

Mountains of Green Gold: Tea Production, Land-Use Politics, and Ethnic Minorities on China's  
Southwest Frontier

By

Po-Yi Hung

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The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Kristopher Olds, Professor, Geography  
Matthew Turner, Professor, Geography  
Ian Baird, Assistant Professor, Geography  
Stephen Young, Assistant Professor, Geography  
Yongming Zhou, Professor, Anthropology

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To My Father, Yao-Kang Hung, and My Mother, Hsiu-Yu Chen

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## Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between tea trade and ongoing physical and symbolic changes in China's southwest frontier environment. By focusing on the landscape of what is deemed "ancient tea forest" (*guchalin*), I aim to understand the interactions among tea trees, entrepreneurs, the state, and an ethnic minority population (the Bulang). In this research, I also seek to address the resulting politics over tea related land-use practices in southwest China. I analyze the material and ideological components of the tea forest by examining ecological changes, market forces, and state interventions. In addition to conducting interviews and archival research, I have conducted intensive ethnographic research to engage in local Bulang villagers' everyday life in a context where the tea landscape in southwest China is symbolically and materially reproduced.

Overall, my research enhances understandings of the relationship between development and environment under the market economy on frontier China today. Tea trade on China's southwest frontier has been unsettling, mobilizing, and re-assembling the connections between human actors and environmental elements. Therefore, the interactions between people and their environment resulting from tea production informs the dynamic (re)formulation of social and subjective identities on the frontier. Additionally, I aim to re-consider "frontier" as an analytic concept within the Chinese context. I argue that China's southwest frontier has been *dilemmas* between tradition and modernity, between territorial margin and connected space, and between nature and development. I use tea production as my lens to investigate these dilemmas, which have become the mechanism to shape and reshape the nature-society relations through peoples' incompatible desires, changing moralities, and cultural renovations.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Frontiers are Dilemmas

Frontier, in the general geographical imagination, is a peripheral space away from the national core, and signifies the edge of national expansion (Turner 1920). Within the jurisdictional territory of a nation-state, frontier is also regarded as the farthest place a national power can reach. In this context, 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 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 due to the flow of people, goods, and ideas.

This emphasis on connections among places, rather than core-periphery, within the general definition of globalization, has to some extent pulled frontier out of the peripheral side of the core-periphery binary. As a result, under the phenomenon of globalization, frontier has been repositioned in the network of relationships among different places (Fold and Hirsch 2009). For example, instead of looking into frontier *within* the jurisdictional territory of a nation-state,

scholars have paid more attention to the *cross-boundary* or *trans-boundary* activities to re-conceptualize frontier, or borderlands more specifically, under the context of globalization (Rosenau 1997). Many have argued that the burgeoning cross- or trans-boundary 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 trans-boundary 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 trans-boundary activities and the increasing number of connections between 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 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 frontier inside the nation-state does not require ignoring the cross- and trans-boundary activities on the frontier. On the contrary, the inquiry should be into how the state power has been reworked through the cross- and trans-boundary activities on the frontier (Donnan and Wilson 1999). In other words, such a research orientation would study 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 re-conceptualize 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 supra-local 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 supra-local processes should not be taken as one-way impositions. Instead, “they help to 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 frontier as a relational space emerges as a productive analytic approach to understand the shifting geographies of the global market economy, which materializes in diverse national contexts.

While the relational approach reconceptualizes frontier as a space constructed by multiple supra-local linkages without neglecting the significance of situated socioeconomic and environmental parameters, it primarily locates 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 frontier as both the metaphoric and physical space for exclusion and inclusion. Even under the current trend of globalization, the linkage between 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 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 different from other central parts of its territory. Therefore, to rethink the differential power of 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 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 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 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 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 in order 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, frontier, though being included inside state territory, has paradoxically remained exclusive from the core, perpetuating the contrast between the developed core and the underdeveloped periphery. For example, the social majority living in the core areas has regarded many indigenous people living on peripheral frontiers as groups who have preserved the primitive tradition and culture. This imagination of the primitive frontier, under a modern global market economy, can easily be seen in the images created for tourism development (Litzinger 2004). The underdeveloped, or primitive, frontier has become imperative to the social majority in order to construct their identity as modern. This construction of a primitive frontier has allowed exclusive power to a nation-state to deepen the core-periphery division, and so to exclude the primitive frontier minority. Maintaining frontier as an excluded entity outside the core territory becomes an imperative to sustain differential power and the social order between the frontier minority and the social majority.

Between the inclusive and exclusive powers, and between the global relational connected space and the national peripheral place, how do we understand frontier under the phenomenon we call globalization? Throughout my dissertation, I argue that we should understand frontier as dilemma. Frontiers are dilemmas. I argue that frontier should not be understood within an either-or framework between the inclusive and exclusive powers, or between the connected space and the national periphery. In fact, we do not always have a permanent, decisive, singular perspective to understand what frontier means, and probably should not. Instead, frontiers are dilemmas constructed by the simultaneity of both inclusive and exclusive powers, and by the dual spatial features of being both a connected space and a national periphery. Taking frontiers as dilemmas,

I propose another research possibility to shed light on the way in which global market economy is taking place inside the national frontier. I inquire into how the dilemma has emerged on the frontier, how the state power has reworked within and manipulated the dilemma to integrate the national frontier into the global market economy, and how different groups of people have repositioned themselves within and reproduced the dilemma on the frontier. My dissertation, therefore, specifically investigates the dilemma and its resulting effects on China's southwest frontier.

## 1.2 Dilemmas on China's Southwest Frontier

China's southwest frontier (*bianjiang*) has different, and even contrasting, meanings. Among its multiple meanings, the southwest China frontier could connote one of the "backward" (*luohou*) frontiers in China, especially in the so-called "areas of minority nationalities"<sup>1</sup> (*shaoshu minzu diqu* or *minzu diqu*). On China's southwest frontier, for example, this connotation of backwardness applies not only to the landscape of shifting cultivations (Sturgeon 2005), but also to China's "minority nationalities" (*shaoshu minzu*) (Harrell 1995; Harwood 2009; Sturgeon 2007, 2010). In accordance, the Chinese state has constructed the "primitivity" of minority nationalities to contrast with the modernity of Han majority (Gladney 2005). Therefore, the state-led development campaigns in southwest China have been substantially oriented to develop the backward landscape and to modernize the primitive lives of minority nationalities.

Not all frontier landscapes in China mean backwardness. China's southwest frontier, for example, can also denote a place where pristine nature and minority culture are well preserved

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of using "ethnic minorities," the Chinese government uses "minority nationalities" to refer to the non-Han Chinese populations in China.



because of its lack of modernization. This image is readily seen in the portrayal of touristic descriptions of southwest China (Litzinger 2004). Meanwhile, the frontier inhabited by minority nationalities has been regarded as “the sites where ‘traditional culture’ was preserved untainted” (Schein 2000, 24). Moreover, international environmental protection projects in southwest China have reinforced the image of a pristine nature on the frontier. For example, UNESCO has designated the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas a World Heritage site, and has described northwest Yunnan as “one of the world's least-disturbed temperate ecological areas, an epicentre of Chinese endemic species and a natural gene pool of great richness” (UNESCO 2012). China’s southwest frontier has been seen as the world’s nature sanctuary. These international projects may, as Weller (2006, 131) stated, “separate humanity from nature.” For environmentalists, modernization, coupled with development, has been a force for the destruction of frontier nature.

The seemingly contrasting meanings of China’s southwest frontier, being backward as well as natural, have produced a dilemma for development. On one hand, development is seen as imperative to counter the backward economy. On the other hand, development has the potential to destroy pristine nature. Scholars studying southwest China have created a significant body of research to understand the symbolic and material changes in the southwest frontier. Such research, for example, addresses the relationship between the discursive practices of backwardness and cash crop plantation (Sturgeon 2010), between frontier imaginations and tourism development (Oakes 2007; Kolås 2011), and between the natural environment and international NGOs’ conservation projects (Litzinger 2004; Hathaway 2010). Most of these studies demonstrate that the changing meanings regarding the frontier landscape in southwest

China, either its “backwardness” or its “pristine nature,” are more or less related to the late-socialist<sup>2</sup> state and the market economy of contemporary China.

While the literature regarding southwest China provides a critical understanding of how the juxtaposition of backwardness and pristine nature emerges on the frontier, it seems to take the juxtaposition as the outcome of both state interventions and market forces. The juxtaposition, in turn, emerges at the specific juncture when the Chinese state initiates multiple governmental campaigns to incorporate frontier into the system of a global market economy. Simultaneously, it is also the juncture at which the Chinese state transforms its power to rearticulate southwest China as its inalienable frontier territory under the context of the global market economy. Hence, if we take the juxtaposition of backwardness and pristine nature as a form of dilemma on the frontier, the dilemma becomes an outcome resulting from the confrontation between the market economy and the power of the state in southwest China.

Throughout my research, I intend to look beyond the view of the dilemma as just an outcome. Rather, I argue that dilemma on China’s southwest frontier is not just an end result, but a mechanism to mobilize state power and people’s actions to rearticulate the relationship among frontier, the state, and the market economy. In other words, my dissertation aims to examine the mechanisms of the dilemma and their symbolic and material effects on frontiers. Specifically, I use the tea production on China’s southwest frontier, particularly in Yunnan, as the empirical foreground on which to flesh out the mechanisms of dilemma in mobilizing the re-articulation among the frontier landscape, the Chinese state, and the global market economy. Next, I provide a historical overview of the tea trade in Yunnan to contextualize the region’s ongoing tea production.

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<sup>2</sup> Following Li Zhang (2006), I refer to China as a “late-socialist” state “because of its one-party rule and its official ideological claim to socialism despite the profound changes that have taken place in economic, social, and cultural realms.”

### 1.3 Tea Production in Yunnan: A Historical Overview

Figure 1.1. The terrace tea gardens (photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Tea has been a cash crop promoted by the Chinese state, in order to develop the lagging economy in southwest China, especially in Yunnan Province. As in Xishuangbanna, tea has been the major cash crop supported by the state to develop the uplands (Sturgeon 2005, 2010). In addition to Xishuangbanna, this development of tea, Pu'er tea<sup>3</sup> in particular, is also seen in Pu'er and Lincang, two other prefectural-level administrative units of Yunnan. Since the early 2000s,

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<sup>3</sup> Pu'er tea can be also spelled 'Puerh tea' or 'Puer tea' in English. Throughout this dissertation, I use 'Pu'er tea' for its spelling.

due to the so-called “Pu’er tea heat” (*Pu’ercha re*), the landscape in Yunnan has undergone significant symbolic and material changes due to the market boost of Pu’er tea. From 1999 to 2007, the price of Pu’er tea increased tenfold and one pound of the finest, aged Pu’er tea could cost 150 US dollars (Jacobs 2009). As a result, people carved out the mountains and turned more of the forest into areas of cultivated terrace tea gardens (Figure 1.1 above).

Figure 1.2. Ancient tea forest or ancient tea arboretum (photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Most of the Pu’er tea has been produced from terrace tea gardens, but tea in Yunnan has also been produced from the “ancient tea trees” (*guchashu*). Compared to the terrace tea gardens, where all the tea trees were neatly trimmed and managed, the ancient tea trees have grown for

hundreds or even thousands of years with slight human-induced disturbance. As a result, these tea trees have been growing with other species of trees, and have constituted a landscape deemed an “ancient tea forest” (*guchalin*) or “ancient tea arboretum” (*guchayuan*) (Figure 1.2 above). The landscape of the ancient tea forest/arboretum demonstrates the historical heyday of the tea trade in Yunnan back to China’s Ming-Qing period (1368–1911) (Yang 2009). While the Pu’er tea industry in Yunnan developed over hundreds of years, tea was produced even earlier in the region, as early as the Tang dynasty (618–907) (Giersch 2006). Historically, tea leaves were harvested from the ancient tea trees, processed, and exported from Yunnan to Tibet and Southeast Asia through the “Ancient Tea Horse Road” (*chama gudaο*) (Freeman and Ahmed 2011; see also Yang 2009).

Despite the historical heyday of the tea trade in Yunnan, Pu’er tea was never considered a valuable tea among Yunnanese before the 1990s. In fact, the increased value placed on the production of Pu’er tea initiated in Taiwan. In order to understand why Pu’er tea is now an essential cash crop in Yunnan, my dissertation includes a discussion of the production of market value for Pu’er tea in Taiwan, which then resulted in dramatic changes in tea production in Yunnan.

### *1.3.1 Market Boom of Pu’er Tea as a Historical Contingency: Reappraisal of Pu’er Tea from Taiwan to Yunnan*

Tea has been one of the important commodities of Yunnan. According to Huang (2005), a renowned Chinese historian, tea trade between Yunnan and Tibet, and Yunnan and China’s Central Plains, started in the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD). Nevertheless, the term “Pu’er tea”



(*pu'er cha*) was not used until the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644 AD). During the late Ming dynasty, a place called Pu'er became the dominant trading center for tea in Yunnan. As a result, "Pu'er tea" became the generic name indicating all the tea produced in Yunnan. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911 AD), Pu'er tea was popular in the imperial family. In 1726, the Emperor Yongzheng designated E'ertai as *Yungui Zongdu* (The governor of Yunnan and Guizhou), who then controlled the trade of Pu'er tea. Since then, the governor would personally choose the best Pu'er tea each year as a tribute to the imperial family in Beijing. In the meantime, in addition to its prevalence in China and Tibet, Pu'er tea was sold to Japan, France, and Southeast Asia. Despite being the preference of the imperial family and becoming an international commodity, prior to the 1990s, Pu'er tea was paradoxically considered by consumers to be the cheapest tea.

Before the 1990s, the major markets for Pu'er tea were increasingly centered in Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Tibet. However, even in these major markets, Pu'er tea was considered the cheapest tea. People seldom drank Pu'er tea directly. For example, in Hong Kong, Pu'er tea leaves were brewed with chrysanthemums to make chrysanthemum tea, and it was primarily used in dim sum restaurants. The Tibetan people use Pu'er tea to make butter tea and to drink with their meals. In other words, before the 1990s, Pu'er tea was not highly valued in these major markets. It was instead regarded as cheap material to be added to other ingredients in order to make other products, such as chrysanthemum tea or Tibetan butter tea. In addition, even in its production center of Yunnan, Pu'er tea was not popular with the general public until the 1990s. Yunnan, before the 1990s, served as the production center but not the consumption center of Pu'er tea. Instead of drinking Pu'er tea, most of Yunnan preferred *dianlü* (Yunnan green tea). *Dianlü* and Pu'er tea are actually produced using the same kind of tea leaves as the raw material.

The difference between them is in the processing of the tea leaves. During the 1990s, Yunnan residents reappraised Pu'er tea and started drinking it, based on its Taiwan-initiated market boom.

Taiwan, an emerging center of Pu'er tea consumption since the 1990s, has played the most critical role in promoting a market for Pu'er tea in the last two decades (Yu 2006). As discussed earlier, the major markets for Pu'er tea two decades ago were Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Tibet. Only after the market boom for Pu'er tea in Taiwan occurred the early 1990s did people in China, including Yunnan and Hong Kong, reconsider Pu'er tea as a most-highly valued tea. It is therefore essential to understand why and how Pu'er tea has been reappraised both by tea entrepreneurs and consumers in Taiwan, most of whom regarded the market boom for Pu'er tea in Taiwan as an event of historical contingency (*lishi de ouran*).

Before 1990, most Taiwanese had never heard of Pu'er tea. In order to investigate the market boom for Pu'er tea in Taiwan as a historical contingency, it is essential to look back to 1997, when China resumed its exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong. In 1997, large volumes of so-called "aged Pu'er tea" (*chennian pu'er*) were sold from Hong Kong to Taiwan. The taste of aged Pu'er tea was re-appreciated by consumers in Taiwan, and therefore, the value of aged Pu'er tea was reappraised by Taiwan's tea entrepreneurs. In accordance, the production value of aged Pu'er tea became the main factor driving its subsequent market boom, first in Taiwan and then in China, Southeast Asia, and other countries, including Korea.

In Hong Kong, although Pu'er tea was largely used for making chrysanthemum tea in dim sum restaurants, aged Pu'er tea was not distinctively differentiated from the general Pu'er tea. Thus, before the 1990s, aged Pu'er tea was not intentionally promoted by the tea entrepreneurs for the tea market in Hong Kong. It was true that the aged Pu'er tea in Hong Kong at that time was sold at a better price than the "new Pu'er tea" (*xin pu'er*). Nevertheless,

compared to the price of aged Pu'er tea today, the value difference between aged and new Pu'er tea was not significant prior to the 1990s in Hong Kong. Things changed during the 1990s, particularly after 1997.

In the early 1990s, more specifically in the few years leading up to 1997, when Hong Kong "returned" to China, many tea entrepreneurs in Hong Kong felt uncertain about Hong Kong's economy. As a result, they were eager to sell out the Pu'er tea in stock before 1997. At that time, part of the Pu'er tea in stock became aged Pu'er tea because it had been stored at the bottom of the inventory for decades, intentionally or unintentionally, by the tea entrepreneurs. As a result, this aged Pu'er tea was mixed in with all the other Pu'er tea in stock when it was released to the market. At this point, a few tea entrepreneurs from Taiwan noticed the release of such large volumes of aged Pu'er tea. They were able to single out the aged Pu'er tea from the general stock, and thereby created a new market for aged Pu'er tea. The Taiwanese entrepreneurs thereby began exporting aged Pu'er tea from Hong Kong to Taiwan. At the same time, they started branding aged Pu'er tea through a variety of occasions, such as the "tea feast" (*chayan*). These branding strategies successfully created the new market for Pu'er tea in Taiwan. The price of aged Pu'er tea, thus, became increasingly expensive. When aged Pu'er tea was previously imported to Taiwan from Hong Kong, one cake or one brick of aged Pu'er tea cost just several hundred New Taiwan Dollars (around ten to twenty US dollars). Currently, the price has risen to at least one hundred thousand New Taiwan Dollars (at least 300 US dollars) for one cake or one brick. In addition, the dramatic rise in price increased consumer interest in buying and storing more aged Pu'er tea. Gradually, aged Pu'er tea became popular not just for drinking, but also for investment. People bought aged Pu'er tea, stored it, and sold it when the price rose. The older an aged Pu'er tea, the better price it could get. Today, "aged Pu'er tea" is not only a tea product, but



is also a constructed concept in Taiwan, implying high-value consumption and an elite culture of tea.

Compared to drinking oolong or baozhong, relatively few people in Taiwan choose Pu'er tea for everyday drinking (Yu 2006). Nevertheless, as mentioned above, many consumers stored large volumes of aged Pu'er tea as an investment in order to sell their stock at a higher price. Consequently, consumers have consistently and systematically bought and stored Pu'er tea, and in this way have made Taiwan into one of its biggest current consumption centers. The high value of aged Pu'er tea has also pushed Taiwanese tea entrepreneurs to search for more aged Pu'er tea, which was exported from Yunnan to Southeast Asia, or even to France, from the late Qing dynasty to the end of Republican China. As a result, most of the best-quality aged Pu'er tea has been brought to Taiwan by tea entrepreneurs and consumers.

This trend of collecting, storing, and drinking aged Pu'er tea has grown to Hong Kong, Yunnan, and Guangdong, to Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, and to Northeast Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea. It is thus not an exaggeration to say that after 1997, Taiwan created the market for the modern consumption of aged Pu'er tea and for Pu'er tea in general. The process of market creation was enabled by the actions of tea entrepreneurs who stored Pu'er tea and by the sovereignty transfer of Hong Kong in 1997. In other words, if the tea entrepreneurs in Hong Kong had not stored the unsold Pu'er tea from the late Qing dynasty at the bottom of their storage, there would not have been a large volume of aged Pu'er tea stocked in Hong Kong. If the Hong Kong public had not undergone uncertainty toward the economy due to the sovereignty transfer in 1997, the tea entrepreneurs in Hong Kong would not have released such large amounts of Pu'er tea, including aged Pu'er tea, to the market and then to the tea entrepreneurs from Taiwan. Therefore, the market boom for Pu'er tea in Taiwan is a historical

contingency. However, the realization of this historical contingency does not only depend on the events in Hong Kong. Rather, the contemporary situation of the 1990s in Yunnan, the production center, and in Guangdong, another consumption center, is worth more investigation to fully explain the contingent development of the Pu'er tea market.

Aged Pu'er tea stored in Hong Kong played a critical role in the booming market for Pu'er tea in the 1990s, but Yunnan had always been the production center and Guangdong the consumption center for Pu'er tea. Unlike Hong Kong, however, these two regions did not have large volumes of aged Pu'er tea in stock. In addition, the quality of aged Pu'er tea in Yunnan and Guangdong was poorer than in Hong Kong. Therefore, at the time that most of the aged Pu'er tea was released from storage in Hong Kong, it represented most of the existing tea that had been stored for more than thirty years. To explain the lack of aged Pu'er tea in Yunnan and Guangdong, it is important to take into account the economic difference between capitalism in Hong Kong and communism in China.

In Communist China, the production and consumption of Pu'er tea was undertaken under a planned economy. Compared to a capitalist economy, which is characterized by the free flow of goods and the "invisible hand" of market force, a planned economy is systematically structured by government control. Consequently, before China moved toward a market economy, the production and consumption of Pu'er tea was quantitatively planned by the government. In other words, the quantity of production and the consumption of Pu'er tea were planned so that they matched. As a result, there was almost no leftover Pu'er tea in the production center, Yunnan, or in the consumption center, Guangdong, under the planned economy. Since there was almost no leftover Pu'er tea, it was difficult to produce new Pu'er tea that could gradually become aged Pu'er tea. Only after 1995 did the Chinese become aware of the market value of

aged Pu'er tea. This was the year in which the major state-owned tea factories in Yunnan were under the process of privatization. Also, 1995 roughly coincided with the point at which the tea entrepreneurs in Hong Kong started releasing their stock of aged Pu'er tea to Taiwan. After 1995, the privatization of the tea factories in Yunnan, combined with the increasing value of aged Pu'er tea in the market, pushed the tea entrepreneurs in Yunnan to systematically store Pu'er tea in order to "age" it for sale at a better price in the future.

Pu'er tea, produced on China's southwest frontier and regarded as the cheapest kind of tea in the past, has in this way increased its value and expanded its market today, due to the reappraisal of aged Pu'er tea that started in Taiwan. Today, the price of aged Pu'er tea, especially when it is aged over thirty years, is far more expensive than other teas. The production center, Yunnan, has benefitted from this reappraisal. The increasing value of the tea has also increased its production in Yunnan. In addition aged Pu'er tea, the regular non-aged Pu'er tea has become popular in the main markets like Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Guangdong. This popularity has also reached countries like Malaysia, Japan, and South Korea.

### *1.3.2 Market Demand as a Contingent Force to Change Meanings between Terrace Tea Gardens and the Ancient Tea Forest in Yunnan*

Terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forests now compose the two primary tea landscapes in Yunnan. These two tea landscapes, however, have contrasting meanings regarding modernity and nature. State policies and market forces at different periods of time have altered, even subverted, the contrasting meanings between the two types of tea landscapes.

Plantations of terrace tea started at least in China's communal period in the 1970s. In 1974, under the provincial government's guidance, called *Transform the Old and Actively Develop the New Tea Garden* (*gaizao laochayuan, jiji fazhan xinchayuan*), plantations of terrace tea, the "new" tea gardens, started expanding in Yunnan (Huang 2005). Since then, the "old" tea gardens, including many ancient tea forests, "have been vulnerable to replacement by monoculture plantations and modern cultivars" of terrace tea gardens (Freeman and Ahmed 2011, 30). However, during the communal period, plantations of terrace tea were not intended for the tea market, but mainly for lifting "ethnic minority farmers up to socialist modernity" (Sturgeon 2005, 41). Even after the communal period ended in early 1980s, the growth of terrace tea gardens was still not for the market *per se*, but mainly for terminating the shifting cultivation practiced by many ethnic minority groups in Yunnan. As the research of Sturgeon (2005) on an Akha community shows, starting in the early 2000s, the government encouraged plantations of terrace tea on farmers' shifting-cultivation lands. The original purpose was to end the shifting cultivation to protect the forest. In other words, the influence of the tea market was relatively less important because of the extremely low price of Pu'er tea before the early 2000s. Nevertheless, the market force of Pu'er tea has gradually played a contingent but critical role in the expansion of terrace tea gardens since its market reappraisal in the early 2000s.

This market reappraisal, as discussed above, emanated not from Yunnan, but from Taiwan. During the late 1990s, especially in the years before Hong Kong returned to China in 1997, Taiwanese tea entrepreneurs purchased a large amount of aged Pu'er tea (*Pu'er laocha*) from Hong Kong. The tea soon substantially increased in its market value due to the unique aging taste<sup>4</sup>. Aging (*chenhua*), then, became one of the major features to re-define the market value of Pu'er tea. As a consequence people, from tea merchants to common tea consumers,

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<sup>4</sup> For more discussions regarding the value reproduction of Pu'er tea, please see Yu (2006).

started purchasing new Pu'er tea, not for drinking, but for “aging” the tea in storage to increase its market value for future sale. This trend became a form of investment. Hence, the price of Pu'er tea, new and aged, has significantly increased since the early 2000s and reached its peak in 2007. The strength of the Pu'er tea market then became the driving force that changed the tea landscape in Yunnan.

The plantations of terrace tea, controlled by the state, responded to the Pu'er tea boom became organized not only for the original purpose of terminating the shifting cultivations, but also to meet the market demand for Pu'er tea. Under the pressure of these market demands, “efficiency” (*xiaoyi*) became a new form of governmental propaganda to package the modernization of tea production. In accordance, plantations of terrace tea were encouraged by the government because of their higher productivity compared to the ancient tea trees. Harvesting the ancient tea leaves demanded much more labor, due to the height and relatively sporadic distribution of ancient tea trees. Even worse, because of their age, the productivity of ancient tea trees was usually low. The production of the ancient tea forest was therefore considered inefficient.

To modernize tea production on the frontier, the state encouraged farmers, including minority nationalities, to cultivate the terrace tea gardens instead of harvesting ancient tea leaves. For the state, it became a campaign to improve the productivity of tea production and thereby boost the local economy. According to an official of the Tea Office in Pu'er Prefecture (*Pu'er shi chaye bangongshi*), in 2007 the total area of tea plantation in Yunnan was about 4,545,000 *mu*<sup>5</sup>, while it was just 2,406,000 *mu* in 1990. The increasing areas of tea plantation from 1990 to 2007 were primarily terrace tea gardens. However, the Pu'er tea market bubble burst in 2007 (Jacobs 2009). Since then, the market value of terrace tea has substantially declined. Meanwhile,

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<sup>5</sup> A *mu* is about 0.167 acre.

the market value of ancient tree tea, though reduced, has been much more stable than terrace tea after the market bubble burst. To date, the price for ancient tree tea is generally much higher than Pu'er tea produced from terrace tea gardens.

Paradoxically, the ancient tea forest, which symbolized the inefficiency of tea production before the bubble burst, has been re-evaluated in the market as a rare resource for making authentic Pu'er tea. Additionally, the ancient tea forest has been re-appreciated because of its natural environment and organic mode of production. Ironically, the monoculture of terrace tea gardens, once seen as the modernization of tea production, has been criticized mainly for the over usage of pesticides and the demolition of biodiversity. The monoculture of the tea plantation is therefore seen as a cause of pollution and damage to the environment (*shengtai huanjing*).

The ideas associated with terrace tea gardens and the ancient tea forest have consistently been in contrast. As discussed above, from the 1970s to the early 2000s, terrace tea gardens signified socialist modernity and the termination of shifting cultivation. However, since the early 2000s, the market for Pu'er tea has become dominant and has shifted the government orientation and propaganda regarding tea production. Terrace tea gardens represented the modernization of tea production for market efficiency, whereas the ancient tea forest denoted backward and inefficient productivity. Nonetheless, after the Pu'er tea bubble burst in 2007, terrace tea gardens have become a symbol of a tainted environment, while the ancient tea forests have been dubbed natural and authentic resources for organic tea production.

The changing meanings of the tea landscapes in Yunnan, I argue, demonstrate a dilemma between being natural and being modern on the frontier, and the tea landscapes are the material form of the dilemma. The frontier tea landscapes have intertwined with the state construction of

socialist modernity and the shifting market demands of Pu'er tea. I do not view the dilemma as only an outcome of the conjuncture between socialist state power and neoliberal market economy. Instead, I view the dilemma as the mechanism that enables action in constructing the frontier, whether the action is from the state, the market, or from local residents. Therefore, my dissertation is a frontier story about tea, a story about the struggles of different groups of people to connect China's territorial margin to the global market economy. Below, I propose three dimensions as the three threads of my tea story on China's southwest frontier.

#### **1.4 Three Dimensions to Approach Dilemma as Mechanism**

While the tea production in Yunnan and its relationship with the mechanisms of dilemma on the frontier are complex, three dimensions have emerged from my field research. These three dimensions are incompatible desires, changing moralities, and cultural renovation. I argue that we need to pay specific attention to these three dimensions to understand dilemma as a mechanism to symbolically and materially shape the frontier. These three dimensions are also three threads to connect my entire dissertation and to triangulate the transformation of China's southwest frontier. I will briefly explain each dimension here; they will be the recurring themes throughout the dissertation.

##### *1.4.1 Incompatible Desires*

Frontiers can be seen as dilemmas with contrasting meanings. Material desires produce these contrasting meanings. In addition, particular desires have distinct material effects on

frontier. While the desire to return to undisturbed nature has constructed frontier as the wilderness (Cronon 1996), the desire for development views frontier as a space for the exploitation of natural resources (Barney 2009). As in southwest China, desire for a nostalgic tradition may have regarded the frontier as the place preserving the authentic culture (Schein 2000). Yet, desire for modernity may have led to a view of China's southwest frontier as a place of backwardness, where the backward culture should be erased through modernization (Hyde 2007). Studies of China's southwest frontier have elaborated these different desires and their symbolic and material outcomes, though they may not specifically use the term *desire*. However, while many of the studies highlight the different scenarios for a specific desire and its specific outcomes on the frontier, more questions have been raised regarding the simultaneity and the incompatibility of desires pertaining to southwest China. My dissertation emphasizes the coexistence of these incompatible desires on the frontier.

Throughout my dissertation, I aim to argue that different desires do not exist individually and separately in constructing China's southwest frontier. Rather, in southwest China, different desires, whether for nature, development, tradition, or modernity, in fact incompatibly and simultaneously coexist with each other. In other words, within every frontier place, and in southwest China in particular, frontier is not a harmonious entity resulting from only one kind of desire. Instead, we need to investigate the simultaneous and incompatible desires for both nature and development, as well as for both tradition and modernity. Investigation of the incompatible desires will reach a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the symbolic and material transformation of southwest China. It is important to note that in studying the incompatible desires on the frontier, the simultaneity and incompatibility of desires do not appear as a pre-



given plan. On the contrary, they contingently emerge through the connections among frontier construction, state power, and the global market economy.

#### 1.4.2 *Changing Morality*

By morality, I refer to the ethical standards emerging from tea production. The ethical standards apply not only to interpersonal relationships, including the relationships between minority nationalities and outside tea entrepreneurs, and among minority nationalities themselves, but also to the ways people treat their environment, and in particular the ancient tea forest focused on in this dissertation.

The incompatible desires and the resulting dilemmas on China's southwest frontier have further mobilized the Chinese state to rework its power to reconstruct the frontier to meet contingent market demand. Throughout my dissertation, I argue that the state has reworked its power by restructuring people's moral standards for tea production. The state's power has not just been realized by governmental campaigns that symbolically and physically alter the frontier landscape of tea, but also by reworking the power it has realized because of the changing moralities emerging in the developing entrepreneurship of the minority nationalities in southwest China. In a sense, the reconstruction of China's southwest frontier has been a state project to reconstruct the minority nationalities themselves. Nevertheless, the process of the reconstruction of the minority nationalities has not been simply a result of a top-down imposition of state power. Rather, it is also a process, I argue, that leads from state government to self-governance, though which the minority nationalities have practiced new moral standards to define themselves in the market economy of tea.

Morality, as a result, becomes an essential social imperative to enhance the realization of Chinese governance on its southwest frontier. To be clear, from government to governance, the state power has never retreated in the development of the market economy of tea. Instead, the changing moralities practiced by the minority nationalities in their day-to-day life of tea production have been the “invisible hands” of the Chinese state under the guise of the cultivation of entrepreneurship for the tea market. However, we should not assume that the cultivation of new moral standards for tea production has been a coherent and peaceful process. Rather, the changing moralities, in fact, have entailed a restructuring of social order that has created tensions, conflicts, and even violence among different groups of people, including government officials, outside tea entrepreneurs, and local minority nationalities.

#### 1.4.3 *Cultural Renovation*

Cultural renovation does not mean a disruption between the past and the present. Renovation is not a totally new invention, which seems to discard the past. Instead, compared to invention, renovation signifies a remodeling process of past cultural practices to re-articulate the shifting relationship among minority nationalities, the state, and the market economy of tea production in southwest China. Renovation itself, of course, manifests the dilemma between the past and the present, a dilemma between keeping the old and producing the new. Tea itself has been a cultural object situated in this dilemma of renovation. Tea, in a Chinese context, is not only a modern commodity, but also a cultural object that never loses its entanglement with tradition. However, I argue that this tradition of tea has been renovated with new elements in different ways by the state, the tea entrepreneurs, and the minority nationalities. The cultural

renovation of tea has also become the practice to reposition *self* and to differentiate *other* within the dilemmas of China's southwest frontier.

Different groups of people, including government officials, tea entrepreneurs, and minority nationalities have struggled to reposition themselves within the dilemmas between tradition and modernity, between nature and backwardness, and between frontier as China's territorial margin and frontier as connected space for the market economy. Cultural practices, whether the religious rituals of minority nationalities or the elite tea tasting ceremony, have become practices that signify the changes resulting from tea production. These religious rituals are an example of rituals that represent a cultural revitalization of local tradition, while they are also a form of cultural renovation to incorporate tradition with new meanings of tea. I specifically highlight the process as a renovation, because the tea rituals themselves are not a thorough invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). On the contrary, minority nationalities participate in the rituals as a cultural practice that connects their past with present tea production.

## **1.5 Theoretical Approaches**

### *1.5.1 Frontier as Place of Assemblages*

Place has been an important analytic concept in human geography; in recent years, it has been reconceptualized in both human geography and other social sciences as a result of increased attention to migration, diaspora, displacement, and movement (Escobar 2008). Similarly, taking frontier as a geographical place, this shifting focus from a stabilized and bounded place to the

dynamic flows of populations living in network connections has changed the way we understand frontier as a place. The research orientation to network connections therefore has taken frontier, not as a fixed entity, but a “hybridity” (Bhabha 1994), produced by its relational spatial reconfigurations.

Doreen Massey (1993, 2005), for example, applies *relationality* to understand place. Within Massey’s framework of relationality, frontier is understood as an open and provisional space where multiple identities and histories conflate with global connections regarding flows of goods and people. Correspondingly, Massey’s re-theorization of place emphasizes a sense of place “primarily global rather than local, forged out of its connections with other places rather than local contingencies, privileging routes rather than roots” (Dovey 2010, 5). However, this framework of relationality risks confusing all the relations among different factors without revealing what is most important from the contingent (Castree and MacMillan 2001; Sunley 2008; Jones 2009). As a result, frontier as a place could easily lose its meaning due to its random aggregation of all kinds of relations connecting one place with places all over the world. For that, I find Kim Dovey’s proposal to take place as an assemblage is a useful framework to complement the relational approach to understanding frontier as a place.

For Dovey, place is not just situated in relational spatial connections. Rather, it is situated in two different “socio-spatial segmentarities” (Dovey 2010, 21), the state and the market. The state attempts to structure a place into the rigid segmentarities by, for example, imposing fixed meanings with grand statements on the monuments of a place. The market, on the other hand, functions as supple segmentarities connecting different places through the flow of information, goods, and people. The territory of a place is thus drawn and redrawn through the intertwining of both rigid and supple segmentarities, which are the state power and the market forces. This

intertwining of the state and the market resonates well with the co-existence of the strata networks and the rhizomatic networks of an assemblage. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Dovey uses *tree* to refer to the strata networks, like the state, in order to contrast the rhizomatic networks, like the market. Here, from the perspective of rigid and supple segmentarities, as well as the viewpoints of tree-like and rhizomatic connections, “territoriality is creative rather than defensive, a form of becoming” (Dovey 2010, 17). In other words, place is always a form of becoming.

Dovey’s proposal of taking the state as the rigid segmentarity and the market as the supple segmentarities to understand place provides a productive framework to flesh out the scenarios happening on China’s southwest frontier. In southwest China, the state, as the rigid power, has always problematized the frontier landscape with an imposed meaning to allow for state interventions to “fix” the frontier problem. For example, the Chinese state has regarded the shifting cultivations as a backward frontier landscape, which has impeded the realization of socialist modernity on the frontier. As a result, the governmental campaign to boost tea production, as discussed, was originally to phase out the shifting cultivations practiced by the minority nationalities and to promote the socialist modernity. Nevertheless, the burgeoning market of tea, as the supple force, has then produced different meanings regarding the frontier landscape based on the shifting market demand of tea.

As discussed in the historical overview, the production of market value of Pu’er tea started in Taiwan, and then turned into a “Pu’er tea heat” in China, including Yunnan. The “Pu’er tea heat” has in turn increased the number of plantations of terrace tea gardens. The plantations of terrace tea gardens were not just designed to address shifting cultivation, but for efficient production that could meet the significant increase in market demand for tea. However,

after the bubble in the Pu'er tea market burst in 2007, the demand for terrace tea dropped and the market has preferred ancient tree teas due to the tea's unique ancient taste, which derives from the "nature" of the ancient tea forest. The market has been the driving force behind the change in China's southwest frontier from a place of socialist modernity to a place of efficient production, and then to a place of ancient nature. In this way, China's southwest frontier has been the place where the rigid state power interacts with the supple market force. It then adds to an understanding of how the dilemmas have been produced throughout the interactions between the state and the market, and how the dilemmas have in turn mobilized the state power to reconstruct southwest China as a place for contingent market demands.

The interaction between the state power and market forces in constructing China's southwest frontier involves both discursive and material practices. In order to stress the simultaneity of both discursive and material practices, I follow Dovey to apply assemblage in understanding frontier as a place. For Dovey, taking place as assemblages is to "avoid the reduction of place to text, to materiality or to subjective experience... 'sense of place' is a phenomenon that connects or spans this materiality/expression dimension; it cannot be reduced to essence nor to social construction" (Dovey 2010, 17). It should be noted that the relationship between material and expressive dimensions of place is not dialectic. In other words, place is not discursively produced and then materially reproduced as a back-and-forth process. Rather, "assemblages are always at once both material and expressive. The expressive pole of the assemblage also embodies 'codes' that govern forms of expression" (Dovey 2010, 16–17). To illustrate, Dovey uses the urban street as an example of assemblage. For Dovey, an urban street is not just a collection of the different elements: buildings, trees, cars, people, sidewalks, etc. Instead, the connections between these elements make it a place of assemblage. More

importantly, it is an assemblage of “material things, flows and spatial connections that co-exist with representational narratives, urban design codes and intensities” (Dovey 2010, 17).

Construction of China’s southwest frontier is thus a place-making process containing both discursive and material powers simultaneously. To flesh out the simultaneity of both discursive and material powers from the state and from the market, I pay particular attention the symbolic and physical changes in the tea landscapes on the frontier. Throughout my dissertation, I focus on the landscape of what is deemed ancient tea forest, and aim to understand the interactions among tea trees, entrepreneurs, the state, and an ethnic minority population (the Bulang). In my research, I also seek to address the resulting politics over land-use practices in southwest China. I analyze the material and ideological components of the tea forest by looking into ecological changes, market forces, and state interventions. The construction of the tea landscape has been essential in shedding light on how the tea trade in China’s southwest frontier has been unsettling, mobilizing, and re-assembling the connections between human actors and environmental elements.

### *1.5.2 Making the Frontier through Reconstruction of Landscape*

I take landscape reconstruction as the critical practice, both discursive and material, for place making. In a sense, landscape has been an essential component in the construction of the meaning of a place. As Moore (2005, 20) argues, “Place emerges as a distinctive mixture, not an enduring essence, a nodal point where these translocal influences intermesh with practices and meanings previously sedimented in the local landscape.” Following Gramsci, Moore further argues that landscapes are the terrain where “the forces of opposition organize,” and emphasizes

“ the *simultaneity* of symbolic and material contestation over terrain” (Moore 2005, 23; *italics* in original).

Moore resonates with Dovey and proposes assemblage as an approach to look at landscape. As he states, “like places, assemblages foreground multiplicities irreducible to a single sense, structure, or logic. They span the divide between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, symbol and substance, marking the ‘imbrication of the *semiotic* and the *material*” (Moore 2005, 24; *italics* in original). However, according to Moore, the scholarship on assemblage may have often occluded “power relations, historical sedimentations, and their forceful effects” (Moore 2005, 24). Therefore, he proposes articulated assemblage to incorporate assemblage with issues of power and history embedded in landscape construction. Following Stuart Hall, Moore highlights the twin concepts of joining and enunciating included in the idea of articulation, that “foregrounds how power relations and historical sediments formatively shape contingent constellations that become materially and discursively consequential” (Moore 2005, 25). As a consequence, Moore uses articulated assemblage to emphasize the linkages among livelihoods, landscape, and environmental resources, which then “inform the cultural politics of place, identity, and subjection” (Moore 2005, 25).

Moore’s proposal for taking landscape as an “articulated assemblage” provides a framework to understand China’s southwest frontier as a place of dilemmas. In the context of this frontier, I argue, the forces of opposition have organized from the state that takes the frontier as its territorial margin and from the market that makes the frontier the connected space of a global market economy. The forces of opposition between the state and the market have then reconstructed frontier landscapes within the dilemmas between tradition and modernity and between primitive nature and economic development. The juxtaposition of contrasting meanings



sedimented in landscapes is a manifestation over the entangled dilemmas on China's southwest frontier. Moreover, I argue these frontiers are not just an outcome, but also mobilize the simultaneity of symbolic and material contestation over landscape. Landscapes themselves, as a form of articulated assemblage, become constitutive of the politics of place-making. As Moore (2005, 23) says, "Conceived as a contested terrain of practice, landscape becomes less a mute backdrop to human agency than formative to cultural politics and identity."

Articulated assemblage, thus, provides a framework to flesh out the forces of opposition between the state and the market as well as the simultaneity of symbolic and material contestation over the construction of the tea landscape. Within the framework of articulated assemblage, I position my dissertation in two groups of literature concerning landscape studies in geography: scaling-up vs. scaling-down landscapes, and landscapes as discursive constructions vs. landscapes as material struggles.

### *Scaling-Up vs. Scaling-Down Landscapes*

Until the mid-1970s, geographers generally considered landscape a tangible object to be empirically accessed, described and researched. At this time, human geographers traced the evolution of landscape by emphasizing the reconstruction of the past, and privileged the non-urban or pre-industrial sites for landscape studies (e.g., Sauer (1963), Hoskins (1985, 1954); also see Wylie (2007) for a detailed and critical review). Since the 1980s, looking for more engagement with the wider social context in which cultures are formed and explained, geographers of landscape studies started conceptualizing landscape as the manifestation of critical sociopolitical issues such as difference, inequality, power, exclusion, and social stratification (e.g., Williams (1985), Cosgrove (1985), Duncan and Duncan (1988), Daniels

(1989), Rose (1993), Mitchell (1994), Gregory (1994), Domosh (1996), Matless (1998); also see Mitchell (2001) and Cosgrove (2003) for a detailed and critical review). This vibrant theoretical body of landscape studies has encountered another challenge resulting from the scenarios of multi-scale associations between different human and nonhuman elements working with diverse objectives, and a reorientation of studies seems imperative to understand the significance of landscape under current multi-scale connections (Mitchell 2003a).

Within the past two decades, geographers have increasingly rejected the view that landscapes are static and apolitical artifacts (Jackson 1989) by *scaling-up* landscapes beyond the local, to inquiries into capitalism (Cosgrove 1985), national identity (Daniel 1993; Matless 1998), gender politics (Rose 1993; Nash 1996), postcolonialism (Gregory 1994), resistance to global homogenization (Osborne 1998), social justice (Zukin 1991; Mitchell 1994, Olwig 1996), law and property (Blomley 1998), built environments (Walker 1995; Domosh 1996), privatization of space and nature (Katz 1998), tourism and authenticity (Oakes 1999), global sense of place (Massey 1994), and the circulation of capital (Henderson 1999). Following the trend toward globalization, this scaling-up framing of landscape studies seems to demonstrate that geographers have been anxious to directly tie local landscapes to the global, and to processes of modernization (Mitchell 2001). The majority of this scaling-up orientation to landscape studies asserts that landscape must always be scrutinized in both local and global scenarios; nevertheless some easily equate global scenarios with dominant forces in determining the local processes affecting people's everyday practices. While acknowledging the imperative of scaling-up landscape studies in an era of globalization, other geographers seek a more nuanced understanding of the landscapes that are entangled in people's everyday lives. This project takes the *scaling-down* approach, with its emphasis on everyday lives.

The scaling-down framing of landscape studies can be traced back to J. B. Jackson's concept of vernacular landscape, referring to the material world of the everyday life of ordinary American people (Jackson 1997, 1960) (Wylie 2007). Departing from Jackson's idea while being aware of its phenomenological framework (e.g., Merleau-Ponty [1969]), some human geographers have re-theorized landscape as a lived and practiced milieu (Cresswell 2003; Wylie 2007), highlighting concepts like dwelling activities (e.g., Ingold [2000]), everyday experiences of mobility (e.g., Wylie [2002], Merriman [2005]), and embodied acts (e.g., Tilley [2004], Lorimer [2005]). Although landscape phenomenology with a scaling-down approach has brought new topics and a basis on which to enrich landscape studies, it risks prioritizing the human subject as the only measure. In this respect, it constitutes a retreat from the politics of bodily practices affected by broader social and economic structures.

Instead of looking at scaling-up and scaling-down approaches as two polarized research orientations, my dissertation seeks the complementarity between these two approaches. Going back to Dovey's project that took place as assemblage, I take the approach of assemblage (Li 2007a; Delanda 2006; Marcus and Saka 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987) as an alternative research framework. Specifically, I follow Moore's articulated assemblage to combine both scaling-up and scaling-down approaches to landscape. That is, my dissertation situates different landscapes of tea in southwest China in relationship to various actors associated with the market economy, state modernization schemes, and local minority groups' livelihood practices. More specifically, practices of assemblage emphasize the *simultaneity* and *contingency* of scaling-up and scaling-down processes. Hence, the framework is able to enhance the understandings of how the localization of market restructuring and state agenda may reproduce hegemonic knowledge of tea production in a contingent way. At the same time, it looks into how the tea production has

been associated with local minority people's livelihood practices to transform the forms and institutions of the market economy and state governance process.

### *Landscapes as Discursive Constructions vs Landscapes as Material Struggles*

The idea that landscapes are socially constructed has been theorized by cultural geographers as well as scholars from other fields. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, landscape studies approached landscapes as “ways of seeing.” New cultural geographers adopted the concept of ways of seeing by investigating the visual qualities of landscapes, which focus on the *representations* of landscapes in paintings, literature, photos, and in other art media. Geographers thus have taken the representations and cultural images of landscapes as the expression of cultural, economic, and political power (e.g. Cosgrove [1998, 1984], Cosgrove and Daniels [1988], Duncan and Duncan [1988, 2004], Jackson [1989]). However, geographers of political economy have argued that landscape is more than a way of seeing, a representation, or an ideology, but a substantive, material reality, a place lived, a commingling of nature and society over and in which there is struggle (Mitchell 2003a, 2003b, 1994). In the meantime, influenced by poststructuralist and postcolonialist theories, geographers keep amending the theorization of landscape as representational, semiotic and as a discursive power (e.g. Gregory [1994], Matless [1998], Cosgrove [1998], Duncan and Duncan [2003]). As a result, a tension between landscapes as discursive constructions and as material outcomes exists in different studies. In failing to engage fully with each other, this tension risks missing a complementary explanatory potential in the conceptualization of landscape (Neumann 2005).

