would pass on his way to and from the ‘Forbidden City’. These days, between Qianmen and the Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tiananmen) – the latter being the gate in front of the Imperial Palace (Gugong) upon which Mao Zedong declared the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October 1949 – sits Tiananmen Square, the symbolic centre of China surrounded on all sides by national iconic architecture. On the western side is the Great Hall of the People, China’s peak representative and legislative body. On the eastern side is the National Museum of China, formed in 2003 by combining the Museum of the Chinese Revolution and the National Museum of Chinese History. These landmarks were completed in 1959 to celebrate the first decade of the founding of the PRC. Thus on one side is the symbol of national political authority and on the other the narrative display of history justifying the existence of its neighbour on the other side of the square. Anyone equipped with a good travel guide would be able to locate these and other nearby landmarks.

Yet what most travel guides don’t tell you is that embedded in the ground just outside Qianmen is a large bronze plaque approximately 1.6 metres in diameter (Figure 0.1). The plaque, placed on site by the Ministry of Transport on the 26 September 2006, displays the four cardinal points of the compass and accompanying animals, both real and mythical, associated in Chinese cosmology with important star constellations and the directions of north, south, east, and west. The circular perimeter is further marked by 64 spatial points that connect the plaque to the number of trigrams found in _The Book of Changes_ (Yijing), a key foundational text in the corpus of Chinese learning. The plaque, laden as it is with a Chinese cosmological heritage, represents point zero for the China national highway network (Ou Yangjie, 2006). According to Chinese cosmology there are actually five cardinal points. In
addition to the familiar north, south, east, and west is the very important cardinal point of ‘the centre’. Indeed, as many people know, in Chinese, in both official (Zhonghua) and colloquial (Zhongguo) versions, the character compounds for ‘China’ designate it as ‘the centre’. In this national highway network plaque, examples of which can be found in many other countries, the ‘zero’ not only represents the starting point for China’s extensive and ever-spreading transport network, it also signifies ‘the centre’ to which all other parts of the nation must be connected. More specifically, and here the Beijing point zero differs from its counterparts in other nations, in drawing upon a rich cosmological heritage the plaque in effect pinpoints China’s capital as the centre of Tianxia, or ‘All Under Heaven’, the cosmological worldview that despite being displaced and ruptured since at least the latter half of the 19th century still persists in various forms in Chinese discourse (Dai Jinhua, 2018: 47–62). The point zero plaque, therefore, represents a meshing of a reinvented symbolic cosmology with a modern technoscientific reasoning (Sigley, 2009) that aims to project Chinese power not only domestically but also, when we take the ambitious ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Belt and Road’) into consideration, globally. To be interconnected and mobile is what it means, in part, to be a 21st-century superpower. In the case of China, it also means reworking the imagery of the past into the representations of the present. In Chinese this is commonly referred to as ‘letting the past serve the present’ (guweijinyong).

Figure 0.1 The Point Zero Disc for China’s National Highway Network.
In this book I refer to this imperative for interconnectedness and movement as China’s ‘mobility narrative’, a narrative with diverse dimensions in which a crucial aspect is to reimagine ancient routes in the cultural nationalism and heritage discourses of today. The notion of a mobility narrative highlights the often-overlooked role of mobility as part of the so-called ‘civilising process’ and as pivotal in forms of ‘civilisational dialogue’ (a concept much in favour in China at the moment). The mobility narrative is a means by which the ‘story of the nation’ can be told from the perspective of movement and exchange. The mobility narrative informs us that it is through trade, pilgrimage, migration and other forms of travel that different communities and peoples interact. Over time such interactions, so the narrative goes, involve the sharing of culture and ways of life. Over even longer periods of time, once separate communities come to be part of the larger socio-cultural entity of ‘the nation’. Mobility narratives, insofar as they tell us how disparate peoples come together as ‘family’, are thus a common feature of modern nation-states. The current Chinese mobility narrative draws upon a rich history of mobility and associated references, and is now being ‘narrated’ and ‘represented’ in ways that bring the ‘coming-into-being’ of the Chinese nation (Zhonghua minzu) onto a global stage. Belt and Road is, in other words, the ‘Silk Road of the 21st Century’. China’s mobility narrative thus has global, including Tianxia, dimensions.

