Journal of
Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

Sturgeon, Janet C. (2012),
The Cultural Politics of Ethnic Identity in Xishuangbanna, China: Tea and Rubber as “Cash Crops” and “Commodities”, in: *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 41, 4, 109–131.
ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

The online version of this article and the other articles can be found at:
<www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies
in cooperation with the National Institute of Chinese Studies, White Rose East Asia Centre at the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield and Hamburg University Press.

The *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* is an Open Access publication.
It may be read, copied and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

To subscribe to the print edition: <ias@giga-hamburg.de>
For an e-mail alert please register at: <www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org>

The *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* is part of the GIGA Journal Family which includes:
Africa Spectrum ● Journal of Current Chinese Affairs ● Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs ● Journal of Politics in Latin America ● <www.giga-journal-family.org>

The Cultural Politics of Ethnic Identity in Xishuangbanna, China: Tea and Rubber as "Cash Crops" and "Commodities"

Janet C. STURGEON

Abstract: In 2003, the poverty alleviation bureau in Xishuangbanna, China, introduced tea and rubber as cash crops to raise the incomes of ethnic-minority farmers who were thought to be backward and unfamiliar with markets. Using Marx's commodity fetish and Polly Hill's critique of "cash crops", this paper analyses the cultural politics of ethnicity for Akha and Dai farmers in relation to tea and rubber. When the prefecture government introduces "cash crops", the state retains its authority as the dispenser of knowledge, crops and modernity. When tea and rubber become commodities, however, some of the symbolic value of the commodity seems to stick to farmers, making rubber farmers "modern" and tea farmers "ethnic" in new ways. Through rising incomes and enhanced identities, Akha and Dai farmers unsettle stereotypes of themselves as "backward". As a result of income levels matching those of urban middle-class residents, rubber farmers even challenge the prevalent social hierarchy.

■ Manuscript received 26 March 2012; accepted 4 September 2012

Keywords: China, Xishuangbanna, rubber, tea, minorities, cultural politics

Dr. Janet C. Sturgeon is an associate professor in the Department of Geography at Simon Fraser University. Her primary research interests are in landscape and livelihood transformations for ethnic-minority farmers in southwest China and contiguous parts of Laos. She is editing a special section for the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* on cross-border dynamics for ethnic minorities in China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma. In 2010 she published "Governing Minorities and Development in Xishuangbanna, China: Akha and Dai Rubber Farmers as Entrepreneurs", in: *Geoforum*, 41, 318–328.
E-mail: <sturgeon@sfu.ca>

Introduction

In 2003, the poverty alleviation bureau in Xishuangbanna Prefecture, southern Yunnan, launched cash crop campaigns to encourage Akha and Dai farmers to plant tea in the uplands and rubber in the lowlands. The purpose of the campaigns was to lift ethnic-minority farmers out of poverty. Like many other development projects in the Global South over the past 50-odd years, cash crops were introduced to link farmers with markets and bring them out of stagnant subsistence livelihoods and isolation. From 2005 to 2008, in a project that examined farmers' adoption of cash crops as a result of the new superhighway linking Kunming (China) with Bangkok (Thailand), our China team focused on tea and rubber. At the beginning of the project, "cash crops" seemed like a meaningful term referring to agricultural products that become market commodities. Fairly soon, though, I began to question the meaning of "cash crops". How could tea and rubber belong in the same category, when they represent very different entities in farmers' livelihoods, histories and senses of identity? It soon became clear that by classifying them as "cash crops", state agents present tea and rubber as the same kind of "thing", a thing that would transform backward minority farmers into modern market producers.

Building on my initial question about the meaning of cash crops, this paper[1] examines tea and rubber under two related rubrics. The first rubric is that of commodities. By drawing on Marx's analysis of the commodity fetish and how subsequent scholars have used this term, I show how tea and rubber behave as commodities and place special focus on how the two crops change and even enhance Akha and Dai self-image in Chinese society. Unlike other analyses of how the commodity fetish erases the particularities of production, this paper focuses on what these particularities do for farmers. The second rubric is "cash crops" and the work this category does in relation to minority farmers (called "minority nationalities" in China, 少数民族, *shaoshu minzu*). In the context of state plans, the term "cash crops" keeps minority farmers in place as passive recipients of state-led economic development and obscures the remarkable differences between tea and rubber in their histories and end consumers, and even in terms of the emerging identities of the

1 Research for this article was supported by NSF Grant #HDS0434043, Understanding Dynamic Resource Management Systems and Land Cover Transitions in Montane Mainland Southeast Asia.

farmers who grow them. Analysing tea and rubber as both "commodities" and "cash crops" opens up the ambiguous arena in which farmers are at once "backward" minorities in need of state help and also progressive entrepreneurs taking advantage of their role as "commodity" producers. Through this juxtaposition, this paper seeks to illuminate the complex cultural politics of ethnic identity in Xishuangbanna.

Roadmap of the Paper

A theoretical section examining the commodity fetish and cash crops is followed by a short section on how minorities came to be seen as perpetually "backward". The next section, on the history of tea and rubber in Xishuangbanna, contrasts tea, a product originating in this locale, with rubber, an industrial crop first introduced into this region in the 1950s. A section on the commodity fetish then explores how the symbolic value of tea and rubber as commodities seems to stick to farmers – making tea farmers "more ethnic" and rubber farmers "modern" – and examines the extent to which these shifts in identity constitute a political challenge for local state agents. The conclusion then knits together farmers' experiences with tea and rubber as cash crops and commodities, revealing how commodity production in tea and rubber changed the incomes and identities of farmers in ways that are intriguingly similar, even though the products and the farmers' identities are distinctly different. In this instance, commodity production and the fetishes involved raised the status of farmers and, from the viewpoint of minority producers, helped them advance rather than exploiting their labour. This comparative examination reveals the complexity of the cultural politics of ethnicity in Xishuangbanna, as minority farmers seek to enhance their "place" in Chinese society.