Political ecology, on the other hand, incorporates the approaches of both political economy and poststructuralism. Thus, it provides a productive tool kit to demonstrate and

engage with how a discursive analysis of landscape should take into account its material manifestations and struggles, and vice versa (e.g., Escobar [1996], Fairhead and Leach [1996], Neumann [1998, 2005], Walker and Fortmann [2003], Peet and Watts [2004], Moore [2005]). However, while theorizing the relationship between nature and society from both the discursive and material perspectives, many political ecologists seem to emphasize landscape as an end product. In other words, landscape is typically treated as a mute backdrop to be described and modified, but not itself affecting the relationship between nature and society.

Recent scholarship on the nature-society relationship and people-environment interactions has incorporated a focus on the practices of assemblage (e.g., Braun [2006], Kosek [2006], Murphy [2006], Li [2007a], Tsing [2005]). These studies also provide an alternative approach with which to study the frontier tea landscape. Specifically, by flagging the situated assemblages of frontier dilemmas between tradition and modernity and between the natural environment and economic development, this project not only looks at the images and discourses about the tea landscape that are produced by market forces and the state agenda, but also examines the changing tea landscape that has been assembled with disparate human and environmental elements and that has changed local tea-production practices. By focusing on practices of assemblage associated with the construction of a frontier tea landscape, this project attempts an understanding of the tea landscape that takes into account struggles over material access to land and their symbolic meanings. It thus avoids the crude differentiation between material determinism and representational politics (Hinchliffe 2003).

## 1.6 An Ethnography of Frontier Tea Story

I use the changing tea landscapes as my lens to investigate the place-making process on China's southwest frontier. I specifically highlight that, through the reconstruction of tea landscapes on the frontier, the place-making process is shifting the assemblage among tradition, modernity, nature, and development. Here I want to connect back to the three threads weaving through the entire dissertation: incompatible desires, changing moralities, and cultural renovations. I argue that the shifting assemblages materialized in tea landscapes have revealed the dilemmas between frontier as China's marginal territory and frontier as the connected space for the tea market. The dilemmas have in turn mobilized different actors, including government officials, tea entrepreneurs, and local minority ethnicities, to reproduce the frontier dilemmas through their incompatible desires, changing moralities, and cultural renovations (all three of which are themselves people's situated practices of assemblage) as they pertain to their everyday tea-production practices.

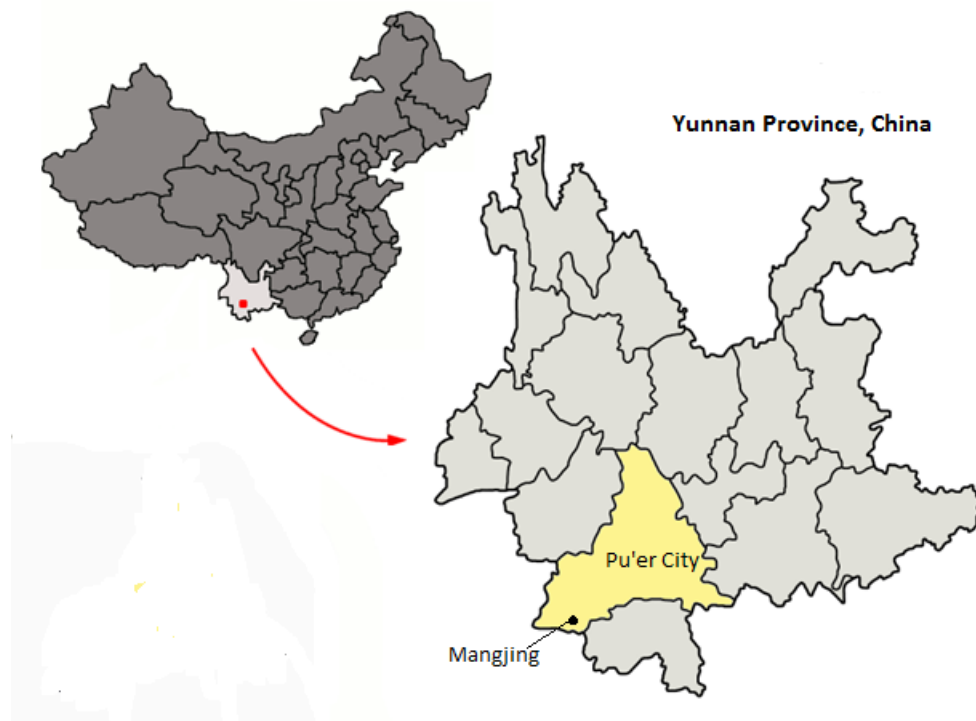
My tea story, in a very general sense, is a story about how people assemble and reassemble human and environmental elements as they confront the dilemmas on China's southwest frontier. Echoing Tania Li (2007a), my tea story is a story about "practices of assemblage" that forge connections among disparate elements and sustain connections in tensions. Moreover, the practices of assemblage are *situated*, and so is my story about tea production. I use ethnography as my central research method to flesh out the situated story of tea on the frontier, as well as to position myself as a researcher in knowledge production. What I will lay out in my dissertation, as was earlier described by Haraway (1991), is the "situated knowledge" presented by me, as an ethnographer.

I believe ethnography enhances the quality of the data obtained during fieldwork as well as the quality of the interpretation of the data, especially at a point when human geographers are increasingly engaged in research focused on everyday life. Ethnography, from this perspective, is both a data-collection and an analytic tool. Living with, working with, laughing with the people that a researcher is trying to understand provides a sense of the self and the other that is not easily put into words (Bernard 1998). It is a tacit understanding that informs both the form of research, the specific techniques of data collection, the recording of information, and the subsequent interpretation of materials collected (DeWalt et al. 1998). As anthropologist Robert Desjarlais (1992) argues, much of the learning regarding people's lives is tacit and at the level of the body. According to DeWalt et al. (1998, 264), Desjarlais has "gained cultural knowledge, learned how to sip tea, caught the meaning of jokes, participated in the practice of everyday life, [and] these interactions shaped his understanding of local values, patterns of actions, ways of being, moving, feeling."

Following Desjarlais's argument, DeWalt et al. (1998, 265) think there is no denying that part of what we know about life in the field is tacit, because "it is embodied in the way we walk, move, and talk." Ethnography embraces the tacit cultural form and therefore "informs interpretation of meaning. Most obviously, it allows us to understand nonverbal communication, to anticipate and understand responses. It shapes how we interact with others and, more fundamentally, it shapes how we interpret what we observe" (ibid). As Clifford (1997, 91) quoting from DeWalt et al. (1998, 265) argues, the field worker "who does not try to experience the world of the observed through ethnography will find it much harder to critically examine research assumptions and beliefs and themselves." This focus on everyday practices and the embodiment of tacit knowledge has enabled ethnographers to understand how a social group

develops a series of relations and cultural constructions that tie it together (Herbert 2000). As Ley (1988, 121) addresses, ethnography “is concerned to make sense of the actions and intentions of people as knowledgeable agents; indeed, more properly it attempts to make sense of their making sense of the events and opportunities confronting them in everyday life.”

Figure 1.3. Map of Pu'er Prefecture (Pu'er City)<sup>6</sup> of Yunnan (modified by Po-Yi Hung from the original version retrieved on March 18, 2012 from the Wikimedia Commons at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Location\\_of\\_Pu%27er\\_Prefecture\\_within\\_Yunnan\\_\(China\).png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Location_of_Pu%27er_Prefecture_within_Yunnan_(China).png)).



For my dissertation, ethnography therefore provides the situated knowledge about how people have confronted the dilemmas on the frontier to make sense of the state and the market through their everyday life of tea production. Specifically, I have conducted my ethnographic

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<sup>6</sup> The Pu'er Prefecture has been officially called “Pu'er City” (*Pu'er Shi*), a prefectural-level city of Yunnan Province, since 2007. A prefectural-city is usually not a “city” as in the usual sense. Rather, it is an administrative division ranking below a province and above a county in the People’s Republic of China. To avoid any confusion, I use “Pu'er Prefecture” throughout the dissertation.



work in a village called Mangjing. Mangjing is located in Jingmai Mountain (*Jingmaishan*), a renowned tea mountain in the Pu'er Prefecture of Yunnan Province (see Figure 1.3 above).

Most of the villagers in Mangjing are one of the minority nationalities of China, Bulang (or Blang). According to one village official, the total population of Mangjing, as of 2011, is about 2,500 people distributed in six “natural villages” (*zirancun*) within the administrative boundary of Mangjing. Approximately 93 percent of its total population was Bulang. As stated by the village official in 2011, there were 6,500 *mu* of terrace (modern) tea gardens and 4,400 *mu* of ancient tea forest/arboretum in Mangjing (a *mu* is about 0.167 acre or 0.067 hectare). In Mangjing, Bulang men and women harvest tea, process their tea leaves, and practice their religious tea rituals, producing a tea landscape simultaneously shaped by the transfer of tea-tree ownership, the governmental campaign to transform tea gardens, and the increasing market demand for ancient tree teas. My job as an ethnographer in Mangjing was to situate myself into the entanglements in the tea forest, the state interventions, the market forces, and the Bulang villagers' everyday life. My dissertation is an ethnography of Mangjing, a village located on China's margin and struggling over its connection to the market economy.

### 1.6.1 *My First Entrance*

It was July 2009, the rainy season in Yunnan as well as the off-peak time for the production of Pu'er tea. Mr. Cai, a Taiwanese tea entrepreneur with American citizenship, drove me to his tea factory in Jingmai Mountain, one of the largest factories that produce “ancient tree tea” (*gushu cha*). As its name suggests, ancient tree tea is the kind of 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 from books, magazines, and from the photos taken by friends who visited the tea mountains in Yunnan. The trip to Mr. Cai's factory located in Jingmai Mountain would be the first time I would see the landscape of ancient tea trees on site. "It is me, the person who teach them (local villagers) how to turn the 'green' (the ancient tea trees) into the 'real gold' in the market," Cai proudly said.

To some extent, Cai's words were not exaggerating, but reflected the significant influence of Taiwanese tea entrepreneurs on producing the value and boosting the market for Pu'er tea (see the discussion in section 1.3.1). As a Taiwanese as well as a tea lover myself, I had taken the opportunity to know many Taiwanese Pu'er tea entrepreneurs, who frequently traveled between Taiwan and China, and mostly to Yunnan, for their tea businesses. Most of these entrepreneurs spoke openly about their experiences in the tea business in China. Also, several of them were willing to directly provide information about where and how they had secured the ancient tea leaves, including Cai. In fact, Cai was the first tea entrepreneur who invited me to have a visit to his tea factory and "his" ancient tea forest in Yunnan, which led to my first field trip to Mangjing in July 2009.

The first visit to Mangjing was with Cai, who intended to show me "his" ancient tea forest in Jingmai Mountain. In 2003, Cai signed a fifty-year contract with the county government to monopolize the "usage rights" (*shiyongquan*) for all the ancient tea trees in Jingmai Mountain. Jingmai Mountain is actually a geographical area including two administrative villages, Jingmai and Mangjing. Although Cai "owned" the ancient tea trees in both villages, he intentionally brought me to Mangjing, because he thought Mangjing, a Bulang village, retained more tea

culture and history than Jingmai, a Dai village. The transference of the ownership of the ancient tea trees, however, did create tension between Cai and the Bulang villagers in Mangjing (see the discussion in chapter 2). Despite Cai's willingness to bring me to Mangjing, the Bulang villagers were cautious about my presence in their village because of my seemingly close relationship with Cai. Although I heard a large share of Mangjing's tea story from Cai's perspective, I seldom had significant and meaningful talks with Bulang villagers during my first visit.

### 1.6.2 *The Second Visit*

In order to establish rapport with the Bulang villagers in Mangjing, I used a different strategy when I arrived in Mangjing for the second time. This time I entered with the help from Teacher Yang, a certificated and locally renowned tea master who was also Cai's good friend. Teacher Yang had a close friendship with several local tea factories run by the Bulang villagers. With his introduction, I was able to set up direct contacts with the Bulang owners of local tea factories. I was also able to reside in one of the main factories, called the Bulang Princess Tea Factory (*Bulang Gongzhu Chachang*) during my second visit to my field site from October to December 2010. I was direct with Cai, informing him that I would stay at the Bulang Princess Tea Factory without hiding my research trip from him. During this second stay in Mangjing, I intentionally introduced myself as a Taiwanese who was pursuing a Ph.D. in geography in the United States. I also made it clear that I was not a businessman, so would not buy and sell any tea to either Taiwan or the United States for any villager. Finally, I clarified that I did not work for Cai in any capacity, and that I had talked to Cai only because I wanted to know about the development of tea production in Jingmai Mountain.

My stay in the Bulang Princess Tea Factory, and the way I introduced myself, worked better, in three ways, at establishing rapport with the local Bulang villagers. First, the Bulang Princess Tea Factory was owned by an elite Bulang family, which was respected by most of the villagers in Mangjing. Being a guest of a respected family had reduced villagers' cautiousness with me, compared to my first introduction as Cai's friend. Second, by assuring villagers that I had no intention of conducting tea business, I was able to cultivate true friendships with many of the villagers, though some would immediately show their indifference once they knew I was actually not a tea merchant. Third, being a Taiwanese pursuing a Ph.D. in the United States created an "instructor-learner" relationship, with the villagers as teachers and me as the student. Most of the time, I was sincere when I asked villagers to teach me, a Ph.D. student from the United States, about their tea culture and their ways of producing tea. As they realized that I was in fact not as knowledgeable as they originally thought, the villagers were willing to teach me what I did not know, with the hope that I would retell their stories once back in the United States. Nonetheless, sometimes I would also be put in the position of giving villagers suggestions as a knowledgeable Ph.D. in the villagers' imaginations. Whenever I was put in the position of a neutral researcher giving suggestions, I would express my true thoughts, which usually led to more conversation, between villagers and me as well as among the villagers themselves.

### 1.6.3 *The Third Visit*

During my second visit to Mangjing, I developed some friendships with the local Bulang villagers, which allowed me to more easily conduct my research on my third field visit, from March to May 2011. Each year, the months from March to May constitute the busiest season for

Bulang villagers, because this is when they harvest and process the “spring tea” (*chuncha*). During my third stay in Mangjing, I was able to participate in the villagers’ everyday tea-production activities. For example, I went harvesting tea with villagers in the tea forest and in their terrace tea gardens, helped them package the dried tea leaves, went with them when they sold tea to outside tea merchants, participated in their religious tea rituals, and sometimes even babysat their kids when their parents were absent for tea harvesting. In addition to staying at the Bulang Princess Tea Factory, I was occasionally invited by my Bulang friends to live in their homes, usually for a period of two to three days. By my third stay in Mangjing, I felt myself not only an observer, but a participant as an ethnographer, and I started feeling emotionally attached to my Bulang friends’ losses and gains related to their tea production.

In addition to being a participant observer during my third visit, I was able to get in touch with more outside tea entrepreneurs by staying at the Bulang Princess Tea Factory. During the yearly peak season of tea production (from March to May), tea entrepreneurs flooded into Mangjing to do their business with Bulang villagers. The Bulang Princess Tea Factory, as one of the major local tea factories, acted as an agent to produce a large share of the “raw material” (*maocha*) for outside tea entrepreneurs (see the discussion in chapter 3). Many outside tea entrepreneurs would stay at the guesthouse of Bulang Princess Tea Factory for a couple days to “supervise” the processing of their tea. I therefore got many chances to drink tea and to chat with the outside tea entrepreneurs, most of whom were willing to share their thoughts about tea production in Mangjing. On a few occasions, I was able to go with tea entrepreneurs to observe how they supervised the Bulang villagers’ processing techniques in the factory. Several of the outside tea entrepreneurs also became friends of mine, and thus had conversations with me about tea, either in Mangjing or at their places outside Mangjing.

#### 1.6.4 *Friends as Key Informants*

I relied on my friends, including Cai, the Bulang villagers, and the outside tea entrepreneurs for my data collection. As a result, instead of conducting general surveys or formal interviews with as many people as possible, I collected my data based on my everyday conversations with my friends, who then became my key informants for this dissertation research. My reliance on friends as my key informants for data collection does not, however, limit my tea story to the unique experiences of my friends. Rather, their experiences epitomize tea production both in Mangjing and more generally in southwest China. I am not suggesting that my particular story is a thorough picture of tea production of Mangjing, but that it is a story that has been situated and based on my three visits to Mangjing. My analysis and interpretation, which come from my participation in and observations about my key informants' everyday lives of tea production are meant to enhance understandings about the changing relationships among people, the state, and the market economy, and about the emergence of frontiers as dilemmas.

#### 1.6.5 *Language and Gender Limitations*

I confronted two research limitations as a result of language and gender. Regarding language, I am a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, but cannot speak the Bulang language. This limited me in that, for example, I was not able to communicate with those who could not speak well in Mandarin Chinese, the old men and women Bulang villagers, in particular. Nevertheless, most of the Bulang villagers in Mangjing who are younger than their early forties

speak well in Mandarin Chinese. They use Mandarin Chinese to communicate with those who cannot speak the Bulang language, including outside tea merchants, non-Bulang government officials, and me. Although Bulang villagers usually speak Bulang with each other, I could still easily ask for a translation into Mandarin to understand the conversations among villagers.

Most of my key informants among the Bulang villagers were male, with the exception of two women. As a man myself, it was easier, and more comfortable, for me to participate in Bulang men's everyday social activities, such as drinking and smoking. Gradually, I cultivated friendships with Bulang men, but seldom with Bulang women. Even when I was invited to dine in Bulang friends' places, usually men, including me, would sit together at a table eating and drinking, while women were sitting somewhere else or doing family chores. As a result, my analysis was mostly based on men's perspectives on tea production in Mangjing.

## **1.7 Chapter Outlines**

I divide the main body of the dissertation into five chapters: property, quality, hierarchy, landscape, and rituals. I will briefly outline each chapter here.

### *1.7.1 Property*

The market reappraisal of the ancient tree teas has changed local Bulang villagers' perception of the tea forest and introduced a sense of property toward the ancient tea trees. In this chapter, I use an event that happened in 2003 as the turning point that substantially altered the relation between the local Bulang villagers and the tea forest. The year 2003 was when Cai, the

Taiwanese entrepreneur, signed a 50-year contract with the county government to become the only legal producer of ancient tree teas in the area of Jingmai Mountain. In other words, Cai became the only person who could use tea leaves from the tea forest in the area of Jingmai Mountain, including all the ancient tea trees in the village of Mangjing. My analysis will trace the genealogy of land distributions before 2003. Meanwhile, I will address Bulang villagers' reactions in reclaiming property rights from Cai. The tension between Cai and the Bulang villagers, I argue, demonstrated incompatible desires from both sides. For Cai, while he wanted to monopolize the resources of ancient tea leaves, he also desired cooperative relations with the Bulang villagers. For the Bulang villagers, they wanted ownership of the ancient tea leaves, but they also desired Cai's strategies in marketing the ancient tree tea of Mangjing.

### 1.7.2 *Quality*

This chapter discusses the three essential standards for tea production brought by outside tea entrepreneurs to Mangjing. These three standards are “pure material” (*chunliao*) of ancient tea leaves, the “artistic techniques” (*gongyi*) of processing raw material (*maocha*), and the “tea art” (*chayi*) for packaging tea as a cultural product. The standards also respectively situate in the three stages of tea production: leaf collection, leaf processing, and product sale. Behind these three basic but critical standards is the outside tea entrepreneurs' differentiation between themselves and the Bulang people, and in general between the Han social majority and China's minority nationalities. This differentiation is based on the idea of “quality” (*suzhi*). Although each tea entrepreneur might define *suzhi* differently, in general they use this term to downgrade the capability of the Bulang villagers in Mangjing in terms of making the ancient tree tea. The



three standards of tea production reveal the outside tea entrepreneurs' three means to judge the Bulang people's *suzhi*. The three standards in turn create new moral standards for the cultivation of the Bulang villagers' entrepreneurship.

### 1.7.3 *Hierarchy*

The increasing value of the ancient tree teas has changed social relations among the local Bulang villagers in Mangjing. I argue that this change in social relations has split Bulang villagers into different hierarchical statuses. This reconfiguration of hierarchical social relations has involved three groups that are based on ownership of the ancient tea trees and the ability to invest in tea production. This chapter examines the differences and the interactions among these three groups of villagers, including local tea company/factory owners, raw material producers (*cuzhichang*), and fresh leaf providers. I regard the local tea company/factory owners as the top tier of the three hierarchical groups. The middle group comprises the raw material producers, who own the basic machines that produce the raw materials (called *maocha*), which are essential to the manufacture of the final products of ancient tree teas. Last are the tea-leaf providers. People in this bottom tier do not own a large number of ancient tea trees, and lack the capital to purchase a machine to make *maocha*, or the skill to run it. They simply provide fresh tea leaves. This chapter discusses the changing social orders within Mangjing based on the emerging hierarchical relations among these three groups of villagers. I argue that the emerging hierarchical relations among Bulang villagers have resulted from their self-engineering of citizenship for the tea market.

#### 1.7.4 *Landscape*

In this chapter, I argue that the transformation of the tea landscape in Yunnan represents the physical form of shifting market demands and has fed the resulting state discourse to redefine modernity and nature for the purpose of tea production. This chapter also seeks to shed light on the Bulang villagers' ambivalence toward positioning themselves in the reconceptualization of modernity and nature that has resulted from the transformation of the tea landscape. Specifically, I discuss the state-led project to transform the modern tea plantation, to restore the landscape of "ancient tea forest" (*guchalin*) or "ancient tea arboretum" (*guchayuan*). In Mangjing, the ancient tea forest was considered by the state to be a form of backward culture and lagging economy. As a result, many ancient tea trees were clear-cut for planting either the "modern" terrace tea (*taidi cha*) or other crops. The growing market of ancient tree teas, in turn, has substantially created new economic, cultural, and political values. As a consequence, the government, ironically, has launched a restoration project to bring back the missing ancient tea forest. This transformation of the tea landscape, I argue, can be viewed as a construction of tradition in modernity. It has been a process of construction of Bulang villagers via landscape transformation. This chapter analyzes the symbolic and physical changes in the frontier tea landscape. In addition, I address local Bulang villagers' multiple responses to the transformation of the tea landscape in order to understand their resulting ambivalent perceptions of modernity, nature, and themselves.

### 1.7.5 *Rituals*

The changing landscapes, social relations, and the reconstructions of the meanings of the tea forest have disrupted Bulang villagers' understandings about their relationship with the tea forest. Confronted with the disruptions, Bulang villagers have rebuilt their linkages with the tea forest through religious rituals, especially through the occasional "Worm Worship" (*chong ji*) and a yearly ceremony called "Tea Ancestor Worship" (*chazu ji*). During the spring peak time of tea production in 2011, the ancient tea forest in Mangjing suffered an infestation of worms. The fresh leaves of the ancient tea trees were largely destroyed by caterpillars, resulting in a severe shortage in the tea harvest. The destruction led the tribal head to hold a village-wide ritual to control the disaster. Tea Ancestor Worship has been specifically held for the Bulang people's legendary ancestor called Pia Ai Leng, who was regarded by local Bulang villagers as a common ancestor without designating him a tea ancestor. Nevertheless, Pia Ai Leng has been honored as the Bulang people's tea ancestor since the Tea Ancestor Worship was restored in the early 2000s. Although these rituals have been publicized as a recovered tradition for the Bulang people, many ceremonial details, specifically those for tea, are new to villagers. The traditional rituals have been renovated to incorporate new meanings for the tea forest. This chapter argues that by participating in the renovated tea rituals, villagers have re-articulated their collective identity as Bulang people with the modern economic, political, and cultural values of the tea forest.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Property: Changes in the Ownership of the Ancient Tea Trees in Mangjing**

It was July 5, 2009, the rainy season of Yunnan as well as the off-peak time for the production of Pu'er tea. Mr. Cai, a Taiwanese tea entrepreneur with American citizenship, drove me to his tea factory in Jingmai Mountain, one of the main production sites for “ancient tree tea” (*gushucha*). As its name suggests, ancient tree tea is a Pu'er tea made from the tea leaves of ancient tea trees (*guchashu*). Before this trip, I had heard of ancient tree tea and tasted it with many tea entrepreneurs, retailers, and tea connoisseurs. But I had not yet seen the ancient tea trees in person, though I had virtually seen the trees from online pictures, books, magazines, and from photos taken by friends who visited tea mountains in Yunnan. The trip to Mr. Cai's factory located in Jingmai Mountain would be the very first time for me to see the landscape of ancient tea trees on site.

Along the route to Cai's factory, most of the tea plantations were still terrace tea, which was also much more commonly seen in Yunnan and other tea production areas in China. Cai pointed to the landscape of terrace tea alongside the road that meandered in the tea mountain, and told me that many of the terrace tea gardens were originally the ancient tea forest (*guchalin*). Tea planters clear-cut the ancient tea forest and changed it into terrace tea gardens. Cai recalled that he was so excited to see so many ancient tea trees alive when he visited Jingmai Mountain for the first time in 2003. However, he was also appalled by the local villagers' reckless removal of the trees. Before 2003, Cai said, the ancient tree tea of Jingmai Mountain was valued much less than terrace tea in the market. Unfortunately, “local people, including local officials, in the

villages of Jingmai and Mangjing<sup>7</sup> didn't realize the value of ancient tea trees before I started my tea factory to produce the ancient tree tea." Nowadays the name "Jingmai," Cai claimed with self-confidence, referred to not only a place but also a renowned brand as one of the best ancient tree teas in the market.

According to Cai, before his arrival to Jingmai Mountain, the price of fresh ancient tea leaves could be as low as 2 to 3 RMB<sup>8</sup> per kilogram. In order to make local villagers in Jingmai Mountain, mostly Dai or Bulang people, realize the "real value" (*zhenzheng de jiazhi*) of the ancient tree tea, Cai purchased the fresh ancient tea leaves at a price ten times higher than the general 2003 price, paying 20 to 30 RMB per kilogram when he started producing the ancient tree tea of Jingmai Mountain in 2003. "They thought I was crazy," said Cai. After Cai raised the price of fresh ancient tea leaves in Jingmai Mountain significantly, the price kept escalated quickly. Cai recalled that in 2004 the price of fresh ancient tea leaves rose to 30 to 40 RMB per kilogram, then to 50 to 70 RMB in 2005, and then to 120 to 140 RMB in 2006. Although the price plummeted sharply after the bubble in the Pu'er tea market burst in 2007, and began a pattern of fluctuating that continues today, "they (local villagers) could still sell their fresh tea leaves with the price of at least 30 RMB per kilogram," claimed Cai.

"Making people realize the real value of ancient tree tea (of Jingmai Mountain) is not necessarily good to me," Cai complained. He said that now everyone knew the ancient tea leaves were "good stuff" (*hao dongxi*), and came to Jingmai Mountain to purchase them. "People ignore that I am the only legal collector of the ancient tea leaves of Jingmai Mountain," Cai asserted in a frustrated voice. Cai informed me that he signed a fifty-year contract with the county

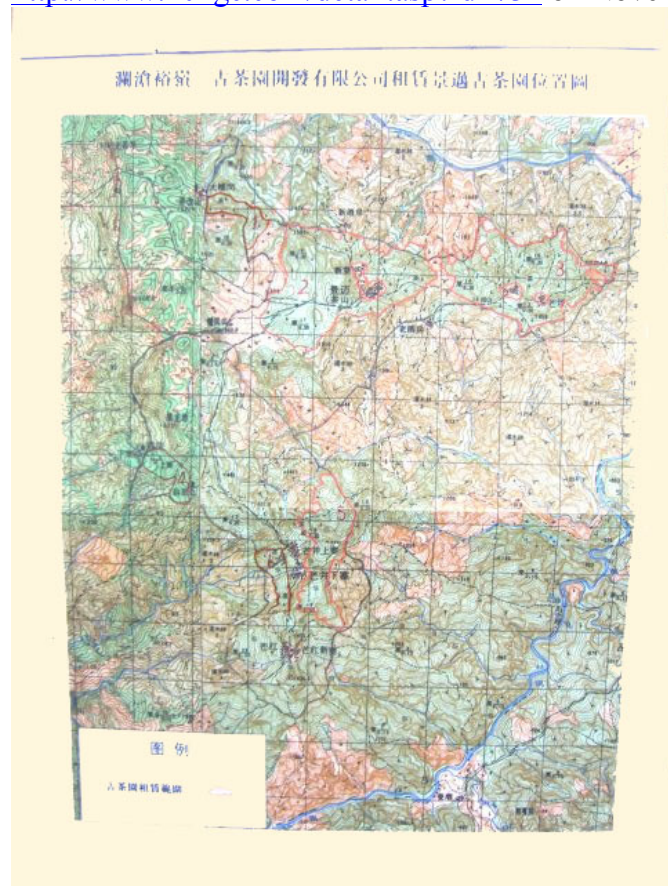
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<sup>7</sup> Jingmai and Mangjing are two major administrative villages in the area of Jingmai Mountain, located in Huimin Township of Lancang County in Pu'er City. While most of the population of Jingmai Village is Dai people, Bulang people constitute the main population of Mangjing Village.

<sup>8</sup> RMB is the official currency in China. 1 US dollar was about 8.28 RMB dollars in July 2003.

government to retain the right for “using and managing” (*shiyong jingying quan*)<sup>9</sup> the ancient tea forest of Jingmai Mountain (Figure 2.1). According to the contract, Cai claimed, local villagers could only collect and sell the fresh ancient tea leaves to Cai. However, tea merchants from outside Jingmai Mountain still came freely to purchase the ancient tea leaves. In addition, local villagers would sell their tea leaves to tea merchants other than Cai, depending on the prices offered by the outside tea merchants. “Legality is a joke; money talks; this is China,” Cai said to me.

Figure 2.1 Areas (circled by red lines) where Cai’s company retains the right to use and manage the ancient tea forest under a fifty-year contract. Retrieved from Cai’s company website at <http://www.101gc.com/detail.asp?id=731> on November 5, 2012.



<sup>9</sup> Cai also claims his right of “usage and management” granted by the fifty-year contract on his company website at <http://www.101gc.com/detail.asp?id=731>. Retrieved on November 5, 2012.

“The contract was only an agreement between the county government and Cai,” said Hongyan<sup>10</sup>, the owner of one local tea company in Mangjing. Hongyan did not think the contract between Cai and the county government was legal, due to its lack of local villagers’ collective agreement. “They [Cai and the county government] did not inform us at all when they signed the contract,” explained Hongyan. In Hongyan’s mind, all the villagers in Mangjing were forced to agree to the contract in order to boost local tea production and the overall development of the tea industry in Yunnan. Indeed, Hongyan admitted that Cai did “make Jingmai and Mangjing famous” in the tea market, especially with his promotion of the ancient tree tea. However, Hongyan still thought Cai did not have the right to “own” villagers’ ancient tea trees under the contract, notwithstanding the fact that the contract was limited to fifty years. “We [Bulang villagers] inherited those [ancient tea] trees from our ancestors,” said Hongyan. She then explained to me that most of the Bulang villagers in Mangjing were actually willing to cooperate with Cai in the interest of promoting tea production. Nevertheless, Hongyan emphasized, Cai had to bear in mind that none of the villagers would dispossess “any single [ancient tea] tree for any single day, not to mention fifty years.”

These different perspectives epitomized the tension between Cai and the local Bulang villagers regarding the ownership of ancient tea trees. The market reappraisal of the ancient tree teas, I argue, had changed local Bulang villagers’ perception of the tea forest and introduced a sense of property regarding the ancient tea trees. In this chapter, I use an event that happened in 2003 as the turning point that substantially altered the relation between the local Bulang villagers and the tea forest. This was the year when Cai, a Taiwanese-American tea entrepreneur, signed a fifty-year contract with the Lancang County Government to become the only legal producer of ancient tree teas in the area of Jingmai Mountain. In other words, Cai became the only person

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<sup>10</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I use a pseudonym for every Mangjing villager.

who could use tea leaves from the tea forest in the area of Jingmai Mountain, including all the ancient tea trees in the village of Mangjing. My analysis traces the situation before the event as well as the impacts afterwards in terms of the changes in ownership of the ancient tea trees. Specifically, I divide the chapter into three major parts in a general chronicle sense.

First, I briefly address the genealogy of land distributions before 2003. This section focuses on a genealogical analysis for the land distributions and the land use practices in the tea forest before 2003, the year when the local government leased out the ownership of the ancient tea trees to the Taiwanese entrepreneur. My major data are the oral histories collected from the members of the tribal head (*touren*) family in Mangjing. These oral histories help to trace back the land distribution of the tea forest in different periods of time, from communist China to today's late-socialist China. In addition to the oral histories, I analyze the major Chinese policies for "land reform" (*tudi gaige*) applied to the village of Mangjing. Second, I focus on the Bulang villagers' efforts to reclaim property rights from Cai. For this part, I aim to elaborate the changing relations between the local Bulang villagers and Cai specifically. Cai's legal and official "ownership" of the ancient tea trees since the year of 2003 led to a reaction from the local Bulang villagers that was, in fact, not consistent, changing from cooperation in the early stage, to later resistance, and finally to an attempt to reclaim a collective ownership of the tea forest. Upon leaving my fieldwork, I found the ownership of the ancient tea trees based on the fifty-year contract signed by Cai actually, in practice, had become ambiguous. The ambiguity of the effectiveness of the contract occurred after the overall Pu'er tea market bubble burst in 2007. This forced villagers into a financial crisis. This financial crisis, then, reconfigured the relationship between Cai and the villagers and changed villagers' perceptions of ownership of the ancient tea trees.



## 2.1 Ownership without Market-Driven Forces: A Brief Genealogy of the Ownership of the Ancient Tea Trees in Mangjing from 1949 to the Early 2000s

### 2.1.1 Before the Arrival of the Communists in 1949

“We [Bulang villagers] ‘took back’ our [ancient tea] trees in the early 80s,” said Xianjin, one of the descendants of the “tribal head family” (*touren jia*). According to Xianjin and many other villagers in Mangjing, before communist China was established in 1949, all the ancient tea trees in Mangjing were privately owned by each household. In other words, all the land and ancient tea trees were inherited from generation to generation until the Communist Chinese government came to Mangjing. However, Xianjin said, before the Communists came, not every household owned private land in the ancient tea forest. Additionally, Xianjin further explained, those who held land there did not have equal shares of land. At the very beginning, Xianjin indicated, the Communists redistributed the land of ancient tea trees in order to make every household in Mangjing to have land with an equal area. This, according to Xianjin, meant that his family lost large amount of land since his family was the tribal head family who owned the largest area of land in the ancient tea forest.

Xianjin’s comments about the ownership of ancient tea trees before Communist China, however, was different from or even contradictory to other explanations from other villagers<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Due to my research language limitation, I could only minimally collect the oral history from the older Bulang villagers who could not speak Mandarin Chinese, but who experienced the ownership of the ancient tea trees before the Communist Chinese government came to Mangjing. The data I collected were mostly from the younger Bulang villagers who ranged in age from their early twenties to their early fifties. In other words, the analysis of the ownership of ancient tea trees was based on the data collected from those who did not actually witness and experience the changing ownership of the ancient tea trees before

During my field research, I was in fact given two other explanations of ancient-tea-tree ownership before the Communist regime. Inconsistent with Xianjin's explanation, several other villagers indicated that the ancient tea forest was actually commonly owned by all the villagers in Mangjing, even before the Communist Party came. In other words, there were no clear boundaries within the tea forest to denote the exact ownership of land for each household. Everyone could freely go to the ancient tea forest to harvest tea leaves prior to 1949. The third explanation I heard from another group of villagers was that all the ancient tea trees, before the Communist Party implemented land redistribution, belonged to the tribal head family, of which Xianjin was a descendant. According to this explanation, at that time the tribal family was responsible for the distribution of the land of the ancient tea forest to specific households. In other words, the tribal head family acted as the landlord of the ancient tea forest.

In spite of the three different narratives villagers provided to explain the ownership of the ancient tea trees before the Communist era, one area of common agreement was that all the tea leaves collected from the tea forest were privately owned by the harvesters. In other words, before the Chinese Communist Party implemented land revolution in Mangjing after 1949, the tea leaves harvested from the ancient tea trees were mostly privately owned, regardless of the blurry scenarios of land ownership in the ancient tea forest. Nevertheless, the ownership, including both the land and the ancient tea leaves, was substantively changed with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (the Communist regime) in 1949. As Xianjin recalled, "we [Bulang villagers] started harvesting tea for the [communist] government." Xianjin stated that, at the beginning, which was in the early 1950s, the communist government seemed to

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the Communist Party came. As a result, it could be expected that they might have different understandings regarding ownership. I presented the comments I collected during my field research. Nevertheless, it is not my intention to certify which comments are true or which are false. I present the comments to highlight the blurry ownership of the ancient tea trees during the specific era based on the data I have at this point.

“try to be nicer” to the poorer villagers, especially those who did not have land. In accordance, Xianjin said that the Communist Party redistributed land in the ancient tea forest to every household in Mangjing. The purpose, according to Xianjin, was to make sure everyone in Mangjing could have a piece of land to make a living. “This did not last long, however,” said Xianjin.

### *2.1.2 From the 1950s to the Early 1980s: The Chinese State’s Confiscation of the Ancient Tea Forest*

Xianjin, explained further that every parcel of land, including every single tea tree in the tea forest, quickly became the state’s property. “The communists told us that it was an ‘advanced’ [*jimbude*] way,” said Xianjin, referring to turning the ancient tea forest into a communal property owned by the state. Nonetheless, Xianjin informed me that at that time most of the villagers, in fact, did not really care about the changing ownership of the whole ancient tea forest. Actually, not just Xianjin but also many other villagers informed me of the villagers’ carelessness concerning the dispossession of the ancient tea forest, including the land and tea trees, in the late 1950s. Two main reasons given by Xianjin and by many other villagers explained their carelessness at the time. First, as Xianjin said, “no one earned their living by harvesting ancient tea leaves,” back to the 1950s, and even in the 1960s and the 1970s. As a result, the dispossession of the ancient tea forest, meaning the changing ownership from private to state-owned, did not have a serious impact on villagers’ livings. Second, related to the first reason, villagers were much more concerned about their subsistence crops for their livelihood, which, as Xianjin expressed, “could decide whether a villager would survive, stay in hunger, or even die,”

in the 1950s and 1960s. “We [Bulang villagers] didn’t have extra energy to think about those [ancient tea] trees,” said another Bulang villager.

“Nothing was ours, even a broken plow in 1960s,” said Xianjin. Xianjin recalled that the Communist Party claimed that everything, including the ancient tea forest in Mangjing, was “communally owned,” but the fact was people did not officially own anything in the tea forest. Even though the state had made every ancient tea tree state property, the Communist Party, Xianjin emphasized, did not care about the production of the ancient tea forest either. Simply put, Xianjin thought the Communist Party did not view the ancient tea forest as a valuable state-owned property that should be kept. In the 1950s, the Chinese state, according to Xianjin, asked the local villagers to cut down the ancient tea trees in order to transform the tea forest into a modern terrace tea garden. The purpose was to increase the overall tea production in Mangjing<sup>12</sup>. However, the transformation was unsuccessful because, as Xianjin noted, no one cared about how much tea one could produce. To clarify, although Xianjin and many other villagers said that both the Chinese state and villagers in Mangjing cared little about the tea produced from the ancient tea forest, from the 1950s to the 1970s villagers still harvested tea leaves which would be collected by the state-owned tea factories. Even though tea production in Manjing was maintained at that time, the reality was that “no matter how much [tea] you produced [for the government], you received the same scanty amount [of food from the government],” according to Xianjin.

Xianjin and many other villagers’ narratives regarding the ownership of the ancient tea forest in the 1950s and 1960s could be compared with the series of “land reform” (*tudi gaige*) practices put in place by the Communist Chinese government. In July 1949, the Communist

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<sup>12</sup> Janet Sturgeon (2005) argued that the tea plantation during the communal era was mainly for building socialist modernity on China’s southwest frontier, not for tea production per se.

Party, which had gained control of most of Mainland China, declared the Common Program (*Gongtong Gangling*), passed by Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (*Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xieshang Huiyi*). The Common Program specifically declared that the "People's Republic of China must change the semi-colonial and semi-feudal system of land ownership, step by step, into the system of ownership for peasants<sup>13</sup>." In June 1950, the Chinese government promulgated the *Land Reform Law of the People's Republic of China* (*zhonghua renmin gongheguo tudi gaige fa*). According to the law, the purpose of the land reform was to demolish the landlord class, which exploited peasants under a feudal system of land ownership, and to replace it with a system for peasants' land ownership, thereby liberating rural laborers for the development of agricultural production, and paving the way for the industrialization of New China<sup>14</sup>.

The inauguration of the Land Reform Law in 1950 substantially changed land ownership in China. The law became a major institutional force for the redistribution of land ownership to those Chinese peasants who had no land and lacked of any other production resources. This resonated well with Xianjin's words that the Communist Party tried "to be nicer" to villagers who did not have private land in Mangjing. Although in Mangjing the ownership of the ancient tea forest after the inauguration of the Land Reform Law was blurry, there was still agreement in the comments from different villagers that the land in the ancient tea forest, including the ancient tea leaves, became the state's property soon after the inauguration of the law. As Xianjin said,

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<sup>13</sup> The original Chinese is "中華人民共和國必須有步驟的將半殖民、半封建的土地所有制改變為農民的土地所有制" (*zhonghua renmin gongheguo bixu youbuzoude jiang banzhimin banfengjian de tudi suoyouzhi gaibianwei nongminde tudi suoyouzhi*). See Wang (2003, 79).

<sup>14</sup> The original Chinese in the Land Reform Law is "廢除地主階級封建剝削的土地所有制，實行農民的土地所有制，藉以解放農村生產力，發展農業生產，為新中國的工業開闢道路" (*feichu dizhujieji fengjian boxue de tudi suoyouzhi, shixing nongmin de tudi suoyouzhi, jieyi jiefang nongcun shengchanli, fazhan nongye shengchan, wei xinzhongguo de gongye kaipi daolu*). See Wang (2003, 79).

the Communist Party tried to be nicer to the peasants, but “it did not last long.” In general, whereas the Land Reform Law was regarded as a radical effort to root out the feudal system and to grant land ownership to peasants, the People’s Commune (*renmin gongshe*) initiated by Mao Zedong in late 1950s soon terminated all private ownership, including land ownership, in rural China.

Xianjin’s words, “Nothing was ours, even a broken plow,” fit with the impact of the state-imposed policy of the People’s Commune. Under the rule of the People’s Commune, all production resources, including all land and every agricultural tool, were collectively owned, “namely by People’s Commune, but in reality by the Communist Party,” in Xianjin’s words. The Communist Chinese government, with the guidance of People’s Commune, confiscated all private lands and all other types of property to turn private ownership into communal ownership (see discussions from Chen [2003]; and Ho [2005]). Additionally, all the private resources for production were automatically submitted to the People’s Commune without compensation. Furthermore, all the goods produced from the communal land were now for the commune, and could not be sold as a commodity, or even be stored individually as private goods for subsistence.

In China, the system of the People’s Commune lasted until the early 1980s (Hu 1998; Chen 2004; Ho 2005). The confiscation of all the private land and other production resources under the implementation of the People’s Commune, in general, reduced the motivation among rural individuals to be productive agriculturally (Wang 2003). More important, it became one of the primary contributors to the widespread social problems of hunger and poverty in rural China (Wang, 2003). This applied to Mangjing beginning in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. The confiscation of the ancient tea forest and the hampered rural productivity resulted in villagers’ carelessness toward the ancient tea trees, and toward tea production in general. In the

words of one villager, “We [Bulang villagers] didn’t have extra energy to think about those [ancient tea] trees.” This harsh period meant that villagers did not own a single tea leaf from the tea forest, and that the widespread threat of rural hunger and poverty pushed villagers to think about the “real food,” but not about tea.

During the era of the People’s Commune, villagers in Mangjing still harvested ancient tea leaves for the state-owned tea factories. In fact, China’s overall tea production under the planned economy of Communist China did not decrease significantly from Communist control. Some have even argued that the overall tea production in China, including Yunnan, increased at a slow pace under the planned economy after 1949 (Etherington and Forster 1993). Many tea cakes of Pu’er tea were still exported to places like Hong Kong. The exportation of tea cakes lasted throughout the planned economy period, into the late 1970s. Some of the tea cakes produced by the state-owned tea factories at that time were highly valued, and played a critical role in the revitalization of the Pu’er tea market initiated in Taiwan in the late 1990s<sup>15</sup>. Hence, the planned economy of tea production during the era of the People’s Commune did not stop villagers’ harvest of ancient tea leaves, though the tea leaves were not privately owned at that time.

### **2.1.3 From the Early 1980s to the Early 2000s: Taking Back the Ancient Tea Trees**

The ownership of the ancient tea forest in Mangjing changed again after the official promulgation of the Household Responsibility System (*Jiating Lianchan Chengbao Zerenzhi*) in 1981.<sup>16</sup> As with the People’s Commune system, the land was still state-owned property. But

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<sup>15</sup> See the discussion in the Section 1.3 of Introduction chapter.

<sup>16</sup> The Household Responsibility System, also called the Household Contract Responsibility System, Contract Responsibility System, or Responsibility System, was the major land reform after the end of China’s Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. This system started from experiments

unlike the People's Commune, agricultural produce was not communal but individual property, which could be freely traded in the market. In other words, it was a system through which the Chinese state acted like a landlord who could contract out state-owned land to rural residents (*baochan daohu* or *fentian daohu*)<sup>17</sup>. Still, every household that had a contract with the state was required to submit to the state a specific quota of the goods produced from the land, but any amount above the required quota for the state was private property belonging to the individual household. Compared to the People's Commune, the Household Responsibility System, through its reform of agricultural produce ownership, significantly increased agricultural productivity and household income in rural China (Oi and Walder 1999; Wang 2003; Chen 2003; Chen 2004; Ho 2005).

The implementation of the Household Responsibility System in the early 1980s thus changed the ownership of the ancient tea forest in Mangjing. As Xianjin had said, the Bulang villagers "took back" their ancient tea trees from the government due to the Household Responsibility System. Xianjin's words revealed a general scenario of the differentiation of ownership between land and the tea trees of the ancient tea forest in Mangjing in the early 1980s. Simply put, the Household Responsibility System, in a sense, redistributed the ancient tea trees to the villagers in Mangjing as individual property, while all the land in the ancient tea forest was still state owned. As Xuannan, a local Bulang elite, said, "[The ancient tea] trees are ours; the land was the state's." "How did the government redistribute all the ancient tea trees to all the

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initiated by some cadres in rural areas in the Sichuan and Anhui Provinces in 1978. These experiments dramatically increased rural productivity in 1979. In 1980, then-Chinese Communist Party leader Den Xiaoping, publicly praised the success of the system. In 1981, under the approval of Den Xiaoping, the reformer leading China toward the market economy, the Household Responsibility System was officially promulgated and implemented widely in rural China (Ho 2005).

<sup>17</sup> *Baochan daohu* or *fentian daohu*, literally in English means, "distribute property to household" or "distribute farmland to household."



villagers in early 1980s?” I asked many villagers in Mangjing, to which I received a general answer from villagers.

Villagers in Mangjing informed me that the government asked every household to identify the land that it owned prior to the Communist Party’s control over China in 1949. However, some households owned small areas of land and some owned none prior to the Communist Party’s confiscation of it all. To solve this problem, villagers said that those who owned larger areas of land prior to the communist era were asked to grant their partial land to those who did not own land. It should be noted that, while villagers had earlier used *land* to refer to the amount of land area they received under the Household Responsibility System, the land was never the villagers’ private property. What villagers did own were the tea trees on the land. Since it was much more difficult to use the number of ancient tea trees per se to implement property redistribution, the land became the agent for the state to redistribute all the tea trees to villagers. However, it was also true that there was an uneven distribution of ancient tea trees on the land. As a result, seemingly identical areas of land, as the agent, could be granted among different villagers, while the density of the ancient tea trees on each granted land parcel could be very different.

