Is Pu-er in Zomia?: Tea Cultivation and the State in China

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"We ordinarily count Yunnan among the provinces of the Chinese empire, but if one leaves the main lines of communication, entering the interior, traveling through the deserts and mountains, you are always in the territory of Yunnan, but you are no longer in China; you are in an uncivilized country without roads, without inns, surrounded by thieves who want your purse or your life, and sometimes both." (Archives of the Société des missions-étrangères de Paris, 539: 220. Cited in Atwill 2005, p.23)

In the early years of the normalization of relations between the U.S. and China, American visitors to China were treated to large banquets hosted by their official sponsors. These banquets usually included large quantities of exotic foods unfamiliar to the Western palate, and they ended with many rounds of toasting to the glorious future of Sino-American relations. After enduring, or possibly enjoying, many courses including luxuries like sea cucumber, ox tendons, or birds' nest soup, the foreign guests were expected to down many glasses of maotai, a highly distilled sorghum liquor produced in the hills of Guizhou in southwest China. If they survived the ordeal, they were prepared for the lengthy negotiations with Chinese officials the next day, followed by another banquet and toasting round.

Maotai never really caught on in the global market, but its use as a feasting commodity reflects the culture of the Communist regime that endorsed it. Although maotai itself is produced in the southwest, the sorghum crop and distilled sorghum liquor is much more dominant in northern China than in the south. The Communist leaders, many of whom came from the peasant communities of the north, enjoyed the rougher versions of sorghum liquor produced in the north. While they were in Yan'an in China's northwest during the resistance war against Japan, they treated themselves and visiting foreigners to ample quantities of it. Baijiu [lit. white liquor, or white lightning], is still the preferred drink of the rural men of north China, but urban people tend to look down on it as too rustic.

Today, when relations between China and the West are more routine, maotai does not appear as often as a required toasting ritual – cosmopolitan Chinese are just as likely to prefer wine, whiskey, or

even cognac – but other exotic products have replaced it. Visitors who appreciate it will be offered small cups of Pu-er tea, also produced in southwest China, in the hills of Yunnan. Tea connoisseurs consider Pu-er tea [普洱茶] to be one of the highest quality teas that China produces today. The best Pu-er tea sells for thousands of dollars per cake. Pu-er cakes are a popular gift for Chinese visitors to the U.S., but many of them understand that not all Americans will appreciate it. It is still an acquired taste, a pungent and smoky flavor, unfamiliar to the Western palate.

Products from the hill country have served important diplomatic, economic, and cultural functions for China for many centuries. China's three oldest and most famous export commodities, porcelain, tea, and silk, depend on highland cultivation. (Silk is manufactured in the lowlands, but the mulberry trees imported to feed the silkworms also come from the hills.) Chinese states have used these products as gifts in diplomatic exchange, as sources of revenue, and as expression of cultural superiority in their relations with other powers.

The shift from maotai to high quality tea provides an interesting index of the different economic culture of China during the reform period beginning in the 1980s. Refined tea is the classic southern beverage, and has been so for over one thousand years. Everyone in China drinks tea, but northerners generally drink cruder brands. Peasant villagers often prefer baicha [lit. white tea], or boiled water. The prevalence of tea as a Chinese national drink masks great regional variations in its economic and cultural significance. The tea bush itself [Camellia sinensis], grows nearly everywhere in China, but the southern Chinese provinces have always been by far the major producers. The southern cultural orientation, and the focus on hill country as the source of the best teas, reflects not so much ecological determinants as social, aesthetic considerations. Whatever the original biological qualities of the leaf itself (on which I am no expert), production of the finest teas depends critically on intensive skilled labor and elaborate production methods. Tea may seem to be a product that is closer to nature than silk or porcelain, since

it is derived directly from a plant, without intermediate steps. But the route from biological growth to consumption passes through a complex series of production and distribution chains, each inflected by a particular natural and social environment. A long chain stretches from the hills of Yunnan or Fujian or Assam to the English tea party.

Furthermore, tea is not just one commodity but several. The tea bush itself has two main varieties, Camellia sinensis assamica, the large-leaf plant mainly used in black teas (and pu-er), and Camellia sinensis sinensis, the small-leafed planted used for green and oolong teas. Classified by processing method, there are six main methods, but the two main products are green teas [unwilted and unoxidized], and black teas [wilted and thoroughly oxidized]. China produces both kinds, but exports most of its black tea and only part of its green teas. Black and green teas have almost entirely separate markets, with black teas dominant in Western Europe, India, and North America, and green teas dominant in East Asia and the Middle East. The Chinese state divides tea into three categories, reflecting the historical position of tea production in global politics. “Border teas” are brick teas consumed within the Inner Asian regions of China and in Central Eurasia, “green teas” are for domestic markets, mainly; and “black teas” serve foreign markets.

