

# The Past and Present of Hubei and the China-Russia Tea Road\*

Chun Zhang

School of Foreign Languages  
Wuhan University of Science and Technology  
Wuhan, China

Ling Liu

Economics and Management School  
Wuhan University  
Wuhan, China

**Abstract**—This paper is the book review of *Hubei and the China-Russia Tea Road*. It depicts the historical relations between Hubei and the establishment of the China-Russia Tea Road based on the historic relies and remains along the Tea Road in Hubei area.

**Keywords**—*Hubei; the China-Russia Tea Road; Jin merchants; The Belt and Road Initiative*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The *Hubei and the Tea Road* was written by Professor Liu Zaiqi, the doctoral advisor of School of Economics and Management of Wuhan University, director of the Russian-Ukrainian Research Center of Wuhan University. It was published by People's Publishing House in Oct., 2018, one of the authoritative publishing houses in China, and also funded by the key bidding project of Shanxi Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau in 2018, "A Study of the status and role of Shanxi merchants (also called Jin merchants) in the Tea Road and the Belt and Road". The book, far-sighted, novel and rich in content, focusing on the relationship between *Hubei and the Tea Road*, will promote Hubei to a new inland highland, and thus raising Hubei's strategic position in the Belt and Road Initiative, with high academic value and practical significance.

## II. THE CALL FOR RESEARCH ON THE *HUBEI AND THE TEA ROAD*

The Tea Road, passing through the Eurasian continent, succeeded the Silk Road as another international economic and trade route connecting the three countries of China, Mongolia and Russia. Most sections of the Tea Road highly overlapped with the planned route of the inland Silk Road Economic Belt, thus considered as an important part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Since the 17th century, the Tea Road, stretching over 13,000 kilometers starting from Wuyi Mountain in Fujian, via Hankou of Hubei to St. Petersburg, the old capital of Russia, connecting more than 200 cities, had witnessed the history of mutual communication and development between countries along the route, with tea as the medium, composing a glorious chapter in the history of

the development of world civilization. Particularly in 2013, when President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech at the Moscow Institute of International Relations, he pointed out that the Tea Road was a "century artery" connecting China and Russia, and had been elevated strategically to a new historical height. Subsequently, the Tea Road application for the list of world heritage led by Hubei Province was put on the agenda, which greatly promoted cities along the route to join the Belt and Road. The Tea Road Research Institutes were established in provinces and autonomous regions along the route, setting off a wave of research on the Tea Road by governments at all levels. Although generations of experts and scholars and local protectors of cultural relics had studied the relevant literature and historical and cultural relics, leaving rich academic accomplishments, their researches are mostly in the form of academic papers, barely books, especially about the significant role of Hubei in the Tea Road and its historical importance in the application. So, there is an urgent need to search for the inner relations and their roles between the *Hubei and the Tea Road*.

## III. THE LAYOUT OF THE BOOK

From the perspective of "Century Artery", starting with the "the wind of tea drinking from the East", the book accounts for the fact that the spread of Chinese tea spreads to Russia and European countries, has promoted the prosperous tea trade at the town of Kyakhta, a small sand dune on the Sino-Russian border, revealed the historical reasons why the focus of Sino-Russian tea trade has gradually shifted from Chaktu in Russia to Hankou in the inland China.

In the second chapter, Hubei is described to have special status on the Tea Road, known as the "The thoroughfare to nine provinces". At that time, tea was a commodity for foreign trade and business. As a traditional tea-production province, and Hubei's tea culture has a long history. Hubei is also an important tea source for Sino-Russian tea trade. The rise and fall of the overall tea trade had the inseparable relations with Hubei, especially Hankou. In the context of the internal and external problems the government was faced with in the late Qing dynasty, the Westernization Movement, which transformed the Chinese economy from the traditional small-scale farmer economy to the western industrial economy, had an important impact on the reform of Hubei tea industry. At the end of the 1880s, the situation of international tea trade had changed suddenly. Due to the rise

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of Indian tea and Ceylon tea, the export volume of tea in Hankou saw the persisting declination with the international market share shrinking sharply, and the operation of Chinese tea deteriorating. As an important part of Hubei's agricultural administration at that time, tea had naturally become an important breakthrough in the reform of the Self-improvement Movement. In response to the reality of the increasingly declining of Chinese tea, Governor Zhang Zhidong, the local representative of the Westernization Group, advocated the transformation of tea affairs in three aspects: the method of making tea, the development of tea market, and the establishment of machine-made tea. Although the Westernization Movement ended in failure, the efforts of Zhang Zhidong and others had objectively promoted the development of Hubei tea industry, Hankou still being the largest tea export market in China.