My next line of questioning included the question, “How did the government decide how many areas of land in the tea forest it would redistribute to each household in Mangjing?” In response, Xuannan gave me the clearest explanation. Mangjing, as an administrative village (*xingzhengcun*), had six natural villages (*zirancun*)<sup>18</sup> or *zhaizi*, including Manghong, Shangzhai, Xiashai, Wengji, Wengwa, and Nanai. All the natural villages, except for Nanai, had different communal areas of ancient tea forest for tea production during the era of the People’s Commune.

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<sup>18</sup> Mangjing is an administrative village of Huimin Township. Nevertheless, the administrative boundary of Mangjing, is made up of six natural villages.

According to Xuannan, the redistribution under the implementation of the Household Responsibility System was based on the total area of the previous communal land of each natural villager, which then was divided by the total population of each different natural village respectively. As a consequence, Xuannan indicated that each individual resident of a natural village was granted the divided area of land. Since each natural village had a different total area of communal land under the People's Commune, the total area redistributed to each villager differed depending on the natural village in which one resided. In general, Xuannan said, each villager was granted at least 2 to 3 *mu*<sup>19</sup> of land in the ancient tea forest after the implementation of the Household Responsibility System. Nevertheless, Xuannan emphasized, the area measurement done by the government official back in the early 1980s was "inaccurate and careless" (*buzhunque you suibian*). Consequently, while some villagers got much more than the average area, some got much less.

Xuannan went on to explain that the total area of the land each household was granted also depended on the size of the household. Xuannan said that each household member, regardless of age, was entitled to receive a parcel of redistributed land. "Even a new-born baby was entitled to a piece of land" in the ancient tea forest, Xuannan emphasized. In other words, the total area of land one household could receive was determined first by the size of the household, and this number was then multiplied by the number of divided areas for each individual. After specifying how much land each villager would get in each natural village, the government, according to Xuannan, started asking each household to identify its land it owned prior to the state confiscation. Those who could clearly identify their land, as many villagers indicated, would then have the ancient tea trees on these identified lands given back to them by the government. But, Xuannan explained, if the total area of a household's identified land was

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<sup>19</sup> One *mu* is about 0.167 acres.

larger than the total amount the specific household could be granted, the government would confiscate the extra land. On the contrary, if the area a household identified was less than the total amount the household should get, the government would redistribute more land to compensate the deficient amount. For those who could not identify any land that was owned prior the state confiscation, the government would redistribute land to them based on how many members were in the household.

“More or less, everyone in Mangjing has ancient tea trees today,” said Xuannan. He also thought that those who had more members in their households were “luckier” in that they received a greater share of land in the ancient tea forest and generally owned more ancient tea trees. Before 1982, according Xuannan, if one could add a member to his or her household by having a baby or getting married, the added member would be granted a piece of land. On the other hand, if there were a death in a household, a portion of the land would be taken away by the state. Xuannan said that the government halted this policy in 1982,<sup>20</sup> however, and promulgated another rule, called “add no land by adding people; decrease no land by decreasing people” (*zengren buzengdi, jianren bujiandi*). Cuosan, a male Bulang villager, experienced the change in the redistribution rule. When his first son was born in 1981, his household received another 3 *mu* of land. However, when his second son was born in 1983, the new rule meant that his household was no longer eligible for another 3 *mu*. The loss of eligibility more land, according to Cuosan, was not a concern to him, however. Although Cuosan felt that the Communist Party “did the right thing” by giving the tea trees back to households in Mangjing, he did not think it helped much in terms of improving villagers’ livelihood, because of the extremely low price of the ancient tea leaves at the time.

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<sup>20</sup> Some villagers noted that it should be 1983.

In fact, most villagers in Mangjing initially felt that they did not benefit much from taking back the ancient tea trees from the Communist Party in the early 1980s, because of the trees' low price. Even though most could start harvesting their own ancient tea leaves, the low price did not encourage villagers to make the leaves their primary source of income. Teacher Su, the leading Bulang figure who is responsible for the current revitalization of the Bulang tea culture, gave two general explanations for the low price.

First, during the 1980s, every household in Mangjing was granted a certain amount of ancient-tea-tree land as private property, but the state-owned tea factories, according to Teacher Su, were still the only buyers for the harvested leaves. In other words, the state-owned factories, without any other potential competitive buyer, could only purchase the leaves at a standardized low price. Second, during the 1990s, the Chinese state started promoting the development of terrace tea plantations in Mangjing.<sup>21</sup> The state-sponsored promotion of terrace tea plantations began in the 1990s, when the ancient tea forest was regarded by the state as a form of tea production that was “lagging-behind” (*luohoude*).<sup>22</sup> In fact, Teacher Su said, the government encouraged villagers to remove the trees in order to transform the ancient tea forest into

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<sup>21</sup> According Teacher Su, the Chinese state promoted the terrace tea plantation in Mangjing three times. The first was in 1962, which then turned out to be more of an experiment without real promotion among villagers. The second time was in the 1970s. Similar to the first time, it failed to successfully create a prevalent plantation for tea production in Mangjing. Teacher Su explained that both the first and the second times were still the “experimental periods” (*shiyan jieduan*) for transplanting the techniques of terrace tea plantation from other places. The third time was in the 1990s. According to Teacher Su, the total area of terrace tea plantation in Mangjing is now about over 7,000 *mu*, which mostly appeared during 1990s. Teacher Su further elaborated that during the 1990s in order to develop terrace tea plantations, villagers in Mangjing started carving out the mountains, chopping down the old-growth trees, including the ancient tea trees, and transforming the forest into “modern” terrace tea gardens.

<sup>22</sup> In addition to Teacher Su and the Bulang villagers in Mangjing, tea merchants from outside Mangjing had similar expressions concerning the “lagging-behind” part of ancient tree tea. For example, one tea merchant from Guangzhou said that in the 1990s, within the Pu'er tea market in general, people highly valued the “modern” terrace tea and depreciated the ancient tree tea. He explained that people depreciated ancient tea leaves due to its random leaf size, inconsistent leaf color, and the relatively bitter and astringent taste, which together were believed by tea merchants to result from “the old-aged tea trees with lagging-behind processing techniques.”

modernized terrace tea plantations. The low price, as well as the governmental promotion of terrace tea plantations, led villagers to depreciate the true value of ancient tea trees. Though they were able to take back ancient tea trees from the government, villagers in Mangjing did not appreciate their private tree ownership. As many villagers said, it did not matter how many ancient tea trees a villager could own during this period.

Not until the early 2000s did the true value of the ancient tree tea become known outside Mangjing, at which point Bulang villagers themselves began to realize its value. Villagers started taking ancient tea trees seriously, considering them their private property, after Cai signed the fifty-year contract with the county government to monopolize their production and successfully increase their price. In the next section, I will focus on the ancient-tea-tree ownership change beginning in 2003. Specifically, I will highlight villagers' changing perceptions of ownership resulting from the burgeoning market it that began in 2003. I also analyze the changing relationships between Bulang villagers and Cai, from initial cooperation, to villagers' resistance, and then to the current ambivalent situation regarding the ownership of the ancient tea trees.

## **2.2 Ownership and the Market: Monopolization of Ancient Tea Trees and Bulang Villagers' Multiple Reactions to Ownership Reclamation**

Cai had an office in Simao<sup>23</sup>, the major town and administrative center of Pu'er City, for the wholesale market for his tea products. The office also acted like a retail shop to showcase and sell a variety of teas produced by Cai's company. I first visited Cai's office in Simao in summer

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<sup>23</sup> The Simao District, formerly the Cuiyun District, is under the jurisdiction of Pu'er City. In 2007, mainly to promote the development of its Pu'er tea industry, Simao City changed its name to Pu'er City. Due to the change, the former Cuiyun District also changed its name to the Simao District. The Simao District is now the political and economic center of Pu'er City.

of 2009.<sup>24</sup> Stepping in Cai's shop-like office, I was immediately attracted to the pictures on the wall. One picture was taken on August 28, 2003, during the ceremony in which Cai signed the fifty-year contract with the government of Lancang County to “operate and manage” (*jingying guanli*) the ancient tea forest in the villages of Jingmai and Mangjing (Figure 2.2). In the picture, note the red banner with white Chinese characters saying, “the ceremony of transferring the ‘usage right’ (*shiyong quan*) of ten-thousand-*mu* of the thousand-year-old ancient tea arboretum.” Under the flamboyant banner is an elevated stage, where Cai stands with the government officials, and with the local elite in the back. Several journalists on one side of the stage carry cameras to shoot the ongoing ceremony. One official is stepping up to announce something with a microphone on the stage. In front of the stage are the villagers from both Jingmai and Mangjing. Most of them seem to stare at what is happening on the stage.

Figure 2.2. The ceremony in which Cai signed the fifty-year contract with the Lancang County Government on August 28, 2003. (Photo retaken by Po-Yi Hung).



<sup>24</sup> Cai's name was seen in many articles and books about Pu'er tea, especially the ancient tree tea (see Wu [2006], for example). Among Pu'er tea merchants, including those from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China, Cai was also a well-known tea entrepreneur. According to many written works as well as comments from tea merchants, Cai was the most important figure, or even the “initiator” (*kaituozhe*), who successfully made the ancient tree tea of Jingmai and Mangjing well-known and then “occupied a significant space” (*zhan yixizhidi*) in the Pu'er tea market. As a tea merchant said, Cai “produce the loud sound to make Jingmai Tea well-known” (*daxiang jingmai cha de minghao*).

This picture recorded a critical moment that changed the ownership of the ancient tea trees in Jingmai Mountain, including the village of Mangjing. In 2003, Cai came to Yunnan to look for the potential to invest in the tea industry in Yunnan. Since the early 2000s, the government of Simao City (Pu'er City today) had been planning to attract more outside investment both from China and from overseas (*zhaoshang yinzi*).<sup>25</sup> In fact, Cai later acknowledged that the government officials of Simao City actively contacted him and invited him to have an “investment investigation” (*touzi kaocha*) into the development of the Pu'er tea industry. For the government officials, Cai was an ideal investor because of his background. Cai's family owned tea plantations and business in Taiwan. The success of the family tea business allowed Cai to expand his business outside Taiwan. In 2003, Cai had tea plantations and processing facilities in northern Thailand, and also exported his tea products to the United States, especially to northern California. Cai's experience and background was especially attractive to the government officials who were responsible for attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) overseas to invest in the tea industry in Yunnan. In 2003, the government of Lancang County in Simao City successfully secured Cai's investment by providing him the fifty-year contract retaining the usage right for all the ancient tea trees in Jingmai and Mangjing.

The ownership of the ancient tea trees in Mangjing, was literally monopolized by Cai with the signing of the contract. Compared to a past in which Mangjing villagers passively followed and accepted all the state's confiscation and redistribution rules, villagers became actively and collectively involved in multiple actions to negotiate their ownership of ancient tea trees beginning in 2003. Their multiple actions included an initial cooperation with Cai, followed

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<sup>25</sup> *Zhaoshang yinzi* has been one of the major duties of local governments at provincial, prefectural, and county levels in China. It has been one of the major goals under China's “Open-Up the West” (*xibu dakaiifa*) campaign of the central government launched in the 2000s. See discussions by Goodman (2004).

by a series of aggressive ownership reclamation actions, and finally an ambiguous compromise between Cai and the villagers. In this section, I argue that the market forces had driven the villagers' negotiations with Cai. Throughout the negotiations, villagers in Mangjing developed an increasing awareness of property, driven by the burgeoning market for the ancient tree tea. In other words, they gradually perceived and realized the ancient tea trees as their private assets to start connecting to the market economy.

### *2.2.1 Initial Cooperation*

“Today villagers [of both Jingmai and Mangjing] have all changed since they realized that they lived with ‘green gold’ all around,” said Cai to me. “Green gold,” in Cai’s words, meant the ancient tea trees. Additionally, what Cai meant by villagers’ changing was not just about villagers’ improvements in their livelihood resulting from the “green gold,” but also their changing perception of the ancient tea trees. Furthermore, the changing perception of the ancient tea trees resulted in the changing relations between Cai and the villagers. According to Cai, when he first came to Mangjing in 2003, he was awed by the landscape of the ancient tea forest. But he was also frightened by the villagers’ carelessness toward the forest, exhibited by chopping down the trees without a second thought. In fact, Cai’s narratives regarding villagers’ ignorance about the “green gold,” in a sense, resonated well with Bulang villagers’ expressions concerning their carelessness about the ownership of ancient tea trees before 2003. Villagers’ had developed a much stronger sense of property after they understood the ancient tea trees as “green gold.” “They learned it from me,” Cai asserted.



The purpose for signing the fifty-year contract with the county government, according to Cai, was to “protect the ancient tea forest” from further damage done by villagers. Cai insisted that he never had the sole intention of making a personal fortune by signing the contract. He explained that he already owned stable businesses in Taiwan, the United States, and Southeast Asia, so it was “not necessary” (*meibiyao*) for him to have the immediate investment in Jingmai Mountain. However, when he first came to Jingmai Mountain, he realized that if he did not “have some immediate actions,” all the ancient tea trees were soon be chopped down by the villagers. For Cai, tea was not only his business but also his life. This led him to push himself to protect and sustain tea as a culture and as a historical treasure. Therefore, he could not tolerate the intentional destruction of the ancient tea trees. Cai had never seen ancient tea trees before coming to Jingmai Mountain. When he did, he said that he immediately felt an inner respect and gratitude to living ancient tea trees confronting him.

“You cannot just tell villagers to protect those [ancient tea] trees,” said Cai. In Cai’s mind, it would be naïve to just ask villagers not to chop down the trees without making them feel the economic benefits, especially when most of the villagers still lived in poverty. As a result, after signing the contract, Cai raised the price of fresh ancient tea leaves from 2–3 RMB to 20–30 RMB per kilogram. Cai said that not just the villagers of Jingmai and Mangjing, but also the tea merchants in China, thought he must have “lost his mind” (*fafengle*) in raising the price by ten times to purchase the ancient tea leaves. From time to time, Cai would reassert that the purpose of raising the price was to keep villagers from destroying the ancient tea trees. He claimed that though villagers thought he was somehow insane to raise the price so steeply, they soon started feeling the value of the ancient tea trees. Since then, Cai said, villagers have rarely cut down the trees, but instead have been willing to sell their ancient tea leaves to Cai.

Cai's words, indeed, echoed well with Bulang villagers' expressions concerning the initial period after the contract became effective in 2003. Like Jinger, a young Bulang man, said, every villager in Mangjing, more or less, benefitted from selling ancient tea leaves to Cai. Jinger further informed me that at the beginning, every villager was happy to sell their leaves to Cai, since he was the only one who could purchase the leaves at the "hardly-imagined" (*buneng xiangxiang de*) price. Jinger, as well as many other villagers, went to the usage-rights-transfer ceremony. Like many other villagers who attended, Jinger could not predict what would happen after the ceremony. According to Jinger and some other villagers, Cai came to visit villagers in person soon after the ceremony. Jinger recalled, one day Cai came to his home with Kangnan, one of the local cadres of Mangjing. Cai showed him a piece of paper, and later Kangnan explained the paper's contents. Kangnan did not clearly address the fact that villagers could now sell their ancient tea leaves only to Cai. Instead, Jinger said that Kangnan emphasized that Cai would spend at least ten times the existing price to purchase his ancient tea leaves, if he sold only to Cai. Kangnan then asked him to sign the piece of paper with his thumbprint. Jinger admitted that he did not read the document word by word. Rather, he listened to Kangnan who told him that the paper was a document that guaranteed Cai would purchase his ancient tea leaves for the promised price.

Similar narratives could be heard from other villagers in Mangjing. Most of the villagers, including Jinger, did actually earn more money by selling their ancient tea leaves to Cai. Accordingly, Jinger said, more villagers started selling their tea leaves exclusively to Cai to receive the price Cai offered, though many villagers felt they were somehow forced to sign the piece of paper to get Cai's price. It should be noted that, as Jinger said, many villagers' understanding was that they would receive the price Cai offered only when they sold all their

ancient tea leaves solely to Cai. In other words, villagers thought that they had the right to sell their ancient tea leaves to others. But from Cai's perspective, villagers had agreed to sell exclusively to Cai, based on the fifty-year contract signed with the county government. As a result, though Cai thought he had legally monopolized the usage rights for all the ancient tea trees in Mangjing, but most villagers did not see it this way. Instead, they thought they retained property rights to the trees, and had the right to sell their ancient tea leaves to anyone. This could easily happen if someone was willing to purchase the villagers' leaves at a better price than Cai offered. Conflicts soon cropped up between Cai and the villagers, especially when tea merchants began coming to Mangjing to secure ancient tea leaves.

### 2.2.2 Villagers' Collective Resistance and Reclamation

Cai soon produced a series of tea products using only the ancient tea leaves of Jingmai Mountain, and successfully promoted them in the Pu'er tea market. Many renowned tea connoisseurs of Pu'er tea praised his company's ancient tree tea products, including Te-Liang Wu in Taiwan (Wu 2006), Teacher Yang, and Teacher Xun in Yunnan. According to Teacher Wu and Teacher Xun, Cai's ancient tree tea became a popular product as soon as Cai produced and sold his first "memorial tea cakes"<sup>26</sup> (*jinianbing*) in 2004. Teacher Yang and Teacher Xun told me that they were "rocked" (*zhenhan*) when they first tasted his ancient tree tea. They said it was the first time they realized that the ancient tea trees in Yunnan could produce such a great

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<sup>26</sup> It was alleged as Cai's first successful tea product in the market. The tea cakes were called "the first memorial tea cakes" to memorialize the first year of the transference of usage rights in 2004. In fact, Cai intentionally named his memorial tea cakes by counting the years after he signed the fifty-year contract to monopolize the usage rights to the ancient tea trees. In accordance, in 2005 he produced the "second memorial tea cakes" (*dierjie jinianbing*). At this writing, Cai has sold the "eighth memorial tea cakes," sold in the market for memorializing the eighth year since signing the contract in 2003.

taste of tea. Teacher Yang and Teacher Xun, two professional tea connoisseurs with recognized national certifications, soon wrote articles to introduce the ancient tree tea of Jingmai Mountain, produced specifically by Cai (Yang and Xun 2007). Teacher Yang and Teacher Xun were not the only two people who started reporting on the ancient tree tea of Jingmai Mountain. The ancient tree tea of Jingmai Mountain, as well as Cai's name, was gradually publicized by other tea connoisseurs, tea merchants, and journalists.

At the same time (starting in the early 2000s) tea connoisseurs and tea merchants started reappraising the value of ancient tree tea. "Few people really understood that the best Pu'er tea should be produced only with the pure material of ancient tea leaves before early 2000s,"<sup>27</sup> said Teacher Yang. Many tea merchants, who sensed the expanding market of the ancient tree tea, started looking for the existing trees in Yunnan, including those in Jingmai and Mangjing. However, Teacher Yang said, no one really knew whether or not the ancient tea trees of Jingmai Mountain could be the source of such good quality ancient tree tea. Or, as Teacher Xun clarified, "no one exactly knew how to do that!" Teacher Yang and Teacher Xun said that only after Cai successfully produced his tea cakes did people start to realize the valuable and "irreplaceable" (*wuke qudai*) taste produced by Jingmai Mountain's ancient tea trees. However, "these people were too late," said Teacher Xun. Teacher Xun continued, "Cai stepped ahead everyone," because all the ancient tea trees in Jingmai Mountain already "belonged only to Cai" after the contract.

The contract, nevertheless, did not stop tea merchants from coming to Mangjing to purchase the ancient tea leaves from villagers. On the contrary, the increasing fame of Jingmai

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<sup>27</sup> Many tea merchants, entrepreneurs, and connoisseurs believed that the trend of using pure material to produce ancient tree tea was initiated with the production of a tea product called *Zhenchun Yahao* in 1995. Since then the ancient tree tea was gradually singled out as a unique type of Pu'er tea. Producing Pu'er tea with pure ancient tea leaves ultimately became the standard for making the best quality of tea.

Mountain and the burgeoning Pu'er tea market had attracted more tea merchants to look for businesses in Mangjing. "People from outside [Mangjing] still came to me for my ancient tea leaves," said Jinger. Indeed, according to many villagers in Mangjing, an increasing number of people came to Mangjing to buy the ancient tea leaves, even though Cai had monopolized the ancient tea trees on Jingmai Mountain. Gradually, villagers in Mangjing realized that people from outside could offer a better price than Cai to purchase their ancient tea leaves.

Consequently, the tension between villagers in Mangjing and Cai increased since more villagers would sell their ancient tea leaves to other merchants "in a sneaky way" (*toutoudi*), said Cai. However, villagers did not view the business with other tea merchants as a sneaky deal. Villagers, instead, believed that they inherited all the ancient tea trees from their ancestors, and Cai would never be the only owner of their ancient tea trees.

The increasing conflicts between the local tea factories and Cai exemplified the intensified tension concerning the ownership of ancient tea trees in Mangjing. Before Cai came to Mangjing in 2003, several households had developed their own tea-production businesses under the policy of the Household Responsibility System. These households later became the primary local tea factories in Mangjing. Before Cai came, they had started collecting fresh tea leaves, including ancient tea and terrace tea leaves, and then processing the leaves into raw material (*maocha*) for sale. Although the price of both fresh tea leaves and raw material was still low before 2003, these households initiated the privatization of local tea production and business after the ancient tea trees were redistributed to villagers. In addition, few owners of local tea factories, especially those who worked as main working staff in the former state-owned tea factory in Mangjing, bought the former state-owned tea factories to run their own tea businesses. Hongyan, one of the owners of a main local tea factory in Mangjing, said that Cai asked all the

local tea factories to stop selling raw material from ancient tea leaves. Instead, according to Hongyan, the local tea factories could only collect and sell the ancient tea leaves to Cai's company.

At the very beginning, Cai intended to recruit all the owners of local factories as the working staff of his tea company. Accordingly, Cai provided a decent salary. In addition, in order to convince the owners of local tea factories to stop selling the raw material, Cai aimed to use the high salary as compensation for their loss. In other words, according to Hongyan, Cai thought the amount of his payment would be attractive enough to increase the revenue of all of the owners of local tea factories, even though the factories could no longer do private business related to ancient tea leaves. At first, in fact, some owners of local tea factories, did accept Cai's offer and then started working for him. A few owners, however, like Hongyan, never accepted Cai's offer. They refused to follow "Cai's order," as Hongyan called it. The refusal of these local tea factories later became the main force to forge a collective resistance to Cai and to the fifty-year contract transferring ancient tea trees.

Hongyan's father was a local Bulang elite, who had worked as a vice director (*fu changzhang*) and then director (*changzhang*) of a state-owned tea factory since the early 1990s. In 2001, Hongyan's father bought the factory when the state privatized it because it was unprofitable. As a local elite who was respected by most villagers, Hongyan's father played a critical role in leading the villagers of Mangjing take action "for the whole villagers' benefit," said Hongyan. When her father bought the tea factory in 2001, Hongyan believed that he had foreseen the potential for developing the tea business, especially for ancient tree tea, in Mangjing. He also thought that only by revitalizing tea production could Bulang villagers improve their living standard. Most importantly, Hongyan said, Bulang villagers needed to realize that they

could benefit most from tea production only by “making and selling tea themselves.” With these convictions, Hongyan’s father took the risk of purchasing the state-owned tea factory in order to revitalize the tea business. In Hongyan’s mind, the ancient tea trees were therefore a vehicle for Bulang villagers in Mangjing to support her father’s ideas. Hongyan said, “We have the best resources [for making tea]. We shouldn’t put them into others’ pockets!”

For Hongyan, and several other local owners of local tea factories, the villagers’ collaboration with Cai under the fifty-year contract was like putting the ancient tea trees into Cai’s pocket. As a result, although the contract became effective in 2003, these owners of local tea factories said that they never followed the rules set by the contract. Indeed, they kept producing ancient tree tea, mostly the raw material, for sale. As a consequence, these few local tea factories, including Hongyan’s, became the major players who initiated the Bulang villagers’ collective resistance to Cai. Hongyan admitted that it was very difficult at first to persuade villagers not to sell tea leaves to Cai, and to keep ancient tea trees “in Bulang villagers’ own pockets.” The main reason, of course, was the decent price provided by Cai. As discussed above, most villagers had been willing to sell their ancient tea leaves exclusively to Cai to earn more household revenue. On the contrary, though owners of local tea factories tried to collect ancient tea leaves from villagers to make ancient tree tea, they could not pay Cai’s competitive purchasing price. Thus, according to Hongyan, local tea factories in Mangjing were unable to collect a large quantity of ancient tea leaves from villagers in the period soon after the contract became effective in 2003. However, things changed after 2005, when the reputation of ancient tree tea from Jingmai Mountain became well known in the Pu’er market.

In 2005, after Cai had successfully promoted his memorial tea cakes, the fame of Jingmai Mountain and its ancient tea forest gradually became, as Teacher Yang said, “a leading brand

name” (*lingdao pinpai*) of ancient tree tea. Meanwhile, starting around 2005, the market for Pu’er tea in general had grown at an extremely rapid pace. This extraordinary growth later became a bubble that burst in 2007. Before the bubble burst, the price of tea leaves, both terrace tea and ancient tree tea, rose very quickly in a relatively short time, even daily. Similar situations unfolded in the other tea mountains of Yunnan. Since the name of Jingmai Mountain was greatly known by tea connoisseurs, tea merchants, and Pu’er tea consumers, an increasing number of tea merchants came to Mangjing to purchase the ancient tree tea, mostly the raw material, from villagers. The local tea factories, as a result, became the major providers of ancient tree tea, mainly the raw material, for the outside tea merchants.

Due to the quickly burgeoning market for Pu’er tea, the tea merchants from outside Mangjing were willing to offer competitive prices to secure the raw material. Moreover, outside tea merchants usually did not conduct their business directly with individual villagers, but with local tea factories instead. Since the outside tea merchants significantly raised the purchasing price to do business with local tea factories, the local tea factories were thus capable of purchasing the fresh ancient tea leaves from villagers at a decent price to compete with Cai. The higher the price outside merchants could provide for the raw material made by local tea factories, the higher the price local tea factories could use to purchase fresh tea leaves from villagers. Therefore, the local tea factories were eventually able to offer villagers a price higher than Cai offered for fresh ancient tea leaves.

As Hongyan indicated, when Cai first signed the contract with the county government, it was hard for local factories to collect ancient tea leaves from villagers due to the much higher price offered by Cai. Indeed, many villagers, Jinger for example, informed me that they did sell their ancient tea leaves to Cai, mostly from 2003 to 2005, due to the decent price paid by Cai.



Nonetheless, things began to change, especially in 2006, when the general price of ancient tea leaves increased exponentially. Based on the information given by villagers, by owners of local tea factories, and by outside tea merchants, the price of the raw material from ancient tree teas rose from between 35 and 40 RMB per kilogram in 2004 to between 120 and 140 RMB per kilogram in 2006. In other words, while the local factories could purchase the fresh ancient tea leaves for just 8 to 10 RMB per kilogram in 2004, in 2006 they could already increase the price to at least 20 RMB per kilogram. At the same time, Cai had purchased ancient tea leaves at 20 to 30 RMB per kilogram since he signed the contract. Accordingly, starting in 2006, the local tea factories gained the capacity to compete with Cai in terms of purchasing ancient tea leaves from villagers. Hence, villagers started to sell their ancient tea leaves to local tea factories for a competitive price.

Cai, of course, noticed this development. From Cai's perspective, any business related to ancient tea leaves, undergone either between the local tea factories and villagers or between the tea merchants outside Mangjing and the local tea factories, was a breach of the signed contract. As a result, all the business conducted by the local tea factories, in Cai's mind, was illegal. During my conversations with Cai, he occasionally mentioned that he had asked the county government to stop all the illegal transactions regarding the ancient tea leaves. Although Cai never specified what the county government had done to protect his legal right, he complained to me about the failure of the county government to enforce its coercive power to practice the authority of the contract. Nevertheless, according to owners of local tea factories and villagers in Mangjing, they did experience the government's coercive power, especially the forest police (*senlin gongan*), in stopping their ancient-tea-leaf business.

“The [forest] policemen just stood in front of the gate of my house,” said Hongyan. The purpose of the forest policemen, according to Hongyan, was to halt any villager who intended to sell the ancient tea leaves to Hongyan’s tea factory. Similar narratives were expressed by other owners of local tea factories. Additionally, Hongyan said that the policemen would also ask to go into the factory to investigate whether or not Hongyan’s factory still produced tea with ancient tea leaves. Villagers in Mangjing also indicated that the forest policemen would not only halt them at the gate of local tea factories. Sometimes they would even walk villagers directly to Cai’s factory in order to make sure no ancient tea leaves were sold to others along the way. Hongyan said that what the forest police did had not only angered the owners of local factories, but also ignited a “furious fire” (*nuhuo*) inside each villager in Mangjing.

As a result, the power of the forest police pushed villagers in Mangjing to start their resistance to Cai and the county government. Villagers expressed to me their multiple actions in against the contract signed by Cai and the county government. Some villagers intentionally sold fake ancient tea leaves, which were mixed with large amount of terrace tea leaves, to Cai, and only sold the authentic ancient tea leaves to the local tea factories. Some directly stopped selling any tea leaves to Cai, but produced the raw material of the ancient tree tea with their own ancient tea leaves or sold their leaves to local tea factories. Sometimes villagers took violent actions to demonstrate their anger. For example, many villagers told me that Cai’s trucks that were used to ship ancient tea leaves and tea products were overthrown by villagers several times. All these actions, for villagers, were not just against the forest police but also were ostensibly to declare the illegality of the contract Cai held.

Villagers in Mangjing clearly did not consider the contract held by Cai a legal document. All the villagers I met informed me that they received no information regarding the content of

the contract before it became effective in 2003. Many villagers told me that they realized the existence of the contract only after the grand ceremony in 2003. In other words, villagers did not participate in any part of creating the contract. “The contract was only a deal between Cai and the county government,” said Hongyan. Hongyan then further addressed that she had endeavored to educate villagers in Mangjing about the illegality of the contract. More specifically, Hongyan said she worked hard to explain to villagers that it was illegal because it did not have the villagers’ collective consent. Furthermore, as Hongyan stated, the contract forced Bulang villagers to put their ancient tea trees into others’ “pockets.” Hongyan then told to me that only by organizing all villagers in Mangjing to protest the contract could the world realize Bulang villagers as the only legal owners of the ancient tea trees. Similar statements were made by other local tea factories.

At the same time, according to the local tea-factory owners, their refusal to accept Cai’s offer was actually supported by a few people from outside Mangjing, who foresaw the value of ancient tea trees. These people, including tea merchants and tea connoisseurs, had more or less started tea businesses with local tea factories before Cai came to Mangjing. Gengli was one example. Gengli was a Han Chinese living in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. Gengli not only had close relations with local tea factories in Mangjing, but his name was also known by many villagers. In these villagers’ minds, Gengli was a true lover of Mangjing’s ancient tree tea, who “loved Bulang tea culture more than any local Bulang villager,” said Hongyan. I met Gengli in April 2011 when he took several tea merchants from Guangzhou, one of the main markets of Pu’er tea in China, to Hongyan’s tea factory. While Gengli did tea business as an entrepreneur, he considered himself more of a “Pu’er tea connoisseur” (*puer charen*), than a “Pu’er tea merchant” (*puer chashang*).

Being simply a “Pu’er tea lover,” Gengli claimed that he never considered tea a commodity for making his personal fortune. Instead, what concerned him most was the “cultural and historical sediments” (*wenhua lishi diyun*) of Pu’er tea. Mangjing, for Gengli, was a place full of the cultural and historical sediments of Pu’er tea, due to its ancient tea forest and the legendary origin of tea culture. Gengli believed that the ancient tea forest in Mangjing was the root of the cultural and historical sediments. Gengli said he was worried that Bulang villagers would lose their roots if they lost their ancient tea trees. He informed me that many tea lovers like him, including those from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and even South Korea and Taiwan, shared his feelings. Therefore, as the usage right of ancient tea trees in Mangjing had been transferred to Cai in 2003, these tea lovers, including Gengli, started worrying that Bulang villagers were losing their roots. In his opinion, keeping alive the local tea factories owned by Bulang villagers was one of the critical strategies to confront Cai’s operation. In order to help Bulang villagers keep their roots, Gengli had tried to maintain business relations with only local tea factories. In addition, he worked hard to promote the local tea factories’ businesses by introducing other tea merchants to them.

The tea lovers from outside Mangjing, according to Hongyan, actually did something more than conducting business with local tea factories. Most importantly, Hongyan thought, they gave owners of local tea factories the motivation to consolidate against the contract. As discussed previously, although several owners of local tea factories resisted the contract and Cai’s offer from the very beginning, they lost their businesses as a result, because most villagers sold ancient tea leaves only to Cai for a much better price. The outside tea lovers’ willingness to do business with local factories, provided the minimum financial support that allowed them to resist Cai’s offer without losing their business. As Hongyan surmised, without those tea lovers’

support, more owners of local tea factories would have “surrendered to Cai’s offer” by being recruited as Cai’s working staff.

The outside tea lovers kept doing business with local tea factories as a form of resistance to the contract between Cai and the county government, and villagers in Mangjing reclaimed their ownership of ancient tea trees based on local history and the culture of tea. As Gengli argued, villagers needed to realize that their cultural and historical sediments of tea were rooted in the ancient tea forest in Mangjing. Indeed, the Bulang villagers held strong to the belief that they inherited the ancient tea trees from their ancestor, *Pia Ai Leng*.<sup>28</sup> Villagers in Mangjing called *Pia Ai Leng* their “tea ancestor” (*chazu*). In 2004, right after the contract was signed in 2003, Bulang villagers “recovered” their traditional ceremony of Tea Ancestor Worship (*chazu ji*). The leading figure who recovered the Tea Ancestor Worship was Teacher Su,<sup>29</sup> a retired teacher and local elite of Mangjing.

According to Teacher Su, the Tea Ancestor Worship had been lost at least since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Teacher Su said that the worship had been an annual ritual specifically for memorizing *Pia Ai Leng*’s deeds that brought tea to the Bulang people. In 2004, with the work of Teacher Su, the worship ceremony was finally resumed in Mangjing and greatly publicized by the mass media.<sup>30</sup> Teacher Su, in fact, did not directly address the recovery of Tea Ancestor Worship as part of the resistance to the transference of ancient tea trees to Cai. Even so, he did express to me that the worship ceremony “must recover” in 2004, because it was an “urgent task” at that time. For Teacher Su, it was urgent to clearly let people from outside Mangjing realize that “it’s us (Bulang villagers) who inherited those [ancient tea] trees from *Pia Ai Leng*.” “Why was it so urgent to let people know that in 2004?” I

<sup>28</sup> See more discussion about *Pia Ai Leng* in the chapter on Ritual.

<sup>29</sup> More information about Teacher Su is provided in the chapter on Ritual.

<sup>30</sup> See the discussion in the chapter on Ritual.

asked Teacher Su. Without directly responding to my question, he simply said that he wanted everyone to know that no one could ever take away Bulang people's tea culture and history.

For villagers who participated in the recovered Tea Ancestor Worship in 2004, however, one of the clear messages the ceremony conveyed was the Bulang villagers' ownership of the ancient tea trees based on their tea history and culture. Jinger and Huaxiao, two young Bulang men, both participated in the Tea Ancestor Worship in 2004. As they recalled, many young villagers like them never participated in, or had heard of, the ceremony until Teacher Su recovered it in 2004. According to Huaxiao, Teacher Su specifically asked all the young villagers of Mangjing to participate in the worship. Jinger said that Teacher Su's purpose was to make the younger generation learn and continue the Bulang people's tea history and culture. In addition, Huaxiao further stated, if Bulang villagers did not continue their tea history and culture, what *Pia Ai Leng* left for villagers (the ancient tea trees) would be "taken away without [villagers'] awareness" (*buzhi bujue beinazou le*).

"The history has told the whole world that the ancient tea trees are ours," said Jinger. Since 2004, young villagers like Huaxiao and Jinger have participated in Tea Ancestor Worship each year. In 2010, these two young Bulang villagers told me that the more they understood their tea culture and history, the more they felt that Bulang villagers should collectively protect their ancient tea trees that had been left by their tea ancestor, *Pia Ai Leng*. However, ironically, both Jinger and Huaxiao also admitted that they started selling the ancient tea leaves to Cai right after the contract became effective. Jinger sold his tea leaves exclusively to Cai because of the price Cai offered, though he explained that villagers did not necessarily think they had been forbidden to sell their tea leaves to people other than Cai. Given that, Hongyan gave me an explanation concerning the significance of the recovery of the Tea Ancestor Worship in 2004.

For Hongyan, the recovered annual worship to *Pia Ai Leng* was a vehicle to claim ownership of the ancient tea trees from a historical and cultural perspective. Hongyan thought that claiming ownership based on the Bulang tea history and culture was critical, especially when most villagers still lacked of a sense of how to retain their ownership. “We couldn’t blame on villagers, who sold their tea leaves to Cai,” said Hongyan. As discussed, several owners of local tea factories, including Hongyan, had been against the contract from the beginning. However, because of the much higher price Cai provided, these owners could not stop most villagers from selling to Cai. Hongyan explained that villagers were “only led by price,” because they did not thoroughly understand the significance of retaining the ownership of ancient tea trees. He said that since 2003, villagers had “just learned about what they could own,” so it was difficult to expect them to know “how to protect what they owned.” As a result, Hongyan did not blame villagers who sold their tea leaves to Cai, particularly since in 2003 most villagers still lived in poverty.

In 2003, Hongyan worried that villagers lacked a sense of the significance of retaining ownership of the ancient tea trees. She told me that she was worried that Cai would gradually legalize his illegal contract when villagers started selling ancient tea leaves exclusively to him. Teacher Su’s timely recovery of the annual worship to their tea ancestor, *Pia Ai Leng* was thus appreciated as a hedge against this concern. “History will not lie,” Hongyan said with confidence. In Hongyan’s opinion, the recovery of the Tea Ancestor Worship in 2004 was timely because it disclosed that *Pia Ai Leng* had given the Bulang villagers the ancient tea trees. Hongyan thought the recovered worship would push the villagers as well as the outside world to “look into the genuine tea history in Mangjing.” She emphasized that it was essential to disclose the genuine tea history, especially when villagers had nothing with which to counter Cai’s economic and

political power in 2004. In Hongyan's view, the recovered Tea Ancestor Worship had become another form of resistance to historically and culturally claim the genuine ownership of ancient tea trees.

The recovered Tea Ancestor Worship in 2004 was a historical and cultural form of resistance to Cai's greater economic and political power. Since then, Teacher Su has made the worship as an annual ceremony in Mangjing to "promote *Pia Ai Leng's* wishes for his descendants," as Teacher Su stated. Teacher Su said that *Pia Ai Leng's* wishes were that all the Bulang villagers would protect all the ancient tea trees, and would bestow the trees from generation to generation. He then led me to the mural on the outside wall of the *Pia Ai Leng* Temple. He specifically asked me to look at the words written in Dai language (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3. The mural on the outside wall of the *Pia Ai Leng* Temple. Notice the words of *Pia Ai Leng's Wish* written in the Dai language on the lower right side (photograph by Po-Yi Hung).





He said that *Pia Ai Leng*'s "wishes for his descendants" (*yixun*) had been recorded on the mural, and then translated it into Chinese Mandarin for me. Below, I translate it into English:

If I leave you buffalos and horses, I am afraid that all the buffalos and horses will be destroyed by natural disaster; if I leave you treasures like gold and silver, I am afraid that you eventually will use them up one day; I will thus leave you tea trees! The tea trees I left will be the inexhaustible resources for my descendants. You have to protect the tea trees as like taking care of your eyes. *You inherit the tea trees from generation to generation, and must not let others snatch the tea trees away*<sup>31</sup> (*italic emphasis added*).

*Pia Ai Leng*'s wishes for his descendants established that the ancient tea trees were Bulang villagers' inheritance. In other words, all the ancient tea trees were owned by Bulang villagers, since *Pia Ai Leng* left the tea trees to them. The wish also established that it was the Bulang villagers' responsibility to protect the ownership of the ancient tea trees, and to prevent them from being snatched away by others. In order to realize *Pia Ai Leng*'s wishes and to unite the villagers to protect the ancient tea trees, on February 26, 2006, Teacher Su established the Association of Ancient Tea Tree Protection of Mangjing (*Mangjing gucha baohu xiehui*). The association then initiated and promulgated the "Conventions on Protection and Usage of the Ancient Tea Arboretum in the Villager of Mangjing"<sup>32</sup> (*Mangjingcun Baohu Liyong Guchayuan Gongyue*). The Conventions were then endorsed by the Village Committee (*cunweihui*) of

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<sup>31</sup> The original in Chinese was “我要给你们留下牛马，怕遭自然灾害死光；要给你们留下金银财宝，你们也会吃完用完；就给你们留下茶树吧！让子孙后代取之不尽，用之不竭。你们要像爱护眼睛一样爱护茶树，一代传给一代，绝不能让别人夺走。”

<sup>32</sup> For the full language of the Conventions in Chinese, see appendix I.

Mangjing, and announced in February 2007. Part of the Conventions, Conventions Two and Three, in particular, purposely conveyed villagers' property rights concerning their ownership of the ancient tea trees.

The beginning of Convention Two declared that “Bulang households *own the rights to manage and to harvest* in the state-distributed area of the ancient tea arboretum, regardless of the size and the location of the state-distributed area<sup>33</sup>” (italics added for emphasis). Additionally, Convention Three manifested that “Any organization (or unit) and individual cannot freely go into the tea arboretum to furtively harvest the fresh tea leaves, crab feet,<sup>34</sup> and ancient tea seeds *without the agreement of the owners*<sup>35</sup>” (italics added for emphasis). Convention Twelve also essentially proclaimed that “the Village Committee and the Association of Ancient Tea Tree Protection reserve the responsibility to *explain the Conventions*<sup>36</sup>” (italics added for emphasis). Based on these three specific Conventions, Bulang villagers not only collectively claimed their ownership and property rights of the ancient tea trees, but also retained their right to explain their ownership and property rights.

The exclusive right to explain the Conventions was therefore essential to the Bulang villagers who, represented by the Village Committee and the Association, became the only authority to interpret the meanings of the Conventions, including meanings related to the property rights of the ancient tea trees. From this perspective, the contract signed by Cai and the county government clearly violated property rights in terms of the ownership of ancient tea trees.

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<sup>33</sup> The original in Chinese characters was “布朗族农户对国家所分给的茶园无论面积有多少、方位在何处，拥有（科学）管理权；（规范化、标准化）采摘权；……”

<sup>34</sup> Crab feet (*Juncus diastrophanthus* Buchen), a Chinese herbal medicine living on the ancient tea trees as a parasite.

<sup>35</sup> The original in Chinese characters was “任何组织（单位）和个人不经茶园主人同意，不得随意进入茶园偷摘鲜叶、螃蟹脚、古茶籽。……”

<sup>36</sup> The original in Chinese characters was “本公约由村民委员会、古茶保护协会负责解释。”

First, as villagers indicated, they were not informed in any way before the contract was signed. As a result, they did not think they agreed to transfer the usage rights to Cai for fifty years, including the right to manage and harvest their ancient tea trees. Second, and more importantly, while Cai regarded the contract as a legal document, villagers regarded themselves as the only collective authority to explain or interpret Cai's monopolization of ancient tea trees. In other words, as Hongyan stated, "It should be us (Bulang villagers) to decide whether or not the contract is legal." At this point, villagers had collectively used the announcement of the Conventions to legitimize and institutionalize, at least at the village level, their property rights to ancient tea trees.

Soon after the Conventions were announced in February 2007, the dramatic burst of the overall Pu'er tea market bubble occurred. This dragged the market price down from its peak in April to its bottom in July. In Mangjing, the price of ancient tea leaves also experienced a significant increase and falloff in the same short period. The crash of the overall Pu'er market and the resulting effect on tea production in Mangjing, therefore, again changed the relationship between Cai and the villagers. While Cai's monopolization of the trees created increasing tension between Cai and the villagers, the tension dissipated with the crash. The mitigated tensions had led to an ambiguity regarding Cai's fifty-year contract and its the transference of usage rights. Villagers still insisted that they owned their ancient tea trees, while Cai continued to claim that he was the only person who owned the usage rights to the ancient tea trees. In practice, both sides compromised and pursued equilibrium in securing each other's tea-leaf business. This apparent equilibrium between Cai and the villagers, coupled with the blurred effectiveness of the contract, been in place since the crash of the Pu'er tea market in 2007.

### 2.2.3 Market Differentiation and the Resulting Ambiguity toward the Contract

“The year of 2007 was crazy,” said Cai. According to Cai, right before the bubble burst, the price of ancient tea leaves for “Spring tea” (*chuncha*) in Jingmai Mountain had risen to over 100 RMB per kilogram. “The market became irrational, and I didn’t want to take part in it,” said Cai to me. In fact, Cai informed me that in 2006 he had predicted that sooner or later the burst of Pu’er tea market bubble would burst. Therefore, he informed me that he was well-prepared for it. In fact, Cai did not rely solely on the ancient tree tea for his tea business. Cai’s company produced a variety of tea products, including Pu’er, oolong, green, and black tea. In addition, he did not solely depend on the tea market in China, but also sold his tea in Taiwan, the United States, and Southeast Asia. Hence, he was capable of applying different strategies to confront the dramatic fluctuations in the Pu’er tea market. In early 2007, when the price of ancient tea leaves started escalating, he had planned to ease off of the “irrational market” for a while. As a result, he decided to temporarily stop purchasing ancient tea leaves from villagers and to stop producing ancient tree tea. “Did the contract allow you to stop purchasing ancient tea leaves for any reason?” I asked Cai. Without releasing any content of the contract to me, he responded that, “Business can only survive with a rational price.”

While Cai said that he intentionally stopped purchasing ancient tea leaves due to the inflated price, villagers thought Cai was actually forced to stop his production of the tea in 2007. According to villagers, in the spring of 2007, people from outside Mangjing flooded the village to purchase any tea leaves, including terrace tea and ancient tree tea. “It was like robbery, not for cash but for tea leaves,” said one villager. In order to “rob” tea leaves from villagers as quickly as possible, the outsiders used an inflated price. Just before the bubble burst, the price for the

fresh ancient tea leaves had reached 120 RMB per kilogram, or even higher. For villagers, 120 RMB for purchasing one kilogram of fresh ancient tea leaves was indeed “crazy,” as Cai also put it. Although villagers knew that the price had gone crazy that spring, they were still happy to accept the crazy price offered. As a result, no one was willing to sell to Cai, who could not offer a competitive price to win villagers’ business. To the villagers, Cai stopped his production of ancient tree tea because he could no longer compete with outside tea merchants to secure the leaves.

The crazy price, nevertheless, caused significant financial problems to villagers soon after the bubble burst. The problem grew from the way villagers did their business with outside tea merchants. Specifically, although the tea merchants were willing to pay a crazy price to purchase the ancient tea leaves, the price was too high for them pay in one full payment. As a result, most of the merchants would pay just one third of the total price but would receive the full quantity of tea leaves. Upon leaving Mangjing, the tea merchants would sign an agreement with villagers, called *baitiao*<sup>37</sup>, as a promise to pay the rest of the money after selling the purchased tea leaves. The system of *baotiao* went well when the price of the tea leaves was rising and the market was quickly expanding. Most tea merchants would come back to pay the rest of money. Thus, it became a way for outside tea merchants to establish mutual trust with villagers, and then to secure a long-term provision of tea leaves from them. However, it collapsed immediately after the Pu’er tea market crashed.

