

Frontiers as dilemma: the incompatible desires for tea production in southwest China

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In this paper, I argue that frontiers are dilemmas composed of multiple dualities, be they exclusive and inclusive powers, connected space and national periphery, or modernity and primitiveness. These dilemmas, in consequence, become the mechanism to create a leeway for the state to 'tailor' different meanings of frontier to meet the contingent market demands. I use tea production on China's southwest frontier as an example to demonstrate that dilemma is not an end result, but a mechanism to rearticulate the relationship among frontier, the state and the market economy. Specifically, I argue that dilemmas on China's southwest frontier have been forged by the Chinese state with its incompatible desires between 'modernisation' and 'primitiveness' of the tea landscapes in Yunnan, a province on China's southwest frontier. Meanwhile, the incompatible desires and the resulting dilemmas on China's southwest frontier have further mobilised the state to flexibly rework its power to reconstruct the frontier to meet contingent market demand. Based on the shifting meanings of tea landscapes, the state has flexibly 'shuttled through' the dilemmas between development of modernisation and preservation of primitiveness on the frontier.

Key words: frontier, tea, China, modernisation, primitiveness, Yunnan

Introduction: frontiers as dilemma

A 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, a frontier is also regarded as the furthest place a national power can reach. In this context, a 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 a frontier on the peripheral side of the core–periphery binary has been complicated, and even problematised, by the phenomenon called globalisation (Paasi 2003). Globalisation, though a

complex and hardly well-defined concept, has challenged the core–periphery binary and emphasised connections throughout the world due to the flow of people, goods and ideas.

The development of cross-boundary and trans-boundary activities and the increasing number of connections between the frontier and other places have made geographers re-conceptualise the frontier as a relational place. As Fold and Hirsch argued, frontiers are 'connected spaces, begging a relational analysis that looks to linkages with supra-local influences and processes' (2009, 95). 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' (Fold and Hirsch

2009, 95). For that, taking the frontier as a relational space emerges as a productive analytic approach to understand the shifting geographies of the global market economy, which materialises in diverse national contexts.

While the relational approach re-conceptualises the frontier as a space constructed by multiple supra-local linkages without neglecting the significance of situated socioeconomic and environmental parameters, it primarily locates the frontier as a 'connected space'. Despite being convinced by this emphasis, many find the framework of relational analysis cannot fully incorporate the persistent perceptions of the frontier as both the metaphoric and physical space for exclusion and inclusion. Even under the current trend of globalisation, the linkage between the frontier and the nation-state's territorial sovereignty has never loosened (Paasi 2003). In a practical sense, the argument provided by Malcolm Anderson still applies in our so-called globalised world: 'Examining the justification of frontiers raises crucial, often dramatic, questions concerning citizenship, identity, political loyalty, exclusion, inclusion and the ends of the states' (1996, 1).

Between the inclusive and exclusive powers, and between the global relational connected space and the national peripheral place, how do we understand the frontier under the phenomenon we call globalisation? Throughout this paper, I argue that we should understand the frontier as a dilemma. By using tea production in southwest China as an example, I argue that the 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 the frontier means, and probably should not. Instead, frontiers are dilemmas composed of multiple dualities, be they exclusive and inclusive powers, connected space and national periphery, or modernity and primitiveness. These dilemmas, in consequence, become the mechanism to create a leeway for the state to 'tailor' different meanings of frontier to meet the contingent market demands.

Next, I use China's southwest frontier as an example to demonstrate that the dilemma is not an end result, but a mechanism to rearticulate the relationship among frontier, the state and the market economy. In other words, this paper aims to examine the mechanisms of dilemma and their symbolic and material effects on frontiers. Specifically, I use tea production on China's southwest frontier, particularly in Yunnan, as the empirical foreground to flesh out the mechanisms of dilemma in mobilising the re-articulation among the tea landscapes, the Chinese state and market forces.

Dilemma of development: between counter 'backwardness' of economy and preserve 'primitiveness' of nature on China's southwest frontier

China's southwest frontier (*bianjiang*) has multiple meanings, which have resulted from the political developments in China as a whole. 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'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 cultivations (Sturgeon 2005), but also to China's 'minority nationalities' (*shaoshu minzu*) (Harrell 1995; Harwood 2009; Sturgeon 2007 2010). Following the Chinese Revolution in 1949, the communist central authority sent scholars to 'scientifically' classify its people within China's territory (Sturgeon *et al.* 2013). Minority nationalities, including those in southwest China, have been categorised and ranked below Han Chinese by the communist central authority based on modes of production (Harrell 1995). 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 for the areas of minority nationalities, including southwest China, have been substantially oriented to develop the backward landscape and to modernise the primitive lives of minority nationalities.

Not all 'primitive' landscapes on China's southwest frontier mean backwardness. Since late 1990s, the rise of environmental concerns and the emergence of the green market throughout China have resulted in new vocabularies of modernity (Sturgeon and Menzies 2006; Menzies 2014) about the frontier areas. In accordance, China's southwest frontier can also denote a place where primitive nature and minority culture are well preserved because of its lack of modernisation. 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 stated, 'separate humanity from nature' (2006, 131). For environmentalists, modernisation, coupled with development, has been a force for the destruction of frontier nature.