This paper is based on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted over six years in Xishuangbanna (January–February in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010; February 2011). Semi-structured interviews were done with members of the following groups: Dai and Akha farmers (subsumed within the Hani nationality in China) in over 30 villages; state researchers at the Tropical Crops Research Institute, the Forestry Bureau, and the Environmental Protection Bureau in Jinghong (prefecture capital); researchers at the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden (XTBG) in Menglun; and state rubber farm administrators and workers at five state rubber

farms. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, with translation as needed for older tea and rubber farmers.

Most of the papers in this topical issue offer policy analyses from the point of view of Beijing. This paper illustrates the value of ethnographic analysis, especially from a vantage point on China's periphery, providing an intimate view of what happens in response to, or in the context of, state policies, development projects and ideologies. Ethnographic fieldwork on cash crops and minorities reveals the unintended consequences of policies and projects as well as the unfortunate state stereotypes of and attitudes toward ethnic-minority populations. The local point of view also brings to light farmers' agency in remoulding their identities in response to emerging opportunities. The farmers would not see their moves as political – they are just trying to raise household incomes – but state agents, especially in response to the success of rubber farmers, recognize the power relations at stake (cf. Kerkvliet 2009).

Theoretical Context

In his critique of capitalism, Karl Marx begins by examining commodities (Marx 1977). He first explores the meaning of value. When producers make goods for their own consumption, these goods have a "use value". When these goods are exchanged for money, they become commodities, and they take on what he calls "exchange value". The work done by commodities and exchange value is central to Marx's framing of the pitfalls of capitalism. Marx explains that the moment when products take on exchange value, a magical transformation gives life to things that then seem to act independently, separate from human agency. This magic, which he calls the "commodity fetish", also erases the particularities of labour, culture and knowledge in the actual production of the commodity. In Marx's words, products as commodities take on a money equivalent (exchange value), which

> conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making these relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly (Marx 1977: 168–169).

Goods that have money equivalents become generic and abstract commodities, seemingly without roots in wide-ranging economic transactions. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Marx proclaimed that the

commodity fetish hides the fact that capitalism produces a society divided into capitalists and workers. From a more recent vantage point, the fetish of the commodity produces what Taussig (1980: 3) calls our "capitalist culture", in which exchange value hides the fact that capitalism creates classes in which commodity producers are exploited, allowing consumers to enjoy endless commodities without knowledge or guilt. For Marx, then, the commodity fetish is central to the success of capitalism, which its proponents claim to be an economic system creating universal economic benefit, but which in fact produces winners and losers.

Where Marx has recently been critiqued is in his next step, where he asserts that if we could remove the veil of the fetish, we could see the social relations of production "plainly" (Marx 1977: 169). Numerous scholars have pointed out that what replaces the fetish is not the plain truth, but layers of complex narratives, texts or representations (Taussig 1980: 9; Mitchell 1992; Castree 2001). As a remedy, some scholars have urged researchers to "get with the fetish" to trace the commodity chains or networks that bring commodities to our local supermarkets (Cook 2004; Cook and Crang 1996). As an example of getting with the fetish, Ian Cook (2004) has looked at tropical fruits, showing how advertising in Britain portrays papayas as dropping from trees in tropical locales and then being whisked to grocery stores to add exotic flavour to the consumer's palate. What Cook then traces is the colonial history that connected Britain to places like Jamaica, the production of papaya on large plantations run by multinational corporations, the exploitation of Jamaican labour, and the advertising campaign that sells the fruit as if no labour, exploitation or heavily racialized history were involved in the link between grower and consumer (Cook 2004).

Following in this vein, other scholars have examined the packaging and marketing of "organic", "fair trade", or "ethical" products in relation to the commodity fetish. These efforts to sell healthy, socially acceptable products purport to highlight and even protect producers. With respect to Fairtrade coffee (brand name) grown in Costa Rica, Carrier (2010: 677) describes coffee packages with a "smiling man or woman of marked ethnic aspect presented as a small-holder working a few acres of land". Carrier notes that this image obscures the outside labour brought in for the intense coffee harvest. The label, however, fetishizes the product as coming from self-reliant peasants, an image that appeals to Northern consumers wanting to connect with and support traditional ethnic-minority ways of life. Fairtrade hides the commodity chain, "eliding the

roasters, shippers and merchants who stand between grower and producer" (Carrier 2010: 686). Even though consumers seek to connect with producers instead of ignoring them, the commodity fetish still disguises the actual production and trade.

In a similar study, Freidberg (2003: 27) analyses "ethical standards" for products, meaning those "produced according to codified environmental and social welfare standards". She focuses on pre-packaged micro-vegetables ("micro-veg") grown and packaged in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Zambia, former British colonies, to be sold in British supermarkets. Again, the ethical standards appeal to Northern consumers concerned about the "survival of species, habitats, and ways of life" (Freidberg 2003: 32). In this analysis, however, the demands of a supply chain to supermarkets, as well as concerns about efficiency and hygiene, have diverted production and packaging from small-holder black farmers and labourers to large-scale white plantations and processing factories. "Ethical standards" for large markets in Britain have in fact reproduced racist colonial relations. Meanwhile, micro-veg from African countries appeals to "consumers' relatively superficial geographic knowledge and curiosity about the faraway", fetishizing the product even as its actual production is obscured. Again, as in Carrier's study, the consumer feels linked to the producer, but in this case is duped by reliance on "ethical standards".

In this paper, instead of focusing on consumers, my analysis starts at the other end, with the producers' understanding of what happens to them when tea and rubber become lucrative commodities. As I argue here, rubber production makes rubber farmers "modern" and tea cultivation makes tea farmers "more ethnic", or ethnic in a new and positive way. The outcome of the cultivation and sale of each product differs, with the results playing out in distinct ways for tea and rubber in the cultural politics of ethnicity in Xishuangbanna. This analysis shows that the transfer of symbolic value to the producers is remarkably similar in both products, adding a new dimension to our understanding of the commodity fetish. The commodity fetish may enable the exploitation of workers, but it may also allow producers to rise in status in a context where their status has officially been set as "backward".

