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THE TEA ROAD

China and Russia meet across the steppe



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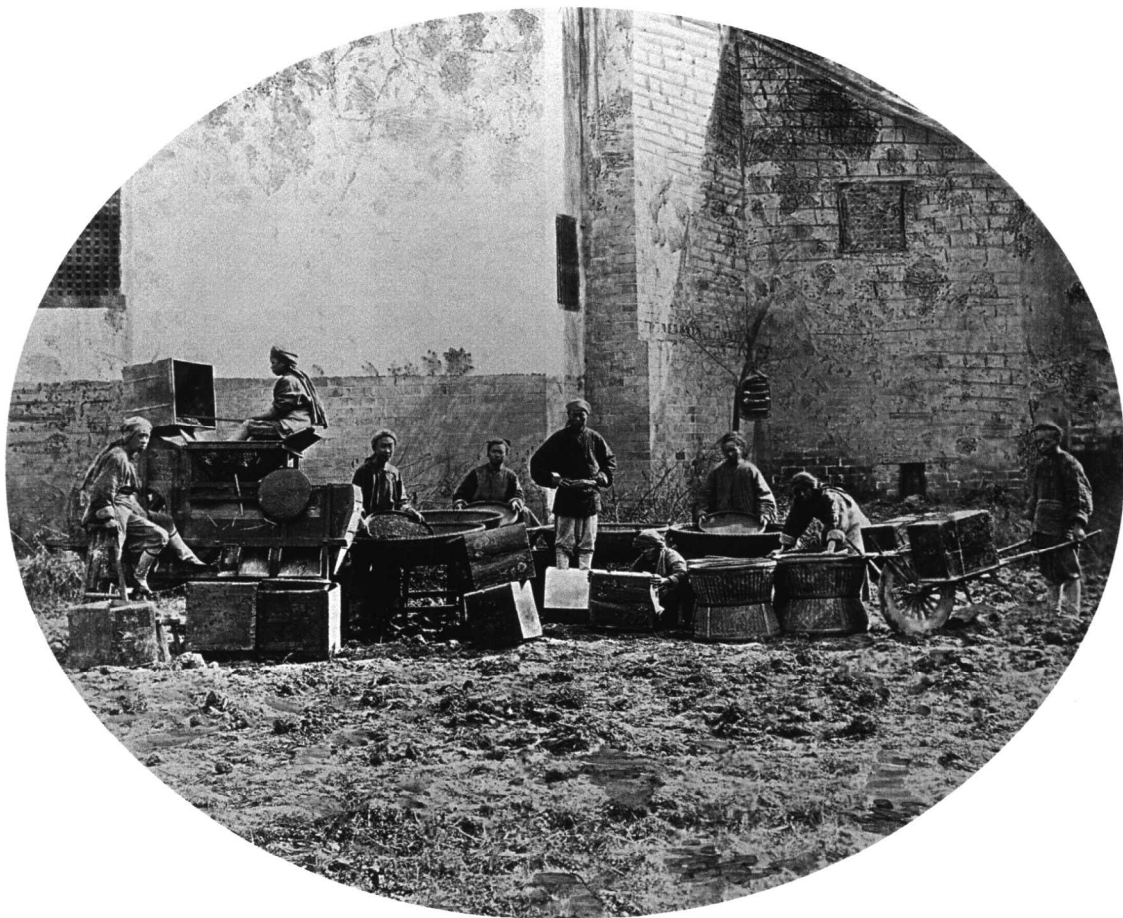
North Russian Yard in Beijing. Bichurin lived in this North Russian Yard in the early 1800s. It was located beside the city walls near Dongzhi Ximen. The first Russians to live in this compound were known as Albaziners since they reportedly surrendered after the initial siege of Albazin in June, 1685. Around two dozen Russians became subjects of the Manchu Kangxi emperor at that time and took up permanent resident in Beijing. The practice of calling Russians in Beijing “Albazines” dates from this time.



South Russian Yard in Beijing. After 1860, Russia was granted permission to establish a full diplomatic presence in Beijing. A new site that came to be called the South Russian Yard was designated the Ambassador's residence and Embassy buildings in this complex were built in a combined Chinese and European style, with European verandas, large glass windows, and European sculpture, but with Chinese rooflines and connected courtyards. The South Russian Yard houses the diplomatic compound of Russia to this day.



