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

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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” (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 “backwardness” to contrast with the modernity of the Han majority 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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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 technocratic and rationalistic human world. And development, defined through the metanarratives of modernity, becomes a ubiquitous form of “progress”
around the world, despite its “self-representation of modernity by the west” (Gupta, 1998, p. 37). However, this take on development as a universal practice associated with the west-centric paradigm of modernity has been challenged by the “beyond-the-west” approach (Robinson, 2003). The “beyond-the-west” approach considers modernity and modernization as heterogeneous practices with geographical, historical, and cultural situatedness (e.g., Escobar, 1995; Gupta, 1998; Ong, 1988).

In general, the scholarship related to the ‘beyond-the-west’ approach acknowledges the imperative to “provincealize” (Chakrabarty, 2007) the west-centric norms of modernity. An important part of this is thus, “the identification of the subordination of the knowledge and cultures of groups outside the European core as a necessary dimension of modernity,” (Escobar, 2008, p. 168). Accordingly, this “beyond-the-west” approach pushes us to pay attention to the complex and contingent forms of modernization in specific non-western contexts. It is, therefore, a push to look into “alternative modernities,” or even “alternatives to modernity” (Escobar, 2008, p. 162) beyond the west-centric paradigm. Nevertheless, this emphasis on “alternative modernities” risks underestimating global capitalist power. As Watts (2003, p. 449, italics in the original) argued, “a multiplicity of other modernities” has the tendency “to obscure the terrible realities of unprecedented global economic inequality and the crude violence of twenty-first-century empire.”

The universalization of west-centric modernity and the heterogeneity of beyond-the-west modernities are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, modernity should be understood through the interrelationships between its universalization as an element of western hegemony and its heterogeneity as situated practices. To grapple with the interrelationships, I take “global assemblage” (Collier and Ong, 2005; Collier, 2006; see also Marcus and Saka, 2006) as a framework to study modernity in the Chinese context. As Collier and Ong (2005, p. 12) indicated, global assemblage “suggests inherent tensions: global implies broadly encompassing, seamless, and mobile; assemblage implies heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated.”

Collier and Ong (2005, p. 11) describe “global forms” not only as technoscience but also as “forms of politics and ethics structured around collectivities to the extent that they are not defined culturally or socially.” Based on this framework, modernity, as a universalized west-centric paradigm, can be understood as one of the global forms of politics and ethics. Yet, it inevitably will “interact with other elements, occupying a common field in contingent, uneasy, unstable interrelationships” (Collier and Ong, 2005, p. 12), and therefore, it will form and reform assemblages of modernity at particular sites.

In the Chinese context, scholars have reconsidered modernity with its shifting meanings for the industrialized production and consumption (Rofel, 1992) and taken modernity as a process of negotiation of socio-economic change (Oakes, 1998) and place-making (Feuchtwang, 2004) for development. On the other hand, other studies have also demonstrated that the reconsideration of modernity in the situated Chinese context cannot ignore the global influence of neoliberal development on China (Harvey, 2007; Wang, 2006). Recently, “global assemblage” has been proposed as the framework to combine both approaches of situatedness and globality. Actually, scholars have used the “global assemblage” framework to investigate the relationship between privatization and neoliberal rationality (Zhang and Ong, 2008). While the neoliberal rationality, as the global form, buttersets market-driven privatization in China, these processes actually do not phase out the strong interventions of the Chinese state, and neither do they have a uniform deployment into every corner of China’s territory; rather, the outcomes of privatization in China are assemblages co-produced by “disparate global and situated elements” that “do not follow a given formula or script” of neoliberal rationality (Zhang and Ong, 2008, p. 10).

Modernization, as a given western script, adopts specific ideas of progress and science (Gaukroger, 2009). This has become the “global form” of modernity adopted by non-western societies, including China. Hence, a more critical issue is to inquire into how modernity as the “global form,” in the Chinese context, has transformed into the situated “assemblage” and what effects the assemblage has produced. This essay, accordingly, examines this question by studying the transformation of tea landscapes in Yunnan.

The tea landscapes in Yunnan have carried different meanings of modernity. The transformation of tea landscapes, I argue, has materialized the ambiguity of modernity in southwest China. Warde (1997) emphasized that the ambiguity of modernity arose from the simultaneity of incompatible desires. While incompatible desires could be broadly defined, for tea production in southwest China, I argue that the incompatibility is the simultaneous desires for both modernity and nature. In China, the term “nature” (ziran) can usually refer to the primitive environment without human-induced development for modernization. However, tea production on China’s southwest frontier has entailed a struggle for both nature and modernity through the symbolic and material construction of ancient tea forests.