To move of course means to create pathways. The better the pathway, the better people, goods and ideas can travel. In this regard, as I shall explore in the chapters that follow, the building of a modern transport infrastructure has been, and continues to be, a major priority for the Chinese government. Despite three decades of construction since 1949, at the end of the 1970s China’s transport infrastructure remained rudimentary by contemporary standards. The rapid expansion of expressways since the 1980s is a good example of the shift in government priorities during the reform era to include a focus on mobility and investment in the national transport and infrastructure network. China’s first expressway was completed on 31 October 1988, an 18.5-km stretch linking Shanghai to nearby Jiading. By 1998 the total length of expressway had reached 6,258 km. In 2001 it had passed the 20,000-kilometre milestone. In 2009 the total length was over 60,000 kilometres. This dramatic expansion was achieved within just two decades. Much of the initial transport development was, however, concentrated in the provinces along the eastern seaboard, China’s littoral zone that contrasts with the vast hinterland and highlands of the western and southwestern regions. This is not surprising given that this is where the vast bulk of China’s population resides and that the region already had favourable conditions for transport investment.

With the launch of the ‘Develop the Western Regions’ strategy (Xibu dakaifa) in 2000, and other related policies of socio-economic development, the building of transport infrastructure began to extend into the hinterland and mountains of western China. Yunnan, a mountainous and landlocked
province of approximately 40 million persons in China’s southwest, was not excluded. Beginning in 1998, the total length of expressway construction in Yunnan had reached 2,630 km by 2010 (Yunnansheng jiaotong yunshu ting, 2012). Since then the expansion has gathered pace as expressways have now been completed linking Kunming, the provincial capital, to almost all prefectoral seats and beyond. Yunnan also hosts the first international expressway linking China with neighbouring countries with the completion in 2012 of the 1,750-km Kunming to Bangkok Expressway (Xinhua, 2011).

As we shall see in the chapters that follow, the integration of the borderlands into the cartographic imagination of eastern China is a pivotal component of the current mobility narrative. Hence it is fitting that Yunnan, and the associated route heritage of the ‘Ancient Tea Horse Road’ (Chamagudao), is a primary focus of this study insofar as it seeks to explore how broader conceptions of national and global mobility interact with borderland identities.

Yet it is not only in the construction of roads and expressways that we can measure the rapid development of a modern transport infrastructure. Similar dramatic expansion has taken place in all fields of transport. Most first, second, and even third tier cities across China have new airports catering to the ever-increasing demand for air travel. Massive modern port facilities, among the largest megastructures in the world, have also been constructed along the eastern seaboard, reminding us that it is not just the movement of people but also of things to which we should pay attention. The conventional railway network now connects Beijing to Lhasa, the ‘rooftop of the world’. Plans are in place for a railway link connecting Yunnan to Tibet and also from Lhasa to Kathmandu. China is currently also home to more than 50 percent of the world’s constructed high-speed railway (Cai, 2017: 9). The high-speed rail network, already well established in eastern China, finally reached Kunming in January 2017 and is now expanding within Yunnan. The tourist mecca of Dali was the first prefectural city to be connected to the high-speed rail grid. Lijiang, a world heritage ancient town, was connected not long after. Other prefectural cities such as Yuxi, Baoshan, and Jinghong are expected to be connected to Kunming within the next couple of years.3,4 China is literally ‘speeding up’ and moving people and things on an unprecedented scale and intensity.5 As Paul Virilio (2007) [1977] notes, in highlighting connections between logistical advances and social development, in modern societies speed, velocity, and mobility are the imperatives of the day. Yet as we shall see, the faster the nation moves, the more people desire to slow down, and they can do so through nostalgically reimagining the more ‘romantic’ forms of transport of times gone by, such as the route heritage of equine caravans lead by indefatigable muleteers. Yunnan’s particular mobility narrative of the tea-horse road also plays a prominent role in connecting the mobility of the past to that of the ‘imagineering’ – to use a neologism coined by Walt Disney – of the present.

As Virilio suggests, in addition to the construction of physical infrastructure, we should also note the simultaneous expansion in the number and
types of user and the multifarious purposes for which people and things travel. As can be expected, with the expansion of transport infrastructure, the transport and logistics economy – the business of moving people and things – has followed closely. To put it briefly, travel across China has become both possible and relatively affordable for a large segment of the population. The expansion of mobility has not only enabled the growth of the domestic consumer economy, but also of whole new industries, such as tourism, which in themselves depend on affordable mobility. Tourism is now a prominent feature of China’s mobility narrative and civilising discourse and a crucial element in the development of route heritage. Yunnan, as one of the most desirable domestic tourist destinations, also features strongly in this aspect of the mobility narrative. In short, no matter whether by land, sea, or air, China is now well and truly interconnected and has become a modern ‘mobile society’. In turn, many of these engineering achievements are forerunners to the Belt and Road as China’s fixation on logistical and transport infrastructure sees it actively engaged in acquiring or building such assets in foreign countries.

