



## Firms' Distribution of the Frontier Tea in Sichuan Province During the Republic of China

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### Abstract

The tea markets of Sichuan Province were divided into the origin, entrepot and consumer markets. The original markets of tea were widely distributed in Sichuan, but the main entrepot markets were Kangding and Songpan, which were called frontier tea. This paper will focus on trading of the western frontier tea and the southern frontier tea. Meanwhile, the author will also analyze the distribution of tea firms in this area.

**Key words:** Firms' distribution; Western frontier tea; Southern frontier tea

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### INTRODUCTION

The frontier tea of Sichuan was mainly divided into "The Southern Frontier Tea" and "Western Frontier Tea". The manufacturing center of the southern frontier tea was in Ya'an and the main original place of tea included Ya'an, Yingjing, Tianquan, Mingshan, Lushan, Qionglai and other cities and counties, in which Ya'an, Yingjing, Tianquan, Mingshan were more important than other cities or counties in this area. Most of the southern frontier

tea produced in these counties and cities were transported to Tibet, Qinghai, Ganzi, Aba, Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture and the southern regions of Gansu Province

The manufacturing center of western frontier tea was in Dujiangyan and the tea produced in this area was sold to Songpan, Lixian, Maoxian, Wenchuan of Sichuan Province and parts of Gansu Province. In the main producing areas of tea, merchants had to deal with procurement of raw materials, tea baking and packaging, transportation, marketing sales, all this work needed to purchase and sale networks, tea factories and business managers and workers to finish. This required a strong commercial capital and good management system. The tea capitalists and their tea firms had emerged in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, these tea firms developed further in the Republic of China.

### 1. FIRMS' DISTRIBUTION OF THE WESTERN FRONTIER TEA IN SICHUAN PROVINCE

Western frontier tea referred to tea produced in counties of Guanxian, Pengxian, Shifang, Pingwu, Beichuan, Dayi, County, Mianzhu, Maoxian, Wenchuan and the sales center was in Songpan, the tea was exported to Aba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The tea was 120 pounds per package and packed into a square, so called "square table tea" (Gao, 1985, p.104).

There were four major firms ran frontier tea in Western Sichuan, then some more tea firms were added in this area, but they were in smaller funds. The total sales of tea were about 1,400 to 1,500 Dan, and the frontier tea was sold from 25,000 packages of the late of Qing Dynasty to 40,000 in 1940. In 1935, the four major tea firms closed down due to mismanagement. Then a number of small tea firms began to rise, some of the bosses came from

Guanxian and some of whom were from Wenchuan (Guo, 1987, pp.28-29).

### 1.1 Guanxian and Songpan

Guanxian was located in the west of Sichuan Province, which was also a strategic position from Chengdu plain to Songpan, it was not only to produce the famous frontier tea but also produce inland tea. The frontier tea produced in Shifang, Chongning, Pengxian, and Dayi of Western Sichuan was transported to Songpan and other places to sell by way of Guanxian. Tibetan traders in Jinchuan bought tea from Guanxian directly in the Qing Dynasty, at the same time, merchants from Gansu often went Guanxian for transactions; therefore, Guanxian was both the entrepot of tea in west roadside, but also the Han and Tibetan trade market, business was very active at that time (Ja & Chen, 1989, p.332).

Songpan had always been a military and economic center in northwest of Sichuan; it was also a traffic artery for economic and cultural exchanges of Han, Tibetan and Qiang ethnic. Songzhou State was set up here during the Tang Dynasty and Songpanwei in the Ming Dynasty; Songpan County was set up in year of 1914, which had been a collecting and distributing center of tea in west roadside (Ja & Chen, 1989, p.363). Merchants in Songpan were mostly wealthy, who were engaged in trade for quite a long time at the local place. They set up shops in the markets of collecting and distributing areas, often dozens of or hundreds of workers were employed to help these firms. The famous of which such as "Fengshenghe", "Benlisheng", "Yihequan", "Dushengxing", "Yutongxiang", etc.. There were also bureaucratic and warlords' capital tea firms such as "Limin", "Dexingha", "Dingfengyong", etc. (Ibid., pp.363-364).

From the beginning of 1912, the tea trade was in free competition situation and it was the most beneficial for capitalized businesses. The frontier tea firms which had the longest history in this area such as Benlisheng, Fengshenghe, Yihequan, Tianshengyong, Yuguochuan and Puyitong, these 6 tea firms had 16,000 to 17,000 certification bills and most of tea in west road was controlled by them. In addition, there were small tea firms, for example, Xingshengqian, Jushunyuan and Hengshengyong, which were mainly engaged in tea business in Songpan. The tea trade of western roadside was carried out mainly in autumn and winter. On the month of 10 each year, tea firms often exchanged velvet antler with tea and something else; however they mainly exchanged wool, leather and herbs with tea in summer. Merchants transported these local products which were exchanged by tea to Chongqing, Hankou and Shanghai for selling (You, 1990, p.146).