Specifically, until the early 2000s, the landscape of the ancient tea forest still signified “backward” tea production and needed to be “modernized” by the cultivations of terrace tea gardens. The terrace tea gardens have been referred to as “modern tea gardens” (xiandai chaoyuan) in Yunnan. Nowadays, the “modern” terrace tea gardens, particularly in Pu’er Prefecture, have been undergoing transformation to restore the “natural environment” of the ancient tea forest. Transformation of the tea landscapes itself, I argue, is a “practice of assemblage” (Li, 2007, p. 264) to “forge connections between [modernity and nature] and sustain these connections in the face of tensions.” It, thus, “invites analysis of how the elements of assemblage might – or might not – be made to cohere” (Li, 2007, p. 264) within the ambiguity of modernity on the frontier. I, therefore, use ethnographic data to shed light on how the meaning of modernity not only is an imposed global form, but has also emerged through the assemblage practiced by people’s everyday life in the transformation of tea landscapes.

3. Methods

The data for this essay are drawn from 16 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork for a larger project studying the relationships amongst tea production, land-use politics, and ethnic minorities in southwest China. I conducted fieldwork during three summers from 2007 to 2009. In addition, 1 year of fieldwork was conducted from July 2010 to June 2011. Specifically for this essay, the ethnographic material is mainly drawn from my stay at Mangjing from October to December 2010 and from March to May 2011. In addition to conducting open-ended interviews with officials of the Pu’er Prefecture Tea Office (Pu’er Shi Chaoye Bangongshi) and the People’s Government of Huimin Township (Huimin Siang Renmin Zhengfu), I mainly conducted participant observations by living with Bulang villagers in Mangjing to understand villagers’ everyday experiences of tea production and the ambiguity of modernity. As Goldstein (2006, p. 5) argued, “the most mundane everyday life experiences provide excellent material from which to launch investigations into processes of modernity.” I participated in the Bulang villagers’ everyday practices of tea production by harvesting, processing, and selling tea with them. Moreover, I observed and recorded the villagers’ encounters and interactions with government officials and outside tea entrepreneurs by attending the
villagers’ formal and informal meetings with officials and entrepreneurs. I took these participations and observations as “an attentiveness to the ‘everyday,’ the concrete quotidian details and expressive trivialities, the at once startling and hardly noticed shifts in the routines and meanings of daily experience” (Goldstein, 2006, p. 5). The ethnographic material for this essay was mainly drawn from my participation in the activities of key Bulang subjects related to tea production. Their life experiences epitomized the villagers’ everyday practices of tea production in Mangjing.

Regarding the language issue, I am a native speaker of Mandarin, but I cannot speak the Bulang language. Nevertheless, most of the Bulang villagers in Mangjing who are in their early forties or younger speak Mandarin. They use Mandarin to communicate with those who cannot speak the Bulang language, especially for their tea businesses. Although the Bulang villagers usually speak the Bulang language with each other, I was able to easily request a translation into Mandarin to understand the conversations.

4. The Juxtaposition of three kinds of tea landscape in Yunnan: Terrace tea gardens, ecological tea gardens, and ancient tea forests

Tea has been a cash crop promoted by the Chinese state 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, 2010). In addition to Xishuangbanna, this development of tea, Pu’er tea3 in particular, is also seen in Pu’er and Lincang, two other prefectoral-level administrative units of Yunnan. Since the early 2000s, due to a surge in market value of Pu’er tea, the landscape of 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). Subsequent to this, many mountainous forests were cultivated into areas of terrace tea gardens (Fig. 2).

Most of the Pu’er tea then was produced in the terrace tea gardens. Tea in Yunnan, nevertheless, was also produced from the “ancient tea trees” (guchashu). Different from 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, resulting in a landscape deemed as an “ancient tea forest” (guchalin) or “ancient tea arboretum” (guchayuan) (Fig. 3). The landscape of the ancient tea forest/arboretum demonstrates the historical heyday of the tea trade in Yunnan going back to China’s Ming-Qing period (1368–1911) (Yang, 2009). While the Pu’er tea industry in Yunnan had developed over hundreds of years, tea was produced even earlier in the region, beginning with 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; also see Yang, 2009).

Terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forests, therefore, constitute the two main kinds of tea landscapes in Yunnan. These two tea landscapes, however, carry contrasting meanings regarding modernity and nature. Different state policies and market forces at different periods of time have resulted in alteration, even subversion, of the contrasting meanings between the two types of tea landscapes.

4.1. Market demand as a contingent force to change meanings between terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forests

Plantations of terrace tea started as early as China’s communal period in the 1970s. In 1974, under the provincial government’s policy 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.

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3 Pu’er tea can be also spelled as ‘Puerh tea’ or ‘Puer tea’ in English. Throughout this essay, I use ‘Pu’er tea’ for the English spelling.
gardens (Freeman and Ahmed, 2011, p. 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, p. 41).

Even after the communal period ended in the early 1980s, the growth of terrace tea gardens was still not intended for the market per se, but mainly to eliminate the shifting cultivation practices of many ethnic minority groups in Yunnan (Sturgeon, 2005). Nevertheless, the market’s increased demand for Pu’er tea has gradually played a contingent but critical role in the expansion of terrace tea gardens since early 2000s.

