

Subscribe to DeepL Pro to edit this document.  
Visit [www.DeepL.com/pro](https://www.deepl.com/pro?cta=edit-document) for more information.

In the old days... We had an uncle - one of my maternal grandmother's sons - who was called Gesso /kɤ˧zo#˥/. His full name was Gesso Ci'er /kɤ˧zo˧-tsʰɯ˩ɻ̩˩/. He used to trade by caravan! He was entrusted with driving caravans between Yongning and Lhasa, on behalf of the lord of Yongning. We children helped with the preparations before the caravans left. We prepared cereal flour to feed the horses. If we were leaving for a month, we needed flour for the horses for a whole month! (Note: this could be a variety of cereals: maize, wheat, sorghum, etc.) And the caravan would take all this with it. When we came back from Lhasa, we brought back tea and butter. Some of these products were sold on the spot, and others were shipped from Yongning to other destinations.

My uncle used to be known as the "caravan leader"! We used to talk about the "caravan leader" and the "grooms". The most gifted caravaneers rode one of the two lead mounts, and bore the title of 'caravan leader'. (Note: one of their responsibilities was to select the goods to be purchased at the destination, with the proceeds from the sale of what the caravan had brought with it. The two horses at the head of the caravan were magnificently bridled and decorated). As for the grooms, they were assistants. It was a prestigious position to be a caravan leader! People would say: "Oh, look, he's at the head of the caravan! It's the Latami who lead the caravan! They were called "the travellers", the ones who used to go off in caravans! It was to them that we owed our tea and butter, the precious foodstuffs that filled the stores at home!

The caravanners' absence could last a month, or just twenty days. For example, we'd leave for Sichuan, towards Xichang; we'd load butter and tea onto the horses, and then go and sell it all in Sichuan, in the old days! It took a month.

When they came home, they brought all sorts of presents for us who'd stayed at home! For a child: a pair of clothes! For his mother: clothes and a skirt! For his little sister: a skirt! For his elder sister: a skirt! There were only three of us girls in my generation. The three kinds of gifts for the women of the house were dresses, shirts and cloth belts. And the braided headdress, used to tie up the hair! We used to talk about "bringing back headdresses from Sichuan". In the old days, apart from those from Sichuan, there were no headdresses here! And for the ladies of the nobility, they used to be an essential accessory. People who went to Sichuan were asked to buy headdresses! satin headdresses! We used to wear the na costume. Nowadays, we don't wear them any more, but I still own one, don't I! The satin used to make the na costume was bought in Sichuan (=in the Xichang region). For someone they liked, they would bring back gifts, such as a long satin headdress (Note: it could be up to twenty metres long; it was wrapped around the top of the head). "Eeeeh! Your big brother's coming back," we'd say to the women whose brother had left on a caravan. "He's going to bring you satin headdresses! That's what they used to say when a caravan went to Sichuan! So the man who had gone with the caravans would bring back a little something for everyone.

Rice was also brought back from Sichuan! Rice was transported and given to the lord, who ordered the caravans. Or, if you had a bit of money, you bought a mule, then a horse, and organised your own caravan! (Explanation: the hope of the caravaneers employed by the lord was to save money to buy their own horses and set up on their own. During the short period when trade from Lhasa to Lijiang was of considerable importance, this activity sometimes occupied the majority of the men in a family: for example, in a family with three able-bodied men, only one stayed in Yongning to work in the fields, and the other two traded in caravans).

There are songs about caravans. We used to sing: "I'm bringing back tea from faraway lands; but on my return home, I learn that my mother died while I was away! How sad, and what good are good things when my mother is no longer here to share them! And again: "It's very sweet to drink your fill of peony infusion and tea; but if my mother died while I was far away, then what's the point, what pleasure could there be in it? This song evokes the peony roots we used to dig up in the mountains and use when we didn't have tea at home. I used to make tea for my mother, a decoction of dried peony bulb shavings. This is what the song said: "If you're not in the company of your mother, of the people you love, how can you savour the pleasure of peony infusions! But now my mother's dead, so what's the point?

Caravanners used to bring back cloth. There were pieces that were all white, very long, measure after measure! With two measurements, you could only make one dress. When we bought fabric, that's how we reasoned: we calculated how many dresses we wanted to make, and we needed twice as many measures of fabric. In the meantime, people in the village would say: "Aaaah! those who've gone to Sichuan, they're going to bring back enough to make dresses! Young girls, if they had a good friend among the men who had left in the caravan, he would bring them back gifts! The young women were told: "Eeeeh! Your friend is coming back! You'll be able to change your clothes!