Mobility, moreover, is not only an option but in many cases has become an imperative, highlighting what Massey (1993) refers to as ‘differentiated mobility’ or what Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006) regard as part of a ‘mobilities paradigm’. People must travel for work, education, and, of course, leisure. Mobility, in this sense, can be just as equalising as it is in creating inequalities. As Jenny Chio (2014: 102) notes, ‘mobility’ in an academic context refers to ‘both the ability to travel and to all of the attendant desires and notions of agency associated with this capacity to envision travel as a socially significant element of one’s subjectivity and life experiences’. To be unable to do so puts you in the lowest category of the disadvantaged ‘immobile population’. ‘Immobility’ is, of course, the flipside to ‘mobility’. Whereas mobility is empowering, to be immobile is the very opposite, that is, to be isolated, insular, and ignorant (and perhaps even xenophobic). According to Chinese Marxism, these were some of the features believed to characterise village life through a ‘petty rural economic ideology’ (xiaonong jingji sixiang) binding China to a ‘feudal ideology’ (fengjian yishixingtai) and thereby hampering socio-economic development. In contemporary China, immobility is an almost pathological state that must be remedied by government and market intervention. The ‘road’ here works both ways in first taking the isolated rural worker into the factories and employment environment of the modern economy whilst at the same time bringing in the ‘civilised’ (wenming) urban tourist to pump money into the rural economy and, theoretically, spread ‘civilisation’ by virtue of the urban visitor’s perceived greater ‘quality’ (suzhi). The scale of this investment and rapid pace of increased transport connectivity is thus testimony to the ‘nation-building’ ambitions of an ‘orthodox developmental state’ in realising the ‘great revival of the Chinese nation’ (Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing).6,7
As this frenzied period of transport construction demonstrates, the point zero for the national road network as described is more than just symbolic. The central government has very ambitious connectivity plans, namely, to physically connect every corner of the nation to Beijing, and by extension to connect each and every part of China to each and every other part. Politically it ensures that all four corners of China are connected to the centre. Socially and economically it enables the flow of goods and people at a speed and scale never before achieved or imagined. Militarily, it signifies the government’s ability to project its power through troop and police deployment to the furthest reaches of the nation. Given the symbolic and physical importance of all of these dimensions to the questions of sovereignty and security, seemingly no expense will be spared in order to achieve ‘national transport connectivity’. This is in effect China’s mobility narrative, a narrative with many dimensions that will be unpackaged and explored in this book. 

China’s last state-sponsored caravan and the building of the Dulong Road

To highlight the extent to which the Chinese government will go in connecting the four corners of China to the Beijing centre, consider the construction of a road in Yunnan that was previously host to the last remaining state-sponsored horse and mule caravan, a vestige of a network of caravan routes, now known as the Ancient Tea Horse Road (*Chamagudao*). Over 3,000 kilometres from Beijing, in remote Gongshan County, Nujiang Prefecture, far up the deep and long gorge shaped by the Nu River (which becomes known as the Salween when it enters Myanmar), the construction of a 96-kilometre road from the county seat of Gongshan to one of the remotest corners of China in the neighbouring Dulong River Valley was completed in 1999 (see Figure 0.2).