With the crash, prices plummeted swiftly and market demand shrank. In consequence, outside tea merchants, who purchased tea leaves at the crazy price and had *baitiao* with villagers,

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<sup>37</sup> *Baitiao* was not uncommon for the tea trade in Yunnan. It created a peculiar way for villagers to collect money from the outside tea merchants, however, because villagers provided the full amount of tea leaves in advance to outside tea merchants. For outside tea merchants, they received the full amount of tea leaves and had to pay just about one third of the total cost up front.

were suddenly hardly able to sell their purchased tea leaves at a profitable price. In fact, many were unable to sell them at all. Although the outside tea merchants signed the *biaotiao* with villagers as a promise to fulfill the payment, they barely came back to Mangjing when they failed to sell the purchased tea leaves. In other words, they were unable to pay off their debts to villagers. For villagers, the collapse of the *biaotiao* system left them to passively wait for the tea merchants to return, which was at that point a rare occurrence.

While many villagers confronted their financial problems that resulted from the failure of the *baitiao* system, some had problems because they could not find buyers. This happened particularly with the raw material producers<sup>38</sup> (*cuzhichang*), who processed the fresh ancient tea leaves into raw material” (*maocha*). Typically, *maocha* could be sold for at least four times the price of fresh tea leaves. Since around 2006, an increasing number of households in Mangjing became *cuzhichang* by installing processing facilities in their homes. These households would make *maocha* for sale in addition to selling fresh tea leaves. In 2007, before the bubble burst, the price of *maocha* rose quickly. Many *cuzhichang* would stock their processed *maocha* on the expectation of a higher price. However, the bubble burst suddenly, and the price dropped instantly. As a result, most *cuzhichang* had large stocks of unsold *maocha*. Although many lowered their sale price substantially, there were no outside tea merchants to buy the *maocha*, and the *cuzhichang* lost their primary source of income. Similar situations existed at the local tea factories.

The shrinking market demand for *maocha* due to the crash led local tea factories to lose much of their business. *Maocha* had been the major vehicle for the local tea factories to sustain their business with outside tea merchants. Soon after the bubble burst, most outside tea

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<sup>38</sup> *Cuzhichang*, or the “raw material (*maocha*) producer,” refers to those who obtain the processing techniques to produce *maocha*, the dried leaves after the primary manufacturing processes. See an additional discussion of *cuzhichang* in the chapter on Hierarchy.

merchants stopped purchasing *maocha* from the local tea factories. Since local tea factories collected fresh tea leaves from villagers to make *maocha* for outside tea merchants, the shrinking demand for *maocha* stopped local factories from purchasing fresh tea leaves from villagers. Additionally, like many villagers, local tea factories suffered from the collapse of *baotiao* system. As Hongyan said, everyone expected that the price would keep rising without any awareness of the possibility of a market crash. Many local tea factories, like Hongyan's, had large stocks of *maocha* that were not yet sold in 2007. Local factories thus dropped their production of *maocha*, because they had to sell their stock before producing new tea.

Tea production in Mangjing seemed to come to an abrupt halt with the crash. As Kangnan, the village cadre, said, Mangjing “was immediately back to a quiet mountain village again” after the sudden disappearance of the tea merchants. According to Kangnan, the “quietness” lasted throughout the second half of 2007 and throughout 2008. Due to the collapse of the *baotiao* system and the unsold stocks of tea, many villagers “did not earn even one [RMB] dollar in 2007,” said Kangnan. Even though in 2008, outside tea merchants started trickling back to Mangjing to purchase ancient tree tea, both the fresh leaves and *maocha*, the price “had hovered around the bottom,” said Hongyan. Most villagers, therefore, were subsisting on what they had earned before the market crash.

Villagers started worrying that they would “eat up” what they earned in the past if they could not keep earning profits by selling tea leaves. They thus began to think about ways to revitalize the ancient-tea-leaf trade. As Jinger said, “We could stop tea production, but the tea leaves still burst out from the trees!” Jinger told me that many villagers just could not help but harvest the tea leaves when witnessing the bursting buds, even though they knew it could be difficult to find a buyer. “Tea leaves mean money; will you let money go when you see it?”

Jinger asked me. Consequently, even though the market demand shrank, villagers still harvested ancient tea leaves. In fact, since villagers kept harvesting tea leaves regardless of the shrinking market demand, they attempted some new strategies to revitalize the tea trade. One of the strategies, ironically, was to resume trade between villagers and Cai.

While Cai claimed that he stopped purchasing the ancient tea leaves from villagers both in 2007 and 2008, villagers did “sporadically knock the door,” as Cai put it, to sell their tea leaves. Cai still insisted that he would not resume his business with the villagers until the overheated market for Pu’er tea cooled down and the impact of the market crash were known. Nevertheless, according to villagers, in 2008 Cai started purchasing ancient tea leaves again in smaller quantities. However, even with the smaller volume, for some villagers, who successfully “knocked open Cai’s door,” it meant a measure of financial relief. Also critical, based on villagers’ words, was that while the price of tea leaves “hovered around the bottom” after the bubble burst, Cai never intentionally lowered his purchasing price to the bottom rate. Instead, villagers said that Cai kept to the same price he offered in 2003, the year when he signed the contract.

Cai’s gradual reentry into doing business with the villagers reconstructed his relationship with them. Resuming the business with Cai after the bubble burst, villagers would compare him to the outside tea merchants, who had left with just their *baotiao* and never come back. Compared them, the villagers viewed Cai as an honest businessman who would pay in full. Some villagers even admitted that they earned more from him, despite the better price offered by the outside tea merchants. As one villager said, “I got more, the real cash, from Cai, but only the useless *baitiao* from other tea merchants!” Another villager said that Cai never used the crazy price to fool villagers, as the outside tea merchants did.



In 2009, the earlier tension between Cai and the villagers over the ownership of ancient tea trees seemed mitigated. In addition, although the damages of the market crash were still felt, the market of ancient tree tea, in fact, had “gradually recovered to normal in 2009,” said Cai. Therefore, Cai had fully resumed his production of ancient tree tea in 2009. I met him during the summer of 2009, when he brought me to his collection station in Mangjing. During my stay at the station, I saw villagers come with bags of fresh tea leaves to sell to his company. He would personally check the authenticity of villagers’ leaves to make sure they were pure and not mixed with terrace tea leaves. It seemed that the tea trade between Cai and the villagers had been ongoing, regardless of the persistent differences in standpoints concerning the ownership of the ancient tea trees.

While Cai resumed his business with villagers, he had altered his marketing strategies for his ancient tree tea product. According to Cai, when he arrived at Jingmai Mountain, one of his goals was to “build up a brand name” for Jingmai Mountain in the market. In other words, in his first few years, he had worked hard to introduce the market to the ancient tree tea of Jingmai Mountain. Additionally, in order to raise its market value, he honed his processing skills and techniques to “thoroughly release the original and the best essence of the ancient tree tea.” In Cai’s mind, he had completed the job of building up a brand name for the tea. Indeed, the ancient tree tea produced by Cai’s company had been highly valued among tea merchants, and Cai had become a renowned person in the Pu’er tea market.

From Cai’s perspective, however, the widespread fame of Jingmai Mountain for its rich ancient-tea-tree resources did not actually benefit his own business. Although he claimed his one and only legal usage right of the ancient tea trees in Jingmai Mountain, he complained that he was never well protected with the legal status he was granted by the contract. Cai never directly

talked about villagers’ resistance to the fifty-year contract he signed in 2003, whereas he seemed also to realize the near impossibility of legally monopolizing the resources of ancient tea trees in Jingmai Mountain. After confronting the villagers’ resistance and market crash, Cai had adopted a different marketing strategy. “Things are totally different from what I saw in 2003,” said Cai. In 2009, Cai told me that since everyone knew the value of the ancient tree teas, and wanted to make their own money from the trees, he needed to “be different from anyone else” in order to sustain his business. He thus targeted his tea products to the “high-end market” (*gaoduan shichang*).

Cai proudly told me that his company was the only one capable of “getting entrance to the high-end market,” not just in China but also overseas. Cai was confident that he had the best processing facilities, the most developed skills, and the most experience and knowledge to produce his tea products for the high-end market. Additionally, his company was the only one in Jingmai Mountain with the ability to obtain organic certification from the United States, EU, and Japan (Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4. Organic certifications from the United States, EU, and Japan hung on the wall of Cai’s office in Simao District of Pu’er City. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung)



With these certifications, Cai informed me that his company was the only one capable of “producing locally and selling overseas” (*zaidi shengchan haiwai xiaoshou*). These organic certifications had helped Cai to expand his business not only to overseas but also to the emerging market of elite consumption in China. As Teacher Yang, the tea connoisseur said, Cai had no retail shop in any location in China, but more and more “high-end customers” (*gaoduan xiaofeizhe*) in China would still automatically come to Cai to purchase his ancient tree teas.

The high-end customers included government officials, company executive managers, and industrial directors. They were not only individual customers, but would sometimes come as representatives of their institutions or companies to do the business with Cai. During my visits with him, I occasionally witnessed the so-called high-end customers that came to Cai’s office for business. For example, in July 2009 I met and had a short talk with a chief executive officer of a mineral company in Guangxi. He came to Cai in order to pre-order the ancient tea cakes, which later would be the mineral company’s gift for the coming mid-autumn festival. Later, Teacher Yang mocked, “Cai’s tea has become his ticket to enter those high-end customers’ world.” Cai’s business in the high-end market seemed to be expanding, and he had, in accordance, adjusted his methods for collecting ancient tea leaves from villagers.

In order to produce the best ancient tree tea for the high-end market, Cai admitted that he had become much more selective in collecting the leaves from villagers, because he was determined to use the best fresh tea leaves. As a result, instead of collecting as many leaves as possible from villagers, Cai intended to collect only those that could meet his high standards. This changed both the method and quantity. First, Cai planned to secure a stable provision of ancient tea leaves specific households that owned the best leaves. Although Cai still had his collection station to collect leaves without any specific discernment, he would gradually

prioritize the usage of the station for collecting leaves from specific households. According to Cai, since he arrived Jingmai Mountain in 2003, he had more or less learned which households, including those in Mangjing, could provide a better quality of ancient tea leaves. These households, therefore, became the source for Cai to secure his stable provision of leaves for expanding his business to the high-end market for Pu'er tea.

Second, since Cai was selective in collecting the ancient tea leaves, the quantity he would collect was reduced. In addition, the higher profits from the high-end market seemed to allow him to reduce his production quantity. Yet, Cai never directly talked to me about whether or not the high-end market had created more profits for his company. Still, he positioned his company as a tea producer distinct from producers for mass consumption. He said, "At the end the ancient tree tea should not be like Lipton....I only sell my tea to those who can truly appreciate the value of tea, including ancient tree tea." In Cai's mind, his tea business was always about quality, not quantity. Furthermore, as mentioned above, he did not thoroughly depend on ancient tree tea for his tea business. This allowed him to adjust his marketing strategies to contend with market fluctuations. Cai's reduced in ancient-tree-tea production also turned out to be one of the strategies to reduce his market risk after the market crash.

Cai never asserted that his adjustment in marketing strategies for ancient tree tea was a response to villagers' resistance. However, from the viewpoint of the owners of local tea factories, his changing marketing strategies were indeed an adjustment to the resistance. As in Xianjin's opinion, Cai reduced his production of ancient tree tea because he eventually realized it was impossible for him to monopolize the ancient tea trees. Meanwhile, like Cai, the market crash in 2007 pushed other owners of local tea factories to reconsider their future business. Paradoxically, these owners in some ways took Cai as a model for running their tea factories or

companies. Like Hongyan, despite her resistance to Cai and the fifty-year contract, she admitted he had positively reconceptualized her thoughts about tea production. Hongyan said, “We need to produce our tea more as the way Cai is doing. We need to upgrade!” In fact, many owners of local tea factories hoped to one day also get into the high-end market.

In 2009, when the market for ancient tree tea gradually recovered, local tea factories had increasingly resumed their business with outside tea merchants. Nevertheless, in most outside tea merchants’ minds, including Cai’s, local tea factories in Mangjing were still incapable of producing tea products for the high-end market. In other words, many outside tea merchants thought that local tea factories still lacked refined processing techniques and the knowledge to produce good quality ancient tree tea. As a result, although outside tea merchants came to purchase the ancient tree tea from local tea factories, what they purchased most was the raw material, *maocha*, not the final tea products. In a sense, local tea factories had gradually become the providers of *maocha*, mostly for the outside tea merchants who sold tea to the general public.

A market differentiation between Cai and the local tea factories had gradually emerged after the bubble was burst in 2007. For Cai, although he still regarded himself as the only legal producer of ancient tree tea in Jingmai Mountain, his marketing strategies for the high-end market had made him reduce the quantity of and be more selective in collecting ancient tea leaves. For the local tea factories, while lacking the ability to get into the high-end market, they became the major providers of *maocha* for outside tea merchants. For villagers, Cai had become more selective in purchasing the ancient tea leaves, but they were also more free to sell their tea leaves to local tea factories, at least without any disturbance from the forest police. For me, the market differentiation seemed to reach equilibrium among Cai, the local tea factories, and other general villagers. This seeming equilibrium, created an ambiguous effectiveness for Cai’s fifty-

year contract and the blurred ownership regarding the ancient tea trees. This blurry scenario persisted until I left Mangjing in May 2011, though both Cai and the villagers in Mangjing continued to claim their legal status in retaining the ownership of the ancient tea trees.

### **2.3 Conclusion: Property Rights and the Situated Dilemma on the Frontier**

This chapter discusses the changing ownership of the ancient tea trees and the resulting conflict, compromise, and then the ambiguity of property rights in Mangjing. The scenario, I argue, reveals the dilemma at the juncture between sustaining state control and opening to the global market economy on China's southwest frontier. As I addressed in the introduction, I highlight three dimensions emerging from the dilemma to understand current changes on China's southwest frontier. The three dimensions, incompatible desires, changing moralities, and cultural renovations, all emerged from the changing ownership of the ancient tea trees in Mangjing.

First, the incompatible desires, were manifested in the Chinese state's land reform, which sought redistribute the ancient tea trees to the Bulang villagers. The Household Responsibility System, on one hand, granted the ownership of the ancient tea trees to villagers for running their individual tea business in the burgeoning tea market. On the other hand, the Chinese state maintained its control over the frontier by retaining the land, not the ancient tea trees, as state property. The land reform, the Household Responsibility System in particular, therefore, manifests the state's incompatible desires between promoting individual responsibility in the market economy and perpetuating political control through state intervention. Although the state has redistributed ownership of the ancient tea trees to Bulang villagers, it was still able to

contract out the ancient tea trees to Cai, an outside tea entrepreneur, without agreement from the Mangjing villagers.

For Cai, his incompatible desires have been the simultaneous desire for monopolization of the ancient tea trees and for incorporation of the Bulang villagers as labor providers. However, while he expected that his legal status would be protected by the state, the state enforcement system, like the forest police, did not last long or work well for him. In addition, while he thought the local villagers would be recruited by him through his fair price offer for tea leaves, the Bulang villagers turned out to care more about their ownership of the ancient tea trees, especially after the rising price in the tea market, which created stronger sense of property among the Bulang villagers.

The Bulang villagers have confronted their own incompatible desires. First, they have aimed to retain the ownership of ancient tea trees. Meanwhile, they hope to cooperate with Cai's marketing strategies and processing techniques to sustain the reputation of the Mangjing ancient tree tea. Driven by the escalation of market value for the ancient tree tea, the villagers sought to claim their ownership of the ancient tea trees during the Pu'er tea market rush and before the 2007 crash. Ironically, after the bubble burst, villagers relied on Cai for continuing their tea harvest and production and then sought to learn from Cai how to enter the high-end market for upgrading their tea business.

The incompatible desires of the Chinese state, tea entrepreneurs like Cai, and Bulang villagers have woven together throughout the negotiations over ownership of the ancient tea trees. Through the process, changing moralities and cultural renovations have also emerged. I have argued that the dilemmas produced by the simultaneity of incompatible desires are not simply an outcome, but a mechanism to drive more action from the state, the entrepreneurs, and the local

Bulang villagers. I specifically highlight the changing moralities and cultural renovations to shed light on the pursuant actions, which are driven by the incompatible desires.

I have briefly discussed them in this chapter. For example, after the 2007 market crash, the failed *baotiao* system, and villagers' informal business contracts with outside tea merchants, villagers' perceptions of Cai's moral standard for doing business were reconceptualized. Cai has become a model for villagers in terms of maintaining integrity and honesty in purchasing villagers' tea leaves at his promised price. As for cultural renovations, the Bulang villagers, in order to reclaim their ownership of the ancient tea trees, have renovated their tea history and culture by recovering the yearly worship of their tea ancestor, *Pia Ai Leng*. The interweaving relationship among incompatible desires, changing moralities, and cultural renovations will be discussed further in the following chapters.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Quality: *Suzhi* and the Tea Entrepreneurs' New Standards of Production for Ancient Tree Tea in Mangjing

As mentioned in the previous chapter on property, Cai<sup>39</sup>, the Taiwanese tea entrepreneur, brought me to Jingmai Mountain in July 2009, the rainy season of Yunnan as well as the off-peak time for the production of Pu'er tea. According to Cai, Jingmai Mountain, where the village of Mangjing is located, was now famous for its abundance of exciting ancient tea trees. Cai confidently claimed that because of him, the name "Jingmai" now referred to not only a place but also a renowned brand for one of the best ancient tree teas. However, at the same time he also complained that he still struggled with how to "level up" (*tisheng*) villagers' "general quality" (*zhengti suzhi*) of tea production. Cai believed that if local villagers' *suzhi* for tea production could not be leveled up, the current reputation of the ancient tree tea of Jiangmai Mountain would be at risk, despite his years of cultivating and to maintaining the fame. Cai divided *suzhi* into two categories: software *suzhi* (*ruanti suzhi*) and hardware *suzhi* (*yingti suzhi*). Cai said that now many villagers have improved their hardware *suzhi*, for example, by using machines to process their tea leaves. However, for Cai, villagers' software *suzhi*, which refers their knowledge, skills, and "cultural awareness" (*wenhua suyang*) for tea production, was still the

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<sup>39</sup> This was my first trip to Mangjing. Before this visit, I had heard of the village of Mangjing from many tea entrepreneurs, retailers, and tea connoisseurs, and had seen Mangjing in books and magazines, and from the photos taken by friends who visited the tea mountains in Yunnan. In fact, Mr. Cai and his factory were often referred to, both in people's conversations and in the published works about the tea of Jingmai Mountain. Some people, including tea entrepreneurs and local villagers, even mentioned Cai as the first person who successfully branded the tea of Jingmai Mountain for the Pu'er tea market. In addition, Cai was also regarded as a controversial figure who literally monopolized the production of the ancient tree tea of Jingmai Mountain, including the village of Mangjing. Please see the discussion in the chapter on property for the relations among the ancient tea forest in Mangjing, the Bulang villagers, and Cai's tea company.

biggest concern for the development of the tea industry in Jingmai Mountain.

Cai's words about *suzhi*, be it software or hardware, represented a general standard for tea production from the perspective of tea entrepreneurs. Tea entrepreneurs came to Mangjing mainly to securing tea leaves harvested from the ancient tea trees. However, at the same time, these tea entrepreneurs found a huge gap between their standard of tea production and local Bulang villagers' methods for harvesting and processing tea leaves. For these tea entrepreneurs, the gap between them and the Bulang villagers in terms of tea production standards put the quality of their end products at risk, particularly the ancient tree teas. Even though tea entrepreneurs found and secured the best material for making ancient tree teas in Mangjing, they had to rely on local Bulang villagers to harvest the tea leaves and to do the basic processing, which included making the raw material *maocha*, for them<sup>40</sup>. As a result, they had a vested interest in the Bulang villagers' *suzhi* in harvesting and processing tea. The Bulang villagers' methods did not meet their standards, and the entrepreneurs felt that the villagers' *suzhi* was still not "leveled-up" enough.

The term *suzhi* was also referred to as *shuiping* or *shuizhun*. Any of these terms were often used to downgrade the Bulang villagers' current capacity for tea production. But in order to ensure the quality of the end products of tea, tea entrepreneurs would often supervise local Bulang villagers' leaf harvesting and basic processing. Instead of coming to Mangjing just to buy fresh tea leaves or raw material, these entrepreneurs would often stay in Mangjing for several days to supervise the processes, from leaf harvesting to basic processing. During their stay, the

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<sup>40</sup> Cai's tea company has been an exception here. Cai only collected the fresh tea leaves from the Bulang villagers, because he had his own tea factory to complete all the required tea processing. For most of the tea entrepreneurs from outside Mangjing, they did not have an on-site tea factory to do the basic tea processing. Therefore, they usually bought the fresh tea leaves and then asked the local villagers they trusted to do the basic processing of tea leaves for them. Also, many of them would directly buy the processed tea leaves, the raw material *maocha*, from villagers, and then ship the *maocha* to other places for the rest of required processing to make the end products.

entrepreneurs would interact closely with the local Bulang villagers, and were usually thoroughly involved in every detail of tea production to guide the Bulang villagers on how to properly make tea. As a consequence, the interactions with Bulang villagers became a way for tea entrepreneurs to help upgrade Bulang villagers' *suzhi* in making tea.

In general, tea entrepreneurs cared about both the “hardware” and “software” *suzhi* of Bulang villagers in Mangjing. In practice, tea entrepreneurs emphasized three dimensions for improving Bulang villagers' *suzhi* in tea production. These three dimensions could also be seen as three different phases for making a good tea product, the ancient tree tea in particular. This chapter will focus on the three general dimensions of *suzhi* that tea entrepreneurs exported to Mangjing for tea production.

First was the origin of the fresh tea leaves. Most tea entrepreneurs believe that the best quality of ancient tree tea came purely from the fresh tea leaves of ancient tea trees. In other words, the best end product of ancient tree tea could only be made from ancient tea leaves that were not mixed with other sources of tea leaves, such as the leaves from terrace tea gardens. In addition, the harvesting and collecting methods for fresh tea leaves from the ancient tea trees also needed to be done carefully without damaging or polluting the freshness of tea leaves at their very first stage.

Second were the processing techniques. These included two general stages. One was turning fresh tea leaves into raw materials, *maocha*. The other was the process for turning *maocha* into the end product of ancient tree tea. Most of the tea entrepreneurs came to Mangjing to buy and/or make *maocha*, so were most interested in the Bulang villagers' *suzhi* in making *maocha*. This included the somewhat delicate skill of using machines and meeting hygienic requirements at every step in handling the tea leaves.

Third was the local tea culture. Tea, for many tea entrepreneurs, was not just production and consumption as a commodity. Rather, they considered tea making and drinking, especially for the high-quality teas like the ancient tree tea, also to be a realization of the local tea culture. While tea entrepreneurs acknowledged that Bulang villagers had their own ethnic tea culture, they also believed that overall, the Bulang villagers did not realize why tea production and consumption should be simultaneously, in Cai's term, a "presentation of culture" (*wenhua chengxian*). In other words, tea entrepreneurs thought the Bulang villagers should upgrade their tea culture by embodying culture through both making and drinking tea. For example, with tea drinking, tea entrepreneurs stressed not only the tea itself, but also the details like the water quality, the texture of the teapot and the cup, and even the etiquette in serving tea. For tea entrepreneurs, Bulang villagers needed to recognize that it was imperative to upgrade their cultural *suzhi* by making and drinking tea in order to upgrade the market value of the ancient tree tea of Mangjing.

Before proceeding to these three dimensions of *suzhi* for tea production and consumption, I provide a brief introduction to the concept *suzhi* within contemporary Chinese context below.

### **3.1 *Suzhi*: An Ideology from State Government to Population Self-Governance in Late-Socialist China**

*Suzhi*, which translated to English means *quality*, was a term used in the early 1980s in China. Specifically, the term appeared in the government propaganda for the "One-Child Policy" (*yitaihua zhengce*) in the name of raising China's general "population quality" (*renkou suzhi*) by reducing the total Chinese population (Kipnis, 2006; Hsu, 2007). This ideology of improving the

quality of China's population the "One-Child Policy" was buttressed by China's late-socialist regime which re-evaluated the value of its human capital in the market economy. The ideology behind the "One-Child Policy" was thus to concentrate resources on one child per family to cultivate a high *suzhi* for the next generation, in order to make China a competitive player in the global market economy. As a result, since the early 1980s, *suzhi* has become a common subject of discourse to measure an individual's value in the market economy (Yan, 2003).

The ideology of *suzhi* was generated in the Chinese state's authoritarian intervention to control China's population. However, *suzhi* has been accepted as a common term by the general population. "*Suzhi* discourse was used for everything from justifying educational reforms to selling nutritional supplements, from trumpeting real estate developments to denigrating litterbugs and short people" (Hsu, 2007: 184). From a state-imposed ideology to a ubiquitous discourse in people's everyday life, *suzhi* could be understood as a "brainwashing" (*xiniao*) process to bring China's general population into the service of the global market economy (Yan, 2003; Anagnost, 2006). Therefore, *suzhi* has become a mechanism for the Chinese state to inculcate a sense of individual responsibility in ordinary citizens for boosting economic development and for enhancing China's status as a rising global power. Under the context of the market economy, *suzhi* has been the means for the Chinese state to realize its state power through the self-governance of the general population.

While *suzhi* has become the discourse that mobilizes China's ordinary citizens, it has also served as a hierarchical language to understand the emerging social stratification that occurs with economic development. In other words, the stratification between "high-quality" (*gao suzhi*) and "low-quality" (*di suzhi*) people has been determined by people's value in terms of their capability to contribute to the market economy. However, on China's southwest frontier, *suzhi* has not only

been the hierarchical language to decipher the emerging social stratification, but in southwest China, it has also served as a differential power mechanism (Yan, 2003) to perpetuate the difference between the social majority of Han Chinese and the minority nationalities, which include the Bulang people. This chapter will next discuss the ways *suzhi* has been re-articulated by outside tea entrepreneurs using their three new production standards for ancient tree tea. The entrepreneurs have used *suzhi* as both a hierarchical and a differential language to position the social status of Bulang villagers in Mangjing.

### 3.2 The “Pure Material” (*Chunliao*)

Cai brought me to a collection station for fresh tea leaves (*caixiandian*) in Mangjing. The collection station was exclusively for his company. Since he signed the fifty-year contract with the Lancang County government in 2003, Cai had officially become the only legal collector of fresh tea leaves from ancient tea trees in Mangjing<sup>41</sup>. As a result, Cai asked villagers in Mangjing to send all of their harvested ancient tea leaves to his collection stations.

Cai recalled that at the very beginning, local villagers in Jingmai Mountain, including the Bulang villagers in Mangjing, thought he was crazy for collecting only ancient tea leaves to make tea, and because he intended to make his tea using only ancient tea leaves. At the time, ancient tea leaves were considered by villagers to be poor material with which to produce tea. The price of ancient tea leaves was much lower at this time than for leaves harvested from the terrace tea gardens. As a result, the Bulang villagers were surprised to find that an outside tea entrepreneur from Taiwan would be willing to sign a long-term contract with the county government to secure the provision of ancient tea leaves. What surprised the villagers even more

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<sup>41</sup> See discussion in the chapter on Property.

was Cai's willingness to pay a higher price than usual to purchase the ancient tea leaves in order to make the tea products from the pure material of ancient tea leaves.

As Cai said, "villagers in Jingmai Mountain, [including Bulang villagers in Mangjing], hardly heard of 'pure material' of ancient tea leaves (*gushu chunliao*)." In other words, according to Cai, "pure material," meaning the tea made only from 100 percent ancient tea leaf, was a new concept for Bulang villagers in Mangjing. Cai believed that pure material had become one of the standards for making the best quality ancient tree tea, but the Bulang villagers did not see this until after he started producing the "pure material ancient tea" (*chunliao gucha*) of Jingmai Mountain for the market. However, from the start of his production of "pure material ancient tea" in 2003, Cai had concerns about the Bulang villagers' handling of the fresh tea leaves as they were transported from the tea forest to the collection station. Cai said he had to keep educating on how to properly harvest from the tea forest, and then to properly ship the ancient tea leaves to the collection station. Even so, he still felt frustrated when the villagers failed to follow his guidance. Even more frustrating was that, according to Cai, the villagers became increasingly "dishonest" (*bulaoshi*) by selling "fake pure material" (*jiachunliao*) to him.

For Cai, the pure material became fake if it was mixed with any leaves other than ancient tea leaves. According to him, villagers in Jingmai Mountain, including the Bulang and Dai people, were increasingly dishonest because they sold fake pure material by mixing terrace tea leaves with ancient tea leaves. Cai said ever since he raised the price of ancient tea leaves in 2003, villagers had started selling the fake pure material to him. This situation became much worse after 2007 when the market bubble for Pu'er tea burst and the price of terrace tea leaves dropped dramatically. While the price of ancient tea leaves has increased since the market crashed, the price of terrace tea leaves was still nearly at its bottom and had never recovered.

Due to the increasing gap between prices for ancient tea leaves and terrace tea leaves, combined with the highly valued pure material of ancient tea leaves in the market, villagers were willing to risk selling the fake pure material. If a villager mixed the ancient tea leaves with terrace tea leaves and still sold it as pure material with a one-hundred percent ancient tea leaf content, he or she could earn more. According to Cai, villagers were willing to take this risk not only because of the price difference between ancient tea leaves and terrace tea leaves, but also because of the difficulty in telling the physical difference between pure and fake material.

Many people, including the tea entrepreneurs, admitted that they could not precisely tell the physical difference in the fake pure material, especially when all the tea leaves were freshly harvested and mixed together right away. Nevertheless, Cai said there was a physical difference between the pure and fake material, though it was nuanced and difficult to detect. He told me that after being fooled by villagers for years, he was expert at instantly telling the difference. He said he not only could tell the difference by sight and by hand sorting the leaves, but also used a kind of chemical to “scientifically” sort out the terrace tea leaves from the ancient tea leaves. Cai had also mentioned his chemical for testing for authentic ancient tea leaves earlier. He said this chemical was his commercial secret, and was sure that no one in the Pu’er tea business had the same chemical to complete the “scientific test.” “It is my weapon to survive and retain my reputation [in the market],” said Cai. Although Cai was reluctant to tell me what kind of chemical it was, how it was made, and where he got it<sup>42</sup>, he would show me how to do the test.

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<sup>42</sup> Cai did once tell me that the chemical was produced based on his own research on ancient tea leaves for years. However, he did not clarify what research he has been engaged in or how he made the chemical based on the research. He kept it as his “business secret” (*shangye jimi*).



Figure 3.1. The plastic sack Bulang villagers typically used for packing fresh tea leaves. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Upon arriving at the collection station in Mangjing, Cai saw a male villager backpacking using a plastic sack (Figure 3.1 above) full of fresh tea leaves and walking to the collection station. Cai asked his driver to drive a bit closer to the villager. As his car was closing on the villager, Cai rolled down the car window to talking to him, and without any greeting, asked, “All ancient tea leaves?” The villager nodded his head. Cai continued, “Don’t use this kind of plastic sack to load the fresh tea leaves! Those tea leaves in your sack can hardly ‘breathe’ right now!” The villager simply smiled and nodded his head again. After this short conversation with the villager, Cai rolled up the window and asked his driver to go directly to the collection station.

Arriving at the collection station, Cai got out of his car and walked into the station. He greeted the station staff, a local young male Bulang villager. In addition to the young staff, there were two male Bulang villagers inside the station. These two men had also just backpacked their fresh tea leaves to the collection station. At that moment, the staff was weighing the two men's collected fresh tea leaves loaded in plastic sacks similar to those just seen on the villager walking on the road. While the staff was weighing the sack, Cai immediately noticed that the fresh tea leaves had been loaded in an improper way. He turned to the two men and talked to them in a tone mixed with irritation and frustration, "Plastic [sacks] again! I know the plastic [sacks] are cheap. But if you keep using these sacks to load fresh tea leaves, you're making your tea leaves cheap too!"

After the two villagers weighed their sacks, Cai pointed to the scale. He told the villagers that they had put too many leaves in one sack without leaving space for the tea leaves to breathe. Then, Cai asked the two villagers to open the plastic sacks and unload the tea leaves. In addition to letting tea leaves breathe, his other purpose was to check their composition. Thus, it was also a procedure to make sure the leaves were from the ancient tea trees without mixing other leaves from the terrace tea gardens. One of the villagers quickly opened and was ready to unload his tea leaves directly to a bamboo sheet on the ground. As soon as Cai saw the villager's gesture of unloading the fresh tea leaves, he squatted down to look and randomly caught some falling leaves in his hand.

The fallen leaves became a small pile on the bamboo sheet. Cai spread the pile of leaves out while grasping handfuls of leaves, taking a closer look, and then putting them back. "All are ancient tea leaves indeed," Cai murmured. He then told me that compared to the terrace tea leaves, ancient tea leaves are thicker and stronger. In addition, the surface of ancient tea leaves

looks more leather-like and the leaf veins are deeper and clearer. Cai also used his hands to feel the tea leaves. He said to me that terrace tea leaves are softer than ancient tea leaves.

Additionally, while squeezing his handful of tea leaves, he explained to me that ancient tea leaves are more elastic and harder to break apart. However, he also admitted that sometimes it was hard to tell the difference just by sight and touch. This was why he typically used his secret chemical to test the leaves.

Cai's chemical was a transparent liquid without any obvious smell. He picked a leaf at random and put it in a small glass. He then used a small wooden stick to press the tea leaf at the bottom of the glass so that the leaf juice oozed out. Next, he poured fresh water into the glass, dropped in a little his chemical liquid, and stirred quickly with the small wooden stick. With that, Cai showed me the changing color of the water, and then showed the glass of water to everyone in the collection station. "This is the color of ancient tea leaves," he said confidently without further explanation. Simultaneously, the Bulang villager whose tea leaves had just passed Cai's "scientific" test laughed out loud and said, "Pure ancient tea trees! Guaranteed!"

After checking on his collection station, Cai went back to his car to head back to the factory. In the car he said to me that he that could not understand why villagers repeat the same mistakes again and again. He then reiterated his viewpoint about *suzhi* to me. He said, "You always have to guide and supervise (*dudao*) what they are doing. But sometimes you have to just admit the *suzhi* of these people [including Bulang villagers] is too low to be educated!" He continued to associate the villagers' low *suzhi* with selling him the fake pure material. Because of the low *suzhi*, he felt that honesty was not regarded by villagers as a business principle. As a result, he had to equip himself with skills and tools to verify the authenticity of the pure material of ancient tea leaves. In other words, authentication became a required process for Cai, and other

tea entrepreneurs in general.

It was not uncommon to hear the term “*suzhi*” from tea entrepreneurs when they described or complained about Bulang villagers’ collecting, packaging, and selling behaviors. Tea entrepreneurs portrayed Bulang villagers’ low *suzhi* as one of reasons for their low standard of honesty. But tea entrepreneurs still depended on villagers’ labor and often felt obliged to supervise, educate, and even test them. The testing was typically done by tea entrepreneurs in the name of upgrading the villagers’ *suzhi* to a level that allowed for the proper processing of fresh pure material.

On the way back to the tea factory, Cai again expressed his opinions on the hardware and the software *suzhi* of the villagers. He concluded that the pure material of the fresh ancient tea leaf was the most important factor in producing the best quality Pu’er tea. For Cai, the ancient tea forest in Mangjing served as a guarantee of hardware *suzhi*. Cai thought that the Bulang villagers were lucky to have access to this pure material, or the hardware *suzhi*. He reiterated, though, that the villagers’ software *suzhi* remained so low that they would often ruin their gift of the hardware *suzhi*. Tea entrepreneurs were also concerned with the Bulang villagers’ *suzhi* in processing the pure material into the raw material *maocha*. They described the nuances in knowledge and skills for this processing as imperative.

### **3.3 The Raw Material (*Maocha*)**

In early April 2011, Liming, a Cantonese tea entrepreneur, drove his own car to Mangjing from the distant Guangzhou, one of the major Pu’er tea markets in southern China. He worked for a renowned tea company and retailer in Hong Kong. One of his main job duties was to search

and secure the provision of fresh tea leaves harvested from the tea forest in Yunnan. In addition, since the tea company based in Hong Kong did not have its own factory on any tea mountain in Yunnan, Liming was charged with finding a local agent to process fresh tea leaves to make the raw material, *maocha*, for the company. The *maocha* product would then be shipped out for additional processing to make the final tea product. As a result, Liming spent considerable time each year in Yunnan, driving from one tea mountain to another to fulfill his job duty.

Like other tea entrepreneurs, Liming usually came to Mangjing during the peak season, particularly the season of spring tea production, to purchase the *maocha*. Different from many other tea entrepreneurs who would come solely to purchase *maocha* directly from the Bulang villagers, Liming would participate in each step of *maocha* production, from leaf harvesting to the final packaging. His participation was to act as a supervisor, guiding Bulang villagers to produce *maocha* based on his production standards. For at least the past three years, he has cooperated with the Bulang Princess Tea Factory, one of the major local tea companies, to collect and process fresh ancient tea leaves for *maocha* production.

In the living room of the guesthouse belonging to the Bulang Princess Tea Factory, Liming sat at the big wooden tea table. He was about to brew the *maocha* recently made by the factory itself without his on-site supervision. He opened the small can and quickly smelled the tea. He then tilted the can to toss some tea on his palm. After that, he handed me the tea can and asked me to smell as he just did. He carefully examined the shape and color of the *maocha* in his palm by slightly palpating the processed tea leaves with the fingers of his other hand. “Got the smell?” he asked me with his eyes staring at the tea leaves in his palm. Then he put the *maocha* into the teapot and poured boiled water into it. After brewing the tea for about 30 seconds, he poured the bright, golden tea soup into two cups, and served one to me. Liming observed the

soup color, smelled it, and then sipped it delicately at the cup before drinking it up. He then held the cup up to his nose to breathe in the fragrance remaining at the bottom. He asked me to repeat each of the procedures for drinking my cup of tea. He then talked about his evaluation of the *maocha* we had just consumed, and wanted me to jot down and remember all the criteria related to the color, texture, smell, and taste.

Liming thought the *maocha* was still not good enough. For him, the problem was not related to the quality of the fresh tea leaves, but the processing techniques. He would start participating in all the manufacturing procedures to supervise and guide the tea processing. Liming was confident that the quality of *maocha* would definitely improve under his supervision. He would serve me the new *maocha* in a few days, and invited me to participate in a comparison based on the same criteria I just jotted down. It would be a comparison between the *maocha* made with his supervision and the one we just drank. He told me that after the comparison, I would realize what he meant when he said, “same material with different *suzhi* would make different tea<sup>43</sup>.”

The same material meant using the same tea leaves harvested from the ancient tea forest in Mangjing. The different *suzhi* referred to the difference between the Bulang villagers and Liming. As with Cai, Liming spoke of the *suzhi* of the Bulang villagers to downgrade the quality of *maocha* made without his on-site supervision. He differed from Cai, however, in that Cai could simply collect the fresh tea leaves and then process them at his factory, but Liming had to rely on the Bulang villagers to complete the basic processing for him. Liming’s concerns about *suzhi* were thus not just about the leaf harvest and collection, but also about the knowledge and skills needed to produce *maocha*. Liming appeared to think that his own *suzhi* was superior to the Bulang villagers in terms of the techniques used to turning the fresh tea leaves into *maocha*.

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<sup>43</sup> The original Chinese said by Liming was “*yuanliao tong, ren de suzhi butong, cha jiu butong.*”

Since Liming felt that the Bulang villagers' *suzhi* was still up to his production standard, it was imperative that he supervised the production on-site.

Early in the morning, Chunyan, one of the managers of the Bulang Princess Tea Factory, was sitting at the living room of the guesthouse. Chunyan was a young Bulang woman responsible for much of the administrative work in her company, including hosting clients from outside Mangjing. Today she was bringing Liming to the tea factory. Tea entrepreneurs come to supervise each year because “they want to make sure what we make is what they want,” said Chunyan. She admitted that often, different entrepreneurs would have their own standard of tea production that did not match other standards, and so she became confused by the differences. She also told me that the Bulang Princess Tea Factory, however, would never be a leading tea company without the tea entrepreneurs' “willingness to guide and teach” (*yuanyi zhidao*).

Liming, Chunyan and I hopped into the jeep and headed to the factory. On the way, Liming said that it was in fact difficult to find a qualified factory to produce high-quality *maocha* in Mangjing. While more Bulang villagers in Mangjing were able to make *maocha* at home and become raw material producers, or *cuzhichang*, Liming thought most of those in-home *maocha* producers still did not have enough knowledge or the necessary skills for tea processing. While many villagers thought becoming a *cuzhichang* was a sign of being “advanced” (*jinbu*), Liming thought differently. He said these *cuzhichang*, if they did not have quality processing skills, could ruin the precious tea leaves harvested from the tea forest. For Liming, tea processing was about “artistic techniques” (*gongyi*). “Without artistic techniques, those people [of *cuzhichang*] could certainly own the best machines but still produce the worst *maocha*,” said Liming.

Arriving at the factory, we saw factory workers spreading recently made *maocha* on the

ground to dry it in the sun.<sup>44</sup> “Don’t you have a drying machine?” Liming asked Chunyan. Chunyan replied that the drying machine being repaired, but because there was more *maocha* to be dried, she was sun-drying the remaining, recently made *maocha*. “How can you guarantee me that all of your *maocha* will be of the same quality if you used two different ways of drying?” asked Liming. Chunyan did not reply, while Liming kept talking. Liming had a serious talk with Chunyan, explaining that sun-drying and machine-drying were two very different processing techniques that entailed two different sets of skills to produce quality *maocha*. He advised Chunyan that the “quality consistency” (*zhiliang yizhixing*) was very important not just for him, but for every customer with whom they dealt. Chunyan, obviously, was not confident of her own ability to retain consistent quality while applying two different drying techniques in the process. Liming felt that Chunyan had risked generating two different kinds of *maocha* with two different qualities.

A few days later, Liming and I sat at the same table in the guesthouse to compare the *maocha*, as planned. Liming assured to me that the one made under his supervision would be of better quality. However, he also admitted to me his persistent worries regarding the “quality consistency” of the *maocha* that the factory would make for him after he left. He said that compared to other in-home *maocha* producers, the Bulang Princess Tea Factory was at a much “higher level” (*jiaogao de shuiping*). Liming made this comment regarding the factory’s processing machines and their workers’ skills in tea processing. Liming was unsure that their tea-processing technique was at a level that could be considered artistic.

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<sup>44</sup> Sun-drying (*rishai*), according to Chan (2008, 159; italics in original), “refers to one of the drying methods. It is a traditional drying way by putting the fresh tea leaves or stacks of Puerh under the sunlight for direct drying. *Raw materials*, compressed tea cakes and stacks of Puerh right after wrapping by bamboo bark can be dried by direct sunlight. The traditional aged Puerh tea cakes with good quality are usually compressed from the sun-drying Puerh tea leaves.” See, Chan, Kam Pong. 2008. *A Glossary of Chinese Puerh Tea*. Taipei, Taiwan: Wushing Books Publication.



Liming stressed that artistic techniques could only be realized by paying attention to the critical and essential nuances and controlling and mastering every processing detail. He again used the difference between the sun-drying and machine-drying of *maocha* as an example. Liming argued if a tea maker could not tell the difference and tackle the nuance, he or she was staying at the level of “techniques without being artistic” (*yiugong er wuyi*). Liming concluded that most of the Bulang villagers, including those working in the Bulang Princess Tea Factory, were trapped at the lower level. For him, the Bulang villagers still had a long way to go to be artistic in tea processing. At this point, he claimed again, the Bulang villagers’ *suzhi* could hardly meet (*suzhi budaowei*) the requirements of artistic techniques.

Similar statements regarding the relationship between artistic techniques and *suzhi* could be heard from other tea entrepreneurs outside Mangjing. They used the term *artistic techniques* to refer to the discrepancy between their standards and the Bulang villagers’ tea-processing practices. Tea entrepreneurs like Liming and Cai used the term *suzhi* to explain the discrepancy between themselves and the Bulang villagers.

Tea production led to meanings for *suzhi* that were reproduced and reconceptualized because of tea entrepreneurs’ standards for “pure material” (*chunliao*) and the production of “raw material” (*maocha*). While *chunliao* related to the *suzhi* of the harvest and collection of tea leaves, *maocha* signified the basic tea processing, which led tea entrepreneurs to use *suzhi* to judge the Bulang villagers’ tea culture. “Tea art” (*chayi*) was used to distinguish themselves from the Bulang villagers.

### 3.4 Tea Art (*Chayi*)

Huiyao, a tea entrepreneur from Shenzhen in Guangdong Province, came to Mangjing in the early spring of 2011. As with Liming and many other tea entrepreneurs from outside Mangjing, Huiyao's purpose was to purchase Mangjing's spring tea, the ancient tree tea in particular. Liming purchased only *maocha* in Mangjing, however, and finalized all the other manufacturing processes elsewhere, while Huiyao purchased the tea cakes<sup>45</sup> directly from the Bulang Princess Tea Factory. The factory made the tea cakes for him, But Huiyao packaged them for sale with his own brand name. In Huiyao's case, the Bulang Princess Tea Factory acted as an "agent" (*daigong*), producing the final tea products, which were then sold with another brand name.

Like Liming, Huiyao came to the factory in person to supervise the tea processing in order to assure the quality of the final products. Compared to Liming, however, Huiyao seemed to have more confidence in the capability of the primary tea companies run by the Bulang villagers. Huiyao thought, for example, that the Bulang Princess Tea Factory was "mature enough" (*gou chengshu*) to produce tea cakes for him. He told me that the company had advanced in terms of their investment in production machines, their attention to hygiene during tea processing, and the training of their staff. Hence, he chose the Bulang Princess Tea Factory as his agent to produce tea cakes. However, he also said that the local companies, in general, were at that point only

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<sup>45</sup> Tea cake (*chabing*), according to Chan (2008, 86; italics in original), "refers to a kind of compressed tea which has a round disc shape. The traditional size of a tea cake is around 19 to 20 cm diameter. Traditionally, a Puerh tea cake weighs 357g per piece. Seven pieces of tea cakes grouping together forms a *stack* and putting 12 *stacks* together in a bamboo basket or a cardboard box will form a traditional Puerh tea trading unit (84 pieces in a basket or cardboard box). The traditional trading unit consisting of 84 tea cakes weights 29.998kg which almost perfectly equals to 30kg. Owing to modern manufacturing and the demands from the market, Puerh tea cakes are no longer having only the 357g standard. A Puerh tea cake can be 25g, 50g, 100g, 125g, 145g, 150g, 200g, 250g, 300g, 357g, 360g, 380g, 400g, 440g, 480g, 500g, 1000g, 1.5kg, 2.5kg, 3kg per piece...etc., or whatever weight tea vendors want. These round disc shape tea cakes can be further divided into 2 categories, *round tea cake* or *discus tea cake*." (See Chan, Kam Pong. 2008. *A Glossary of Chinese Puerh Tea*. Taipei, Taiwan: Wushing Books Publication.) Huiyao asked the Bulang Princess Tea Factory to primarily make the traditional Pu'er tea cake, which weighs 357g per piece.

good enough to be an agent for him or for other customers outside Mangjing. The main reason, Huiyao argued, had to do with the “cultural thickness” (*wenhua shendu*) of the Bulang people’s local tea culture. Huiyao thought the lack of “cultural thickness” handicapped the villagers’ capacity to market their tea as a cultural product.

Considering tea a cultural product, Huiyao said that the Bulang people could not simply produce tea as a commodity. Instead, he thought they needed to work harder to integrate their tea products with more cultural elements. The easiest most important way to do this, Huiyao argued, was to cultivate the villagers’ senses of “tea art” (*chayi*). “Tea art,” Huiyao said, “is an attitude to tea (*duicha de taidu*). Eventually, you build up your relationship with tea based on the attitude.” In order to demonstrate what he meant, Huiyao showed me how he made a cup of tea to serve a guest.