"Cash crops" has long been a taken-for-granted category in agricultural development. As early as 1996, though, Polly Hill critiqued the term "cash crops" in her trenchant book, *Development Economics on Trial*. Where she worked in West Africa, there was no crop that farming families did not sell, including those that economists called "staple" or "subsistence"

crops. Moreover, these farmers had been selling crops for centuries in long-distance trade networks that were fundamentally rural. Hill is debunking at least two assumptions here:

- that engaging in markets is something new for farmers, who are assumed to be backward, subsistence cultivators, and
- that the introduction of "cash crops" would transform traditional farmers into market-oriented, modern cultivators, breaking them out of rural isolation.

For Hill, the term "cash crops" made no sense, provoking her to look at how development planners used the term to establish themselves as experts at improving livelihoods, which, as she shows, they little understood. Hill, too, was arguing for the value of ethnographic research. Her comments on "cash crops" apply to Xishuangbanna as well, where state agents have launched cash crop campaigns to bring "stagnant", "backward" minority nationality farmers into the market and the modern world. In Xishuangbanna, as in West Africa, however, upland and lowland minority farmers had been involved in long-distance trade networks for centuries until the communist regime ended farmers' trade in the 1950s (see Hill 1998; Forbes 1987 on long-distance trade). Here I build on Polly Hill's analysis by showing that state introduction of cash crops reinforces the relationship between ruler and ruled, modern and backward, those well versed in progress and modernity and those lacking in knowledge and in need of help. In this understanding, state promotion of cash crops constitutes part of governance in Xishuangbanna. Most of these cash crop campaigns failed. Each campaign failure, though, was blamed on minority farmers for their backwardness and lack of scientific knowledge; despite the failures, each new campaign reproduced the state as the provider of economic development. I have written about the power relations involved in cash crop campaigns elsewhere (Sturgeon 2010) and lack the space to repeat the argument here. The question in this essay is what happens to power relations when cash crops are successful.

The story of cash crops rests in a larger context of the Chinese regime's drive over the past 20-some years to turn China into an economic giant in the global economy. Citizens are called on to become entrepreneurs whose success will contribute to national economic growth (Hoffman 2006; Rofel 2007; Yan 2008). Farmers in rural Yunnan, like workers in major cities, understand that becoming rich responds to the state call to become successful entrepreneurs. Under local campaigns to

spur economic development, the Xishuangbanna landscape has quickly changed from highly diverse forests and complex agriculture into monoculture swaths of tea and rubber. Xishuangbanna, touted as the prefecture with the highest biodiversity in all of China, is losing its diversity to the national and prefectural goal of economic growth (Sturgeon 2011). While this larger context is not addressed in this essay, the national ideology and its local effects are important for understanding the dynamics at hand.

Minorities as "Backward"

Before 1949, Xishuangbanna was known as the Buddhist principality of Sipsongpanna, more closely linked with Southeast Asia than with China. Changing the name to Xishuangbanna (a transliteration of Sipsongpanna), the Chinese regime incorporated it into the People's Republic in 1953 as an autonomous Dai prefecture. During ethnic identification (民族识别, *minzu shibie*) in the 1950s, state research teams identified 13 minority nationalities in Xishuangbanna and ranked them according to their advancement in the Marxist modes of production (primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, socialist), with Akha rated as primitive (shifting cultivators) and Dai rated as feudal (wet rice farmers) (Sturgeon 2005; Diana 2009). In any case, all groups were designated in degrees of backwardness behind the Han. Policies were implemented to help minorities "catch up", but the rankings ensured that the Han and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were in charge of definitions, rankings and plans. These days, bookstores in Xishuangbanna carry booklets describing the characteristics and level of development of each group. The rankings and stereotypes of each minority are taught in school and have become entirely naturalized (Borchert 2008; Harrell 1995). No one talks about production mode anymore, but minorities are still ranked in the same order, now based on level of "development". In relation to development, all minorities are thought to be "backward" in spite of rapid transformations in their landscapes and livelihoods. In this locale there has been limited minority violence and no political threat to the central government, unlike in Tibet and Xinjiang. An analysis of tea and rubber as cash crops and commodities, however, reveals the ways in which Akha and Dai unsettle the given stereotypes and the assumption of "backwardness" they imply.

The History of Tea and Rubber in Xishuangbanna

The cash crop campaigns of 2003, promoting tea in the uplands and rubber in the lowlands, were successful, although not necessarily for the reasons the poverty alleviation bureau imagined. Over the past 15 or so years, state extension agents in Xishuangbanna have introduced a series of cash crop campaigns, featuring in turn pineapples, coffee, macadamia nuts and sugar cane, among others. Agricultural extension agents introduced each new crop, believing that farmers needed to be pulled out of isolation and subsistence livelihoods and into the ever-growing socialist market economy. As it turned out, almost all of the cash crop campaigns failed, largely because state agents had not concerned themselves with varieties of crops appropriate to local micro-climates or with the collection, sale or processing of these new crops (Sturgeon 2010). Tea and rubber as cash crops were successful, however. Discovering the sources of success requires taking a brief foray into the history of tea and rubber in Xishuangbanna.

The Tea Story

As in Hill's West Africa, there is a long history of trade in agricultural products in Xishuangbanna, among which tea takes pride of place. Plant geneticists now claim that tea originated in southern Yunnan and contiguous parts of Burma and Laos (Forbes 2008: 3). Tea from this region has been traded for centuries, perhaps millennia, allegedly having been discovered by the legendary Emperor Shennong in 2737 BCE (Forbes 2008: 3). Most tea drunk in China comes from the small-leaf variety (*Camellia sinensis*). Tea from southern Yunnan, on the other hand, is derived from large-leaf *Camellia sinensis var. Assamica*, which is fermented into tea cakes to make pu'er tea (Menzies forthcoming). The tea was originally collected in Pu'er Prefecture, just north of Xishuangbanna, from which the tea takes its name. Most of the large-leaf *Assamica* was grown in the hills surrounding the town of Simao in Pu'er Prefecture, and farther south in Sipsongpanna, the principality that was incorporated into China as Xishuangbanna Prefecture.