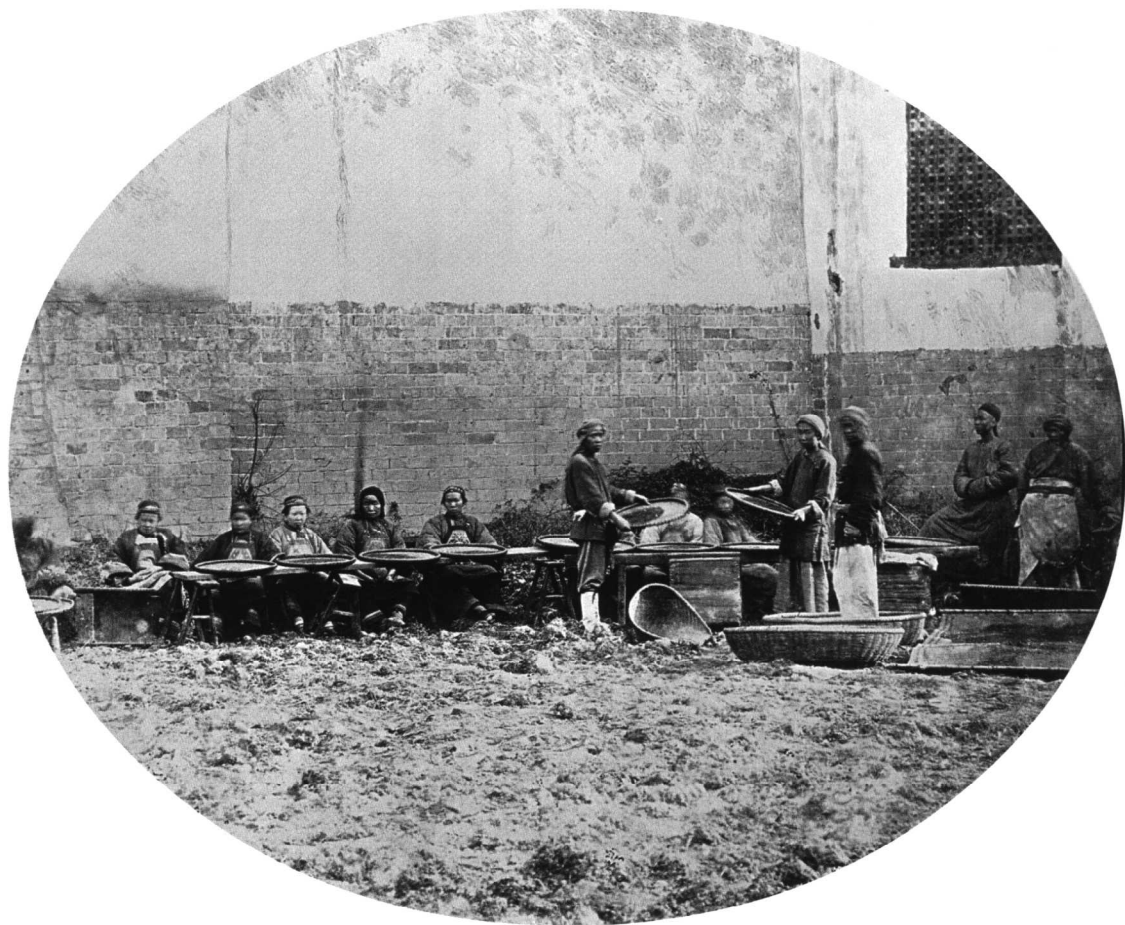
Tea cultivation in a yard in Hubei province. During the height of Tea Road trade in the nineteenth century, tea was cultivated in central China for Russian owners. This photograph shows seedlings growing in a back yard before being transplanted to hillsides in early spring. The seedlings were destined for looseleaf tea and therefore allowed to reach a height of 60 to 120 cm. Seedlings raised for brick-tea were allowed to reach the height of a man. Plants produced tea leaves for ten to twelve years before being cut down and replaced with new seedlings. Photograph credit: A. Boyarski, 1874.