The market reappraisal of Pu’er tea began not in Yunnan, but in Taiwan. During the late 1990s, Taiwanese tea entrepreneurs purchased a large amount of “aged Pu’er tea” (Pu’er laocha) from Hong Kong. This aged Pu’er tea soon substantially increased in market value due to the unique aged flavor. “Aging” (chenhua), then, became one of the major features used to re-define the market value of Pu’er tea. As a consequence, people, ranging from tea merchants to common tea consumers, began purchasing new Pu’er tea, not for drinking, but for “aging” the tea through storage to increase its market value for future sale. Hence, the price of Pu’er tea, new and aged, significantly increased, beginning in the early 2000s, reaching its peak in 2007. The “heat” of the Pu’er tea market then became the driving force in changing the tea landscape in Yunnan.

Due to the boom in the Pu’er tea market that began in the early 2000s, the state’s plantations of terrace tea were not only intended for the original purpose of stabilizing cultivation practices, but also to meet the increased market demands for Pu’er tea. Under the pressure of market demands, “efficiency” (xiaoyi) became a new message of governmental propaganda to encourage the modernization of tea production. Accordingly, plantations of terrace tea were encouraged by the government due to their higher productivity compared with the ancient tea trees. Harvesting the ancient tea leaves demanded a much greater labor force due to the height and relatively sporadic distribution of the ancient tea trees. Even worse, due to the old age of the ancient tea trees, their productivity was usually low. Therefore, the ancient tea forest was considered “inefficient.”

To “modernize” tea production on the frontier, the state encouraged farmers, including minority nationalities, to cultivate terrace tea gardens instead of harvesting ancient tea leaves. For the state, this became a campaign to improve the productivity of tea production and 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 plantations in Yunnan was approximately 4,545,000 mu, while it was only 2,406,000 mu in 1990. The newly developed tea plantation areas from 1990 to 2007 were mostly terrace tea gardens. However, the Pu’er tea market experienced a bubble burst in 2007 (Jacobs, 2009). Since then, the market value of terrace tea has substantially declined. Meanwhile, the market value of ancient tree tea, though it has declined, has remained much more stable than that of terrace tea. To date, the price for ancient tree tea is, in general, much higher than other Pu’er tea produced from the terrace tea gardens. As in April 2011 in the village of Mangjing, the fresh terrace tea leaves were sold for around 10–12 RMB per kilogram, while the fresh ancient tea leaves were sold for around 40–60 RMB per kilogram.

Paradoxically, the ancient tea forests, which symbolized the “inefficiency” of tea production before the bubble burst, have been re-evaluated in the market as a rare resource for the production of “authentic” Pu’er tea. Additionally, the ancient tea forest has been re-valorized because of its “natural” environment and “organic” methods of production (See also Qi et al., 2005 for the biodiversity in the ancient tea forest in Mangjing). Ironically, the monoculture of terrace tea gardens, once considered to represent the modernization of tea production, has also been criticized for over-usage of pesticides and the lack of biodiversity, resulting in damage to the “ecological environment” (shengtai huamjing).

The meanings associated with terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forests have varied over time. As discussed here, from the 1970s to the early 2000s, the terrace tea gardens signified the modern socialist efforts to terminate shifting cultivations. However, since the early 2000s, the economy of Pu’er tea has become the dominant force behind government propaganda related to tea production. Terrace tea gardens, then, represented the modernization of tea production for the purpose of market efficiency, whereas the ancient tea forests denoted backward and inefficient production. Nonetheless, after the bubble of the Pu’er tea market burst in 2007, as an official said, the terrace tea gardens have become a symbol of a tainted environment while the ancient tea forests have come to symbolize “natural” and “authentic” resources for organic tea production. Currently, mainly due to the shifting market demands, many terrace tea gardens are undergoing a transformation into another tea landscape: ecological tea gardens.

4.2. From contrast to ambiguous combination: Ecological tea gardens

Due to the plummeting price of terrace tea and the increasing value of ancient tree tea, many terrace tea gardens underwent another transformation in the name of restoration of the “missing” ancient tea forest. In Pu’er Prefecture specifically, the restoration of the ancient tea forest has been initiated under the prefectural-wide campaign called Scientific Pu’er (kexue pu’er). Terrace tea gardens, under the campaign of Scientific Pu’er, were planned for conversion into “ecological tea gardens” (shengtai chayuan). Ecological tea gardens represent the “transitional” landscape between terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forest. Particularly in Pu’er Prefecture, owners of terrace tea gardens were asked to remove some of the tea trees and then plant five different kinds of local tree species, including aglawood, houpu, camphortree, white boubinia, and downy cherry. According to local villagers in Mangjing, they were asked to cut down almost two thirds of their tea trees in their terrace tea gardens (see Fig. 4). In addition, no pesticides or chemical nutrients were allowed in the ecological tea gardens. The aim was to restore the “natural environment”, similar to that of the ancient tea forest. The ecological tea gardens were

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4 For more discussions regarding the value reproduction of Pu’er tea, please see Yu (2006).

