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"Ancient Chinese Post Station-Marketplace-Temple": A Study on the Site Landscape Investigation and Spatial Chart Construction of the Chengdu-Chongqing Ancient Road

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the recurrent spatial triad of "post station–marketplace–temple" along the Chengdu–Chongqing Ancient Road, addressing a seemingly simple yet long-overlooked question: why did ancient people consistently locate these three functionally distinct institutions in close proximity? Previous scholarship has either examined the historical evolution of the entire road as a linear entity (akin to viewing a map) or analyzed individual post stations or temples in isolation (like taking close-up photographs), without treating them as an integrated whole. To fill this gap, we propose the novel concept of the "composite unit"—a tightly clustered, functionally complementary ensemble comprising a post station, a marketplace, and a temple within a walking distance of 15 to 25 minutes (approximately 800–1,200 meters). This configuration functioned as an ancient "one-stop service zone." Drawing on historical documents, field surveys, and GIS-based digital technologies, we systematically investigate the spatial layout, operational logic, and cultural significance of such composite units along the Eastern Main Route of the Chengdu–Chongqing Ancient Road during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Our findings reveal that this triadic arrangement was not an accidental juxtaposition but rather an efficient socio-ecological module shaped by the long-term interaction among transportation, commerce, and religious systems. It achieved high synergy among security, economic, and cultural functions at minimal spatial cost, offering profound insights for the holistic conservation and revitalization of linear cultural heritage today.

Keywords: Chengdu–Chongqing Ancient Road, post station; marketplace, temple, cultural route, spatial chart, composite un

1. Introduction

Since 2022, the wave of digital innovation led by Generative AI has profoundly reshaped research paradigms across the humanities and social sciences. In the field of cultural heritage, scholars are no longer content with isolated analyses of static relics; instead, they increasingly explore the dynamic social networks and cultural ecosystems embedded within material carriers. This shift mirrors the transformation in art and design education—from "tool substitution" to "human–machine collaboration"—centered on understanding heritage as a living system constituted by interactions among multiple agents. The advent of sophisticated computational tools, from network analysis to agent-based modeling, has empowered researchers to move beyond descriptive cataloguing towards explanatory and predictive frameworks that can simulate the complex interdependencies that define human-environment relationships over time.

Yet against this broader theoretical and technological backdrop, research on China's indigenous linear cultural heritage, particularly the Chengdu–Chongqing Ancient Road remains underdeveloped. Existing studies tend to focus either on macro-level route reconstructions or on descriptive accounts of individual heritage sites,

lacking an integrative analytical framework capable of revealing the deep-seated social logic and cultural intelligence behind commonplace spatial configurations along the road, such as the co-location of post stations, old commercial streets, and temples. This lacuna represents a significant missed opportunity, as the Chengdu–Chongqing corridor stands as one of the most vital arteries of communication, commerce, and cultural exchange in Southwest China for over two millennia. Its historical role in integrating the Sichuan Basin with the Central Plains and the Yangtze River Delta cannot be overstated, serving as a conduit for everything from imperial edicts and military logistics to salt, silk, and migratory populations.

Travelers to Sichuan often observe that along the Chengdu–Chongqing Ancient Road, ruins of post stations are frequently accompanied by historic market streets and temples—an arrangement reminiscent of modern highway service areas where gas stations, restaurants, and convenience stores cluster together. But why did ancient societies organize their infrastructure in this way? What functional or symbolic connections existed among post stations, marketplaces, and temples? This question has never received a comprehensive answer. The prevailing scholarly approach has been to compartmentalize these elements: historians of the postal system study the bureaucratic machinery of the yizhan (post station); economic historians analyze the rise of periodic markets (changshi) in agrarian societies; and scholars of religion or architecture focus on the iconography and patronage of local temples. While each of these strands yields valuable insights, their separation obscures a more fundamental truth: that these institutions were not merely adjacent but were mutually constitutive parts of a single, adaptive socio-spatial system.

This study seeks to unravel this intriguing phenomenon by examining how ancients designed their "service zones." We introduce a "network-integrative" perspective that transcends traditional "point-and-line" thinking and propose the original concept of the "composite unit"—a micro-scale socio-service system formed through functional complementarity and spatial synergy among a post station, a marketplace, and a temple within a specific spatiotemporal scale. By integrating historical textual analysis, in-depth fieldwork, and cutting-edge GIS spatial modeling, this paper not only maps the spatial chart and operational mechanisms of this ancient "social operating system," but also aims to provide a locally grounded, theoretically rigorous, and practically valuable "Chengdu–Chongqing model" for the holistic conservation and adaptive reuse of linear cultural heritage—thereby advancing research from superficial "what is" toward deeper "why" and "how to apply." Our central thesis posits that the composite unit was not a product of top-down imperial planning alone, but an emergent property of a complex adaptive system, where the needs of state, market, and community converged to produce a remarkably efficient and resilient node within the larger network of the ancient road.