The Dulong Valley is home to the Dulong people (*Dulongzu*), one of China’s smallest ‘ethnic minority nationalities’ (*shaoshu minzu*) with a population of approximately 7,426 persons according to the 2010 Population Census of China. In 2010 the per capita income for Yunnan was reported as 7,225 yuan. The Dulong residents, by contrast, reported a per capita income of 4,370 yuan, lower than the provincial figure just cited and much lower than the 10,000 and more per capita incomes found in the large urban centres and eastern provinces. In 2010, for instance, the per capita disposable income for the provincial capital Kunming was 8,200 yuan. For Beijing and Shanghai it was 14,114 and 17,166 yuan respectively. However, the official statistics for Dulong may be somewhat inflated as the anthropologist Guo Jianbin (2010: 50), who spent several years on the ground doing fieldwork in Dulong, writes that in 1999 the average per capita income was a mere 681 yuan. Whatever the case may be, Dulong is without doubt one of the most isolated, disadvantaged, and poorest communities within the PRC.
The Dulong are a Tibeto-Burman-speaking people who share the region with other ethnic groups including Tibetans, Lisu, Naxi, Nu, and Han. The Dulong, or more correctly the extended kinship networks they share, can also be found across the border in neighbouring Myanmar where other ethnonyms such as ‘Drung’ or ‘Derung’ are used. As remote mountain valley people of this region they have much in common with their ‘kin’ in the Brahmaputra Valley – the Dulong River is after all the eastern most source of the Irrawaddy River – and also with certain communities in Assam and Nagaland in not too far away (as the crow flies) India, just as they do with the peoples over the other side of the Gaoligong Mountains in the Nu River Valley (where a handful of Dulong villages can also be found). Historically the Dulong engaged in a combination of ‘slash and burn’ swidden agriculture and the harvesting of the forests and streams in the lush but precipitous mountains that surround them. The Dulong generally adhered to animistic beliefs and practices, but in recent times many have converted to Christianity. Over a long period of time the Dulong collectively forged a culture that reflected both landscape and lifestyle and the mutual interactions between the two. In this sense they remind us that ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are often closely intertwined and that their conceptual separation is more a product of a modern mindset rather than anything else. The Dulong do not just live alongside ‘nature’, it is a core and inseparable part of their own ‘culture’.

Figure 0.2 Map of the People’s Republic of China highlighting Beijing and Dulong locations.
Yet whilst remote and seemingly isolated the Dulong people have constantly been within the zone of other more powerful political and cultural forces, namely the Tibetans on one side and the representatives of the dynastic Chinese government in the form of the local chieftain (tusi) clan of the Naxi (the Mu Clan in Lijiang) on the other. The Mu Clan was represented in the Nu and Dulong River Valleys by the Duan clan which held political sway since at least the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE) and only relinquished authority with the establishment of the PRC in 1949 (Duan, 2010: 10–11). The first recorded official Chinese government report that mentioned Dulong and its people did not appear until 1908, at the very end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), when an official was sent to investigate the violence inflicted at the time on foreign missionaries and converted Christians by nearby Tibetan lamaseries (Duan, 2010: 91). The impact of British colonial power in Burma (Myanmar) should also be noted as an important influence. Indeed, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries when negotiating the border between British Burma and Qing China, the British proposed to use the Gaoligong Mountain Range as the territorial divide, which would have meant that the Dulong River Valley would have been included as part of modern Burma (Woodman, 1962). Needless to say the Chinese authorities would not compromise on what they regarded as sovereign territory. Such is the fate of ethnic communities on the borderlands. In any case, for much of history the Dulong people maintained a high degree of independence from the machinations of Chinese power – dynastic or republican – and British colonial authority. Only nearby Tibetan chieftains seemed to have had any ongoing influence insofar as they levied taxes on the residents of Dulong since at least the mid-19th century (Gros, 2010b: 117).

Prior to the building of the Dulong Road the only effective way to transport goods in and out of the valley was via horse and mule caravan. According to Stéphane Gros (2010a: 41) the caravan transported cereals and other products amounting to 900 tons per year. The horse and mule caravan, led by a team of local muleteers, demonstrates how crucial such caravans were historically in logistical transport in mountainous regions such as Yunnan (in indeed much of western and southwestern China) (see Figure 0.3). Although the trail to Dulong was by no means a major artery of the tea-horse road we can still consider it as the then last remnant of a transport and mobility culture that once played a crucial role in regional, national, and even global history up to the very recent past. Every summer the state-sponsored caravan would traverse the Gaoligong Mountains before the first winter snows made the task impossible. One of the muleteers, a woman named Geda’na – who will feature again in our tea-horse road story – reported to a journalist that at its peak the caravans consisted of 500 animals. According to Geda’na the muleteers were contracted to take 15 annual consignments with bonuses for achieving more and penalties for falling short (Su Xiaoxiao, 2006: 58). During winter the Dulong Valley, which takes its name after the Dulong River, experiences
heavy snowfalls. Prior to the completion of the road in 1999, Dulong was effectively cut off from the rest of China for anything up to six months per year. The story of the Dulong caravan in its final years was captured in the 1997 documentary film *The Last Caravan* (*Zuihou de mabang*) (in which Geda’na was one of the protagonists). The contrast here, on the one hand, between a China where the eastern seaboard was rapidly constructing a modern high-speed rail network with the official sponsorship of mule and horse teams as logistical modes of transport in a far-flung corner on the other, could not highlight more sharply the starkly different extents of
economic development and transport connectivity in China and its ‘multiple modernities’ (or in this case its ‘multiple mobilities’).

