

TEA PRODUCTION, LAND USE POLITICS, AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

STRUGGLING OVER DILEMMAS IN
CHINA'S SOUTHWEST FRONTIER

PO-YI HUNG



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in China's Southwest Frontier

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To my wife, Huai-Hsuan Chen, and my daughter,
Madeleine Shen-Siang Hung

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INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

Tea Production and Dilemmas on China's Southwest Frontier

Pu'er tea¹ is complicated . . . Compared to the terrace tea (*taidi cha*), ancient tree tea (*gushu cha*) has much stronger *chaqi* (*qi* of tea) going through tasters' bodies, from tongues to fingers, to toes," (see Figure 1.1 for terrace tea gardens and Figure 1.2 for an ancient tea forest) said Zhongyao,² a certificated tea taster. I sat with Zhongyao at a big wooden table arranged for tea tasting in his house. From time to time, this nationally recognized Pu'er tea taster pushed me to feel with almost every pore in my skin the power of *chaqi* released from the ancient tree teas. He explained that the ancient tea trees could obtain much stronger *chaqi* because their roots grow deep into the land, where human disturbance was still rare. According to Zhongyao, Yunnan, a province on China's southwest frontier, had the greatest quantity of ancient tea trees and forests in the world. "Unfortunately," Zhongyao continued, "people don't realize the value of ancient tree tea until they have already chopped down so many ancient tea trees to plant the modern tea (*xiandai cha*)."³

After visiting Zhongyao, I surfed online and found an article at *The New York Times*.

From relative obscurity a few decades ago, tea from Yunnan, especially Pu'er, has become a fashionable, must-have variety in the tea shops of Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing. Surging demand for Pu'er—often advertised as wild tea even if it is from the plantations—has made farmers here rich and encouraged entrepreneurs to carve out more plantations from jungle-covered hillsides . . . Tea from Pu'er was popular around the region in ancient times: historians describe "horse tea trails" that radiated from Pu'er, the main trading center for the tea, into northern and eastern China, Tibet and beyond . . . The recent surge in popularity is attributed to newly affluent, health-conscious Chinese who believe that Pu'er tea lowers cholesterol, cures hangovers, helps fortify teeth and trims away fat. (Fuller 2008)



Figure 1.1 Terrace tea gardens.

Photograph by Po-Yi Hung.



Figure 1.2 Ancient tea forest or ancient tea arboretum. Notice that tea trees have grown under the canopy of different kinds of trees.

Photograph by Po-Yi Hung.

This article conveyed a juxtaposition of both the “ancientness” and “fashion-ability” of Pu’er tea, a tea produced on China’s southwest frontier. Reading the article, I recalled certificated tea taster Zhongyao’s words about the unique *chaqi* of the ancient tree tea, a characteristic materialized only through the ancientness of the tea trees. On the other hand, the ancientness has also been consumed as a form of fashion for newly affluent and health-conscious Chinese in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing.

“The ancient tea trees are disappearing,” said Lincui. It was July 2009, the rainy season in Yunnan as well as the off-peak time for the production of Pu’er tea. Lincui, a tea entrepreneur from outside Yunnan, drove me to his tea factory in Jingmai Mountain, one of the largest factories that produce ancient tree tea (*gushu cha*) at the renowned tea mountain (Figure 1.3). As its name suggests, ancient tree tea is Pu’er tea made from the tea leaves of ancient tea trees (*gucha shu*). Before this trip, I had heard of ancient tree tea from tea entrepreneurs and had drunk it on several occasions with tea entrepreneurs, retailers, and tea connoisseurs. Nevertheless, I have not yet seen the ancient tea trees in person, though I did see the trees in pictures in books and magazines and in the photos taken by friends who visited the tea mountains in Yunnan. The trip to Lincui’s factory located in Jingmai Mountain would be the first time I would see the landscape of ancient tea trees on-site. “I am the very person who teach them [local villagers] how to turn the ‘green’ (the ancient tea trees) into the ‘real gold’ in the market,” Lincui proudly said.