The third chapter systematically expounds Hubei Tea Road in Russian historical documents from the perspective of Russia. The historical development process of the Russians' meeting tea has been widely discussed. The most credible statement is recorded in *The Siberian Observations* published by Tomsk in 1902. The Chinese tea was sent to Russia as early as 1638, when the Russian mission visited Mongolia, the then Aletan Khan treated the Russian minister with Chinese tea and presented the tea to the Russian tsar as a gift. Subsequently, the tea was deeply sought after by the Russian royal family, and then popular throughout Russia. "The Kyakhta Era of Tea Trade" in this chapter, based on the 1727 Sino-Russian Treaty of Kyakhta, elaborates on the rise and fall of the tea trade on Kyakhta border. Since the second half of the 18th century, Chaktu's tea trade had grown substantially, and tea had gradually become the main cargo of Sino-Russian trade. By the end of the 18th century, Russia's tea imports accounted for a quarter of the total. In 1800, tea had become a conversion unit for all Russian-Chinese trade. From 1847 to 1851, tea accounted for 95% of Chinese goods transported across the Eurasian continent. With its unique medical effect, tea had gradually become a necessity for the Russian aristocracy, a consumable for the nomadic people of Siberia and the diet of the poor, developing Russia into a fixed and huge market for tea consumption. The prosperity and development of tea trade had produced the mutual benefit and reciprocity of the economies of China and Russia, established a model for promoting economic globalization and regional economic integration. The Russian government used the taxation of the tea trade to guarantee the state's fiscal revenue, and the tea trade became an important source of the original accumulation of Siberian merchant capital. As the economist Korsack pointed out, the Chaktu tea trade was of great significance to the development of the entire Russian industry, which had greatly stimulated the social and economic development of cities along the route and became the most important factor in the Russian industrial revolution. According to Korsack's statistics, the value of goods shipped to China produced by Russian factories, was more than 4 million rubles. Nearly half of Russian industrial and handicraft products were exported to China, which becoming the largest sales market for Russia. But by the middle 19th century, Chaktu's tea trade was affected by the fundamental

changes in the overall tea trade system and was caught in a serious crisis. Due to the influence of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom uprising, the Wuyishan tea route was forced to be interrupted. The Jin merchants switched to buy tea from "two lakes" (Hunan and Hubei) and transported to Kyakhta. Hankou thus replaced Fujian as the center for tea purchase by Russians. After the signing of the "Beijing Treaty" in 1861, Hankou was assigned as a trading port. With the ever-rising inland transportation cost, Russian businessmen began to take the sea, along the Yangtze River north to Tianjin, taking Zhangku Avenue to Kyakhta. Since 1870s, nearly half of the tea in Hankou was shipped to Odessa in southern Russia, and the tea trade in Chaktu, which has prospered for more than two centuries, has lost its glory forever. By the beginning of the 20th century, with the opening of the Siberian Railway, Kyakhta's inland tea trade era ended, and faded out historically.

The chapter then switches the research perspective to "the sea-borne China-Russia tea trade", and discusses the development process of Sino-Russian marine tea trade mainly based on Hankou. At the beginning of the 18th century, after Russia established its position as a maritime power, considering economic and political factors, the Russian government decided to conduct a marine tea trade in the Black Sea. At the beginning of the 19th century, when the Graf mission visited the Qing dynasty, he proposed to organize a seaborne tea trade between China and Russia. However, the Qing dynasty did not allow marine trade at that time, thus slowing down the progress of the marine trade. In 1870, with the official opening of the Suez Canal, the sailing time from Hankou to Odessa was shortened from 50-60 days to 35-40 days, greatly increased the turnover rate of industrial capital. In mid-February 1871, the first vessel "Chikhov", the first tea-carrying vessel of Russian Shipping Trade Committee, sailed from Odessa to China. In August of the same year, the tea that was transported back home from Hankou by the "Chikhov" had already been in the Novgorod market. The transport of tea was not only safe but also low cost, established Odessa one of the center of the Russia's wholesale tea at the end of the 19th century.