As noted, the first road connecting Gongshan and Dulong was officially opened on the 9 September 1999. According to media reports, prior to the building of the road, Dulong was the only ethnic minority community – the Dulong people – in China not to be connected to the provincial, let alone national, road grid. This was a state of affairs that the cosmological spirit of the point zero plaque in Qianmen, Beijing could not abide. With financial support from both national and provincial ministries of transport, the 96-kilometre road cost 98 million yuan, nearly one million yuan per kilometre. This is a staggering investment for a community of approximately 7,000 persons that, as noted, is one of the poorest in China. The Dulong Road is classified as a ‘level four public road’ (siji gonglu), the lowest level of road in China built to meet the needs of connecting a county seat with the various other population centres within its jurisdiction. It thus also has the distinction of being China’s most expensive ‘level four public road’.

The road is toll free and the financial contributions by the local residents was minimal. Given the low incomes and other socio-economic disadvantages, the residents of Dulong are not required to pay tax. On the contrary, as is often the case in very remote and poor regions in the Chinese borderlands officially designated as a ‘poverty county’ (pinkunxian), every resident of Dulong was eligible to receive a government poverty alleviation subsidy of between 20 and 50 yuan per month (Guo, 2010: 53). Given the difficult terrain and complex geopolitics, there is no prospect that the road will be extended into neighbouring Myanmar or Tibet (a road to the latter, from Gongshan directly up the Nu River Valley, already exists and is being upgraded). As with much of Yunnan, especially in very remote regions, the terrain is extremely difficult and dangerous for road building. The road passes through some of the best remaining primeval forest in China (part of the Gaoligong Mountains Nature Reserve) and consideration of environmental impacts was also a factor in the difficulty. In the spirit of the ‘foolish old man who moved mountains’ (yugongyishan), a theme I shall return to in Chapter 4, the road consists of countless tight corners and narrow ledges blasted out of sheer mountainside. The most treacherous section at the high mountain pass (3,700 metres) was nicknamed ‘the devil’s road’ (moguilu) by the construction workers (Zhang Yaqi et al., 2014). On completion in 1999, The People’s Daily – the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China – declared that the road had ‘ended the history of China’s last ethnic minority without a public road’. All roads truly do lead to Beijing.

However, given that this initial road had to pass over the range at 3,700 metres it was still virtually impassable for half a year after the first snow falls around November. Moreover, during the monsoon season in summer the rain in Gongshan buckets down for days and even weeks. The road was thus also prone to landslides and erosion. Traffic, needless to say, was
constantly disrupted. Despite the advantages it was perceived to bring, drivers and passengers complained that the road was far too dangerous. In light of these challenges, the authorities decided to build a 6,680-metre tunnel below the snow line so as to keep Dulong connected to Gongshan and the rest of China all year round. Work commenced in 2011 and was completed in 2014. At 76 kilometres the new road is also shorter. The total cost for the second road amounted to 400 million yuan (other media reports quoted an even higher figure of 600 million yuan). The tunnel is the longest road tunnel in Yunnan and the most challenging for the construction team at the time.

All in all, the road to Dulong represents a remarkable engineering achievement and a clear physical sign that transport connectivity is a major priority of the Chinese government. In his message to the people in 2014 – taking the opportunity to connect the completion of the second road to his vision of the China Dream (Zhongguomeng) – President Xi Jinping declared:

The opening of the tunnel connecting the county seat [Gongshan] with the Dulong Valley represents the historical conclusion due to heavy snow of the annual half year isolation experienced by generations of Dulong people, one of the 56 ethnic nationalities of China. The Dulong compatriots now have the chance to realise the Chinese Dream of a ‘moderate lifestyle’ (xiaokang shenghuo) just like their compatriots throughout the rest of China.