5 A mu is about 0.167 acre.

6 One RMB is about 0.16 US dollar.
expected to eventually grow into the tea forests. In other words, the “ancient” tea forests, paradoxically, have been remade during present times in the form of ecological tea gardens to eliminate the “modern” elements of terrace tea gardens.

Ecological tea gardens, however, did not represent a complete disconnection from modernity; rather, they demonstrated another form of modernization based on an alleged “organic” method of tea plantation and production. The establishment of organic ecological tea gardens represented a “more advanced” (geng xianjin de) modernization of tea production, distinct from the terrace tea gardens. Additionally, organic plantations of ecological tea gardens have resulted in an ambiguous combination of modernity and nature. In other words, organic plantations of ecological tea gardens, representing a more advanced modernization of tea production, were a key to restoring the “natural environment” of the ancient tea forest.

Currently, terrace tea gardens, ecological tea gardens, and ancient tea forest juxtapose each other in Yunnan. The contrasting meanings associated with terrace tea gardens and ancient tea forests, coupled with the ambiguous combination of modernity and nature that characterizes ecological tea gardens, demonstrate the ambiguity of the modernity on China’s southwest frontier. Nevertheless, the meanings of modernity and nature cannot be directly imposed on the tea landscapes. Instead, the ongoing transformation of tea landscapes is a meaning-defining process that is based on people’s everyday practices of tea production. Only through people’s everyday practices for tea production can the different perceptions of modernity and nature emerge and be reproduced.

Next, this essay will present a case study of the village of Mangjing. In 2011, the terrace tea gardens in Mangjing were in the process of undergoing a transformation to ecological tea gardens. The government of Lancang County launched the transformation policy for Mangjing to follow the “Scientific Pu’er” campaign in the year of 2010. As guided by “Scientific Pu’er,” the owners of the terrace tea gardens were asked to only keep 160 tea trees per mu and to plant other trees of local species in the space from which tea bushes were cleared. The transformation of the landscape in Mangjing was buttressed by official rhetoric, which played a critical role as a discursive practice to redefine the meanings of the tea landscapes.

5. The official rhetoric for transforming terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens in Mangjing

Enpei Bai, the former Communist Party Secretary of Yunnan Province, visited Mangjing on May 13, 2011. His visit was widely reported in Yunnan’s major mass media (e.g., see Shen and Li, 2011). All of these media reports directly quoted Bai’s words. For example, according to Xiangxing Shen and Hanyong Li (2011) of Yunnan Daily, Bai referred to the tea garden transformation as a realization of the following idea: “go 50 years backward for ecological production; move 50 years forward for brand and technique.” This statement, a propaganda slogan indeed, has caused damage to 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 concluded, the criticisms were multiple, such as the consequences of the loss of biodiversity, the usage of pesticides and chemical nutrients, and soil erosion (see also the report by Fuller (2008)). As a result, “traditional” tea production based on the resources of the ancient tea forest 50 years ago was re-defined in the official rhetoric as an “ecological” way of production, by which the natural environment was simultaneously protected during tea production.

The relationship between the Bulang villagers and the tea forest in Mangjing 50 years ago was flagged by Bai as an example of “ecological” tea production. Therefore, he urged 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 the terrace tea gardens to the ecological tea gardens represented the first step in discarding the “modernity” of terrace tea gardens and recovering the Bulang villagers’ “ecological” production of 50 years ago. Paradoxically, today, the term “ecological” in China not only refers to the “traditional” production 50 years ago, but also signifies the advanced “organic” with regard to tea production. Organic production has been considered both by the state and the consumers as a more “advanced” method of tea production. Accordingly, while the first half of the slogan stressed “going backward” to the method of production of 50 years ago, the second half emphasized “moving forward” to apply the up-to-date technique (keji) for producing ecological tea. The phrase, “move 50 years forward for brand and technique,” provided a sense of “advancement” (xianjin) for ecological tea gardens. In accordance, the transformation, from terrace tea gardens to ecological tea gardens, was not just a task of going back to the “traditional” method of tea production; in addition, it was also defined as a realization of “advancement” for organic production in the future.

The ecological tea gardens have been considered by the government officials as indicative of the advancement of future organic production. Meanwhile, the ecological tea gardens have also displayed the “traditional” method of production used in the past. Ambiguously, being “ecological” has combined the incompatible desires for both “future advancement” and “past tradition” for tea production. As a result, the transformation from terrace tea gardens to ecological tea gardens has emerged as an “ambiguity of modernity” in Mangjing. The use of the official rhetoric has become a discursive practice to produce an “ambiguity of modernity” between being “advanced” and being “traditional.” The construction of ecological tea gardens has become the construction of “tradition in modernity” for the frontier tea landscape.