2. Literature Review

Research on the Chengdu–Chongqing Ancient Road and its associated cultural heritage has recently shifted from singular historical verification toward multidisciplinary, integrative approaches. Early foundational work by historical geographer Lan Yong—including A Comprehensive Study of Yuan Dynasty Post Stations in Sichuan and An Examination of the Ming Dynasty "Map of Sichuan's Four Routes and Post Stations" Related to Tea-Horse Trade—systematically reconstructed the road's route changes, post station systems, and official transport networks across dynasties, establishing the road's identity as a "linear transport corridor"[2][3]. Jin Hang further popularized awareness of this historic corridor through accessible narratives[1]. However, such studies predominantly emphasized the macro "line," offering limited insight into the spatial organization, functional interplay, and socio-ecological dynamics of local nodes—a limitation characterized as "seeing the line but not the points, seeing the points but not the network."

Concurrently, some scholars explored regional cultures of Bashu (Sichuan Basin), such as Xu Xueshu's

interpretation of Sichuan's "Land of Abundance" image[15] or Lü Yifei's reflections on Three Kingdoms cultural tourism[4], yet often detached from the concrete spatial fabric of the ancient road, thus failing to elucidate how transport routes shaped local societies. These studies, while culturally rich, tended to treat the region as a relatively homogeneous entity, overlooking the granular ways in which specific infrastructural nodes like those on the Chengdu–Chongqing Road acted as crucibles for the formation of local identities and economies.

With evolving heritage conservation philosophies, scholarly attention has expanded to spatial structure and living heritage. On one hand, researchers have adopted new frameworks like "landscape genes" and "heritage corridors." For instance, Zou Weihan and Zhang Dingqing explored methods for constructing traditional settlement charts using the Shannan section of the Shu Road as a case study[5]; Zhong Chong introduced Japanese approaches to linear historical landscape research, highlighting historical geography's role in heritage identification[13]; Wu Jialong et al. examined how comprehensive land consolidation could integrate with the protection of the Nanyue Ancient Post Road[14]. These works offer methodological references for understanding the spatial logic of the Chengdu–Chongqing Road, suggesting that its value extends far beyond its physical path to encompass the entire cultural landscape it helped create and sustain.

On the other hand, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) studies have increasingly employed spatial metrics. Jiang Juanli, Li Jiangmin, Xu Baicui, and others used GIS to reveal the spatial clustering of ICH projects and their correlations with natural and cultural environments[7][8][9]. Gao Bingzhong interpreted ICH's role in public cultural integration[11], while Zhang Bo and Cheng Wei emphasized the catalytic effect of cultural-tourism fusion on ICH revitalization[10]. These insights underscore that ancient roads were not merely physical conduits but also channels for cultural circulation and community interaction. The movement of people along these routes was inseparable from the transmission of skills, beliefs, and aesthetic sensibilities, which would then take root and evolve in the nodes where travelers paused.

Notably, specialized studies on specific Bashu routes provide crucial empirical support. Cheng Longgang and Yang Xuesong focused on the "Sichuan Salt Road," verifying its routes, historical roles, and heritage composition through fieldwork[18][21]. Chen Shisong linked the "Huguang Fills Sichuan" migration movement to its profound impact on regional beliefs and market-town patterns[22]. Hu Bin et al. analyzed the spatiotemporal distribution of religious sites like grotto temples[16], while Kan Aike et al. examined how geography influenced the siting of ancient villages[26]. These micro-histories are invaluable, as they demonstrate the powerful agency of non-state actors—merchants, migrants, and local communities—in shaping the cultural geography of the region. They show that the landscape was not a passive canvas for state policy but an active arena of negotiation and adaptation.

Technological innovation is also driving paradigm shifts. Li Hongfei et al. applied social network and circuit theory to model the Guanlong Ancient Road corridor[12]; Ding Long et al. used space syntax to optimize heritage tourism paths in historic districts[19]; Zhang Yaqiong and Xie Qian explored digital technologies and knowledge graphs in landscape heritage research[23][24]; Liu Ying considered heritage corridor perspectives for Silk Road tourism integration[20]. Collectively, these demonstrate that "digital humanities" and "network analysis" are emerging as key trends in linear heritage studies. They provide the quantitative and visual tools necessary to move from anecdotal observation to systematic pattern recognition, allowing researchers to test hypotheses about connectivity, centrality, and flow that were previously impossible to verify.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain: most studies either emphasize macro-route reconstruction or focus on single heritage elements (e.g., post stations, temples, ICH items), rarely treating post stations, marketplaces, and temples as an organically integrated, functionally synergistic whole. Even when

spatial relationships are addressed, few combine deep fieldwork with historical documentation to uncover the underlying social logic of "why this layout?" and "how it operated dynamically." Against this backdrop, our introduction of the "composite unit" concept seeks to advance Chengdu–Chongqing Road research from "point-and-line separation" toward "network integration," and from static preservation toward living transmission. Our work builds upon this existing scholarship but pushes it forward by insisting on the necessity of a holistic, systemic view that can account for the emergent properties of the triadic relationship.

3. Research Framework: From "Point-and-Line Thinking" to a "Network Perspective"

As noted earlier, travelers in Sichuan often notice that post station ruins along the Chengdu–Chongqing Ancient Road are typically accompanied by old market streets and temples—much like modern highway service areas. But why this arrangement? What links exist among these three institutions? This paper aims to answer this question by reconstructing the ancient "service zone."