Pu-er occupies a liminal position between the foreign black tea and domestic green tea markets, accounting in part for its unique and growing prominence. It uses the large leaf variant, C. assamica, which is the source of all black teas, but its processing uses a fungus in addition to fermentation through the natural oils. It is a post-fermented green tea rather than a fermented black tea. Although "to Western palates [pu-er] tastes more like a dose of Chinese medicine," it has gained popularity in Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities, and made some inroads in the West. Connoisseurs praise its earthy flavor in very similar terms to the vocabulary of wine:

“Pu-erh flavors can change dramatically over the course of the aging process, resulting in a brew tasting strongly earthy but clean and smooth, reminiscent of the smell of rich garden soil or an autumn

leaf pile, sometimes with roasted or sweet undertones." [Etherington and Forster 1993, 19; "Pu-erh," Wikipedia.en] Tea journals call Pu-er the Chateau Petrus of teas. Tea tours to Yunnan help to publicize the specialty teas for foreign visitors. [Kung 2005]

This is an exploratory essay on some of the many cultural and economic associations with tea, examined in historical perspective. I haven't yet found the central key theme, much less model, for this analysis, but which strands are most productive depends on your responses, and I look forward to your comments.

Two guiding theoretical conceptions inform these comments: tea as a social product, and tea as a hill product. Like all commodities, beverages have a social life. [Appadurai 1986] The study of particular commodities has become particularly attractive to scholars looking for new ways to link people together in a globalizing world. Instead of the traditional borders of nation states and empires, or world religions and civilizations, the study of commodity chains jumps across ocean and land barriers, drawing in many different ethnic groups, nations, and religions around a common product. All sorts of people have jumped on this bandwagon since Sidney Mintz wrote his classic work on sugar. [Mintz 1985]. Since then, studies have proliferated of commodities like apples, bananas, birds' nests, cod, coffee, forests, furs, kingfisher feathers, opium, rubber, and spices all the way to tulips, wine and whales, just to name a few. [Pollan 2001 (apples, tulips); Richards 2001 (forests, whales); Zheng 2005 (opium); Tucker 2000 (bananas, rubber); Kurlansky 1997 (cod); Freedman 2008 (spices); Tagliacozzo ed. 2008 (birds' nests, kingfisher feathers); Sideways (wine).] The best of these studies link local production sites with global distribution mechanisms, and they often connect the flows of the commodity closely to the colonial states of the nineteenth century.

Strangely enough, with only a few exceptions, tea has not yet figured very prominently in these studies, despite its political and economic importance. Obtaining access to Chinese markets in order to

offset the deficit caused by tea imports, of course, was the primary cause of the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century. But it is not only a British colonial story. Americans participated heavily in the tea trade in the nineteenth century, and Russians had made tea their preferred non-alcoholic drink since the eighteenth century. China occupied a monopoly position in tea exports, as in silk, and porcelain, until the nineteenth century, when competition emerged from British production in Assam and Ceylon, and from Japanese production at home and in Taiwan. The story of tea is the story not just of one tropical commodity under one empire, but a multi-stranded one of collaboration and competition between many merchants and empires.

It's also important to remember that the flows of many different commodities intersect each other. The drawback of focusing on only one good is that it tends to neglect the interweaving of trade goods at each nexus of production and distribution. At the production site, decisions of farmers to grow one crop rather than another reflect their responses to global market demand. Chinese farmers even in remote areas have responded quite quickly to market forces, shifting from grain to cotton to tea to mulberry when growing conditions permit. (This adaptability to the market is more true of Chinese peasants in the south than the north, which has harsher constraints). Merchants always carried many different goods in the cargo of their caravans and ships, hoping to lower risks with a balanced portfolio. The camel caravans of the landed Silk Routes carried tea, silk and other products together, as did the ships of the Southern seas. (Fragile porcelains, obviously, were less common on camel back than in the hold of ships). Consumers also affected the types of commodities on the trade routes, as they learned to make subtle distinctions in the products they preferred, influenced by advertising and changing tastes. Consumer preferences affected technologies of distribution as well, and the changes in shipping technology had unexpected consequences. The American demand for the freshest teas inspired the creation of the clipper ships, the fastest commercial sailing ships, developed in the 1830s. They held much less cargo than the enormous East Indiamen, but they brought tea to the market much more

quickly. Clipper ships turned out, however, to be very helpful to opium smugglers. The Americans first, followed by the British, used clipper ships to deliver opium supplies along the Chinese coast to their Chinese collaborator in small "crab boats" with fast rowers. So the demands of the tea trade instigated the boom in opium not just for economic but for technological reasons.

Since exports must be balanced by imports, any one crop export generates demand for a return cargo. Silver, the primary medium of payment for tea exports until the rise of the opium trade, was in this sense a commodity like any other, with its own particular social life. Singling it out as a special category called "money" can mislead analysts into neglecting its conditions of production and exchange. [Flynn & Giraldez 2000] A comprehensive analysis just of the China tea trade, then, would lead us into many other linked strands of commodity exchange around the world: a fascinating story, but much too long to tell here. Instead, I will only outline a few strands of the links that connected Chinese tea to the rest of the world.