The construction of “tradition in modernity” associated with ecological tea gardens has reconfigured the relationship between tradition and modernity. Specifically in Mangjing, tradition and modernity do not represent a long-lasting contrast, but rather an emerging assemblage used to meet the contingent market demands for the ancient tree tea. Nevertheless, the ongoing transformation of the tea landscape has resulted in different and competing interpretations among the Bulang villagers.

6. Transformation of tea landscapes as a meaning-defining process: Multiple responses to ecological tea gardens

While the official rhetoric of ecological tea gardens has resulted in the construction of “tradition in modernity,” the Bulang villagers in Mangjing actually developed different understandings concerning the transformation of the tea landscapes. Specifically, ecological tea gardens, as a new form of tea plantation, have disrupted the villagers’ perceptions of their relationships with modernity. 
and nature. In fact, the word, “ecological (ecology),” was a vague term before the introduction of ecological tea gardens. The landscape transformation from terrace tea gardens to ecological tea gardens, thus, has been a meaning-defining process. The villagers produced different meanings regarding the concept of “being ecological” through their engagement in the landscape transformation. Based on the construction of the meaning of “being ecological,” the villagers have also re-conceptualized modernity and nature through their practices for tea production.

6.1. Reduced income and other complaints related to “Being Ecological”

Spring is usually the busiest season for the Bulang villagers in Mangjing as they harvest their tea leaves during this season. The spring of 2011 was even busier for the villagers, especially for those who owned terrace tea gardens. In addition to harvesting fresh tea leaves, the villagers needed to transform their terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens, as guided by the county government.

One 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 that 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 possible that the township officials would visit Huaxiao’s terrace tea garden, which was considered by Minghai to be an ideal showcase to demonstrate the transformation process in Mangjing.

On the way to Minghai’s house, Huaxiao made a quick stop at a terrace tea garden that had undergone transformation. “Look, we were requested to keep about 2-m distance between two tea trees (Fig. 5),” Huaxiao said to me while pointing to the extra space between two of the remaining tea trees. He lit a cigarette and complained to me that after his terrace tea garden was transformed into an ecological tea garden, his revenue had not increased as the government officials had promised. Similar to many other villagers in Mangjing, Huaxiao did not earn a greater profit after clearing almost two thirds of his tea trees. Huaxiao’s family did not have large numbers of ancient tea trees, and they depended much more on harvesting terrace tea leaves to generate income. Therefore, the transformation project has resulted in a substantial economic impact on Huaxiao’s family.

Considering the topic of ecological tea gardens, Huaxiao did not agree that the terrace tea gardens were not “ecological.” On the contrary, Huaxiao thought that the terrace tea plantation could “become ecological” by limiting the usage of pesticides and other chemical products. He showed me that the terrace tea gardens adjacent to the road were undergoing transformation as the government wanted first. In the opinion of Huaxiao and many other villagers, the purpose of transforming these terrace tea gardens was not for production of ecological tea per se, but for tourism development in Mangjing. According to Huaxiao, “They (the government officials) must think terrace tea gardens are too ugly to show tourists, so they want all the ancient tea forests back”.

6.2. “Being Modern” and “Being Scientific” as separate moral standard for preserving nature

While many villagers in Mangjing, such as Huaxiao, complained about the resulting reduction of revenue after the transformation of their terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens, some villagers took the transformation as a move toward “scientific” tea production. Paradoxically, many villagers perceived the “scientific” tea production of ecological tea gardens as a step away from “modernization.” In other words, while they considered ecological tea gardens to be “scientific,” they did not regard the ecological tea gardens as a “more advanced” approach to the modernization of tea production; rather, they perceived a distinction between “being modern” and “being scientific.”

As one of the village cadres, Minghai had endeavored to realize the goals of the prefectural campaign of “Scientific Pu’er” in Mangjing. 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 would come to Mangjing to supervise the transformation of the tea gardens. I went to Minghai’s house for the meeting with Huaxiao.

Seeing Huaxiao and I, Minghai greeted us and handed us cigarettes before he went to add some dried wood to the fire to boil the water in a kettle. Huaxiao breathed out the thick smoke of his cigarette and said to Minghai with a mocking tone, “Need more wood for the fire? I’ve got plenty left in my tea garden. Purely ecological (yuan shengtai de)!” Minghai did not respond, but he continued adding more dried wood to the fire pile, blazing with the sporadic and bursting sounds from the burning wood. He then stood up, placed some processed tea leaves in the bottoms of two glasses, and handed the glasses to Huaxiao and me. Huaxiao treated Minghai and himself to another cigarette. Shortly after, a steaming vapor came from the kettle spout. Minghai turned to the fire, took the kettle, and poured water into Huaxiao’s glass. The room was full of hazy smoke, with mixed smells of burning wood, cigarettes, and tea. Minghai prepared himself a glass of tea and sat at the bamboo round table. After having a sip of tea, he put the cigarette back to his mouth and slightly held it with his lips. He then turned to Huaxiao, raised his voice a little bit, and said, “The ecological method (shengtai de) is good; the ecological method is scientific!”