Pu'er tea has been famous throughout China for a long time, known primarily as a digestive aid. The very best pu'er tea was not traded, but instead became tribute tea sent from Simao to the emperor. From the ninth to the nineteenth centuries, the imperial court traded pu'er tea for

horses from Tibet and Mongolia, since horses were needed for the Chinese military (Forbes 2008: 1–2). Early in the twentieth century, Han traders established tea factories in Sipsongpanna and encouraged upland farmers to plant tea in the understory of what were then vast expanses of primary forest (Hill 1998). Farmers spaced the tea bushes relatively far apart and allowed them to grow into large bushes, or what might be called small trees. In the Six Tea Mountains (villages) of Xishuangbanna, which were believed to produce the finest-quality pu'er tea, farmers thinned the canopy above each tea bush to allow the proper amount of sunlight (Menzies forthcoming). Most of this famous tea was produced by farmers whose descendants are now classified as minority nationalities in China.

Beginning in the early 1950s, the People's Republic closed down markets and cross-border trade. By the late 1950s, Xishuangbanna farmers, like rural people across China, were organized into agricultural communes, turning minority cultivators into true subsistence farmers. Some continued to cultivate pu'er tea but sold very little. In the 1980s, when commune agricultural and forest lands were contracted to villages and households in the household responsibility system, pu'er fields were also allocated to households, although many of the oldest tea bushes were located in what were then designated as village-protected forests and state forests. Farmers continued to pick the tea wherever it grew, but the price of tea in the 1980s and 1990s was very low. Often only old people and children were sent out to pick tea, since the labour invested was not worth the price (Sturgeon 2005). During my field research in the mid-1990s, upland farmers cited stories about Zhu Geliang introducing tea to the area – clearly a legend, but one that links the farmers' own past to early Chinese history. In China more broadly, however, by the 1990s the history of pu'er tea had been all but lost. People in cities drank fancy teas from Fujian and Zhejiang, but pu'er tea, if known at all, was a historical artefact.

In the early 1990s, a team from Taiwan visited the Kunming Institute of Botany in the capital of Yunnan Province to see if pu'er tea was still produced. Botanists in Kunming said they had never heard of pu'er tea, or if they had, that pu'er tea no longer existed. The Taiwan team insisted on travelling with their hosts to the Six Tea Mountains in Xishuangbanna, where they found that farmers had continued to cultivate and process high-quality pu'er tea up to the present, including throughout the Cultural Revolution and the collective period (Menzies

2011). The Taiwan team reintroduced the history of pu'er tea to China and opened up the possibility for international markets.

Since about 2003, pu'er tea has been enjoying a huge market boom. Informants in Kunming said that a Japanese doctor had recently discovered that pu'er tea could lower blood pressure, help with weight loss, and even prevent cancer. Since these are major health problems produced by industrialized modernity, including in China (see Maurer et al. 1998), the market for pu'er tea took off in China and in boutique markets in Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Europe and North America. The price for pu'er skyrocketed, bringing greatly increased incomes to Xishuangbanna farmers. The tea was marketed as organic, curative and ethnic, with a particular focus on southern Yunnan, effectively creating a *terroir* for pu'er tea. In the Six Tea Mountains, some informants claimed to belong to a *benzu* (本族), or original ethnic group (Menzies forthcoming). It was unclear whether this was an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) meant to appeal to international consumers looking for indigenous pu'er tea, but the claim was remarkable in China, where the official 56 *minzu* (民族, nationalities), without a *benzu*, had long been set (Harrell 1995). The tea producers quickly realized that being "ethnic" or "indigenous" had great value in international tea markets.

In the past few years, tea farmers in Xishuangbanna have done very well, with the exception of the price bubble bursting in mid-2007. As of 2011, however, the pu'er price was still reasonable, and upland Akha farmers in Mengsong, my long-term research site, had plans to process their own tea and market it as "Traditional Mengsong Akha Pu'er Tea". Rather than playing down their minority nationality, Mengsong Akha highlight their ethnicity on a label that features S'mio, the first Akha man. Akha men today can recite genealogies 55 to 65 generations from S'mio down to themselves. For Akha, S'mio is a seminal and almost sacred figure. Featuring S'mio on the label is an unusual step, since he is revered as central to Akha identity. The label thus proclaims, for them, the depth of Akha history and indigeneity to this place. Just below S'mio on the label is a bare-breasted woman suckling a child, with two other children just visible. The bare-breasted woman does not appear in genealogies, but this depiction reflects Akha acknowledgement of the popular image of Dai women bathing naked in the river. For Han men, Dai women are thought to be particularly alluring and available (Hyde 2007). The Akha woman on the label is inseparable from family and children, and does not suggest promiscuity, but Akha tea producers think her half-

naked image may still appeal to Chinese consumers. Along with S'mio and his family are photos of attractive Akha girls in traditional dress picking tea in picturesque settings. Pretty girls are a fairly common marketing ploy, similar to Carrier's smiling peasants. In my experience, Akha people of all ages and genders pick tea and they never do so in traditional dress. On this label, then, the images are multivalent. Mengsong Akha tea producers seek to show that they and the tea are indigenous to this place, and that there is a connection between ethnic tea pickers and global consumers. The Akha tea farmers create the fetish themselves by suggesting that girls in Akha traditional dress pick the tea, and that consumers are linked directly to Akha livelihoods without intervening supply-chain intermediaries.

In 2003, the prefecture government launched a poverty alleviation campaign to encourage upland farmers to plant more tea. In light of the long history and recent resurgence of pu'er tea, it is notable that in the 2003 campaign, state extension agents arrived in Mengsong and elsewhere promoting what farmers called a cheap, poor-quality tea variety. To raise farmers' incomes, state officials offered farmers free tea seedlings and five years of grain and cash subsidies for planting the new tea. In 2007, I discovered that Mengsong farmers had accepted the subsidies, but instead of using the poverty alleviation tea, most had planted the high-quality tea long known to them. In the farmers' experience, this high-quality tea only went up in value over time. During the recent tea boom, tea from bushes 80 to 100 years old was fetching anywhere from 100 to 500 CNY (15.79 to 78.95 USD) per kilo, whereas the poverty alleviation tea could only bring in 30 CNY (4.74 USD) per kilo. Farmers welcomed buyers from Hong Kong and Taiwan who paid a premium price for the pu'er tea. Akha farmers pointed out that local tea middlemen were known to buy Mengsong tea at a lower price, mix it with low-quality tea, and then sell it as genuine pu'er for a high price in China, an occurrence also mentioned by Jinghong tea shop owners (who emphasized that their own tea was genuine). To the extent that farmers claimed exploitation, it was at the hands of domestic tea traders rather than from international buyers for high-end boutique markets. In the international arena, Akha farmers felt appreciated as ethnic or indigenous people with a long history in a particular place, and they marketed the tea accordingly. To my knowledge, prefecture administrators did not feel threatened by the burgeoning tea market – some of them even became middlemen to benefit from the high prices. Some state agents commented on minor-

ities' lack of market experience, reflecting the need for the state to step in, once again, to "help" backward minorities.