Seeing tea as one of many tropical Asian hill crops that aroused global demand allows us to put it in a larger comparative and theoretical perspective. Willem van Schendel and James Scott have put forth a new regional geographical concept of the hill lands of Southeast Asia, centered on the idea of "Zomia". [van Schendel 2002] In van Schendel's analysis, Zomia is a virtual region that is not captured by the confines of conventional Area Studies analyses. It lies across and between the boundaries of nation states, and its borders are defined more in ecological than in the conventional terms of flat regional cartography. Zomia is hill country, populated mainly by local inhabitants with a great deal of independence from lowland states. They embrace multiple religions and cultures, and resist homogenization. They practice "escape agriculture," which allows them to flee the demands of the tax collector or military recruiter. Their own political structures tend to be decentralized, small in scale, and more ephemeral. They can resist lowland states militarily, despite their numerical inferiority, by taking

advantage of the difficulties of campaigns in mountainous terrain. Even when they are nominally part of larger states, the actual administration of territories in these regions often delegates a great deal of autonomy to native leaders. Family relations may be less patriarchal, allowing women to hold political authority.

The Zomia concept in its original guise applied mainly to highland Southeast Asia, but other geographers have extended its reach to south China. Jean Michaud defines this hill country as including the southwestern Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, western Guangxi, and western Guangdong, and we could also add western Sichuan and the highlands of Hunan, Jiangxi, and Fujian. van Schendel himself implies that the zone extends as far east as Kunming in Yunnan.

Many aspects of the definition do fit southwest China quite well. Southwest China has similar terrain of high mountains separating river valleys, and divisions between highland and lowland peoples. Chinese states penetrated these regions very slowly. It was not until at least the year 1700, and arguably in some areas 1900, that Chinese administration gained genuine control of the hill districts in any meaningful sense. [Giersch 2006, Herman 2007, Lee 2000, Lombard-Salmon 1972] The crops cultivated by hill peoples either served local markets, or they went out in many different directions, crossing modern state boundaries. Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Guangxi had just as significant trade links with Tibet, Burma, and Vietnam as they did with China proper. The multiple ties of these regions undercuts the validity of the classic model of regional geography outlined by G. William Skinner. [Skinner 1977] For Skinner, the physiography defined by major river watershed determines transport costs, which determine the major flows of goods. The flows of goods, in turn, condition the market hierarchies, which generate centers in the lowlands. The Chinese imperial state tapped the rich lowland cities for its main revenue source, while establishing a larger military presence in the poorer peripheries. Over a long period of time, China's economic history is a story of many regional macroregional economies followed

unsynchronized cycles determined by regional processes, more than a nation or empire-wide unified story or a series of disconnected local histories.

The Zomia argument in effect removes much of the southwest periphery from the Skinnerian macroregional cycles, arguing that they follow different rules of economic distribution and social change. It helps us to test alternative geographical models of conceiving of Asian space. Which works better, at what time periods, and for what commodities? It may be that no single model covers all economic and social processes equally well.

As Scott also argues, the evolution of states in the highlands and lowlands was an interactive and symbiotic process, in which each depended crucially on the other economically, socially, and culturally. Conventional state-centered histories focused on the lowland states tend to erase the role of the peripheries, and the history of China is no exception. But we can give many examples of the deep interdependence of Chinese state formation on the highland frontiers, even if we confine ourselves only to the role of tea. The interdependence of frontier and core is an economic process, in which each region trades or extracts commodities from the other; it is a social process, in which migration of peoples in both directions conditions the resources available for the creation of armies, states, households, and production forms; and it is a cultural process, in which projected images of the barbarian outsider determine policies by the core states, and vice versa.

The interdependence of the two zones indicates, however, that we should not polarize the two forms of life too sharply. As ideal types, the Zomia vs. settled distinctions have value, but in everyday social practice few peoples fit the pure type. There were always middle grounds where commodities, cultural tokens, and diplomatic exchanges occurred, and hybrid formations constantly reappeared. This was just as true of the southwest regions as of the pastoral nomadic regions.