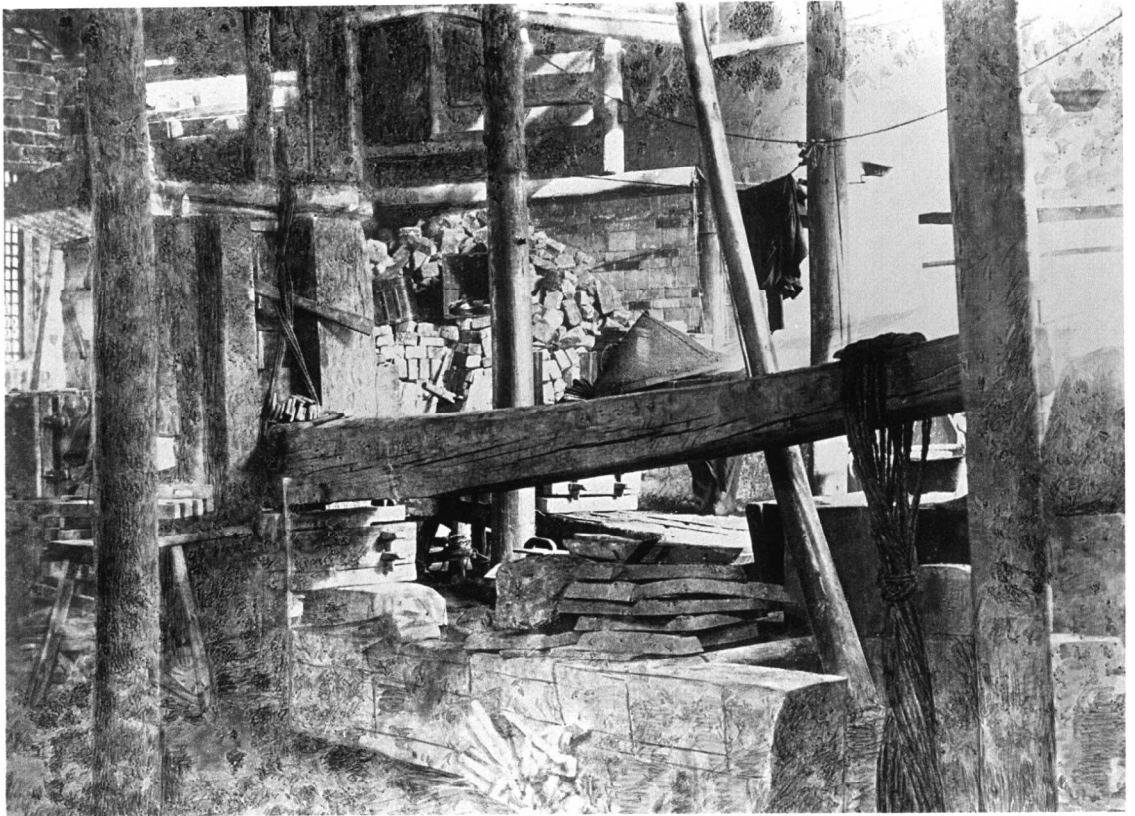
Tea processing in the 1870s in central China. This was described in contemporary accounts as follows: tea roasters first piled up long rows of earth on the ground of the yard of the tea factory, then placed lighted charcoal inside depressions spaced evenly along the rows. They put ashes over the burning charcoal to regulate the heat, then placed the high conical *baiko* baskets over the charcoal with tea spread on top of the bamboo mesh. Tea was roasted for around three hours before being turned by hand to give an even roast to the leaves. The charcoal stayed hot for some five days, so a considerable amount of tea could be roasted over each hole. Tea bound for Kiakhta was roasted over a slow, light heat, whereas tea bound for ocean transport was put through a longer roasting process. Too much roasting would result in tea that had lost its fresh flavor, too little roasting would result in tea that grew mouldy on the long sea passage. The main difference between "Canton" or sea-transported tea and "Kiakhta" or land-transported tea was the length of roasting time. Since the less intensive roasting of Kiakhta tea allowed greater freshness, Russians and many Europeans were convinced that land-transported tea was better.