As indicated here, the government introduction of "cash crops" produces and reproduces the state as the site of knowledge, modernity and economic growth, in contrast to minority nationality farmers, who are imagined to be perpetually backward, isolated and subsistence-oriented (see Sturgeon 2010). Analysing the role of the term "cash crops" uncovers the power relations involved in the category. Farmers are thought to be caught somewhere in the past, whereas state agents, many of whom are Han, are believed to be progressive and entrepreneurial, leading minorities into a brighter future.

State administrators act based on a representation of minority farmers, especially those in the uplands, as backward, isolated and unaccustomed to markets. Upland farmers, including Mengsong Akha, have another representation of themselves as indigenous, ethnic and knowledgeable about pu'er tea. The "indigenous" or "ethnic" part reflects their history as minorities on China's periphery, but also responds to buyers who currently value the ethnic, the organic, and the pure, exotic product, especially in relation to health. In other words, if the veil of the fetish is removed, we find multiple representations: state agents constituting upland minorities as those needing state help, and minority farmers presenting themselves as indigenous experts in a product valued by an international audience. The cultural politics of ethnicity with respect to tea are entangled with governance, markets, status, and power relations, but analysis does not reveal a single, "plain truth".

The Rubber Story

The rubber story in Xishuangbanna is dramatically different, but also requires an exploration of its history beginning in the 1950s. At that time, the newly formed People's Republic faced a trade embargo from the United States, including on rubber, and wanted to become self-sufficient in this strategic product needed for the Korean War and for industrial development (Chapman 1991; Xu 2006; Anonymous 12, 13, 14, 15). Senior Chinese scientists introduced rubber from Southeast Asia to Xishuangbanna in large state plantations, transplanting not only the rubber, but also the agricultural plantation model emblematic of colonial resource extraction across Malaysia and Indonesia (Sturgeon and Menzies 2006). For the first two decades, the state rubber farms were military

operations run by army officers and worked by former soldiers. Central leaders were concerned about potentially restive minority populations, and about the possible return of Nationalist (Guomindang, Kuomintang, KMT) troops who had retreated just across the border into Burma following the communist victory in 1949 (Anonymous 13, 15). In their multiple roles on behalf of the national government, the state farms established a strong political, military and economic presence in Xishuangbanna. The eventual eleven state rubber farms dominated the valley floor, erasing previous ecologies, "knowledges" and cultures of production (cf. Tsing 2000). Past cultivation was replaced by modern state farms, staffed by Han from elsewhere in China in a factory-like production model believed to be suitable for latex, an industrial product (Sturgeon and Menzies 2006). The state farms, the Han workers and the rubber itself were symbols of modernity in the backward prefecture of Xishuangbanna (Sturgeon forthcoming). For two decades, local minorities were excluded from working on state rubber farms because they were thought to be too backward, lazy and unreliable to work on this important product.

In the early 1980s, with the contracting of land to households in the household responsibility system and the shift to what came to be called a "socialist market economy", the prefecture government decided to teach minority farmers to cultivate rubber on their own lands. National demand for rubber continued to rise, and the role of local government was now to help raise farmers' incomes (Sturgeon and Menzies 2006). Through major state development campaigns in the mid-1980s and again in the mid-1990s, farmers were urged to plant rubber on any sloping lands below 700 metres, above which rubber would not thrive. During the 1990s, rubber-farming households reported that they could earn 100 CNY (15.79 USD) for tapping rubber every other day during the season from February to November. Farmers were grateful for a reliable, steady income, even though rubber did not make them rich (Anonymous 17).

In 2001, China entered the World Trade Organization and began to use the world price for rubber, which was then lower than the state-subsidized domestic price. Beginning in 2003, however, the world price began to rise dramatically (Qiu 2009). At the same time, the forestry department in Xishuangbanna distributed "Grain for Green" certificates that enabled farmers to obtain free seedlings to plant rubber as part of the huge China Western Development project (西部大开发, *Xibu da kaifa*). Grain for Green was intended to promote reforestation, including

of rubber trees in Xishuangbanna, since rubber counts as "forest cover" in China. Grain for Green was also merged with the prefecture poverty alleviation campaign to raise farmers' incomes by having them plant even more rubber (Sturgeon 2010).

As a result of expanding rubber cultivation as well as the escalating world rubber price, minority rubber farmers in Xishuangbanna saw their household incomes rise beyond their wildest dreams. Interviews in 2006 and again in 2010 (Anonymous 1–11) revealed that many rubber households earned the equivalent of about 30,000 USD per year. To put this in context, in 2009 urban household incomes across China averaged 13,481 USD and rural incomes averaged 4,856 USD (*China Daily* 2010). In Xishuangbanna, the richest households interviewed made in excess of 80,000 USD per year. Unsurprisingly, farmers' incomes exceeded those of workers on state rubber farms. Additionally, rubber farmers had devised highly creative and flexible arrangements for land, labour and capital in expanding their rubber holdings and adjusting rapidly to changing markets (Sturgeon 2010). As a result of their enhanced incomes, Dai and Akha rubber farmers spoke in interviews about future investments, their ability to get bank loans, and their arrangements for health and retirement insurance. They were also able to put their children through school, including through university for those who qualified. Their interests and plans echoed those of middle-class urban Chinese (see Rofel 2007). Akha and Dai rubber farmers claimed that they were becoming modern, through both increased incomes and the association with rubber, an industrial product. Their identities and status in China, in their own view, had been transformed by the cultivation and sale of rubber.

