

Mongolian camel caravan road

Academician B. Shirendev

Mongolia

(3-5 August 1992)

A report to the International Seminar "Great Silk Road and Nomads"

Since immemorial time Mongols used ordinary ox-carts and camels for transportation of various goods in the country or to some towns in Russia and China. Main transport animals were oxen, horses and camels. Transportation of goods was implemented by horses and oxen between distances of 50 to 300 kilometres, mostly in summer and autumn. In fact Mongols used horses for their ride than carriages. A Mongolian horse has power to carry 65 to 80 kilograms of loads to various distances, but in towns, monasteries some noble people or propertied classes had horse-carts. Camels had been very popular transport means in steppe, forests and in Gobi zones of the country. People ride on camels and also train some of them to carts called "khasag tereg" those have origin from Iran and Turkey. Any camel caravan can cover 30 to 35 kilometres per a night in cold seasons, but 30 to 40 a day in warm seasons. It means that a loaded camel goes about 5 kilometres in an hour. This kind of transport of camels has special Mongolian terms – ayan jin teekh: JIN means WEIGHT. So any material or thing must has weight – JIN, AYAN means TRAVEL, TRAVELLING. Thus above-mentioned combining terms express TRAVELLING BY GAMES to a distant place.

Mongolian camel caravan transport had brought invaluable contributions to the country's economy and trade services among 111 banners and 13 spiritual ruling districts, and to relations of neighbouring Russia and China. Caravan leaders were ordinary herdsmen and seasonal workers. Such caravan leading people had accumulated many years of experiences about their work and endurance, power and knowledge. Also they had been good geographers. They used to know good and bad roads, steppes and mountains, rivers and springs, pasturing places within the country and in neighbouring states which were familiar to them. Besides their hard work in cold and heat they were most able people who used to bring world news to their people and new goods for the country. So, such camel caravan leaders were people who had to fulfil much important duties for their own society.

So many fork roads had joined main centres of the country's administrations and economy branches. For example: I. Maisky had marked thus: Khovd-Uliastai-Zayin Shvi (Tsetserleg) to Ikh Khuree (Ulaanbaatar is 1550 kms of distance, Uliastai – Zayain Shvi is 500 km of distance, Zayin Shvi – Ikh Khuree is 550 kms, Zayin Shvi – Khatgal 500 kms, Zayain Shvi – Vangin Khuree 450 kms, Uliastai - Mörngin Khuree (Mörön town) = 400 kms and Mörön-Övör Hiagt is 600 kms far from each other. About the Mongolian camels caravan not one historical book or article had mentioned, but many of them. The camels' caravan road used to join many important towns of various businesses and economic centres of Russia and China to Mongolia before the revolution in 1921.

Main camels caravan roads to Chinese towns:

Manchurian station to Sanbeisin Khuree (Choibalsan town) of 1000 kms, Ikh Khuree to Beijing road of 1100 kms, Uliastai to Sair Us to Chuulalt khaalga 1900 kms of road, Uliastai to Guchen of 900 kms of road: Khovd to Altain Shar sum 400 kms of a road.

Main camels caravan Roads to Russia:

Khovdo-Kosh-Agash (Hoshoo mod) = 400 kms, and this road comes to a town called Biisk, Belotsarsk (Kizyl) to Uliastai 700 kms, and it reaches to Krasnoyarsk, Mond to Tunk to Erkhoo 400 kms, Ikh Khuree to Khiagt and Deed Ud (Ulan Ude).

M. B. Pevtsov had written: "A long camel's caravan loaded with boxes of boxes of tea goes continuously along the road of Chuulalt khaalga-Ikh khuree-Khiagt and those boxes of tea first reaches to the eastern part of Tsarist Russia and then to the distant western district. "By M. B. Pevtsov's information, Russian factory owners in Hanikou and Phuchjou had sent 876 thousand pood baikhu or pressed tea from Chuulalt Khaalga to Russia by Khuree in between 1877 and 1878.

Also, there is news about English firms those transported 160 to 200 thousand pood of wool from Mongolia via China to Europe.

Some noble people or princes governed transport business relying on simple herdsmen and caravan leading people. Camels' caravan leading people went through all hardships in heat and cold, day and night earning just for their daily bread. Comrade Nasanbaljir noted that Mongolian camels' caravan people reached 35 to 40 thousand by 1910. Their caravan camels had been from 355 to 384 thousand. However, these figures can be checked again in historical

notes. I. Maiski observed over 300 thousand camels in Mongolia by 1918. Numberless camels-caravan which used to cover roads in steppe, gobi from the west to the east; and from the north to the south of the country and some towns in Russia and China had taken various names and titles in those days. Camels are called “Ships of the Earth”, Trains without Wheels, “Even caravans” and “Fine Lines”.

Maiski named the camels’ caravan as “The Lines”. I think it is a more definite term of its kind. Mongolian camels caravan to abroad use to continue its journey for 2 or 3 months of period, passing 30 to 35 kms of distance a day. They used to stay a night of rest during such a journey. Caravan people let to water camels once a week and let to rest 1 or 2 nights on grassy land. Caravan leading people (ayaanchid and jinichid) always made this time a chance to prepare more new provisions for their food and fuel for the next long journey. Some families near the travelling road way used to help for caravan people giving information about the weather, country, pasture and even customs or rates abroad (in Russia and in China). Mongolian camels’ caravan leading herdsman were good diplomats, too.

Mongolian camels’ caravan road was a continuation of the Great Silk Road, and our future interest on this theme can be developed.