The seemingly incompatible meanings of China's southwest frontier, economic backwardness as well as natural primitiveness, have produced a dilemma of development. On one hand, development is seen as imperative to counter the backward economy. On the other hand, development has the potential to destroy the primitiveness of 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 of economy 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' of economy or its 'primitiveness' of nature, are more or less related to the late-socialist² state and the market economy of contemporary China.

While the literature regarding southwest China provides a critical understanding of how the juxtaposition of backwardness of economy and primitiveness of nature emerges on the frontier, it seems to take the juxtaposition as the outcome of both state interventions and market forces. Hence, if we take the juxtaposition of backwardness of economy and primitiveness of nature as a form of dilemma of development 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.

This paper, nevertheless, looks at the dilemma of development not as a result, but as a mechanism for the Chinese state to flexibly rearticulate its southwest frontier with the forces of the market economy. More specifically, this paper argues the dilemma has been forged by the Chinese state with its incompatible desires between 'modernisation' and 'primitiveness' of the tea landscapes in Yunnan, a province on China's southwest frontier. The dilemma emerges at the specific juncture when the Chinese state initiates multiple governmental campaigns to incorporate the frontier into the market economy of tea. The ongoing tea production in Yunnan, therefore, has been the materialisation of the dilemma on the frontier.

Tea production in Yunnan

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 tea³ in particular, is also seen in Pu'er and Lincang, two other prefectural-level administrative units of Yunnan. Since the early 2000s, 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 US\$150 (Jacobs 2009). As a result, people carved out the mountains and turned more of the forest into areas of cultivated terrace tea gardens (Plate 1).

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 with 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 little 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*) (Plate 2). 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 gudao*) (Freeman and Ahmed 2011; see also Yang 2009; Sigley 2013).



Plate 1 The terrace tea gardens

Source: Photo by author



Plate 2 Ancient tea forest or ancient tea arboretum

Source: Photo by author

Terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forests now compose the two primary tea landscapes in Yunnan. These two tea landscapes, nowadays, have materialised the dilemma between two incompatible desires regarding modernisation and primitive nature on the frontier. This dilemma has been the mechanism for the state, especially the local authorities at provincial, prefectural and township levels, to create a leeway to manipulate meanings of the two kinds of tea landscapes for the changing market demands. Accordingly, state policies and market forces at different periods of time have altered, even subverted, the contrasting meanings between the two types of tea landscapes.

Incompatible desires between modernisation and primitiveness

Desire for modernisation: changing meanings of terrace tea gardens

Terrace tea plantations originated 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).

During the communal period, however, plantations of terrace tea were not thoroughly 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 the early 1980s, the growth of terrace tea gardens was not only for the market per se, but mainly for terminating the shifting cultivation practised by many 'backward' ethnic minority groups in Yunnan. As the research of Sturgeon (2005) on an Akha community shows, starting in the early 2000s, the local government, especially township officials, encouraged plantations of terrace tea on farmers' shifting-cultivation lands.

While the plantations of cash crops in Yunnan, including terrace tea in the uplands, were to end the shifting cultivation for the realisation of socialist modernity, the local authorities also associated these plantations with various national-wide campaigns for the environment and for poverty alleviation (see also Sturgeon and Menzies 2006 for the discussions on rubber). Take the campaign of Grain for Green (*tuigeng huanlin*) as an example. Since early 2000s, the campaign of Grain for Green has pushed the township officials to encourage minority farmers to convert sloping land into terrace tea gardens both to prevent erosion and to alleviate poverty (Sturgeon 2005). Accordingly, plantations of terrace tea were mainly one of the actions for local authorities to respond the central state's policies concerning environmental degradation and rural poverty. The influence of the market demand for Pu'er tea per se was still relatively low at first. Nevertheless, market demand for 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 came not from Yunnan, but from Taiwan. During the late 1990s, especially in the years before Hong Kong was 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 increased its market value significantly due to its unique aging taste. Aging (*chenhua*), then, became one of the major features to redefine the market value of Pu'er tea (Yu 2006). As a consequence, people, from tea merchants to common tea consumers, began purchasing new Pu'er tea, not for drinking, but for 'aging' in storage to increase its market value for future sale. This trend became a form of investment. Hence, the prices for Pu'er tea, both new and aged, have significantly increased since the early 2000s, reaching their 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 responded to the Pu'er tea boom by organising not only for the original purpose of terminating the shifting cultivations, but also to meet the market demand for the tea. Additionally, the expansion of terrace tea gardens has also been a strategy for the local authorities to meet the goals of Opening Up the West campaign started by the central state from 2000. The national policy of Opening Up (see Goodman 2004) has pushed the local governments, from provincial to

township levels, to initiate a new cultivation system, including tea plantations (Zhang 2014). In other words, while the food deficiency problem was reduced, the central state has implemented the Opening Up the West to boost cash crop plantations for the economic development in its western territory, including Yunnan. The local authorities had flexibly articulated the ideas of Opening Up campaign with the market demand for Pu'er tea to reinforce the desire for the terrace tea gardens. Under the pressure of market demands, 'efficiency' (*xiaoyi*) became a new form of governmental propaganda to package the modernisation of tea production. Plantations of terrace tea were encouraged by local authorities because of their higher productivity compared with ancient tea trees. Harvesting ancient tea leaves demanded more labour because of the height and relatively sporadic distribution of ancient tea trees. Even worse, because of their age, their productivity was typically low. The production of the ancient tea forest was therefore considered inefficient, and of course, 'backward'.