Minghai then turned to me and asked whether or not I agreed with his statement, “the ecological method is scientific.” It was obvious that Minghai did not really want an answer from me, but only my approval of his words. Being a Ph.D. student studying in an American university, I was regarded by Minghai, and the local villagers in general, as a “scientific” person. As a result, from time to time, the villagers, including Minghai, would ask me to approve their words or give suggestions. Usually, I cautiously avoided providing any concrete judgment during these conversations. Nevertheless, on this specific occasion, Minghai forced me to make a
comment by saying, “Doctor (boshi), give us some guides and lessons (zhidao); isn’t this your job here?” I soon realized that I may have been put in the position of having to make a real 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 the terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens was scientific. When I tried to further explain my comment to Minghai and Huaxiao, two other men arrived at Minghai’s house for the meeting.

One of the two men yelled at the gate. Minghai recognized the voice and quickly went to greet the two men. Huan, one of the two men, stepped into the hazy house and cried out loudly to Minghai, “Do you store your tea in the house? The smoke would just ruin your tea110!” Huaxiao quickly took up Huan’s comment and said, “Yeah, very unscientific of you, Minghai!” Minghai then turned to me and tried to defend himself. Minghai said, “None of us is unscientific! In fact, we (the Bulang people) are all scientific. Being scientific comes from our ancestors, and now we continue this way of being.” In Minghai’s opinion, “ecology” is a science that has been practiced by the Bulang ancestors who used, but did not destroy, the ancient tea forests. As a result, he believed that the transformation from terrace tea gardens to ecological tea gardens was a necessary process to bring the science of the Bulang ancestors back to Mangjing. “It’s our authentic tea culture,” reiterated Minghai.

During the conversation, Minghai continued to emphasize that terrace tea gardens represent a landscape of “modernization” (xiandaihua de) and that ecological tea gardens represent “scientization” (kexuehua de). More importantly, Minghai perceived modernization as a different process from scientization. He said, “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 applied “ecology” as a “science” to care for the tea forest. On the contrary, terrace tea gardens were the product of modernization, which in Minghai’s mind was doing damage to the Bulang villagers’ tea production. Minghai explained that to manage the terrace tea gardens well, the Bulang people applied “modern” methods to produce tea, including the use of pesticides and chemical nutrients, as well as the carving out of the forest for tea plantation. Accordingly, the modernization of tea production, represented by the terrace tea gardens, was “not good; not scientific.” Minghai confidently supported his viewpoint. In other words, for Minghai, the modernization of tea production, which has been realized by the management of terrace tea gardens, is not scientific. Terrace tea gardens are not scientific because the resulting damage to the natural environment has made them “not ecological.” For Minghai, only “being ecological” could be claimed as “being scientific.”

As exemplified by Minghai’s comments, many Bulang villagers in Mangjing considered the ecological tea gardens to represent a “scientific” method of tea production. However, for the Bulang villagers, “being scientific,” as opposed to “being modern,” became more a moral standard for taking good care of the ancient tea forest and “nature” in a broader sense. In other words, “being scientific” through “ecological” tea production, for many Bulang villagers, was not about using scientific techniques or facilities to produce tea; rather, “ecology,” as a “science,” was a moral doctrine to treat the natural environment well. On the contrary, the so-called “modernization” of tea production practiced in the terrace tea gardens, for many villagers, violated the moral doctrine due to the damage it causes to the natural environment. As a result, the practice of transforming the terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens, for Bulang villagers, represented the separation of the moral standards between “being modern” and “being scientific” with regard to tea production. Similarly to Minghai, many of the Bulang villagers positioned themselves as “being scientific” based on a belief that before the introduction of “modern” terrace tea gardens, they had practiced the “ecological” method of tea production to protect the ancient tea forest.

6.3. Smoking as “Unscientific”: Bulang villagers’ quality (Suzhi)

Bulang villagers considered the ecological tea gardens to be a “scientific” method of production practiced in their tradition, whereas most non-Bulang outsiders, including the government officials and tea merchants, were more concerned with the “advanced” organic production of the ecological tea gardens. More specifically, the organic production of the ecological tea gardens required a strict standard of hygienic processing, which was a critical part of “scientific management” (kexuehua guanli). Many outside government officials and tea merchants have complained that the Bulang villagers have not been able to “advance” to the level of hygienic processing required to meet the criteria of “scientific management” for tea production. Accordingly, smoking has been cited by non-Bulang outsiders as a demonstration of the Bulang villagers’ “low quality” (di suzhi) of hygienic tea production, which has resulted in their failure to achieve “scientific management” of the ecological tea gardens. The township officials’ visit to Mangjing exemplified the scenario.