3.1 Spatiotemporal Scope

We focus on the Eastern Main Route during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. This period represents the road's most mature and active phase. The Ming dynasty, following the chaos of the late Yuan, undertook a massive project of state-building that included the reconstruction of a national post station system. The Ming Huidian (Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty) stipulated clear standards for station establishment and management, creating a reliable backbone for imperial administration and communication. The Qing dynasty, inheriting and refining this system, saw the road reach its zenith of commercial and social activity, particularly during the High Qing era of the 18th century. Critically, this era left an unparalleled wealth of local gazetteers (difangzhi), archives, and travelogues—such as the Jiaqing Sichuan Tongzhi (Comprehensive Gazetteer of Sichuan, Jiaqing reign), Minguo Neijiang County Gazetteer, and Minguo Longchang County Gazetteer—which meticulously document post station locations, market schedules, and temple activities, providing a robust and reliable primary source base for our investigation.

Geographically, we concentrate on the Eastern Main Route, the officially designated trunk road between Chengdu and Chongqing—equivalent to today's "Beijing–Kunming Expressway." Stretching approximately 540 km from Jin'guan Post Station in Chengdu to Tongyuan Gate in Chongqing, it passes through Jianyang, Ziyang, Neijiang, and Longchang. We selected this route for three compelling reasons:

As the official road, it featured a complete and well-documented post station system—Lan Yong's meticulous research verified that the Qing established 13 official stations along this route, averaging one every 41.5 km, a spacing that closely aligns with the institutional norm of "one station per 30 li" (~15 km), which was predicated on the daily travel capacity of a courier on horseback[2];

The region was economically vibrant, benefiting immensely from Tuo River water transport which connected the road to a wider network of trade. Thriving industries like Zigong's famed well salt, Neijiang's sugar production, and Longchang's high-quality ramie cloth created a constant flow of goods and people, supporting numerous and relatively well-preserved marketplaces and temples;

Scholars including Lan Yong have confirmed the emergence of a distinct "Eastern Main Route Economic Belt" during the Ming–Qing period, a corridor of intensified economic and social interaction that exerted a profound and lasting influence on the regional development of Sichuan[2]. Thus, this route offers an ideal, high-fidelity laboratory for studying the "post station–marketplace–temple" composite unit in its most developed form.

3.2 Core Concept: The "Composite Unit"

We define the "composite unit" as a micro-scale socio-service system in which a post station, a marketplace, and a temple are spatially proximate and functionally complementary within a defined area. This concept is inspired by, yet distinct from, existing frameworks like "cultural landscapes" or "heritage clusters." It is specifically designed to capture the unique, tripartite synergy observed on the Chengdu–Chongqing Road. Analogous to a modern commercial complex—where one can dine (like post station lodging), shop (like marketplace trade), and attend events (like temple gatherings)—these three elements form an integrated experiential whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Specifically:

The post station served as an "official service center + postal hub," responsible for the critical state functions of document relay, official reception, horse changing, and lodging for authorized personnel. According to the Jiaqing Sichuan Tongzhi, major stations employed a station master (yicheng), dozens of couriers (yizu), and dozens of horses, symbolizing the tangible presence and authority of the central state at the local level. Its primary function was to ensure the smooth flow of information and personnel for the imperial bureaucracy.

The marketplace functioned as the people's "grocery store + bazaar," the engine of the local economy. It included daily markets (changshi) for basic necessities and periodic markets (also called changshi, but held on specific days, e.g., those ending in 3, 6, or 9) that attracted a wider regional clientele for bulk trade and specialty goods. The Minguo Neijiang County Gazetteer describes these markets as "bustling with voices and goods from all trades," a vivid testament to their economic vitality and social importance.

The temple was more than a mere place of worship—it acted as a multifaceted "community activity center." Beyond its primary religious function of hosting rituals and festivals, it served as a neutral ground for dispute mediation, a venue for theatrical performances and public announcements, and a social hub where news was exchanged and community bonds were reinforced. The Minguo Longchang County Gazetteer notes that Yuwang Temple "held annual temple fairs attracting merchants from all directions," highlighting its role as a key node in the regional commercial and social network.

These three institutions formed a "composite unit" through a process of functional interdependence and mutual reinforcement: post stations brought a steady and predictable flow of people (renliu), which directly stimulated the growth and regularity of marketplaces; the economic activity and social congregation of the marketplaces, in turn, generated the crowds and resources necessary to sustain the temple and its various community functions; and the temple's activities, especially its large-scale temple fairs, acted as powerful attractors, drawing in even more visitors from a wider catchment area, who would then utilize the services of both the marketplace and the post station. This created a self-reinforcing, virtuous cycle. This was not a random aggregation of convenient facilities but a carefully balanced, self-sustaining micro-ecosystem that optimized resource use and social interaction within a constrained spatial footprint.

3.3 Research Methods

To rigorously test our hypothesis and construct a detailed picture of the composite unit, we employed a triangulated methodology that combines three distinct but complementary investigative strands.

Historical Textual Analysis: Our first step was a systematic review of Ming–Qing gazetteers, official archives (such as the Qing Shilu and local administrative records), and personal travel writings (like those of envoys or literati). This allowed us to reconstruct the institutional contexts, official policies, and documented spatial records of our period of interest. For example, the Sichuan Tongzhi provided data on the official capacity

of post stations (number of horses, personnel), while the Neijiang Gazetteer offered precise details on market schedules and the types of goods traded.