I should also point out the striking parallels between the core concepts of Zomia and the social and ecological characteristics of another region usually lying beyond the lowland states: the steppes of Central Eurasia. Here, too, pastoral nomads living in conditions of high mobility usually formed "stateless" formations, with chieftains ruling over small bands moving between pasturelands allocated by customary rights. They had less stratification than their settled neighbors – the position of women was much higher than in China. Pastoralism is the ultimate version of "escape agriculture," a highly mobile production system like swidden but on a much vaster scale. Reliance on horses for transport allowed for very rapid movements over vast realms of space. Only rarely did state builders succeed in unifying the multiple tribes under one ruler, and these were generally large confederations rather than stable states. Unlike the south, however, when Khans did unite their followers, they often conquered the Chinese or Mideastern settled realms, enriching themselves and their followers and transforming the administrative systems of the conquered territories. Reenergized by conquest from Eurasia, the new regimes then resumed their frontier expansion in southern and richer regions. The early Ming campaigns against Vietnam, the Ming voyages across the southern seas are carryovers of the Yuan universal empire project, as were the expansions resumed by the Manchu Qing conquerors in the 17th and eighteenth centuries. Mughal expansion in India's borderlands had much of the same character.

How does tea fit into the Zomia/Skinner division, and how does the social life of tea illustrate the ties that connect hills to urban teahouses? Here are a few examples indicating their close relationship.

The Politics of Tea: From the Tea-horse trade to the tea parties of Lhasa.

In the Northern Song dynasty (960 – 1126 CE), reformers in charge of the government in the 11th century aimed to increase revenue collection in order to finance wars against the rival dynasty in the North, the Liao, which was ruled by partly nomadic horse riding military men. They set up a tea

monopoly designed to trade tea from Sichuan for horses for the military. The tea monopoly was one of the largest interventions of a Chinese state in the private economy, rivaled only by the salt monopoly. It failed, however, to generate enough revenue, or gather enough high quality horses, to hold off the northern states. The Song lost the rest of North China to the Jin dynasty in 1125.

The Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644 CE) also carried on the tea-horse trade on its northwestern frontier for similar motives. Once again, lacking enough horses for military use, the Ming attempted to get these WMDs from their enemies by offering them China's most profitable products. Nomads not only drank tea themselves, but traded it with other Central Eurasian merchants for cash, which they could use to purchase Chinese silks. Ming officials tried to use licenses for tea trade to win over certain Mongol tribes as allies and use them against others, in the classic "use barbarians against barbarians" strategy. The Ming tea-horse trade also failed, in the end, however to generate the necessary military resources, and the Ming fell to domestic rebellion and Manchu invasion in 1644.

The Qing rulers (1636 – 1911) also manipulated the frontier tea trade in their contest with the Mongols, with more satisfactory results. Most Mongols had converted to Tibetan Buddhism during the 16th to 17th centuries, allying themselves with the Yellow Sect of lamas in Lhasa. It was a Mongolian Khan who gave the Yellow Sect head lama the title of "Dalai Lama" in the 16th century. Under the name of "presenting tea to the Dalai Lama," Mongols joined caravans that took tea and other goods to Lhasa, in return for silver, gold, and Buddhist artifacts. The Qing rulers were determined to interrupt this trade, so as to establish their own ties to Lhasa and cut off the enemy Mongols from autonomous access to Tibet. First they conquered Qinghai, a Mongolian and Tibetan region through which caravans passed on the way to Tibet. They burned down thousands of Tibetan temples and put the local Mongols and Tibetans under strict military control. Then they enacted restrictions on this tea trade, making sure that they knew the exact composition of caravans and controlled numbers of trades and frequency of trade.

This was one of the key economic sanctions that undermined the strength of the rival Zunghar Mongol states, allowing the Qing to eliminate the state in the mid 18th century.

Tea has thus fulfilled important economic and political functions in the relations of China to northern nomadic states since the 11th century CE. This product of the southern hills has served both as the quintessential Han "Chinese" culinary symbol and as a critical economic good in the diplomacy of Central Eurasia.

Tea in Highland Fujian

With the arrival of European colonial powers in Southeast Asia, Chinese tea gained a new maritime export market. Although tea grew wild in many places, its main production zone in earliest time was in the Sichuan basin, and its main use was as a medicine. Around the eighth century CE it spread to southeast China, and became a common beverage in both north and south China. The Classic of Tea, by Lu Yu, in 780, established it as a connoisseur's drink, produced through an elaborate process, involving seven stages and twenty-four separate implements. Tea taxes soon followed. The Tang dynasty (618 – 906 CE) attempted to transplant tea shrub to official plantations, but severe opposition from growers stopped this plan. Under the Song, tea acquired its dual reputation as the everyday drink of commoners and the luxury drink of choice of the elite. In 1206 an official noted that "everyone, high and low, all drank tea, especially the farmers." But single cakes of rare teas sold for up to 40,000 copper cash coins. [Gardella 1994, 25] The scholar-official Fan Zhongyan (989-1052) wrote, "now the sheds are filled with flat round cakes of tea. Beiyuan's tribute will reach the Son of Heaven in time." The flat round cake form, the ancestor of modern Pu-er tea, had already become a preferred type for the court.