Making a cup of tea, in Huiyao’s opinion, was one of the basic practices of tea art. He paid attention to every detail while making the cup of tea for me. From boiling the water to handing me the cup, Huiyao carefully and skillfully completed every step with dexterity. In addition, he insisted on using his own teapot, teacups, and kettle. He told me that every time he came to Mangjing, he would bring all of his own items to make a cup of tea. Even though he could easily find the items to make a cup of tea in the guesthouse of the factory, he said he never used them. He claimed, “It is all about my attitude to tea.”

Figure 3.2. The plastic-like tea cups Bulang villagers used to serve their guests. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Huiyao’s purpose in bringing his own tea-making equipment was to thoroughly “embody” (*tixian*) the essence of tea. He explained to me in detail the different function of every item he used, including the kettle, teapot, and teacups. He also contrasted the effect on tea quality for each item found in the guesthouse. For example, his teacups were different from the plastic-like cups (Figure 3.2 above) used in the guesthouse, in that they were made from sand-fired clay (*zisha*). He claimed that the plastic-like cups used in the guesthouse would simply compromise or even destroy the essence of the tea. Compared to the plastic-like cups, Huiyao’s cups would be much better “to keep the soup temperature and to hold the fragrance,” said Huiyao. More

importantly, the different textures between the plastic-like and the sand-fired cups, according to Huiyao, would produce a different sensual tea experiences. The sensual experiences were had in the “sense of holding” of cups as well as through the “instant taste” at the first sipping. Huiyao thought that the rich and exquisite sensual experience of a good tea, like Mangjing’s ancient tree tea, was totally “killed” by using the plastic-like cups.

“Plastic-like or sand-fired [tea cup]? [The choice] reveals your attitude to tea,” said Huiyao. It was an attitude, he explained, that showed one’s deep concern toward the authentic and original character of tea. Therefore, for him, the concern with the authenticity and originality of tea reflected an attitude of respect. He regarded this respect as an initial step in moving up from the level of drinking tea to the practice of tea art. Pointing to the plastic-like cups used in the guesthouse, Huiyao said to me that the common use of the plastic-like cups in Mangjing was concrete evidence of the Bulang villagers’ current attitude toward tea. It was also evidence revealing the villagers’ need to “cultivate a more respectful attitude [to their tea],” said Huiyao.

Bulang villagers, in Huiyao’s mind, considered their ancient tree tea not as a cultural product (*wenhua chanwu*) but as a commodity (*shangpin*). While tea was always a product sold in the market, for Huiyao, selling tea as a commodity was totally different from selling it as a cultural product. In his opinion, selling tea as a cultural product required sellers’ knowledge and skills in the practice of tea art. For now, he thought the Bulang villagers only cared about the commodity aspect, and so neglected the cultural dimension of tea sales. To strengthen his point, Huiyao once again brought up the comparison of the plastic-like cups to the sand-fired cups.

Huiyao said, “Commodity is only all about money!” As a result, he thought the Bulang villagers, by understanding tea only as a commodity, cared only about money. Using the plastic-like cups became an example to support this opinion. Huiyao said to me that every time he came

to the Bulang Princess Tea Factory, he would ask the working staff not to use the plastic-like tea cups to drink tea, or at least not to use them to serve their customers. However, every time he came back, he was disappointed again to see the same plastic cups in the guesthouse. According to Huiyao, it was obvious that the managers of the factory, and the Bulang villagers he met in general, did not think it was necessary to spend money to replace the plastic-like cups with sand-fired ones. Thus, in Huiyao's mind, if the villagers focused only on the price difference between plastic-like and sand-fired cups, they would "lose more by saving little" (*yinxiao shida*). What Bulang villagers lost, he said, was the opportunity to enrich their tea as a cultural product, and to advance their own tea culture within the tea market.

Finally, Huiyao concluded that the villagers' ignorance of tea art would eventually make them less competitive in the market. He thought the Bulang villagers in Mangjing were lucky to have easy access to the ancient tea forest and the best tea leaves for making tea. However, their lack of tea art and weak capacity to selling tea as a cultural product, in Huiyao's opinion, could trap them in the role of a production agent for others. Using the Bulang Princess Tea Factory as an example, Huiyao reassured me that this local tea company could produce tea for others, but would always need outside entrepreneurs' assistance to sell it. In fact, Huiyao considered himself a facilitator in promoting and selling Mangjing's tea as a cultural product. Although the Bulang Princess Tea Factory, in Huiyao's opinion, could produce good-quality tea cakes, he did not think the factory could compete for the "outside high-end market" (*waizai gaoduan shichang*), especially the markets in China's coastal cities, like Shanghai and Beijing, and overseas, in countries like Taiwan and South Korea.

Huiyao's perception of the Bulang villagers' lack of tea art, or of tea culture in a broader sense, was not uncommon among tea entrepreneurs from outside Mangjing. Paradoxically, these

tea entrepreneurs sold their tea products under their own brands, although the processing and manufacturing, except for the final packaging, were completed by local tea companies run by Bulang villagers. In other words, the villagers' companies acted only as a production agent for other tea companies or retailers outside Mangjing. This created a hierarchical division between local producers and outside tea sellers. It also created a division between local Bulang villagers and outside tea entrepreneurs. "Culture" was often flagged by the outside tea entrepreneurs, like Huiyao's idea about tea art, to narrate this kind of hierarchical division. In other words, those qualified to be outside tea sellers had the knowledge and skills of tea culture, tea art for example, and could Mangjing's tea as a cultural product for the "outside high-end markets." In this hierarchical division, on the contrary, the Bulang villagers would always be the "local producers," based on the entrepreneurs' sense of the villagers' lack of awareness and capacity for the art of tea, and would be unable to sell their tea as a cultural product.

The division between outside sellers and local producers based on the narratives and practice of tea art fits well with the general discourse concerning *suzhi*. Although Huiyao did not directly mention the term *suzhi* to describe the Bulang villagers' lack of tea art, the ideas and practices of tea art did resonate with Cai's comments about the hardware and software *suzhi*. When talking about the difference between hardware and software *suzhi*, Cai highlighted the software *suzhi* as cultural practices in both the production and the consumption of tea. Similarly, tea art, for many tea entrepreneurs from outside Mangjing, was a form of cultural practice that, in Huiyao's words, embodied the cultural thickness of tea as a cultural product. Tea art could thus be defined as one criterion to judge the level of *suzhi*. Again, the Bulang villagers were positioned in the low level of *suzhi* in terms of their performance and practice of tea art.

Accordingly, although some tea entrepreneurs from outside Mangjing, (Huiyao, for example) could positively recognize the Bulang villagers' ability to process tea, they still downgraded the Bulang villagers' *suzhi* based on the villagers' lack of tea art. From the viewpoints of hardware and software *suzhi*, entrepreneurs like Huiyao trusted the Bulang villagers' hardware *suzhi* in terms the pure material of ancient tea leaves and the manufacture of the products with advanced processing techniques. However, these entrepreneurs disqualified Bulang villagers' software *suzhi* by based on the cultural imperative, the tea art in particular, to sell tea as a cultural product. As a result, the alleged disqualification of Bulang villagers' performance in the art of tea became a rationale for Huiyao as well as other outside tea entrepreneurs to enlist Bulang villagers as their local production agent, albeit one in need of assistance to sell tea outside Mangjing.

### **3.5 Tea Production, the Discursive Practices of *Suzhi*, and the Essentialization of the Bulang People**

This chapter has discussed the three essential standards for tea production introduced by outside tea entrepreneurs to Mangjing. These three standards are the “pure material” (*chunliao*) of ancient tea leaves, the “artistic techniques” (*gongyi*) of processing raw material (*maocha*), and the “tea art” (*chayi*) for packaging tea as a cultural product. The standards are respectively situated in three stages of tea production; i.e., leaf collection, leaf processing, and product sale. Behind these three basic but critical standards is the outside tea entrepreneurs' differentiation of themselves from the Bulang people. This differentiation is based on the ideas of quality, or *suzhi* in Chinese. Although different tea entrepreneurs might define *suzhi* in different ways, in general



term is used to downgrade the capability of Bulang villagers in Mangjing in terms of making the ancient tree tea. The three standards of tea production reflect the outside tea entrepreneurs' three means of judging the Bulang people's *suzhi*.

### 3.5.1 *The Authenticity of Pure Material and the Bulang Villagers' Moral Standard of Integrity*

The standard for pure material derives from the imperative of producing tea with authentic pure material. Based on this imperative, the fake pure material sold by Bulang villagers, which is mixed with terrace tea leaves, has been designated by outside tea entrepreneurs proof of the Bulang people's low *suzhi*. This is because tea entrepreneurs think the villagers are not felt to have the personal honesty and integrity that are primary rules for doing business. Due to the low *suzhi* of the Bulang people alleged by the outside tea entrepreneurs, the entrepreneurs develop their own skills and tools to investigate and test the composition of fresh tea leaves, in order to ensure that the tea leaves sold by Bulang villagers are authentic pure material.

Cai's case provides a good example of outside tea entrepreneurs' standards for pure material and the connection to their concerns with the Bulang villagers' low *suzhi*. Cai divides *suzhi* into "hardware" and "software" dimensions. He considers the ancient tea leaves in Mangjing and Jingmai Mountain the best "hardware" *suzhi* to secure pure material. However, the low "software" *suzhi* of the Bulang villagers, for Cai, has compromised the high quality of the "hardware" *suzhi*. It is compromised because Bulang villagers have tried to fake the pure material by mixing in terrace tea leaves selling the product as authentic pure material. For this reason Cai, like many other outside tea entrepreneurs, has equipped himself with the skills and

tools to retain the authenticity of pure material. He has done this by sight, by touch, and by a “scientific” chemical test.

The process of authenticating the composition of pure ancient tea leaves brought by Bulang villagers becomes a process of authenticating villagers’ *suzhi*. In other words, although outside tea entrepreneurs, like Cai, use their skills and tools to test the authenticity of the ancient tea leaves, what they actually test is the villagers’ moral standard for selling the authentic pure material. Put another way, the tea leaves, throughout the process, have become the means for outside tea entrepreneurs to test Bulang villagers themselves. Testing tea leaves is, in fact, simultaneously testing the *suzhi* of the villagers. Once an outside tea entrepreneurs’ test fails to show the authenticity of the pure material sold by a villager, it demonstrates the alleged low *suzhi* of Bulang villagers in general. Given that, if a Bulang villager’s tea leaves fail to pass the test, the tea leaves immediately become an authentic example of Bulang people’s low *suzhi*. Consequently, the fake tea leaves in fake pure material provide authenticity to the judgment of Bulang villagers’ low *suzhi*. Low *suzhi* becomes one of the authentic characteristics inherited by blood. In effect, the investigation and test on tea leaves serve only to strengthen the entrepreneurs’ fixed perceptions of the Bulang people’s *suzhi* inferiority. Here, *suzhi* has become not only a hierarchical word to express the high quality of outside tea entrepreneurs from the low quality of Bulang villagers. In addition, it represents the differential power of outside tea entrepreneurs toward Bulang villagers. The differential power has been created by essentializing “low quality” as an inherited characteristic of Bulang villagers in terms of their lack of moral integrity.

### 3.5.2 *The Quality Consistency of Maocha and the Bulang Villagers' Lack of "Artistic Technique" (Gongyi)*

The second production standard exported by outside tea entrepreneurs is closely associated with the processing of raw material (*maocha*). As discussed before, most outside tea entrepreneurs go to Mangjing to purchase the *maocha*, and then to ship it to other places to complete the processing into final tea products. As a result, outside tea entrepreneurs, like Liming, rely on the Bulang villagers in Mangjing to produce *maocha* for them. The best quality *maocha* should be made from pure material, which is one-hundred percent authentic ancient tea leaves. However, outside tea entrepreneurs think using the authentic pure material does not necessarily guarantee good quality *maocha* production. The quality will, again, depend on Bulang villagers' *suzhi* in processing *maocha* from the pure material.

Liming's on-site supervision in the Bulang Princess Tea Factory provides an example of outside tea entrepreneurs' concerns about the Bulang villagers' ability to produce *maocha*. Many tea entrepreneurs from outside Mangjing believe that their on-site supervision is required in order to help the Bulang villagers meet the high standards in tea processing; without their supervision, it is felt that only poor-quality *maocha* would be produced. These tea entrepreneurs feel that, even though many Bulang villagers now have the techniques to produce *maocha*, their low *suzhi* does not, according to Liming, allow them to understand the nuances of artistic processing techniques that could retain a consistent quality of *maocha*.

Artistic techniques, for many outside tea entrepreneurs, require people's *suzhi*. Because of the Bulang villagers' low *suzhi*, on-site supervision is regarded by outside tea entrepreneurs like Liming an imperative duty to assure the artistic aspect of tea production. Outside tea

entrepreneurs' emphasis on artistic techniques and their connection to Bulang villagers' low *suzhi* further position Bulang villagers in an inferior status. Although the *maocha* trade between outside tea entrepreneurs and Bulang villagers seems to be completed through a neutral producer-buyer relation, the trading process is actually a practice of a hierarchical construction between superior tea entrepreneurs and inferior Bulang villagers. This superiority-inferiority scenario is practiced and realized through the outside tea entrepreneurs' on-site supervision of artistic techniques, combined with their perception of Bulang villagers' low *suzhi*. Bulang villagers, once again, have a lower status for tea production.

### 3.5.3 *The Culture of "Tea Art" and the Constraint of Bulang Villagers' Mobility*

The third standard that outside tea entrepreneurs have brought to Mangjing relates to the idea and practice of "tea art." Tea art, for most outside tea entrepreneurs, indicates a form of culture that is embodied through people's practices in the production and consumption of tea. Practicing tea art, for many tea entrepreneurs, requires a high level of *suzhi* to be aware of the cultural significance of tea. As with Huiyao, tea art is not just a practice that embodies the cultural meaning of tea, but also an attitude held by people who attain higher *suzhi* that shows respect for tea. Outside tea entrepreneurs, like Huiyao, attribute Bulang villagers' inability to practice tea art to their lack of a high standard of *suzhi*. For Huiyao, this further cripples the Bulang villagers' promotion of their tea as a cultural product to outside high-end markets.

Outside tea entrepreneurs blame the Bulang villagers' low *suzhi* for their ignorance of tea art and their resulting failure to promote tea as a cultural product. Accordingly, the Bulang villagers are designated the local production agent for outside entrepreneurs, like Huiyao, who

are considered capable of selling tea as a cultural product. As discussed, this has generated a hierarchical relationship between Bulang villagers and outside tea entrepreneurs. In this hierarchical relation, outside tea entrepreneurs view themselves as superior to outside tea sellers, while Bulang villagers are regarded as inferior local tea producers. In other words, Bulang villagers, in the view of these outside tea entrepreneurs, could not sell their tea to the high-end markets themselves, unless they could upgrade their *suzhi* to practice the art of tea and sell tea as a cultural product.

The generated hierarchical relation between local producers and outside sellers, also has a spatial implication. More specifically, due to the alleged low *suzhi* of Bulang villagers by outside tea entrepreneurs, the villagers are spatially constrained as local tea producers. On the other hand, the high-end tea markets outside Mangjing are only open to tea entrepreneurs, who have a high *suzhi* for tea art. Tea art, as a form of tea culture, has been used by outside tea entrepreneurs to spatially restrain Bulang villagers to the local. As a result, the mobility of Bulang villagers is also conceptually constrained. For tea entrepreneurs, unless Bulang villagers can upgrade their *suzhi*, they will remain in need of outside tea entrepreneurs' assistance to connect their tea production to the outside market.

### **3.6 Conclusion: *Suzhi* and the Incompatible Desires of both Raising the Living Standards and Downgrading the Social Status of Bulang Villagers**

Outside tea entrepreneurs' perceptions of the *suzhi* of Bulang villagers has created a collective downgrade of the Bulang people in the context of the market economy of tea production. In other words, *suzhi* has become a substantive term to normalize Bulang villagers'

lack of entrepreneurship and ability to survive alone in the competitive tea market and has been the basis of the villagers' inferior position. This has become the discursive practice that legitimizes the entrepreneurs' on-site supervision of tea production. By putting Bulang villagers in an inferior position, outside tea entrepreneurs regard themselves as superior supervisors to teach, guide, or even to test Bulang villagers in the interest of better tea production.

The outside tea entrepreneurs' narratives regarding the villager's *suzhi*, I argue, reveal a broader picture of the long-lasting hierarchical and differential relationship between the majority Han Chinese and minority nationalities embedded in Chinese society. In the Chinese context, the majority Han Chinese have been regarded as the most "civilized" population among minority nationalities. Most outside tea entrepreneurs, including Cai, who came to Mangjing for its tea production and businesses were Han Chinese, who considered tea a Han Chinese cultural symbol with which to view Bulang villagers' tea production. In other words, they used tea as both a material and a cultural symbol to signify the Chinese Han's superiority to and difference from Bulang villagers, and minority nationalities in general, while conducting tea business and embodying the tea culture. This embedded relationship epitomizes the incompatible desires occurring in the market economy on China's southwest frontier.

China's southwest frontier has engaged in the market economy since the "Open-up the West" campaign in the early 2000s. Given the number of areas on China's southwest frontier that are "areas of minority nationalities" (*shaoshu minzu diqu*), where economic development has lagged behind, one of the Chinese state's desires has been to develop the frontier to improve conditions for minority nationalities. The majority Han Chinese, however, who dominate political power in China, still want to maintain the social hierarchy and difference between Han and minority nationalities. Therefore, the incompatible desires between "raising minority

nationalities' standard of living" and "downgrading minority nationalities' social status," I argue, have emerged out of the developmental campaign on China's southwest frontier. The ideology of *suzhi*, has appeared as a means by which the state reconciles its incompatible desires for developing the areas of minority nationalities in southwest China.

While the Chinese state has attempted to improve conditions for minority nationalities on its southwest frontier, the majority Han Chinese expect them not to develop "too well," which might break down, or even subvert, the hierarchy and difference between the "superior," "developed," and "civilized" Han and the "inferior," "underdeveloped," and "uncivilized" minority nationalities. The state needs minority nationalities to cultivate their skills for engaging in a market economy but this engagement, ironically, is not meant to destabilize the embedded social order between the Chinese Han and the minority nationalities (Sturgeon 2007). *Suzhi*, as an ideology originating in the state "One-Child Policy" campaign, has played the discursive role of incorporating the incompatible desires for both raising and downgrading minority nationalities on the frontier.

On the one hand, *suzhi* discourse, though originated as a state-imposed ideology, has become a ubiquitous language with which the general population self-governs as it engages in a competitive market economy. This self-governance regarding improving individual's *suzhi* has then become, not a state-enforced regulation, but a taken-for-granted moral standard that encourages China's population, including the minority nationalities, to be more competitive in the market economy. As shown in the tea production in Mangjing, outside tea entrepreneurs have brought new standards of tea production to the Bulang villagers as capacity building to improve the Bulang villagers' *suzhi* of tea production and stay competitive in the fluctuating tea market. On the other hand, *suzhi* discourse also plays a critical role in sustaining the hierarchical order

and maintaining the difference between the Han Chinese and China's minority nationalities. Outside tea entrepreneurs have in this way essentialized Bulang villagers' "low quality" (*disuzhi*) through, for example, reinterpreting and reclassifying both Han Chinese and Bulang tea cultures.

While outside tea entrepreneurs have used *suzhi* to collectively downgrade the Bulang villagers in Mangjing, Bulang villagers, in practice, actually have different views on the production standards. The next chapter, *Hierarchy*, will address Bulang villagers' practices in light of outside tea entrepreneurs' production standards. Also, I will analyze how the multiple types of new production practices and standards have reconfigured the social relations among Bulang villagers themselves.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Hierarchy: Tea Production and the Changing Social Order among Bulang Villagers in Mangjing

It was April 10, 2011, a typical, busy day in the village of Mangjing, where many of the villagers climbed up the ancient tea trees and harvested spring tea leaves in the tea forest (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. A Bulang villager plucking tea leaves on the top of an ancient tea tree. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Baoni<sup>46</sup>, a young Bulang villager in his early 20s, worked with his wife in the tea forest. They were busy harvesting tea leaves from the ancient tree branches. While harvesting the tea leaves, Baoni received a phone call to inform him that the rotary fixing machine<sup>47</sup> (Figure 4.2) and the rolling machine<sup>48</sup> (Figure 4.3) were about to ship to his house. “Machines are here; I’m going home first,” Baoni yelled to his wife who was on the other tree away from him. He jumped off the tea tree and left his tea-leaf collecting bag on the ground. “Drink some water,” Baoni’s wife yelled back. “No time already!” Baoni replied; he seemed desperate to get home to see his machines.

Baoni had been expecting the arrival of his machines for almost three months. His wait was so long because he had purchased second-hand machines instead of new ones. He could not afford to buy two new machines at the same time, but still hoped to have them before the peak season for harvesting spring tea. Baoni said that the machine dealer had been willing to look for second-hand machines for him, but that he had warned Baoni that it could take much longer to receive them. The dealer could not guarantee that Baoni would have his machines by early April, the peak harvesting season.

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<sup>46</sup> A pseudonym is used for every individual referred to in this chapter, with the exception of public figures.

<sup>47</sup> A rotary fixing machine (*guntongshi shaqingji*) “refers to one of the methods of *preparatory fixation* (*shaqing*). It means that the fresh tea leaves are put into a metallic rotary machine in which the tea leaves are heated in order to reduce its internal fermentation process and to enhance its softness for the next step in the manufacture process, *twisting and rolling* (*rounian*)” (Chan, 2008, 157-8; italics in original). A rotary fixing machine is also referred to as a fixation machine in English. See, Chan, Kam Pong. 2008. *A Glossary of Chinese Puerh Tea*. Taipei, Taiwan: Wushing Books Publication. Also see notes 47, 48, and 49.

<sup>48</sup> A rolling machine is specifically for *twisting and rolling* (*rounian*). Twisting and rolling “refers to one of the manufacturing processes in which tea leaves are being kneaded, i.e., to twist and roll. The tea leaves are being rolled into a needle shape so as to damage the surface layer of the tea leaves. The purpose of tea leaf surface destruction is to release its internal tea leaf juice which can enhance further chemical reactions” (ibid, 158). A rolling machine is also called a tea roller in English. See, ibid. Also see notes 46, 48, and 49.

Figure 4.2. The rotary fixing machine (photograph by Po-Yi Hung).





Figure 4.3. The rolling machine (photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Today Baoni would finally get his machines. After receiving the phone call from the machine dealer, who was on his way shipping the two machines to Baoni's house, Baoni rushed home from the tea forest. Walking at a quicker pace on the meandering trail home, Baoni complained to me about the expensive shipment fee charged by the machine dealer, though he kept smiling while complaining. The machine dealer had not yet arrived when Baoni arrived home. Baoni opened the door and went into the room where he planned to put the machines. He checked the plugs and the hoses to see if both the gas and electricity were properly installed. Baoni then went to the back of his house to have a glance at the old big wok<sup>49</sup> which he used for stir-frying tea leaves for the *preparatory fixation*<sup>50</sup> (*shaqing*) with his hands. He then said with a confident tone, "I'll finally advance to the status of 'automatic production' (*zidonghua shengchan*)."

Baoni quickly checked all the gas and electricity installations before stepping out of his house. Standing just outside the gate, Baoni lit up a cigarette and gently held it to his lips without really smoking it. He unintentionally shook his left leg, grabbed his cell phone in one hand, and impatiently checked the clock on the phone screen from time to time. "Baoni!" A sudden and

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<sup>49</sup> Here Baoni referred to another method for *preparatory fixation* called *stir-frying in wok* (*guochao*). "It means that the fresh leaves are placed into a big Chinese wok for stir-frying in order to reduce their internal fermentation process and to enhance their softness for the next step in the manufacture process, *twisting and rolling*. During the process, the fresh tea leaves have to be stirred thoroughly by hand." (*ibid.*; italics in original). Compared to the rotary fixing machine, stir-frying in a wok is more labor intensive due to the need to stir-fry tea leaves by hand (*ibid.*; also see notes 46, 47, and 49).

<sup>50</sup> *Preparatory fixation* (*shaqing*), also abbreviated as *fixation*, "refers to the manufacturing process for stopping the internal chemistry reaction caused by enzymes after *plucking* and removing certain degree of green astringency. For tea other than Puerh, the purpose of preparatory fixation is to stop the fermentation completely. However, in Puerh tea, preparatory fixation is to reduce its internal fermentation process and to enhance its softness for the next step in the manufacturing process, *twisting and rolling*. There are two primary methods for preparatory fixation in Puerh tea, *stir-frying in wok* or using the *rotary fixing machine*. The temperature of the preparatory fixation must not be too high, otherwise the tea leaves will stop the internal fermentation completely and lose [sic.] their aging ability" (*ibid.*, 157 [italics in original]; also see notes 46, 47, and 48).

resounding voice yelled Baoni's name. It was from Chengqiu, another Bulang villager who was a bit younger than Baoni. Seeing Chengqiu, a close friend, Baoni immediately approached him.

After learning that Chengqiu was heading to “the princess's home”<sup>51</sup> (*gongzhu jia*) to sell newly harvested fresh tea leaves, Baoni excitedly told Chengqiu that the two machines for processing tea would arrive soon. Chengqiu then put his arm around Baoni, and said in a mocking tone, “[You are] a *xiaozi* (petite bourgeoisie) already! Level up! Remember to take care of me sometimes!” With a little embarrassment, Baoni's face flushed quickly after hearing Chengqiu's words. He then nudged Chengqiu, and asked how much Chengqiu would receive by selling the fresh tea leaves to “the princess's home.” Without waiting for Chengqiu's response, Baoni, in a joking tone, asked Chengqiu to consider selling the fresh tea leaves to him, rather than to the “princess's home.” Since Baoni would have the basic tea processing machines soon, he would be able to process the fresh tea leaves into *maocha*<sup>52</sup>, the raw material for making Pu'er tea, much more quickly now. In addition to processing his own tea leaves, Baoni expected to buy fresh tea leaves from others and produce more *maocha*. Baoni said to Chengqiu, “I'd be happy to ‘take care of’ your tea leaves with a special higher price [than the “princess's home] since you're my brother!”

Chengqiu did not have the resources to purchase a processing machine, or even a big wok. He could only sell fresh tea leaves that he harvested from his own land. After learning that Baoni

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<sup>51</sup> Here “the princess's home” refers to one of the major local tea companies called the *Bulang Princess* (*Bulang gongzhu*). Most villagers in Mangjing called it “the princess's house” to indicate the tea company.

<sup>52</sup> *Maocha*, also called *raw materials*, *raw tea leaves*, or *unprocessed tea* in English. It “refers to the status of dry tea leaves after the primary manufacturing process. In the course of manufacturing Puerh tea, after the fresh tea leaves are plucked, they will undergo the process of *preparatory fixation* and the process of *twisting and rolling*. After that, the raw tea leaves will be dried either by *sun-drying* or by machine. The dried tea leaves at this stage is [sic.] called or *raw materials*. In Chinese, it is called “*Mao Cha* [.]” Some people also call these dried tea leaves *unprocessed tea*, however, this translation is, to a certain extent, is conceptually inappropriate because the tea leaves have already undergone several procedures of primary processing” (ibid., 160; italics in original). Also see notes 47 and 49.

would be willing to buy his tea leaves at a higher price than he got from the princess's home, Chengqiu turned to me, laughing, and said, "Look! [Baoni] knows to start his business right away. Not like me. No money [and] no *suzhi* (quality)<sup>53</sup>!" Baoni's face flushed again, and he immediately interrupted, "Stop joking! The one who has real *suzhi* would rather do [tea] business outside Mangjing. Not me! I'm only in Mangjing to make *maocha*."

Chengqiu, Baoni, and the "princess's home" in fact represented the three general ways for Bulang villagers in Mangjing to take part in the current system of tea production. These are: as tea company runners, as raw material producers, and as tea leaf providers.

First are the local tea company runners or *dachang*<sup>54</sup>, epitomized in the *Bulang Princess Tea Factory*. They are the few local villagers who now have their own tea factories and brands. They harvest their own tea leaves, and also collect tea leaves from other villagers in order to produce their own tea products. They also often act as agents who produce ancient tree teas for other companies outside Mangjing<sup>55</sup>.

Second are the raw material producers or *cuzhizhang*<sup>56</sup>, such as Baoni. They own the basic equipment, woks, or processing machines at their houses to produce the raw materials (*maocha*). *Maocha* can usually be sold at a better price than fresh tea leaves. These villagers usually make *maocha* from the fresh tea leaves harvested from their own trees, and sell it to people from outside the village. Many of them also act as primary providers of fresh tea leaves for the local

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<sup>53</sup> See the discussion in the chapter on quality.

<sup>54</sup> *Dachang*, in Chinese means "big company" or "big factory."

<sup>55</sup> See the discussion in the chapter on quality.

<sup>56</sup> *Cuzhichang*, in Chinese means "the factory for basic processing." For the production of Pu'er tea, the basic processing refers to the production of the raw materials, *maocha*. In addition, most of the so-called *cuzhichang* in Mangjing are actually not real "factories," but villagers' homes where *maocha* is produced either with woks or with processing machines. Therefore, instead of translating *cuzhichang* as "basic processing factory," I use "raw material producers" to more directly and precisely refer to the real functions of *cuzhichang* in Mangjing.

tea companies. A few of them may act as buyers of fresh tea leaves, especially when they can afford to purchase the basic processing machines to produce more *maocha* per day.

Last are the villagers who simply provide tea leaves (*chanong*)<sup>57</sup>, such as Chengqiu. They do not typically own a large number of ancient tea trees. Even though they have enough ancient tea trees to harvest, they may still lack enough capital to purchase machines or enough household labor to make *maocha*. They simply provide fresh tea leaves. In order to survive themselves, many of them also work harvesting tea leaves for other villagers, helping to make *maocha*, and/or participating in other local labor-intensive jobs, such as road construction and house building.

According to village officials, more and more villagers have become raw material producers in Mangjing, though there are no official statistics to provide exact numbers. As addressed by Kangnan, one of the village officials, “Villagers have ‘upgraded’ (*shengji*) themselves from collectors of tea leaves to producers of raw materials mostly in recent ten years. Right now you may see one or two raw-material producers out of every three households.” While Kangnan only mentioned three local tea companies<sup>58</sup> run by Bulang villagers, he also informed me that more companies could be seen in the next two to three years. He said that fewer and fewer villagers were satisfied to be just tea-leaf collectors. They could get a loan from a bank to invest in the proper machines for processing tea leaves at home. However, Kangnan said, “they thought they

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<sup>57</sup> *Chanong* means “tea farmer” in Chinese. In fact, in a sense most of the villagers in Mangjing were all “tea farmers” since they all harvested tea leaves from their tea trees. Here the term *chanong* refers only to those who harvest and sell their tea leaves for their living without doing any other processing job.

<sup>58</sup> According to Kangnan, the three major local tea companies were *Bulang Gongzhu* (Bulang Princess), *Changbao Chachang*, and *Nanxi Chachang*.



were ‘upgraded’ [by using machines]. But it does not count [as upgraded] if proper machines have no proper usage<sup>59</sup>!”

This chapter looks into the relationship between tea production and the resulting reconfiguration of social order among the three general groups of Bulang villagers in Mangjing. It should be noted that I do not intend to draw a distinct line to distinguish rigid divisions in character or labor among these three groups. In fact, villagers in these three groups shared many characteristics and job types in terms of their involvement in today’s tea production. For example, all of them harvest tea leaves from their own tea trees as fresh tea leaf providers. In addition, all of the villagers could participate in labor-intensive jobs other than tea production, such as home building, especially during the off-peak seasons. Instead of drawing distinct lines to arbitrarily characterize the three general groups of Bulang villagers, my analysis focuses on the ways villagers perceive of and position both themselves and others based on their reconceptualization of competence in tea production.

The reconceptualization of competence in tea production, I argue, has unsettled the moral economy in Mangjing and become a mechanism to incorporate Bulang villagers into the market economy. Based on the discussion in the chapter on quality, the new standards for tea production have been mainly brought in by the tea entrepreneurs outside Mangjing. As a result, the standards have become new ways to judge competence in producing tea of good quality. In this chapter, I will address the situations that Bulang villagers find themselves in regarding three new production practice standards: formulating new moral codes for the tea trade; using the new techniques for tea processing; and struggling in an elite market promotion culture. I argue that the differentiation of competence with new production standards, together with the Bulang

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<sup>59</sup> “Proper machines have no proper usage,” in Chinese is *haode jiqi meiyiu haode shiyong*. The proper machines here mainly refer to the rotary fixing machine and the rolling machine. See notes 46 and 47.

villagers' everyday practice of tea production, has restructured the social order, in a hierarchical sense, within Mangjing. This restructured social order, has in turn pushed Bulang villagers to further integrate themselves into the market economy of tea production and consumption.

#### **4.1 Judge People Based on Their Tea Leaves: Translate the Authenticity of Ancient Tea Leaves into a New Standard of Morality**

Since the pure material of ancient tea leaves has become one of the production standards for making the most valuable ancient tree teas on the market, the authenticity of the ancient tea leaves has become critical to outside tea entrepreneurs. This new production standard was then taken on by Bulang villagers, especially the villagers who operated their own tea-production companies. Local companies run by Bulang villagers, according to the village officials, have played the biggest role in buying ancient tea leaves from other villagers. As a result, those Bulang villagers who buy fresh tea leaves from others to make tea in their own companies have taken the need to authenticate the ancient tea leaves seriously, doing so before making a deal with other villagers.

Lingbai, a local female villager working for the Bulang Princess Tea Factory (the Princess), was collecting tea leaves from other villagers. As usual, she collected three kinds of leaves: ancient, ecological, and terrace tea. Ancient tea leaves were priced much higher than the other two. On this particular day,<sup>60</sup> the price per kilogram for fresh ancient tea leaves was about 60 RMB, while ecological tea leaves were selling for 20 RMB per kilogram and terrace tea leaves were 12 RMB per kilogram. "This year the price [of ancient tea leaves] has soared much

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<sup>60</sup> The price of fresh tea leaves, including all three kinds of tea leaves, could fluctuate significantly in a day. For example, on April 3, 2010, the price of fresh ancient tea leaves per kilogram was about 40 RMB in the morning, while in the late afternoon the price had increased to just more than 60 RMB per kilogram.

higher due to the disastrous worm bite,” said Lingbai. Because of the worm bite and the resulting drop in harvest volume, Lingbai reported that the retail price of a tea cake made from the pure material (*chunliao*) of ancient tea leaves would be extremely high. She also reported that an influx of fake tea would appear in the market due to the soaring price and decreasing volume of the leaves.

“One of my duties is to stop the faking process at its very origin,” Lingbai said. What she meant by “very origin” was the collection of the fresh tea leaves. The tea of pure material should be only made from pure material of *fresh* ancient tea leaves. As a result, Lingbai considered herself a gatekeeper who would make sure all leaves collected were authentic pure material, harvested directly from the tea forest and not mixed with leaves from terrace or ecological tea gardens. “I’m an expert at telling the difference [between different tea leaves],” said Lingbai. She told me that knowing precisely the difference between tea-leaf types was a process of learning by doing. The learning-by-doing process, for Lingbai, was not just about how to tell the difference in leaves, but also about learning each villager’s individual “personality and quality” (*renpin*). “After all these years, I know whose tea leaves are authentic for sure. Also, I have gradually learned whose tea leaves are more likely to be faked,” she said confidently.

Typically, when a villager came to the Princess to sell ancient tea leaves, Lingbai would ask to have the fresh leaves unloaded from the sack or basket to the prepared bamboo sheets on the ground (Figure 4.4). After that, she would first judge the authenticity of the leaves by sight. She would then randomly grasp a handful of leaves to feel their texture and to examine the shape and veins of the leaves. If a villager passed all these tests, she would then weigh all the leaves on the scale to validate the volume and then inform the villager how much money she would pay. This was just a standard way to check leaves, however. She reported that she could also judge

the authenticity of the leaves not by the leaves per se but by their individual personality and quality. Indeed, some villagers' tea leaves would pass her examination with few sight and touch checks. I noticed that Lingbai could reject a villager's tea leaves without the standard checking as well.

Figure 4.4. Checking the authenticity of the ancient tea leaves. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



A middle-aged woman arrived on her motorbike with two sacks of tea leaves. While Lingbai saw the women coming, she immediately murmured to me that the women had tried to sell her fake pure material before. The woman stopped her motorbike, brought the two sacks of tea leaves, and said to Lingbai that one was filled with ancient tea leaves and the other with terrace tea leaves. Lingbai immediately asked the woman to open the sack of ancient tea leaves.

After taking a quick look at the leaves, Lingbai said she would take the terrace tea leaves but not the ancient tea leaves. The woman did not argue with Lingbai and quickly weighed her terrace tea leaves. After the woman left, I asked Lingbai why she did not check the woman's ancient tea leaves in a standard way. "It is not necessary," she responded. She then explained that everyone knew the woman could fake her ancient tea leaves by mixing in other types of leaves. For Lingbai, there were two primary reasons that she did not trust the woman. First, she heard from others that the woman had tried but failed to sell her fake pure material before. Second, Lingbai said that everyone knew that she did not have many ancient tea trees on her land. Additionally, the woman, according to Lingbai, recently processed ancient tea leaves herself and became a raw material maker (*zuzhichang*), selling *maocha* in her house. Lingbai thought that, given this, the woman would be likely to keep the finest ancient tea leaves for herself, and so she considered it too risky to trust the authenticity of the woman's ancient tea leaves.

"More and more villagers act like this woman, especially this year [due to the disastrous worm bite]," said Lingbai. Villagers were willing to risk selling their fake pure material, as she indicated, because of the soaring price of ancient tea leaves and the resulting price difference between ancient other types of tea leaves. If one could successfully sell fake material by mixing it with ancient tea leaves, one could earn significantly more. Lingbai complained that an increasing number of villagers had become "dishonest" (*bulaoshi*). However, she also admitted that sometimes the dishonest villagers made more money than the sellers who were honest. Referring to the middle-aged woman again, she said that her rejection of the woman's ancient tea leaves was actually a punishment for the woman's past dishonesty. She wanted other villagers to learn a lesson from this consequence for selling fake leaves.

Lingbai's role as a gatekeeper was not uncommon in Mangjing, especially in the local tea companies run by Bulang villagers. While this emphasis on authenticity was first viewed as a standard that was imperative for the production of the best ancient tree tea, it gradually became viewed by the Bulang villagers as a new moral standard as well. As Lingbai's case shows, she not only used a variety of methods to judge the authenticity of the tea leaves, but she also reconstructed authenticity into a moral standard by which to judge villagers' behavior. Some villagers even used this standard to stereotype other villagers' tea leaves and personal character. In Lingbai's case, her rejection of the middle-aged woman's ancient tea leaves was primarily based on her judgment of the woman's personality and quality. She did not judge the woman's tea leaves per se, but took just a quick look at them, because she claimed that she already knew the woman would fake the tea leaves. Paradoxically, even if the woman did bring authentic pure material, Lingbai would likely still reject the woman's tea leaves, because she wanted to punish the woman's dishonesty in the past.

It should also be noted that authenticity was not only judged by the physical characteristics of tea leaves and/or by a personal record of faking the material. Rather, as in Lingbai's example, the number of tea trees owned and the ability to process them into *maocha* were also factors used to evaluate the authenticity of the leaves. Lingbai thought the middle-aged woman's leaves would not be authentic partly because the woman did not own many ancient tea trees. It was also because, according to Lingbai, the woman could keep ancient tea leaves to make *maocha* herself. Under this logic, the more ancient tea trees a villager had, the more chances the villager would provide the authentic pure material. It also appeared that the less capacity a villager had to process leaves, the more it was expected that the villager would sell his or her ancient tea leaves to others.

Behind the practice of authenticating the purity of the ancient-tea leaves was a change in Bulang villagers' perception of morality. With the introduction of pure material as a new standard of tea production by outside entrepreneurs,<sup>61</sup> it began to be incorporated by local Bulang villagers not just as a production standard, but also as a new moral code by which to judge people. On the surface, the judgment of tea-leaf quality was intended to ascertain the quality of tea production. Behind the physical investigation, however, was a moral judgment on villagers. Authenticity as a new standard of morality was also associated with the quantity of ancient tea trees one villager owned and with one's capacity to process ancient tea leaves. Villagers like Lingbai, who served as gatekeepers, would often take other factors into consideration, such as the number ancient tea trees the villager owned and whether or not the villager could process the leaves, to determine if moral code of authenticity had been violated.

While authenticity as a new standard for judging tea production was generally accepted by Bulang villagers, the associated moral judgment on individuals, as discussed above, was also new. These moral judgments were primarily between the Bulang buyers and the sellers of ancient tea leaves. In most cases, buyers operated local tea companies, while sellers lacked the capacity to process large volumes of fresh tea leaves. These moral judgments created tension between villagers, particularly when the gatekeepers misjudged the authenticity of tea leaves or stereotyped certain villagers. Due to the emergence of moral judgment, the Bulang villagers increasingly thought that upgrading from tea-leaf sellers to buyers, or at least to processors, was the only viable route to avoiding judgment of their morality by others. As a result, they increasingly attempted processing their ancient tea leaves to make *maocha* by themselves. In this way, the raw material producers, or *cuzhichang*, became another emerging social group in Mangjing.

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<sup>61</sup> See the discussion in the chapter on quality.

#### 4.2 Being *Cuzhichang* as Upgrading in the Social Order

I went back to Baoni's place few days later, after the tea processing machines shipped to his house. When I arrived, Baoni was working with his wife to process the fresh ancient tea leaves into *maocha*, after harvesting them from his land. He told me that he was still a bit awkward at operating the machines. Even worse, in the past few days he had ruined some fresh tea leaves by improperly processing them with the machines, though most of the tea leaves he ruined were from terrace tea gardens, not the ancient tea forest. After practicing how to correctly operate the machines to make *maocha*, he said to me that he was confident enough to process his own ancient tea leaves with the machine without over-drying or over-heating them. Even though Baoni said he was confident, I sensed his nervousness; he kept turning the machines off and to check the leaves inside. Although he was still nervous about ruining his ancient tea leaves, he was fairly satisfied with his machines so far. "At least I know my [ancient tea] leaves are all authentic. No need to be authenticated by others now," he said in a rising voice.

Baoni recalled that before the price of ancient tree tea had escalated, especially before 2003, no one cared about their authenticity. Prior to 2003, the price of terrace tea leaves, according to Baoni, was typically more expensive than for ancient tea leaves. At this point, things were "upside-down," since the price of ancient tea leaves was at a peak and the price of terrace tea leaves was at bottom. Baoni joked and said that in the past, villagers could have added the ancient tea leaves to the authentic terrace tea leaves. "Did people really do that in the past?" I asked. "No," Baoni replied. He said that in the past the price difference between ancient and terrace tea leaves was smaller than today, so it would have been pointless to mix different kinds



of leaves for the sake of price. More importantly, Baoni reported, people, including government officials, tea entrepreneurs, and Bulang villagers, were all “more honest” (*bijiao laoshi*) then. In other words, Baoni thought authenticity became an issue only because people had become more dishonest and therefore abused the mutual trust needed in buying and selling tea leaves.

Still, Baoni as well as many other villagers in Mangjing did not take the standard for authenticity as necessarily a bad thing. Rather, caring about the authenticity of ancient tea leaves, for many villagers, also represented an “elevation of *suzhi*” (*suzhi tisheng*) because “people now have enough ‘level’ (*shuiping*) to realize the real value of ancient tree teas.” Baoni took this re-appreciation of the ancient tree teas based on the standard of “authenticity” as a positive development introduced by outside tea entrepreneurs. Regarding Mr. Cai, Baoni, like most of the villagers in Mangjing, was not happy with the fifty-year contract Cai had with the county government to monopolize the production of ancient tree tea.<sup>62</sup> Baoni also thought, however, that it was because of Cai’s initial production and subsequent success in promoting the ancient tree tea that villagers recognized the real value of the tea. Cai’s introduction of new ideas and practices had helped villagers to level up in terms of improving tea production. Caring about authenticity was regarded by Baoni and other villagers as important to this leveling up to achieve better production.

While acknowledging the standard of authenticity of ancient tea leaves as means to level up villagers’ tea production, Baoni thought that villagers’ sense of morality, paradoxically, did not simultaneously level up. He commented on the increasing incidence of faking the pure material. Nevertheless, he believed that most villagers would still be honest when selling their tea leaves. The tricky reality was that, Baoni argued, once even a small number of villagers violated the moral code of authenticity, buyers became suspicious of every villager. He said that

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<sup>62</sup> See the discussion in the chapters on property and quality.

many honest villagers had been hurt by the dishonesty of the villagers who sold fake tea leaves. Every buyer, especially the local companies and factories run by Bulang villagers, would now check a seller's leaves with suspicion. This suspicion, for Baoni, had done damage to the "trust and compassion" (*xinren yu ganqing*) formerly seen among villagers. Specifically referring to the villagers who owned a company or a factory in Mangjing, Baoni said peevishly, "they think all villagers, except for themselves, are suspects."

Similar reactions were heard from other villagers who often sold their tea leaves to the local tea companies or factories. Many villagers thought it was not fair to be categorized as suspects who should be always checked by the gatekeepers of the tea companies. As one villager told me, there were currently only two groups of villagers living in Mangjing: those judging whose leaves were authentic, and those who were judged. Baoni thought this saying was true, but exaggerated. One way to avoid being judged, according to him, was to upgrade from a provider to a processor of ancient tea leaves. Baoni informed me that it was one of the primary reasons he had decided to get a loan to purchase processing machines.

As Kangnan, the village party secretary, indicated, an increasing number of villagers in Mangjing became *cuzhichang* (raw material producers) by processing their own fresh tea leaves at home. Baoni's case is an example of this. There were, according to Kangnan, one to two *cuzhichang* for every three households in Mangjing, and more were expected in the future. Kangnan used the term *upgrade* to describe villagers' general actions in processing their own tea leaves to become *cuzhichang*, though he thought that many villagers still could not skillfully control the processing. As a result, he felt that villagers' upgrading could only be practically realized when they were skillful at operating the processing techniques. Kangnan's perception of upgrade was based on the individual's knowledge and skill in processing. This echoed the

outside tea entrepreneurs' perceptions of the villagers' lack of nuanced skills.<sup>63</sup> Kangnan, people like him, and outside tea entrepreneurs emphasized the upgrading actions of villagers on the technical dimension of tea production per se. However, for many villagers, including Baoni, they upgraded by processing tea leaves at home as a *cuzhichang* with a more complicated goal.

Villagers became *cuzhichang* to upgrade their processing skills, but they also sought to upgrade to another social status in which they did not have to be morally judged. For example, Baoni, while still awkward at operating his machines, was motivated to upgrade his techniques in order to avoid the moral judgment of villagers and gatekeepers. Being a *cuzhichang* became a symbol, and meant, for many villagers, that they could climb to a different social status.

In addition to upgrading to a higher social status as a *cuzhichang*, villagers in Mangjing expected to earn more money by processing leaves and selling *maocha*. Villagers clearly became *cuzhichang* out of the hope of earning more and making a better living. In general, the price of *maocha* was much higher than of fresh tea leaves, especially ancient tea leaves. In fact, most of the tea merchants from outside Mangjing came to buy *maocha*. Villagers were eager to become *cuzhichang* in order to find a niche in the *maocha* market in Mangjing. At the same time, however, the market had become increasingly competitive because of the growing number of *cuzhichang*. The tougher competition among *cuzhichang* had thus created another differentiation in social status within the group itself. Again, Baoni's case demonstrated this emerging differentiation.

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<sup>63</sup> See the discussion in the chapter on quality.