Field Surveys: Between 2025, we conducted multiple, in-depth expeditions to key sites along the Eastern Main Route, with a particular focus on Zizhong (Neijiang) and Longchang. Our fieldwork protocol was comprehensive. We used high-precision GPS devices to measure the exact distances and walking paths between the core components of each suspected composite unit. We extensively photographed architectural remains, street layouts, and any surviving inscriptions or steles. Crucially, we conducted semi-structured oral history interviews with local elders, whose lived memories and inherited knowledge provided invaluable qualitative data that filled critical gaps in the documentary record, especially regarding the social life and temporal rhythms of these places in the early 20th century.

Digital Spatial Analysis: To synthesize our qualitative and quantitative data, we constructed a Geographic Information System (GIS) database. All historical locations derived from texts and all field-measured coordinates were georeferenced into a unified coordinate system, using high-resolution satellite imagery as a base map and the digitally corrected Qianlong Imperial Atlas terrain model to account for historical topography. Within this GIS environment, we performed several key analyses. First, we created a precise spatial distribution map of all verified composite units. Second, we conducted a "space syntax" analysis—a computational method that models a network of spaces to assess their relative connectivity, integration, and potential for pedestrian flow. This allowed us to move beyond simple Euclidean distance to understand the actual ease of movement between the post station, marketplace, and temple within their historical urban fabric, thereby identifying which nodes were true centers of activity versus more peripheral elements.

This closed-loop approach—texts providing the initial leads and historical context, fieldwork verifying their physical reality and adding social depth, and digital tools revealing overarching spatial patterns and network properties—ensures that our conclusions are both historically grounded in primary evidence and spatially precise in their analytical rigor.

4. On-Site Decoding: Real-World Operation of Ancient "Service Zones"

Having proposed the "composite unit" concept and established our methodological framework, we now test its validity through empirical investigation. After rigorous data integration and cross-validation along the Eastern Main Route, we identified two exceptionally well-preserved, functionally coherent composite units that serve as our primary case studies: Zizhou Post Station (modern Zizhong) and Longqiao Post Station (modern Longchang City).

We must clarify a common misconception found in popular media and some preliminary reports: the claim of "42 composite units" along the route lacks rigorous empirical support. Of the 13 official Qing-era stations on the Eastern Main Route, our systematic verification process revealed that many were either isolated administrative outposts with no significant adjacent market or temple, or standalone religious sites that had lost their connection to a functioning transport node. To be classified as a valid composite unit for this study, a site had to satisfy three strict, empirically verifiable conditions:

(1) The post station's location must be confirmed by contemporaneous gazetteers, official maps, or physical inscriptions;

(2) A marketplace must have been documented as continuously operating from the late Qing through the Republican era, and its historical core must lie within a ≤1 km straight-line distance of the post station;

(3) A temple must have maintained active ritual or communal functions by the late Qing/early Republic period, and its location must form a clear triangular or linear adjacency with the other two components,

creating a walkable ensemble.

Our two cases not only meet these criteria but also demonstrate the remarkable adaptability of the composite unit model. They confirm the prevalence of the triadic arrangement while simultaneously showcasing how ancients pragmatically adapted its layout to local geography, economic specialties, and social needs, resulting in distinct spatial morphologies.

4.1 Zizhong: A Shared Hub for Officials and Commoners

Located at the strategic midpoint of the Eastern Main Route along the navigable Tuo River, Zizhong was a critical water–land junction, a fact that fundamentally shaped its composite unit. Here, the three components form a stable, equilateral triangle: Zizhou Post Station sits at the geometric and functional center, the Nanhua Palace Marketplace is situated to the east, and the Wu Temple (dedicated to the deified general Guan Yu) lies to the west. Our high-precision GPS measurements confirm that the shortest practical walking paths between any two of these points fall consistently within the 800–1,200 meter range, translating to a comfortable 15–25 minute walk, a clear embodiment of the "proximity principle" that governed their placement.

The Zizhou Post Station, classified as a "major station" (dazhan) in the Jiaqing Sichuan Tongzhi, was a substantial operation, housing a station master, dozens of couriers, and stabling up to 40 horses. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is its permeability. Contrary to the image of a rigidly exclusive government compound, the station was not an impenetrable fortress. Historical records and local oral histories suggest that common travelers, particularly those with legitimate business or letters of introduction, could often find lodging or at least temporary shelter within its precincts or in the immediate vicinity. The area surrounding the station was a hive of civilian activity, dotted with tea houses, simple eateries, and shops selling harnesses and other travel necessities. This "official-for-public" openness reflects a pragmatic, flexible approach to local governance that recognized the mutual benefits of integrating state infrastructure with the needs of the traveling populace.

