



Tea forest in the making: Tea production and the ambiguity of modernity on China's southwest frontier

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 March 2012

Received in revised form 10 January 2013

Available online 12 February 2013

Keywords:

China
Yunnan
Tea
Modernity
Minority nationalities
Assemblage

ABSTRACT

The simultaneous but incompatible desires for both “tradition” and “advancement” have produced the “ambiguity of modernity” in the areas of minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu diqu*) on China's southwest frontier. This paper, in accordance, directly addresses the ambiguity of modernity through the investigation of the tea landscape in Yunnan. This essay builds on Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier's “global assemblage” framework to analyze the relationship between the “global form” of modernity and the situated assemblages of “ambiguity of modernity” in southwest China. Data are based on ethnographic research in the village of Mangjing, located in Jingmai Mountain, a renowned tea mountain in Yunnan. Most of the villagers in Mangjing are one of the minority nationalities of China, Bulang. I discuss the state-led project in transforming the modern tea plantation for “restoring” a landscape deemed as “ancient tea forest” (*guchalin*) in Mangjing. In addition, I address Bulang villagers' and government officials' multiple responses to the transformation of tea landscapes. I argue that the transformation of tea landscapes has been the practice to turn the “global form” of modernity into the shifting “assemblages” amongst tradition, modernity, science, and nature. The ambiguity of modernity has emerged from the shifting assemblages, providing both the state and Bulang villagers more leeway to symbolically and physically (re)produce meanings for the tea landscapes to meet the contingent market demand for tea. The transformation of tea landscapes, however, has become another process to perpetuate Bulang villagers' social status of being “low quality” as China's minority nationalities.

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1. Introduction

The word for “frontier” (*bianjiang*) in Chinese carries different, even contrasting, meanings. Among the multiple meanings, frontier could connote “backwardness” (*luohou*) in China, especially in the so-called “areas of minority nationalities”¹ (*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 cultivation practices (Sturgeon, 2005) but also to China's “minority nationalities” (*shaoshu minzu*) (Harrell, 1995; Harwood, 2009; Sturgeon, 2007, 2010). Accordingly, the Chinese state has constructed the “primitivity” of minority nationalities as a form of “backwardness” to contrast with the modernity of the 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.

China's southwest frontier, paradoxically, can also denote a place where pristine nature and traditional culture are “preserved

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¹ Instead of using the term “ethnic minorities,” the Chinese government uses “minority nationalities” to refer to the non-Han Chinese populations in China.

untainted” by minority nationalities (Schein, 2000) due to “backwardness.” This type of image is easily seen in the portrayal of touristic descriptions of southwest China (Litzinger, 2004). Moreover, international projects for environmental protection in southwest China have also reinforced the images of pristine nature on the frontier. For example, UNESCO has designated the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas as a World Heritage site, and it describes 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). In this case, China's southwest frontier is seen as one of the world's sanctuaries of nature. However, these international projects may also, as Weller (2006, p. 131) stated, “separate humanity from nature.” For environmentalists, modernization and development represent a human force threatening to destroy pristine nature.

The seemingly incompatible meanings of China's southwest frontier as “backward” as well as “natural” have resulted in an ambiguous scenario for modernization. On the one hand, modernization seems to be imperative to counter the “backward” economy. On the other hand, modernization seems threatening in terms of its potential to destroy pristine nature. Scholars have conducted significant research to critically understand the symbolic and material changes that have occurred on China's southwest