### 4.3 Differentiation between Automatic and Handmade Production

Figure 4.5. Hand-processing with a stir-frying wok. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



In Mangjing, being a *chuzhichang* could be generally differentiated into two levels based on villagers' methods of processing tea leaves. Processing by hands or machine was the key factor in the differentiation.<sup>64</sup> To transform fresh tea leaves into *maocha* required three procedures: *preparatory fixation*, *twisting and rolling*, and *drying*.<sup>65</sup> All three processes could be done by hand or by machine. For example, for the *preparatory fixation*, one could use a stir-frying wok by hand or a rotary fixing machine. In Baoni's case, before purchasing a rotary fixing machine,

<sup>64</sup> See notes 46, 47, 48, and 49.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

he had processed the leaves with a big stir-frying wok. Compared to machines, hand processing was a more labor-intensive task, in part because it required using one's hands and stir-frying the leaves continuously without stopping (Figure 4.5, above). As Baoni reported, hand processing, though labor intensive, produced a lower volume of *maocha* than machine processing. In addition, hand processing was regarded both by outside tea merchants and local villagers to be a backward way of production. It was backward in terms of efficiency, hygiene, and quality consistency, though some merchants did appreciate it and package it as a traditionally produced tea for the market

Before Baoni upgraded to machines, he had to stir-fry tea leaves with wok and then twist and roll the fried leaves by hand. The inefficiency of hand processing made him barely able to process all of his leaves, which had to be processed within 24 hours to result in the best quality *maocha*. Both harvesting and hand processing were labor-intensive tasks. "It was just impossible for me to process all my leaves by hand," said Baoni. Before he could finish processing his stock, he often had to sell the leaves he could not process to the local tea companies or factories. After purchasing the processing machines, Baoni regarded himself as upgrading to the level of "automatic production" (*zidonghua shengchan*) from the level of "handmade production" (*shougong shengchan*). Being at the level of automatic production, Baoni expected to process all his tea leaves on his own, particularly his ancient tea leaves. He also expected to escape moral judgment based on their authenticity when he sold them.

The differentiation between automatic and handmade production also resulted from the increasing competitiveness within the *cuzhichang* group. As mentioned, most of the *cuzhichang* were eager to occupy a space in the burgeoning *maocha* market. However, the increasing number of *cuzhichang* had pushed villagers to think about how to become more advanced than other

*cuzhichang* in order to be competitive. While *handmade* signified backwardness, automatic production with machines denoted being advanced. In other words, for many villagers of *cuzhichang*, the processing machines had the connotation that they were more advanced in tea production than others. As Baoni put it, it was a level-up of “production *suzhi*” (*shengchan suzhi*). On the other hand, those who could not invest in the processing machines were gradually regarded as less advanced in producing *maocha*.

Being a *cuzhichang* in Mangjing, as discussed, was an upgrade of social status for villagers that often allowed for the avoidance of the moral judgment of one’s authenticity by the gatekeepers of local tea companies. At the same time, it forced villagers of *cuzhichang* to get involved in the competitive market to sell *maocha*. To villagers, market competition as the standard of authenticity was new. Most villagers came to realize that they had to compete with their peers of *cuzhichang* in order to survive in the market. One way to survive was to distinguish oneself from others and prove better at producing *maocha* using advanced production techniques. Using machines, as a result, was seen by villagers as an advanced method of tea production. Those who still used the traditional processing, such as stir-frying by hand with a wok, were regarded as lagging behind, or even backward.

This differentiation between automatic production and handmade production, between advancement and backwardness, within *cuzhichang*, became the driving force in the reconfiguration of social status among villagers of Mangjing. No matter how one could skillfully operate the processing machines, to villagers, ownership of machines was enough to take a step toward successfully climbing to a higher social status. Along with the discourse concerning *suzhi*, villagers believed that advancing to the level of automatic production improved their own *suzhi*.

As Baoni said, it was regarded by villagers as a level up in the “production *suzhi*,” a self upgrading to be more competitive for the market.

While the standard of authenticity and automatic production had been the emerging standard and the driving force for villagers to climb to a higher social status, there was another group of villagers who were marginalized at the bottom. These were villagers who could not advance to be a *cuzhichang* and were left to be *chanong* selling fresh tea leaves to others. While still part of the contemporary tea production in Mangjing, this bottom group of villagers could be pushed down by such standards as authenticity and automatic production.

#### **4.4 Marginalization but Not Exclusion: *Chanongs*’ Positioning in Mangjing’s Tea Production**

Chengqui, Baoni’s close friend, was a Bulang villager in his early forties. Unlike Baoni, Chengqui could not afford the investment needed to buy processing machines. Even though Chengqui could process fresh tea leaves into *maocha* in the traditional way, he rarely did, due to a shortage of labor in his family. Chengqui lost his wife early and did not have children. His mother had passed away, and at this point he lived alone with his father, who had suffered a stroke. Because of this, during the peak season of tea production Chengqui typically harvested just enough tea leaves to sell without doing the processing himself. His father’s need for care left him with little energy or time to make *maocha* at home, although he believed he could earn more by selling the *maocha* made from his own tea leaves.

Chengqui’s most valuable assets were his ancient tea trees. Due to the low number of residents in his household, however, Chengqui was granted fewer trees during the

decollectivization of the lands in Mangjing<sup>66</sup>. The decollectivization was based on the number of people who lived in a household; the more people living in a household, the more area of land in the ancient tea forest would be granted to the household. At the time of decollectivization, there were only three people living in Chengqui's household, including his father, mother, and himself. As a result, compared to other household, he was granted less land in the tea forest. Even worse, according to Chengqui, the ancient tea trees on his granted land were more sparsely distributed compared to other villagers' land. Due this lower density of tea trees, his total harvest of fresh tea leaves might be less than for others who owned a similar amount of land.

Despite all these seeming disadvantages, Chengqui told me that the ancient tea trees he had now were enough to keep him busy, especially during the peak harvest season. He was busy mainly because he was the only person who could do the harvest. "It is good not to have too many trees, or I'll be tired to death," Chengqui mocked himself. As with most villagers in Mangjing, during the peak harvest season, he would rise early, rush out after preparing and serving breakfast for his father, and then try to complete his harvesting by eleven o'clock in the morning. He then he had to sell his leaves quickly, and rush back home again to prepare and serve lunch for him and his father. In the past, Chengqui said, he could easily find a neighbor or friend to help to take care of his father. But now people could hardly provide help because "everyone has to 'take care' of tea first." Most of the time, Chengqui cared for his father by himself while other villagers were busy harvesting tea.

I went harvesting tea leaves with Chengqui many times. Although his land was not far away from his home, it was located on a very steep hillside. Due to the relatively thin density of tea trees, he had to climb up and down the steep hillside and up and down the trees to harvest as many leaves as possible. This labor-intensive job, for Chengqui, had become one of his everyday

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<sup>66</sup> See discussion in the chapter on property.



routines during the harvest season. After completing his harvest, Chengqui would typically go to the Bulang Princess Tea Factory to sell his leaves.

Usually, Chengqui could easily sell his tea leaves. One day, however, the Bulang Princess Tea Factory suddenly stopped taking ancient tea leaves from villagers because, according to the factory staff, the factory had taken in too many fresh tea leaves and had surpassed their processing capacity. Consequently, Chengqui was advised to sell his tea leaves to others. He then decided to try another local tea company also run by Bulang villagers. But the selling process did not go smoothly at this company. Chengqui's tea leaves were designated as not being pure material that was from one-hundred percent ancient tea leaves, despite the fact that they were pure. The staff of the tea company complained that there was a mix of some yellowish green in his leaves. He tried arguing with the company staff, and in fact he wanted me to support him as a witness of his harvest. Chengqui said, "Dr. Hung can prove its authenticity!"<sup>67</sup> In the end, the factory agreed to buy Chengqui's leaves but at a slightly lower price than the usual price for ancient tea leaves. He reluctantly made the deal with the company because he did not have enough time to look for another buyer before he went home to take care of his father.

After making the deal, Chengqui invited me to have a lunch at his house. It was the first time he had invited me to his home, though I had gone harvesting tea leaves with him several times. Upon entering the house, Chengqui apologized because he thought his house was untidy

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<sup>67</sup> At Mangjing, many villagers who knew me would call me "Dr. Hung." Most of the time, I intentionally avoided getting involved in business transactions between villagers. On this specific occasion, I supported Chengqui because I did go harvesting the ancient tea leaves with him, and then went with him directly from his land to sell his tea leaves. However, I also sensed that the company staff still doubted the authenticity of Chengqui's tea leaves. The company staff said to him, "OK, I'll give Dr. Hung a face (*gei mianzi*)," while completing their transaction. It seemed to me that the tea company staff bought Chengqui's tea leaves at a slightly lower price because of my presence, and did not want to be rude to me by rejecting Chengqui's tea leaves, since I supported his story.

and disorganized. Unlike other *cuzhichang*, he said he was only a *chanong* (tea farmer), so did not expect customers. For Chengqui, it was not necessary to keep his house tidy and organized. In fact, he informed me that I was the first “outsider” (*wairen*) who had come to his house as a guest. I also met his father for the first time. The old man could still walk clumsily along with an oxygen tank. After introducing me to his father, who could not speak Mandarin Chinese, Chengqui asked me to sit on a bench while he prepared a glass of tea for me.

Chengqui served me the tea brewed with the *maocha* made from his ancient tea leaves. Although Chengqui did not have extra labor to make *maocha* as a business, he told me that every year he would still keep some fresh tea leaves to make *maocha* for himself and to drink daily at home. Handing me the glass of tea, he apologized to me again because he thought his tea must not be good enough for me. He said that his *suzhi* did not qualify as good tea like those sold in the market. Nevertheless, he assured me that all the tea he made and reserved was from the ancient tree tea. At this point, Chengqui briefly complained again about the negotiations with the tea company that had just happened. He related the negotiations to his personal circumstances, claiming that sometimes he felt people bought his tea leaves only out of pity for him and his father, but not because of his authentic ancient tea leaves.

While feeding his father, Chengqui asked me to eat first. At the same time, his father talked feebly with Chengqui in the Bulang language. It turned out his father wanted to apologize to me for not treating me well. He also wanted to thank me for helping Chengqui with the harvest over the past few days. Chengqui translated his father’s words to me. His father also wanted me to know that he asked Chengqui to take very good care of their ancient tea trees. According to Chengqui’s translation, he did not want Chengqui to lease the tea trees out to

others.<sup>68</sup> I asked Chengqui about his intentions regarding leasing out the tea trees. He admitted that he did at one time consider leasing them in exchange for a large amount of money. One of the two major reasons was that he needed money for better medical care for his father. The other reason, according to Chengqui, was because of his inability to advance himself to a better level for tea production.

While more villagers advanced their capacity for tea production, Chengqui said he “was destined” to simply be a *chanong*, a tea farmer. Even if he could make *maocha* himself to become a *cuzhichang*, he thought it was still impossible for him to advance to automatic production by purchasing machines to produce *maocha*. All he had were the ancient tea trees. Consequently, he thought leasing out his ancient tea trees was just one way to best utilize his only resources. Of course, he admitted, the rising market value of ancient tea leaves had made him more earnings in the past few years. However, the profit he earned was still not enough to support better medical care for his father. As a result, he thought leasing out the tea trees was the best option to gain quick cash and escape his current financial shortfall.

Ideally, Chengqui would have had someone to lease his tea trees for at least ten years who would have been able to pay the rent upfront in total for ten years. He would also ask the lessee to hire him as a contracted laborer to harvest the ancient tea trees. In this way, by leasing out his ancient tea trees, Chengqui would be the lessor who received the rent from his lessee. He would also be hired by his lessee to work harvesting ancient tea leaves as a wage laborer.

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<sup>68</sup> In fact, all the ancient tea trees in Mangjing have been leased out for fifty years to Mr. Cai’s company, according to the contract signed between Cai and the government of Lancang County. Nevertheless, due to the controversy over the contract and the resulting murky circumstances regarding the ownership of ancient tea trees, some villagers might still sign contracts with others, privately if not legally, to lease out their ancient tea trees. I actually asked Chengqui about this issue. His response was that most of the villagers did not acknowledge the contract signed between Cai and the government of Lancang County. As a result, he claimed that he and his father were still the only people who legally own the property rights to their ancient tea trees. For more discussion on the property rights issues, please see the chapter on property.

Chengqui knew his father was against this plan, but he informed me that the only reason he had not yet done it was because he was still looking for a suitable lessee who could meet his requests for both rent and wage. According to Chengqui, there were some villagers who had successfully leased out their tea trees and still worked as wage laborers for their lessees. Actually, Chengqui had high hopes for his leasing plan. He said that many *chanong* in Mangjing, especially those who could not advance themselves to a higher tea production level, had similar thoughts and plans. “That’s the best way to survive ourselves without depending on other people’s mercies for buying our tea leaves.” He also said that he could complain about many things but did not. In Chengqui’s mind, this was an era in which everyone should figure out a way to live well without too much help from others.

Chengqui repeated that it was difficult for *chanong* to advance their tea production and so to upgrade to a higher social status in Mangjing. Tea production had served to marginalize them at the bottom level of the reconfigured social order. *Chanong* were struggling to find a way to survive in the market economy without “depending on other’s mercy” to sell their tea leaves. They still had the ancient tea trees as an asset, and hoped this would at some point allow them to improve their lives. As a result it was common for *chanong* like Chengqui to plan for leasing their tea trees while being hired by the lessee as a wage laborer. Financial concerns seemed to be the most important factor driving their plans, but there was a deeper motivation for the repositioning, if not upgrading, of their social status. There was a different social status associated with being a lessor that allowed one, as Chengqui said, to at least avoid depending on other’s mercy. Becoming a wage laborer hired by lessees to harvest tea was another strategy to participate in tea production. The ancient tea trees in this scenario were not just the *chanong*’s

asset, but also the means with which to move from one social status to another, and even to retain dual statuses as both a lessor and a wage laborer.

#### **4.5 Turning the Entire Village of Mangjing into a Tea Factory: Change in the Social Order and Fitting in with the Market Economy of Tea**

The social order in Mangjing had been changed. The new hierarchical order had been realized through the differentiation of local tea companies (*dachang*), *cuzhichang*, and *chanong* among Mangjing villagers. Behind the reconfiguration of the hierarchical social order were the discursive and material practices related to the authenticity of ancient tea leaves and the processing techniques for the production of *maocha*.

The standard that one-hundred percent of pure ancient tea leaves be authentic, or *chunliao*, was introduced by outside tea entrepreneurs. It had become increasingly imperative in order to produce a superior ancient tree tea for the market. Bulang villagers also used the standard in their tea-production practices. The fresh tea leaves were typically sorted into three categories: the most valuable ancient tea leaves, the ecological tea leaves (in the middle), and the cheapest terrace tea leaves. In order to prevent villagers from mixing ancient tea leaves with other kinds of leaves, buyers, especially for local tea companies, served as gatekeepers who authenticated villagers' leaves. This standard of authenticity developed into a moral standard among villagers. The authentication of ancient tea leaves became a judgment regarding an individual's personality and quality as a businessperson.

Those who could not engage in the new competitive market, improve their personal *suzhi*, or upgrade their social status and remove themselves from moral judgment, remained *chanong*, or tea farmers, who could sell their fresh tea leaves to other villagers, but were socially marginalized due to their inability to process their own tea leaves. The ongoing reconfiguration of Mangjing's social order, in a sense, had gradually pushed *chanong* to the lowest social status. Many *chanong* still had their own ancient tea trees, however, which provided a means to survive. When *chanong* leased their ancient tea trees to others, and thereby became lessors, and then were hired back as wage laborers, it was not necessarily to upgrade to a higher social status. Instead, it was a way to survive independently.

The reconfiguration of Mangjing's social order resulted from the differentiation between local tea companies (*dachang*), *cuzhichang*, and *chanong*. This process, I argue, turned the village into an *aggregated factory* that brought villagers together for the purpose of tea production. The aggregation was based on tea production and sought to allow for engagement in the market economy. This aggregated factory processed ancient, ecological, and terrace tea leaves for outside consumers. Among them, the most popular and valuable was the product made from ancient tree leaves. Accordingly, there were gatekeepers in this aggregated factory, to ensure the authenticity of the *chunliao* (pure material) of the ancient tea leaves. Automatic production became important because it helped meet the increasing market demand for *maocha*, and the market preference for advanced processing techniques. Villagers who could not process tea leaves still participated in the factory as wage laborers. In this way the market economy, in the form of tea production, reconfigured the social order of the village and repositioned villagers in the aggregated factory of Mangjing.

#### 4.6 Conclusions: A Normalized Hierarchical Social Order and the Discourse of *Suzhi*: Self-Governance and Bulang Villagers' Social Status

The reconfiguration of the social order in Mangjing repositioned villagers' hierarchical status, which resonated well with the emphasis on *suzhi*. As discussed in chapter [number], outside tea entrepreneurs used *suzhi* as both a discursive and material practice to collectively downgrade Bulang villagers' tea-production capability<sup>69</sup>. *Suzhi*, with its explication of the social hierarchy, had been introduced by outside tea entrepreneurs to legitimize their exportation of new production standards to Mangjing. As a result, the outside tea entrepreneurs regarded themselves as the group to upgrade villagers' collective *suzhi* by requiring authentic ancient tea leaves, advanced skills in tea processing, and an awareness of tea as a cultural product. These practices then became the driving force behind the reconfiguration of Mangjing's social order.

By practicing the new standards, Bulang villagers also differentiated themselves into hierarchical social groups based on their ability to meet the new production standards. Villagers took the standards, such as authenticity and automatic production, as the criteria to redefine their own social status. Most of the villagers had managed to identify with a new social status based on these production standards by upgrading, leveling up, or advancing to meet them. The resulting reconfiguration in the hierarchical social relations were based on one's level of tea-production *suzhi*. In turn, the discursive and material practices of *suzhi* further normalized the hierarchical stratification among villagers through their self-categorization and struggle for a higher social status.

This reconfiguration of the social order and its relationship to *suzhi* were also connected to China's governance of the population for the sake of the market economy. Southwest China,

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<sup>69</sup> See the discussion in the chapter on quality.

to the Chinese state, has been a backward area inhabited by many “low *suzhi*” minority nationalities, including the Bulang. In order to create market socialism in China, the state has promoted *suzhi* to convince social actors, including the minority nationalities, to upgrade in order to serve the market demand. In Mangjing, this has benefitted from villagers’ “will to improve” (Li 2007a). In the name of improving *suzhi* to meet market demand, villagers were involved in a new round of self-discipline. These self-disciplinary practices included following a new moral code of authenticity and applying advanced processing techniques in order to improve the *suzhi* of tea production. Villagers’ engagement to improve *suzhi* was associated with market demand on the surface, but the state’s power managed to reconfigure Mangjing’s social order and create stratified social relationships that represented governance without the direct presence of the state.

While the social order among Mangjing’s Bulang villagers has been reconfigured, they have also been unified for the purpose of organic tea production, called “Scientific Pu’er” (*kexue Pu’er*). The purpose of the Scientific Pu’er campaign was to restore the missing ancient tea forest and to recover the ecological method of tea production practiced by Bulang villagers approximately fifty years ago. The campaign, has entailed a substantial transformation of Mangjing’s tea landscapes, which has in turn reconstructed Bulang villagers’ subjective identity as one of China’s minority nationalities. These issues will be addressed in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Landscape: Restoration of the Missing Ancient Tea Forest in Mangjing

On a busy day in early April 2011, the busiest season of the year in Mangjing for harvesting and producing Spring Tea<sup>70</sup> (*chuncha*), Jinger<sup>71</sup> received an early-morning phone call from his friend. On the phone, they speculated on the day's selling price for fresh tea leaves. Three types of leaves were discussed<sup>72</sup> (the ancient tea leaves, the terrace tea leaves, and the ecological tea leaves). Jinger and his friend agreed that the price of ancient tea leaves would clearly continue to rise. But they estimated different prices for terrace and ecological tea leaves. Jinger thought the price of ecological tea leaves would decline because one of the main tea factories had temporarily stopped collecting them. He also tried to convince his friend that the price of the terrace tea leaves could increase a little bit due to the higher demand from buyers, particularly the buyers from Guangdong Province.

After hanging up, Jinger repeated his reasoning, saying that “no one can truly tell the difference between the ecological tea leaves and the terrace tea leaves.” In Jinger's mind, it was hard to understand why people would spend more money to purchase ecological tea leaves if they could not even tell the difference. Then he ate a simple breakfast with some nice homemade ancient tree tea produced from the leaves of his ancient tea trees. The distinctive aroma with a hint of gentle bitterness filled Jinger's cup. With a simple sip, he enjoyed the unique sweetness

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<sup>70</sup> According to Chan's “A Glossary of Chinese Puerh Tea,” spring tea “refers to the tea manufactured from the first batch of tea leaves (including tea buds and shoots) grown in spring after winter. After resting in winter, tea trees have stored a lot of nutrients for budding. This allows the spring tea to have a richer and better flavor. Spring tea is also known as the *first tea*” (italics in original). See Chan, Kam Pong. 2008. *A Glossary of Chinese Puerh Tea*. Taipei, Taiwan: Wushing Books Publication: 166.

<sup>71</sup> A pseudonym is used for each individual mentioned in this chapter, with the exception of public figures like the party secretary of Yunnan Province.

<sup>72</sup> The conversation was actually in Bulang dialect. I asked Jinger to repeat their conversation in Mandarin Chinese after he hung up.

quickly that counteracted the bitter taste, a distinct characteristic of ancient tree tea. Taking another sip, he took a deep breath with the teacup near his nose to catch the fragrance at the cup's bottom. He then sighed and said "the ecological tea would never taste like this. One hundred years later? Maybe, but not now."

At about 7 a.m., Jinger headed out from his home as quickly as possible to harvest the fresh tea leaves before the sun scorched them. As usual, he harvested the leaves of the ancient tea trees first. He still could not decide if he should harvest the ecological or the terrace tea leaves next. Usually he and his brother would harvest the ancient tea leaves together, and then one would collect ecological tea leaves while the other harvested terrace tea leaves. However, Jinger's brother was not home today, and Jinger could not harvest both the ecological and the terrace tea leaves alone in one day because of his other household chores. Jinger thus had to decide which tea garden he would go to after harvesting the ancient tea leaves. Although he had just argued with his friend about whether the price of ecological tea leaves would rise or fall, he waited to decide until after he had completed harvesting the ancient tea leaves.

Jinger went to his land<sup>73</sup> in the ancient tea forest. He climbed up and down from tree to tree harvesting the leaves from trees that were at least three hundred years old. Throughout, Jinger kept his cell phone in his pocket in order to receive updated selling prices for both ecological and terrace tea leaves. According to Jinger, the selling price of ecological tea leaves was generally higher than the price of terrace tea leaves, but harvesting ecological tea leaves was still the "least efficient" (*zuimeiyou xiaoyi de*) job. Jinger explained that compared to the terrace tea garden, an ecological tea garden of the same size would produce approximately one third the leaves. So, the price difference between the ecological and the terrace tea leaves would need to

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<sup>73</sup> In fact, villagers do not own the land but the ancient tea trees in the tea forest. The land in the forest is still the state property. See the discussion in the chapter on Property.

be large enough to compensate for the lower volume produced by the ecological tea garden. Jinger complained that despite its often-higher price, the volume of fresh tea leaves he could harvest from his ecological tea garden was much lower than was true for his terrace tea garden. As a result, he had been trained to calculate the price difference between the two leaves precisely in order to maximize profit from his limited labor.

At around 10:30 a.m., Jinger sat under an ancient tea tree, took a break, and made a call to his friend to confirm the most recent price of fresh tea leaves. The price of the ecological tea leaves did not drop as much as he expected. Looking around at the ancient tea trees on his land, Jinger stood up and headed to a corner down the slope where he saw the shining bright green of fresh leaves near the tops of ancient tea trees. Pointing to a giant tea tree on the way down, he said, “they (the local officials) wanted me to cut down about two-thirds of my tea bushes in my terrace tea garden, and to believe the rest of the tea trees would grow like this one (the giant tea tree) in the long future.”

Jinger’s family owned three pieces of land. The smallest was located in the ancient tea forest. The biggest had been converted from a terrace tea garden into an ecological tea garden. The last one was still a terrace tea garden, although it was soon to be converted into an ecological tea garden. All three pieces of land were in Mangjing; they epitomized Manjing’s tea landscape, with the juxtaposition of ancient tea forest, terrace tea gardens, and ecological tea gardens. The juxtaposition represented the shifting but still contested ideologies and land-use practices related to tea production in Mangjing, and in China’s southwest frontier as a whole.

Figure 5.1. Terrace tea gardens in Mangjing. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



According to local Bulang villagers, including Jinger, Mangjing’s ancient tea forest had been much larger in the past. Before 2003, the low value of fresh tea leaves harvested from the ancient tea trees led local villagers to cut them down and plant other crops. The local government also encouraged villagers to convert the tea forest into modern cultivated tea gardens, called “terrace tea” (*taidi cha*). (See Figure 5.1, above.) The escalating economic, political, and cultural value of the ancient tea forest had encouraged both villagers and government officials to restore it. Current terrace tea gardens in Mangjing have thus been under transition. The county government has plans to convert all terrace tea gardens into “ecological tea gardens” (*shengtai chayuan*) (Figure 5.2). Ecological tea gardens are present during the transition from terrace tea



garden to ancient tea forest (Figure 5.3). Owners of terrace tea gardens were asked to remove some of the tea trees and replant local (not tea) tree species, in an effort to restore the biodiversity seen in the ancient tea forest. The long-term expectation is that the ecological tea gardens will become tea forest for future generations of Bulang people.

Figure 5.2. Ecological tea gardens in Mangjing. Notice that 2/3 of the tea trees have been cut down from the original terrace tea gardens. (Photo by Po-Yi Hung).



This chapter investigates the relations between changing land use practices and the contested reconfiguration of the tea landscape in Mangjing. I specifically discuss the ideological and material constituents in the emerging tea landscape known as the ecological tea garden. I

also explore the symbolic and material changes to the situated tea landscape, and the resulting conflict over an ongoing restoration project to convert terrace tea gardens to ancient tea forest. The chapter focuses on the ambivalence of local Bulang people toward the ecological tea gardens, examines the dilemma confronted by local villagers as they pursue the restoration of the ancient tea forest, and discusses the resulting disruptions to local villagers' ideas about nature and modernity.

Figure 5.3. The ancient tea forest in Jingmai Mountain. The ecological tea gardens were expected to become the ancient tea forest in the future. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Po-Yi Hung

## 5.1 Ecological Tea Gardens: Between Tradition and Modernity

As discussed above, terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forests constitute the two primary tea landscapes in Yunnan. Their histories, however, have been distinct. As discussed in the introduction, from the 1970s to the early 2000s, the terrace tea gardens symbolized socialist modernity and its efforts to end shifting cultivation. However, from the early 2000s to the market crash in 2007, terrace tea gardens represented the modernization of tea production for the market, whereas the ancient tea forest denoted backward and inefficient productivity. Since the bubble in the Pu'er tea market burst in 2007, the terrace tea gardens have become a symbol of a tainted environment, while the ancient tea forests have been dubbed natural and authentic resources for organic tea production. Because of the current shifting market demand, terrace tea gardens are increasingly transitioning toward a landscape of the ecological tea garden.

Due to the drop in terrace tea prices and the increasing value of ancient tree tea, many terrace tea gardens have been under transformation in the name of restoring the “missing” ancient tea forest. In the Pu'er Prefecture specifically, the restoration of the ancient tea forest has commenced as a prefecture-wide campaign called Scientific Pu'er (*kexue pu'er*). Terrace tea gardens, under the guidance of Scientific Pu'er, were expected to become “ecological tea gardens” (*shengtai chayuan*), which were the transitional landscape between terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forest. Particularly in the Pu'er Prefecture, owners of terrace tea gardens were asked to remove some of their tea trees, and to replant five different local tree species, including agilawood, houpu, camphortree, white bouhinia, and downy cherry. Local villagers reported being asked to cut down almost two-thirds of the tea trees in their terrace tea gardens. (See Figure 5.4 and Figure 5.5 for the landscape contrast between terrace tea gardens and ecological



tea gardens.) In addition, any pesticide or chemical nutrient was prohibited in the ecological tea gardens. The aim was to restore the natural environment to the level of the ancient tea forest, since the ecological tea gardens were expected to eventually become tea forest. In other words, the ancient tea forest, paradoxically, had recently been under-producing, in the transition to ecological tea gardens, and the attempt to erase the modern elements of terrace tea gardens.

Figure 5.4. A terrace tea garden before being transformed into an ecological tea garden. Photo taken by Po-Yi Hung in July 2009. This was the same tea garden pictured in Figure 5.5. That photo was taken in April 2011 from a different distance and angle.





Figure 5.5. Ecological tea garden transformed from the terrace tea garden pictured in Figure 5.4. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Ecological tea gardens, however, were not completely disconnected from modernity. Rather, they represented another form of modernization through the organic method of tea plantation and production. The organic ecological tea gardens represented a “more advanced” (*geng xianjin de*) level of modernization that could be differentiated from that of the terrace tea gardens. Additionally, the organic ecological tea gardens created an ambiguous combination of modernity and nature that was key to restoring the natural environment of the ancient tea forest.

Currently, terrace tea gardens, ecological tea gardens, and ancient tea forest are juxtaposed in Yunnan. The contrasting histories of terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forest,

coupled with the ambiguous combination of modernity and nature in ecological tea gardens, epitomize the ambiguity of modernity on China's southwest frontier. Meanings of modernity and nature are not directly imposed on the tea landscapes, however, but are based in the everyday practice of tea production. Only through these everyday practices can the alternative meaning of modernity and nature emerge and be recognized.

A case study of the village of Mangjing is presented below. In 2011, the terrace tea gardens in Mangjing were in the process of transformation to ecological tea gardens. The government of Lancang County launched a transformation policy that called for following the Scientific Pu'er campaign of 2010. Guided by Scientific Pu'er, the owners of terrace tea gardens were asked to keep just 160 tea trees per *mu* and to restore trees of local species in the space where the tea bush was cleared. The transformation of the landscape in Mangjing was supported by official rhetoric, which played a critical role as a discursive practice to redefine the meaning of the tea landscapes.

## **5.2 Transforming Terrace Tea Gardens into Ecological Tea Gardens in Mangjing: The Official Rhetoric**

Enpei Bai, the former Communist Party Secretary of Yunnan Province visited Mangjing on May 13, 2011 (Figure 5.6). His visit was widely reported in Yunnan's major media (e.g. see Shen and Li [2011]). All media reports quoted Bai directly. For example, according to Xiangxing Shen and Hanyong Li (2011) of the *Yunnan Daily*, Bai referred to the tea garden transformation as a realization of the idea to, "go 50 years backward for ecological production; move 50 years

forward for brand and technique<sup>74</sup>.” This statement, a propaganda slogan, manifested the official rhetoric concerning ecological tea production and the tea forest restoration in Mangjing, and in Pu'er Prefecture in general.

Figure 5.6. Visit to Mangjing from the former Communist Party Secretary of Yunnan Province, Enpei Bai (far right in photo). Photo was retrieved on November 8, 2012 from [http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/www.yn.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2011-05/16/content\\_22770411.htm](http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/www.yn.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2011-05/16/content_22770411.htm). Photo by Zheng Yang.



The first half of the slogan, “go 50 years backward for ecological production,” was intended to problematize the modern elements of terrace tea gardens. As Bai claimed,

<sup>74</sup> The original sentence in Mandarin Chinese is “shengtai shengchan fangshi houdui wushi nian; pinpai keji shuiping qianjin wushi nian.”

“development definitely cannot damage the ecological environment.”<sup>75</sup> The development of terrace tea gardens, under Bai’s logic, has damaged the natural environment in Mangjing, and more broadly in Yunnan. This slogan has therefore resonated well with diverse criticisms of terrace tea gardens. As one official in the Pu’er Tea Office stated, the criticisms were multiple and included the consequence of lost biodiversity, the use of pesticides and chemical nutrients, and soil erosion (see Fuller’s report [2008]). As a result, traditional tea production was re-defined in the official rhetoric as an ecological production method by which the natural environment was protected.

The fifty-year relationship between Bulang villagers and the tea forest in Mangjing was thus flagged by Bai as an example of ecological tea production, prompting his message to Bulang villagers to “go 50 years backward” to the era when the modern terrace tea gardens had not yet been developed in Mangjing. Thus, the transformation from terrace tea gardens to ecological tea gardens represented the first step in shedding the modernity of terrace tea gardens, and recovering Bulang villagers’ original ecological production methods.

Paradoxically, in modern China, the term *ecological* also signifies *organic* when referring to tea production. Organic production has been considered both by the state and by consumers a more advanced method of tea production. Accordingly, while the first half of the slogan stressed “going backward” to the mode of production that was in place fifty years ago, the second half emphasized “moving forward” to apply modern techniques (*keji*) in the production of ecological tea. The phrase, “move 50 years forward for brand and technique,” assured that ecological tea gardens represented “advancement” (*xianjin*). The transformation from terrace tea gardens to ecological tea gardens, was not just seen as going back to the traditional method of tea

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<sup>75</sup> The original Mandarin Chinese is “*fazhan juebuneng pouhui shentai huanjing*.” See the coverage by Shen & Li (2011) in *Yunnan Daily*.



production, but it was also promoted because it represented advancement in terms of future organic production.

While ecological tea gardens are a sign of the advancement of future organic production, they also represent the traditional method of production. *Ecological* has taken on an ambiguous meaning in that it refers to incompatible desires for both advancement and tradition in tea production. As a result, the transformation from terrace tea gardens to ecological tea gardens can be viewed as an ambiguity of modernity in Mangjing. The official rhetoric has encouraged this ambiguity between the advanced and the traditional, and the construction of ecological tea gardens has become a construction of tradition in modernity for the frontier tea landscape.

In Mangjing, tradition and modernity do not represent a long-term contrast, but an emerging assemblage to meet contingent market demands for ancient tree tea. The ongoing transformation of the tea landscape has resulted in different and competing interpretations among Bulang villagers.

### **5.3 The Transformation of Tea Landscapes as a Meaning-Making Process: Multiple Responses to Ecological Tea Gardens**

While the official rhetoric concerning ecological tea gardens has been constructed as *tradition in modernity*, Bulang villagers in Mangjing arrived at different understandings concerning the transformation of tea landscapes. Specifically, ecological tea gardens, as a new form of tea plantation, have disrupted villagers' perceptions of their relationship with modernity and nature. The words *ecological* and *ecology* in fact were not used before the introduction of ecological tea gardens. The landscape transformation from terrace tea gardens to ecological tea

gardens has thus been a meaning-making process. Villagers interpreted being ecological in different ways, depending on the nature of their engagement in the landscape transformation. Based on the meaning that was given to being ecological, villagers also re-conceptualized modernity and nature through their practice of tea production.

### *5.3.1 Reduced Income and Conflict over Being Ecological*

Spring is usually the busiest season for Bulang villagers in Mangjing due to the harvest. The spring of 2011 was even busier for villagers, particularly for those who owned terrace tea gardens. In addition to harvesting their fresh tea leaves, villagers needed to transform their terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens as prescribed by the county government. It was a chilly morning in late April 2011. I was with Huaxiao, a local young Bulang man in his early 20s. Huaxiao had to get up early on this day to go to Minghai's house for a quick informal meeting before the arrival of the township officials. Minghai was one of the Bulang village officials of Mangjing. Minghai asked Huaxiao to attend the meeting because it was likely that the township officials would visit Huaxiao's terrace tea garden, which was considered by Minghai an ideal showcase to demonstrate the transformation process in Mangjing.

Figure 5.7. Space between tea trees. Around two meters were between two tea trees in the ecological tea garden. Notice that the different species of tree were planted in between (photograph Po-Yi Hung).



On the way to Minghai's house, Huaxiao made a quick stop at the side of a terrace tea garden, which had completed its transformation. "Look, we were requested to keep about two-meters distance between two tea trees," (Figure 5.7 above), Huaxiao said, pointing to the extra space between two of the remaining tea trees. He lit a cigarette and complained that after his terrace tea garden was transformed into an ecological tea garden, his revenue did not really increase as promised by the government officials. As with many villagers in Mangjing, Huaxiao's profits did not improve after clearing almost two-thirds of his tea trees. His family did not have a large number of ancient tea trees, and depended much more on harvesting terrace tea

leaves to support themselves. The transformation project thus had a significant economic impact upon Huaxiao's family.

Turning to the topic of ecological tea gardens, Huaxiao did not agree that terrace tea gardens were not ecological. On the contrary, Huaxiao thought the terrace tea plantation could become ecological by limiting the use of pesticides and other chemical products. He showed me that all the terrace tea gardens adjacent to the road were under transformation first, which was, according to him, because the government wanted them gone first. The real purpose of transforming the terrace tea gardens, in the opinion of Huaxiao and many other villagers, was not ecological, but was to develop tourism in Mangjing. "They (the government officials) must think terrace tea gardens are too ugly to show tourists, so want all the ancient tea forest back," said Huaxiao, as he tossed his cigarette butt away.

### *5.3.2 Being Modern and Being Scientific as Separate Moral Standards in Treating Nature*

While many Mangjing villagers, including Huaxiao, complained about the reduction in revenue after transforming their terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens, some villagers understood the transformation as a scientific method of tea production. Paradoxically, many villagers perceived the scientific tea production from ecological tea gardens as moving away from modernization. In other words, while they understood ecological tea gardens to be scientific, they did not regard them as more advanced or a modernization of tea production. Rather, they perceived that the transformation created separate tea gardens that represented either being modern or being scientific. Minghai, a Mangjing village official, epitomized many villagers' perceptions of the separation between being modern and being scientific.



As one of the village cadres, Minghai had tried to meet the goals of the prefectural “Scientific Pu’er” campaign. In Mangjing, the specific goal was to transform all the terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens. Minghai asked Huaxiao to attend a meeting before the visit of the township officials, who were to come to Mangjing to supervise the transformation of tea gardens. I went with Huaxiao to Minghai’s house for the meeting.

Seeing Huaxiao and me, Minghai greeted us and handed cigarettes to us before he went to add some dried wood to the fire to boil water in a big kettle. Huaxiao exhaled a thick plume of smoke from his cigarette, and said to Minghai with a mocking tone, “Need more wood for the fire? I’ve got many left in my tea garden. Pure ecological (*yuan shengtai de*)!” Minghai did not respond, but continued adding more dried wood to the fire pile, blazing and sparking from the burning wood. He then stood up, prepared two glasses, put some processed tea leaves at the bottom, and handed the glasses to Huaxiao and me. Huaxiao treated Minghai and himself to another cigarette. Shortly after, steaming vapor rose from the kettle spout. Minghai turned to the fire, took the kettle, and poured water into Huaxiao’s glass. The room immediately filled with hazy smoke formed from the mixture of burning wood, cigarettes, and tea. Minghai gave himself a glass of tea and sat at a round bamboo table. After serving himself a sip of tea, he put the cigarette back to his mouth and held it to his lips. He then turned to Huaxiao, raised his voice slightly, and said, “The ecological (*shengtaide*) is good; the ecological is scientific!”

At this moment, Minghai turned to me and asked whether or not I agreed with his words, “the ecological is scientific.” It was obvious that Minghai did not really want an answer, but only approval, from me. Being a Ph.D. student studying in an American university, I was regarded by Minghai, and the local villagers in general, as a “scientific” guy. As a result, from time to time villagers, including Minghai, would ask for my approval or advice. Most times, I was careful to

avoid expressing my opinions in a situation like this. But on this occasion, Minghai forced me to make a judgment by saying, “Doctor (*boshi*), give us some guides and lessons (*zhidao*); isn’t this your job here?” I recognized at this point that I had been put in a position where it was nearly impossible to avoid making a judgment. I therefore responded to Minghai, “Yes, ecology is considered as a science in many places, but....” Minghai immediately interrupted me, and said to Huaxiao, “Do you hear what Doctor Hung just said?” Minghai seemed to take my words as an authoritative statement to convince Huaxiao that transforming terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens was scientific. At the point when I began to explain my opinion to Minghai and Huaxiao in more detail, the other two men arrived for the meeting.

One of the two men yelled at the gate. Minghai recognized the voice and quickly headed to greet them there. Huani stepped into the hazy house and cried out loud to Minghai, “Do you store your tea in the house? The smoke would just ruin your tea!”<sup>76</sup> Huaxiao jumped on Huani’s words, and said “Yeah, very unscientific of you, Minghai!” Minghai then turned to me and tried to defend himself. He said, “None of us is unscientific! In fact, we (Bulang people) are all scientific. We got it from our ancestors, and we got to bring it (the science) back and continue.” In Minghai’s opinion, ecology was a science that had been practiced historically, and without destroying the ancient tea forest, using the Bulang ancestors’ wisdom. He believed that the transformation from terrace tea gardens to ecological tea gardens was a necessary process to bring the Bulang ancestors’ science back to Mangjing. “It’s our authentic tea culture,” he said.

During these conversations, Minghai emphasized terrace tea gardens as a landscape of “modernization” (*xiandaihua de*) and ecological tea gardens as “scientization” (*kexuehua de*). He

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<sup>76</sup> Tea absorbs smells from its surroundings easily. In order to preserve the original aroma of tea, it is critical to store it in a proper container or space. In addition, the storage, ideally, should be away from any material that has a strong smell to avoid the potential for pollution. As a result, if any tea is not properly stored and is exposed to smoke from things like cigarettes and burning wood, it will easily become polluted by absorbing the smell of the smoke.

perceived modernization as different from scientization, saying, “Many modernized things are actually not scientific!” He used terrace tea gardens as an example of modernization. He said that terrace tea gardens, of course, had no linkage to the Bulang people’s ancestors, who considered ecology to be a science that would take care of their tea forest. On the contrary, terrace tea gardens were the product of modernization, which in Minghai’s opinion was damaging to Bulang villagers’ tea production. Minghai explained, in order to manage the terrace tea gardens well, Bulang people applied modern methods of tea production, including the use of pesticide and chemical nutrients, and the destruction of the forest for tea plantation. The modernization of tea production, represented by the terrace tea gardens, was “not good; not scientific,” Minghai confidently asserted. In other words, for Minghai, the modernization of tea production was not scientific, because the resulting damage to the natural environment was not ecological. For Minghai, only being ecological could be considered being scientific.

Many Bulang villagers in Mangjing related to the ecological tea gardens as a scientific method of tea production. However, for Bulang villagers, being scientific, as opposed to being modern, became the moral standard for protecting the ancient tea forest and, in a broader sense, nature. In other words, for many Bulang villagers, being scientific in the interest of ecological tea production was not about using scientific techniques or facilities to produce tea. Rather, ecology, as a science, was a moral doctrine for treating the natural environment well. On the contrary, for many villagers the so-called modernization of tea production practiced in the terrace tea gardens violated their moral doctrine because of its damage to the natural environment. As a result, the practices that transformed terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens, for Bulang villagers, had separate moral standards. As with Minghai, many Bulang villagers positioned

themselves on the side of being scientific with a belief that even before the introduction of modern terrace tea gardens, they had been practicing ecological tea production

### 5.3.3 *Smoking as Unscientific: Bulang Villagers' Quality (Suzhi)*

Bulang villagers understood the ecological tea garden as a scientific production method that was practiced according to tradition, whereas most non-Bulang outsiders, including government officials and tea merchants, were concerned more with the advanced organic production of ecological tea gardens. Their organic production required a strict standard of hygienic processing, which was a critical aspect of “scientific management” (*kexuehua guanli*). Many outside government officials and tea merchants complained that Bulang villagers had not been able to advance to the hygienic processing level to meet the criteria for the scientific management of tea production. Smoking, in particular, has been flagged by non-Bulang outsiders to demonstrate the Bulang villagers’ “low quality” (*di suzhi*) that resulted in their failure to meet the standards for scientific management. The township officials’ visit to Mangjing illustrates the situation.

The purpose of their visit, according to Minghai, was not just to understand the progress toward the transformation of terrace tea gardens. More importantly, they came to prepare and rehearse the forthcoming visit of the former Communist Party Secretary of Yunnan Province, Enpei Bai. Bai’s visit to Mangjing was part of his trip to investigate the development of the tea industry in the Pu’er Prefecture. Mangjing was located in Pu’er, and was chosen for Bai’s visit because of its thriving production of ancient tree tea and its increasing production of ecological tea.

With the help of Minghai, I was introduced to the township officials when they arrived, and was then allowed to join them while they were in Mangjing. The officials asked Minghai to rehearse the agenda for Bai's forthcoming visit, wanting to be sure that every stop Minghai chose was the best place for Bai's investigation. One of the purposes of Bai's visit was to investigate the progress of the tea forest restoration (the ongoing campaign to transform all the terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens). The township officials would thus specifically pay attention to the transformations, and would look for an ideal example of an ecological tea garden to demonstrate the transformation's success.

I was invited to join the township officials on their drive. In the car, one said to me, "the statement of 'industrialize ecological construction; ecologize industrial development'<sup>77</sup> can't just be a slogan." This official believed that what was going on in Mangjing represented the act of putting a slogan into action. The official informed me that Mangjing had been a hot spot for government officials to visit because he and other officials in the car had worked hard to make it exemplify "Scientific Pu'er on the ground."

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<sup>77</sup> In Mandarin Chinese, it is "*shengtai jianshe chanyehua; chanye fazhan shengtaihua*." Another statement made by the township official was "scientize industrial development" (*chanye fazhan kexuehua*). He was trying to explain the substantive goal for the whole tea forest restoration and for the tea industry in Yunnan. Although he did use the two terms of "ecologize" (*shentaihua*) and "scientize" (*kexuehua*), he did not specify a difference between them.

Figure 5.8. Landscape contrast. The landscape difference between a terrace tea garden (bottom half of photo) and an ecological tea garden (upper half of photo) (photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



In order to show “Scientific Pu’er on the ground” in Mangjing, Minghai, as planned, selected Huaxiao’s ecological tea garden, which had just been transformed from a terrace tea plantation. Huaxiao’s garden was located just on the side of the Mangjing’s main road. For Minghai, the location of Huaxiao’s ecological tea garden was ideal for official visits. First, it was easy to reach to view closely. Also helpful was that there was an untransformed terrace tea garden just behind Huaxiao’s ecological tea garden. This would make it easy for visitors to have a clear view and discern the landscape difference between terrace tea gardens and ecological tea gardens (see Figure 5.8, above).

The township officials and I were followed Minghai, who rode a motorcycle in front of us. Huaxiao, Huani, and the other villagers also rode motorcycles. As one of the township officials opened his door upon arriving at Huaxiao's garden, a cigarette butt on the ground immediately caught his eye. With no gesture or word, he got out of the car and stood just beside the cigarette butt. He pointed it out to me when I got out of the car, and then asked the driver, another township official, park the car on the other side of the road. At the same time, Minghai, Huaxiao, Huani, and the other Bulang villagers were about to walk ahead to the ecological tea garden. But the township official quickly halted them and asked them to come to where he stood.

"This way, please," Minghai approached to the township official, intending to show him the direction to the ecological tea garden. He did not realize why the township official had stopped. The official pointed to the cigarette butt on the ground while Minghai was talking. "It is important to clean up every cigarette butt before the visit of Party Secretary Bai!" said the township official in a commanding tone. Minghai quickly picked up the cigarette butt, then turned to the other Bulang villagers and asked them to stop smoking in the tea gardens. He said it could cause a fire, especially when all the tea tree brush had not been cleared out. "No, no, no!" the township official interrupted immediately with a rising voice, "it's more about the matter of being hygienic for ecological production [of tea]!" Minghai froze for a second, and then kept nodding his head at the township official. Huaxiao, standing aside and listening, was trying to hide his smile by sealing his lips in an unnatural and awkward way.

After visiting Huaxiao's garden, the township official and I returned to the car to visit the next destination. He commented on the cigarette butt, and then said that teaching and practicing "Scientific Pu'er" in the area of minority nationalities (*minzu diqu*) was a tough job. He said,

“their (Bulang villagers’) ‘quality’ (*suzhi*) is not enough. Still a long way to go!” According to him, most of the Bulang villagers did not understand the core (*hexin*) of “Scientific Pu’er.”