The Nanhua Palace marketplace, operating on the traditional schedule of days ending in 3, 6, or 9 (as recorded in the Minguo Neijiang Gazetteer), was the economic heart of the town, drawing farmers from the surrounding countryside with their grain and livestock, and attracting long-distance merchants dealing in salt and textiles. Just a short walk away, the Wu Temple served as the spiritual and social anchor. Dedicated to Guan Yu, a deity revered for his loyalty and martial prowess, the temple held monthly rites on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month and hosted a grand Spring Festival fair. Crucially, our research uncovered a sophisticated temporal coordination between these institutions. The major temple fair was deliberately scheduled for the Lunar New Year period, a time of general celebration, while the regular market days continued on their established 3-6-9 cycle throughout the year. This deliberate staggering of major events prevented overwhelming congestion while ensuring a consistent, year-round rhythm of activity that kept the entire composite unit economically and socially vibrant. This intricate dance between space and time—creating a feedback loop where the station drew people who fueled the market, whose success sustained the temple, whose festivals then drew in new crowds—was not the product of a single bureaucratic decree but an emergent optimum, a solution refined over centuries of trial, error, and adaptation. It stands as a testament to the ancient community's profound mastery of managing flows of people and resources.

4.2 Longchang: The Triad Embedded in a Cultural Landscape of Memorial Archways

Longchang presents a fascinating variation on the composite unit theme, where the triad is seamlessly woven into a pre-existing and highly symbolic cultural landscape: its famous collection of 17 Ming–Qing stone memorial archways. These archways, erected by imperial decree to honor local paragons of Confucian

virtue—loyal officials, filial sons, chaste widows, and righteous citizens—line the main north-south thoroughfare, known today as "Archway Street." In Longchang, the composite unit does not form a triangle but is elegantly strung out in a linear sequence along this very street, spanning approximately 1,000 meters from end to end.

The sequence begins at the northern entrance to the walled city with the Nanguan Post Station, a modest but strategically vital gateway that marked the official entry point for all travelers arriving from Chengdu. Moving southward along Archway Street, the traveler is immediately immersed in a unique sensory and ideological experience. Beneath the solemn, towering archways that preach the abstract virtues of "loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness," the vibrant reality of everyday commerce unfolds. Vendors set up their stalls in the shadows of these monuments, selling Longchang's famed ramie cloth, sturdy earthenware, and locally grown ginger. This juxtaposition is not a contradiction but a profound synthesis: the ethical framework provided by the archways legitimized and gave moral weight to the commercial transactions happening below, while the economic vitality of the market ensured the maintenance and social relevance of the archways themselves.

The linear sequence culminates at the southern end of the street at the Yuwang Temple, dedicated to Yu the Great, the legendary emperor credited with taming China's primordial floods. Given Longchang's role as a key transit and transshipment hub for merchant guilds from Huguang, Shaanxi, and Jiangxi, the temple's dedication to a master of water control and large-scale engineering was deeply resonant. More importantly, as the Minguo Longchang Gazetteer explicitly states, the temple was "jointly built by merchant associations from Shaanxi, Huguang, Guangdong, and Jiangxi." It was far more than a place of worship; it was the city's primary guildhall (huiguan). Here, merchants from different provinces could meet in a neutral, sacred space to negotiate contracts, settle disputes through peer arbitration, share market intelligence, and foster a sense of shared identity and mutual support. Thus, a traveler arriving in Longchang did not merely find a place to rest for the night. They entered a complete ecosystem where they could engage with the highest ideals of the state (the archways), participate in the regional economy (the market), and connect with a powerful trans-local business network (the temple/guildhall). This transformed Longchang from a simple "waystation" on a journey into a compelling "destination" in its own right.

This Longchang case exemplifies a true, layered cultural landscape in the fullest sense of the term. The physical structures—the archways, the post station, the market street, and the temple—are not isolated monuments but interconnected components of a single, self-coherent system. They simultaneously convey spiritual and ethical values, enable complex economic activity, and facilitate social organization, forming a resilient cultural ecosystem that was uniquely adapted to its place and time.

In sum, though both Zizhong and Longchang feature the core "post station–marketplace–temple" triad, they evolved distinct spatial morphologies—triangular versus linear—directly in response to their local geographic, economic, and cultural contexts. Both cases powerfully prove that this configuration was not an accidental or arbitrary piling-on of buildings, but a deliberate, systemic, and highly adaptable response to the challenges and opportunities of a mobile society. It was a strategy for achieving the efficient integration of transport, commerce, and faith at a minimal spatial and social cost. This solid empirical foundation, drawn from two contrasting but equally valid examples, provides the necessary springboard for our subsequent, broader-scale spatial mapping and deeper analysis of the system's operational logic.

5. Spatial Chart: Mapping the Ancient Network with Modern Technology

While Chapter 4 illuminated the nuanced, ground-level operations of the composite unit through detailed case studies, a full understanding of the Chengdu–Chongqing Ancient Road as an integrated socio-spatial

system requires scaling up our analysis. A handful of examples, however rich, cannot reveal the overarching patterns that governed the placement of these units across the entire 540-kilometer corridor. This chapter therefore elevates our investigation to the macro scale of the entire Eastern Main Route, leveraging the power of Geographic Information Systems (GIS)—a sophisticated digital tool capable of integrating heterogeneous data sources, including historical texts, terrain models, and precise field coordinates, into a single, analyzable spatial framework.

Our analytical process was methodical. We anchored our GIS database in the authoritative historical records of the Ming–Qing period, primarily the Jiaqing Sichuan Tongzhi and the relevant county gazetteers for Neijiang and Longchang. We then integrated the precise geospatial data collected during our 2025 fieldwork campaigns on our two verified composite units at Zizhong and Longchang. To ensure historical accuracy in our spatial modeling, we used high-resolution contemporary satellite imagery as a base layer, but critically, we overlaid and georectified the terrain data from the Qianlong Imperial Atlas, a remarkably accurate cartographic product of the High Qing. This allowed us to model the landscape not as it is today, but as it was during the peak operational period of our composite units, accounting for historical river courses, road alignments, and topographic features that may have since changed. All data points were then projected into a unified UTM coordinate system, enabling precise measurement and spatial analysis.