To modernise tea production on the frontier, the local authorities encouraged farmers, including 'backward' minority nationalities, to cultivate terrace tea gardens instead of harvesting ancient tea leaves. For the local officials from provincial to township levels, it became a campaign to improve the productivity of tea production and thereby boost the local economy. Behind this, moreover, it was also a campaign to contrast the 'modern' terrace tea gardens to the 'backward' ancient tea forests. 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* (a *mu* is about 0.167 acre), while it was just 2 406 000 *mu* in 1990. From 1990 to 2007, the growing tea-plantation areas 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, while the market value of ancient tree tea, though reduced, has been much more stable since 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.

Desire for primitiveness: changing meanings of ancient tea forests

During the modernisation of tea production, the ancient tea forests had been symbolised by the state as a backward landscape on China's southwest frontier. Paradoxically, the ancient tea forest, which symbolised the inefficiency of tea production before the bubble burst, has been re-evaluated by the market as a rare resource for making authentic Pu'er tea. Additionally, the 'primitiveness' of 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 representing the modernisation of tea production, has been criticised for the overuse 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*). Hence, 'being primitive' replaced 'being modern' as the desire for state to re-define the tea landscape in southwest China. The changing desire, from 'being modern' to 'being primitive', has resulted in a process of state intervention, especially at the prefectural level, to devalue the terrace tea gardens on China's southwest frontier. On the other hand, the ancient tea forests have had access to the provincial state's endorsement because of their 'primitive' characteristic for organic tea production.

Specifically, in order to 'go back' to the 'primitive' organic production of tea, the provincial government of Yunnan has launched a campaign called 'Scientific Pu'er' (*kexue puer*) to transform the terrace tea gardens. 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. 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 forests. 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 (Plate 3). In addition, any pesticide or chemical nutrient was prohibited in the ecological tea gardens.



Plate 3 Ecological tea gardens

Source: Photo by author

The aim was to restore the 'primitiveness' of 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.

As shown, desire for modernisation or primitive nature has been fluid and temporal, based on the changing need for state sovereignty and for market demand. The ideas associated with terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forests have consistently been in conflict. 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 modernisation of tea production to achieve market efficiency, whereas the ancient tea forest denoted backward and inefficient productivity. Since 2007, however, terrace tea gardens have become a symbol of a tainted environment, while the 'primitiveness' of ancient tea forests has been dubbed natural and authentic resources for organic tea production.

The changing meanings of the tea landscapes in Yunnan, in accordance, demonstrate a dilemma of incompatible desires between being primitive and being modern on the frontier. The tea landscapes, thus, are the material form of the dilemma. In other words, the juxtaposition of two types of frontier tea landscapes, including terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forests, has intertwined with the state construction of socialist modernity and the shifting market demands for organic Pu'er tea.

Incompatible desires and the flexible relations between the state and the market

Frontiers can be seen as dilemmas with incompatible meanings. In addition, these incompatible desires have distinct material effects on the frontier. While the desire to return to undisturbed nature has constructed the frontier as wilderness (Cronon 1996), the desire for development views the 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 modernisation (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. This paper emphasises the coexistence of these incompatible desires on the frontier.

Using tea production in Yunnan as an example, I 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, the 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 primitive nature and industrial development, as well as for both authentic tradition and advanced 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 market economy.

Specifically, the incompatible desires and the resulting dilemmas on China's southwest frontier have further mobilised the Chinese state, especially the local authorities, to flexibly rework its power to reconstruct the frontier to meet contingent market demand. Based on the shifting meanings of tea landscapes, I argue that the state has flexibly 'shuttled through' the dilemmas between development of modernisation and preservation of primitiveness on the frontier. Meanwhile, the dilemma has created a leeway for the state to realise its intervention through governmental campaigns that symbolically and physically alter the frontier landscape of tea. Put it another way, the dilemma has been the mechanism for the state to sustain a flexible relationship with the contingent market of tea.

As a result, dilemmas are therefore imperative for the Chinese state to interact with the changing, even unpredictable, market forces by repositioning southwest China within multiple dualities. That is, dilemmas within the dualities 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. The scenario of 'shuttling through' these dualities demonstrates that the Chinese state has hardly retained a straightforward plan to control its southwest frontier, but has flexibly adjusted its controlling strategies with the contingency of the market economy.

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Notes

- 1 Instead of using 'ethnic minorities', the Chinese government uses 'minority nationalities' to refer to the non-Han Chinese populations in China.
- 2 Following Li Zhang (2006, note 1), 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.'
- 3 Pu'er tea can be also spelled 'Puerh tea' or 'Puer tea' in English. Throughout this paper, I use 'Pu'er tea' for its spelling.

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