The official thought the core of “scientific Pu’er” was more than just the villagers’ physical participation in transforming their terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens. Rather, he believed the essence of “scientific Pu’er” required the improvement of personal qualities, meaning proper and “civilized” (*wenmingde*) behavior in scientifically managing tea production. Most of the Bulang villagers, according to the township official, only physically participated in the tea garden transformation without correcting their “uncivilized,” and therefore unscientific behavior. He insisted that correcting all the unscientific behaviors of Bulang villagers, like smoking during tea processing, was a difficult but critical thing to do. The township official believed that the Bulang villagers would lose their competitiveness in the tea market if they did not recognize the damage caused by their unscientific management behaviors, such as smoking. He said, “Simple! You (the Bulang villagers) smoke, and people (the consumers) leave, even if the missing tea forest will be restored in the future!”

#### **5.4 Conclusion: The Construction of Landscape as a Construction of Bulang People**

This chapter, by paying attention to the ambiguity of modernity, reconsidered the symbolic and material changes to the tea landscapes in Mangjing in order to understand China’s southwest frontier as dilemma. Frontier, as the dilemma between tradition and modernity and between nature and development, is made up not only of temporary and site-specific elements, but also of enduring and structural factors (Fold and Hirsch 2009). Considering China’s southwest frontier as a place of assemblage is a productive approach to understand how disparate



elements, both ephemeral and long-lasting, are assembled, disconnected, and reassembled on the frontier to produce the ambiguity of modernity in time and space. Inquiries into dilemma are thus inquiries into not just the binaries, but the interrelationships between structured universalization and contingent situatedness, between the unchanged and the changed in the case of the minority nationalities of southwest China, and on China's frontier at large.

As shown in the transformation from terrace tea gardens to ecological tea gardens in Mangjing, an ambiguity of modernity has been established in the incompatible desires of the Chinese state for both tradition and advancement among minority nationalities on the frontier. On the one hand, the ecological tea gardens imply going back to a traditional method of tea production to protect the natural environment. On the other hand, however, they denote the advancement of organic tea production. The ambiguity between tradition and advancement, then, becomes the state's construction of tradition in modernity to meet the contingent market demands for natural and organic tea.

While the Chinese state has constructed tradition in modernity for tea production, for Bulang villagers in Mangjing, the transformation of tea landscapes is more about the difference between being modern and being scientific. Modernity, as a global form (Ong and Collier 2005) that originated in Europe has been conflated with science (Gaukroger 2009). In the Chinese context, campaigns for modernization have typically prioritized science as one of the top principles (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Sigley 2007; Wang 2011; Weller 2006). However, for Bulang villagers the transformation of the Mangjing tea landscape, paradoxically, has become a discursive and material practice that blurs and even disrupts the connection between modernity and science. As discussed, Bulang villagers have understood the terms *modernity* and *science* as two distinct moral standards for the treatment of nature. Being modern, in the case of

terrace tea gardens, is harmful to the natural environment. In contrast, being scientific benefits the natural environment because of the ecological method of production practiced in the ecological tea gardens.

These shifting assemblages among tradition, modernity, science, and nature have then produced and reproduced the ambiguity of modernity in Mangjing's tea landscapes. Minority ethnicities, like the Bulang people, have been one of the key components in the shifting assemblages. Recently, scholars have noted that many Chinese traditional practices are subject to scientific scrutiny as tradition is assigned a modern meaning (e.g., Karchmer [2002]). For Bulang villagers, similarly, the "Scientific Pu'er" campaign has urged them to "go 50 years backward" to their traditional methods of tea production. The campaign has also defined Bulang traditions as ecological.

The shifting assemblages, however, have not substantially altered the long-term social status of Bulang villagers as China's minority nationalities. Under the "Scientific Pu'er" campaign, non-Bulang outsiders have encouraged the scientific management of organic tea production. For these government officials and tea merchants, being scientific is more about personal practices, such as quitting smoking, that make for hygienic processing. This emphasis on hygiene in organic production has further downgraded the assessment of Bulang villagers' overall quality (*suzhi*). The social majority outside Mangjing still consider Bulang villagers in their given role as "other Chinas," (Litzinger 2000) whose "low quality" (*di suzhi*) is problematic. Here, "quality" (*suzhi*) has been the value coding (Yan 2003) that repositions Bulang villagers in relation to tea production. Value coding when applied to the Bulang, therefore, finds them "as lacking, in need of constant readjustment, supplementation, and continual retraining" (ibid., 511).

Behind the landscape transformation, is yet another social and political enterprise that reinforces Bulang villagers' low status. For the Han majority, including government officials and tea merchants, Bulang villagers represent the traditional method of tea production, which protects nature. However, they are not expected to advance to more modern and scientific organic production because of their low *suzhi*. The construction of ecological tea gardens, therefore, has been one of the “economic development interventions undertaken in the name of modernization as a homogenizing process that imposes a rigid physical and conceptual order on subject populations” (Williams 2000, 503). Despite the shifting assemblages among tradition, modernity, science, and nature, the market economy of tea, overall, has reinforced and perpetuated the social order between “inferior” minority nationalities and the “superior” Han majority in China.

Instead of accepting this inferior status, Bulang villagers have created their own positioning in the burgeoning market for ancient tree tea. In the next chapter, I will address how Bulang villagers have renovated their religious tea rituals by incorporating the multiple new meanings of the ancient tea forest. I will also examine how their tea rituals have created the cultural renovation that allows Bulang villagers to re-articulate their relationship with the ancient tea trees and to reposition themselves in the market economy of tea.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Ritual: The Renovation of Tea Ceremonies and Bulang Villagers' Re-articulation of a Collective Ethnic Identity**

The fresh buds of the ancient tea trees, which were harvested in spring, were the prized material used to make “spring ancient tree tea” (*gushu chuncha*), a highly valued product in the Pu'er tea market. Villagers were most busy harvesting the fresh tea leaves from late March to late April. During the early spring of 2011, however, Mangjing villagers had a much worse tea-leaf harvest because of a disastrous worm infestation. According to villagers of all ages, the number of caterpillars that had rapidly appeared in the tea forest was unprecedented. Because of the infestation, almost all the fresh buds, particularly in the Aileng Mountain area, had been eaten.

By April, Yaoni, a Bulang villager in his early forties, was still not able to harvest much from his ancient tea trees, which were located on Aileng Mountain. Instead of being at work harvesting, Yaoni was at home on April 2, 2011, busy preparing offerings for the ritual of the “Worm Worship” (*chongji*) later that day. He was worried about the damage from the worm infestation, which had caused a significant shortage of fresh tea leaves. Yaoni told me that in the past few years, April was the busiest month for him and for every villager in Mangjing. He reported that the damages, however, were so serious that their tribal head (*touren*) had decided to hold a ritual of “Worm Worship” to reduce the harm. It would be also a ritual to consult the spirit of the mountain, who would then predict the disaster's severity.

I was standing beside Yaoni to watch as he prepared his offerings, including cooked white rice, apples, watermelon, dried melon seeds, raw grains, and dried tea leaves. He put a little of each item on a green plantain leaf, and then gently wrapped the leaf into a square about the size

of an adult's palm. He also prepared a larger plantain leaf, which functioned as a big plate on which all the rest of the offering items would be put. Yaoni informed me that the "Worm Worship" he was about to attend was the biggest he had participated in. According to him, because of the severity of the infestation, the tribal head had asked each household to have at least one person attend the ritual. Yaoni said that this time he believed over one hundred households would participate in the ritual, especially those who owned ancient tea trees on Aileng Mountain.

Yaoni reported that every year there was some damage from caterpillars eating the sprouting tea leaves, but that this time was different. The influx of caterpillars and the resulting damage, for Yaoni, were signs that the mountain spirit wanted to warn the Bulang villagers of something. Yaoni said that the mountain spirit was probably as hungry as the caterpillars. In the past few years, he said, the mountain spirit had generously provided its ancient tea leaves so that villagers could make much more money. Villagers, including Yaoni himself, often failed to provide enough offerings to worship and feed the mountain spirit, however. Yaoni thought that the caterpillars were just the agents sent by the mountain spirit to send a message to the villagers. He told me in a quasi-mocking tone, "we need to feed up the mountain spirit before feeding up ourselves, or he (the mountain spirit) will make everyone hungry again by eating up all our tea leaves!"

Yaoni's words represented the Bulang villagers' belief in a reciprocal relationship between them and the ancient tea forest, and between people and nature in a broader sense. In fact, many ethnic minorities on China's frontier, including the Bulang people, have practiced their religious beliefs and developed their moral codes based on their relationship with the natural environment. The market economy has substantially altered people-environment relations on China's frontier,

but religious practices still play a critical role when ethnic minorities seek to understand their changing relationship with nature. In Mangjing, the burgeoning tea production since early 2000s had substantially changed Bulang villagers' sense of property, had restructured their social relations inside Mangjing, and had generated multiple connections with the outside world. Confronting these changes over the course of a decade, local villagers in Mangjing had struggled for new understandings concerning their relationship with the ancient tea forest, and their ethnic identity as Bulang people. As a result, they renovated and participated in traditional rituals related specifically to tea. These renovated tea rituals have become an essential activity for local villagers to re-articulate themselves within the new economic, political, and cultural landscape of tea. Tea rituals are also critical ceremonies that retain and assure local villagers' collective identity as Bulang people.

In this chapter, I analyze two tea rituals in Mangjing, the "Worm Worship" (*chongji*) and the "Tea Ancestor Worship" (*chazuji*) rituals. During the early stage of peak spring tea production in 2011, the ancient tea forest in Mangjing had suffered from a serious worm infestation. Copious numbers of caterpillars ate the fresh leaves, creating a severe shortage. The situation was so grave that the tribal head held a village-wide ritual to get the disaster under control. In addition to the "Worm Worship" ritual, Bulang villagers had also rebuilt their linkages with the tea forest through a yearly ceremony called "Tea Ancestor Worship." This ceremony is specifically held for the Bulang people's legendary ancestor, *Pia Ai Leng*, who was regarded by local Bulang villagers as a common ancestor and not designated a tea ancestor. *Pia Ai Leng* is now honored as their tea ancestor, since the "Tea Ancestor Worship" was restored in the early 2000s. Although the ritual was publicized as a recovered tradition for Bulang people, many of

the ceremonial details related to tea were new to villagers. They had renovated their traditional rituals to incorporate new meanings connected to the tea forest.

### **6.1 Worm Worship: Between the Mountain Spirit's Message and Market Risk**

In addition to the food offerings, Yaoni prepared an empty plastic bottle in which he filled about one third with homely brewed corn wine. He explained to me that he would go to the ancient tea forest to catch the caterpillars by hand and then put them into the bottle. According to Yaoni, villagers would typically go to the ancient tea forest in early spring to catch the caterpillars and reduce the damage from the worms. Villagers did this by hand because no pesticide was allowed in the tea forest. Yaoni reported that in the past few years, the number of caterpillars had been smaller than this year. In previous years, villagers could reduce the worm damage simply by catching the caterpillars by hand. "Why do you need the bottle for the caterpillars you catch?" I asked. Yaoni replied that because people from the Yunnan Tea Research Institute would come to see the caterpillars, villagers were asked to put the caterpillars into a transparent bottle with transparent alcohol. This would allow the professional personnel from the Tea Research Institute to identify the species of the caterpillars trapped in the bottle.

Figure 6.1. The worm altar for the Worm Worship ritual. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



On the way to Aileng Mountain, where most of Yaoni's ancient tea trees were located, I helped him carry the offerings for the worship. We went to the worship site first to work with other participant villagers to set up the altar for the ritual. Many villagers had arrived before us. The basic structure of the altar had been constructed by other villagers. Yaoni saw the constructed altar, and said, "We're late! Look! They've got the 'gigantic worm' (*dachong*) set up already." The altar did look like a gigantic worm (Figure 6.1, above). The worm head was



composed of two bundles of plantain leaves. Each bundle was three or four plantain leaves that were bundled up with a tree stick. Two sticks bundled with plantain leaves were set parallel, on two sides and vertically fixed to the ground with the plantain leaves pointing up to the sky. These plantain leaves acted like the antenna of the head of the gigantic worm.

Figure 6.2. The offerings on the body of the worm altar. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Between the bottoms of the two antenna was another stick horizontally bundled together with the two separated vertical sticks of plantain leaves. These three sticks produced a square-like shape, which was the mouth of the worm altar. Just before the mouth, villagers set up a

lower table-like object, which was made of tree sticks, square braid of bamboo, and plantain leaves. The sticks acted like table legs, and a flat and square braid of bamboo acted like the table surface covered with a big plantain leaf. Offerings, including fruits, grains, and dried tea leaves, were put on the table right before the mouth of the worm altar. The meandering body of the gigantic worm was also composed of tree sticks, a flat braid of bamboo, and plantain leaves. Each household was given a part of the body on which to put offerings (Figure 6.2, above). Over one hundred households participated in the worship, and the body consisted of villagers' offerings that stretched from the head to the tail.

Yaoni and I arrived relatively late, so Yaoni could only put his offerings near the tail of the worm altar. "Hope the mountain spirit can still eat 'from head to tail' (*cong tou da wei*)!" said Yaoni, laughing gently. According to Yaoni, the length of the gigantic worm demonstrated the severity of the worm infestation. The longer the length, the more serious the damage. After placing his offerings, Yaoni took his plastic bottle among the villagers and headed out to catch the caterpillars. On the way to his ancient tea trees, he pointed to many damaged tea leaves to prove the seriousness of the damage (Figure 6.3). Oddly, while I saw many eaten leaves, I did not see many caterpillars. "They (the caterpillars) hide because they know we're about to have the ritual," said Yaoni in a joking tone. Yaoni then found several caterpillars on his ancient tea trees and put them into his bottle to intoxicate them with the corn wine in the bottle. When Yaoni and I went back to the worm altar, the ritual had begun.



Figure 6.3. The eaten leaves of an ancient tea tree. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Most of the villagers were seated on the ground around the worm altar. While most of the men were dressed relatively casually, most of the women wore their traditional Bulang costumes to participate in the ceremony. An elderly man sat just near the head of the worm altar and held a thick sutra of Hinayana Buddhism, which was a bit worn out and had yellowish pages. The Buddhist sutra was written in Thai, and the Bulang old man recited the sutra word by word and

page by page. Every villager sat together and quietly listened to the recitation of the old man. During the recitation, a group of people arrived. “People from the Tea Research Institute came,” Yaoni informed me, nudging my shoulder. The group from the institute was led to the location of the ritual by one of the village cadre, Kangnan. Although the recitation continued, Kangnan summoned several villagers to show the institute group the caterpillars caught by villagers. Kangnan, who knew me, saw me sitting beside Yaoni and waved his hand to me. I waved my hand to greet him, and he asked me to come to him by waving his hand again.

When I approached him, he was checking a caterpillar that was in one villager’s bottle. Without much conversation, Kangnan introduced me to the people from the Tea Research Institute, who were standing aside and checking another villager’s bottle. “You should learn about tea knowledge from these professionals (people from the Tea Research Institute),” he said. Teacher Wang, one of the people from the Tea Research Institute, replied to Kangnan with a mocking tone, “Nowadays, be an ‘expert of worm’ (*chong zhuanjia*) first before being an ‘expert of tea’ (*cha zhuanjia*).” After saying that, Teacher Wang handed me a bottle with caterpillars inside (Figure 6.4). We then had a short conversation about the worm damage in Mangjing. “Did a similar situation happen in other tea mountains in Yunnan?” I asked. “Yes, not just in Pu’er, but also in Xishuangbanna,” he replied. Teacher Wang did not consider the infestation in Mangjing or the other tea mountains abnormal, however. He said, “It is certainly serious, but not uncommon actually!”

Figure 6.4. The “drunken” caterpillar in the bottle. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



According to Teacher Wang, the increased number of caterpillars was not uncommon after a warm and dry winter. After inspecting the caterpillars, he also reported that he did not find any new species of leaf-biting insects. The caterpillars he had seen in the samples provided by villagers were common to the ancient tea forest. In fact, Teacher Wang told me, the sudden increase in caterpillars in the early spring might have happened in the past. His concerns were more with the seemingly higher frequency of the infestations. In Teacher Wang's opinion, villagers did not pay as much attention to worm damage in the past because they did not depend on ancient tea leaves for their survival. He felt that villagers were more concerned with the

damage caused by the worms because for most of them the ancient tea leaves were their primary source of income. “They (the villagers) worry about worms only because they worry about their ‘gold and silver’ (*jinyin caibao*),” he said.

The recitation continued while I talked to Teacher Wang. Our conversation ended when the villagers prepared to kill two roosters and spread the blood on the offerings. The rooster sacrifice was an essential worship ritual, because villagers believed that the mountain spirit had put signs in the roosters’ tongues, heads, and bones. Those signs appeared in dead roosters and would tell villagers whether or not the mountain spirit was satisfied with their offerings and worship. It would be a critical element in the prediction of how serious the damage would be and how long it would last. After killing the two roosters and spreading the blood on the offerings on the worm altar, villagers started a fire and prepared a big pot in which to cook the two roosters. While several villagers were boiling the roosters, Kangnan, the village cadre, asked the villagers to be seated and to be quiet. He then invited Teacher Wang to give a short explanation about the status of the worm damage.

Teacher Wang stood in the middle of the villagers to explain the situation in Chinese Mandarin. Kangnan stood just beside him and translated into Bulang for the older villagers who could not understand Mandarin. Teacher Wang explained that the situation was caused by the previous winter’s cold and warm and dry weather. He suggested that villagers clean up the fallen leaves more often because the larvae survived the winter by living under them. Additionally, he suggested that villagers bury the cleaned-up leaves in the ground not only to reduce the survival chance of the larvae, but also to nurture the soil of the ancient tea forest. Last, during the early spring, in addition to catching the caterpillars by hand, Teacher Wang suggested that villagers use some herbal pesticides that would not cause chemical pollution in the tea forest. He also warned,



however, that even herbal pesticides should be used with care. He asked villagers not to buy pesticides themselves from the stores, because retailers did not always understand what kinds of pesticides were safe for the ancient tea trees. He suggested that the personnel from the Tea Research Institute would be happy to provide guidance to villagers on using pesticides.

While Teacher Wang was talking, one villager interrupted and asked, “Is there any other way to kill the caterpillars?” The villager asking the question then expressed his concerns about the ongoing damage. He said that since neither he nor any of the villagers could buy the herbal pesticides at this point to use themselves to kill the caterpillars, he was worried that the damage would continue. Another villager jumped in to agree. He asked Teacher Wang if the personnel of the Tea Research Institute could bring them the herbal pesticides tomorrow and could in this way teach villagers how to use the pesticides as soon as possible. Teacher Wang did not give villagers a specific timeline for when the personnel could come again to provide guidance in pesticide use. He said only that he would discuss it with the village cadre, Kangnan. Teacher Wang then switched to another topic regarding other ways to control the caterpillar invasion.

Teacher Wang told villagers that in addition to using herbal pesticides, they should apply “physical prevention” (*wulixing fangzhi*) and “biological prevention” (*shengwuxing fangzhi*) to reduce the number of caterpillars. For physical prevention, Teacher Wang suggested that villagers hang lamps in the tea forest during the night. The light would attract moths, so villagers would be able to kill a large number of them this way. Killing the moths would reduce the number of caterpillar larvae. For biological prevention, he suggested some biological pesticides that could directly kill the larvae by implanting fungi or viruses into it. These fungi or viruses would not destroy the natural environment of the tea forest. One of the two villagers who had asked questions earlier stood up, interrupted Teacher Wang again, and said that he did not think

the suggestions would solve the worm problem right away. He said that instead of learning something to do in the future, he needed to know how to stop the ongoing damage immediately. Several villagers then agreed that it was imperative to solve the situations as soon as possible. One said that the more he waited, the more he lost. Other villagers seemed to agree with this viewpoint and started murmuring among themselves.

Teacher Wang tried to ease the villagers' concerns by saying that he would speak with Kangnan to work out an immediate solution that could minimize the damage. He asked villagers to keep catching the caterpillars by hand until they learned how to use the herbal pesticides correctly. He raised his voice to say, "We need to feed the mountain spirit; we also need to protect the tea forest in a scientific way." Kangnan, still translating Teacher Wang's words, started into a longer speech in the Bulang language after Teacher Wang's talk. While he was talking, I went back to sit with Yaoni. I asked him to translate what Kangnan was saying into Mandarin Chinese for me. According to Yaoni, Kangnan was basically reiterating and reinforcing most of what Teacher Wang had said, although he was talking more about the relationship between the mountain spirit and Teacher Wang. "What? Relationship between the mountain spirit and Teacher Wang?" I asked him

Yaoni then explained to me that Kangnan wanted all the participant villagers to be grateful for Teacher Wang's visit to Mangjing. According to Yaoni's summary of Kangnan's words, Kangnan had said that Teacher Wang was in fact sent by the mountain spirit. "Why?" I asked Yaoni. He replied that Teacher Wang came because the mountain spirit was sending so many caterpillars to eat villagers' ancient tea leaves. "Do you mean that the mountain spirit creates the worm disaster on purpose because the mountain spirit wants Teacher Wang to come?" I asked Yaoni again, while jotting down his comments. Yaoni seemed to be confused by my



question, pointing to my written notes, and saying, “It’s not that complicated! Very simple!” Then he asked me to simply write down, “The disaster of caterpillars came, so Teacher Wang came. These are all his (the mountain spirit) arrangements!” Meanwhile, Kangnan was still talking in the Bulang language. Yaoni told me that he said Teacher Wang was the agent sent by the mountain spirit to teach villagers about the scientific knowledge needed to manage the worm infestation. Yaoni said that Kangnan wanted villagers to believe that it was also the mountain spirit’s will to push villagers to manage the ancient tea trees in more scientific ways. While still being confused by Yaoni’s summary of Kangnan’s speech, I jotted down notes and decided to talk to Kangnan in person later.

Kangnan concluded his speech by asking all the participant villagers to applaud as thanks for Teacher Wang and other members from the Tea Research Institute. Kangnan, Teacher Wang, and other people from the Tea Research Institute left after his speech. Before leaving, he asked if I would like to go with them to talk further with the Tea Research Institute professionals. I decided to stay instead, to see the final ritual of the worm worship. The two sacrificed roosters had cooled in the big pot. The villagers then gathered to view the prediction signified by the rooster bones. The old man who had just recited the Buddhist sutra decided that this time it was only necessary to see the bones from the roosters’ wings, not the bones from their heads or tongues. The old man smoothly pulled off one wing from a rooster, and then ate the meat, leaving just with the wing bones. He then took two toothpicks and carefully inserted them in the wing bone (Figure 6.5, below). According to Yaoni, the old man was probably the only one person who could read and understand the meanings signaled by the toothpicks on the wing bone.

I was with Yaoni throughout the whole process. Originally, I expected Yaoni to explain more details about the ritual and about how to read the signs on the rooster bone. However, Yaoni said that currently only few elders in Mangjing knew how to practice the ritual and to read the signs demonstrated by the combination of toothpicks and rooster bones. As a result, he could only tell me that according to the old man, the sign revealed by the toothpicks on the bone was good. The old man, according to Yaoni, said that the mountain spirit was satisfied with villagers' offerings and the worship. In addition, the old man read the sign and told villagers that the disaster would end soon. Also, the old man said that the mountain spirit would like all the villagers to practice better management of the ancient tea forest in the future. After hearing the old man's interpretation of the sign, villagers, including Yaoni and me, started eating the rest of the rooster meat.

Since the sign was read as a good one, everyone seemed relieved and started drinking some home-brewed corn wine together. I filled a pink, plastic cup with the corn wine, and intended to make a toast to the old man. I asked Yaoni to come with me as my interpreter. The old man was friendly to me. However, he seemed very tired after the ritual. Still, he wanted Yaoni to tell me that the only things people could eat were the roosters, and he was glad that I could eat the roosters with them. However, the old man wanted me to know that the offerings should be left in the tea forest; no one was allowed to take the offerings away now.

Figure 6.5. Reading the sign given by the mountain spirit on the rooster's wing bone.  
(Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



I then replied to the old man that I would not take any offering from the worm altar because I was full after eating the roosters and drinking corn wine with everyone. I hoped to have more conversations about the ritual with the old man, so I asked, “Why did you prepare two roosters but look at the sign from only one of the two?” Although Yaoni translated my question to the old man, he seemed not to follow it. Instead of replying to the question, he said unrelated things. He then said something in the Bulang language to me, and everyone sitting near him laughed, including Yaoni. Yaoni translated the old man’s words for me. He said the old man wanted to tell me that, like all the caterpillars, I was also sent by the mountain spirit to come to

Mangjing. “Why?” I asked. Yaoni said, “Because you’re Taiwanese!” I asked the old man why he thought I was sent by the mountain spirit. “I told you already!” said Yaoni, “You’re Taiwanese. The Taiwanese make our tea famous and expensive!” While Yaoni was talking, the old man looked at me and said something again to me in the Bulang language. “What did he just say?” I asked Yaoni. He told me that the old man wanted to ask me if I would write about their ancient tree tea when I went back to the United States. “Yes, I will!” I replied. Yaoni then talked to the old man, and the old man said something to me again. According to Yaoni, he thanked me for telling people in the United States about their tea, and that the mountain spirit would bless me.

After the short conversation with me, the old man decided to go home. I noticed he was tired, so refrained from asking more questions. I was confused by what the old man had told me, however. “Did the old man really say that I was sent by the mountain spirit because I am Taiwanese?” I asked Yaoni on the way back to his home. Yaoni confirmed that the old man did say so, and gave a simple explanation. He told me that every villager knew that the reputation of the ancient tree tea in Jingmai Mountain, including Mangjing, was established by Mr. Cai, a Taiwanese entrepreneur who owned the 101 Tea Company<sup>78</sup>. Yaoni also expressed that the value of ancient tree tea in general was discovered by Taiwanese people, who then boosted the market for Pu’er tea<sup>79</sup>. After the Taiwanese people’s discovery of ancient tree tea, Yaoni said, people in Mangjing, and in Yunnan in general, realized the actual value of their “treasure” (*baozang*). As a result, Yaoni said that every villager in Mangjing knew that the development of ancient tree tea was deeply related to the Taiwanese. The old man, Yaoni thought, believed the mountain spirit

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<sup>78</sup> For the relationship between Cai, the Bulang villagers, and the ancient tree tea in Mangjing, please see the discussion in the chapter on property.

<sup>79</sup> For the relationship between the value of production of ancient tree tea and Taiwan, please see the discussion in the introduction.

sent Taiwanese people to develop the Bulang villagers' tea business. According to Yaoni, in the old man's mind, as a Taiwanese researcher, I was therefore also sent by the mountain spirit.

I was not sure if what Yaoni told me conveyed the original meanings expressed by the old man or if it was Yaoni's own interpretation. Nevertheless, it was true that many villagers believed that the development of the ancient tree tea market in Mangjing, and in Yunnan in general, was initially promoted by Taiwanese people. However, what surprised and confused me at this moment was the connection between Taiwanese people, the mountain spirit, and the caterpillars. In the Bulang villagers' thinking, or at least in the old man's mind, both the caterpillars that ate their tea leaves and Taiwanese people who promoted their tea were sent by the mountain spirit. However, what did this connection among Taiwanese people, the mountain spirit, and the caterpillars mean to the old man, and to the villagers in Mangjing in general? Although Yaoni tried to explain it to me, his answer was still vague. Unfortunately, during my stay in Mangjing I did not have another chance to talk to the old man to clarify what he meant by saying that I, as a Taiwanese person, was sent by the mountain spirit. I received another explanation, however, regarding the connection among Taiwanese people, the mountain spirit, and the caterpillars after I talked to the village cadre, Kangnan, and his younger son.

I called Kangnan the day after the worm worship, and he asked me to come to his house in the early evening. When I went, Kangnan had just finished his dinner and was preparing to process the fresh tea leaves to make *maocha* with his son. He had two sons, who were both doing tea business in Mangjing. When I visited, Kangnan was working with his younger son, Xiaodao, processing tea. Shortly after I greeted them, Kangnan received a phone call and then left for a villager's home. He told me that he would come back soon and asked me to wait in his house.

After he left, I talked to Xiaodao, who was putting fresh tea leaves into the rotary machine<sup>80</sup>. Xiaodao was in his late teens, and had worked with his father in tea production in Mangjing since he graduated from junior high school (*chuzhong*). I volunteered to help Xiaodao with the processing, but he wanted me to just watch him, or he felt that his father would blame him for “being lazy” (*toulan*) by letting me do his labor-intensive job.

I agreed to just watch and had a conversation with Xiaodao. I asked him if the recent worm infestation had affected the latest price for fresh ancient tea leaves. Xiaodao did not name the exact price to me, but told me that the price had risen because of the infestation. He felt that the higher price was not necessarily a good thing for villagers. The reason, according to Xiaodao, was that potential buyers increasingly hesitated to purchase tea leaves because of the high price. He said that *cuzhichang*<sup>81</sup> in Mangjing, including his family, had stocked more processed tea leaves without having a firm deal with outside buyers. Although the total volume of fresh ancient tea leaves was reduced due to the worm damage, most villagers still had to harvest the fresh tea leaves not eaten by caterpillars. When villagers sold them to a *cuzhichang*, such as Xiaodao’s house, the villagers with a *cuzhichang* had to process the leaves in 24 hours, or they would wither and be spoiled. As a result, the processing of the leaves could not stop, even though buyers of processed leaves had not yet appeared. If a *cuzhichang* could not find a current buyer for processed tea leaves (*maocha*), they would need to stock more tea to wait for potential buyers.

“Why not lower the price?” I asked Xiaodao. He replied that no one wanted to be the first spoiler of the high price. He also told me that higher prices might attract fewer buyers, but it also meant higher profit. “It was so-called ‘market risk’ (*shichang fengxian*),” said Xiaodao. I was

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<sup>80</sup> See notes 46, 47, 48, and 49 in the chapter on hierarchy.

<sup>81</sup> See the discussions of *cuzhichang* in the chapters on quality and hierarchy.

honestly surprised that Xiaodao, a graduate of junior high school, could use the term *market risk* to express his idea. He went on to say that everyone was confident that buyers would eventually appear after the worm worship. He said that he heard the mountain spirit gave a sign saying that the worm disaster would pass without doing serious and long-term harm to the Bulang villagers' tea business. Thus, he believed the purpose of the mountain spirit in sending the caterpillars was not to destroy and stop Bulang villagers' tea production. He thought that the stocking situation of processed ancient tea leaves was only temporary, and a buyer who was willing to purchase their tea at a high price would surface in the near future.

“So, you believe in the mountain spirit, don't you?” I asked. Xiaodao seemed a little embarrassed by my question, and replied that he was not a superstitious person. Like many young Bulang men and women in Mangjing, he thought of himself as part of a generation that managed tea production with an eye to market risk rather than to signs given by the mountain spirit. However, he said that he still felt good when his thinking was endorsed by someone he respected, including the mountain spirit. “What if your thought about market risk was not endorsed by the mountain spirit?” I asked. Xiaodao laughed a little, and then replied, “Disappointed maybe, but just a little bit!” He assured to me that he might reconsider his idea, but would not totally change his thinking.

During our conversation, Xiaodao made clear that he felt that all the villagers in Mangjing should have at least some sense of market risk. He informed me that many young villagers who were similar in age would gather together to talk about tea production, and to learn about market risk from each other. Xiaodao even thought that the young villagers were already qualified to teach the older generation about market risk. But it was impossible in Mangjing, according to Xiaodao, for a youngster like him to teach anything to an older villager. He said the

older generation thought the youngsters needed to learn from them, so it was very difficult to get them to listen to and to learn the youngsters' ideas about market risk. He continued, saying that it was true that the signs of the mountain spirit could still play an important role in many Bulang villagers' minds, especially for the older generation. Xiaodao then joked, "Let the mountain spirit teach them (the older generation) about the market risk then!"

"How do you know the mountain spirit also understand market risk?" I asked Xiaodao. "He (the mountain spirit) is not a human being! He of course knows everything!" said Xiaodao. "Can you teach me about market risk?" I asked, hoping to encourage Xiaodao to express more of his ideas of market risk. My request seemed to embarrass Xiaodao again, however. He hesitated to talk to me about it. Instead, he said that he dared not teach me anything, because I must know more than him. Xiaodao insisted that he was not qualified to teach me, but should learn from me about market risk. In the end, he said that I should talk to his father (Kangnan) about market risk. I then asked him if he learned the concept of market risk from his father. He responded that he was not sure. He did say that he very often would be with his father while his father was doing business with outside tea merchants. On these occasions, his father would sometimes talk about market risk with him when deciding whether or not they would make a deal with an outside tea merchant. Again, Xiaodao said that his father would be the right person for me talk to about market risk.

It turned out that Kangnan did not come back to his house as soon as he promised. I then decided to leave, and to come back some other time. When he called the next morning, he apologized to me first for not being able to talk to me the previous day. He then invited me to join him at a banquet held by one of his friends. The purpose of the banquet was to celebrate the completion of his friend's remodeled house. According to Kangnan, the revenue from selling tea



had allowed his friend to finally earn enough money to renovate his old house. Kangnan said that I should go with him because it would also demonstrate how Bulang villagers have benefitted from burgeoning tea production. Kangnan suggested meeting in the early evening at his house.

When I arrived, he had been waiting for me, smoking in front of the gate. I hopped into his car and set next to him. On the way to his friend's new house, Kangnan said he was informed by Xiaodao that I wanted Xiaodao to teach me the market risk of tea production in Mangjing. I tried to clarify that I was actually interested in how the younger generation in Mangjing understood the development of tea production. I told him more about our conversation. I emphasized that the conversation had started from talking about the worm worship. I then reiterated some key thoughts expressed by Xiaodao. Kangnan said that it was true that the older generation was more superstitious than the younger one. As a result, whenever a village-wide disaster happened, according to Kangnan, the older villagers would ask for a religious ritual to ease the anger of the mountain spirit and to solicit a sign to predict the result of the disaster. Meanwhile, in Kangnan's mind, the worm ritual or any other religious ritual practiced by Bulang villagers nowadays should not be regarded as just superstitious. In fact, he asked me to look at the ritual more from the perspective of Bulang tradition. He believed that Bulang tradition was still rooted in every villager's mind, including the youngsters. He said that the youngsters thought the ritual was superstitious only because they wanted to be different and trendy. Kangnan believed that the mountain spirit was actually still alive in Bulang youngsters' minds.

I resonated with Kangnan's thoughts by reiterating Xiaodao's words. I told Kangnan that Xiaodao had said that the mountain spirit would teach the older generation about market risk. I said that it was proof that Xiaodao believed in the existence of mountain spirit. Then I took the opportunity to ask Kangnan about his speech on the day of the worm worship. I also told him

what I understood, based on the translation by Yaoni. After hearing how Yaoni translated his speech to me, Kangnan laughed and told me that Yaoni had only translated part of it. He said that he was actually saying something about market risk, and that he had tried to help all the participant villagers to get a sense of market risk from the worm worship. Kangnan said that instead of directly teaching villagers it was, he used the religious ritual as the occasion to effectively make villagers realize the meaning of market risk.

“What exactly did you say in the speech?” I asked again. Kangnan said that he tried to tell the villagers that the mountain spirit sent the caterpillars to eat the ancient tea leaves with a purpose, which was to let the villagers know that the mountain spirit could make them rich in one day, but also could make them lose everything in another day. He then urged them to respect the mountain spirit more by managing the ancient tea trees better, and asked them to follow the guidance expressed by Teacher Wang. He had added that Teacher Wang was also sent by the mountain spirit to help Bulang villagers correctly manage their ancient tea forest without destroying the natural environment.

Kangnan reiterated that showing respect to the ancient tea trees was important. He said that in the past, villagers would identify an oldest or biggest tea tree as the “tree of tea spirit” (*chahun shu*). Before harvesting the ancient tea leaves, according to Bulang tradition, villagers prepared offerings to worship it and to show their gratitude. Kangnan said that villagers increasingly omitted this ritual when they harvested tea leaves. From Kangnan’s perspective, the neglect of this worship of the tree of tea spirit demonstrated villagers’ diminishing respect for the tea forest. He told me that this is why many villagers, especially the elderly, believed strongly that the mountain spirit was angry because fewer villagers practiced the ritual of the tree of tea spirit.

I told Kangnan about the old man who told me that I was sent by the mountain spirit because I was from Taiwan. He laughed out loud and asked me to believe the old man's words, but he did not provide an interpretation of the words. He did say something similar to Yaoni though, that Taiwanese people had contributed in important ways to the realization by villagers of the "price value" (*jiaqian jiazhi*) of the ancient tree tea of Mangjing. He also said that the development of tea production in Mangjing, and the increasing value of the ancient tree tea, to most villagers, was unexpected. It was hardly possible for Bulang villagers to imagine that they could survive simply by selling tea. "Everything happened just too fast," said Kangnan. As a result, Kangnan said that many villagers, especially the elders, could not understand the rapid development of tea production, and "the arrangement of the mountain spirit" (*shanling de anpai*). Meanwhile, he added, "You Taiwanese were the initiators (*qitou de ren*)"<sup>82</sup> of all the fast development and unexpected results.

Arriving at Kangnan's friend's house, I found that the white, cement, two-story building was much more like a new than a renovated house. Kangnan's friend came out to greet us and then led us into the house. In the living room, many villagers sat on the leather-like sofa watching the new TV set. Kangnan's friend introduced us proudly, saying that it was a TV with a 30-inch screen. Kangnan responded that it could be the biggest TV set in the village so far. A new set of karaoke machines were also set up so that the guests could enjoy their stay at the house. "We have Taiwanese songs!" the host informed me. I was then forced to sing a Taiwanese song called *Aibia Jia-e Yia*, meaning "Working hard is imperative for winning." Although villagers could not understand the lyrics, they all seemed familiar with the melody and some even hummed the song with me.

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<sup>82</sup> Kangnan gave this statement with reference to Cai. For more discussion about the relationship between Cai and the tea production in Mangjing, please see the chapter on property.

This was when I realized that Taiwan, a faraway island from Mangjing, was somehow so closely connected to Bulang villagers through the burgeoning tea production. In fact, it was not just about Taiwan, but the connections between Taiwanese tea markets and the Bulang villagers. These distant tea markets, whether in Taiwan, Guangdong, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, or Malaysia, could earn Bulang villagers substantial profits in a short time that would allow them to renovate or even build a new house, like the house of Kangnan's friend. But the market also had the power to make Bulang villagers lose everything in an instant. Like Kangnan said, everything happened in a short period, and Bulang villagers confronted the rapid development of tea and still sought to understand it, be it market connections or market risks, from religious rituals like the worm worship. As a result, although Bulang villagers practiced their religious rituals in the name of tradition, the rituals themselves were practiced with new meanings that resulted from tea production.

While rituals like worm worship became an opportunity to let villagers understand market connections and risks, Bulang villagers also practiced rituals in order to re-articulate themselves as Bulang people after confronting the force of the market. In the next section, I use the "Tea Ancestor Worship" (*chazu ji*) as an example to demonstrate how Bulang villagers practiced the ritual to understand the new meanings of tea and to collectively re-articulate their ethnic identity as Bulang.

## **6.2 Tea Ancestor Worship: Tea Production and Bulang Villagers' Collective Re-articulation of Ethnic Identity**

On April 6, 2012, Cuosan, a Bulang villager in his early forties, was on duty walking the tea forest to check for fires. While walking, he would hit the gong to warn villagers of the potential for a fire disaster in such dry weather. I met Cuosan at the Bulang Princess Tea Factory guesthouse, where he took his lunch break after completing his morning duties. I had lunch with Cuosan, and he graciously allowed me to walk with him as he completed his duties after lunch. He would walk the Aileng Mountain, which was just behind the guesthouse. According to Cuosan, walking the mountain was fairly easy since the recent construction of a new trail. (Figure 6.6). Aileng Mountain was the site of the worm infestation, and it was where the worm worship had been held.

Figure 6.6. The constructed trail crossing the ancient tea forest and leading to the altar at the top of Aileng Mountain (photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Observing the healthy buds of an ancient tea tree, Cuosan expressed confidence that the number of caterpillars had dropped after the worm worship. He then said that Aileng Mountain was named after the Bulang people's tea ancestor, *Pia Ai Leng*, and that Aileng Mountain was a "magic" (*shenqide*) place because all things, good and bad, started there. "*Pia Ai Leng* gives his sign here," said Cuosan. He then used the worm infestation as proof. He said that *Pia Ai Leng* was not happy with villagers who forgot to regularly worship their "trees of tea spirit" when harvesting tea leaves. As a result, the infestation, in Cuosan's view, was a sign from *Pia Ai Leng* that he wanted more respect for the tea trees from villagers. Interestingly, Yaoni had provided a similar explanation of the infestation, though he described the disaster as a sign from the "mountain spirit." "Is *Pia Ai Leng* the mountain spirit of Aileng Mountain?" I asked Cuosan. He did not reply directly. Rather, he asserted again that *Pia Ai Leng* was the tea ancestor of all Bulang people. He then said that each year villagers would collect tea leaves from their "trees of tea spirit," and together would make the "tea of tea spirit" (*chahuncha*) to worship *Pia Ai Leng*.

Cuosan continued to hit his gong while on the way to the summit of Aileng Mountain. An altar, recently constructed specifically for the tea ancestor worship, was at the summit (Figure 6.7, below). The altar had been completed in 2010. According to Cuosan, its completion meant the recovery of the Bulang-villager tradition of tea ancestor worship. He said that Bulang villagers had different rituals for different spirits, and the altar on the summit of Aileng Mountain was specifically for *Pia Ai Leng*. Although it meant a recovery of tradition, Cuosan also said that the altar was newly constructed in order to worship *Pia Ai Leng* in a consistent time and place. He said that villagers started coming back to Aileng Mountain to worship *Pia Ai Leng* after Teacher Su recovered the yearly ritual of tea ancestor worship, and that originally, the ritual was



held in different Mangjing locations. But Teacher Su established the regular altar for the worshipping rituals and then chose Aileng Mountain as the site for the altar.

Figure 6.7. The altar constructed on the top of Aileng Mountain for the Tea Ancestor Worship. (Photo by Po-Yi Hung).



“This year the government is about to ruin our regular worship,” he complained. He said that the government had forced villagers to move up the regular date for the worship in order to promote a countywide festival, the Calabash Festival (*hulu jie*), designed for tourism development.<sup>83</sup> According to Bulang villagers, the official date for worshipping *Pia Ai Leng*

<sup>83</sup> The Calabash Festival was a countywide promotional event in Lancang County, packaged as a traditional celebration of the Lahu people, one of the minority nationalities of China.

should have been April 16, 2011, based on the calculation of Dai calendar. However, because of the festival, county officials had asked the villagers to hold their tea ancestor worship on April 8, 2011, more than a week prior to April 16. The county government was attempting to promote tourism by moving the traditional festivals of different minority ethnicities within the county administration closer together. Many villagers did not agree with changing the date for their worship ceremony, but they were forced to comply with the county government's order. As a result, Bulang villagers regarded the April 8 worship as fake; in fact, most of the villagers were not planning to go to it.

Cuosan and many other villagers reported that they would still go to the Tea Ancestor Shrine to “perform” (*biaoyan*) the Tea Ancestor Worship for government officials and outside visitors. However, since the performance was regarded as a fake ritual, many villagers insisted that outside visitors not be allowed to approach the altar. Approaching the altar, according to Cuosan, was essential to completing the worship ceremony. The April 8 ceremony would not in fact even contain this final step in the ritual. The cancellation of the final ritual, Cuosan said, was approved by Teacher Su, who was widely recognized as the person responsible for recovering the Tea Ancestor Worship. On a subsequent day, I spoke with Teacher Su, whose home was located near the Tea Ancestor Shrine.

“No, we won't go to the altar to worship on April 8,” said Teacher Su. He also said that they would not demonstrate the worship procedures at the shrine. Still, although he disagreed with the government's decision to move the worship date forward, he did not think the new date made the ritual completely fake. Instead, he thought it could promote the Bulang tea culture to outsiders. He said that he welcomed participation in the worship ceremony by people from all over the world. He also regarded the worship ceremony as the best chance for the Bulang people



to “learn to communicate” (*xuexi jiaoliu*) about their own tea culture to the world. In Teacher Su’s mind, villagers in Mangjing could hardly imagine that their tea culture had become of such interest to outsiders, including researchers, government officials, and tourists. However, “things happened very quickly,” said Teacher Su, and he thought Bulang villagers should learn how to “speak for our tea culture by ourselves” (*ziji shuo ziji de cha wenhua*) as soon as possible. As a result, he informed me that he was training a couple of young villagers to be the interpreters who would introduce Bulang tea culture and history at the worship ceremony on April 8.

“The more people are interested in our culture, the more we (Bulang people) need to speak our culture [by ourselves],” insisted by Teacher Su. According to him, the burgeoning tea production and market appreciation of ancient tree tea had focused increasing attention on the Bulang people’s traditions, especially those traditions closely related to tea. Unfortunately, he said, the revitalization of people’s interest in Bulang tea culture did not automatically translate to an ability to promote tea culture themselves. He said that, for example, the increasing number of publications, including academic reports, travelogues, and articles in tea magazines, devoted to Bulang tea culture were written primarily by non-Bulang authors. As a result, “the more I read, the more mistakes I find.” His frustration made him more aware of the need for Bulang villagers in Mangjing to speak about their culture themselves. Teacher Su regarded the April 8 ceremony as an opportunity to do that.

“Why not promote Bulang tea culture by letting visitors go up to the altar on Aileng Mountain [on April 8]?” I asked Teacher Su, since he did not view the worship on April 8, 2011 as fake, as many other villagers did. Teacher Su, being silent for seconds after drinking a cup of ancient tree tea, then affirmed, “We [Bulang people] need our ‘interpretation right’ (*huayu quan*).” He explained that this interpretation right should be regarded critical to Bulang villagers,

allowing them to speak about their own tea culture. In Teacher Su's opinion, by cancelling, or more accurately, by prohibiting outside visitors from participating in the ritual of going to the altar for the worship ceremony on April 8, the Bulang people would lose their interpretation right. Still, Teacher Su disagreed with the government's order that moved the worshipping date ahead. "We would like to tell all the visitors, including the government officials, that we (Bulang people) only go to the altar on the date calculated by the Dai Calendar," said Teacher Su. He asserted again that promoting Bulang tea culture did not mean altering their traditions, particularly their religious tea ceremonies.

Teacher Su, then, further addressed the importance of training Bulang interpreters to introduce the Bulang tea culture to visitors on April 8. He repeated that it would be an opportunity for the Bulang interpreters to express their own culture for visitors. In fact, Teacher Su informed me that he had asked all the interpreters to highlight the need to go up to the altar to worship the Tea Ancestor. The purpose was to inform visitors of the correct date of holding the ritual. In other words, for Teacher Su, it was an opportunity for Bulang villagers to speak up about their own culture by showing and explaining to visitors why they would not head to the altar for the worship ceremony on April 8. Even though it could be that not all the visitors would remember what the Bulang interpreters said, Teacher Su still believed that their decision to reject going up to the altar on April 8 would demonstrate their collective will to sustain their tradition of Tea Ancestor Worship.

"Does the county government know that there will be no ritual at the altar on April 8?" I asked. After a moment of silence, Teacher Su responded to me without directly answering my question. Instead, he said that he felt situated in a dilemma (*hen maodun*) between the government and the villagers. He said upon his return to Mangjing, the government was very

supportive, granting him a piece of land on which to build the shrine of *Pia Ai Leng*. In 2003, the government also helped him to reinstitute the yearly Tea Ancestor Worship, which had been lost at least since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Teacher Su thought that the burgeoning market for Pu'er tea had led the government to pay much more attention to the Bulang people, one of the minority ethnicities in China. He also felt that Bulang villagers should be grateful for all the assistance the government provided.