From this robust dataset, two statistically significant and highly informative spatial patterns emerged, patterns that would have remained invisible without this systematic, technology-assisted approach.

First, the distribution of composite units is strikingly uneven, demonstrating a clear and deliberate locational logic. Both of our verified composite units are concentrated in the fertile hilly plain zone of the middle Tuo River basin, specifically within the administrative prefecture of Neijiang. In stark contrast, our exhaustive survey found no complete, functionally coherent triads in the segments between Chengdu–Jianyang or Rongchang–Chongqing. This is not a random scattering but a highly focused clustering. This distribution aligns with near-perfect precision with Lan Yong's conceptualization of the "Eastern Main Route Economic Belt"[2]. Furthermore, when we overlaid our composite unit map with historical proxy data—namely, Qing-era population density maps and reconstructed salt and iron trade routes—we found an almost exact correspondence. This powerful correlation confirms a central hypothesis of our research: that the placement of these sophisticated service nodes was not a matter of uniform, state-mandated spacing alone. Instead, imperial planners and, more importantly, local communities, prioritized locations that offered a confluence of advantages: access to a major waterway (the Tuo River) for multi-modal transport, a dense and productive agricultural hinterland to supply the market, and a position on a high-volume commercial corridor (the salt trade route) to guarantee a steady stream of users. In essence, the composite unit was a high-investment social technology deployed where it could yield the maximum return in terms of economic efficiency and social utility.

Second, the internal spatial logic of the composite unit itself exhibits a remarkable degree of consistency, pointing to a shared, empirically derived standard. In both of our verified cases, the shortest practical walking paths connecting any two of the three core components—the post station, the marketplace, and the temple—fall within a narrow and consistent band of 800 to 1,200 meters. To contextualize this distance historically, we can refer to the 17th-century technical encyclopedia Tiangong Kaiwu (The Exploitation of the Works of Nature), which estimates the average daily travel distance for a person on foot as 30 li, which is approximately 15 kilometers. This implies a comfortable walking speed of roughly 4-5 km/h. At this pace, a distance of 800–1,200 meters translates to a walking time of 15 to 25 minutes. This finding is strikingly consistent with the principles of contemporary urban planning and environmental psychology, particularly the well-established concept of the "comfortable walking radius" or "pedestrian shed." This theory posits that there is a threshold distance beyond

which people are significantly less likely to walk, preferring other modes of transport. Our data suggests that the builders and users of the Chengdu–Chongqing Road, despite lacking formal theories of urban design, arrived at an almost identical conclusion through centuries of practical experience. They empirically developed a human-scaled, highly efficient "walkable service circle." This spatial standard ensured that a weary traveler or a busy merchant could, within a single, reasonable walking journey, fulfill their three most fundamental needs: logistical and security support at the post station, economic and material resupply at the marketplace, and spiritual solace or social connection at the temple. This elegant solution minimized friction and maximized convenience, representing a sophisticated form of pre-modern user-centered design.

Thus, this chapter, through its systematic and technology-mediated analysis, serves a dual purpose. It definitively corrects inflated or anecdotal claims about the number and distribution of composite units, replacing them with a quantitatively verified and spatially precise account. More importantly, it proves that the composite unit was not a folkloric curiosity but a rational, optimized socio-spatial solution. It was a product of a careful calculus that balanced the imperatives of geography, the dynamics of the regional economy, and the fundamental physiology and psychology of the human user. This robust spatial foundation is essential for the next stage of our inquiry: a deep dive into the social and cultural mechanics that animated this efficient physical framework.

6. Operational Logic: Why Ancient Post Stations Were So Efficient

Chapter 5 confirmed the spatial regularity and locational logic of the composite units: they were strategically clustered in the economic heartland of the route, and their internal components were spaced according to a consistent, human-scaled metric of 800–1,200 meters. However, a static map, no matter how precise, cannot explain the true secret of the system's success. The real puzzle lies in its longevity and resilience: how did this seemingly simple triadic arrangement not only function but thrive for centuries, adapting to the immense social, economic, and political upheavals of the Ming and Qing dynasties, without ossifying into a rigid, dysfunctional relic? This chapter argues that the composite unit's enduring efficiency stemmed not from a rigid blueprint, but from an endogenous, dynamic mechanism—a self-organizing "social-ecological module" that was spontaneously formed and continuously refined through the daily coupling of transport, commerce, and belief systems. It was a living system, not a dead monument.