With the continuous prosperity of Sino-Russian tea trade, Russian experts and scholars began to investigate and study China's politics, economy and culture, and resulted a series of research accomplishments with high value on the early tea trade between China and Russia. In 1820, the Russian sinologist Orlov first described Chinese tea to the world in his book *The Latest Detailed Chinese History and Geographic Description*, and he was also the first Russian scholar to introduce Wuhan and Hubei. The Orthodox missionary Skaczkov was the first Sinologist to translate the tea Saint Lu Yu's book *The Classics of Tea into Russian*. The famous economist Alexander Korsack's book *The historical data of Russia-China trade relations* was published in 1857, used hundreds of pages to describe the list and quantity of teas shipped to Russia, and also introduced China's tea producing area and the tea route from China to Chaktu. The Russian Consulate in Hankou had been collecting information on Hubei tea production and Hankou tea trade, and has compiled the information in books and published. In

the historical essay "Tea History" published in Russia in 1870, there was one chapter on Russian merchants in Hankou. In the same year, tea trader Konstantin Popov published Chinese Tea and Its Production, which highlighted the Russian merchants and the tea industry in Hankou. In 1874, the Russian rulers organized a trade visit to China and studied the production of tea in Hubei. The team photographer Boyarsky took more than 200 photos of tea production, which are still on display in National Academy of Sciences Historical Archives in St. Petersburg. There were also many Russian scholars conducting in-depth research on China's tea trade, including historical data on tea trade, production techniques of different types of tea, etc. These research achievements are extremely valuable literature for further understanding of the history of the Tea Road.

The fourth chapter focuses on the "Oriental Tea Port — Hankou". The author collected a large number of first-hand and second-hand literatures by searching online, reading historical archives, visiting relevant experts and scholars, and conducting field research, documentary pictures, etc., elaborated on the historical evolution of "Hankou makes tea growing, tea makes Hankou developing." This chapter, "To the modern and prosperous Hankou", introduces the Hankou's reputation as "The thoroughfare to nine provinces". It is the throat of Hubei and the commercial town in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River since ancient times. In 1861, Hankou was turned into a trading port. With convenient water and land transportation, it quickly grew into the largest distribution center for tea and other commodities, and then gradually changed from a traditional town to a modern commercial metropolis. Hankou had grown to be one of the three major tea markets in the country, the center of the world tea trade, with tea playing a vital role in the prosperity of modern Hankou, and objectively promoting the process of local industrialization and stimulating the development of the regional financial industry. Hankou ultimately stood on the world stage with an internationalized image.

Hankou is located in the grand tea-producing area, with tea houses scattered around, attracting the tea merchants from every corner of China. Among them, merchants from Shanxi, Huizhou, Guangdong, Hunan and Jiangxi, together with local traders, were well known as the six major tea gangs in Hankou. Each gang built their own guild to maintain their geopolitical relations, or "office", "association" and "club". The "Shanshaan Guild", jointly built by Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants broke through the old model of the association, and was oriented by commercial interests. By adopting a commercial and non-blood internal operation mode, it had established a close, orderly and fair group cooperation mechanism, with its guilds covering many parts of the country. After the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement, the tea trade of Jin merchants jumped to the largest trade commodity in Hankou, and Jin merchants became the leading force of Hankou's business, showing the success of the Jin merchants' management system. In addition, the Hankou Tea Office was also an important industry organization at that time. Different from the regional association, it was established by the six major tea

gangs and registered with the government to formulate its own regulations. This joint association not only helped its members to seek commercial interest, but also acted as a manager or even a broker to safeguard the rights and interest of Hankou tea merchants in the tea trade between China and foreign countries, to defend market regulation, and to promote steady development of Hankou tea market.