Interviews at five state rubber farms, meanwhile, revealed that top-level state farm administrators, invariably Han, continued to emphasize that minority farmers' management of rubber was "chaotic" and "inefficient". Rubber farmers, they said, would still be backward and poor without help from the state farms (Anonymous 14, 16). Minority farmers should learn from and follow the state and the CCP. Farmers would never match the productivity of state farms, which were modern, efficient and scientific (Anonymous 12, 13, 14, 15, 16). These kinds of statements were so frequent and emphatic that they seemed to be deflecting a perceived threat from minority farmers, who were supposed to be passive recipients of state-led development, and were instead forging their own rubber practices and getting rich.

That the perceived threat from rubber farmers was real is reflected in the financial conditions of state rubber farms. The production units of state rubber farms had been privatized in 2003 to allow them to operate outside China, particularly in neighbouring Laos and Burma. By 2006, highly placed Chinese sources at the XTBG and the Kunming Institute of Botany told us that state rubber farms, as companies, were in financial trouble. Having relied on state subsidies and support for almost 50 years, these entities were not flexible and dynamic enough to engage in the world economy. By 2010, XTBG researchers working on rubber said that the state farm companies were going bankrupt and would possibly be dismantled, with the land distributed among state farm workers. State rubber farm personnel had good reason to feel threatened by minority farmers whose incomes and security exceeded their own.

By contrast, those ethnic-minority farmers who planted rubber had been doing very well, including making sharecropping arrangements with relatives in Laos to extend their rubber holdings across the border (Sturgeon forthcoming). Even as state agents introduced rubber to farmers to alleviate poverty, farmers themselves used rubber production to get rich. Rich minority farmers represented an inversion of the social hierarchy in which Han were supposed to be at the top and backward minorities ranked in order behind them. The cultural politics of rubber were challenging the social order, causing Han state farm managers to accuse rubber farmers of creating "chaos" and disturbing "social stability", claims commonly made about people who are seen to be threatening the political order in Chinese society (Sturgeon 2010). In addition, the prefecture government closed some of the border crossings to Laos to prevent farmer-to-farmer cross-border rubber arrangements.

Again, as in the case of tea, if we remove the veil of the fetish, we find more than one representation of minorities as rubber farmers. State farm administrators see minority rubber farmers as backward, inefficient and in need of help, whereas the farmers portray themselves as successful entrepreneurs, becoming modern through increased wealth and management of an industrial product. The cultural politics of ethnicity with respect to rubber are embedded in governance, markets, status and power relations, and – unlike in the case of tea – minority farmers' success with rubber represents a challenge to the social rankings in Xishuangbanna. As with tea, however, analysis does not reveal a single, "plain truth" about commodity production.

The Commodity Fetish

Rubber is sold domestically along two sets of linkages, one long established for the state rubber farms, and the other for small-holder rubber farmers. Farmers now tap into both these networks to sell their rubber. As a commodity, rubber is not associated with Xishuangbanna, even though Chinese people know about the prefecture from a popular television series about educated youth (知青, *zhiqing*) sent from cities to Xishuangbanna to tap rubber during the Cultural Revolution. But the image of rubber tappers does not stick to the product. In any case, people do not go to the store to buy a kilo of rubber, but rather to buy tires, gadgets and machines in which rubber is a component. Rubber is an industrial product, more like petroleum or coal than like tea. Rubber is not ethnic, exotic or charismatic – it does not have a *terroir*. Even I, who have done research on rubber for eight years, can buy new tires for my car without thinking about where the rubber comes from.

With respect to the commodity fetish, the conditions of production for rubber disappear almost immediately. It is a totally generic, abstract product, just as Marx claimed. It is hard to imagine rubber as a high-status product that would be removed from sale, such as tribute tea. The political stakes surrounding rubber are high, since it is a strategic military as well as industrial product, but it has no luxury cachet. Even though the actual labour going into rubber production disappears in exchange value, the very modernness of rubber as a product seems to stick to rubber farmers. Not only their newfound wealth, but also their association with rubber makes these farmers modern, at least in their own eyes. In this case, some of the monetary value as well as rubber's status stay with minority farmers who cultivate it. Within Xishuangbanna, the extraordinary success of Akha and Dai rubber farmers seems to threaten the prevailing social hierarchy. In return, the prefecture state agents denigrate minority farmers' rubber cultivation, saying farmers' practices are "chaotic" and "challenging social stability", and they have closed border crossings to Laos to prevent informal cross-border rubber production among minority farmers. Farmers' status as "modern" may not be officially acknowledged, but their achievements in rubber production have not gone unnoticed.

Tea has been planted extensively in Xishuangbanna in recent years, in response partly to state subsidies and partly to rapidly rising prices. Farmers in the Six Tea Mountains have been approached directly by traders from Hong Kong. These farmers now claim to be descendants of

a *benzu*, or original ethnic people in this place. Through the cultivation and sale of pu'er tea, farmers, including Mengsong Akha, are becoming even more indigenous or "ethnic" in relation to international markets. As a commodity, pu'er tea has become a boutique item for *cognoscenti* in Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Europe and North America. It is possible to buy pu'er tea from websites that extol its organic, curative properties. The popularity of pu'er tea coincides with a discourse of health and of the importance of ingesting organic products cultivated by indigenous people who have grown this product for a long time (see Carrier 2010 and Freidberg 2003). The labour, culture and knowledge invested in this product are doubtless romanticized, but that labour and history never disappear entirely as pu'er tea becomes a commodity in global markets. And when people buy pu'er tea, they check whether it has been grown in southern Yunnan, reinforcing a *terroir* for pu'er tea – its origin, like its producer, does not become abstract and generic.