The purpose of the township officials’ visit, according to Minghai, was not just to understand the progress of the transformation of terrace tea gardens. More importantly, they came to prepare for the forthcoming visit of the former Communist Party Secretary of Yunnan Province, Enpei Bai. Bai’s visit to Mangjing was part of a trip to investigate the development of the tea industry in Pu’er Prefecture, and Bai’s visit to Mangjing would be used specifically to highlight its thriving production of ancient tree tea and the increasing production of ecological tea.

Upon the arrival of the township officials, with the help of Minghai, I was introduced to them, and they then allowed me to participate in their travels through Mangjing. The township officials asked Minghai to rehearse the agenda for Bai’s forthcoming visit. The township officials wanted to make sure that every stop that Minghai chose was appropriate for Bai’s investigation. One of the purposes of Bai’s visit was to investigate the progress of the tea forest restoration and the ongoing campaign to transform all the terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens. Therefore, the township officials would specifically pay attention to the transformation process and would look for an ideal “sample” of ecological tea gardens to demonstrate the “success” of the current policy.

I was invited by the township officials to sit in the car with them. In the car, one of the township officials said to me, “the statement ‘industrialize ecological construction; ecologize industrial development’ (chanye fazhan kexuehua). He was indeed trying to explain the substantive goal for the whole tea forest restoration and for the tea industry in Yunnan. Although he did use two different terms of “ecologicize” (shentaihua) and “scientificize” (kexuehua), he did not specify any difference between them.

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110 It is easy for tea to absorb smells from the surroundings. To preserve the original aroma of tea, it is important to store tea in a proper container or space. In addition, ideally, tea should be stored away from any material that has a strong smell to avoid any potential of pollution. As a result, if tea is not properly stored and is exposed to smoke such as that from cigarettes and burning wood, it will easily absorb the smells of the smoke.

111 In Mandarin Chinese, this is “zhengtai jianshe chanyehua: chanye fazhan shengtaihui.” Another statement made by the township officials was “scientize industrial development” (chanye fazhan kexuehua). He was indeed trying to explain the substantive goal for the whole tea forest restoration and for the tea industry in Yunnan. Although he did use two different terms of “ecologicize” (shentaihua) and “scientificize” (kexuehua), he did not specify any difference between them.
me that Mangjing has been a “hot spot” for government officials to visit because he and other officials in the car have tried hard to use it as an example of “Scientific Pu’er on the ground.”

To show “Scientific Pu’er on the ground” in Mangjing, Minghai, as planned, brought the township officials to Huaxiao’s ecological tea garden, which had recently been transformed from a terrace tea plantation. Huaxiao’s ecological tea garden was located adjacent to the main road of Mangjing. For Minghai, the location of Huaxiao’s ecological tea garden was ideal for the visit of government officials, including the township officials and the former Party Secretary of Yunnan Province. It was easy to reach for close investigation, and an untransformed terrace tea garden could be found just behind Huaxiao’s ecological tea garden. As a result, it would also be easy for visitors to discern the difference in the landscape between terrace tea and ecological tea gardens (see Fig. 6).

Sitting in the car, the township officials and I were led by Minghai, who rode a motorcycle in front of us. Huaxiao, Huani, and the other villager also rode their motorcycles behind the car. Upon our arrival at Huaxiao’s ecological tea garden, one of the township officials opened the door to get out of the car. Just before he stepped out of the car, a cigarette butt on the ground caught his attention. Without making any action or uttering a word, he got out of the car and stood beside the cigarette butt. He pointed the cigarette butt out to me when I got out of the car. Then, he asked the driver, another township official, to move and park the car on the other side of the road. Minghai, Huaxiao, Huani, and the other Bulang villagers were all about to walk ahead to the ecological tea garden. However, the township official quickly stopped them and asked them to come to where he stood.

“This way, please,” Minghai approached the township official and intended to show him the right direction to the ecological tea garden. He did not realize why the township official had stopped. The township official pointed to the cigarette butt on the ground while Minghai was talking. “It is important to clear up all the cigarette butts out of sight before the visit of Party Secretary Bai!” said the township official in a commanding tone. Minghai quickly picked up the cigarette butt. He turned to the other Bulang villagers standing nearby and asked them to stop smoking in the tea gardens. He said it could cause a fire, especially when the cut tea trees had not yet been cleared. “No, no, no!” the township official interrupted immediately with a rising voice, “it’s more about the matter of being hygienic for the ecological production [of tea]!” Minghai froze for a second and then continued nodding his head at the township official.

After visiting Huaxiao’s ecological tea garden, the township official and I returned to the car to visit another destination in Mangjing. He reminded me of the cigarette butt he had just seen. He commented that teaching and practicing “Scientific Pu’er” in an area of minority nationality (minzu diqu) was difficult. He said, “their (the Bulang villagers’) ‘quality’ (sushi) is not enough. Still a long way to go!” As for the township official, most of the Bulang villagers did not understand the core (hexin) of “Scientific Pu’er.”