From the Song to Qing, however, leaf teas generally replaced cake and brick teas as the most high quality products. In the sixteenth century, fermented black teas [hongcha] developed in northern Fujian (Minbei) as the primary export product for Western markets. Pekoe teas were exported to Russia

beginning in the late eighteenth century, while the semi-fermented oolong teas became major exports from Fujian and Taiwan to the U.S. in the nineteenth century. [Gardella 1994, 31]. The uplands of northern Fujian supplied nearly all of the teas exported through the Canton trade system in the eighteenth century. Tea comprised seventy percent of total purchases by the Dutch East India company and one quarter of the profits of the British East India company. Overland tea exports to Russia at the border town of Kiakhta grew rapidly after the signing of the Sino Russian trade treaty in 1727. From 1786 to 1830 the total amount of tea sold by the EIC doubled, and northern Fujian teas rose from 48 to 73% of total exports. At the same time, Minbei exports to Russia grew to up to 7.6 million pounds per year, or 76% of total exports to Russia in 1850. The remote highlands had established remarkably long connections with the global markets of Eurasia.

The general commercialization of China from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries increased cash crop production in many places, including mountainous peripheries, but the forms of production fit into existing property structures. The northern Fujian tea region, centered in the Wuxi [Bohea] hills on the border of Fujian, Zhejiang, and Jiangxi, developed out of a complex layered structure of property rights. Landlords held topsoil rights and collected fixed money or share rents, while giving relatively permanent subsoil rights to tenants. The tenants themselves could be small family farmers or larger "rich peasants" who employed hired labor for subsistence and commercial production. During the tea boom of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, outside merchants entered to supply capital and distribution networks, negotiating with landlords to supply tea leaves processed by local tenants. But there was also a highly mobile seasonal labor force supplied by marginal peasant farmers and forest dwellers known as "shed people." They provided the pickers and processers during the peak season. Fujian, like the rest of China, never developed large scale plantation production.

In the mid-nineteenth century, when Amoy and Fuzhou became treaty ports, Fujian opened to foreign trade. The monopoly exerted by Canton had restricted opportunities for tea exports from Minbei, but the shortening of transport routes provided by the opening of the southeast coast started a tea boom. The great profitability of tea exports stimulated the growth of Fujian's major coastal cities of Amoy and Fuzhou, and attracted thousands of immigrants to the hills. The Wuyi hills needed at least 200,000 workers to pick tea each year, and this seasonal demand drew in migrant landless "shed people" from the neighboring provinces of Jiangxi and Zhejiang, as well as mountainous Fujian. The imperial state gained revenue from these exports through the new lijin taxes on commerce, and merchants in the thriving cities of Fuzhou and Amoy profited greatly. Yet local officials worried about the threat of social unrest in the new boom towns, both in the hills and in the cities. As tea spread from the Wuyi hills to other parts of Fujian, and large crowds of migrant workers followed the picking season, local observers complained about social unrest. The most observant officials realized that tea production caused ecological damage and social disorder:

"From the time of [Fujian's] opening to commerce, foreign ships have flocked [here] and merchants have been corrupted by profits. More and more mountains have been planted over. Verdant cliffs have been cut down to the red soil, and clear streams in the valleys have become yellow-flowing [because of] the reckless cultivation. In the mountains good and bad people mingle together in the tea workshops. Not only are they unprepared for drought and floods, but also exposed to bandits." [Bian Baodi, cited in Gardella 1994, 102]

At the same time, showing the interrelatedness of commodity chains, the rise of tea exports increased opium exports in two ways: some foreign merchants obtained tea in the hills by bartering opium for tea, and newly wealthy consumers in the cities used the cash profits to support their habits. [Gardella 106].

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese tea exports dropped dramatically in the face of competition from British colonial production in India and Ceylon and Japanese production on the home islands and Taiwan. In 1882, Fuzhou exported 60.6 million pounds of tea to Great Britain and 17.7 million pounds to Australia, but by 1890 exports had dropped to 23.1 and 14.4 million pounds, respectively. The price of black tea dropped from 20 taels per picul to 3-5 taels per picul from the 1870s to 1880s. Imperial Maritime Customs observes at Fuzhou noted in 1905 that "within twenty years a valuable trade has dwindled to the most meager dimensions." [Gardella 115] Tea bushes now grew wild as farmers turned to other crops to support themselves. In Fuzhou, native banks crashed, artisans and shops went bankrupt, unemployment rose, and crime increased.

The proximate cause of the tea industry's collapse was the creation of tea plantations by the British in Assam and Ceylon. The British had tried for some time to break China's export monopoly. In the 1840s and 1850s, Robert Fortune, the East India Company's botanical spy, had secretly investigated the tea country of South China in order to gather information and botanical specimens. But the real boom in tea plantation production only occurred in Assam after 1880. By 1890, India exported over 100 million pounds of tea, nearly half the Chinese figure, and it surpassed China by 1900. Ceylon and India together exported double the Chinese amount by 1910. Tea, like rubber and other tropical crops, fit plantation production well, because the trees lasted for generations and produced all year round. Large scale production units were factories in the field under nearly military forms of labor control. Colonial property law allowed large corporate producers to enclose large amounts of land in "wilderness" areas. Although the workers were not slaves, they worked under harsh supervision, low wages, and poor conditions of life. Tribal groups from the hills were moved from areas vulnerable to famine to the disease ridden plantations. The plantations regulated plantings and labor force allowed mechanization of rolling and firing, created black tea as a standardized industrial commodity that sold for low prices.