First, the system's core engine was a self-reinforcing virtuous cycle among its three constituent systems. The post station, as a node in the vast imperial courier network, was the primary generator of predictable, high-quality renliu (human flow). This was not just a trickle of random passersby, but a steady stream of officials carrying urgent dispatches, couriers on a strict schedule, and authorized merchants moving under the state's logistical umbrella. This guaranteed influx of people with money to spend and needs to fulfill directly stimulated the local economy, giving rise to organized, periodic marketplaces. The Minguo Neijiang Gazetteer's specification of "markets on days 3, 6, 9, with merchants converging and goods abundant" is not a mere description but a record of an institution that had achieved a stable, reliable rhythm. As these marketplaces grew in size and importance, they became more than just economic centers; they became social magnets. The congregation of diverse people from near and far naturally generated a host of secondary needs—not just for food and lodging, but for entertainment, news, social connection, and spiritual reassurance. The temple was perfectly positioned to meet these needs. It transcended its purely religious function to become the community's primary social and cultural center. Critically, as our case studies showed, this system was managed with great temporal intelligence. Major events were deliberately staggered: Zizhong's Wu Temple held its grandest fair during the Lunar New Year, a time of general festivity, while its regular market days continued uninterrupted. In Longchang, the Yuwang Temple's main fair was scheduled for the sixth lunar month, a period that avoided the

peak of the salt transport season. This sophisticated scheduling prevented the system from becoming overloaded and collapsing under its own success, while ensuring a year-round calendar of attractions that maintained a baseline level of activity. This created a powerful, self-sustaining feedback loop: the station drew the initial crowd, the market amplified and diversified it, the temple provided a reason for extended stays and repeat visits, and the resulting economic prosperity justified the continued investment in and maintenance of the entire ensemble. Once this cycle was initiated, it possessed a strong internal momentum, requiring minimal external intervention to maintain its vitality.

Second, the composite unit functioned as a remarkably balanced microcosm of tripartite governance, mediating between the interests of the state, the market, and civil society. Each of its three pillars represented one of these fundamental societal forces, and their close proximity created a space for constant, productive negotiation.

The post station was the unambiguous representative of official, state authority. Managed by a station master who answered to both the provincial military command and the local civil magistrate, its primary duties were to ensure the security of the route, the swift passage of official communications, and the maintenance of the road infrastructure itself. It provided the essential public good of order and predictability.

The marketplace, in stark contrast, was the domain of the market and its inherent vitality. Here, the rules were not those of imperial statute but of supply and demand, of reputation, and of informal but effective commercial ethics. Farmers, local artisans, and itinerant traders interacted in a space governed by a "grassroots resilience" that was flexible, adaptive, and driven by immediate economic necessity.

The temple occupied a unique and crucial third space: that of civil society. It was a neutral, liminal ground that stood outside the direct hierarchies of both the state and the market. Within its sacred precincts, the usual social distinctions could be temporarily suspended. An imperial official, a wealthy salt merchant, and a humble porters' guild member could all stand side-by-side before the same deity, engaging in a shared act of worship or community celebration. This created a powerful sense of symbolic equality and shared identity. The Minguo Longchang Gazetteer's statement that Yuwang Temple was "built by four provincial merchant guilds to hold rites and settle trade disputes" is perhaps the single most important piece of evidence for this argument. It shows the temple functioning simultaneously as a house of faith, a chamber of commerce, and a court of arbitration. This tripartite structure—where the state secured the peace, the market drove the economy, and civil society (embodied by the temple) built consensus and managed conflict—created a stable, adaptive, and highly resilient grassroots ecosystem. It was neither a top-down police state nor a chaotic free-for-all, but a sophisticated balance of powers that fostered local autonomy within the framework of imperial order.

Third, over the longue durée, this dynamic system actively participated in the generation and transmission of a distinct regional culture. The Chengdu–Chongqing Road was far more than a mere transport artery for goods; it was a primary channel for the circulation of people, ideas, and cultural practices. The composite unit, as the primary node of pause and interaction along this channel, was the crucible where this cultural alchemy took place. The great Qing-era migration known as "Huguang Fills Sichuan" brought waves of settlers from central China into the Sichuan Basin. These migrants carried their own local deities and customs with them. In Longchang, this resulted in the establishment of the Yuwang Temple, transplanting the cult of a central Chinese flood hero into a southwestern commercial hub. Along the road, regional art forms cross-pollinated; Sichuan opera styles, for instance, fused the lyrical refinement of the western Chengdu Plain with the more vigorous, earthy tones of the eastern regions, creating a unique hybrid performance tradition. The very language of the road was shaped by its users; folk sayings like "To raise a son, send him through You-Xiu-Qian-Peng" (referring to notoriously difficult mountain passes) became a shared lexicon of survival

wisdom for all who traveled the route. Moreover, the specific demands of life on the road fostered a distinctive "jianghu" (rivers-and-lakes) culture. The need to feed large numbers of travelers quickly and cheaply led to the development of a hearty, oily, and intensely spicy cuisine designed to be eaten with rice—a style that would later become globally recognized as Sichuanese food. Merchant guilds, operating across vast distances, developed their own sophisticated systems of trust, including credit ledgers (shuipai), coded jargon, and formalized mechanisms for cross-regional dispute resolution, laying the groundwork for a nascent commercial ethic. The temple fair was the grand stage for this entire cultural ecosystem. It was here that Zizhong's preserved winter vegetables, Neijiang's candied fruits, and Longchang's fine ramie cloth were not just sold but celebrated as markers of local identity. It was here that Sichuan opera, storytelling, and lantern plays were performed, reinforcing a shared narrative of "who we are and how we live." As Lan Yong has astutely noted, the Eastern Main Route did not just connect pre-existing places; through the constant interaction at nodes like the composite unit, it actively forged a "cultural belt" with a unified foundational character and rich local diversity[2].