Weighing tea. After being weighed, each bag of tea was tested for quality in a random sampling process. According to late nineteenth-century accounts, the sampler swished the tea inside the bag with his hand, then pulled out a handful for testing leaf size and quality. Tea from these handfuls was made in rows of small pots; the tea was stirred with a wooden stick and allowed to steep for a length of time carefully measured by an hourglass. Taste tests then determined the finest leaves.



Sifting tea. Tea was sifted by hand through varied bamboo sifters, in order to grade tea according to leaf size. This job was generally done by women and children. Tea leaves went through a sequential process, with finer leaves being sifted by the next person down the line. Once the tea was sifted, it was put through a winnowing process by being blown through a machine with a fanbelt, shown on the left side of the photograph called *Processing tea*. The finest-grain tea was blown across a box with drawers, which caught the tea dust for use in making tea bricks. Bricks were made of lesser grades of tea: large-size tea leaves were interspersed with middle-sized leaves and tea dust in a wooden frame the size of the eventual brick. The layering process was repeated, and tea was occasionally raked in order to blend the mixture into one mass. The brick was then pressed, using the machine shown in the photograph called *Brick-tea press*.



Brick-tea press. This primitive equipment is a press for making brick tea. Tea that had been roasted and placed in rectangular molds was compacted by the wooden lever into bricks. Tea leaves roasted for brick tea were covered with a fine layer of soot, which gave them a dark smoky appearance as well as flavor. This led foreigners to believe that brick tea was glued together with bull's blood. In fact, tea was packed tightly with this manual press which was basically a large wooden block with a lever. By contemporary accounts, it took four men to operate. One stood on a rack that was over the lever and threw himself on it like an acrobat in a circus. Two more caught the lever as it came down on the brick, pressing it to the floor. A fourth man hauled the lever back up with the aid of a rope and a pulley, and made it ready for the next throw. In describing this process, a Russian observer in the 1870s noted, "In conditions of exact calculation, and if all are measuring precisely and performing properly, six bricks can be pressed in one minute."



*Outside a tea factory in Anloundun village, Hubei province. "Factories" were rented by foreigners, mainly British or Russians, for an annual fee. This disguised the fact that they were essentially owned by the foreigners, which was not allowed under nineteenth-century Chinese laws. Late nineteenth-century Russian factories made *lao-cha*, or common green tea, *Jing-cha*, or "Capital" brick tea bound for Siberia, and *mi-zhuan*, or "fine" tea roasted into black tea but also bound for Siberia.*



Tea transport. This transit point for tea was near the town of Fanchen on the left bank of the Hanchuan River. Opposite the town of Fanchen was the military base of Sanyang-fu, said to have housed six thousand Manchu and Chinese troops in the 1870s. The soldiers protected a major trade junction from Beijing to Kalgan and Beijing to Höhhot, two cities that distributed tea into Mongolia via spurs of the Tea Road.