Lower prices and mass marketing drove up per capita consumption of black tea in Britain to over 6 pounds per capital by the end of the nineteenth century.

China, by contrast, maintained its decentralized form of market production. The Fujian hills had never specialized exclusively in tea, and family farmers produced most of the crop alongside their own food and cash crops. Local customary property rights ensured that tenants could hold small plots with fixed rents, preventing accumulation of land by landowners. Hundreds of thousands of peasant growers, assisted by large groups of migrant tea pickers, provided nearly all of Fujian's tea into the twentieth century. An equally decentralized chain of merchant brokers transported the product to the export cities.

Which system had greater ecological and economic advantages in the long run? This question still concerns analysts of China's tea industry today. The uncontrolled cultivation regime of China's hills could lead to unrestrained stripping of the forests in boom times, followed by abandonment in times of bust. On the other hand, the flexibility and fragmentation of production meant that farmers never turned the entire region into a monocropping system, and they could shift to other crops flexibly as market conditions changed. Modernizing colonialists, and modern economists, have regarded plantation systems as allow for more "rational accounting or control," arguing that the large scale of production, the long-term investment horizon of owners, and the mechanization and standardization yield predictable and lower-cost results. Yet plantation agriculture of many crops, as Richard Tucker has shown, causes widespread ecological devastation, removing variation from the landscape and making large areas completely dependent on global market conditions. [Tucker 2000]

Although China lost its export monopoly to plantation production, its aggregate production of tea increased, and prices of production may have been approximately equal to that of Indian plantations. Green tea exports increased in value while maintaining constant quantities. In general, a much smaller

volume of trade in more expensive, higher quality teas superseded the larger, more remunerative trade in cheaper common teas of the nineteenth century, now largely dominated by competitors.

The larger question raised by these contrasting tea stories is why small scale production persisted in China, while plantation cultivation took over in Assam. I don't have definite answers to this question, but I will just indicate some skepticism about the conventional explanations and suggest some altrernatives. First, one could argue that British colonialism in Assam was more alien and more brutal than the Chinese penetration of highland frontiers. I find this unlikely, since we have ample evidence of Chinese state ruthless use of violence against hill peoples whom they considered to be no better than beasts. I and other scholars have found it helpful to view the Ming and Qing dynasties as in many ways comparable to their contemporary European colonial regimes. [Perdue 2007; Hostetler 2001; Herman 2007, Teng 2007]. One might also argue that the British had greater commercial drive to develop the tea export trade than the Chinese. This arguments would fit the East India Company period better than the late 19th century, but the EIC itself did not develop tea plantations in India. Another argument points out that the British introduced mechanized processing into tea plantations, unlike the Chinese, but this raises the chicken-egg issue: did the British mechanized processing because they imposed the plantation form, or did mechanization come first and then reorganization into plantations? A better argument points to the novel exploitation of the Assam hills, which were a newly discovered frontier region, and therefore open to flexible property production systems. Still, this argument also does not completely explain the difference. Although the Fujian hills had been long time tea producing regions, Yunnan and other regions did not have nearly as much output, but they still produced on small plots. The British were able to make use of the defenseless hill peoples in coerced plantation labor, but Chinese tea planters also made extensive use of non-Han minorities and mobile shed peoples.

I would propose local cultural explanations instead of broad technological contrasts. The hill peoples and shed peoples of southern China creatively adapted lowland Chinese property systems to defend their rights to land and mobility. The two tier property rights system ensured income and property for landlords and tenants. The hill property systems were a hybrid middle ground combining hill mobility with settled attachment to individual plots.

A second local cultural feature also came into play: the contrast of diversity with uniformity. As a crop with multiple markets, functions, and cultural uses, tea in China appealed to many different tastes. Its producers made special efforts to create varieties of many different kinds and to distinguish them on the local market. The tastes and skills of the domestic market transferred equal distinctions to the global market, so that even American consumers learned the difference between early and late varieties, particular sources and blends. They valued freshness in the nineteenth century, using the fast clippers to bring the freshest blends to market. In India, by contrast, where the crop had no prior domestic demand, British cultivators aimed at a standardized, mass market product for the widest possible audience. Black teas connoisseurs will, of course, protest that Darjeelings, Assams, Earl Greys, and Orange Pekoes do have subtle distinctions of flavor, but Chinese green tea connoisseurs mock the crudities of the black tea market. China did, and does now, sell a lot of black tea to the global market, but they regard this as crude stuff fit only for barbarian palates. The contrast of green, or more broadly East Asian, teas with black [south Asian] teas is so great that the two could be regarded as completely different commodities.

