

**Hung, Po-Yi. 2015. *Tea production, land use politics and ethnic minorities struggling over dilemmas in China's southwest frontier*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 205pp. ISBN 978-1-137-49407-8; US\$91.**

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Po-Yi Hung's book is based on his dissertation research in Yunnan Province, China. The book is an interesting examination of the dilemmas that China's ethnic minorities face in adjusting to the global market economy; in this case the international tea trade. The author examines the shifting assemblages of tradition, modernity, nature and development in the production and reproduction of place in the tea forests of China's southwest frontier. It is an ethnography that identifies the incompatible desires, changing moralities and cultural renovations that constitute embodied practices of harvesting, processing and selling tea. It is divided into topics including property, quality, hierarchy, landscape and ritual. These are used to analyse the contestations, negotiations and (re)articulations with tea production among the state, the market and the engagement of the local ethnic group, the Bulang people.

Theoretically, Hung combines assemblage theory with a governmentality approach, in line with Tania Li's (2007a) work on community forest management in Indonesia. In part one, the author conducts a genealogy of changing ownership rights in the tea fields of Mangjing. Historical examination of land reforms reveal the incompatible desires of the Chinese state to maintain control over the frontier border regions that are populated by the ethnic minorities that have historically resisted Han domination, while simultaneously expanding a privatised tea industry in Mangjing. The book shows the incompatible desires of tea entrepreneurs and Bulang villagers that emerge to construct meanings of tea production, engendered by the global tea market that fuels contestations of land and property rights in the tea fields of Mangjing.

Hung explores the effects of reconfiguring this global market and its effects on improved tea production and the moral order. *Suzhi* as a discursive tool is commonly applied analytically to examine the effects of neoliberalisation on discourses of inferiority and the marginalisation of ethnic minorities. Hung explains tea entrepreneurs from outside the region used *suzhi* to downgrade the Bulang people; labelling them 'backward' and 'uncivilised.' A lack of 'tea culture' among the villagers is used to justify labelling them with low *suzhi* status. The outsiders were able to reconfigure a moral order in Mangjing that supports the production of tea for a competitive global market, while simultaneously solidifying their position of superiority within that moral order.

*Suzhi* similarly reconfigured the social order within the Bulang community itself. By introducing new standards for tea production, the tea traders also created a new social hierarchy. Hung explores how a moral code of trust signifies high *suzhi* status; individual villagers are respected for the integrity of their tea harvest. Similarly the application of advanced processing technologies that improve the quality of tea produced, can elevate a villager's place in the social order. The transformation of the social order in Mangjing exemplifies how the Chinese state governs the ethnic minorities from a distance through the international global tea market, and through tea entrepreneurs.

Hung then turns to analysis of changing landscapes to understand the dilemmas of development on China's ethnic minority frontier. A desire for market success drives the state's incompatible desires for advancement and tradition. There are, therefore, shifting assemblages of tradition, modernity, science and nature. Contradictions emerge between the market value of ecological tea, which is produced and marketed as part of traditional Bulang culture, and the need for scientifically managed organic tea that only the state and tea entrepreneurs can provide. The emergent assemblage becomes fertile ground for further downgrading of the Bulang villagers status inherent in the *suzhi* discourse. The 'ambiguity of modernity' is that the state constructs tradition within modernity, to meet the demands of the global tea trade. This in turn reinforces the inferior status of the Bulang minority with respect to the Han majority.

Through ethnology, Hung examines the response of the Bulang villagers to the low *suzhi* status they have been accorded. They undergo a cultural renovation in order to rearticulate their Bulang identity after a caterpillar infestation threatens the annual harvest. The villagers' relationship with their ancient tea forest has been challenged through the dilemmas over modernisation and the incompatible desires of the state, markets and science. The Bulang rearticulate their relationship to the ancient tea forest through performing 'worm worship.' An assemblage of science, market and cultural tradition emerge through this ritual to redefine

meanings of place and the caterpillar disaster. Meanwhile, scientists define place through a scientific epistemology that explains the worm infestation, and subsequently offers remedies. State officials define the disaster in terms of market risk and potential lost revenue. In response the villagers produce their own emergent construct of place and the event, incorporating the constructs of the state and scientists to redefine place through the 'spirit of the mountain' who is teaching the Bulang people of the consequences of neglecting their traditional rituals, and not respecting the tea forest and the natural environment.

Preparation for the 'Tea Ancestor Worship' reveals the constant conflict over place making that occurs on the frontier. In renovating tea rituals and rearticulating Bulang identity, the villagers attract further state intervention through market opportunities for tourism and sales of the high quality 'authentic' Pu'er tea harvested specifically for the ceremony. This time the villagers negotiate space for the market and their traditions by holding separate ceremonies for the tourists and for villagers. The villagers negotiate control over their culture by using the state ceremony as an opportunity to narrate their own tea culture to outsiders, without losing communication rights to state or market actors. Even though the Bulang people have had to incorporate market risks and opportunities into their tea rituals, their traditional meanings have been preserved.

In conclusion, the author uses Tania Li's (2007a) version of assemblage theory effectively, in order to analyse the dilemmas experienced through the complex, messy and situated process of place-making occurring on the Chinese frontier. Hung argues that dilemmas between tradition and modernity, and nature and development, rather than resistance or collaboration, define the place making process. Incompatible desires produce a continual process of disassembling and reassembling incoherent elements to "make place." Li's (2007b) critique of the Foucauldian subject making process is used to explain the failings of government: in this case the incomplete process of *suzhi* building to reconstruct place through moral reordering in its advancement of market objectives. Hung concludes with Dovey (2010), reconceptualizing assemblage as a two-fold process, in which a mix of elements and approaches are needed to analyse place-making on the Chinese frontier. The author avoids, therefore, setting up a dialectical relationship between embodied concepts such as global/local, tradition/modernity or primitiveness/civilization.

Research into the effects of *suzhi* in China is robust, but evidence of these neoliberal subject-making processes in the ethnic minority regions of the country are rare, making Hung's contribution a meaningful one. The rich ethnographic data collected during fieldwork is insightful. The addition of the two-fold analysis, identifying the simultaneous presence of contradictory elements which form dilemmas, is a welcome departure from analysis of dialectical relationships. Hung contributes to our understanding of the dilemmas ethnic minorities face as a result of the state's attempt to transform the "frontier as China's national margin" to "frontier as China's connected space between tradition and modernity."

## References

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