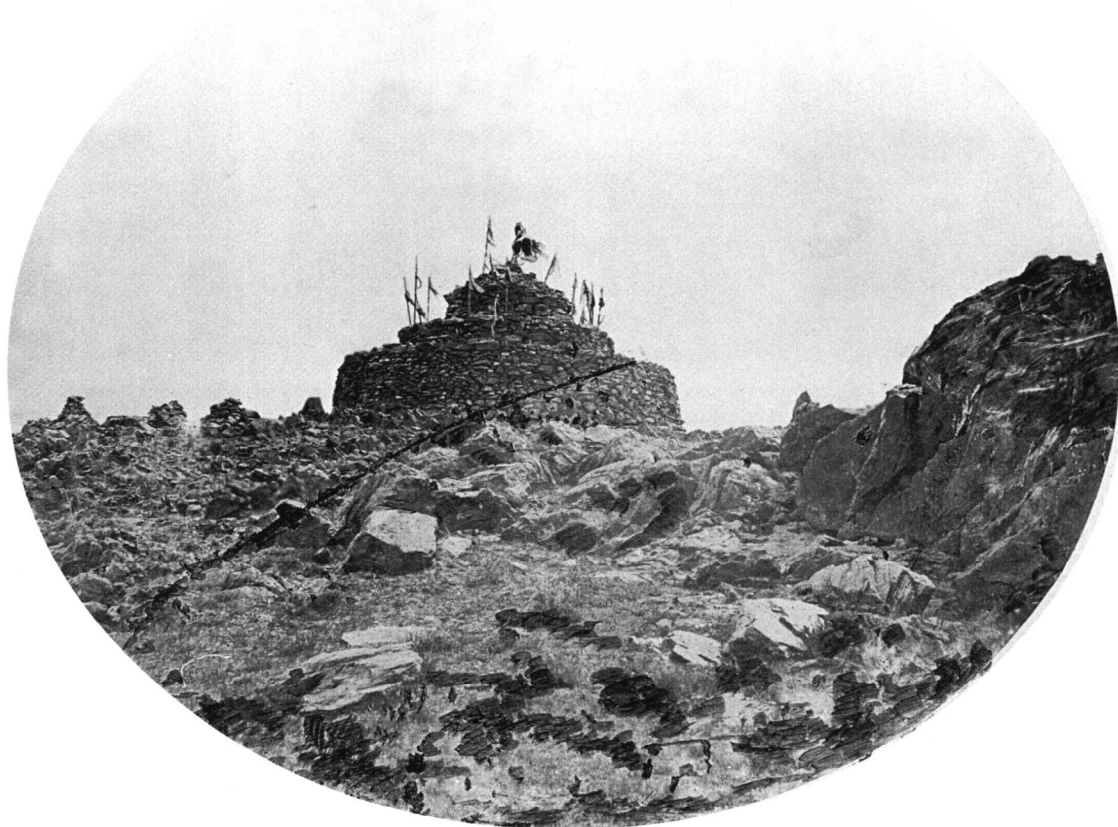
Inside a tea-packing factory. Late nineteenth century.



North of the city of Kalgan, moving towards the pass to Mongolia. A narrow valley snakes its way through precipitous hillsides north of Kalgan, ending in the pass that leads onto the high plateau of Mongolia. In the 1870s, when this photograph was taken using a large glass-plate negative, transport up and over the pass was mainly by mule. That the glass plates made their way safely back to St. Petersburg shows how they were valued.



Gates in the Great Wall at Kalgan. This photograph shows the Great Wall of China around one hundred and thirty years ago, near its point of intersection with the Tea Road.



*Ovoos along the Tea Road from Peking to Urga, at the location of a pass. Different types of ovoos graced the landscape of nineteenth-century Mongolia. They showed passes, marked the perimeter of jurisdictions, or were sacred indicators of a holy place, such as a spring or a high point. Like cairns in Scotland or the Rocky Mountains, they were used to mark the way; in Mongolia they were also religious in application. Ovoos throughout Mongolia were and are often festooned with fabrics such as *hatag*, or silk offering scarves. These were used as money in Mongolia and, being valuable, were also used as tribute to the gods. Although the glass plate of this photograph has been retouched, this ovoos is clearly festooned with flags and *hatag*.*



Northern Chinese pedlar. This studio portrait of a pedlar, photographed in the vicinity of Kiakhta by the Russian photographer V. Lanin, shows an example of the early profession of the founder of the tea-trading company, Da Sheng Kui. That founder, Wang Xiangqing, started life as a peddler but went on to create a tea-and-banking empire that lasted more than two hundred years and that enjoyed an annual turnover of more than ten million silver dollars. In this photograph, note the Russian influence just north of Mongolia in the 1870s: a pedlar in a sheepskin-lined Mongolian *del* stands next to a chair transported all the way across the continent from Europe.



Camel loaded for transport, with camel drovers young and old.



A camel caravan on the move, packed with cases of tea. Photograph credit: Nagy Miklós, 1909.



Chinese bosses from Maimachin. These wealthy employers lived in the Chinese town of Maimachin, on the border of what is now Mongolia and Russia. Maimachin or “Buy-Sell-Town” was located inside the territory of the Tüsheet Khan, the leading Mongolian khan during the period of Manchu rule over Mongolia and China. The photograph shows the prosperity of Chinese merchants in the years in which Da Sheng Kui’s business in Mongolia was at its height.