The diversity of green tea production fits well with the Chinese small scale family production, based on skilled wage labor, while the standardized black tea plantation product fits the coerced labor regime of Assam. Local cultural property and taste regimes meshed in each sense with different global aesthetic and consumer demands.

Tea in Yunnan: the first Tea War

Tea has grown wild in Yunnan since ancient times. In fact, Yunnan may be the origin of the wild cultivars of all modern tea plants. Yunnan produced tea as early as the Tang dynasty (618-907), but the region did not become an administrative unit under dynastic control until the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). Some tea exporting began under the Yuan, but the Yuan and its successor, the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) had very little impact in the region. The real boom in Pu-er tea exports occurred in the eighteenth century when the new Qing emperor, Yongzheng (1723-1735), recruited new men to important frontier posts who endorsed aggressive expansion. They advocated taking control away from native officials and instituting direct Qing administrative control, while encouraging colonization by Chinese migrants.

One Manchu official, E'ertai, beginning in 1726 dramatically transformed the frontier region with ruthless military conquests. Qing troops invaded Sipsongpanna in southern Yunnan in 1727 and 1732 to suppress conflicts between native inhabitants and new migrants. These conflicts broke out over efforts to grasp control of profits from a new tea trade. Southeast of Simao, in highland villages, hill peoples like the Akha and Jinuo harvested the tea leaes and sold them to Chinese merchants. These merchants processed and exported the finest teas to interior China, Tibet and Southeast Asia. In 1727, possibly because of dispute over sexual relations between a Chinese merchant and a highland woman, a crowd of hill people murdered at least fifteen Chinese near Simao. At first, Qing authorities expected the Tai ruler of Sipsongpanna to settle the incident by capturing the killers, but in fact the local ruler had no authority over the hills, in the Muong Ham domain, which were controlled by his kinsman. This ruler, who had contacts with Burma, refused to help the Qing, and instead attacked a Qing patrol. E'ertai took advantage of the incident to launch a full-scale invasion of eastern Sipsongpanna. After very difficult fighting, he subdued native resistance, and stationed a large garrison in Simao, located in the newly created prefecture named Pu-er. To support the expanded military presence, he levied taxes on salt wells and took control of the tea industry, forcing all merchants to conduct their trade in a government-supervised market in Simao. The state would tax the trade, prevent conflicts between natives and

immigrants, and restrict trade to holders of government licenses. The government earned about 2,100 taels of silver from the trade.

The occupation of Simao imitated in some respects the earlier experience of the border tea trades of the northwest. The state attempted to establish monopoly control of marketing of the profitable tea crop in order to support border defense, while leaving native peoples considerable autonomy. Like the Song and Ming precedents, however, this tea monopoly did not produce impressive results in revenue collection, and it provoked local resistance. In 1732, Tai nobles objected to excessively high levies on the tea crop by Qing officials, and mobilized in support of an allegedly immortal Theravada Buddhist monk to attack Qing troops. They besieged the city of Simao for ninety days until it was relieved. Military intervention drove out the rebels, but even more important, many Tai aristocrats decided to ally with the Qing to protect their positions. As a reward, they gained a partial retreat of Qing troops from the hills. E'ertai's successor, Yinjishan, concluded that Qing forces were too limited to impose total control; it was more efficient to leave the native elites alone, reduce tax impositions, and pull back the garrisons. [Giersch 2006]

The tea industry boomed in the eighteenth under loose Qing supervision and native elite autonomy. Simao grew to become a large town of 30,000 people by the 1830s, attracting merchants from many parts of China and Southeast Asia. In the 1830s, it was a military boom town, in which garrison households occupied 40% of the population, but by 1850, the larger population of 50,000 was mainly civilian. War and trade were the main stimulants to urban growth. The wars with Burma beginning in 1767 drew in more military forces, and merchants to supply them. Intensively cultivated orchards replaced wild bush cultivation. Merchant caravans carried teas to Tibet, Burma, Siam, and interior China in large numbers. 6,000 to 7,000 mule loads, or over one million pounds per year, left the hills in the early eighteenth century, and this number had more than doubled by the late nineteenth

century. Many of the caravan merchants and muleteers were Muslim Chinese, who had lived in Yunnan since the thirteenth century, and established separate networks with non-Han peoples of southwest China and Southeast Asia. [Atwill 2005, 43] Tea merchants invested in the construction of a post road covering 225 km of mountainous terrain from the tea hills to Simao, and erected a stone stele to celebrate their generosity. In the production structure, native people worked the fields as pickers, while Tai nobles acted as middlemen delivering the product to Chinese merchants, who dominated the long-distance trade. [Giersch 2006, 180]. Tea was only one component of a "thickening web" of connections across the southwestern hills. Cotton imports from Burma rose greatly in exchange for the Yunnan exports of tea, silk, and salt .