(cited in Zhang Yaqi et al., 2014)

Connectivity, the civilising effect, and the rise of route heritage

The China Dream referred to here by Xi Jinping is a public relations campaign that crystallises the values and aspirations the Communist Party of China (CPC) wishes to promote to the broader population as it enters the officially declared ‘New Era’ (Xinshidai). As President Xi noted, one of these aspirations is to realise a ‘moderate level of development’ (xiaokang shenghuo) (a target that has in fact been included in government planning since the early reform period of the 1980s). Given that the Dulong Valley, and indeed much of Gongshan County and Nujiang Prefecture, is one of the poorest regions of China, such an aspiration is understandable. Yet a ‘moderate level of development’ could not be attained so long as Dulong was cut off from the rest of China. Thus, there is another very important element to this story of the Dulong Road. Namely, that the developmental state cannot abide isolation. Isolated communities, it is held, harbour physical (through genetic inbreeding, poor diets, and disease) and cultural backwardness (through lack of education and exposure to the outside world). Indeed, as already noted, being isolated and immobile is one of the very features of ‘being backward’ (luohou). Hence, in order for Dulong to be transformed
from a ‘backward periphery’ to something more resembling contemporary ‘socialist spiritual and material civilisation’, it literally had to be ‘opened up’ and exposed to the outside. This mimics a larger narrative that China itself ‘had’ to be opened up in the late 1970s in order for it to make the transition from ‘Maoist socialism’ to Dengist ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. By extension this metaphor of opening and development can be traced back to Western, and later Chinese, arguments during the 19th century that regarded the Opium War (1839–1841) on similar grounds, including by Karl Marx who wrote in the *New York Daily Tribune* in June 1853 that:

> Complete isolation was the prime condition of the preservation of Old China. That isolation having come to a violent end by the medium of England, dissolution must follow as surely as that of any mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin, whenever it is brought into contact with the open air.

By contrast, in the ‘New Era’ the end of isolation brings about renewed life rather than dissolution. In other words, each village that ends its isolation is another community firmly entering the embrace of the nation (*Zhonghua minzu*) and ready to take on the opportunities and challenges that ‘modernisation’ and ‘globalisation’ present. A well-known ditty that emerged in the 1980s puts the connection between roads and prosperity as follows: ‘If you want to get rich, build a road’ (*yao zhifu, xian xiulu*). As part of the ‘three connects’ (*santong*) policy, that is, ‘connect roads, connect electricity, and connect water’, and more recently as part of the policy of building a ‘new socialist countryside’ (*shehuizhuyi xinnongcun*) and the ambitious 2020 target to eliminate extreme poverty in rural China, the transport authorities have made it explicit that, as far as rural China is concerned, every county seat must be connected to the national highway network and the overwhelming majority of villages must be connected to the county network by even the most rudimentary of roads.

The building of the road to Dulong is in this case a salient example of how modern transport infrastructure and increased mobility facilitate changing perceptions of and interactions with the time and space of the nation. The party and government seek to not only build the infrastructure but also to facilitate movement through these new mobility networks by actively encouraging travel for the purposes of work, education, and leisure. Enhancing mobility hence contributes to the governmental ambition to ‘raise the quality of the population’ (*tigao renkou suzhi*). As Jenny Chio (2010, 2011) argues, this works, for example, by enabling ruralites to travel to the cities for work and education thereby exposing them to the ‘civilising effect’ of urban culture. Going the other way, enhanced mobility will allow the urbanites to travel as tourists to once remote regions and thereby ‘spread the civilising effect’. As Pál Nyiri (2009: 154) notes, ‘tourism is seen as a two-way civilizing tool, capable of producing change in tourists as well
This is what Chio (2010: 15) describes as the 'morality of mobility', and which I consider as an integral part of China's 'mobility narrative'. Thus, in addition to the movement of people and things, the creation of greater mobility also enables the 'flow of civilisation'.

As noted, in more recent times this 'mobility narrative' encompassing economic, political, and cultural exchange has been deployed in Xi Jinping’s grand project of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, short for ‘The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road’. In this case China proposes to use its advanced transport construction skills and vast financial resources to fund the building of roads, railways, airports, and shipping facilities across the Eurasian land mass, Southeast Asia, Africa, and indeed anywhere else that signs onto Belt and Road (and that in itself is not even a necessary condition for Chinese infrastructure investment). In reviving the notion of the ‘Silk Road’ the Chinese authorities seek to capitalise on the power that ancient trading routes have on the contemporary imagination. Here the notions of the ‘flow of civilisation’ and ‘civilisational dialogue’ are deployed as means of recognising national differences in a diverse world but in ways which seek to enhance cooperation rather than produce a Huntington-like ‘clash of civilisations’. Likewise, the notion of the ‘Ancient Tea Horse Road’ that is now synonymous with the interaction of ethnic cultures across Southwest China and beyond shows the power of regional trading routes on the (re)imagining of regional identities and cultural heritage. This is, in effect, what I mean by ‘route heritage’. The playing out of identities based on local, national, and global route heritage can tell us a great deal about the relations between the borderlands and the centre, and the various ways in which history is used to ‘understand the present’ rather than just to ‘understand the past’.