The township official thought the core of “Scientific Pu’er” went beyond the villagers’ physical participation in transforming the terrace tea gardens into ecological tea gardens; rather, he believed the essence of “Scientific Pu’er” should include the improvement of “personal quality,” meaning the proper and “civilized” (wenmingde) behaviors that are required for the “scientific management” of tea production. However, according to the township official, most of the Bulang villagers physically participated in the tea garden transformation without taking any further action to correct their “uncivilized” and, therefore, “unscientific” behaviors. He insisted that correcting all the “unscientific” behaviors of the Bulang villagers, such as smoking during tea processing, was a difficult but critical project. “They (Bulang villagers) don’t care if they would drop and mix their cigarette ashes with tea,” said the officials. The township official believed that the Bulang villagers would lose their competitiveness in the tea market if they did not realize the damage caused by their “unscientific management practices,” such as smoking.

7. Conclusions

By focusing on the ambiguity of modernity, this essay aims to reconsider the topic of minority nationalities on China’s frontier to understand the concept of modernization. The frontier is constituted not only by temporary and site-specific elements but also by enduring and structural factors (Fold and Hirsch, 2009), such as the state interventions and the market economy. Global assemblage is a productive approach to understanding how disparate elements, both ephemeral and long-lasting, are assembled, disconnected, and reassembled on the frontier to produce the ambiguity of modernity in a different time and space. Inquiries into this ambiguity are thus inquiries into the interrelationships between structured universalization and contingent situatedness in areas of minority nationalities of southwest China, and on the Chinese frontier at large.

As shown in the transformation from terrace tea gardens to ecological tea gardens in Mangjing, the ambiguity of modernity is manifested in the incompatible desires of the Chinese state for both “tradition” and “advancement” in the areas of minority nationalities on the frontier. On the one hand, the ecological tea gardens imply “going back” to the traditional method of tea production to protect the natural environment. On the other hand, 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” production of tea.

While the Chinese state has constructed “tradition in modernity” for tea production, for the Bulang villagers of Mangjing, the transformation of the tea landscapes is more related to the difference between “being modern” and “being scientific.” As discussed, the Bulang villagers have understood the terms “modernity” and “science” as two different moral standards related to the treatment of nature. “Being modern,” as demonstrated in the terrace tea gardens, is harmful to the natural environment. In contrast, “being scientific” is good for the natural environment because of the “ecological” method of production that is practiced in the ecological
tea gardens. In the Chinese context, campaigns for modernization have usually prioritized science as one in the top principles (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Sigley, 2006; Wang, 2011; Weller, 2006); however, for the Bulang villagers, the transformation of the tea landscape in Mangjing, paradoxically, has become a discursive and material practice to blur, and even to disrupt, the connection between modernity and science.

These shifting assemblages of tradition, modernity, science, and nature have produced and reproduced the ambiguity of modernity in the tea landscapes of Mangjing. Minority ethnicities, such as the Bulang people, have been a key element in the shifting assemblages. Recently, scholars have observed that many traditional Chinese practices are subject to scientific scrutiny to redefine “traditions” with modern meanings (e.g., Krichmer, 2002). Similarly, for the Bulang villagers, the “Scientific Pu’er” campaign has urged them to “go 50 years backward” to their “traditional” methods of tea production. The campaign has also dubbed Bulang traditions as “ecological.”

However, the shifting assemblages have not substantially altered the long-lasting social status of the Bulang villagers among China’s minority nationalities. Under the campaign of “Scientific Pu’er,” the non-Bulang outsiders have highlighted the “scientific management” of organic tea production. For government officials and tea merchants outside Mangjing, “being scientific” is more related to bodily practices, such as quitting smoking, for example, related to the hygienic processing of tea during production. This emphasis on hygiene as it is related to the organic production of ecological tea gardens has further downgraded the Bulang villagers’ overall quality (suzhi). Generally, the social majorities outside Mangjing still consider the Bulang villagers as “other Chinas,” (Litzinger, 2000) whose “low quality” (di suzhi) is always problematic. Here, suzhi refers to the “value coding” (Yan, 2003) used to reposition the Bulang villagers for the development of organic tea production. Value coding, therefore, considers the human subject (the Bulang) “as lacking, in need of constant readjustment, supplementation, and continual retraining” (ibid, p. 511).

Beyond the transformation of the landscape, another social and political enterprise is underway to reinforce the Bulang villagers’ status of “low quality.” For the Han majority, including government officials and tea merchants, the Bulang villagers demonstrate the “traditional” method of tea production to protect “nature.” However, they will never “advance” to the more “modern” and “scientific” methods of organic production due to their low quality. The constructions of ecological tea gardens, therefore, have been “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, p. 503). Despite the shifting assemblages of the tradition, modernity, science, and nature of the tea landscapes, the market economy of tea, overall, has reinforced and perpetuated the social order between the “inferior” minority nationalities and the “superior” Han majority in China.

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