The "Historical Changes of Jianghanguang of Hankou" in this chapter elaborates on the history of Jianghanguang. Since the opening-up of Hankou in 1861, the Qing government set up Jianghanguang for the purpose of collecting export tariffs. During the period of the Republic of China, Jianghanguang's power of jurisdiction and management in the area was further expanded. On the eve of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the jurisdiction of Jianghanguang reached its peak. However, during the War of Resistance, Jianghanguang was once closed, and officially resumed its foreign business until Japan announced its unconditional surrender. In the early days of liberation, Jianghanguang was changed its name to Wuhanguang, but with the shrinking of the foreign trade in Wuhan, Wuhanguang was abolished in May, 1956. It was restored again until 1980. At the end of this chapter, the author uses detailed data to explain the export situation of Russian merchants and tea trade in Hankou, and detailed the basic situation of Russian expatriates in Hankou, the structure of expatriates, the history of Russian royal family members visiting Hankou, and Alexander Road in Hankou. Leifsky Orthodox Church, China-Russia Daosheng Bank, the Russian Consulate in Hankou, the establishment of the past and other little-known past events presented to us a vivid picture of the past glory. These precious documents help to deepen our understanding of the modern "Oriental Tea Harbor-Hankou" in the social history and humanities.

The fifth chapter to the eighth chapter respectively expounds several other important node cities in the Hubei section of the Tea Road except Hankou, including Chibi, Wufeng, Yidu and Xiangyang. The author's description of these four important node cities has certain similarities in the layout of the articles. Firstly, the geographical location of the node cities and the natural environment suitable for tea planting are discussed. Secondly, the history of local tea culture and tea economy of each node city is explained. Finally, a large number of documentary pictures are used to show the remains of historical sites related to the Tea Road. Through the discussion on the evolution process of the important node cities on the Tea Road in Hubei, it vividly reflects the important position and historical influence of Hubei, which enables us to have a new insight in the relationship between *Hubei and the Tea Road*.

The ninth chapter "The Contemporary Value of the Tea Road" is the book's essence. The study on the Tea Road, with the historical and cultural heritage and social and economic values it carries, aims to promote the economic development of the provinces and countries along the route, further advance the development trend of economic globalization and regional economic integration, subsequently realizing the mutual benefit economically, mutual trust politically, mutual understanding culturally, and



mutual exchanges freely, to jointly build up a community of human destiny. "The Tea Road and the Belt and Road" in this chapter deeply involves the inner relationship between the Tea Road and the Belt and Road. As the international trade route connecting Asia and Europe, the Tea Road is a successful demonstration of modern China's opening-up to the outside world and economic globalization. It is also a great practice of integration into Europe and the world, with contemporary value that transcends the time and space. It is a road of civilization integration, covering a wide range of time and space, with regional coherence, commercial inheritance, economic and trade extroversion, and humanistic inclusiveness; it is a model of interaction between East and West civilizations, which is extremely unique and important in the world; it is a road of cultural communication. The spread of tea along the Tea Road not only changed the local diet structure and lifestyle, but also reconstructed and transformed the local social culture; it is a road of ideological exchange, not only being a long-lasting Eurasian economic corridor, but also reflecting the "Tea Road Spirit" in the China-Western cultural exchange. Li Poxi, director of the Development Research Center of the State Council, pointed out that the Tea Road mainly referred to the land passage, the North Asian passage of the Silk Road, connecting the Central Asia, West Asia and South Asia passages of the Silk Road to form a network linking some cities with sea passages, thus become an important part of the Silk Road since ancient times. The inland and seaborne trade route of the Tea Road is highly compatible with the current sea and land wings of the Belt and Road Initiative. The inland Tea Road, from Hankou, northward to Henan, Shanxi, Hebei and other provinces, then across Mongolia to Russia, is an important part of the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor in the Silk Road Economic Belt, while the marine Tea Road, from Hankou to Shanghai or Guangzhou, then setting off to sea via Singapore, Malaysia, South Africa, etc., and finally reaching England, is also an important part of the "Maritime Silk Road". Accordingly, the study of the Tea Road is an important driving force to promote the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. Domestically, it links the Belt and Road Initiative, the Yangzi River Economic Belt and Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Collaboration; globally, it links Mongolia's Prairie Road Initiative and Russia's Eurasian Grand Passage and Eurasian Economic Union Strategy, jointly pushing forward the economic and trade cooperation and cultural exchanges, advancing the integrative development of modern agriculture and cultural tourism, ultimately forming a new approach to the tea-tourism development, forging China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Ecosphere, further upgrading the industrial transform in the cities along the route, with the ultimate goal to more stable good-neighborly and friendly foreign relations between China and Russia, the maintenance of regional peace and stability, and the realization of the regional mutually benefit and win-win.