Ah, hmm, I forgot something. Sichuan, we used to trade salt there too, didn't we! The city of Yenge /jɤ˧ŋɤ˧/ [=Chengdu], what's its current name? I don't know what it's called these days! Well, this place, Yenge /jɤ˧ŋɤ˧/, the caravans went there frequently. And also to Hoddi /ho˧di˧/ [the (Han) Chinese regions of Sichuan: Yanyuan, Yanbian, Xichang...]. There was also a destination called Adizzee /ə˧ti˥-dzi˩/ [Weixi 维西].

The eldest uncle, as I was saying, had the title of "caravan leader"! (Tibetan word: tshong pa ཚང་པ) It's the equivalent of what we'd call 'the boss' today (Chinese word: 老板), isn't it! He led the whole caravan, everyone followed him! As for the younger uncle, whose name was Daeshi Baepae /ʈæ˧ʂɯ˧-pæ˩pʰæ˩/, he was given the role of groom! He put the loads on the horses; and he was also in charge of leading the horses to pasture. In the evening, we slept where the horses had reached. The caravan leader was exempt from the chores carried out by the grooms; he rested in his tent. Tents were unfolded and saddles stacked! If the journey lasted a month, you lived in a tent for a whole month! That's what a caravan journey was like. The leather bags used for transport were gigantic!

We women used to weave linen, and the men would go and sell the linen cloth in Sichuan. Every time the caravanners left, they took with them all the linen cloth we'd made. It didn't sell for much. Here's what the proverb said: "In Sichuan, we lose our linen; in Lhasa, we lose our threads! In the old days, when your son went to Lhasa, he wouldn't come back! And when the caravans took the linen fabric to Sichuan, it was as if it had been thrown out of the window: there was hardly any money to be made! (Explanation: the linen fabric was taken to Sichuan, where it was not highly prized and sold at low prices; this trade brought in meagre sums of money. The sons left for Lhasa to become priests or to trade, and many did not return or did not return for a long time, because a merchant did not return from Lhasa until he had made a fortune, and a monk did not return until he was well known, otherwise the fear of bringing shame on their family dissuaded them from returning. The journey was long and arduous; many did not have the means to undertake the return journey, and remained in Lhasa; others disappeared on the way)". You lose your linen in Sichuan, and your son in Lhasa! That's what the proverb says. In the old days, women used to weave late into the night. Some of them would fall asleep at work; their heads would bang against the upright of the loom, boom! and the shock would wake them up; then they'd go back to spinning the linen, spinning again and again. All to be sold in Sichuan!

Those who couldn't go themselves, who didn't have any men in their family who took part in the caravans, entrusted the fabrics to the caravaneers, who with the profit from the sale bought them cotton fabrics. In the past, all the cotton worn in Yongning came from Sichuan!

There were piles of linen cloth this high! We folded it, layer upon layer, over and over again. We wove quantities of it! It was the only thing we had to sell! After selling the linen, the travellers would bring back cotton cloth. I think there was also silk among the things they brought back from Yenge /jɤ˧ŋɤ˧/ [Chengdu]. For my little brother, my uncle would bring back a man's outfit, made of silk! (Note: this was a garment that men wore from the age of thirteen: a jacket tied at the waist, worn over the shirt, on special occasions: weddings, invitations...) To the rest of us, the three children who weren't yet thirteen, he would give a silk dress. It resembled the silk dress worn by the ladies you see on television in historical films! Another part of the costume was the shoes. They were made of leather and carefully sewn. They were truly magnificent! They weren't like today's!

We were told: "Well! You've got your wish! Your uncle, the caravan leader, is coming back and he's going to give you some new clothes! Uncle used to be so generous to us! He bought us all sorts of presents. The nephews and nieces who had a talented uncle used to get beautiful clothes from him, and good food too! The uncle was also very generous with poor people: he welcomed them into his home.

He had ten horses. Two members of the family went off in caravans: one was the groom and the other was the caravan leader. They drove no less than ten horses! If one person went, he drove four horses. If you were driving eight horses, two of you would go, and then there would be two grooms and two caravan leaders. When they got to the town, the grooms looked after the horses, while the caravan leaders went around the town shopping. It was they who announced: "Tonight, we'll stop at Loshu /lo˧ʂv̩˩/ (=Luoshui, by the Lake) Tomorrow, we'll reach Luggu /lo˧gv̩˩/ (Ninglang)!"