Taming the mountains: landscape, culture, and the Janus-face of modernity

A number of reasons, including the aforementioned isolation, are typically credited for the apparent ‘backwardness’ of the Dulong people, and indeed for any community in China, that is cut off from the outside world. Yet one of the most significant factors is the nature of the landscape itself. In a form of perceived environmental determinism, the harsh terrain of China’s southwest is held to have not only shaped the culture of the local human inhabitants, but also inhibited their development. For instance, Li Shu (2006: 101–102), drawing upon the 19th-century work of Frederick Engels and Lewis Henry Morgan on the evolution of the family, writes that:

Due to the long state of isolation created by the mountains and rivers, the social development of most ethnic groups [in Yunnan] was slow, with some even in a state of stagnation. Up until the 1950s the Dulong, Jinuo, Lisu, Nu, Lahu and Bulang were still in a state of primitive society.
For the Dulong this state of ‘being primitive’ had remained largely in place despite the best efforts of the authorities. Only by bringing an end to physical isolation, such as through the building of the Dulong Road, can the situation be positively transformed (remote communities in China typically have better access to the outside world through television, radio, and, more recently, mobile phone technology, even before the completion of modern roads). With China’s increased prosperity and capabilities, the ‘tyranny of the terrain’, or as James C. Scott puts it ‘the frictions of terrain’, can now be tamed and overcome. As I will argue in coming chapters, this is akin to a form of ‘terraforming’ for the purpose of extending the ideology and infrastructure of the ‘socialist market economy’ to the four corners of the nation. Just as it is argued that Western imperialism brought dynastic China into the modern world, so too the ‘socialist market economy’ will bring the ‘backward’ and ‘isolated’ ethnic groups into the embrace of a modern China. Viewed from this perspective, the building of the first and then second road is a metaphorical battle between the forces of nature and the ingenuity of humans.

Dulong is a sliver of land in a remote river valley where the inhabitants have lived for thousands of years, coming and going as they please or as conditions demanded. Despite the view of the Dulong as insular and isolated, their kinship and trading networks extended in all directions – to China, Tibet, Burma, and India. Although at different times they were claimed as the subjects of different political entities, they maintained a large measure of autonomy and were in effect ‘ungovernable’ and ‘ungoverned’. In this regard the Dulong River Valley is prime Zomia country, Zomia being a geocultural concept referring to extensive autonomous networks of ethnic communities in the highland regions of the mainland Southeast Asian land massif (to be discussed more extensively in Chapter 3). When in turn the modern nation-states determined the borders of the colonial and then contemporary world, the Dulong Valley became part of the PRC, and the Dulong people became, in time, one of the ‘brothers and sisters’ of the 56 nationalities that make up the ‘ancestral land’ (zuguo). With traditions of tattooing (women, it is said, tattooed their faces to make themselves less attractive to Tibetan raiders), animist nature worship, ‘slash and burn’ swidden agriculture, hunting and foraging in the forests, and so on, they were classified not only as primitive but also as living fossils (huohuashi) – remnants of a pre-historic ‘primitive communism’. With the arrival of socialism in the 1950s the Dulong were, it was argued, about to skip several modes of production and join the socialist fraternity. Yet even with the power of the Maoist state at its disposal, the sheer ruggedness and isolation of the terrain made the penetration of Mao Zedong Thought Teams during the Cultural Revolution difficult. Through-out this period the last state-sponsored caravan remained in place, carrying precious supplies over the Gaoligong Mountains year after year. Finally, the material and technological circumstances in China changed in the 1990s and a renewed effort was launched to end Dulong’s isolation. Whereas the Dulong looked upon the landscape as their home, as the place where their identity
and culture were forged, the modern world, by contrast, saw the landscape as an enemy to be defeated. As one Chinese journalist covering the building of the road put it, using the imagery of warfare, ‘the valley gorge that was silent for thousands of years is now echoing with the incessant shriek of shells and bursts of bombs’ (Yuan Xiaobing and Ma Weizhi, 2011). Dulong’s state of nature is thus ‘silent’ and outside of history, and only through deafening violence blasting away the earth can the modern world finally arrive.