Going back to the United States from the jungle of ancient tea trees in southwest China, I was surprised one day when I found an ancient-tree-tea product from Yunnan in an American supermarket chain specializing in natural and organic food. The tea can displayed a picture of two female tea harvesters who are members of a Chinese ethnic minority and this description:

Ancient Tree Teas are hand harvested in a wild, organic and shade grown environment. The old tea-tree forests are rich with biodiversity, fertile soil and ecological balance not typically found in cultivated tea gardens. The Dai, Lahu and Bulang ethnic minorities of Yunnan’s remote mountain villages have cultivated tea for more than 1300 years, harvesting it from heirloom tea trees planted by their ancestors in 696 AD. [These] Ancient Tree Teas are produced exclusively by these peoples, whose economic well-being and cultural traditions are intertwined with the ancient trees (Rishi Tea).

Suddenly, tea entrepreneur Lincui’s words about the disappearing landscape of ancient tea forests came to my mind. Lincui’s criticism about the ignorance of the ethnic minorities regarding the “real value” of the ancient tea trees also emerged in my thoughts when I was reading the words on the tea can. Although



Figure 1.3 Map of Pu'er Prefecture (Pu'er City)⁴ of Yunnan (made by Chunyi Hsu).

Lincai claimed that he was the person who “taught” the ethnic minorities to once again appreciate the value of ancient tea trees, the description on the tea can showed a different story. According to the description on the tea can, the economic well-being and cultural traditions of the ethnic minorities have been intertwined with the ancient tea trees for more than 1300 years. Oddly, while Lincai has invested in a modern tea factory to produce ancient tree teas with advanced processing techniques in Yunnan, to turn the “green” into real “gold,” the description on the tea can stressed the well-preserved natural environment and tradition of the ethnic minorities without mentioning any modern technique in producing the ancient tree tea. The landscape of ancient tea forests on China’s southwest frontier seemed to display a paradoxical

juxtaposition of modern development, undisturbed nature, and preserved tradition. Moreover, terms like “ancient,” “fashion,” “modern,” “ecological balance,” “economic well-being,” “cultural tradition,” and the like are bundled with tea entrepreneurs and ethnic minorities in descriptions of the frontier tea landscape in southwest China. This juxtaposition, in fact, conveys the current dilemma regarding development on the frontier.

Frontiers Are Dilemmas

The frontier, in the general geographical imagination, is a peripheral space away from the national core, and the frontier signifies the edge of national expansion (Turner 1920). Within the jurisdictional territory of a nation-state, the frontier is also regarded as the farthest place a national power can reach. In this context, the frontier most often denotes the border areas or borderlands of a nation-state, the “geo-body,” as distinguished from other forms of national identity (Winichakul 1994). Even today, many of the borderlines are hardened, not just for securing but also for differentiating the territorial power of a nation-state (Delaney 2005). Either as territorial expansion or as differentiation, most national frontiers within the core-periphery division are exploited to serve the development of the national core (Booth 2007). However, the positioning of the frontier on the peripheral side of the core-periphery binary has been complicated, and even problematized, by the phenomenon called globalization (Paasi 2003). Globalization, though a complex and hardly well-defined concept, has challenged the core-periphery binary and emphasized connections throughout the world that are due to the flow of people, goods, and ideas.

This emphasis on connections among places, rather than on core-periphery, within the general definition of globalization has to some extent pulled the frontier out of the peripheral side of the core-periphery binary. As a result, under the phenomenon of globalization, the frontier has been repositioned in the network of relationships among different places (Fold and Hirsch 2009). For example, instead of looking into the frontier *within* the jurisdictional territory of a nation-state, scholars have paid more attention to the *cross boundary* or *transboundary* activities to reconceptualize the frontier, or borderlands more specifically, under the context of globalization (Rosenau 1997). Many have argued that the burgeoning cross- or transboundary activities happening on a nation-state's frontier have signaled a retreat of the state power and manifested the neoliberal power of the global market economy (Castells 1989). Nevertheless, concerns about the overemphasis on the cross- or transboundary activities have also reminded us of the potential neglect of the persistent state power on the frontier (Paasi 1998).