After the abolition of the traditional tea system of the Qing Dynasty, The pattern of four firms in western road which monopolized frontier tea was broken, and new tea firms appeared in Songpan. The boss of tea firms "Lihengyong",

"Fuxiang" was from Guanxian; while the boss of "Xifeng", "Chengfengrong", "Futaiqian" was from Songpan; at the same time, there were some other tea firms such as "Qingshengtai", "Xingcheng", "Dexingyuan" and "Songpan Branch of China Tea Company", etc.. These new tea firms were coexisting with the four major tea firms. (Committee of Cultural and Historical Data, para.4, 1997, pp.6-7)

### 1.2 Dayi, Wenchuan and Shifang

Dayi County has a long history of planting tea, with an annual production of 2,656 Dan by the end of Qing Dynasty and 3,550 Dan in 1938 (Compilation Committee of Dayi County, 1991, p.341). During the Republic of China, the towns of Xinchang and Guankou in Dayi were important tea markets; Xinchang Town produced about 1,200 to 1,500 Dan annually, while Guankou Town outputted about 1,200 Dan each year. When the tea production season was coming, merchants from Chengdu, Shaanxi and other places gathered in these two towns to set up acquisition points for procurement and processing, and then transported to other places to sell (Compilation Committee of Dayi County, 1991, p.552).

There were two towns Yingxiu and Xuankou in Wenchuan which produced tea, Shanxi tea firms set up their branches in these two towns during the Republic of China, they purchased tea and made it packages to sell to Tibetan areas called frontier tea, while the one that sold to inland called inland tea (Local History Compilation Committee, para.2, 1992, p.518).

Tea was the main export goods in Shifang County which had a long history of tea production. In the year of 1875, there was only one tea firm in the county center of Shifang, its main business was operating fine and coarse tea, at the same time, the firm ran tea from other provinces. In 1908, a tea firm called "Rongchanghe" was opened outside the north street in Shifang. In 1931, a merchant from Chengdu set up a tea branch of "Luyuheng" in the center of north street, whose main business was to sell the famous tea from local and other provinces, this tea firm was closed in 1949 (Compilation Committee of Shifang County Annals, 1988, pp.18-36).

According to the statistics in 1949, the county's annual production of tea was about 150,000 kilograms, of which the fine tea covered 1/5; coarse tea was sold to Northwest of China, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Tibet, Yunnan and other places. And the fine tea sold in Chongqing, Wanxian and other provinces after local processing (Compilation Committee of Shifang County Annals, 1988, pp.18-37).

### 1.3 Beichuan, Anxian and Pingwu

Beichuan mainly exported frontier tea to other places during the Republic of China; there were tea firms' branches "Fengshenghe", "Yihequan", "Benlisheng", "Yuguoxiang", "Jushengyaun", which purchased tea in townships of Chenjiaping, Youping, Leiguping and Yangjiao, there were more than 10 buyers who provided tea to these firms' branches. After processed into bags,

the tea was shipped to Songpan by way of Tumen and Maoxian, the other way leading to Songpan was by way of Chenjiaba, Doukou and Pingwu. The annual sales of tea was more than 100 tons, and most of which was sold to Maoxian, Mianyang and Zhongba in Sichuan Province, or Wenxian, Wudu and Tianshui of Gansu Province (Compilation Committee of Beichuan County Annals, 1996, p.554).

Tea was one of the main specialties in Anxian, most of which was sold to Maoxian, Songpan, Lanzhou, etc. There were more than 20 tea firms in its original producing places, including Yufengxiang, Fengshenghe, Chenfengyun and the Trade Commission. In 1933, the tea which sold to Songpan was up to 400,000 kg (Ibid., p.387).

Pingwu has a long history of tea production. In the Qing Dynasty, the tea production increased gradually and the producing areas expanded from west to south of the county, forming tea producing center in northern mountain areas and markets and firms established (Hu, 1999, p.78). Doukou and Suotong were two lively market towns by the river of Qingyi and they were main original tea producing places of Pingwu. During the Public of China, there were more than 8 tea firms such as “Yihe”, “Fengsheng”, “Yuguoxiang”, “Jushengyuan”, “Dingliyan”, “Sanxinghe”, “Benlisheng”, “Xinshengqian”. When the new tea was traded every year, the urban residents from Jiangyou, Mianyang, Santai of Sichuan Province and Wenxian, Wudu of Gansu Province got together with their native products to exchange for tea (Fu, 2000, p.145).