In the past, when we set off from Yongning, we spent the night in Luggu /lo˧gv̩˩/ (Ninglang). When we set off from Ninglang, we would spend the night at Bae'ercho /pæ˧ɻæ˩-ʈʂʰo˩/ (红桥). From here, it is only a day's walk to Luggu (Ninglang). The journey from Yongning to Ninglang used to involve three stages! We spent three nights on the way! (Note: in the past, it took three days from Ninglang to Yongning; seven days from Lijiang to Yongning; three months from Yongning to Lhasa).

At lunchtime, the horses were taken out of their saddles and led out to pasture. Again, in the evening, we took their saddles off and prepared the camp. There were no hotels like there are now! We slept in the mountains, by the side of the road, and that was that! In the old days, we didn't take the same route as we do now. (Note: today's road crosses the Yangtze much further downstream than where the caravaneers travelling from Lijiang to Yongning used to cross it). The way back was via the Lijiang glacier (now Mount Yulong). They would take you over a rope bridge over the Yangtze. The horses were tied with a wooden accessory that slid over the rope bridge. Once the horse was securely attached, Vzzzt!!! it was thrown over the river on the rope. On the other side, on the cliff, someone would hold on to the horse. The wooden slide would be sent back over the other rope bridge, whose incline allowed passage in the other direction, and so on. That's what we used to call 'crossing the Yangtze'! "Eeeh! Tonight, the caravaneers are going to make it to the Yangtze", said the family members who stayed at home. The women of the family were counting the days! "They must have reached here, they must have reached there; in so many days, they'll be here, then there, then there...". There were no telephones like there are now! If they didn't come back, a few days after the expected return date, the family would start to worry. "Alas! Have they fallen victim to a bandit attack? Alas, my son is not coming back! His mother was very worried! She ran back and forth, asking: "It seems that some people from the village of Ggae'er /gæ˧ɻæ˩/ [a village near Yongning] were part of the same caravan; have they returned? Then she'd set off running again, once more asking questions of the women from the various households! We asked people we knew, friends, for news! If we left together, and you came back first, my family will be asking you for news, won't they. If I'm the first one back, they'll ask me! Finally, someone who had just returned gave some news: "They'll be here by this evening! Don't worry, come on!

My uncle called Gesso, he was the caravan leader, he was in charge of the purchases, and he carried the money! The uncle called Baepae /pæ˩pʰæ˧˥/, he was really clever too! He looked after the horses. They went to Lhasa, and then to Xichang, Yanyuan... In the old days, when we didn't know where someone had gone [in Sichuan or Yunnan: Chengdu, Xichang, Kunming...], we used to say: "He's gone to the Chinese regions! This time they've gone to pick up a load of rice! In the old days, there was no rice in Yongning! All we had was rice brought by caravan from the Chinese regions. But the lord, with the help of the Chinese, gradually understood: a few Chinese families settled down; and as they planted a few plots of rice, it was passed on from one to the next: you plant a plot; we plant a plot; and so on. That's how this culture spread!

There could be thirty, forty, fifty horses in a caravan! On the Yongning plain, there was a herd of horses belonging to the people of the village of Khaeqie /qʰæ˧tɕʰi˧/; one of us, the people of Alawua /ə˧lɑ˧-ʁwɤ˧/; one of the people of the village of Ggae'er /gæ˧ɻæ˩/! one of the people from Langua mountain /lɑ˧ŋwɤ˧/! one of the people from Zhoshi village /ʈʂo˧ʂɯ#˥/! We knew each other, we were friends, we understood each other well, so we set off together, in the same troop. The horses followed each other in a long line, their bells going "gling, gling, gling!" The bells on their chests would go "ding, ding, ding!" and the bells would go "Dooong, dooong, dooong!" (Note: the mules had bells that made a deeper sound.) We, the people of the household, would recognise our caravan by its particular noise when it approached, even before it had reached the valley! We'd say: "Ooh! Here they come! Ooh! you can hear the lead horse's bells".

It was my eldest uncle, my mother's eldest brother, who drove the horses, and my youngest uncle helped him. When they set off in their caravan, they knew that there was a risk of encountering brigands at this or that place; so they were warned and managed to outwit the brigands! (Note: the brigands knew the caravaneers; they chose whom they would attack; some caravaneers who had good relations with the brigands' chiefs were spared; brigands who would have attacked them would have had to deal with their chiefs).