Along the Tea Road, there are more than 200 towns, 167 scenic spots, 17 natural and cultural heritages and cultural landscapes in the world, with a large number of relics, old paths and articles scattered throughout the area, leaving a wealth of cultural heritage resources. Fully tapping the

historical and cultural value of the Tea Road is an important part of realizing people-to-people exchange. Carrying out The Tea Road research, with tea culture as a link, is to gather the consensus of cities along the route, to fully explore the profound connotations of historical sites and humanities, and to actively engage in the regional cooperation, to enhance the understanding of the people of China, Mongolia and Russia, and to consolidate the foundation of the social public opinion of the construction of the Belt and Road. In particular, starting from 2013, Hubei took the lead, actively promoted the Tea Road application and the construction of the Tea Road Cultural Corridor, showing the world the spirit of inclusive and open Chinese tea culture and the spirit of hardworking and honest cooperation of Jin merchants. To show the world the traditional Chinese values is help to promote Chinese cultural soft power and discourse power, to strengthen the traditional friendship with peoples along the route, to promote the commonwealth of peoples, and to inject new vitality into regional cultural exchanges.

Hubei is an indispensable part of the Tea Road (China section) with special status. The Tea Road (Hubei Section) starts from the Xianning in the east, by Pan River to Hankou, travelling through the Yangtze River, and then on the west of the Han River. It passes through Caidian, Hanchuan, and Mianyang (now Xiantao), via Tianmen, the hometown of the tea saint Lu Yu, Qianjiang, Zhongxiang and Jingmen, then came out of Fancheng on the north bank of the Han River in Xiangfan, and then arrived in Henan Province along the Tangbai River. Hubei was not only an important tea-planting and tea-making area, but also an important distribution center and transportation channel. It was an important relic of the remains and also a cultural exchange and integration of China-Mongolian-Russia, an indispensable part of the Tea Road. In the context of the country's efforts to promote the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, Hubei should take this historical opportunity to actively promote opening-up, focus on the research of the Tea Road, speed up the application of relics, to link the Belt and Road in the following aspects: as the leader of the Tea Road application, Hubei should further study and maintain the history and cultural heritage of the Tea Road in the Hubei section, revitalize the historical and traditional industries, build regional tea brands, as a strong tea province, dig deeply into the cultural resources of the Tea Road, establish a tea culture industry chain, strengthen regional linkage, promote the coordinated development of Two Circles and Two Zones, build a new highland for inland Wuhan, do a good job in the construction of Hubei Free Trade Zone, and forge Hubei' new pattern of opening-up.

#### IV. THE UNIQUENESS OF HUBEI AND THE TEA ROAD

The book *Hubei and the Tea Road*, from a global perspective, expounds the internal relationship and development process between Hubei and China-Russia Tea Road, and has important contemporary value and realistic meaning for promoting the strategic integration of Hubei and the country's the Belt and Road Initiative in the new era. Its value and innovation are in the following three aspects:

### A. Unique Research Perspective, and Profound Meaning

As a century-old link between China and Russia, the Tea Road played an important role in the Sino-Russian historical economic and cultural exchanges. Its inland and seaborne trade routes are highly compatible with the Belt and Road Initiative, thus becoming its important component. The precious study of the Tea Road was generally carried out from a domestic perspective, especially on Jin merchants. Undoubtedly, Jin Merchants played an important role in this international trade route prosperous for more than two hundred years, but Hubei also plays an irreplaceable role in the Tea Road (Hankou to St. Petersburg). Hankou, earning a reputation of "Oriental Tea Port", was once the center of the world tea trade. Chibi's Yangludong was one of the main tea sources of green brick tea and black tea on the Tea Road. Now Wuchang, Yidu and other places in Yichang are the important tea source and core production area of "Yihong Tea" and Xiangyang is the center for Water and Land Transport. Based on the special status of Hubei in the Tea Road and its historical importance in the Tea Road application, the study of the Tea Road is inseparable from the discussion of Hubei. In the context of further promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, from the perspective of globalization, the book, focusing on Hubei, expounds the dynamic development process of Hubei and the evolution of the Tea Road, deeply accounts for the rise and fall of the Tea Road and its impact on Hubei's industrial development. At present, Hubei is actively engaging in the Tea Road's application and promotes the link with the Belt and Road, which vests the study of the Tea Road the value of the times. The deepening and extending the related researches have opened up a new way of thinking for the comprehensive study of the relationship between Hubei and China-Russia Tea Road.