The development of cross boundary and transboundary activities and the increasing number of connections between the frontier and other places does not necessarily mean a retreat of state power under the current trend of globalization (Shapiro and Alker 1996). To be sure, the global market economy has never removed a state power from the frontier. Rather, in many cases the state power has been transformed, rather than subdued, in the context of globalization (Sharma and Gupta 2006). In other words, the state power has still been a critical enactor of the constitution of the global. In addition, as Sassen (2006, 1; *italics added*) argued, “The epochal transformation we call globalization is taking place *inside* the national to a far larger extent than is usually recognized.” According to Sassen, an understanding of the transformation of the frontier *inside* a nation-state, in fact, provides one of the avenues to an understanding of the constitution of the global. Meanwhile, focusing on the transformation of the frontier inside the nation-state does not require us to ignore the cross- and transboundary activities on the frontier. On the contrary, the inquiry should be into how the state power has been reworked through the cross- and transboundary activities on the frontier (Donnan and Wilson 1999). In other words, such a research orientation would require a study of how the state power has been transformed to enable the integration of the national frontier with the global market economy.

To break down the core-periphery binary and to tackle the integration between the *inside* national and the *outside* global, geographers have sought to reconceptualize the frontier as a relational space. As Fold and Hirsch (2009, 95) argued, frontiers are “connected spaces, begging a relational analysis that looks to linkages with supra-local influences and processes.” However, this emphasis on the supralocal linkages of relational analysis does not ignore the situated social, cultural, and environmental factors that in turn shape the symbolic meanings and material outcomes on frontiers. In accordance, the supralocal processes should not be taken as one-way impositions. Instead, they help us “understand the reshaping of frontier society, environment and economy, but they also reflect on the continuing significance and legacy of frontiers in national development” (*ibid.*). For that, taking the frontier as a relational space emerges as a productive, analytic approach to understanding the shifting geographies of the global market economy, which materializes in diverse national contexts.

While the relational approach reconceptualizes the frontier as a space constructed by multiple supralocal linkages without neglecting the significance of situated socioeconomic and environmental parameters, this approach primarily locates the frontier as a “connected space.” Despite being convinced by this emphasis, I find the framework of relational analysis cannot fully incorporate the persistent perceptions of the frontier as both the metaphoric and

physical space for exclusion and inclusion. Even under the current trend of globalization, the linkage between the frontier and the nation-state's territorial sovereignty has never loosened (Passi 2003). In a practical sense, the argument provided by Malcolm Anderson (1996, 1) still applies in our so-called globalized world: "Examining the justification of frontiers raises crucial, often dramatic, questions concerning citizenship, identity, political loyalty, exclusion, inclusion and the ends of the states." Nevertheless, I would argue that the frontier as a national space of exclusion and inclusion not only constructs the sovereignty differentiation among nation-states but also continues to play a crucial role in differentiating places and people *within* the jurisdictional territory of a nation-state.

Within this jurisdictional territory, the state often has still constructed the frontier as a peripheral place that is different from other central parts of its territory. Therefore, to rethink the differential power of the frontier under the global market economy is, to some extent, to reconsider the reconfiguration of the core-periphery division inside a nation-state. To be sure, the core-periphery division within a nation-state has never been jettisoned by the state, in spite of the burgeoning connections between the frontier and other places. In other words, the global market economy does not necessarily phase out the core-periphery division inside a nation-state. Instead, the core-periphery division may have been reinforced by the state to legitimize a national development campaign on the frontier. Simply put, the uneven development between the core and the peripheral areas within a nation-state may have reinforced the construction of the frontier as the underdeveloped periphery. The purpose is to retain the contrast between the underdeveloped frontier and the developed core of a nation-state.

The construction of the frontier as a differential mechanism to sustain the core-periphery division within a nation-state entails powers of both inclusion and exclusion. First, by constructing the frontier as an underdeveloped periphery, the national development campaign has aimed to mitigate the alleged gap of development between the core and the periphery. By doing so, the campaign has inevitably resulted in the reinforcement of the bureaucratic authority of the state. Taking privatization of land property as an example, the state may institutionalize frontier land through the redistribution of property rights to boost the market economy on the frontier. The bureaucratic procedures for mapping and then distributing land property, as James Scott (1998) has demonstrated, become the state project for legibility and control and, therefore, an inclusive power to further incorporate the frontier territory.

Second, although included inside the state territory, the frontier has paradoxically remained exclusive from the core, perpetuating the contrast between the developed core and the underdeveloped periphery. For example,