In the old days, when you crossed the Yangtze, the brigands would rob you and take everything with them! The horse would come back empty! (The brigands stole all the goods, and often let the horses go; it was difficult to fence horses and resell them, because horse convoys did not go unnoticed, and the horses could be recognised, while the goods could easily be disguised, the money buried...) In the past, five of my family's horses were stolen! That's how it happened. A family hired one of my uncles to go off in a caravan; they must have been people from Luggu /lo˧gv̩˩/ (Ninglang)! They had hired five men, and they had set off with ten horses. Well, the brigands, they stole it all! There was nothing we could do! (Approximate date of events: around 1960. The speaker was already about ten years old. She remembers because her uncle, the second-in-command, had promised her little silver trinkets, and the sad and disappointed niece remembers his return without fanfare). It gave us quite a scare! This is what my grandmother used to say: "Losing money is no big deal, but if I lose my sons...! We got everyone in the village together to go and look for my uncle. At night, he came back. He didn't have his clothes on, he was naked! He must have given them his knickers! The bandits had completely stripped the people in the caravan and taken all their clothes! They had also taken all the horses.

Then the eldest uncle said: "Don't worry, don't worry! I'm going to buy back as much as has been lost" (Note: some of the goods in the caravan belonged to the family: the cargo of five of the horses). And then, true to form, he bought back a load, and went off to sell it, to put this sad episode behind him.

I'm thinking... Adizzee /ə˧ti˥dzi˩/ [Weixi], where was it, who knows! I don't know! Adizzee... When we went to Adizzee, didn't we come back via the Yangtze? Would that be the place they call "Baoshan"? Today, we talk about "Baoshan" [宝山] and "Fengke" [奉科], in Chinese! This place, the one called Adizzee /ə˧ti˥dzi˩/, used to have a fabulous trade! We used to talk about "Adizzee clothes". Cotton fabrics, large quantities of which were brought back. The women of Yongning used to buy them! There were also Adizzee belts. A belt used to sell for a silver coin! Now that was really valuable! A skirt cost exactly three silver coins! A set of ten bowls was worth two silver coins! To give you an idea, a family that had collected ten silver coins at home, that was enough to eat in abundance that whole year. Back then, who had bundles of money like they do today?

Caravanners used to go everywhere! Not least in Muli. The family of the lord of Muli were called "the Guca /kv̩˧tsʰɑ˥$/ of Muli"! In the past, we knew the lord of the Yongning monastery; he knew the qualities of the men in our family, and he decided to put my uncle in the service of the lord of Muli, in the service of the Guca family /kv̩˧tsʰɑ˥$/! (Summary of this story: one of the narrator's uncles was sent to the lord of Muli by the lord of Yongning, to be in his service; but after seven years he returned to Yongning. On his return he spoke the Pumi language fluently). The lords of Muli and the monastery were linked by family ties! The lords of Muli and those of the Yongning monastery were like brothers! (In particular, they were linked by family alliances; according to the speaker's memories, a princess from Yongning had married a lord from Muli). They stood together, supporting each other in times of need! For example, if there are a lot of people in my area, I'll give you some subjects! That's how the subjects of the Lord of Yongning could be put to work for the Lord of Muli. That's how my uncle was once sent to serve the lords of Muli. Over there, my uncle drove caravans for this lord. When he returned by caravan, he gave the lord of the Yongning monastery what he had brought back; and in turn, the lords of the monastery sent these goods to other destinations. Once the caravan expedition was over, he returned to his role as subject of the Muli lords.

But my uncle has been flirting with young girls, so they say! And in particular with a good friend of the Lord of Muli. So the Lord of Muli got angry, and sent him back to Yongning! He wanted to give him back to the lord of the Yongning monastery. But my uncle said: "Oh no, it doesn't work like that! I don't want to be the subject of the lord of the Yongning monastery, any more than I want to be the subject of the lord of Muli! I'm going to form my own caravan! So saying, he set off to drive his own caravans! In our village, of the people who drove caravans, there was only my uncle, he was the only one. All the families in the village, those who had a horse, came to ask him: "Uncle, please! Uncle Gesso, please drive our horse, loaded with his goods! We're begging you! We'll share the profits with you! You'll buy salt and bring it back to us, you'll buy tea and bring it back!" And they entrusted him with their horse loaded with goods. People like him, well, today we'd call them "bosses"! (Chinese word: 老板, with great prestige in early 21st century China).

Those were the days of the caravan! Nobody stayed at home and did nothing. All the able-bodied men roamed the roads with the caravans! During the rainy season, the men stayed in Yongning with their animals, and the women cut hay for the horses, taking care to feed them well! (Explanation: during the rainy season, there was hardly any travel; the caravans only travelled during the dry season, when the roads were more practicable: from September/October to April/May). The caravans were really exhausting, weren't they! That's how it used to be!