

Tea-obsessed Canadian shares his stories of the Tea Horse Road

By Wu Hao

Canadian Jeff Fuchs is fond of mountains and tea, so much so that he may well be the first foreigner from a Western country to travel the 5,000-kilometer Tea Horse Road, a legendary trade route connecting the provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan, Tibet and parts of India and Bangladesh.

On March 1, Fuchs shared his experiences at a Capital M literary festival event.

Two necessities: mountains and tea

Fuchs has lived in Asia for the past decade and done work related to indigenous mountain culture, oral histories and tea.

Before coming to China, he spent a considerable time in Switzerland, where he developed his love for mountaineering. "Traveling in the mountains, every 5 minutes, you see something tremendous and you feel very small. You see how much space and how much silence [there is], and for me this is good," he said. "I'm not a city person. City people are just rushing for no reason."

Fuchs said he prefers tea to coffee because he didn't come from a coffee-drinking family.

"My father had tea in the house from a very early age," Fuchs said. "The culture of tea is special. I think for me it's the earth's one pure medicinal drink. There is so much culture attached to tea that you need time to learn about it."

"I prefer Yunnan's tea culture because it's so simple, you don't need a fancy teapot," he said. "It is less words, less speaking, and more understanding of what makes this tea so good."

In 2003, a friend from Taiwan told him that Yunnan was a very special, ethnically diverse place, and that – most importantly – it had mountains and tea. Fuchs came with that in mind.

Old tales along the Tea Horse Road

Fuchs made his home in Shangri-la in northwestern Yunnan at the eastern base of the Himalayas. Occasionally he led expeditions on behalf of Wild China, which sponsored him.

Most Chinese know about the Tea Horse Road, but few really understand its history and significance.

Fuchs learned about it when he met a 94-year-old woman who had lost her brother, uncle and father in a blizzard on the Tea Horse Road.

"These faces truly represent more of the Tea Horse Road than the maps," Fuchs said.



Fuchs sits amid an ancient tea tree forest near Nannuo Mountain in southern Yunnan with one of his many tea masters.

He found, in his exploration, that the tea road was actually more like a migratory route encoded in people's DNA—a route of language, culture and blood.

"One of the aspects that is so beautiful about the Tea Horse Road is it opens access to some of the most isolated communities on the planet," he said.

For example, he met a girl named Lama who wore stone jewels that her mother and grandmother collected from traders from Lhasa.

He also discovered that some people on the route spoke dialects unique to the plateau.

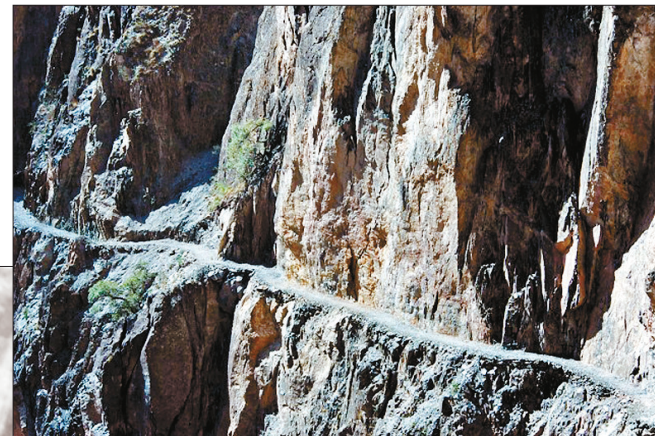
What surprised him most was the similarities between the people in these areas and

South American aborigines.

"I actually shot film of Indians, so we turned the sound down and showed them to the Tibetans, and they said these are the exact things we do – it's not just the facial features, it's the hats, it's the way that they've been bred, and the music," Fuchs said.

"As soon as I turned the volume up and voices started coming out, you could see [their surprise]: everything is familiar except the language."

Fuchs also heard many touching stories, such as the one about a woman who fell in love with a Han trader who promised he would return to find her. He never did – because, as Fuchs later found out, he perished on the road.



A mere strip of a pathway deep in the Himalayas hints at the perils that traders and travelers faced on the Tea Horse Road.

late for the translator.

Fuchs said many of the traders on the route have always been illiterate, so that many of their stories, while interesting, aren't able to be preserved.

He met Dawa, a trader, in November 2011. "Dawa asked me what I was doing with this, and he was very angry that a Tibetan, Yi or Han wasn't telling the story," Fuchs said. "Why is a white guy [telling it], and why are so few people interested?"

When he wasn't traveling, Fuchs was very happy to be promoting Wild China.

"There is a surprising number of people who want to learn more about tea culture, this crazy frontier, this place in China," he said. "Some people say it's backwards, but I'd say it has more stories, and more people willing to tell those stories, because they have time."

Fuchs said as some parts of the route modernize, "I don't think they always know what they are losing."

"Sometimes our history is very selfish," Fuchs said about Western culture. "We don't understand anything unrelated to the West. But I think the Tea Horse Road is something we have to understand because of its huge influence across Asia and the Middle East."

Fuchs started a tea company that sources Pu'er tea, and he'll continue exploring the Tea Horse Road and develop new routes for Wild China.

"We are trying to document the old trade routes, create a route that foreigners and Chinese would like to travel, open this area out, do something different – not just Lijiang, Dali, but deeper into China," Fuchs said.

Photos provided by Jeff Fuchs

Challenges and speed bumps

Before Fuchs went to Yunnan, he spent half-year doing research.

"At the beginning, when I started, I thought I was learning a lot. As I traveled, I felt there was so much to take in that I had to empty myself [of that research] because I couldn't hold everything in my brain," he said. "At the end I felt like I had refilled with information. And at the end, I feel I've done a good thing, for my life, for the Tea Horse Road."

Language was a challenge, since every 15 kilometers there was a different dialect, but Fuchs managed to make his way by finding locals to trans-