In the mid-nineteenth century, a major rebellion, known as the Panthay, or Muslim rebellion, destroyed the trading links of the region for several decades from 1856 to 1873. After the suppression of the rebellion, the tea trade apparently revived, but the town of Simao did not. It had only 9000 inhabitants in 1920. By this time, however, all Chinese tea producers faced global competition from the new British tea plantations in Assam and Ceylon, so they lost the opportunity to dominate large global markets. The defeat of the rebellion decisively shifted Yunnan's orientation toward China. "[T]he Panthay Rebellion in many ways was the final battle in a centuries-long process to formally and firmly orient Yunnan toward central China." [Atwill 2005, 190] By the twentieth century, Yunnan produced very little export tea.

The Rise, decline, and Rise of Pu-er: a new life for Yunnan Tea?

In the twentieth century, the turbulent transition from empire to nation severely damaged tea production everywhere in China. By 1949, Fujian produced only 3,900 tons, less than one-third of its peak output of 12,250 tons in 1936. Under Mao's government, several government bureaucracies – the Ministries of Agriculture, Commerce, and Foreign trade, took charge of domestic and export tea

production. They encouraged rapid expansion of the area of tea cultivation. The area planted grew from under 200,000 ha in 1950 to over 1,000,000 ha in 1976. Surprisingly, the Cultural Revolution, despite the havoc it wreaked in the cities, was the period of most rapid expansion of tea acreage. Yields on the new acreage, however, fell, so that overall output only increased by a factor of two, while acreage increased by five. [Etherington & Forster 1993, 78]. The low yields were a result of extensive instead of intensive cultivation, when quantity of land, not quality and productivity were the highest values. In the reform period since 1978, yields have begun to rise, but in the 1990s China's average yield of 500 kg/ha was only one quarter that of India's. With half the world's tea acreage, China produced only 20% of world output, while India, with under 20 % of total area, produced over 30 % of total output. [Etherington & Forster 1993, 76]. The complex mixture of bureaucratic supervision and newly privatized production and processing made the Chinese tea industry production and distribution uniquely chaotic. India, by contrast, with its Tea Board inherited from the colonial period to represent the combined interests of growers, processors and exporters, looked far more unified. As Etherington and Forster commented in 1993, "the management of the tea industry in China is highly specialized and differentiated ... different varieties of tea are directed to specific markets, domestic and export, and each has its own administrative and pricing regimes. Nowhere else in the world of tea do we find this phenomenon, and probably nowhere else in the Chinese agricultural sector do we come across a commodity with such a complex and contradictory administrative setup." [Etherington & Forster 1993, 70] When it comes to tea, the usual contrasts of anarchic India with organized China do not apply.

Yunnan is not now one of the top provincial tea producers, but its area of cultivation is expanding faster than most other provinces. Yunnan's second tea war occurred in the late 1980s, when suddenly domestic demand for tea surged all over the country. Processors competed with each other to grab tea supplies, and crude processing facilities exploded, doubling in less than a decade. Prices of the raw product soared, causing state owned industries which sold at official prices to go bankrupt. Tea

farmers did get higher profits, as they quickly shifted away from export black tea to domestic green tea. But this tea boom also meant rising tax evasion, corruption, declining quality, adulteration of tea with toxic chemicals, and damaging ecological impacts. The "war" ended in 1988 -1989, after which prices and production slumped, and unused stocks built up. By the early 1990s, tea farmers held great resentment against government interference in their production and distribution, while some commentators worried that Chinese might even stop drinking tea altogether. [Etherington and Forster 1993, 174-193].

In the 1990s, with the dissolution of collectives and most state farms, Chinese tea once again was produced on very small farms, using unmechanized, low-yielding, primitive methods. Descriptions of the tea industry from the 1930s, blaming the decline on the industry on small peasant production, backward cultivation methods, and the lack of machinery, seemed to apply just as well to the new reform era. In the early reform period, yields fell as the large collectives broke up into household production units. But over time the reform era may produce significant changes. In 2004-05 Chinese output surpassed that of India for first time. Yields have increased, and certain teas have gained world-class reputations for quality. China still tries to export large amounts of low-quality black tea, but domestic consumers now show increasing sophistication, demanding careful control of quality in the green tea and specialty markets.

Pu-er is only a small part of the new global tea boom in China, but even though it has more cultural than economic importance, pu-er's fame once again shows how tea is a useful index of China's historical progress. Its processing methods date from the Song dynasty; it is a local product from the hills of China whose taste only a few Westerners have acquired; it is, however, a global product indicating China's ability to create top quality exotic consumer products for domestic and global Asian markets. Like its companions, silk, porcelain, and for a while, maotai, pu-er tea is a good drink to think with in considering China's current and historical place in world commodity chains.

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