## 2. FIRMS’ DISTRIBUTION OF THE SOUTHERN FRONTIER TEA IN SICHUAN PROVINCE

### 2.1 Qionglai, Mingshan, Ya’an and Tianquan, Etc.

Since the Song and Yuan dynasties, Ya’an had been a national trade market of tea mainly and mutual trade place in Ming Dynasty. The trade of Han and Tibetan was transferred to Kangding in Qing Dynasty. Ya’an was the main origin of the southern frontier tea and its yield and quality were the best in the five counties of Southern frontier. The tea merchants in Ya’an were mainly from Shanxi and rich of capital. The tea firm “Yixing” was opened in Ming Dynasty and there were more than 60 tea firms in Guangxu Period of Qing Dynasty. After the Republic of China, there were about 20 tea firms in Ya’an (Ja & Chen, 1989, p.331).

From the late of Qing Dynasty in the early Republic of China, there were 18 large tea firms, but only 4 were left in 1949. 65% of the tea was transported by non-local merchants and 35% of which by the local (Compilation Committee of Mingshan County Annals, 1992, p.374).

The market of Mingshan had four kinds of purchase form during the Republic of China; the first was sole

proprietorship firm which purchased crude tea through hawkers and then sold it after making clean; the second was the joint ventures; the third was sporadic purchase and then sold to tea factories in Ya’an and Qionglai for refining; the fourth one was agencies who charged fees from their partners (Ibid., p.296).

Tianquan was one of the tea producing counties in southern frontier areas during the Qing Dynasty and the merchants promoted the tea industry revival for thier positive and flexible marketing methods, there had been more than 23 tea firms until the middle and last period of the Republic of China and the annual sales of tea were about 7,000 Dan (Ibid., 1997, pp.199-220). Between 1912 and 1918, the Sichuan government adopted a tea ticket system and the tea tax became a major part of the military expenses in southern frontier areas.

The tea of southern frontier areas was still concentrated in Ya’an, then transported to Kangding and sold to Tibetan merchants for tea firms. In 1935, there were 38 tea firms in the four counties Qionglai, Mingshan, Ya’an and Yingjing (You, 1990, p.145). It was shown as Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**The Distribution of the Tea Firms of Qionglai, Mingshan, Ya’an and Yingjing**

Counties	Number of tea firms	The major tea firms
Qionglai	5	Qingfu, Lisheng, Heju, etc.
Mingshan	9	Xiji, Yutai, Ruiyichang
Ya’an	15	Tianrenxing, Yixing, Hengtai, Fuhe, Yongchang, Jucheng, Yongyi, etc.
Yingjing	9	Lanyongtai, Kangning Company, Jiangyouxin, Jiangyousheng, etc.

Note. Source: Liu. 1938, pp.5-10.

### 2.2 Kangding and Ganzi

Kangding is located in the eastern foot of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and tea industry had been flourishing since the Qing Dynasty, Han and Tibetan businessmen gathered here doing business. The tea industry brought prosperity to this area and Kangding became political, economic and cultural center of Kham regions (Ja & Chen, 1989, p.363). Merchants from different places gathered around Kangding, some of whom from Shanxi, some from Sichuan and some were from Yunnan. The businessmen from Shanxi owned the most of capital and they mainly stayed in Ya’an, these merchants from Shanxi lived in Shaanxi Street of Kangding. In addition, there were merchants from Ya’an, Yingjing, Tianquan, Mingshan, and Qionglai in Kangding who set up tea firm branches here to be engaged in tea business. According to the statistics in 1930, Kangding had a total of 37 tea firms, in which Ya’an 14, Yingjing 8, Tianquan 12, Mingshan 2 and Qionglai 1 (Yang, 1937, pp.217-221). The main tea firms and its business situations were shown as Table 2 and Table 3.