The government, however, had made many villagers unhappy by changing the worship date. Teacher Su reported that many had asked him to reject the government's order. Nevertheless, as the leading figure in charge of the yearly Tea Ancestor Worship, he sought a compromise between the government's order and the Bulang villagers' protest. Instead of being trapped in the dilemma, Teacher Su instead felt obligated to find a "combination between tea industry and tea culture" (*cha chanye yu cha wenhua de jiehe*). He argued that the Bulang villagers should realize that without government support, the Bulang tea culture would still not be publicized or understood.<sup>84</sup> In other words, Teacher Su thought Bulang villagers would still need to cooperate with the government to promote both their tea industry and tea culture. He said that he had convinced most of the villagers to participate in the ceremony held on April 8. He then reiterated his argument that the Bulang people had an interpretation right to narrate their tea culture. He regarded the ceremony on April 8 as the initial step in the Bulang villagers' quest to find the right balance in a "combination between tea industry and tea culture." On the one hand, Teacher Su felt that Bulang villagers would promote their culture on April 8; on the other hand,

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<sup>84</sup> During the conversation about the government's decision to move the date for the worship ceremony up, I sensed that Teacher Su became more cautious about how to respond to my questions. It seemed to me that he was cautious because he did not want to say something "bad" about the government, especially the county government. Throughout our conversation, Teacher Su emphasized that the Chinese government, from the township and county-government level to the provincial and central government, had been supportive in the revitalization of Bulang tea culture.

they would still sustain their tradition by refraining from going to the altar to worship *Pia Ai Leng* on the wrong date. Teacher Su concluded that the outsiders, including the government officials, needed a better understanding of Bulang tea culture, while at the same time Bulang villagers needed to better express their own culture independently.

As I was leaving, Teacher Su informed me that villagers would soon begin decorating the shrine for both the ceremony on April 8 and the Shankang Tea Ancestor Festival (*shankang chazu jie*) from April 13 to 16, 2011. He said that I was welcome to come to the shrine and join the decorating activities. He also said that he was collecting the “tea of tea spirit” (*chahun cha*) from every household in Mangjing for the decorations, explaining that the “tea of tea spirit” was the most important offering in the worship of the *Pia Ai Leng* shrine. To make the “tea of tea spirit,” every household had to collect the tea leaves from their “tree of tea spirit” (*chahun shu*), which was the biggest or oldest tree among the ancient tea trees belonging to each household. Teacher Su wanted me to know that the “tea of tea spirit” was considered the best ancient tree tea in Mangjing, because it was made exclusively from the trees of tea spirit in the ancient tea forest. It was “treasure of the treasures” (*baozhong zhi bao*), he said.

### **6.3 Between Buddha and *Pia Ai Leng*: The Combination between the “Shankang Festival” (*Shangkang Jie*) and the “Tea Ancestor Festival” (*Chazu Jie*)**

“It’s such a rush to make my ‘tea of tea spirit’ now,” Yaoni complained. This was true for many villagers, who felt pressured to make their “tea of tea spirit.” There were two main reasons for the stress. First, as mentioned above, the ancient tea trees in Mangjing, especially those on Aileng Mountain, had suffered from a serious worm infestation this year, and many villagers still

did not have quality tea leaves from their trees of tea spirit to produce the tea. Second, the worship ceremony in the shrine of *Pia Ai Leng* had been moved up eight days, so many villagers had a shorter period to prepare their teas of tea spirit as the offerings. In other words, the shortage of good quality tea leaves and the shorter time for preparation had put most villagers in a difficult situation as they attempted to make their teas of tea spirit. Many villagers, including Yaoni, thought the county government had been inconsiderate in forcing the villagers to move up the date for their *Pia Ai Leng* worship.

“They said only the ‘Tea Ancestor Festival’” will be moved, not our ‘Shankang Festival,’” said Yaoni, emphasizing the two different festivals. He explained that many people from outside Mangjing thought the Shankang Tea Ancestor Festival was one festival. However, according to Yaoni, it was in fact two separate festivals that were connected. Typically, the Shankang Tea Ancestor Festival lasted for four days. The first three days, Yaoni told me, were the Shankang Festival and the fourth day was the Tea Ancestor Festival. The Shankang Festival, Yaoni said, was like the Bulang people’s celebration of the New Year. The Tea Ancestor Festival, was specifically for the Bulang people to honor and worship their ancestor, *Pia Ai Leng*. Therefore, what would be held on April 8, 2011 was only part of the Tea Ancestor Festival, and did not include the Shankang Festival. Bulang villagers would still celebrate their New Year during the Shankang Festival from April 13 to 15. As Yaoni and several other Bulang villagers told me, Bulang people used to worship Buddha and *Pia Ai Leng* together during the Shankang Festival. Starting in 2005, the villagers, led by Teacher Su, had recovered the Tea Ancestor Festival to specifically worship *Pia Ai Leng*. In other words, as Yaoni said, Bulang villagers currently worshipped Buddha in the Shankang Festival and *Pia Ai Leng* in the Tea Ancestor

Festival. Nevertheless, these two festivals were connected by taking place over a consecutive four days.

In Yaoni's opinion, the Tea Ancestor Festival should remain connected with the Shankang Festival, because Bulang villagers used to worship Buddha and *Pia Ai Leng* together. "It is our tradition," said Yaoni. As a result, moving the Tea Ancestor Festival ahead, for many villagers, officially broke their tradition, regardless of the fact that the Tea Ancestor Festival was only recovered in 2005. Also critical was that many villagers still lacked good-quality tea leaves to make the "tea of tea spirit." Yaoni said that every Bulang villager hoped to prepare the best tea for both Buddha and their ancestor, *Pia Ai Leng*. Nevertheless, the "tea of tea spirit," for Yaoni, also represented the best ancient tree tea in all of Mangjing. He said, "if we (Bulang villagers) cannot produce the best quality of 'tea of tea spirit,' we ruin the fame of Mangjing tea." It turned out that the tea was not just an offering in the worship of Buddha and *Pia Ai Leng*, but was also a tea product for sale. According to Yaoni, every year the tea offering would be made into the "memorial tea cakes" (*jinian bing*) and sold in the market. Teacher Su was responsible for their production, promotion, and sale at the festival. Every household, according to Yaoni, would receive part of the proceeds from selling the tea cakes, as long as the household had contributed its "tea of tea spirit" as an offering. Yaoni informed me that every year people from outside Mangjing would come and purchase the tea cakes, which were "blessed by Buddha and *Pia Ai Leng*." Yaoni felt that the outsiders were more interested in the memorial tea cakes than in the Bulang people's tradition, so they did not care which date was the correct for holding the ritual.

Figure 6.8. The altar and the totems of tea at the square in front of the Shrine of *Pia Ai Leng* (photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



On the day before April 8, I went to the Shrine of *Pia Ai Leng*. Teacher Su and many other Bulang villagers were there preparing for the worship on April 8. As I arrived, Teacher Su was busy teaching several young Bulang villagers to correctly and dramatically hit the big drum hung outside the shrine. Many other villagers were busy decorating the altar located in the middle of the square in front of the shrine. In the center of the altar were tall totems of tea (Figure 6.8, above), where villagers were decorating with things like ribbons, flowers, and banana leaves. I walked across the square to go inside the shrine, where a golden statue of *Pia Ai Leng* was located. Next to the statue was another statue, this one of the *Seventh Princess*



(*qigongzhu*). In front of the two statues were boxes of the teas of tea spirit, purportedly contributed by every household in Mangjing. Between the boxes of “tea of tea spirit” and the two statues were strings, which attached the tea, *Pia Ai Leng*, and the *Seventh Princess* (Figure 6.9) to each other. On the right-hand side, inside the shrine, was a statue of Buddha (Figure 6.10), in a golden color similar to the statues of *Pia Ai Leng* and the *Seventh Princess*. As I walked around inside the shrine, a young lady with a bright-pink Bulang costume approached. The young girl, named Xiaohe, was one of the Bulang interpreters trained by Teacher Su. Xiaohe said she had seen me the other day, and was happy to give me a tour to relate the story of *Pia Ai Leng*.

Figure 6.9. The statues of *Pia Ai Leng* (on the right) and the *Seventh Princess* inside the shrine, which were attached to the boxes of the “tea of tea spirit” on the ground. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).





Figure 6.10. The statue of Buddha inside the shrine. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Xiaohe was one of the interpreters who were on duty to act as the “on-site tour guide” for the visitors who arrived early to participate in the worship on April 8. She first led me outside the shrine to see the paintings on its walls. A total of 22 paintings, including one with the words

of “Wishes of *Pia Ai Leng*,” were on the wall. The paintings described Bulang tea history based on the legends of *Pia Ai Leng* and the *Seventh Princess*, including how *Pia Ai Leng* discovered tea and then taught the Bulang people to plant it around the mountains where the Bulang people resided (Figure 6.11, below). The story concluded with a painting depicting the historical moment in 1951 when the alleged last Bulang tribal head, Su Liya, contributed Mangjing’s ancient tree tea to Beijing for Chairman Mao, the founding father of the People’s Republic of China (Figure 6.12, below). Xiaohe described through every painting on the wall. To my surprise, she was fluent in the story behind each painting, though she said she had never been a professional interpreter before. She ended her tour on the painting of Su Liya’s trip to Beijing in 1951. She said that Bulang villagers in Manjing were now participating in boosting the frontier economy through tea production. More importantly, she emphasized, the Bulang villagers were also responsible for revitalizing the frontier tea culture, which is the origin of the tea culture of China and of the world.

Upon stepping inside the shrine, Xiaohe explained to me that the shrine had been the religious center Mangjing. She told me that according to many old villagers, Mangjing used to have a shrine of Buddha, which was destroyed in China’s Cultural Revolution in the early 1970s. Xiaohe then said that elderly visitors to the shrine were happy now, because they could not only worship *Pia Ai Leng* and the *Seventh Princess*, but also Buddha. Back inside the shrine, she pointed out a scene of two spectacular statues of *Pia Ai Leng* and the *Seventh Princess*. She then pointed to the boxes of the “tea of tea spirit” on the ground, and said that every year Bulang villagers would make the tea as the best offering to worship *Pia Ai Leng*, the *Seventh Princess*, and Buddha. She then pointed to the strings that attached the tea to the two statues. According to Xiaohe, the strings played a role in transmitting villagers’ honors to *Pia Ai Leng* through tea.

Villagers also believed that *Pia Ai Leng*'s goodwill and blessings would be transmitted to the tea, and then to all the villagers who had contributed their tea. Most importantly, Xiaohe said, the strings did not just attach Bulang villagers to *Pia Ai Leng*, but also attached every Bulang villager to each other, demonstrating that Bulang people were an indivisible group of people. In addition, she emphasized that all Bulang villagers were blessed by *Pia Ai Leng* and benefitted from tea, regardless of the differences between rich and poor, healthy and sick, young and old, men and women, and between villagers who travelled outside and those who lived in Mangjing.

Figure 6.11. Paintings describing the Bulang tea history on the wall of the shrine. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).





Figure 6.12. The painting of Su Liya's trip to Beijing to contribute tea for Chairman Mao. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



Upon completing her “interpretation tour” with me, Xiaohe invited me to participate in the Shankang Festival. She informed me that their traditional New Year would start in the early morning on April 13, 2011. The first critical ritual for every villager was to “clean up the Buddha” (*Xi Fo*). “How do Bulang people celebrate New Year with *Pia Ai Leng* and the *Seventh Princess*?” I asked. She responded that the Bulang people used to worship *Pia Ai Leng* and the

*Seventh Princess* on the last day of the Shankang Festival.<sup>85</sup> On New Year's Day, according to Xiaohe, Bulang villagers would not only clean up the Buddha, but also clean up the statues of *Pia Ai Leng* and the *Seventh Princess*. They would specifically worship *Pia Ai Leng* on the fourth day of the Shankang Festival.<sup>86</sup> However, Xiaohe explained that this year the worship day for *Pia Ai Leng* was moved up to April 8, in order to cooperate with the county government's plans to promote tourism. She then said that Bulang villagers were grateful to have the government's support in promoting their tea industry and tourism development. After the interpretation tour, Xiaohe invited me to sit outside the shrine to have a cup of the "tea of tea spirit." She informed me that on April 8, there would be a booth outside the shrine specifically for the sale of the tea. Again, she emphasized that the tea was made by the best tea leaves of the ancient tea trees, and was blessed by both Buddha and *Pia Ai Leng*.

At about 2 p.m. on April 8, I returned to the shrine. Many villagers had arrived with their traditional Bulang costumes. One the traditional male black costumes had a symbol of tea sewn on the back (Figure 6.13, below). Villagers gathered to rehearse the worship ritual around the altar in the middle of the square. I was informed by one villager that there would be a big group of visitors coming at 4 p.m., and that they would start the ritual after the arrival of the group of visitors. I then saw Kangnan, the village cadre. According to him, April 8, 2011 had been officially designated as the "pre-opening" (*shikaiyuan*) for the Jingmai-Mangjing Thousand-Year Arboretum of Ten-Thousand-*Mu* of Ancient Tea Trees.<sup>87</sup> Kangnan reported that the government

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<sup>85</sup> Here Xiaohe did not really distinguish the Tea Ancestor Festival from the Shankang Festival. In fact, most of the villagers, like Xiaohe, did not distinguish the two. Villagers in Mangjing typically just called it the Shankang Festival, and referred to the worship day for *Pia Ai Leng* as the "last day" of Shankang Festival. Nevertheless, as mentioned by Teacher Su and some other villagers, the worship day for *Pia Ai Leng* was actually not the last day of the Shankang Festival, but of an independent festival called the Tea Ancestor Festival, which would occur on the day after the Shankang Festival.

<sup>86</sup> See note 10.

<sup>87</sup> In Mandarin Chinese, "*Jingmai-Manjing Qiannian Wanmu Guchayuan.*"

intended to make the area of ancient tea trees in both Jingmai and Mangjing a world heritage site, and also intended to develop it as a major tourist attraction in Yunnan Province. Ideally, Kangnan said, the worshipping ritual for *Pia Ai Leng* would become the ceremony that would attract outsiders to Mangjing. “You may need to buy a ticket to get in next time,” said Kangnan to me, laughing.

Figure 6.13. A Bulang man wearing his traditional costume with a symbol of tea sewn on the back. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).





Figure 6.14. Bulang villagers and visitors during the Tea Ancestor Worship ceremony. (Photograph by Po-Yi Hung).



The group of visitors arrived late at around 5 p.m. The Bulang villagers welcomed them by lining up on both sides of the route leading to the altar in front of the shrine. After arriving at the square where the altar was located, the visitors were seated at tables arranged on the sides of the square outside the shrine. They began eating while Kangnan, who was in the middle of the square, welcomed them. After Kangnan's speech, Teacher Su announced the beginning of the Tea Ancestor Worship. Many of the visitors rushed to the altar with their cameras to shoot the ceremony, while others remained seated to continue eating and drinking, not paying attention to the ritual. The Bulang villagers soon chanted and danced around the tea totem and the altar,

surrounded by the cameras' clipping sounds and dazzling flashes, and by the substantial noise from the visitors (Figure 6.14, above).

#### **6.4 Conclusion: Renovation of Rituals and the Re-Articulation of Bulang Identity through the Market Economy of Tea**

On April 13, 2011, the first day of the Shankang Festival, I returned to the shrine to participate in the ritual of cleaning the Buddha. I arrived around 8 a.m. and many old villagers, including men and women, were already there to clean the three statues in the shrine, including *Pia Ai Leng*, the *Seventh Princess*, and the Buddha. They used cloths rinsed with water to mop the dust off of the statues. After the cleanup, villagers, mostly from the older generation, started gathering and sitting on the floor in front of the Buddha. Next to the Buddha was the old man who had earlier recited the sutra of Hinayana Buddhism written in the Dai language during the Worm Worship. Again, he held the thick sutra in his hands and recited page by page to honor Buddha and the first day of Bulang villagers' New Year. During the sutra recitation, everyone held a lit candle, and would light another candle when the fire died out. Each household had also prepared a different "treat" to share with the other participants at the shrine, including rice cakes, candies, and cigarettes.

I sat down near a middle-aged Bulang woman, who then lit a candle for me. Villagers continued to arrive for the sutra recitation; eventually they were sitting in every corner of the shrine, including the space near the statues and the boxes of tea. I was informed by several villagers that most of the young people were busy harvesting tea leaves so could not attend the cleanup ritual in person. The middle-aged woman sitting next to me said the fresh tea leaves had



bloomed quickly and profusely after the Worm Worship ceremony in early April. She reassured me that the participants would light candles for every villager who could not be in the shrine. She pointed to the boxes of the “tea of tea spirit” and said confidently that the Buddha would still feel every villager’s wishes through our tea.

In this chapter, I specifically investigated the relationship between tea production and Bulang villagers’ rituals. Instead of looking at how the rituals have been invented through the development of tea production, I highlighted the perception of how the rituals have incorporated new meanings because of tea production. As with the Worm Worship ceremony, Bulang villagers, by participating in the ritual, constructed their awareness of market risks and market connections through their reconsideration of the relationships between caterpillars, the trees of tea spirit, and the mountain spirit. The Tea Ancestor Worship demonstrates that Bulang villagers have struggled to incorporate their traditional rituals into the promotion of the tea for the market. It should be noted that their collective belief in the mountain spirit, their tea ancestor *Pia Ai Leng*, and the Buddha, no matter what new meanings have been incorporated into the rituals, have not changed.

Bulang people’s pivotal belief, in fact, has been that, through tea, they retain the essential power to rearticulate themselves as Bulang. As with the Tea Ancestor Worship, Bulang villagers sought the “interpretation right” to communicate their own understandings of Bulang tea culture to outsiders. Additionally, despite of the fact that the social order has changed for different groups of villagers (see the discussion in the chapter on hierarchy), the Bulang villagers still believed that, regardless of their social status, they were blessed by their ancestor and by Buddha through the ritual offerings of “tea of tea spirit.” As expressed by the middle-aged woman inside the shrine, the lighting of candles for the villagers who were absent from the sutra recitation

demonstrated that Bulang villagers were united, and were all blessed by Buddha and *Pia Ai Leng*, who would “feel” everyone through the “tea of tea spirit.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **Conclusion: Production of Ancientness as a Dynamic Scenario for Making a Frontier Tea Place**

The tea story of Mangjing is ongoing and incomplete. Kangnan, one of the village officials, reported recently that since I left in May 2011, the prefectural government of Pu'er City, as well as the provincial government of Yunnan, is planning to submit an application to UNESCO to make the ancient tea forest around Mangjing an internationally recognized world heritage site. He also said that Mangjing was undergoing a new round of construction meant to support tourism. In order for tourism-development plans to succeed, according to Kangnan, "their (Bulang villagers') culture has to be well-preserved." Mangjing was one of the places where the authentic tradition of Bulang culture needed to be thoroughly preserved. One of the natural villages of Mangjing, Wengji, was in the process of recovering Bulang villagers' traditional houses. As part of the process, villagers in Wengji had been asked to phase out all the modern-looking exterior features of their houses, and could only renovate or modernize the interior of their houses.

In addition to the projects to develop tourism, Mangjing had attracted attention from some international organizations. For example, he reported that he has been involved in the development of a "cooperative society" (*hezuoshe*) among Bulang villagers, which is supported by the Ford Foundation as poverty alleviation for rural China. With Ford Foundation's support, Kangnan had initiated the cooperative society, called "A-Baila," meaning "the best tea left by the Bulang ancestors." Kangnan said that his initiation of the A-Baila Cooperative Society was also supported by the Solidaridad Network, a foundation based in the Netherlands with the goal of

making markets work for the poor worldwide. Kangnan had high hopes for the A-Baila Cooperative Society. He fervently believed that it was only through a cooperative society among villagers that the profits earned from tea production be evenly distributed to every villager in Mangjing. However, he also admitted that he had a long way to go to make A-Baila a renowned market brand of ancient tree tea. In the meantime, he was happy to have the support of international organizations like the Ford Foundation and the Solidaridad Network for A-Baila. With the support, Kangnan surmised, A-Baila would soon receive the organic certification recognized internationally, and then could “step out from Mangjing” (*cong Mangjing zouchuqu*) into the outside competitive tea market.

Despite his faith in the development of the cooperative society in Mangjing, Kangnan said that “sometimes I feel the dilemma inside me” (*youshi ganjue hen maodun*) when promoting the tea production development initiatives in Mangjing. On the one hand, Kangnan, as a communist and village official, had the responsibility delegated by the Communist Party to gain outside support for improving tea production. On the other hand, Kangnan, while appreciating the outside assistance, felt that Bulang villagers had gradually lost control of their ancient tea trees. Kangnan further said that Bulang villagers welcomed any outside people, including tea entrepreneurs and international organizations, who came to Mangjing to assist them with their tea development. He felt that most outside people, however, did not really understand the Bulang people’s tradition and culture, and therefore disrespected it. “They don’t know what we really want and hurt our dignity,” he claimed.

Kangnan’s words epitomized the developmental dilemma on China’s southwest frontier. While “development” (*fazhan*) has been the politically correct term for addressing the future of southwest China, in practice, the process of development has led to the confrontation of a series

of dilemmas. These dilemmas, as materialized through the tea production in Mangjing, have pulled between the preservation of the old and the creation of the new. In Mangjing, the incompatible desires have been the pulling forces between sustaining political control over the frontier territory and boosting the market economy by devolution of property rights. Also, they have represented the simultaneous desires of both raising Bulang villagers' standard of living and degrading their social status. For Bulang villagers, their dilemmas have been the incompatible desires for both outside assistance in tea production and the independent control over their ancient tea trees.

Dilemmas, however, have not stopped people from taking action on the frontier. The state has used the ideology of *suzhi* to transform state control of the general population into a moral standard of self-governance that boosts the market economy. *Suzhi* has thus become a discursive power for outside tea entrepreneurs, and in general for the social majority of Han Chinese, to improve Bulang villagers' processing techniques in tea production without leveling their status in the social order as China's minority nationalities. Although the *suzhi* discourse has been institutionalized, Bulang villagers have also reproduced their own moral standards related to the treatment of their ancient tea forest, and have renovated their tea rituals to re-articulate their relationship to the ancient tea trees.

The emerging incompatible desires, the new moral standards, and the renovation of tea cultures represent a situated place-making process to reconstruct Mangjing as a frontier. Mangjing has been a frontier struggling for its connection to the global market economy at China's southwest border. People in Mangjing, including the government officials, the tea entrepreneurs, and the Bulang villagers, have created situated assemblages among tradition, modernity, nature, and science through their confrontations with and reactions to their

developmental dilemmas related to tea production. As materialized through landscape transformations, the dilemmas have become shifting assemblages between tradition and modernity as well as between natural preservation and economic development. Furthermore, current efforts to develop tourism in Mangjing, and the planned application to become a UNESCO World Heritage site, have led to a new round of situated assemblages that result from the dilemma between “development” and “heritage” and that have just emerged. Place making on China’s frontier has been an ongoing process assembling different elements within different sets of dilemmas.

In the preceding chapters, I have used my ethnographic data to provide some perspective on the economic relations, social lives, and cultural practices of tea, the ancient tree tea specifically, from and on China’s southwest frontier. I have portrayed them as a rich, complex, and even messy scenario representing an actual place-making process at the juncture between an authoritative state power and the market. In other words, the actual place-making process, I argue, has never been a well-defined, given, or straightforward project, but a confrontation of the dilemmas of development. Throughout the dissertation, I have discussed the dilemmas along three threads: incompatible desires, changing moralities, and cultural renovations. These three threads, I argue, demonstrate that place, as China’s southwest frontier, has been forged through the ongoing and contingent assemblages of disparate human actors and nonhuman elements. Below I expand on the relationship between assemblage and place with the theme of developmental dilemmas.

## 7.1 Place Making as a Complex Process with Dilemmas for Development

While place seems to lose its significance when tied to development, because of the increasing “placeless” flow of ideas, goods, and people, human geographers have demonstrated that place still plays a critical role in the seemingly placeless world of development. As human geographers, explicitly or implicitly, attempt to claim a constant local agency within place as a countering force toward the neoliberal development trend, they risk understanding place as no more than a formation of local resistance. As a result, place making has been simplified to refer to territorial struggles or social movements that defend local difference or identity against the seemingly universalized ideology and practice of development.

In considering China’s southwest frontier as a place, my study shows that place has not always been the agent in resisting universalized development. Instead, place making has been an inconsistent process with dilemmas. The dilemmas have derived from the simultaneous but incompatible desires to both defend local difference against the control of the dominant market and to brand local difference for outside markets. As shown in the tea production process in Mangjing, for ancient tree tea in particular, people, including local officials, outside tea entrepreneurs, and Bulang villagers, all confronted dilemmas in frontier tea production. For government officials and tea entrepreneurs, Mangjing, and China’s southwest frontier in general, have been a frontier place that is continually in need of development, particularly for tea production, to improve the living standards and to level the overall “*suzhi*” of the minority nationalities. On the other hand, these government officials and tea entrepreneurs have at the same time viewed Mangjing as a frontier place that should be kept underdeveloped in order to

retain its primitive nature and local tradition to sustain the “ancientness” of frontier tea production.

For the villagers in Mangjing, who are mostly Bulang, their dilemmas result from their simultaneous desires to position themselves in both a developed and an underdeveloped Mangjing. Tea production demonstrates that, on the one hand, they have been eager to advance Mangjing as a modernized tea-production place with the latest processing techniques and marketing strategies. On the other hand, they have also been eager to preserve Mangjing as a reservoir of Bulang ancestors’ wisdom in producing authentic ancient tree tea according to their long-lasting traditions. As a result, place making, as demonstrated in Mangjing, has been a process that involves different sets of incompatible desires from different groups of people. These incompatible desires have then produced dilemmas, which consequently become a major mechanism to push different actors to take actions, contingently, in constructing and reconstructing their place. The different actors, including government officials, tea entrepreneurs, and Bulang villagers, in fact have not had a clear and straightforward idea or plan regarding how to make Mangjing a frontier place for tea production. Rather, they have been situated in their dilemmas, which led them to act in the context of both state intervention and the market demand for tea.

What I want to stress is that we need to pay more attention to the complexity of dilemmas, rather than to assume either resistance or collaboration, in order to flesh out the actual configuration of a place. On China’s southwest frontier, tea has been the main cash crop for development. But the focus on southwest China, or more specifically Yunnan, as a place to connect to the tea market has not been well planned. Rather, Yunnan as a “tea place” has been constructed through the rich, or even messy, conflicts, negotiations, and compromises that reflect



different actors' incompatible desires and the dilemmas between modernization and tradition. As exemplified in the construction and reconstruction of different tea landscapes in Mangjing, the shifting meanings among terrace tea gardens, ecological tea gardens, and ancient tea forests have revealed the dilemmas between moving forward to a more modernized scientific method of tea production and going backward to remove the modern elements from traditional and natural methods of production. As a result, Mangjing, as a frontier "tea place," has been made and remade through the assemblages among modernity, tradition, science, and nature.

To rethink place as an analytic tool for analyzing the process of development, we should examine the ways people confront their development dilemmas. We should also analyze the processes by which human actors and nonhuman elements assemble, disassemble, and reassemble to form and define a place based on their incompatible desires within the dilemmas. To be sure, addressing development dilemmas need not confine us to the binary opposition between, for example, modernity and tradition or between culture and nature. Instead, I examine the coherence (or incoherence) of assemblages that result from the incompatible desires inherent in dilemmas. In other words, I argue that place as assemblage does not come from random connections among disparate elements. Rather, the disparate elements of place making, be they coherent or incoherent, have been assembled and reassembled under the umbrella of incompatible development desires.

In Mangjing, people's incompatible development desires have been oriented on making Mangjing a frontier "tea place." The changing relationships between the ancient tea forest, Cai, and the Bulang villagers exemplify the scenario. Before Cai monopolized usage rights to ancient tea trees in 2003, both the government officials and the Bulang villagers considered the ancient tea forest a symbol of backward tea production. This led them to turn the ancient tea forest into

terrace tea gardens to modernize tea production and develop the tea industry in Mangjing. After Cai's successful promotion of the ancient tree tea of Mangjing, however, the ancient tea forest quickly became a valuable resource to government officials and to Bulang villagers. The county government signed a fifty-year exclusive contract with Cai to lease the usage rights to ancient tea trees, which was the impetus for the ancient tea forest to become a cultural symbol to Bulang villagers as they sought to re-articulate their "tea history" with the forest. Bulang villagers also used the ancient tea forest as a cultural and historical force to resist Cai's monopolization of the ancient tea trees and to further claim Mangjing as the Bulang people's tea place. Adding to the complexity, Bulang villagers have ironically chosen to continue collaborating with Cai in order to see that their ancient tea products reach the high-end organic market.

In addition, the emerging organic, so-called high-end market for tea, has led the government to dub the ancient tea forest, not a symbol of backward production, but an advanced organic production method, relying on the Bulang villagers' tradition to balance the relationship between tea production and natural protection. The ancient tea forest, thus, has been assembled and reassembled with different meanings to define Mangjing as a place for tea production, but the assemblage processes have never involved more than the incompatible desires of each group. As seen in the Bulang villagers' changing relations with Cai, their dilemmas have resulted from their incompatible desire for both modernization and tradition as well as for both resistance and collaboration with Cai. Mangjing as a "tea place" in the shifting meaning of the ancient tea forest has been made and remade through these incoherent assemblages of modernity and tradition and of resistance and collaboration.

Place, as assemblage, has been made with few persistent and coherent elements because of the incompatible desires within the development dilemmas. In other words, the incoherence of

assemblage in making a place has been temporary, and the disassembling and reassembling processes are continual. However, in addressing the situated shifting assemblages of a place, we should not ignore the broader, structured force behind the disassembling and reassembling processes. The market, I argue, has been one of the forces that orient the shifting assemblages in place making. Simply put, confronting the dilemmas associated with development, people have acted based on changing market demand in reassembling otherwise incoherent elements to define a place. The shift in market demand for ancient tree tea demonstrates the scenario.

As described above, ancient tea leaves were originally regarded by tea merchants and consumers as the poorest material with which to produce tea. The landscape of the ancient tea forest was also felt to symbolize a backward frontier in terms of tea production. Before the crash of Yunnan's Pu'er tea market in 2007, the demand was primarily for terrace tea but not for ancient tree tea. In Mangjing, specifically, the true value of ancient tea trees was not recognized until Cai signed the fifty-year contract with the county government. In fact, ancient tea trees had been removed and replaced with terrace tea plantations in order to improve the efficiency of tea production. After the ancient tree tea gained recognition in the tea market, and particularly after the market for the tea crashed in 2007, people in Mangjing have been eager to transform their terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens.

Mangjing residents have engaged in restoring the missing ancient tea trees in order to recover the traditional method of tea production to meet the growing demand for organic tea. The ancient tea trees, in particular, have been assembled, disassembled, and then reassembled to match each type of tea-production practice. It should be noted that these changing scenarios all occurred in the short span of a decade, from the early 2000s to the early 2010s. While assemblage emphasized the temporary connections among these coherent and incoherent

elements, market forces deriving from the demand for tea has been the consistent influence in defining Mangjing as a frontier tea place.

While market demand has played a pivotal role in assembling and reassembling disparate elements to define Mangjing as a frontier tea place, the power of the state has never been withdrawn. Instead, I argue that the tea story in Mangjing demonstrates that the power of the Chinese state has been *reworked* (Sigley 2006) through changing moralities, based on the discourse of *suzhi*. Two dimensions of the discourse have established the means by which the Chinese state has reworked its power for the market economy. First, as in Mangjing, villagers have viewed *suzhi* improvement as their own responsibility if they are to improve their tea production. In other words, as in anthropologist Tania Li's (2007b) words, *suzhi* has represented villagers' "will to improve" in order to forge a better connection between villager's tea production and market demand. In this way, the power of the Chinese state has been realized, not through direct power imposition, but through its effect on villagers' everyday practices of *suzhi* improvement for tea production.

New moral standards have thus emerged for *suzhi* improvement. For example, villagers, as discussed previously, have come to view the authenticity of ancient tea leaves as a new moral standard in doing tea business. The *suzhi* discourse continues to provide the Chinese state an avenue for its direct power intervention. Because the Chinese state has identified its southwest frontier and its minority nationalities, including the Bulang people, as having low *suzhi*, Mangjing and the Bulang villagers have had an ongoing need for the government's help to raise the level of their *suzhi* for tea production, and for economic development in general.

The ancient tea forest on China's southwest frontier has in fact never been truly ancient. Its ancientness, in other words, has never been static, but instead has referred to a superficial

physical form of the tea trees, symbolically and materially constituted through the dynamic interactions among the state, the market, and the people on the frontier. These interactions, I argue, have pushed us to rethink China's southwest frontier as a place of situated assemblages mobilized by the market economy of tea production.

## **7.2 Reconsideration of Assemblage and Place in Human Geography**

Place has been an analytic tool for human geographers to know and understand the world. However, different geographers have taken different approaches to the study of place. For example, while David Harvey (1996; 2000) has stressed place as a rooted unity to resist the broader global capital accumulation, Doreen Massey (1993; 1997) has put emphasis on the unbounded openness of a “global sense of place,” with place conceptualized as being shaped by an evolving and increasingly global constellation of relations. Although they have applied different approaches to study place, human geographers and other social scientists have more or less looked into place by looking at its connections to the flow of people, goods, and ideas. For example, anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2001) has argued that place has been configured through the shifting gathering of things, thoughts, and memories. Based on this theoretical trajectory, human geographers have increasingly understood place as an event marked by network and change, “rather than a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the authentic” (Cresswell 2004, 40).

Scholars have also considered the network and change of a place to understand frontier. Frontier, as a place, has never simply been a geographical corner or hinterland of a nation-state, but a site connected to the wider networks leading people and things in and out. Environmental

historian William Cronon's story about an Alaskan town called Kennecott provides a useful example. According to Cronon (1992), the boom and demise of Kennecott has been closely related to its connections to the global copper economy. In tracing of the development of the copper trade in Kennecott, Cronon establishes the need to pay attention to the constantly evolving socioeconomic and environmental networks of a frontier place. Following Cronon's model, I have taken place as my tool to analyze the symbolic and physical construction and reconstruction of China's southwest frontier, as represented through tea production in Mangjing.

With Cronon's work in mind, I argue that Mangjing, as China's frontier village, has been made and remade through the tea trade between the local Bulang villagers, the Chinese state, and outside tea entrepreneurs from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and from other locations in China. Cronon did not present his story as a theory, but I have chosen to look for a theoretical framework to think through my frontier tea story. Human geographers have increasingly used relational thinking to theorize place and its connections around the world. For example, geographers Neils Fold and Philip Hirsch (2009) have theorized the frontier of Southeast Asia as a relational, connected space, looking into the linkages of supra-local influences and processes in producing frontier. This trend toward theorizing place with its connections or networks has, however, made human geographers cautious about the erosion of place (Cresswell 2004). In other words, while connections, networks, and flows have become the dominant language in human geography, they have also resulted in an erasure of place (Dirlik 2001).

Human geographers have attempted to retheorize the significance of place within a world constituted more and more by networks and flows. For example, human geographers have advanced their research on the production of place through the "politics of scale" (Gibson-Graham 1996; Swyngedouw 1997). In addition, though applying a relational analysis in

understanding frontiers, Fold and Hirsch (2009: 95) have reminded us that relational analysis should be coupled with place-based analysis of the “continuing significance and legacy of frontiers in national development.” While acknowledging the significance of politics and scale and the imperative of combining relational thinking with place-based socioeconomic and environmental parameters, human geographers seem to take place as a unanimous unit. In doing so, we have risked losing our insight into place as it has been produced by incoherent agglomerations of both ephemeral and lasting elements through its continually evolving connections with others around the world. I argue that we should reconsider place, not just from the perspective of politics of scale or relational thinking, but also from the perspective of assemblage.

My frontier tea story has revealed that the increasing connections of people and things as well as the flow of ideas and meanings for tea production has never eroded, or even erased, Mangjing as a place. Instead, Mangjing, and China’s southwest frontier, has been made and remade as a frontier tea place through the shifting assemblages of tradition, modernity, nature, and science. I argue that assemblage provides human geographers a framework to think through how people and things have been put together, coherent and incoherent, to produce and reproduce a place. As such, I further argue that we should understand the process of place making as, in anthropologist Tania Li’s (2007a) words, “practices of assemblage.” I believe that my frontier tea story has shown that assemblage can provide a different lens with which to look into the relationships between government, the market, and place. Place has also helped us to think through the meaning of assemblage.

### **7.2.1 *Government, Assemblage, and Place***

I argue that to consider place and its connections without losing the significance of place, we should prioritize the relationships between government, assemblage, and place. Assemblage is not only a theoretical concept, but is also the practice of connecting diverse elements in a specific juncture of space and time. As Li (2007a, 264) says, “assemblage links directly to a practice, to assemble...Assemblage flags agency, the hard work required to draw heterogeneous elements together, forge connections between them and sustain these connections in the face of tension.” However, while flagging agency, Li (2007a, 266) asks a more critical question regarding pulling things together, or “how the elements of an assemblage are, in fact, assembled.” Li addresses this question in an investigation of the community forest management in Indonesia. With the case study, Li highlights the deficiency of the Foucauldian idea of governmentality, and considers practices of assemblage to be the complementary framework with which to study government.

Place, if understood from the perspective of a Foucauldian sense of governmentality, would belong in the framework of constructed subjectivities. However, the notion of constructed subjectivities seems to imply a seamless and smooth government technique in designating a specific meaning for place that has been internalized in people’s everyday lives. It must be acknowledged that governmentality provides a useful tool for understanding how the meanings of a place, associated with government technique, embed into the constructed subjectivities through people’s everyday lives. In other words, meanings of a place are performed, rather than coercively imposed, through the construction of subjectivities. As a result, the subject’s agency in place making is dispersed in the micro-practices of everyday lives, by which the disciplinary



power of government engineers the productive capacity of its subjects to produce the dominance and oppression of subjects themselves. As shown in the tea production of Mangjing, Bulang villagers have internalized the discourse of *suzhi* through their everyday practices of tea production. For Bulang villagers, improving their *suzhi* has meant improving their tea production in order to have access to the outside high-end tea market. For that, the Chinese state has designated Mangjing a frontier tea place, and the discourse of *suzhi* has become a technique of government to make Bulang villagers govern themselves through their will to improve local tea production.

Yet governmentality, I argue, has limits in understanding how subjects are mobilized by different ideas, or other forms of knowledge, to contest inscribed meanings of a place. Governmental intervention is not a smooth process by which to construct subjectivity of place. The contradictory effects of different interventions and the refractory populations can in fact result in the failure of government (Li 2007b). New forms of knowledge emerging from different groups of people can then step in to contest and compete for alternative ways to govern. This has been discussed in terms of the changing ownership of ancient tea trees in Mangjing. While the local government contracted out usage rights to Cai in the name of improving tea production in Mangjing, in the end the contract strengthened villagers' sense of property. Villagers resisted the legality of the contract and yet they retained their interpretation rights in order to explain their historical and cultural ownership of the ancient tea trees.

Gramsci's ideas of hegemony or organic intellectuals (Crehan 2002) have been proposed by scholars in order to compensate for deficiencies in the concept of governmentality, especially regarding contested ideologies resulting from failures of government (Moore 2005; Li 2007b). Gramsci's ideas of hegemony or organic intellectuals as mobilizing subjects for alternative

sociopolitical purposes have another critical shortcoming, however. Specifically, Gramsci presupposes a well-defined plan contained in the subjects' minds for implementing new thinking about governance. In terms of the relationship between place making and the constructed subjectivities, the well-defined plan of subjects implied in Gramsci's ideas does not in reality apply to most of the process of place making. As a result, the ideas provide a less useful framework for dealing with the messiness, contingency, and improvisation experienced by subjects as they identify, create, and practice new ideologies for governing. Assemblage, which stresses the simultaneity of both the systematic structure of governance and the unexpected connections between disparate discursive and material elements, is for this reason proposed below.

The assemblage of a systematic structure of governance and its unexpected connections have been illustrated in the cultural renovations to Bulang villagers' tea rituals. While villagers have practiced their traditional but organic production of ancient tree tea without using pesticides, there was a setback when a destructive worm infestation occurred. Villagers understood the worms to be the agent of their mountain spirit sent to punish their insufficient gratitude to the ancient tea trees. In response, they conducted a worm worship to feed the mountain spirit. The ritual also served as an occasion for villagers to understand what market risk could mean to them in light of their heavy reliance on the ancient tea trees to make their living. Here the so-called traditional and organic production of ancient tree tea has been the structured force to self-governance by prohibiting the use of pesticides. The worm infestation represented the unexpected event prompting villagers to form an assemblage based on the worms, the mountain spirit, the ancient tea trees, and market risk.

I argue that the constructed subjectivities of a place thus do not provide a simple way to explain the various forms of assemblage. Though complemented with Gramsci's ideas of hegemony or organic intellectuals, governmentality as a research framework is still deficient in its capacity to account for place as a contested locale where situated subjects "do the work of pulling together disparate elements without attributing to them a master-mind or a totalizing plan" (Li 2007a, 265). Place making is not realized by a totalizing plan, but is ambiguous; the situated subjects can pull diverse elements together to make a place according to the available resources at particular times. Assemblage therefore provides an analytic framework to understand place making.

### ***7.2.2 Dilemmas, Assemblage, and Place***

While assemblage provides a promising explanation of place as a mixture of incoherent elements, human geographers have been cautious about its vagueness and sloppiness in creating more confusion than clarification. As Paul Robbins and Brian Marks (2010, 191-192) put it, "Assemblage geographies as texts, presentations, and arguments will have to embrace their freeing explanatory innovations with an eye towards clarifying rather than obfuscating the points they wish to make." For that, I argue, while assemblage has provided a different explanatory lens through which to look at the process of place making, the investigation of place making, in turn, has also provided a path to think through the meaning of assemblage. More specifically, throughout my dissertation, I have argued that the construction of Mangjing as a frontier tea place has been realized through the different sets of dilemmas confronted by different groups of people at different times. Assemblage has been a useful theoretical tool to shed light on the

dilemmas in defining Mangjing as a frontier tea place. Meanwhile, the dilemmas themselves have also led us to think about assemblage from a more concrete perspective.

Dilemmas, I argue, resonated well with Deleuzian ideas about “twofold.” In the text of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) proposed multiple sets of twofold to conceptualize the idea of assemblage, including smooth/striated, network/hierarchy, rhizome/tree. Dovey (2010, 22) explained the twofold by asserting that “they co-exist in a mixture rather than a dialectic relation; they morph or fold into the other rather than respond to it.” By highlighting the concept of place-as-assemblage, Dovey (*ibid.*, 30, italics in original) argued that assemblage enables us “to see all places as embodying twofold concepts such as rhizome/tree, difference/identity, but also global/local and open/closed. Most importantly it enables us to encounter and understand the sense of place as an everyday experience rather than either an essentialized ‘*genius loci*’ or a myth.”

Echoing Dovey, I argue that assemblage is not constituted by random connections or agglomerations among disparate people and things. Rather, the meaning and materiality of assemblage have been forged through the existence of twofold. From the perspective of place making, twofold has been symbolized and materialized through the dilemmas of development. As a result, I argue that to articulate the relationship between place and assemblage, we need to directly address the formation and effectiveness of dilemmas. The creation of Mangjing as a frontier tea place has been mobilized by people as they have coped with their development dilemmas. The dilemmas between frontier as China’s national margin and frontier as China’s connected space, between tradition and modernity, and between primitiveness and civilization have produced shifting assemblages to define and redefine Mangjing. In other words, the practices of assemblage that connect disparate elements have been realized in confrontations

among different people as they confront dilemmas that occur in the development of Mangjing's tea production.

Over the past two decades, scholarship in a variety of fields, including geography, "has tended to deemphasize place and to highlight, on the contrary, movement, displacement, traveling, diaspora, migration, and so forth. Thus, there is a need for a corrective theory that neutralizes this erasure of place, the asymmetry that arises from giving far too much importance to 'the global' and far too little value to 'place'" (Escobar 2008, 7). I therefore argue that assemblage could be one of the approaches to reconsider, not only for its significance but also because of the changing character of place. I have stressed that we need to pay more attention to articulating the twofold of assemblage in looking at the dilemmas of making a place. I do not argue that twofold is the only concept for understanding assemblage. The meanings of twofold will have been concretely embodied if we think through place as an assemblage of development dilemmas. And assemblage has helped us to understand that place is the simultaneous mixture of dilemmas between openness and boundedness, and between change and permanence.

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## Appendix I

### Original Chinese of the Conventions on Protection and Usage of the Ancient Tea Arboretum in the Villager of Mangjing

#### 一、芒景村保护利用古茶园公约

千年万亩古茶园是布朗族祖先给后代留下的珍贵遗产。在全国乃至全世界都是唯一的，是中国茶城、普洱茶都的历史见证，是中华民族古茶文化的典范，是布朗人民的骄傲，具有致富奔小康的品牌效应。为加强古茶园的保护与管理，合理利用古茶资源，根据《中华人民共和国民族区域自治法》、《中华人民共和国森林法》、《澜沧拉祜族自治县自治条例》、《澜沧拉祜族自治县人大常委会关于保护景迈芒景古茶园的決定》等有关法律、法规，结合芒景实际，特制定本公约。

第一条 保护和管理好、利用好古茶资源是芒景布朗人民的神圣职责和义不容辞的光荣义务，每个布朗族公民都要把古茶园视为生命的一部份，视为中华民族的瑰宝，像保护自己的眼睛一样爱护古茶园。

第二条 布朗族农户对国家所分给的茶园无论面积有多少、方位在何处，拥有（科学）管理权；（规范化、标准）采摘权；无权砍伐茶园内任何一棵林木，包括已枯烂的林木和树根，保持古茶园的原始性、生态性。严禁在古茶园内使用化肥农药；严禁在古茶园内种植其他农作物；严禁在古茶园内乱扔垃圾和污染物；严禁在古茶园内猎捕野生动物；严禁毁灭性采摘等自杀行为。违者取消其管理权与采摘权。

第三条 任何组织（单位）和个人不经茶园主人同意，不得随意进入茶园内偷摘鲜叶、螃蟹脚、古茶籽。违者除没收其所采摘之鲜叶、螃蟹脚、茶籽外，加罚所采摘总价值三分之一的处罚金。

第四条 每一位布朗族村民都要自觉维护古茶的名声，为打造古茶品牌做出应有的贡献。以信誉诚信促销售，以高质量、高标准求高经济效益。严禁古茶、台地茶不分混拌采摘或将台地茶冒充成古茶卖的不良行为，违者处150%的罚金。

第五条 为确保芒景茶的纯真，维护芒景茶的名声，打造芒景茶的品牌，芒景境内的鲜叶不得往外流，外面的鲜叶也不得流进芒景。违者，除全部没收所拉运的鲜叶外，加罚拉运鲜叶总价值30%的处罚金。

第六条 芒景境内的布朗族村民可以到外村外相去收购干茶，但不得拉入芒景境内，更不得当成芒景茶去卖。违者，对拉入的干茶除全部没收外，加罚所拉入干茶总价值的50%处罚金；对把外村外乡的茶当成芒景茶去卖的人，一经发现，罚所卖干茶总价值的30%处罚金。

第七条 芒景境内布朗族村民，出售自己加工的干茶前，必须向村民委员会、古茶保护协会报告，由村民委员会、古茶保护协会出具证件后方可出售，否则不予以承认。

第八条 待条件成熟时，芒景村内干茶价格由村民代表大会根据市场情况进行讨论后统一核定，经核定后任何人不得自行升、降。违者视情况给予处罚。

第九条 芒景村任何一个村民，都有抵制、举报违约行为的权利与义务。对举报者，村民委员会、古茶保护协会给予保密，并给予重奖，奖励金额为所举报物质总价值的50%。

第十条 芒景布朗人欢迎国内外客商到芒景来买茶，与布朗人民共同为保护古茶园做出自己应有的贡献。

第十一条 为了更好地保护古茶原貌，古茶园内提倡挖塘种茶，严禁开挖种植沟，违者必须恢复原貌，每米种植沟给予10~30元的处罚。

第十二条 本公约由村民委员会、古茶保护协会负责解释。