### B. Novelty and Innovativeness with Precious Literatures

The characteristic innovation of the book is that it cites a large number of related research achievements from Russian scholars' research and historical documents of Russian collections. For a long time, the complicated diplomatic relations between China and the Soviet Union has led to a lack of mutual cultural exchanges, which negatively influenced the translation of Russian historical books and documents. For the language barriers, Domestic scholars cannot directly obtain Russian historical data, so they can only focus on the domestic part. For lack of the research on the Russian part of the Tea Road, there has long existed incomplete understanding about the historical evolution of the Russian section of the Tea Road, the experience of the Russian government and Russian businessmen in China, and the Sino-Russian tea trade relations and related data, which are undoubtedly important obstacles to comprehensive and objective research. The author of the book obtained a doctorate degree in Russian international relations, published academic books in Russian and also published academic papers in the top Russian journals. He is also an adjunct professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies at Moscow State University, famous home and abroad for his study on the strategic relationship between China and Russia, Prof. Liu, proficient in Russian, has extensively read the

literature in the Russian History Museum, the National Archives and the Library, done a lot of preliminary research work, accumulated rich research experience, and maintained a close academic relationship with Russian scholars on the Tea Road study, with the comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the two centuries long development history and research status of the Tea Road, therefore, he can best provide Russian historical data support for the current research. The book has a chapter solely expounds the Russian historical materials of *Hubei and the Tea Road*, and extensively quotes the Sino-Russian tea trade data in the Russian National Historical Archives, which has obtained the precious and reliable value of the Russian part. The historical data has made up for the weakness of home research on the Russian part, which has effectively broadened the scope of domestic scholars' research.

### C. Rich Content with Historical Reality

The book, closely focusing on the theme of *Hubei and the Tea Road*, profoundly expounds the historical change of the Tea Road and its inner relations from such aspects as its development, the special status of Hubei in the Tea Road, its exploration in Russian historical materials, the five important node cities in Hubei section of the Tea Road, and its present value of the times. The Tea Road, once served as the "century artery" connecting China and Russia, not only formed an international economic and trade system based on tea trade, multi-city cooperation, and multi-industry linkage development, but also promoted the collision and integration of Eastern and Western civilizations. It has effectively promoted the socio-economic development of China, Russia and even Central Europe. By a review of Russian historical archives, field study, search for network materials, and access to experts, a large number of Russian scholars' relevant research accomplishments, the data of Sino-Russian tea trade and documentary photographs of related ruins have been collected, greatly enriched the content of the book. This book is based on solid historical materials, covering ancient and modern China and the world, and showing readers the development history and relationship of *Hubei and the Tea Road*. The Tea Road was once a splendid treasure in the history of human civilization. Its rise and fall undoubtedly condensed the historical experience and practical wisdom of countless ancestors. On the basis of respecting the history, the author knows how to make a difference, and endows the study the profound connotation of the times and the meaning of value. The Tea Road puts the Mongolian Grassland Road Initiative, the Russian Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road Initiative under a unified framework, consolidate regional cooperation consensus, form a cooperative mechanism for the coordinated development of China, Mongolia and Russia, and jointly promote the Sino-Mongolian-Russian economic corridor. It contributes to the promotion of economic globalization in the context of the current economic globalization.

## V. CONCLUSION

In summary, the rich content, the clarity of the hierarchy, the informativeness of the materials, the unique insights and

the profound knowledge of the book will have important reference value for the future research of the Tea Road both in China and foreign countries.

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