Conclusions

To reprise, tea and rubber are linked together as "cash crops", a category that both embodies and conceals the power relations between state administrators and ethnic-minority farmers. As I have shown, tea and rubber are very different entities in their histories and consumers, and in terms of the emerging identities of the farmers who grow them. Tea originated in this part of the world, and has a long history of cultivation, trade, tribute and political relations. Tea farmers see themselves as part of this history, as well as keepers of traditions that feature them as indigenous to this place. In recent years, the people who buy pu'er tea have been middle-class consumers, whether Chinese, European or North American, intent on protecting their health and supporting ethnic-minority producers of tea from an exotic spot in China. Far from losing the particularities of production, pu'er carries them, connecting consumers throughout the world with the people, history and region of pu'er tea. And tea cultivators, in the current global trend to savour the exotic, build on this fetish to market the tea, seeing themselves as "ethnic" in a new and positive way. Tea as a fetishized commodity has also enabled Akha to rise in status in Chinese society, at least from their own perspective. However, neither farmers' increased incomes nor the promotion of "exotic" ethnicity is a threat to state agents in Xishuangbanna: The success

of farmers as ethnic tea growers matches with what state cash crop campaigns were intended to do.

Rubber, by contrast, was introduced to Xishuangbanna in the 1950s to meet a military and industrial need. For years, only Han were thought to be modern enough to cultivate and process rubber. Once introduced to ethnic-minority farmers, rubber cultivation spread rapidly, but within the prefecture state administrators and state farm personnel have continued to regard farmers' management of rubber as backward and inefficient. Rubber from Xishuangbanna is for national domestic consumption within China, but the end consumers are buying cars and machines, rather than "rubber" from a particular locale. Consumers have no idea whether they are purchasing rubber goods made from minority farmers' trees or from large state rubber farm plantations. The particularities of production fall away immediately when rubber becomes a commodity. Rubber farmers, though, seem to take on some of the characteristics of rubber, that thoroughly modern product. Production of a commodity enables Akha and Dai rubber farmers to rise in status, and their greatly enhanced incomes challenge established social rankings in China.

My analysis differs from Marx's on commodity fetishism in that rubber farmers, in some magical way, actually become modern in their association with rubber, even though rubber as a commodity behaves exactly as Marx predicted. Farmers' market experience of pu'er tea, meanwhile, differs from "getting with the fetish" of tropical fruits. Unlike papayas, which seem to lose their histories and production relations entirely by the time they reach British supermarkets, pu'er tea takes some of the particularity of its production with it wherever it goes in the world. In this sense, pu'er tea is like Fairtrade coffee and "ethical" micro-veg. Unlike those cases, though, Akha themselves have "gotten with the fetish" to take advantage of current consumer values. Pu'er tea, in its present global incarnation, makes its consumers healthy and its producers more ethnic, linking the two in a new kind of fetish.

As noted in the introduction, capitalism tends to produce winners and losers, a fact hidden by the commodity fetish. This article is not meant to be an encomium to capitalism, but rather an attempt to explore the multiple possibilities of commodity production and some surprising effects of the commodity fetish. Markets in Xishuangbanna are changing rapidly, and future state actions in tandem with large-scale businesses could yet co-opt and exploit minority farmers. Their successes are provisional. Meanwhile, one purpose of this paper is to highlight the agency

of Akha and Dai farmers in taking advantage of cash crop production to raise not only household incomes but also their status in China.

This story of cash crops is set in a prefecture whose economy is transitioning from being dominated by state rubber farms run by Han directors to becoming much more dynamic – a place where minority farmers contend for cash crop success. State governance through cash crop campaigns is still very much in place, but analysing what happens to the value of cash crops as commodities and how a certain symbolic value sticks to producers reveals farmers unsettling the stereotypes and even perhaps challenging the ranking of minorities in Xishuangbanna. Seemingly neutral "cash crops" turn out to be mediators of power relations between farmers and state agents and, through the commodity fetish, a subtle means to challenge the status quo.

References

Anonymous 1 (2010), interviews with farmers in three Dai village in Menglunsinze township, 17 January: male village head (61 years old), 21-year old man, another village head (56 years old), and a 40-year old woman.

Anonymous 2 (2010), interviews in Chengzi cun and Man E (Dai) villages, 28 January (all farmers): village head (51 years old), 45-year old man.

Anonymous 3 (2010), interviews in Man E and Man Bian (Dai) villages, 29 January (all farmers): women's group leader (40), village head (52), woman (55), man (63).

Anonymous 4 (2010), interviews in Man Jiang and Man Zha (Dai) villages, 30 January (all farmers): woman (65), group of men (mid-40s), man (35) and his mother (63), woman (68), man (33).

Anonymous 5 (2010), interviews in Man E (Dai) village, 4 February (farmers): woman (57), man (77).

Anonymous 6 (2010), interviews in Man Su Xing (Dai) village, 6 February (farmers): village head (male 46), man (64).

Anonymous 7 (2010), interviews in Man Lun Cun (Dai) village, 7 February (farmers): woman (43), man (22).

Anonymous 8 (2010), interviews in Man Haguo (Dai) village, 12 February (farmers): village head (male 56), man (69).

Anonymous 9 (2010), interviews in Guo Fang (Akha) and Ban Kalong (Akha) villages, 15 February (farmers): group of men (20s), two women (20s), village head (male 39), former village head (54), group of women (50s), woman (42) woman (45) couple (30s).

Anonymous 10 (2006), interviews in Ban Dok Duang (Dai), Man Ba San (Akha), Guo Fang (Akha), and Ban Kalong (Akha) villages, 11 February (farmers): man (45) and his mother (62), man (65), couple (30s), man (40), village accountant (41), assistant village head (male 45), village head (46), another village head (49), couple (50s), village accountant (33), woman (34), man (22).

Anonymous 11 (2006), interviews in Man Zuang (Dai), Man Jiang (Dai), and Man Jia (Dai) villages, 12 February: brother and sister grain traders (20s), woman farmer (47) farming couple (40s).

Anonymous 12 (2006), interviews with production manager and retired scientists at Dong Feng State Rubber Farm, 18–19 February.

Anonymous 13 (2006), interviews with manager, production head, retired workers, and minority officer, Meng Peng State Rubber Farm, 10 February.

Anonymous 14 (2006), interviews with production manager and minority officer at Meng La State Rubber Farm, 14 February.

Anonymous 15 (2006), interviews with production manager and retired workers at Mengxing State Rubber Farm, 14 February.