**Table 2**  
**The Main Tea Firms and Its Business Situations in Kangding**

Counties	Name of tea firms	Hometowns	Tea licenses (sheet)	Sales regions
Ya'an	Yixing	Jingyang, Shanxi	11,600	Local place and Tibet
	Fuhe	Ya'an, Sichuan	11,500	Local place and Tibet
	Hengtai	Jingyang, Shanxi	8,000	Local place and Tibet
	Yongchang	Ya'an, Sichuan	4,000	Areas of Chando and Caya
	Jucheng	Jingyang, Shanxi	4,500	Areas of Chando and Dege
	Yonghe	Jingyang, Shanxi	2,400	Areas of Litang and Batang
	Fengsheng	Jingyang, Shanxi	1,600	Areas of Litang and Batang
	Tongfuchang	Heqing, Yunnan	1,300	Southern Kangding
	Fujuheng	Ya'an, Sichuan	1,300	Southern Kangding
	Yongxing	Ya'an, Sichuan	1,300	Southern Kangding
	Yiheng	Ya'an, Sichuan	1,400	Southern Kangding
	Yongyi	Ya'an, Sichuan	1,400	Southern Kangding
	Yongyuchang	Ya'an, Sichuan	1,400	Southern Kangding
	Tianrenxing	Jingyang, Shanxi	9,400	Local places
Yingjing	Yuxing	Yingjing, Sichuan	7,000	Tibet
	Rongtai	Jingyang, Sichuan	7,400	Tibet
	Changshengyuan	Jingyang, Sichuan	1,900	Tibet
	Yishengyaun	Jingyang, Sichuan	1,900	Tibet
	Quananlong	Jingyang, Sichuan	1,900	Tibet
	Youxing	Jingyang, Sichuan	1,200	Tibet
	Weisheng	Jingyang, Sichuan	1,200	Tibet
	Hongxing	Jingyang, Sichuan	400	Tibet
Qionglai	Songmao	Ya'an, Sichuan		
Mingshan	Ruixing	Mingshan, Sichuan	1,300	
	Yuzai			
Tianquan	Fuyuan	Tianquan, Sichuan	1,600	Kangding, Danba and Daofu
	Taimaosong	Tianquan, Sichuan	600	Kangding, Danba and Daofu
	Taimaojiu	Tianquan, Sichuan	600	Kangding, Danba and Daofu
	Qingfachang	Tianquan, Sichuan	1,600 (Total of the three firms)	Kangding, Danba and Daofu
	Qingfachang	Tianquan, Sichuan		Kangding, Danba and Daofu
	Qingfarong	Tianquan, Sichuan		Kangding, Danba and Daofu
	Detai	Tianquan, Sichuan	1,280	Kangding, Danba and Daofu
	Taichang	Tianquan, Sichuan	1,280	Kangding, Danba and Daofu
	Kechang	Tianquan, Sichuan	(Total of the two firms)	Kangding, Danba and Daofu
	Xinghua	Tianquan, Sichuan	1,280	Kangding, Danba and Daofu
	Hengsheng	Tianquan, Sichuan	1,280	Kangding, Danba and Daofu
Hengyi	Tianquan, Sichuan	(Total of the two firms)	Kangding, Danba and Daofu	

Note. Source: Yang, 1937, pp.217-221.

**Table 3**  
**The Facts About Tea Firms' Capital and Employees in Kangding**

	Capital	Number of firms	Capital amount (in thousand)	Number of employees	Remarks
Tea industry	In total	37	950	220	There was a tea street in Kangding specializing for firms to store and sell.
	Sole corporation	23	700	120	
	Joint venture	15	250	100	

Note. Source: Lai, 1995, p.186.

During the Anti-Japanese War, the Kuomintang military intervention in the tea industry and the national commercial capital increasingly fading, the tea markets of Kangding were also depression (Yang, 1937, pp.217-221). In 1939, only 20 or more tea firms remained in Kangding and these remaining firms organized the Tibetan Tea Limited Company on January of 1939 in order to improve frontier tea trade (Gao, 1985, p.125). The company had been producing and selling tea for many years, however, its effect was not clear for the lack of detailed plans (The Archives & Ethnic Institute of Sichuan, 1990, p.242)

In 1921, there were about 28 tea firms in Ganzi, in which 8 belonged to Shanxi merchants, 7 belonged to Sichuan merchants, 1 belonged to Xining merchants, 7 temple firms and 5 hereditary headmen, the capital of each tea firm was more than two thousand silvers, Daikin Temple, Ganzi Temple and Zakho Temple had the most abundant capital especially (Lai, 1995, p.189). All these firms' or temples' businesses were mainly associated with the tea trade, especially for herbs, tea, cloth and groceries and they mainly came from Shanxi Province, Sichuan Province and the local place of Ganzi.

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## CONCLUSION

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With the improvement of transportation during the Republic of China, trading exchanges were more active, not only people but also goods. At the same time, tea was an important part of people's lives in ethnic areas; therefore, frontier tea trading was necessary, and the different tea firms became a major force in the trading. By doing the research on the distribution of tea firms, we can get a general understanding of the flow of the tea trading.

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