Of course, the authorities also hope that the completion of the upgraded road will encourage more tourists to visit Gongshan and Dulong, thereby improving income and employment opportunities for the local population. They hope that busloads of moderns will come to Dulong to see ‘nature’ and see a people ‘in their nature’. Yet this ‘state of nature’ is one that has already disappeared, not only with the building of the road, but also due to other acts of government policy and more general social change. For instance, one of the first major social and cultural changes to take place in Dulong and the Gongshan region began with the severe floods across eastern China in 1997. The devastating effect of these floods were seen by the authorities as exacerbated by the excessive logging and deforestation taking place in the western hinterland. A total logging ban was thus implemented nationwide in 1998. At the same time, in order to meet the demands of being a conscientious international citizen with the recognition of the biodiversity of the region, the authorities also created a number of extensive ‘nature reserves’ in the 1980s. These in turn became part of the UNESCO World (Natural) Heritage Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas in 2003 (referring to the Yangtze (Jinshajiang), Mekong (Lancangjiang) and Nu rivers). With the policies of ‘returning farmland and pasture to forest’ (tuigeng huanlin; tuigeng huancao) (also known as the ‘sloping land conversion program’) most of the Gaoligong Mountain Range in Nu River Prefecture was henceforth declared off-limits to farming, hunting, and foraging. The Dulong people were thus deprived of the fundamental activities and livelihoods that were the foundations of their community and cultural identity. This was particularly emasculating for the men folk who could no longer take their crossbows – sometimes with bolts dipped in homemade poison – to hunt in the fashion of their ancestors. Nor could they maintain their farmland on the high slopes in the newly formed nature reserve. The authorities were well aware of the challenge these changes would bring extended compensation measures which in addition to cash handouts included annual supplies of grain and other basic necessities. In repeating the familiar story of how nation-states cut off indigenous peoples from their ‘traditional’ resources, the locals can no longer harvest the forest or engage in ‘slash and burn’ (of course many locals still engage in these activities but now with the threat of fines or other punishment). At this point ‘man’ has clearly been removed from ‘nature’, at precisely the same moment that tourists are expecting to see ‘man in nature’. Most of the tourists, no doubt, will be oblivious to what has transpired.
Marshall Berman (1982: 15) in his influential study of modernity writes that,

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.

In this connection, as one of the few scholars to have engaged in extensive fieldwork in Dulong, Guo Jianbin (2010) provides a detailed account of the building of the first road into Dulong and the impacts on the local Dulong community since completion. In short, whilst the road has brought many benefits and conveniences, it has also greatly disrupted the traditional rhythms of life. Most notably, and disturbingly, the completion of the road and implementation of renewed poverty alleviation coincided with a significant increase in the instances of suicide. Dulong has one of the highest suicide rates among young males in all of China. A Chinese journalist who covered the building of the road also took note of this phenomenon and brought it to public attention in a series of reports under the title of ‘The Secret Valley and the Dangerous Abnormality of Suicide’ (Zhao Meng, 2014).

According to international and national methods for measuring the rate of suicide, the suicide rate in Dulong is 40 times greater than that of the rest of China. Zhao Meng (2016) spent six months in Dulong at the time and published his observations on the dark side of ‘modernisation’ concerning suicide. He later wrote:

Although suicide in Dulong is historically common, the years 1999 and 2009 represent two major moments after which cases of suicide increased dramatically. 1999 was the year the road was completed and outside culture began to arrive [in a large scale fashion]; and 2009 represents the beginning of large scale poverty alleviation programs [including those of ‘The New Socialist Countryside’ policy] bringing many outsiders to visit and work in this remote gorge.

In addition to these two events, and in the absence of specialised research without wishing to give a definitive answer as to why there is such a spike in suicides, Zhao Meng listed several factors which would seem to have also contributed, including ‘the harsh natural environment, insular social concepts, and the dismantling of traditional lifestyles in the face of outside forces’. Chen Jianhua, a Han Chinese scholar at the Yunnan University of Finance and Economics who was born in Dulong, told Zhao Meng (2015) that:

The poverty alleviation program of the government has brought about great physical [yingjian] changes. At the same time as changing the