Anonymous 16 (2006) interview with manager at Jinghong State Rubber Farm, 23 February.

Anonymous 17 (1995), interviews with Akha and Dai rubber farmers, July.

Borchert, Thomas (2008), Worry for the Dai Nation: Sipsongpanna, Chinese Modernity, and the Problems of Buddhist Modernism, in: *Journal of Asian Studies*, 67, 1, 107–142.

Carrier, James G. (2010), Protecting the Environment the Natural Way: Ethical Consumption and Commodity Fetishism, in: *Antipode*, 42, 3, 672–689.

Castree, Noel (2001), Commodity Fetishism, Geographical Imaginations and Imaginative Geographies, in: *Environment and Planning A*, 33, 1519–1525.

Chapman, E. C. (1991), The Expansion of Rubber in Southern Yunnan, China, in: *The Geographical Journal*, 157, 1, 36–44.

China Daily (2010), China's Urban, Rural Income Gap Widens, 22 January, online: <www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2010-01/22/content_9361049.htm> (12 June 2012).

Cook, Ian (2004), Follow the Thing: Papaya, in: *Antipode*, 36, 4, 642–664.

Cook, Ian, and Phil Crang (1996), The World on a Plate: Culinary Culture, Displacement & Geographical Knowledges, in: *Journal of Material Culture*, 1, 2, 131–153.

Diana, Antonella (2009), *Roses and Rifles: Experiments of Governing on the China-Laos Frontier*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The Australian National University.

Forbes, Andrew (2008), *China's "Ancient Tea-Horse Road" in Historical Perspective, Trade Routes*, online: <http://cpamedia.com/trade-routes/tea-horse-road-historical-perspective> (19 February 2009).

Forbes, Andrew D. W. (1987), The Čin-Hō (Yunnanese Chinese) Caravan Trade with North Thailand during the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, in: *The Journal of Asian History*, 21, 1–47.

Freidberg, Susanne (2003), Cleaning Up Down South: Supermarkets, Ethical Trade and African Horticulture, in: *Social and Cultural Geography*, 4, 1, 27–43.

Harrell, Stevan (1995), Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them, in: Stevan Harrell (ed.), *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 3–36.

Hill, Ann Maxwell (1998), *Merchants and Migrants: Ethnicity and Trade among Yunnanese Chinese in Southeast Asia*, Southeast Asia Studies Monograph Series 47, New Haven: Yale University.

Hill, Polly (1996), *Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological Case for a Prosecution*, London: Cambridge University Press.

Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger (1983), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hoffman, Lisa (2006), Autonomous Choices and Patriotic Professionalism: On Governmentality in Late-socialist China, in: *Economy and Society*, 35, 4, 550–570.

Hyde, Sandra Theresa (2007), *Eating Spring Rice: The Cultural Politics of AIDS in Southwest China*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kerkvliet, Benjamin (2009), Everyday Politics in Peasant Societies (and Ours), in: *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36, 1, 227–243.

Marx, Karl (1977), *Capital, Volume I,* New York: Vintage Books.

Maurer, Crescencia, Changhua Wu, Yi Wang, and Shouzheng Xue (1998), *Water Pollution and Human Health in China*, China Environment Series 2, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center.

Menzies, Nicholas K. (forthcoming), Regional Change and Ancient Forest Tea: How Globalization Turned Backward Minorities into Green Marketing Innovators, in: Susanna Hecht, Christine Padoch,

and Kathleen Morrison (eds), *Social Lives of Forests*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Menzies, Nicholas K. (2011), personel communication, as a Ford Foundation/ Beijing program officer in the 1990s, Menzies witnessed this "rediscovery" of pu'er tea. Menzies was also a member of the research team on the adoption of cash crops in Xishuangbanna.

Mitchell, Timothy (1992), *Colonizing Egypt*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Qiu, Jane (2009), Where the Rubber Meets the Garden, in: *Nature*, 457, 246–247.

Rofel, Lisa (2007), *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Sturgeon, Janet C. (forthcoming), Cross-border Rubber Cultivation between China and Laos: Unexpected Outcomes of Regionalization, in: *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*.

Sturgeon, Janet C. (2011), The Rough Side of Rubber, in: *Chinadialogue*, 16 February, online: <www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/4109-The-rough-side-of-rubber> (14 July 2012).

Sturgeon, Janet C. (2010), Governing Minorities and Development in Xishuangbanna, China: Akha and Dai Rubber Farmers as Entrepreneurs, in: *Geoforum*, 41, 318–328.

Sturgeon, Janet C. (2005), *Border Landscapes: The Politics of Akha Land Use in China and Thailand*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Sturgeon, Janet C., and Nicholas Menzies (2006), Ideological Landscapes: Rubber in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, 1950 to 2007, in: *Asian Geographer*, 25, 1–2, 21–37.

Taussig, Michael (1980), *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Tsing, Anna (2000), Inside the Economy of Appearances, in: *Public Culture*, 12, 2, 115–144.

Xu, Jianchu (2006), The Political, Social, and Ecological Transformation of a Landscape: The Case of Rubber in Xishuangbanna, China, in: *Mountain Research and Development*, 26, 3, 254–262.

Yan, Hairong (2008), *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Contents

Introduction

- Anne-Marie BRADY
  Ethnicity and the State in Contemporary China 3

Research Articles

- Carla FREEMAN
  From "Blood Transfusion" to "Harmonious Development": The Political Economy of Fiscal Allocations to China's Ethnic Regions 11
- Robert BARNETT
  Restrictions and Their Anomalies: The Third Forum and the Regulation of Religion in Tibet 45
- **Janet C. STURGEON**
  The Cultural Politics of Ethnic Identity in Xishuangbanna, China: Tea and Rubber as "Cash Crops" and "Commodities" 109
- Uradyn E. BULAG
  Seeing Like a Minority: Political Tourism and the Struggle for Recognition in China 133
- Anne-Marie BRADY
  "We Are All Part of the Same Family": China's Ethnic Propaganda 159
- James TO
  Beijing's Policies for Managing Han and Ethnic-Minority Chinese Communities Abroad 183

Contributors 223