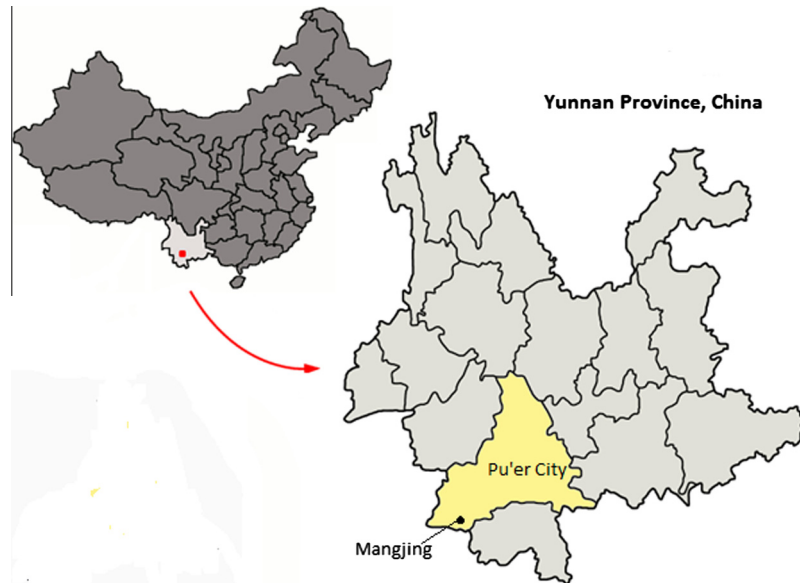


Fig. 1. Map of Pu'er Prefecture (Pu'er City) of Yunnan (modified by Po-Yi Hung from the original version retrieved on March 18, 2012 from the Wikimedia Commons at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Location_of_Pu%27er_Prefecture_within_Yunnan_\(China\).png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Location_of_Pu%27er_Prefecture_within_Yunnan_(China).png)). Pu'er Prefecture has been officially named “Pu'er City” (*Pu'er Shi*), a prefectural-level city of Yunnan Province, since 2007. A prefectural-city is not a “city” as in the usual sense; rather, it is an administrative division ranking below a province and above a county in People's Republic of China. To avoid any confusion, I use “Pu'er Prefecture” throughout the article.

frontier. Such research, for example, addresses the relationships between the discursive practices of “backwardness” and cash crop plantation (Sturgeon, 2010), between perceptions of the frontier and tourism development (Oakes, 2006; Kolas, 2011), and between the natural environment and international NGO's conservation projects (Litzinger, 2004; Hathaway, 2010). Most of these studies demonstrate that the changing meanings regarding the frontier landscape in southwest China, either depicting “backwardness” or “pristine nature,” are closely related to the late-socialist² regime and the market economy of contemporary China. Building on this literature, I argue that the juxtaposition of “backwardness” and “pristine nature” has been one of the outcomes of the “ambiguity of modernity.”

According to Warde (1997, p. 173; see also Adema, 2000), the ambiguity of modernity originates from the “mutual incompatibility of the simultaneous desires.” Focusing on tea production in the areas inhabited by the minority nationalities of southwest China, I argue that the simultaneous desires for both “tradition” and “advancement” have materialized the assemblage between nature and development in tea plantations. In this essay, I further argue that the seemingly incompatible desires for “tradition” and “advancement” have in fact provided the state more leeway to symbolically and materially reconstruct a “tradition in modernity” to meet the contingent market demands for tea. Moreover, I explore the (re)positioning of minority nationalities that has resulted from the ambiguity of the modernity related to tea production. Specifically, I use the transformation of the tea landscape in Yunnan to investigate the emergence and the effects of the ambiguity of modernity. The data are based on ethnographic research in the village of Mangjing. Mangjing is located in Jingmai Mountain (*Jingmaishan*), a renowned tea mountain in Yunnan (Fig. 1). Most of the villagers in Mangjing are Bulang (or Blang) people. I discuss the state-led campaign to transform the modern terrace tea plantation to “restore” a landscape deemed to be an “ancient tea forest” (*guchalin*) or “ancient tea arboretum” (*guchayuan*).

For the theoretical discussion, I propose the framework of “global assemblage” (Collier and Ong, 2005) to investigate the ambiguity of modernity on China's southwest frontier. Afterwards, I address my research methods and data collection for this essay. Next, to provide a historical overview, in Section 4, I briefly discuss the juxtaposition and the changing meanings of three kinds of tea landscapes in Yunnan. These three kinds of tea landscape are terrace tea (*taidi cha*) gardens, ecological tea (*shengtai cha*) gardens, and ancient tea forests. I will then succinctly explain the reconfiguration of modernity and nature that results from these tea landscapes. Following this, in Section 5, I use Mangjing as an example to explore the official rhetoric supporting the transformation of tea landscapes. I specifically analyze how the term “ecological” has been flagged in the rhetoric to redefine the relationship between modernity and nature. Before the conclusion, in Section 6, I focus on local Bulang villagers' struggles over the transformation of the tea landscapes. I discuss the villagers' reconceptualization and confusion, as well as the resulting ambivalence amongst tradition, modernity, science, and nature.

2. Global assemblage and the emergence of the ambiguity of modernity in China: A theoretical dialogue

Discussions on modernity, though various, can be roughly categorized into two general approaches. One considers modernity as a Western project derived from the era of Enlightenment, highlighting reason and progress (Harvey, 1990). Modernization, in accordance, means a linear “progression” from the assumed “irrational” and “traditional” societies to the “rational” and “technoscientific” societies (Taylor, 1989). Moving forward to reach modernity, therefore, entails “technological innovation, enabling new forms of industrial production and consumption, and supporting the progressive reform of social and political structures and culture” (Woods, 2011, p. 132).

Development has been a form of modernity (Escobar, 1992; Ferguson, 1999) for reaching a technocentric and rationalistic human world. And development, defined through the metanarratives of modernity, becomes a ubiquitous form of “progress”

² Following Li Zhang (2006, n. 1), I refer to China as a “late-socialist” state because of “its one-party rule and its official ideological claim to socialism.”

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