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Tea Production, Land Use Politics, and Ethnic Minorities: Struggling Over Dilemmas in China's Southwest Frontier

By Po-yi Hung. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. xii + 205 pp. US$ 79.99. ISBN 978-1-137-49407-8.

"People ignore that I am the only legal collector of the ancient tea leaves of Jingmai Mountain" (p 38), a Taiwanese tea merchant with plantations in northern Thailand and customers in northern California told Po-yi Hung when they met in Mangjing in Yunnan. With Pu'er tea prices rising, the tea merchant had come to the village in China's southwest in 2003, solicited by the local county government. It granted him exclusive rights over the teas from the village's "ancient trees" for 50 years. But the attempt to monopolize the mountain did not stop villagers selling to other dealers. The price went up from 2–3 RMB per kg, before the merchant's arrival, to 140 RMB per kg in 2006. "Legality is a joke, money talks, this is China" (p 38), the merchant told Hung. In turn, villagers and local tea producers considered the contract that gave him a monopoly on tea purchases to be "illegal." In 2007, the bubble burst. Prices settled back at around 30 RMB per kg. The relationships among the Bulang villagers, the tea merchants, the county government, and the tea trees fluctuated with the rise and fall of the price of Pu'er tea on the global market. This is the compelling story Po-yi Hung tells in this book.

In the introduction, Hung discusses his subject in relation to theorization of "frontiers." I am unsure whether "frontier" is really useful here. After citing Frederick Turner, most of what Hung quotes from other scholars could apply to many places, whether or not they are frontiers in the Turnerite tradition. A more fitting theoretical context might be "bubble" commodities in countries undergoing rapid economic change. The obvious "frontierness" of this context is not in Jingcai Mountain's location, near where China meets Myanmar. The latter country is barely mentioned, and possibly irrelevant to the story. The more important interaction across social and spatial boundaries is between the poor ethnic-minority Bulang villagers on the one hand, and merchants from Taiwan and China's prosperous eastern cities on the other. Minus the ethnic dimension, which is not a major theme in most of this book, this sort of interaction is a feature of many places in China.

The perspectives of the outsider tea merchant and the villagers are different in many ways. In the Taiwanese merchant's telling, he taught the villagers the real value of the trees, from which they also "developed a much stronger sense of property" (p 49) and the ecological sense to protect the trees. All the tea merchants from outside the area consider the locals to be of low "quality" (*suzhi*). Despite their social distance from the tea merchants and state officials, the locals appear to have internalized the discourses of *suzhi* developed by the state and the merchants. Lower-status villagers explain their low status by reference to low *suzhi*. In this context, *suzhi* seems to be defined through a mixture of having the knowledge and capital to undertake mechanized tea production, and an understanding of the value of the authenticity of the "ancient" tea trees. Many scholars have written about the notion of *suzhi* in contemporary China, but what this book shows about the Bulang villagers' adoption of this discourse is important and interesting.

There are different sorts of tea landscape: terraced monocrop tea gardens (in nonorganic and organic, "ecological" forms) and what the villagers and merchants call "ancient tea forest." Hung shows how the market crash in 2007 led to a reconsideration of the value of each type. Importantly, this is a context in which narratives about modernization and science that emerged during earlier eras are breaking down and losing coherence. The former Party secretary of Yunnan has advocated going "50 years backward for ecological production; moving 50 years forward for brand and technique" (p 122). Villagers now see a contradiction between "modernization" (meaning fertilizer and pesticide-heavy methods) and "science." For the villagers, "science" has become a "moral doctrine for treating the environment well."

Whether or not Bulang ethnicity matters and, if so, in what context and how, are questions that are not prominent in this book. They emerge to some extent in the final chapter, on ritual. Here Po-yi Hung narrates his encounters with "worm worship" (to deal with caterpillars eating the villagers' tea plants) and "tea ancestor worship." The chapter is interesting for what it shows about Hung's relationships with people in Mangjing: we learn about omissions in their translations from Bulang into Mandarin for him. We also hear from a local ritual specialist who said that Hung was sent to the village by the mountain spirit. But one wonders if there are not opportunities to do more here. Who was this "elderly man" who performed the rituals at the worm worship and read from a Dai language sutra (p 161; confusingly the sutra is described as being written in "Thai" elsewhere, p 137)? What else did this elderly man do in the community? The villagers were angry with the local government asking them to move the tea ancestor worship, so that it could be packaged together for tourists with other ethnic minorities' festivals. But what

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else might a local teacher have been thinking of when he said that the Bulang needed their *huayu quan* (here translated as "interpretation right," though something like "right to a voice" might be a more natural-sounding English translation)?

Hung is to be applauded for including 25 photos in the book, which give an impression of the various kinds of tea landscapes, the tea production labor, and the rituals that he observed. It would have been good if some of them could have been reproduced in better quality.

Minor gripes aside, the insights about the villagers' adoption of discourses of *suzhi*, their sense of a contradiction between modernity and science, and their relationships with the merchants from outside make this an interesting and valuable book. Beyond the small audience of scholars who work on Yunnan, it will be significant to those who study the interaction between global commodity markets and rural communities in developing countries.

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