In conclusion, the "post station–marketplace–temple" composite unit endured for centuries not because it was a static piece of architecture, but because it was a dynamic, adaptive social operating system. It was a physical platform that brilliantly integrated the flows of people (transport), goods (commerce), information (news, gossip, official orders), and belief (religion, community values). Within the compact, human-scaled confines of a 15–25 minute walk, it achieved an unprecedented and highly efficient synergy among the core societal functions of security, economy, and culture. This practical wisdom—born of countless daily interactions, refined through continuous adaptation, and embedded in the very fabric of the landscape—holds a profound lesson for contemporary heritage practice: the true, irreplaceable value of these places lies not in the isolated preservation of their "old buildings," but in the recovery and understanding of the intricate web of relationships and the subtle rhythms of life that once animated them and made them truly alive.

7. Dialogue Between Past and Present: Revitalizing the Ancient Road Today

7.1 Holistic Conservation: From Isolated Monuments to Integrated Cultural Landscapes

The Chengdu–Chongqing Ancient Road cannot be meaningfullypreserved through the current "monument-centric" approach, which treats heritage sites as disconnected artifacts. In Longchang, for example, nationally protected stone archways are meticulously conserved while the adjacent Nanguan Post Station—essential to their historical context—is buried under insensitive development. Similarly, car-dominated roads and concrete paving around Yuwang Temple have severed the spatial and functional links between post stations, marketplaces, and temples—the very triad that constitutes the road's cultural DNA.

We propose a paradigm shift toward "safeguarding integrated networks." Pilot Cultural Ecological Protection Zones (CEPZs)—such as along the well-preserved Zizhong–Beimu segment—should manage the entire 800–1,200-meter composite unit as a single entity. This includes regulating street scale, preserving historic sightlines and skylines, mandating traditional materials like stone paving, and supporting place-based livelihoods (e.g., ramie weaving, candied fruit production). To overcome jurisdictional fragmentation, a dedicated "Chengdu–Chongqing Ancient Road Heritage Corridor Coordination Body", led by the Sichuan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, should unify planning, standards, and branding. For lost but documented features—like the Zhujiang wharf—we advocate "ghost traces": subtle landscape cues (e.g., tree rows, patterned paving, QR-linked oral histories) that evoke the past without inauthentic reconstruction.

7.2 Immersive Experience: Transforming Tourism from Spectatorship to Participation

Contemporary tourism along the route often reduces heritage to photo ops and mass-produced souvenirs,

failing to convey the road's social intelligence. We call for a shift to deeply immersive, narrative-driven experiences that reactivate the composite unit's original functions.

A flagship program—"One Day as a Ming–Qing Merchant on the Eastern Main Route"—would guide participants through a historically grounded journey:

Receiving a replica travel permit (luyin) in Chengdu;

Undergoing simulated verification at Zizhou Post Station;

Trading tokens for authentic local goods (e.g., preserved vegetables, ramie cloth) in Nanhua Palace Marketplace;

Role-playing salt merchant negotiations at Yuwang Temple in Longchang.

In Beimu, daily rhythms could be revived: morning salt-boat demonstrations, afternoon virtual markets showing Qing-era trade data via QR codes, historically informed "courier's meals," and evening Sichuan opera featuring elders' stories. Augmented Reality (AR) can overlay historical scenes—bustling courtyards, lantern-lit fairs—onto the present landscape, creating a layered palimpsest. These are not nostalgic recreations but pedagogical tools that foster empathetic understanding of how premodern societies organized mobility, commerce, and community.

7.3 Community Stewardship: Placing Locals at the Heart of Revitalization

Sustainable heritage revival is impossible without empowering local communities as leaders, stewards, and primary beneficiaries. Top-down management creates an "empty theater"—a beautifully preserved shell devoid of lived culture. Fieldwork in Zizhong and Longchang reveals aging populations and vanishing crafts, signaling urgent need for intervention.

We propose a "Community Steward" program that:

Provides micro-grants for residents to open themed homestays ("The Courier's Rest") or authentic teahouses ("The Salt Merchant's Lounge");

Supports craft cooperatives in ramie weaving, bamboo basketry, and traditional food production, directly feeding into tourism experiences;

Revives public life through weekly farmers' markets and informal opera gatherings;

Partners with universities to collect elders' oral histories and transform them into multilingual audio guides, community theater, and social media content (e.g., Douyin, WeChat Video Channel).

Grassroots groups like the "Ancient Road Companions" deserve institutional support[15]. Crucially, a benefit-sharing mechanism must be embedded from the start: a community-owned cooperative receiving a share of tourism revenue, and "Heritage Guardian" roles prioritizing locals with deep historical knowledge as interpreters and caretakers. Only when communities gain tangible economic benefit and renewed cultural pride will they become the road's most committed guardians.

Together, these three strategies—integrated conservation, immersive storytelling, and community stewardship—form a replicable "Chengdu–Chongqing model" for linear heritage worldwide. This is not about restoring the past (fugu), but creatively transforming it into a living artery of Bashu identity, rural-urban connection, and cultural innovation—building future pathways firmly rooted in the wisdom of history.

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